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HI FI NEWS / JULY 06 / KEN KESSLER / DUETTE

"THEIR PERFORMANCE IS REMARKABLE, OPTIMIZED AND IDEALLY SITED
IT REALLY IS SPECTACULAR"

HI FI PLUS / ISSUE 47 / ROY GREGORY / DUETTE

PROVO-NANCE

Provo, Urethra hi-fi artisans, the speaker builders of **Wilson Audio**, have now been at the top of the high-end tree for three decades. Recent recognition of their achievements tells us that consistency has yet to affect David A. Wilson's enthusiasm, as is evident in the rave reviews afforded the stunning new small speaker, the **Duette** - a Wilson "first" designed to perform as well against walls or on shelves as it does in free space. The award-winning **Alexandria** has been acknowledged globally as the greatest cost-no-object speaker available today. As the **Alexandria** paves the way for new and exciting advances in music reproduction, so, too, does the delightfully exciting **Wilson WATT Puppy System 8**, which remains the benchmark for consumers who desire compact speakers that demonstrate zero compromise. For this season, we're pleased to note that its bright-chassis sister, the sublime **Sophia** has been revised to earn the **Sophia 2** name. And for the comprehensive embrace of authentic surround-sound, **only** the wall-mountable effects speakers and centre channel model in the **WATCH** range achieve the ultimate in home theatre sound playback. Now that's what we call "Provo-nance".



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www.absolutesounds.com info@absolutesounds.com



EDITORIAL

Editor

Roy Gregory

Contributors

Anke K. Bronner
Chris Binns
Mark Childs
Richard Clews
Anthony H. Cordesman
Dave Davies
Dennis D. Davis
Steve Dickinson
Peter Doward
Richard S. Foster
Jason Hector
Andrew Hobbs
Jimmy Hughes
Jason Kennedy
Paul Messenger
Reuben Parry
Alan Sircorn
David Stirling
Chris Thomas

Photography

Simon Marsh
Andrew Bronner (Peterson)

Cartoonist

Dave Davis

The Editorial Office can be contacted at:

Hi-Fi+ Editors
Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd
Cornerways House
School Lane
Ringwood, Hampshire
BH24 1LG
United Kingdom
Tel: +44 (0)1425 461133
Net: www.hifiplus.com

Advertising

Tel: +44 (0)1425 461113
Fax: +44 (0)1425 461139
Email: sa.es@hifiplus.com

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Creative Byte
Pooie, Dorset
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One of the great things about sharing a stable with a legendary title like *The Absolute Sound* is that it gives us access to a whole new roster of writers. So it's an enormous pleasure to welcome our first contribution from Anthony H. Cordesman, one of the most respected and longest standing audio commentators in the USA. With a penchant for leading-edge technology, more than 30-years reviewing equipment, including spells at *Stereophile* and *Audio* as well as *TAS*, has left him with an enviable depth of experience and a uniquely balanced perspective. You can read his views on the EMM Labs CDSA-SE player on page 40.

Meanwhile, a rather lower key demonstration than we normally stage, this at the Bristol Show, produced no less staggering results than we're used to. Aiming to compare the sonic and musical impact of connectors, we employed a mixture of genuine, high-end and high-priced WBT phono plugs and speaker terminals, standard lightweight phono plugs and fake WBT clones from the Far East. The phono plugs were all mounted to Chord Co. Cobra cables, at the same time and by the same person. The speaker terminals were mounted in parallel on the back of a set of Audio Physic Virgo V loudspeakers, as described in my column in this Issue. Ringing the changes we were able to elevate or completely destroy the performance of the demonstration system – and not just in terms of hi-fi performance. Using a simple voice and guitar intro with sparse drum and bass backing, in the worst case, the relationship between the instruments, the vocal phrasing and inflexion, the naturalness of the instruments was completely dismantled, rendered tinny, disjointed, grainy and brittle. I'll be writing it up in full for the next issue, but for the moment take this on board: don't under-estimate the influence of even the most prosaic parts of the signal chain. Things are not always as they seem...

Roy Gregory





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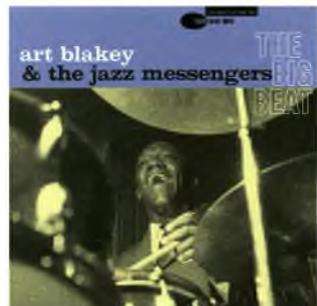
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HOME TRUTHS...

by Jimmy Hughes

As I look around my house, filled to the rafters with CDs and LPs (And he does mean FILLED! Ed.), I can't help but acknowledge the practical and economic advantages of having music stored on a hard-drive. If the CD eventually becomes extinct, I guess most music collections will be stored in some form of digital memory system, not on discs. But, for me, having a disc plus booklet or a sleeve with a nice picture and informative liner notes, was always a big, big part of the package. Still is. Of course the music is the main thing. But, whenever I was given a CD-R copy of a disc, I still had to go and buy the proper issue. Having the booklet or sleeve gave the music an identity.

Every 'classic' album is inextricably linked to the cover art that adorned it on its first release. Just think of all the seminal Bob Dylan records, for example. How can you call to mind *Blonde on Blonde* (say) without seeing that gate fold 12 x 24 fuzzy image of Dylan? Same with the Beatles' albums. You can't imagine *Sgt Pepper* without that sleeve. It's seminal – iconic. Just imagine if *Sgt Pepper* had no title and no sleeve, and that, when you bought it, it was just called the *Beatles Album No 7*.

The songs would be exactly the same, but something vital would be missing. At least it would for me. Somehow, the sleeve (or booklet) gives the music its identity. It places it in time and space. Gives it a context. Makes it into something. Actualises it. The songs on *Blonde on Blonde* would sound just as great had there been no cover. But (somehow – don't ask me to explain) the sleeve pulls the whole thing together.

I was never a radio fan. Of course, I listen to the radio, and enjoy it. But I never got into expensive stereo tuners. The idea of getting a good tuner and taping music from stereo broadcasts was initially appealing, but after a few tries I stopped doing it. At the time, I put this down to having a big collection of music on LP and (later on) CD. But now, when I look back, I realise it was also something to do with not having pictures and text to go with the music. Broadcasts just didn't compare to LPs. Back in the '70s, for

example, I could easily have recorded a live broadcast of Colin Davis conducting Sibelius' *First Symphony* on Radio 3. But how could it compare to the Philips LP of this work, with Davis conducting the Boston Symphony, its colourful and atmospheric Edvard Munch cover and detailed liner notes? That was the Real Thing. Somehow, having the LP sleeve 'fixed' the music and performance in time and space.

In the pop and jazz world, albums usually retain their original cover art when the recording in question is

re-released at a lower selling price. But classical re-issues (until fairly recently) tended to feature entirely new sleeves. I think the idea was to create a clear distinction between new recordings and re-releases. Often, classical re-issues had less 'classy' artwork. Also, many mid and budget-price labels were themed, with a similar appearance. For example, Universo, Festivo, or Sequenza from Philips; Ace of Diamonds or World Of... from Decca. DG had Privilege and Signature, and later on Galleria.

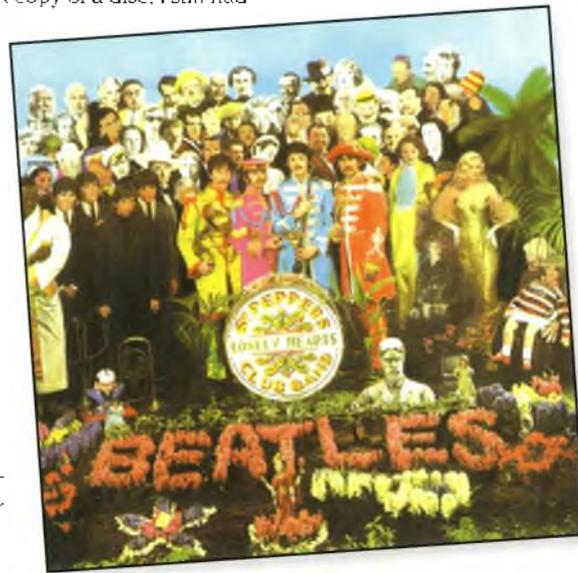
Also, in the '70s especially, the thinking was that things

from the 1950s or '60s were hopelessly old fashioned.

Many companies streamlined their corporate logos, and ditched things like black and white photos for sleeves.

The idea was to look colourful and modern, and older things had to comply with this rule. Then, about a decade ago, someone at DG had the bright idea of using the original LP sleeve covers for re-issues. It's amazing it took the record companies so long to realise the 'pull' of the original sleeve. This is something any collector of classical CDs could have told them would work. Indeed, a friend of mine actually buys favourite recordings he's already got just because the new re-issue has the original sleeve design. Okay, that might be a bit sad... But, in doing so, he feels he's getting closer to the recording, as originally issued. It takes him back to the time when he first bought the disc...

Actually, it's not just sad, it's bloody pathetic – get a grip man...



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'This arm/turntable combo is the most graceful-sounding analogue front-end I've heard'.

Ken Kessler Review - Hi-Fi News, Volume 51 No. 5.

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SPEAKERS CORNER

by Paul Messenger

We are constantly being told by the know-nothing mass media that we are moving into an era where our traditional forms of music software will be replaced by internet downloading. Forgive my scepticism, but twenty years ago those same pundits promised us that vinyl would be dead by 1990, and look what happened to that prediction.

Our relationship with our music is a complex affair. Sure, downloading is quick, convenient, potentially inexpensive, and is already establishing itself as a popular alternative to traditional media. And as internet access rates and computer storage capacities go on rising, higher resolution downloads with less or no compression will become increasingly viable and hopefully available. But the simple fact that these don't involve a real physical object will, in my opinion, always alienate enough customers to ensure that the 'harder forms of software', such as vinyl and CD, will continue to co-exist.

Let's take a moment to consider the attributes of the various music storage media. Despite being relatively bulky and susceptible to damage, vinyl has survived for more than half a century. That in itself is a uniquely impressive achievement, which gives great confidence to anyone who believes a record collection is for life, not just the next few months. Add in the observations that it still potentially offers the best sound quality, and comes in a physically attractive format with its own 'poster' on the front, and it's difficult to see any alternative format taking its place, except of course on convenience grounds.

The first successful attempt to do this was of course Philips' Compact Cassette, born in the mid-1960s and making a serious bid for stardom a decade later, when vinyl was going through a particularly rough patch. One of the cleverest features of the cassette was that it was the same size as a pack of playing cards, whose ease of handling had evolved as a biological match for the human body through millennia. Compact, record-capable, portable and inherently free from surface noise (aided and abetted by Mr Dolby's clever noise reduction system), there was a time when the cassette looked like a serious contender. But where is it now? Mass duplication was always a problem, and pre-recorded examples never matched up to the quality obtainable with real-time home recording. Unlike vinyl, longevity wasn't a cassette trait, and it seemed to disappear almost before CD got going, apart from some residual in-car use. Somehow it never even got close to vinyl's long-term collectability, more pretender than contender.

Although the little 120mm Compact Disc became an immediate style icon, sales didn't really get going properly until the late 1980s, due to high initial prices of both software and hardware. Silent backgrounds were particularly appreciated by classical music listeners, and convenience features like remote control, track skipping and a playing time of more than an hour all served to make it the prime music carrier throughout the 1990s, while the addition of record capability has helped it keep up with the game in the current decade. Fears that the data on CDs would eventually start to deteriorate seem to have abated, but the packaging has always proved troublesome – I don't know anyone who actually likes the wretched 'jewel case': the card-based alternatives don't seem much better; and the sleeve notes are always much too small for easy reading.

That sales of regular music CDs have been declining in the last couple of years is well documented, but they're doing so from a historic high, and the picture is a very muddy one, due to the parallel growth in 'legal' and 'illegal' downloading, and of copying.

There still seems every reason to believe that the 120mm optical disc has the potential to provide long term archive storage for music albums in CD form, and movies as DVDs. But there remains the lurking worry that the medium is still evolving, which inevitably leads to concerns over long term stability, less perhaps of the disc format than of the hi-tech replay hardware involved. For example, many of the multi-purpose chips being developed today are primarily low voltage/consumption types, developed very much with the massive mobile phone sector in mind, and are therefore likely to be less suited to high quality audio applications than previous generations of chips.

Long-term stability is really the core strength of the vinyl disc. It did go through a number of changes in the early days, with variations in the equalisation curves adopted by different record companies, as well as some alternative disc sizes and rotation speeds, as well as the major shift from mono to stereo. But those uncertainties are long past, and apart from the occasional 12-inch 45rpm single, vinyl today has a format stability and permanence unmatched by other media

It's pretty obvious that hi-res downloading represents one of the futures for hi-fi, not only because of the technological determinants of increasing internet speeds and computer memory capacities, but probably more significantly because it will become cheaper to

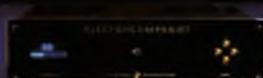


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► deliver (though not necessarily purchase), while the cost of 'hard' software will continue to rise. (We've already seen bulky, heavy vinyl become significantly more costly than the CD equivalent, reversing the situation that existed back in the 1980s.)

Many of us will doubtless be happy enough to settle for 'virtual' downloaded software, storing it on our computers or

servers. But the computer on which I'm writing this might be the first I've used for music storage, but it's my fifth computer in eighteen years, and three at least are long gone. It may well be that my music files will happily transfer to the sixth, seventh and so on to the tenth in fifteen or twenty years time, but I certainly don't feel as confident about their future as I do about my forty year old vinyl discs. 



PLAYING THE SYSTEM

by Roy Gregory

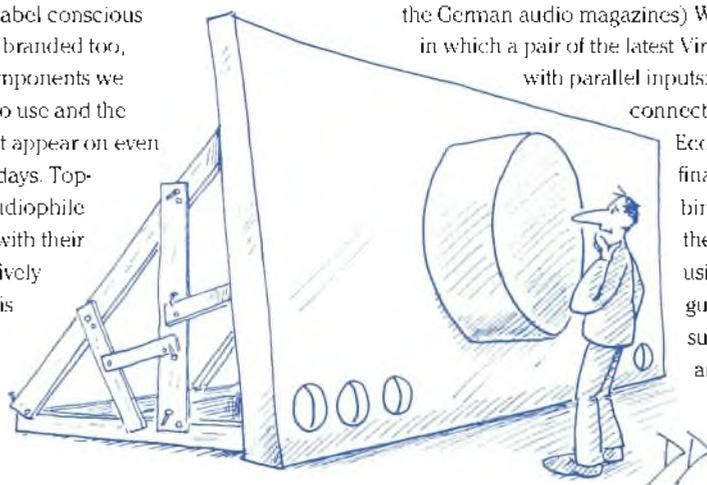
Not so long ago I was bemoaning the primacy of industrial design and the heavy hand it rests on product development. In truth, hi-fi has never looked so good (assuming you don't object to a certain staid uniformity) or been finished so well – at least on the surface. The downside is the proportion of the production budget that gets diverted to achieve that end, expenditure that must impact on performance. Of course, it doesn't necessarily cost any more to make a product look good as opposed to bad, and creative design can save money (using new materials, techniques or spreading costs across a range of products), but looking at modern budget kit in particular, it's hard to see just how the fancy casework can be accommodated without cutting corners elsewhere. The question becomes; what corners and where? At this year's CES, at least one answer was forthcoming – and the implications are far from edifying.

As well as nice knobs, a good surface finish, hidden fixings and all the other elements that contribute to the superior appearance of modern components, sockets and hardware play an all-important part in the creation of perceived value. It's no longer enough that those phono-sockets are gold plated, in today's label conscious market they have to be branded too, just like the internal components we expect manufacturers to use and the fancy binding posts that appear on even budget speakers these days. Top-marque amongst the audiophile name-checkers? WBT, with their distinctive and impressively substantial connectors is always sure to impress – just so long as your budget can bear the strain. The problem

is that such paragons of German engineering don't come cheap, so that whilst seeing them adorning a speaker costing several thousand pounds isn't that surprising, finding them on components well down into three-figure territory certainly is. It's also increasingly common – at least until you look a little closer when you discover that what appears to be a WBT socket actually only looks the part. You've just entered the world of fake componentry – a growing trend in modern manufacturing.

But does it matter? After all, to be an effective fake, doesn't the structure, finish and operation have to be essentially the same as the original. And we all know how much you pay for designer labels. Aren't these just no-name equivalents? Well, I could talk to you about materials and tolerances, plating and the sonic impact of surface treatment. But companies like WBT have been doing that for a while with no apparent effect, so they decided to take a more direct route. Rather than telling people that the quality of your connectors effects the sound of your system, why not show them? Which is exactly what they set out to do.

Enlisting the aid of Audio Physic (and encouraged by one of the German audio magazines) WBT offered a demonstration in which a pair of the latest Virgo speakers was equipped with parallel inputs: one set of WBT NextGen connectors, one pair of the company's Economy Line binding posts, and finally, a pair of imitation "WBT" binding posts manufactured in the Far East. The comparison, using simple female voice and guitar was simple and far from subtle. Intimate, expressive and involving via the NextGen inputs, full of subtlety and nuance, the performance ►



► took a step down via the Economy Line sockets, losing focus, transparency and resolution, eroding the stage depth, musical communication and sense of flow. But it was the step down to the fake sockets that really stopped things in their tracks. Robbed of low-level information and dynamic subtlety, the performance becomes two-dimensional and mechanical, grainy and colourless, a crude cardboard cutout compared to the involving, vibrant, lively rendition we'd first heard. In fact, the very qualities that separate good hi-fi from more run of the mill offerings.

Interestingly, the catastrophic performance drop suffered when using the imitation sockets is easily avoided, there being plenty of options that sound significantly better without costing the earth. NextGen might represent the icing on the cake, but there are other, less extravagant options that are certainly viable – they just don't necessarily look the part. However, take a look around the budget kit resting on the shelves at your local hi-fi shop and you'll be amazed just how often companies take the parts that look the part over those that deliver the goods.

Now, think how often those decisions are compounded on multiple levels. How often a manufacturer might extend a poor choice of socket to cables, cabinet materials, drive units or electrical components that are also sonically sub-standard. Layer on layer of nuance and texture are stripped away, the engaging quality central to the performance long gone, in the service of creating a product that looks like it will sound good, presumably on the basis that customers will buy with their eyes rather than their ears. You have been warned. There's a lot of very pretty products out there – and if they look too good to be true it's probably because they are.

But things can go a whole lot further than simple window dressing. What about products that deliberately set out to

appear like something else. Whilst WBT might not agree, manufacturing lookalike components reaches a whole new level once the counterfeiters start creating complete products. There's barely a manufacturer out there who hasn't seen facsimiles of their designs, some crude, some remarkably sophisticated, appearing from the Far East. Some of these are almost laughable (the half-sized B&W Nautilus "snail" or the speakers with painted "diamond" domes) but others are not. Siltech recently uncovered a rash of fake cables being offered on the internet where the producer had gone to great lengths to imitate the external appearance, branding and construction of genuine Siltech products. But delve under the skin and all you found were basic copper conductors and the crudest insulation. There was no effort at all to mimic performance – just the appearance, in the clear hope of separating the gullible from their money. Nor are Siltech the only company to suffer so, with cables arguably the easiest of all products to copy or "repackage". What are we to make of a long lead that's been cut into shorter lengths and inexpertly terminated in the process before being sold on at an inflated profit. Frankly, the perpetrator of such an act is just as guilty of fraud as the manufacturer of a counterfeit cable. In all cases, the victim is the end-user whose craving for a bargain has led them into an ill-advised purchase. With the advent of the internet, the notion of buyer beware has never been so relevant. But as the WBT experience shows, there's a far from subtle erosion of the standards we've come to expect from even apparently respectable sources, lookalike components cropping up on some really quite surprising products, lookalike brands achieving high-street respectability – despite borrowing their proportions and appearance from well-established competitors. Given the sonic impact of a single pair of sockets, buyer beware indeed for all is not necessarily as it seems... ►+



MUSIC MATTERS

by Alan Sircom

The mid-life crisis gets us all in the end. It mugs you quietly in your sleep, and you wake with a burning and totally irrational desire to pursue the things you gave up in your teens and twenties. Or, the things you'd have done in your teens and twenties if only you had the bottle and the dosh to do them. Some just need a radical change and get religion (mid-life Christeys), experiment sexually or go into politics – sometimes all three, and not necessarily in that order.

Fortunately for me, I retained a small piece of rationality. I

didn't take up Thai boxing (too exhausting), riding a Harley (too expensive) or base jumping (too dangerous). Neither did I leave my wife and get a girlfriend half my age (too exhausting, expensive and dangerous). Instead, my attempt to return to the fountain of youth simply involved picking up the guitar for the first time in more than a decade.

Even here, some semblance of rationality still won the day. I quickly abandoned the idea of going back to my psychobilly roots (I lacked the armful of tattoos and foot-high quiff even ►



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BY THE EDITOR OF THE SOUNDS OF MUSIC SYSTEM 1001

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**"IT JUST SOUNDS LIKE YOU ALWAYS HOPED
CD COULD SOUND, IF CD WAS DONE RIGHT"**

BY THE EDITOR OF THE SOUNDS OF MUSIC SYSTEM 1001

AUDIO RESEARCH | REFERENCE CD7 VACUUM TUBE CD PLAYER

Audio Research has always used the knowledge gained through designing their Reference series components to benefit every model in their range. Phono stages, pre-amplifiers, power amps – Audio Research believes, like Formula 1 car designers, that the benefits gained at the cutting edge should be shared.

A new entry level pre-amp delivers a taste of Reference sonics to a wider audience: the LS17. Fully featured and supremely functional, it is a dream match for the VS55 stereo power amplifier – an astonishingly affordable introduction to Bill Johnson's wizardry. And we remain dazzled by the LS26, which we suspect will find itself driving more than a few Reference 110s.

Reference 110 is the first ever single-chassis, stereo power amplifier in the Reference range, the 2x110W Reference 110 – a perfect match for the LS26 or the Ref 3, the finest pre-amp ever issued by Audio Research. But there's more.

So fine is the CD3 MK II that Audio Research was inspired to develop it further. The resultant CD7 is so good – its internals include a Ref 3 derived output stage – that this player has earned the honour of becoming the first-ever Reference series digital source component. For analogue supporters, the all-tube Ref PH7 phono stage is probably the best phono section available today. Completed with either the flagship Ref 610T or 710 monoblocks, the Reference models reign supreme.

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► then) and that mid-1980s wedded-to-the-chorus-pedal indie sound is best left in the mid-1980s. I also realised that there's nothing worse than trying to demonstrate that you've still 'got it' by spanking out blues licks, because there's only so much room for middle-aged guys to look ridiculous, and most of that room is taken up by Jeremy Clarkson. Caesars and Roman generals receiving their laurels used to have a slave at their side to whisper "you are mortal" to bring them down to earth... mid-life rockers should have one whispering "you look daft in leathers".

So I began to learn jazz licks. It's the perfect mid-life obsession, because you don't look an idiot doing it. Of course, to play jazz well takes decades of playing arpeggios and chord substitutions, but you can rise to the level of mediocre pub jazzer in a couple of years, if you aren't starting from beginning. Or so I thought; it seems my fingers have forgotten their dexterity and span and my calloused fingertips are now all soft and gentle again. Plus, my music reading – never a strong suit – is slow and stodgy. But, I'll get there, or get bored.

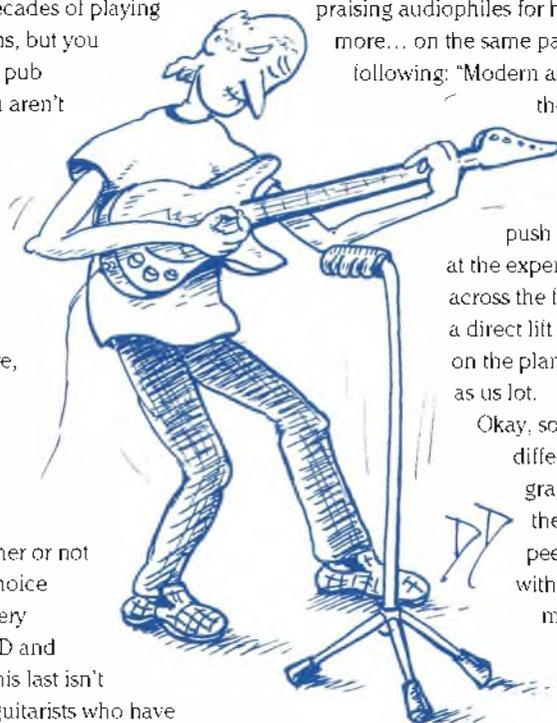
As I began to go deeper into the jazz idiom, I began to spot very hi-fi like tendencies from the guitar-wielding cognoscenti. The choice of guitar, amp, whether or not to use effects pedals, even the choice of pick... all couched in terms very similar to the ones used about CD and vinyl and valves vs transistors. This last isn't even an analogy; there are jazz guitarists who have a very similar playing style who swear by their valve amps and others that are resolutely solid-state. There are also those who hold the 'extreme' views. Those who say tone comes from the guitar alone and those who suggest with subtle tone shaping in the amplifier, one guitar can be made to sound remarkably like any other.

At first, I thought the effects pedal debate was akin to the great cable tussle in hi-fi, but then I found out that people are starting to check out different types of guitar cable, too. Put two guitar geeks in a room for long enough and they'll have strong opinions about Klotz over Mogami leads. Whether this is a good thing or the start of bad jazz madness, only time will tell.

Then, I happened across Henrikson amplifiers, the makers of the Jazzamp. With a single 250mm driver and a small, light cabinet, this solid-state combo is proving a popular choice among cats (see, the terminology is embedding already) who

play in small groups. It's an incredibly minimalist design, too – even reverb, that mainstay of all guitar amps since the mid 1950s, is a reluctant new optional extra. All it has is a single input, a volume control and a series of parametric equalisation points, to subtly accommodate the sound of the guitar being played.

So far, so good. But then you read the online blurb on the website... "the electronic design engineer in me observed that the warmth was merely a matter of doing what all audiophile equipment tries to do; that is to faithfully reproduce the sound that is input." Now here's a thing – a manufacturer of pro amplifier gear almost praising audiophiles for holding on to fidelity. But there's more... on the same page, this Henrikson guy states the following: "Modern amplifiers are manufactured for



the mass market, or more precisely, kids playing trash rock in their garage. Electronically speaking, the amplifiers are designed to push higher frequencies and volume at the expense of clean, even amplification across the frequency spectrum." This could be a direct lift from any hi-fi magazine anywhere on the planet. This guy is on the same page as us lot.

Okay, so the guy doesn't really know the difference between a parametric and graphic equaliser, but the purity of the Jazzamp among its modelling peers (amps are essentially computers with gain stages these days, with preset modes to replicate guitar legend setups) makes it a sure-fire hit with the traditionalists. Also, any jazz guitarist who has even the slightest hi-fi orientation will be signing over cash at speed. One day soon, when my fingers are ready, I'll definitely be checking this out.

There's a disparaging element to this, too. Those who use big-name products (Gibson, Epiphone or Ibanez guitars, Fender or Roland amps) are quick to dismiss the more custom-built element (such as Sadowsky guitars and AER amplifiers) as 'boutique', while in reverse you get accused of being 'mainstream'. You can see why I feel at home in this world.

Soon, I'll make the decision whether to splurge on a cheap-ish but decent archtop guitar (called a 'jazzbox' in the trade) or save up for a while and buy a hand-made one. Or buy something more universal like a Gibson Les Paul. Unfortunately, that I'm thinking like this clearly means that I'm not out of the mid-life woods yet. Plus, I've started looking longingly at Harley-Davidsons... ▶+

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Incoming!

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Dear Sir,

I sat front row centre at one of your demonstrations at the Manchester Hi-Fi show and thought that, in general, you clearly showed the value of accurate positioning of the cartridge (using a two point protractor), adjusting VTA for each record, use of a mono cartridge and use of replay 'curves' for specific record labels. However I must raise the issue of an error I think you made during the demo. You talked about both low and high frequencies being attenuated during the production of records to allow the signal to be cut onto the record. Whilst I agree with you about low frequencies it is my understanding that the high frequencies are boosted during this process and that it is the job of the phono-stage to apply the necessary cut to the high frequency signals - so the RIAA curve would perhaps be better thought of as a slope. That aside the issue of different replay 'slopes' is one I now intend to investigate - for instance is the difference worth worrying about on a £1200 phono-stage rather than the £12000 pound we were lucky enough to hear. Final point couldn't the differences we heard due to VTA just as easily be brought about by adjusting tracking weight and hence SRA?

Regards

Rob Radcliffe.

Firstly, you (and a few other people) were absolutely correct in that record replay curves boost – not cut – the treble; one of those errors that got into the first rehearsal and never got corrected. Apologies all round.

As to your questions: the differences are perfectly audible and just as musically important on the VAC pre-amp (\$5000 all in) and also the Gaerne Slee Jazz Club, which will be reviewed in the next issue. So yes, it is worth worrying about. Adjusting tracking force will indeed adjust VTA/SRA. However, do you really want to (and is it sensible to) vary your tracking force on a record by record basis? Far better I would suggest to have properly engineered arm height adjustment. Ed.

Dear Sir,

From my point of view your column (*Playing The System* in Issue 53) hits the basics concerning high-fidelity and realism. And your final rhetorical question "Why not listen to mono?" is the only conclusion to be drawn.

In my experience growing up with recorded and electronically reproduced music: the best (most pleasant

and realistic) sound I ever got was from my first mono radio receiver. After 30 years of futile tweaking and optimizing - based on both international reviews and discussions with system designers - my stereo system in order to come to a similar aural sensation, I finally found the theoretical and practical explanation for my disappointment; "crosstalk" between the two speakers in a stereo set up and their generation of comb-filter effects/artefacts inevitably confusing the ear-brain-system.

Crosstalk cancellation (XTC) is the solution, commercially available today in the latest Version of the TacT RCS 2.2 XP room correction pre-amp/processor. The articles on www.ambiophonics.org give most convincing grounds for the shortcomings of classical stereo designs and their elimination. The gain in realism and reproduction of the original staging is overwhelming, with the added benefit of hitherto unheard details that were buried by the crosstalk effects. And XTC does a fantastic job in a two speaker system without complementary surround speakers!

I am looking forward to reading your evaluation of this concept in hi-fi+ - in my view a substantial step forward towards a 21st century high-fidelity standard.

Regards

Dr-Ing. Michael Graw

Luebeck, Germany

Dear Sir,

I would like to react to Jimmy Hughes' *Home Truths* piece in Issue 56, by quoting an extract from a song by that great artist Melanie - "a thing is a phallic symbol if it's longer than it's wide"!!! In other words, sexuality like beauty is in the eye of the beholder (or should that be listener?). Or if you want the pedantic version according to reception theory - it only exists in the interaction between the work of art and the reader/ listener/viewer.

Using Naim amps I can only agree with Paul - unplugging everything a couple of times a year is great for the sound (and that includes all the boards in a NAC72). The same goes for Moth isolation transformers (big ones!). If he really wants an ordinary Schuko to IEC, I think I can afford to post him one or two of the several that are sleeping in the kitchen cupboard!

Great mag.

Yours,

Nigel Briggs

Lyon, France



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Wide Open Window...

The Revel Salon Ultima 2 loudspeaker

by Chris Binns

Ah...me and my big mouth. I have recently made no secret of the fact that I sometimes experience the odd nagging doubt regarding the direction in which loudspeaker technology has moved in the last few years; technically superior but more musical and enjoyable? I'm not always convinced. Doubts cast while revisiting some classic products from thirty or so years ago were brought to a head during my time with the Spondor SP100Rs, a great (and thoroughly enjoyable) loudspeaker that has the core of its design rooted firmly in the seventies. Meanwhile, much noise had been emanating from a room not too far from the house where a new pair of Revel Salons have been clocking up the hours, running in prior to residence in the listening room. The irony here is that if there's any loudspeaker that can claim to represent the cutting edge of technology when it comes to moving-coil designs, the Salon would undoubtedly come pretty near the top of the list.

To put this into perspective, the Salon 2 is the flagship in the Ultima 2 series of loudspeakers from Revel, a company formed in 1995 by US consumer giant Harman International with the sole intention of competing in the high-end speaker market. To that end, the combination of generous financial resources together with extensive development and manufacturing facilities courtesy of JBL was enough to attract Kevin Voecks, already something of a leading light in high-end loudspeaker design, into the fold. Under his expert

guidance, and with pretty much a free hand to indulge himself, the existing state of the art measurement facility was augmented by an advanced and exhaustive psycho-acoustic listening procedure, designed with the help of Dr Floyd Toole from the Canadian National Research Council.

The ensuing products were impressive and the original Salon certainly left its mark some seven years ago as one of the best all round loudspeakers I have ever used. More tellingly, they found universal acclaim from the wide range of people who got to listen to them; a highly unusual occurrence considering the diverse tastes of rock and roll engineers when compared to classical musicians.

Apart from the visual similarity of some of the drive units, there is not much to connect the revised Salon to the original version in terms of their appearance. Gone is the striking, idiosyncratic ugliness that separated Revel

from the crowd, to be replaced by a more conventional aesthetic that is no doubt more acceptable in terms of what some have come to expect from large loudspeakers: tall, slim and extremely heavy. The review pair was finished in a high gloss black lacquer; I confess that this was a rare occasion when I might

actually have preferred the mahogany finish, as with an enclosure this large the result of such a massive expanse of dark gloss was a little overbearing in my room.

Immediately apparent is the highly contoured front baffle, machined from 2.5 inch MDF, the curves carefully engineered to reduce diffraction across a broad spectrum of frequencies. The remainder of the cabinet takes the form of a radius, constructed from nine bonded layers of composite, pressed into the required shape and considerably more rigid than the equivalent conventional enclosure. A deeply recessed panel at the back has two sets of high quality five way binding posts accompanied by two controls, one for tweeter level (± 1 dB in 0.5dB steps) the other to subtly adjust bass ▶



► balance for use near room boundaries. A Plexiglas door with a small cutaway for cable entry covers the panel to present a neat appearance – so long as you can actually close it. In practice, using chunky cables with 4mm plugs presented a bit of a problem unless inserted into the side of the binding posts, which is possible but not ideal. Of course, the US tends to favour spades over banana plugs; worst case scenario is that the door can be removed.

The base is threaded in the usual manner to allow levelling with the spikes (or if reversed small plastic feet) and is just slightly larger than the outline of the cabinet; this supports the structure via four pillars to allow space in which the downward firing port can breathe. The grille consists of an open steel cage covered by the cloth which should offer minimal interference if required. This sits over the front panel and is neatly held in place by a series of small magnets. The general finish of the loudspeaker was to the high standard you would expect, but I harbour reservations over the size of the bolts securing the bass units; not so much the bolts but the head, which takes the same size allen key as the small bolts used for mounting phono cartridges. Unless there is some engineered decoupling, as is the case with the larger bolts on the mid range unit, there is no chance of really tightening the bass units into the baffle, the effect of which can often be just as dramatic as adding spikes. However, this could be a moot point; did I ever feel that the bass lacked definition? Not really.

The Salon employs six drivers in a four-way configuration, three 200mm bass units, a 165mm upper-mid, 100mm mid and a 25mm tweeter. (See side panel) The choice of high order (24dB per octave) crossover slopes allows each driver to work effectively within its designated bandwidth, and well away from break up modes

Nuts and Bolts...

Speaking with Kevin Voecks revealed that much of the initial research for the new range of loudspeakers revolved around the continued development of new and more sensitive test procedures, necessary in order for the team to measure and evaluate the reduced levels of distortion that they were hoping to achieve. To suggest that the Mark 2 Salon is a revision or makeover of the original would be misleading, and ultimately wrong, as despite some similarities in the appearance of the drivers, it is essentially a completely new design from the ground up. The result of four years of intensive research by the Revel team, backed by the full weight of Harman's extensive facilities, little or no restriction was placed on the development process. As a result, the second generation Salon uses completely new drive units that have a number of interesting features. A dual Neodymium magnet assembly concentrates a more uniform field into the gap while presenting less surface area to interfere with linear movement. Improvements to the spider, surround composition and shape have resulted in a considerable reduction in distortion over a wider bandwidth, alongside improved thermal characteristics that reduce dynamic compression. While the large, edge wound voice coils and Titanium cones have been retained, the radical new tweeter has seen a change to Beryllium for the diaphragm material, resulting in greater efficiency and dramatically increased extension. This goes part of the way towards explaining the absence of the small, rear-firing

where cones behaviour becomes unpredictable. The crossover itself is separated into sections that are sited in different locations within the cabinet to minimise any interaction. Internal wiring is not specified but looks to be average gauge stranded copper, and high quality capacitors and air cored inductors are mounted to boards that are hard wired rather than relying on printed circuit track.

As I have already intimated, the first generation Revel loudspeakers made a considerable impression, so expectations were running high for the Salon 2. With an ample break-in period behind them and the challenging task of shifting

HF unit that was a consistent factor in many of Kevin's earlier designs, including the first generation Salon, where it seemed to add extra space and sparkle at the top end. As he put it, "we found that we just didn't need it anymore." The simple enough looking front plate is in fact a waveguide that serves to shape the tweeters dispersion at the crossover point, allowing better integration with the mid unit. It also increases sensitivity (and thus power handling) by more efficiently coupling the diaphragm with the surrounding air, along the same lines as horn loading. The port loading arrangement has also seen considerable revision, and is now hyperbolic in shape giving better efficiency with lower distortion and compression.

Associated Equipment

The Salon is a large and demanding wide-bandwidth speaker, with genuinely high-end performance. That makes it extremely demanding of partnering equipment, as the accompanying list demonstrates. Don't be fooled by their comparative affordability (at least compared to the competition); this is one speaker with which you can't cut corners.

Bryston 14 B SST, Golmund Telos 200 power amplifiers
 Audio research SP10, Golmund Mimesis 27.3, Ayre K-1xe pre-amplifiers
 Audio research Ref 7, EMM Labs CDSA CD players
 Linn LP12/Ekos/Lyra Helikon record player
 Herron Audio phono-stage
 Nordost Valhalla Cabling

hundred kilo loudspeakers into my listening room accomplished, I arrogantly assumed that, based on my experience with the mark one, getting a good result with the Salon 2 should be pretty straightforward. Which of course, wasn't the case. Positioning the speakers for an even bass response was relatively easy with the aid of some low-frequency sweeps, and much like their predecessors demonstrated that if the alignment of the speaker is well engineered it is perfectly possible for a large loudspeaker to provide even and extended bass in my room. However finding a position that delivered a strong, central image ►

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▶ and balanced soundstage proved more difficult and required incremental movements and some shifting of the furniture.

First impressions using the SP10/Bryston combination were frankly disappointing. While there was no doubt that the Salon's were impressively full-range, they sounded rather coarse and mechanical, almost as if they were cold and hadn't been run in. It was when RG suggested that I try the Goldmund Telos power amps that I began to get the picture. The Bryston 14B SST that had proved so successful with the Mark 1s definitely had the grunt to drive the latest Salons to impressive levels, but lacked a degree of refinement and sophistication, not something that I would have previously criticised it for. (To be fair, it is a quarter of the price of the Salon's; the 28B's I suspect might be a different case.) Likewise the ebullient if slightly rough around the edges performance of the old Audio Research SP10 came across as course and ill-defined, a really rather unhappy combination. What was becoming apparent was not so much that the new Revel's were unnecessarily demanding, although they do need an amplifier that has plenty of really

genuine power delivery, but that they were much, much more revealing of the signal with which they were being fed. Despite some pretty refined CD playback in the form of the EMM labs

frighteningly capable of exposing the nature and the quality of the signal that they received.

And the music? With the sublime Ayre K-Ixe feeding the Goldmund

power amps the Salon's began to fade into the background and became less obtrusive, providing an open door on whatever material you were listening to. To put it another way, there just seemed to be less loudspeaker between you and the performers, at which point I realised just how good the Salon could be. If I talk about cleanliness, the tendency is to immediately assume clinical, dry or lacking in warmth, but in many ways the Revel transcends such descriptions, as there is simply less crap coming from the loudspeakers in the way of coloration and distortion compared to most other designs I have heard, with the possible exception of electrostatics. What you hear is an incredible amount of detail and resolution, but not in a forced or unnatural way, just simply more obvious as there is little in the way of grunge or fuzziness smearing the result. The spatial

characteristics of instruments also benefit from this articulation. Solo piano, for example, where the initial strike sat solidly between the speakers while the reverberation of the space in which it was recorded decayed away to effectively define where the boundaries were, while the speakers would 'disappear' in a way that usually only small precision boxes achieve. ▶



CDSA and the ARC Ref 7, there seemed a larger gulf than I am used to between digital

and analogue replay via the relatively modest Linn set up, the latter sounding surprisingly good. This was a factor that was going to become a recurring theme throughout the review period; the Salon's proving time and time again to be

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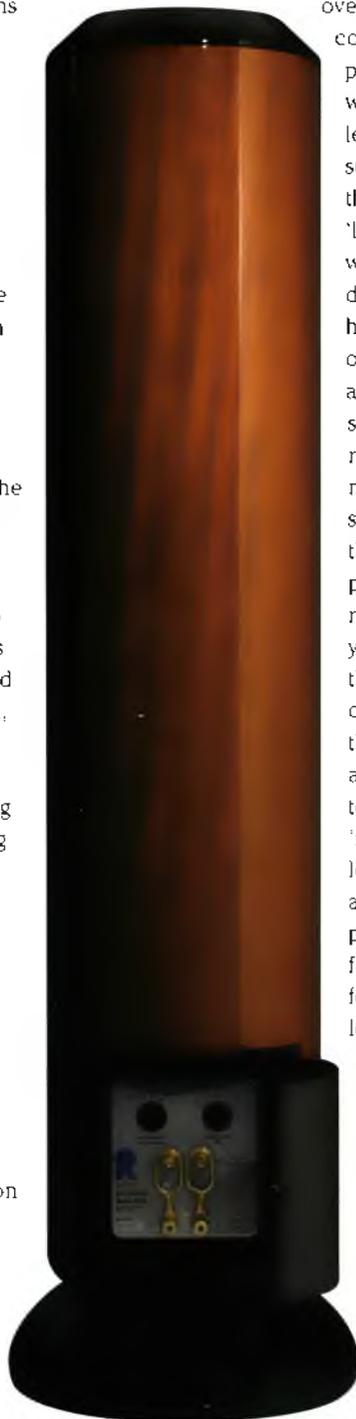
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▶ Another trait that I have tended to associate with good panel loudspeakers is coherence, and multi-drive unit designs generally seem to fall behind in this area. While it took me a little while to put my finger on it, I realised that the Salon's were exceptional when it came to reproducing the sense of the whole audio bandwidth with everything arriving at the same time. A well-recorded string quartet gave you an added dimension of the empathy between the players which I have rarely encountered, while the relationship that (hopefully) exists between drummer and bass player with good, non synthetic rock music was at times exhilarating, providing the rhythm and timing that moved the music along at a pace set by the players, not the system. It does of course help that the Salon's are capable of particularly fast, taught and visceral bottom-end that you feel as well as hear, with genuine extension that effortlessly fills the room. The only thing missing was an occasional lack of bite in the midrange with certain electric guitar solos, but it's quite possible that what was missing was the distortion that I am used to hearing, as it was the only time I felt a little disappointed



But for me, one of the most interesting things about the Salon 2s one that I really came to appreciate over time, was the consistency of their performance across a wide range of listening levels. You won't be surprised to learn that the Salon's do 'loud' exceptionally well, with fearsome dynamics and no hint of hardening or compression; and because of the sheer clarity in their reproduction it is not until you hear something (or don't) that puts things in perspective that you realise just how loud you have been playing them. On several occasions, alone in the house, I spent an evening listening to those tracks that 'need' to be played loud and grinning like an idiot at the sheer power and drama that flowed effortlessly forth from the Salons, leaving the room with that contented feeling you get after a really good concert. But turn the volume down - right down, and the Revel's continued to deliver music with exactly the right proportions, with all the attack and dynamics beautifully intact, and losing little of the excitement and emotion that makes listening enjoyable.

I guess you can tell that I have been pretty impressed by the Salon 2s. While pushing forward the boundaries of moving-coil loudspeakers, particularly in terms of minimizing coloration and distortion, they have managed to do this in such a way as to enhance the musical experience rather than render it an academic and unemotional event. However, the refinement comes at a price, as the Revel's are both demanding of genuine load tolerant power, and ruthlessly revealing of its quality. But at the end of the day, they have restored my faith in modern loudspeaker technology, and as with all truly great products, have left me wanting more. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Four-way reflex loaded loudspeaker
Drive units:	1x 25mm beryllium dome tweeter 1x 100mm midrange 1x 165mm mid-woofer 3x 200mm woofer
Sensitivity:	86 dB @ 2.83 Volts @ 1 m
Impedance:	6 Ohms nominal, 3.7 minimum @90 Hz
Frequency range:	-3dB from 29 Hz - 45 kHz
Dimensions(WxHxD):	279 x 1185 x 504mm
Weight:	81 kg ea.
Price:	£15000

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Asking Questions? Giving Answers!

The Grand Prix Audio Monaco Turntable

by Roy Gregory

Turntable design has seen little real innovation since the 1980s, with development fastening instead on the refinement of existing approaches – refinement that has followed two basic paths: increasing simplicity and increasing mass. Indeed, the vast majority of record players now offered to the public constitute subtle variations on an extremely basic theme, rigidly coupled plinth systems support heavy platters, belt driven from standalone motors. The more you pay the more you get: more belts, more motors, more mass. Okay, so I'm exaggerating slightly, but the only



really innovative turntables I've seen since the original AR-XA, are the Versa

Dynamics 2.0 air-bearing design and its spiritual descendents, the Rockport record players, culminating in the impressive and vastly expensive Sirius III, complete with a dual-axis air-bearing, zero-contact direct-drive system and vacuum platter, all contained in a massive, active air-suspended and constrained layer plinth. No wonder the purchase price was astronomical.

For us mere mortals such exotic

creations are largely irrelevant, leaving us with a choice of variations on the belt-driven theme – variations that have, in fairness, achieved a high level of performance, given the inherent shortcomings of the approach. Shortcomings? Well – yes. I'm afraid that given the essential dichotomy at the heart of turntable design, a stretchy belt isn't exactly a high-tech response.

The problem facing any turntable



designer is to create a player that revolves at accurate, stable speed and does so quietly (meaning, without excessive mechanical vibration). The trouble is that accurate, stable speed control demands a close-coupled drive system and the motor just happens to be the biggest single source of vibration in the unit. Hence the use of belt-drive, which doesn't just decouple the motor noise, it also helps solve the far thornier issue of real-time variations in speed, through the twin devices of elasticity and slippage. So, far

from subtle changes in motor speed are evened out by the belt into less jagged and intrusive variations. Like I said, it may not be sophisticated, but it is surprisingly effective. So much so that it drove off the commercial threat of direct-drive with comparative ease, despite the latter's clear theoretical benefits. You see, even if you coupled a decent, quiet direct-drive motor to a well-engineered bearing (which actually isn't that difficult) the Achilles heel was the speed control system, which used servos to hunt the correct speed. The end result was arguably a platter that turned constantly too fast or too slow, but most damagingly of all, was constantly changing speed, a subtle distortion the ear detected all too readily. The advantage of a belt drive is that those fluctuations in speed are far more gradual and thus less intrusive.

Turntable designers have responded to these issues by applying inertia: ever-heavier platters or auxiliary fly-wheels. They've also built better and more accurate motor control systems. The problem is that the heavier the platter the more powerful (and thus noisier) the motor has to be and the less capable it is of controlling the system's speed accurately. In fact, if you are not careful the platter starts to drive the motor, a highly undesirable situation! Of course, designers have worked long, hard and with varying levels of success to deal with these problems, but every solution applied has one thing in common: it is ►

► trying to ameliorate the effects rather than eliminate the cause – which is the belt itself.

It was against this background of turntable development that Grand Prix Audio set out to apply their proven engineering and materials expertise to the creation of a clean sheet design. Eschewing conventional wisdom and design approaches, they embarked on a fundamental re-examination of the problems of record replay and arrived at a simple (but staggering) conclusion. The single most important aspect of turntable performance should be speed stability, as this defines the accuracy of the pitch information embedded in the record.

Yet existing standards of measurement were wholly inadequate when it came to defining both absolute accuracy and stability. With a background in the high-tech world of car racing, where each design project is very much a team effort and results are measured against an empirical standard, their response was entirely predictable: they assembled a team of engineering partners with the necessary skills, and set out to devise a measurement protocol capable of revealing the effects of the various engineering solutions applied. Having done that they could finally set to work on product development – and what a product they produced.

GPA's Monaco turntable breaks all the analogue rules: it's small where the competition is big, it's direct rather than belt driven and in a world where mass

and quality are seemingly indivisible, it's positively svelte. It's also superbly finished, beautifully executed and reassuringly expensive (should you need the price of your equipment to reassure you as to its quality). To dyed in the wool vinyl addicts of the sort who might consider dropping £12K on a turntable, that presents quite a challenge. After all, real men don't listen to record players they might actually be able to lift up! But look at the engineering that's gone into the Monaco and it's awfully hard not to be impressed, both by the

to predict the results of its action, thus applying just enough corrective "nudge" to avoid overshoot and re-correction. Thus it doesn't just keep the speed (well) within the under/over limits, any changes are minimal and smooth, rather than sudden or jerky. Perhaps it's better to describe it as maintaining rather than correcting the speed, a notion that gives a better sense of the progressive nature of its action. The result is an incredibly smooth and cog-less drive system. This is a world away from the on-off servos that marred early direct-drive performance. It also avoids or minimizes the kind of cyclic errors that can



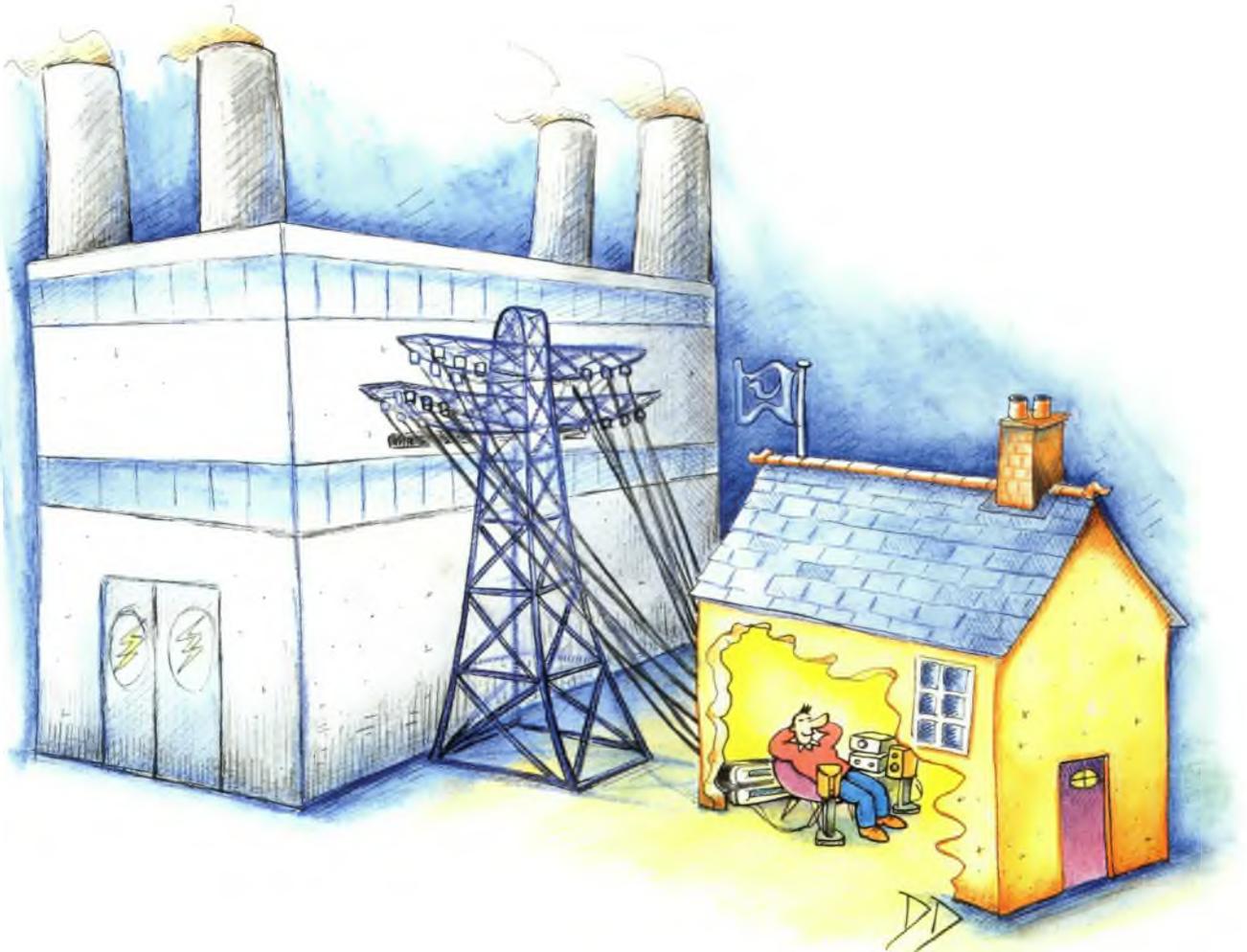
attention to detail and the thinking behind it.

Heart of any table is the drive system and having settled on speed stability as the key performance parameter then it was a very short step to direct-drive. Executing that drive system was another matter. The Monaco's motor is based on a 12-pole DC design with a ceramic rotor, originally developed for use in the micro-precision field of IC and chip production. The underside of the platter carries an encoder disc with over 4700 individual lines that are optically read over 4000 times a second, the results being fed to sophisticated DSP control circuitry. Where this differs from most solutions is that rather than simply reading any error and correcting it, the circuit is able

afflict belt drive systems, both through slippage but also concentricity issues with drive pulleys and platters. Any drive system will be prone to error, but the important thing to note here is the nature of those errors and that they vary with different systems, rather like the nature of distortion generated by a valve as opposed to a solid-state amplifier. So whilst belt drives tend to exhibit relatively high levels of cyclic error as well as individual random events, the Monaco's direct drive system virtually eliminates cyclic errors, confining itself to specific random events. Causal linkage is always an attractive but dangerous path, but this lack of cyclic ►



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► error and the smearing and rhythmic imprecision that goes with it is exactly what you'll hear when you listen to the Grand Prix 'table.

This complex and highly controllable motor system is in turn built around a sophisticated pressurised oil-bath bearing, in which the platter's rotational action pumps lubricant up the shaft of the bearing, creating a system in which there is zero horizontal contact. The vertical axis is supported by a ceramic ball resting on a proprietary hybrid alloy thrust-plate, coupled to the bearing shaft by a damped support rod, the whole assembly submerged in the oil reservoir. Those surprised by the physical contact maintained in the vertical axis should reflect on designer Alvin Lloyd's reasoning: any fluid, flexible, magnetic or air interface introduced at this point will inevitably introduce a vertical spring rate, which will in turn impact on the reading of vertically encoded information.

This brings us to the final element in the drive system, which is of course the platter, a precision machined magnesium alloy disc coupled to a phosphor-bronze mass ring that both damps the whole and optimally locates its centre of gravity. GPA are reluctant to discuss the surface finish of the platter save to say that it is extremely rigid, thus preventing any vertical deviation of the record and subsequent loss or distortion of vertical amplitude information. In this regard, the low mass, self-damping and extreme rigidity of the magnesium exceeds the performance of all but the most sophisticated and costly composite constructions. Its selection again underlines the emphasis on sound engineering and the appropriate use of materials rather than simple, cost no object extravagance, an approach that informs the entire design of the Monaco.

Taken as a whole, this system has consistently delivered speed accuracy better than 0.002% peak error, measured under the most exacting conditions and with no measurable rumble. This compares to the 0.001% claimed for the

(also direct drive) Sirius III – although no parameters or measurement protocol are published to support that figure. The next best (and rather more relevant) published claim for speed consistency is in the region of 0.005% and that comes from the belt-driven Continuum. But GPA go a stage further, applying a 3-Sigma protocol to the platter itself, rather than the motor, thus eliminating downstream inaccuracy in the drive system and measuring actual speed consistency on a nanosecond by nanosecond basis. This means that no more than three individual instances of speed variation approaching the chosen parameters are acceptable within a thousand samples, a dramatically more accurate standard than the RMS method usually applied. Do the maths and you discover that in practice, it's entirely possible for the Monaco to play an entire 20minute LP side without deviating from its speed by more than 0.002% on a single occasion, confining any speed deviation to far lower levels – an astonishing degree of speed consistency.

Given the inherent accuracy and low noise levels of the table, it's no surprise that GPA were unwilling to compromise concentric accuracy with a peripheral clamp, or risk the noise and variability associated with vacuum clamping. Instead they've opted for a simple screw-down clamp, but use it in conjunction with a soft washer that is placed beneath the disc and compressed by it, thus damping the record. The washers come in three different durometers (or hardnesses) to optimally damp different weight records, another example of the meticulous engineering that's been applied throughout this record player. The end result is a near textbook speed performance from a critically damped platter system whose drive is contained within the lateral dimensions of the platter itself.

The second part of the motor-unit equation is the plinth system, a structure that must deal with the practical questions of accommodating and

levelling the platter and arm, as well as dealing with internal and external sources of vibration. The compact nature of the drive system itself means that the plinth needs to be no bigger than the platter, while GPA's experience with composite structures and mechanical resonance means that the actual shape and construction of the plinth offer a previously impossible range of options. They have chosen to create a double skin structure, it's complex shape moulded in carbon-fibre and accurately integrating all the hard-points necessary for mounting the external elements and drive. This includes a six-bolt fixing for the alloy outrigger arm-board, located near the deck's centre of gravity. The precision machined alloy plate that supports the arm simply slides in horizontally before fixing, allowing the 'table to support tonearms of any length or type, pivoted or parallel tracking, although only one at a time. Alloy? Yes, alloy. Real engineering is about the appropriate use of materials rather than profligate expenditure. The specially selected aluminium serves its purpose perfectly, so why bother with a complex and more costly composite solution of dubious merit?

The void between the two outer skins is filled with a polymer damping compound creating an incredibly rigid, dimensionally accurate, stable and inert structure, representing the second layer in the 'table's defence against both internal and external mechanical resonance. Second? Yes. The first is the oil-bath which is an effective damper for resonance generated within the dynamic elements of the bearing itself. Bolting the bearing sleeve, well and stationary parts of the motor directly to the plinth creates an effective sink for residual energy, which will otherwise simply circulate within the structure.

GPA have eschewed any form of external suspension, instead preferring to rely on users investing in a proper support, an area of course in which the company cut its audio teeth. ►

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► Instead the plinth is supported on three conical alloy feet, each tipped with a large diameter ceramic ball, the ball and socket arrangement allowing the feet to pivot, ensuring a firm footing. One of the feet is fixed in height and this is located immediately beneath the tonearm outrigger to avoid introducing an unwanted element of flexibility or source of vibration at this critical point. The others support the opposite side of the plinth, their balls seated in very finely threaded sockets that allow for precise height adjustment. The underside of each foot is finished off with a thin layer of Sorbothane, again selected to match the weight distribution and mass of the deck. Set up consists of installing the plinth and platter on the feet, levelling the whole and filling the bearing oil bath through ports provided in the label area of the platter with the syringe provided, then sealing them with self-adhesive labels. As well as the syringe you also get a machinist's level, a beautifully executed spanner to fit the levelling sockets, a holder on which to store the compression washers for the platter, and a superbly machined plate to support your tonearm's external termination box (should it have one).

Control is provided by the small external micro-processor unit and this provides on/off, 33 and 45, with a 10-second lag between switch on and full speed at 33. There's also fine pitch control in 0.2% steps, with an illuminated scale showing the current setting. The control unit is fed from a small DC transformer and connected to the table via a locking Lemo connector. Once assembled the deck's diminutive proportions will come as something of a shock to audiophiles brought up on the "bigger is better" school of turntable design, although the all-up weight of 18kg and the lightweight platter gives you a fair indication of just how inert the plinth element really is.

I installed the Monaco turntable in two locations, atop the heavy-duty top shelf mounted on my finite elemente HD-03

rack and also on GPA's own superbly engineered Perspex and carbon-fibre Brooklands wall-shelf, a unit that shares materials and the critically-damped approach of the deck. The deck proved remarkably impervious to differences in support, and subtly greater transparency and focus from the wall shelf could simply reflect its solid mounting compared to the floor standing rack. Either way, the deck performed superbly. Tonearm used was a current Triplanar VIIi, with a range of different cartridges. As previously described, setting the deck up is an object lesson in engineering exactitude with both the tools and the measure available to ensure perfect results easily achieved. Moving it short distances is similarly simple; just make sure that you keep it level to prevent spillage from the oil bath (and having a second pair of hands available to place the feet is a real bonus).

Expectation is a funny thing. Having got the Grand Prix table installed, what exactly should you anticipate from this record player, a design that seemingly flies in the face of both current fashion and audiophile dogma? If familiarity breeds contempt then it also creates that expectation, an anticipation of how a record and record player should sound. Well, be warned, the Monaco sounds as different as it looks... Which creates something of a problem for the reviewer; on the one hand comparisons with existing turntables could be construed as negatives, on the other, the flaws and sins of existing players are familiar to readers (as noted above) whereas this design delivers quite a different sonic thumbprint which you've got to identify before you can have any hope of describing it.

So let's start somewhere completely different and look at CD and what its

introduction revealed about record replay. For all its other faults, CD highlighted two major flaws in the performance of turntables: the digital medium offered superior top to bottom linearity and greater overall speed consistency*. Suddenly, a great many turntables sounded lumpy, bumpy and wobbly as well.

Naturally, analogue designers responded to the situation with improvements of their own. The trouble is, that like a spot on the end of someone's nose, once you notice it your eyes just can't ignore it. You can cover it up but that just hides it, it doesn't cure the problem. Now, whilst there were those who described the thickened and muddled low frequency energy emanating from their record players as audio "truth", once you heard it there was no ignoring the inevitable conclusion that this was the structure of the turntable you were hearing, it's inability to deal with stored energy in a linear fashion, rather than the inherent warmth, weight and roundness of the musical performance. Besides which, just because something isn't "real" or "right", it doesn't mean that it's necessarily nasty or unpleasant. Indeed, carefully managed, this weight and warmth contributes in no small part to the appeal of record replay, adding impact and a feeling of power as well as a cuddly smoothness to the vinyl medium's established strengths of rhythmic flow, musical structure and phrasing – and most important of all – the absence of "process" from the sound. There's also no escaping the fact that most CD players are (for all their technical virtues) more musically intrusive than record players; you hear them working. Turntables might impact the recording more, but you notice them less. Collectively, there's no question that for today's more refined ►

* Speed consistency isn't the same thing as temporal coherence. CD might not have had rhythmic integrity and its sense of musical ebb and flow suffered as a result, but its pitch security was undeniable and in many cases piano recordings came as both a shock and a revelation to listeners subconsciously inured to constant, subtle speed variation. Of course, a great deal of the rhythmic dislocation was subsequently laid at the door of brutally inadequate digital filter design, but the whole quagmire of up- and over-sampling and the alternative of filterless players is a whole discussion in itself which we'll be looking at shortly.

► record players, the many performance pluses outweigh the negatives.

So where does that leave a solution that in many respects promises the best of both worlds? Greater linearity and speed stability combined with the proven qualities of vinyl replay: Champion, you might think. But there's also the danger that it satisfies the adherents of neither, lacking the habit forming additives of most vinyl systems and the ease of use and software compatibility for those who prefer CD replay. Give a tea drinker a cup of Earl Grey instead of PG Tips and he'll notice the difference,



maybe even the superiority. But if he takes three sugars and you don't put any in the Earl Grey, that's what he'll notice! Or, in other words, technical superiority in and of itself is no good if the baby goes out with the bathwater.

This has been a long (and convoluted) introduction. I've spent a lot of time on the Grand Prix Audio turntable's structure and thinking, and nearly as much setting a scene. Why? Because this deck is genuinely different and understanding its achievements means appreciating how it works and why it is so different.

Quite a build up; so just how does the Monaco sound? Well, like any table that depends on the arm and cartridge. With the Monaco it depends more than most. So let's start with the turntable sounding at its best, and later we can discuss the issues around matching other bits to

achieve that performance.

The first thing you'll hear with the Monaco is a startling level of clarity and lack of confusion. The soundstage is wide, wide open and deep, and individual images are beautifully distinct from one another, but this is not the sort of etched, hyper-reality that you get from high-definition, imaging *uber alles* systems. Instead you are presented with a natural, unforced sense of

space and perspective, location and separation, built on the foundation of uncluttered, top to bottom linearity. There is no thickening or smudging at the bottom; there is no excess weight bubbling up to blur the mid-band and flesh out the sound. Instead, instruments and voices are naturally weighted and exist with their own tonality and in their own acoustic space. That's why they separate out so readily.

The natural assumption that goes with this is that the Monaco will sound leaner and less substantial than other decks and to a point that's true. But back to back comparisons (and I've

been exhaustive in this) always end up with the competition sounding rounded, blurred and overweight, the GPA consistently delivering better pitch security, texture and harmonic resolution, not just at low frequencies but across the board. Of the decks on hand the one with the closest spectral balance is the Clearaudio Master Reference, which sounds notably more linear than other decks anyway, yet still fails to match the Monaco. Doesn't the absence of weight rob the deck of impact and

musical power? Again, close comparisons to the resident tables show that whilst the likes of the Kuzma XLA and TNT with Rimdrive initially offer greater weight and impact, a more impressive sense of drive, actually, the GPA bests both in terms of musical drama and expressive range, its greater textural palette and dynamic discrimination easily countering the sheer weight of the other decks, often leaving them sounding ponderous and puffed out. Ever watch an athlete at the tail end of a long race, the guy trailing in at the back of the pack? That lack of life, the jump, spring and energy that so obviously propelled the winner, that's what the comparisons brought to mind*.

Which brings us to the question of speed – or pace. You might think that the GPA will sound fast. It doesn't. Instead it sounds right, and there's a big, big difference. In days of yore, turntable manufacturers would occasionally set their demonstration units to run slightly fast, giving them a lively, crisp and upbeat sound that impresses in a quick .5/8 dem. The trouble is that the longer you listen the more you notice the hurried, cluttered and congested nature of the sound. The Monaco is the exact

* Interestingly, the Rimdrive has transformed the performance of the TNT by moving it – you guessed it – significantly further towards the type of performance offered by the Monaco. There's also a new power supply coming for the XLA and it will be interesting to see how that affects things

▶ opposite. Musical information arrives exactly as, when and where it should, meaning that the impact and drama come from the performance of the players (not the performance of the player – err, turntable). It's this sense of uncluttered organization that dovetails with the GPA's linearity and even spectral balance to deliver its astonishing clarity and intelligibility. Individual notes are beautifully defined: placement, leading edge, harmonic development and decay. But just as importantly their spacing and the spaces between them become more natural and more apparent, which in turn makes phrasing much more effective and powerful. So, listening to Janis Ian's 'Some People's Lives', the pauses between each line become almost as telling and poignant as the lyrics themselves, adding emphasis to the words but also locking the vocal to the studied pacing and accents of the piano. The end result is a huge increase in the emotional impact and sense of natural delivery on this starkest and simplest of songs. As you add instruments and density to the music and mix, the benefits become even more obvious.

The third leg to this particular performance tripod, a natural extension of what you hear on the Janis Ian track, is the uncanny overall musical coherence. The different parts of a composition, different strands, different instruments, manage to lock together into a coherent – and above all, recognizable – whole. That makes it easy to hear what's going on, so you spend less brain effort on sorting things out and more on enjoying them: which makes for both more involving and relaxed listening. But, in the same way that the clarity and intelligibility depends on the speed consistency, this third quality is inextricably entwined with the other two. It's the inherent balance, the integrity of these interlocking attributes that makes the Monaco what it is – and allows it to do what it does, which is to provide a clear and naturally proportioned musical skeleton. It's up to the arm and cartridge

to put flesh and clothes on the body, to decide on the physique and dress sense if you like, but it's hard to quibble with the foundation provided by the table.

Which brings us to the question of partners for the chassis. Of course, providing such a stable platform means that the type of tonearm employed is wide open: gimbal, uni-pivot, even a parallel tracker, the Monaco would suit them all. More importantly, your choice needs to have an even balance top to bottom, because the deck is going to show up any leanings one way or another, and it must – absolutely must – offer record by record VTA adjustment. Okay, so I've been banging the drum on this for a while but hear me out. Anybody who sat in on our demonstrations at RMAF or the Manchester Show should be in no doubt that VTA affects rhythmic integrity and musical flow. Get it wrong and the timing consistency and coherence of the Monaco replay platform will tell you instantly. The music will become stilted, thin, tonally bleached and disjointed if the arm is too high, purposeless, bland and lacking in energy if it's too low. But fear not, the right height is equally clear, making adjustment a doddle. Increasingly, topflight arms are offering this facility so choice is hardly limited and you quickly get accustomed to this being just another part of the record playing ritual.

The deck's self-effacing nature also puts a heavy burden on cartridge choice. At first glance you might be tempted to go for something warm and fulsome, adding familiar body and weight to the overall picture. Fine, if you want the Monaco to sound more like all the other record players out there. Me, I'd rather play to its strengths. So, mounting the Koetsu Urushi Sky Blue (a fine cartridge in the right context) it was made to sound sluggish and overburdened. The Clearaudio Accurate, with its dramatic and colourful "double dipper" balance sounded exaggerated and obvious, while never has the resolution shortfall of the Lyra Scala sounded so apparent when

compared to the Titan i. Indeed, the Titan left its little brother sounding almost clumsy in comparison. So, first priority with your choice of cartridge must be an even top to bottom balance (I'd think that the Benz LP and Dynavector XVI would both score well in this regard). Second is resolution and transparency and here the Titan rules supreme. Adding the Lyra's dexterity, agility and dynamic discrimination to the clarity and composure of the deck brings out the best in the both of them, revealing every last nuance in the playing and enunciation of the performers. You want up close and personal? You got it, but despite the transparency and immediacy, the music is never forced, never fired at you. It's just right there in front of you.

But there's another aspect to this. In many respects your cartridge will sound more like itself than ever before. But a natural extension of that is that the impact and influence of the phono-stage, its matching to the cartridge becomes much, much more significant. The difference between pick-ups was plenty apparent with the Groove Plus, but my preference for the Titan increased dramatically as soon as I put the Connoisseur in the system. So think about your vinyl replay set up as including everything up to the input sockets of your line-stage (including cables) or you'll be limiting the potential performance. The problem with all that clarity and transparency is that it cuts both ways; you hear it when it's there but boy do you notice if it's not. Perhaps the most telling example of this was a brief flirtation with the Ortofon MC7500. The Monaco delivered up all the tonal colours and textures this cartridge is justifiably renowned for, but you could almost hear the Connoisseur running out of steam when it came to gain. Substituting the Groove the results were way better, but the honesty of the deck still made it all too clear that the dynamic range and impact were suffering.

Does that make the Monaco one of those decks that leaves half of your ▶

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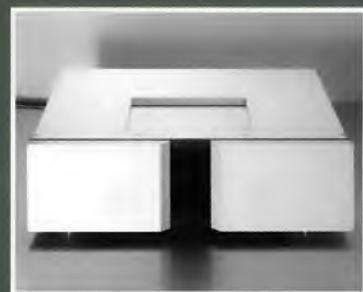
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► record collection unplayable? Actually, it's quite the opposite, but let's look at this in a slightly different way. Instead of checking out its performance with a disc you know, pick something new that you've never played before. Cue it up on your existing deck and play the opening track a couple of times. Now swap to the Monaco and I reckon you'll notice two things: it seems like you can hear twice as much, but also you get into the music, catch its thread and its groove, twice as fast.

articulate, the nuances in the delivery more natural. The paring away of the bass weight revealed patterns and textures that gave the lower registers character and an undulating sophistication lost in the previous pile-driver incarnation. But most telling of all was the way in which the percussion motifs scattered through the track locked into place and defined the rhythm and pace, setting the structure and progress of the piece.

Another "first time" experience? Play a piano disc – and pretty much any one will do. Clearly the Janis Ian is a contender here, but you

the length of the notes and the deck's exceptional speed stability make this a perfect match. But it goes much further than that. It's the clarity and micro-dynamic discrimination, the ability to hold different sounds at different levels separate that allows the Monaco to reveal the full harmonic and structural complexity of the instrument.

Cisco's recent release of the Heifetz *Kreutzer Sonata* underlines this last point perfectly. I've always held a candle for the Martzy reading, finding Heifetz flashy and ostentatious. But the superiority of the Cisco transferred combined with the Monaco reveals a different picture. Yes, Martzy certainly serves the music better; the Heifetz is definitely a Heifetz – if you get my drift. But for the first time I have a 'table that can keep pace with the flashing bow, the cascade of notes



The first phenomenon is easy enough to understand. In some respects you are hearing more because the Monaco is unmasking more information, but what's really going on is that you can make more sense of the whole, that the picture is more complete. As a result you get the second effect, which is down to the music communicating more effectively: you really do understand it better.

The first time I noticed this was on the Jonathan Rice album *Further North* which is a great record, but one with seriously dense bass mixes that tend to dominate proceedings along with the voice. Playing the record for the first time on the TNT I was bowled over by the presence, power and drive. But transferring it to the Monaco the array of instruments, especially the guitars and percussion were freed from the swamp and the carefully crafted mix emerging for the first time. The voice was more distinct, the lyrics more comprehensible and

can pick one almost at random, because most turntables don't actually manage to reproduce anything like the full weight and complexity of a piano. What you'll hear from the Grand Prix will make you realize just what you've been putting up with for so long. The sonorous depth and multiple harmonics it produces in the bass, their clarity and lack of smearing, the sharper attack and unmistakably percussive qualities of the right hand notes, the sense of an instrument, a body, a rack of tensioned wires, the effortless length of the decay, the clear use of the damping pedal; they all contribute to something that's obviously, recognisably, unmistakably a piano. Now listen to almost any other 'table! Of course,

that explode from the Maestro's violin. What is unveiled is a technical *tour de force* of literally breath-taking dimensions. The ability to effortlessly unravel the complex runs and rapid fire salvos brings true appreciation, a clarity and lack of congestion that has more in common with life than our expectations of recordings.

Think now, what that means for other records. The way the Monaco unravels tracks makes it a window on recorded quality – and yes I did mean "recorded" not "recording". What will emerge from your records is the quality of the playing, the artistry of the players. So, "Jammin'" from *Babylon By Bus* becomes an infectious, joyous romp, the agile, mobile bass line driving ►

► things along, Marley on an obvious high and feeding off the audience. Great recording? Not a bit of it – but a great band and a great night! Where many systems struggle to capture the chemistry and frisson of really tight ensemble playing, be it the Wailers or Quarteto Italiano, the Monaco/Titan/Connoisseur chain revelled in it, allowing you, the listener, to do the same. The downside is that the deck will also show up clumsy playing and groups that aren't as tight as they should be, studio work that breaks rather than builds the continuity and flow in a track.

So far I've yet to uncover a significant flaw in the Grand Prix Audio Monaco. On a practical level I'd like a lid and I'd like to be able to mount a second arm. But musically speaking it's weighting of instrumental energy right across the range and especially at high frequencies, its ability to float acoustic bass and drums or accurately capture the speed and tonality of percussion, is very near to life, and only a subtle lack of woodiness to cello and double bass betray it. I'm not even prepared to lay that at the door of the 'table as the other decks I've used with the Titan simply don't resolve low frequency harmonics with anything like the same clarity, so it could be the cartridge. Likewise, you can find decks that conjure a greater sense of acoustic space or simply deliver more wallop. But this deck's deviations from the natural are sufficiently small to be subsumed by taste rather than accuracy. Which is another way of saying that if you want a bigger, bolder and more colourful picture you might well prefer the TNT, greater low-end weight and a more palpable acoustic, then the Kuzma. But whilst you might prefer another deck I suspect you'll find it as hard as me to fault the

Monaco's musical integrity and overall coherence.

More importantly, that sonic integrity reflects the engineering integrity of the design as a whole. It would be easy to hang the performance benefits of this 'table on the hook labelled direct drive, but there's much more to it than that. They're also down to the 'table's ability to generate and dissipate energy and the sophistication of its bearing design and speed controller. No one factor



reigns supreme, they all contribute. In the same way, this isn't about the superiority of direct drive over belt drive: it's about the speed accuracy and consistency of this system, the superiority of this implementation rather than the specific technology employed. The important things are the speed consistency, the physical structure, the materials used and the execution of the design. There's more than one way to build a turntable. Success rests on following your chosen path to its logical extreme, which is exactly what Grand Prix Audio have done – thankfully with equal emphasis on the logic AND the extreme. Indeed, no designer or manufacturer has ever been as frank and open about their 'table's technical achievements or *raison d'être* – as GPA's white paper on the deck will make clear. Read it and you'll see that buying this deck rests on more than just the promise of performance.

So direct-drive might seem like

the star, but even a star needs a supporting cast, and here that cast are also stellar – as is the resultant performance. In many ways this is the most accomplished, convincing and insightful turntable I've used at home. The more I've used it the more I've enjoyed it; the more I've put in, the more I've got out. Will I miss it when it goes? Why don't they make stick on patches for vinyl withdrawal? Of the serious vinyl replay contenders this is by far the most practical. Nor, given

the cost of the competition and the material content and execution involved here, is it extravagantly expensive. It's demanding and rewarding in equal measure and if Grand Prix Audio's Monaco doesn't sound like other turntables maybe, just maybe it sounds like the great 'tables to come.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Direct-drive turntable
Speeds:	33 and 45 RPM, user variable
Speed Accuracy:	Better than 0.002% peak deviation 0.0014% RMS
Wow And Flutter:	Better than 0.002%
Rumble:	Below measurable levels
Tonearm Compatibility:	Universal
Dimensions (WxHxD):	310 x 130 x 390mm (depending on arm mount)
Weight:	18.2kg
Price:	£12000

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Dog Day Afternoon...

Meitner's CDSA-SE SACD Player finally makes sense of Digital Sound

by Anthony H. Cordesman

High quality digital replay is a mess. Conflicting formats and their competing claims have created a complex and confusing field in which the all too prosaic realities of everyday digital performance have been obscured and glossed over. I have severe reservations about most of the claims I have heard manufacturers and other reviewers make regarding "advances" in the sound quality of CD players and about the merits of SACD in general. In far too many cases, I have not heard the benefits that other reviewers have heard, and high cost, high-end players have not differed enough from much lower cost units to justify their price tag.

Underpinning this is the simple, inescapable truth that no player can ever correct the fundamental sonic limitations inherent in the now hopelessly outdated CD medium. As for SACD, far too many highly praised players have offered only limited sonic benefits over CD, and far too many SACDs are simply bitstream versions of recordings made using much older and less advanced equipment.

Yet here I am, listening to (with considerable pleasure) and about to praise (in considerable depth) the Meitner CDSA-SE. It's not a path I undertake lightly. The Meitner has its own limitations and it also can't overcome the inherent limitations in what should be a redundant format – but it does do a better job than anything else I have heard to date. It gets more out of CD and mediocre CD recordings

that any other player I know. Equally important, it shows just how good SACD can be when the data on the disc is a true, high quality bitstream recording. And those things combined make this the only high cost player I have yet heard that clearly justifies its price tag.

Never Trust a Digital Recording Process Older Than You Are (At Least in Dog Years)

I am not a "digiphobe." The problems I have heard in CD since the earliest Sony and Phillips players have not stopped me from doing a great deal of my listening



to CDs, or from building up a collection of silver discs to match my black vinyl ones.

I use an iPod and Apple lossless compression, and even put up with those original Telarc and Denon LPs made from the first, crude digital masters. The fact is, however, that anyone who listens seriously to 24-bit/96 or 192kHz or advanced bitstream recordings quickly realizes that 16-bit/44.1kHz CDs come at a sonic cost that no CD player can possibly correct.

You hear those sonic limitations even using direct live recording masters of 16-bit/48kHz digital tapes, or listening to the best 16-bit/44.1kHz CDs. As good as the best CD recordings are there is still less clarity in low-level passages, less articulation of dynamic contrasts and less musical life. There is a loss of harmonic detail in the upper midrange and treble that simply isn't evident on higher resolution digital discs. More contentiously – as it is less obvious and I can find no technical explanation to justify it – modern digital media produce more powerful and detailed deep bass.

In fact, it's hardly surprising that the sonic shortcomings of 16-bit/44 or 48kHz recordings are so apparent. It's like going back in digital time from the latest PC or Mac to a Sinclair or Commodore. CD isn't just based on outdated technology, it's technology that has none of the compensating euphonic characteristics of LP or analogue tape. In fact CDs should have died at least half a decade ago, when it became possible to make 24-bit/96kHz recordings just as cheaply, and CD players with 24-bit chipsets to play them without down-sampling.

Unfortunately, the sonically excellent efforts of a few recording companies like Chesky and Classic Records to pioneer 24-bit/96kHz discs died in the rush to SACD and DVD-A, and the format wars that followed; wars that effectively killed DVD-A ►

▶ and turned SACD into a niche format for a small number of audiophiles. The impact of higher resolution digital formats was further undermined by the quality of too many of the discs that did appear. Frequently mastered from 48-bit or old analog tapes, often bedeviled by musically unrealistic surround sound effects and by the almost arbitrary assignment of the 5.1 effects channel to bass energy, height

There may be hope in True Dolby and DTS-HD – at least virtually every new Blu Ray player and decent receiver or AV processor will provide the capability to play back the equivalent of lossless 24-bit/96kHz recordings, and many will play direct SACD bitstream inputs, via HDMI 1.3). My preliminary experiences with such players and receivers are promising. But, no high-end processors and



decks are as yet available that can play True Dolby and DTS-HD, and no firm has as yet announced a commitment to issuing high-end music recordings on these formats. Moreover, some receivers that can play True Dolby and DTS-HD don't play the 24-bit/96kHz signal from

DVD-As, only ordinary Dolby, and present serious menu problems in playing back SACDs.

coming from small recording labels. These recordings are replacing the flood of mass label dross that did so much to discredit SACD in its early years, and offer sound quality that is at least up to the 24/96 level. But they don't answer the essential conundrum facing today's digital listener: how to get the most out of the best or most interesting performances trapped in the "upper mid-fi" purgatory of bad to mediocre CDs?

This is the backdrop against which I find myself viewing the Meitner CDSA-SE player, as well as the context that reveals its greatest strength. In this day and age it is a practical impossibility to acquire in-depth experience of every CD player or DAC on the market, but none I've used (including the top-of-the-line dCS and Esoteric units) does as consistently good a job of making the upper octaves of strings, woodwinds, bass, and percussion as musically clean, realistic, and life-like as the Meitner. The CDSA-SE provides more life, more air, cleaner dynamic contrasts, and more harmonic integrity with a wider range of recordings, and not simply with obvious targets like massed strings, cymbals and snare drums, or untrained soprano voice. The soundstage is less two-dimensional and has more depth, and imaging is cleaner, particularly with complex musical passages. And, at least to my ears, the mid and deeper bass is cleaner.

Moreover, the Meitner gets the best out of early and mediocre CDs – which must make up at least 80% of the CD inventory. It does not impose its character on recordings, and it does not exaggerate any given aspect of timbre, dynamics or the sound stage that is not on the original recording. Above all, it does not harden recordings in an effort to create more apparent detail. To me at least, the worst aspect of some players that seek to get the best out of CD is that they sharpen harmonics in the search for ▶

information or not at all, results were variable to say the least – often made worse by unusual menus that made proper set up difficult or didn't really explain the options they presented.

As a result, 16-bit/44.1Khz is still the de facto high-end standard for most recordings, and for most "high-end" digital listening. If anything, the popular trend is away from higher resolution towards various forms of MPEG and digital "lossy" media. A whole generation is growing up having heard nothing better than a digital recording format that is now older than they are; after all – digital ages in dog years.

Taking the Sonic "Dog's Breakfast" Out of Digital "Dog's Years"

How ironic then that the purist, two-channel "high-end" is still largely locked into "upper mid-fi" digital. Audiophiles, particularly the vast majority that remain committed to stereo, are going to be living with the technological equivalent of a "dog's breakfast" for years to come – particularly those of us with over 1,000 CDs.

There are a few glimmers of hope. The good news for classical music buffs is the growing number of really good stereo and multi-channel SACDs

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► information. It is the sonic equivalent of making excessive use of the "sharpen" control on digital photo processors. They may provide more apparent "detail" with the clearest possible recordings, but that detail is not present in live music or the original recording, and the end effect is to make most CDs sound worse rather than better. One reviewer has called this the "cut glass effect," and this kind of sound is sometimes excused as revealing the limits of ordinary CDs. It shouldn't be excused at all. Like every aspect of high-end

– and using everything from the latest audiophile CDs to the earliest Sony and Philips discs – the performance attributes outlined above are utterly consistent with any system and CD good enough to reveal them.

I am not a digital engineer, and it has been a long, long time since I opened an electronic engineering handbook, but the Meitner CDSA-SE player does have a unique technology that may explain these benefits. Where most CD players now up-sample 44.1 kHz to 192 kHz, the Meitner uses an extremely sophisticated mix of filters

me. If you open the unit, however, you find some extremely sophisticated circuit boards, a specially converted Philips drive mechanism, and top quality components in the analogue stages. It is also interesting for the non-geek to know a little of the Meitner Labs history. The following description (from the company itself) is no more self-effacing than any other audio bumpf – and one has to be as cautious of buying a manufacturer's line as ever – but it does underline that Ed Meitner has real "street cred" as a digital engineer,

Over the past 25 years, Ed has investigated all aspects of vinyl and optical disc playback and built a succession of good sounding products. He has built transport and converter separates as well as integrated players. The CDSA-SE is the finest player he knows how to build today.

In 1992, years before the rest of the industry came to understand what he had done, Ed published a little-known AES paper which explained the causes and solutions for common types of jitter in digital audio systems, he identified the key jitter phenomenon later called program-related jitter and solved it. Ed was able to make those loading discoveries by constructing his own ultra-sensitive jitter measurement device called a LIM Detector years before conventional instruments achieved a similar resolution.

Also in 1992, Ed launched the IDAT D-to-A converter, at that time the most radical audio converter ever made. (He) used a new type of up-sampler he called a "Digital Audio Translator." To this day, no ►



design, CD players need to obey the basic principle of the Hippocratic oath: "First, do no harm."

The Meitner won't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, but it does provide very different sonic benefits from the kind of tweaking you get by simply changing filter types or eliminating the filter altogether, tweaking the roll-off of the upper octaves, or subtly boosting bass a bit. There are a lot of very good CD units out there, particularly those that make effective use of up-sampling, but I find their benefits to be smaller and some to be tweaked in ways that produce synergy with some recordings and systems and not with others. After several months of using the Meitner in my own system and those of my friends

and processors to up-sample to 5.6448 MHz – twice the frequency of the bitstream process used in making SACDs. In crude terms, it converts the CD signal to a bitstream signal with a 120 dB signal to noise ratio and then uses 5th order noise shaping to push high frequency digital noise above 40kHz and far outside the audible spectrum. It then converts to analogue using a gentle filter slope.

If you want more technical data, particularly an explanation of FIR filtering, you are going to have to go to someone more qualified than

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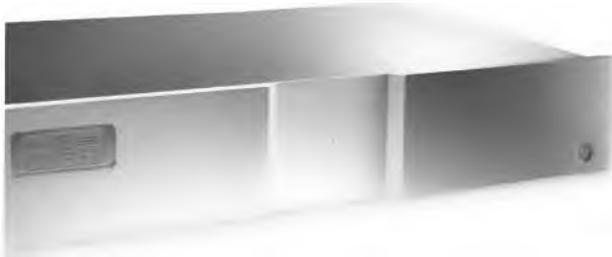


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Main image: KSL Kondo Gakuon Mono Valve Amplifiers



▶ other up-sampler has matched the sophistication and sonic authenticity of Ed's. An advanced 21st-century version of that up-sampler, now called MDAT (for Meitner Digital Audio Translator), is incorporated into the EMM Labs CDSA-SE.

Then in 1993 Ed built the BiDAT single-bit D-to-A converter, a unit so well loved that many BiDAT owners still prefer it over other converters. This was after Ed had already built earlier multi-bit and single-bit converters. The BiDAT was Ed's declaration that single-bit converters can be as good or better than multi-bit

tuning which no other audio converter can hope to match.

All this and we have yet to mention how Ed builds power supplies like no other, how he carefully builds matched dual circuits in his purely-balanced designs, how he employs 21st-century circuit board materials, how he builds audio clocks which outperform dedicated master clocks, plus a myriad of other refinements Ed has gleaned from decades of crafting fine players and converters.

high-end audiophiles have yet to become SACD converts. They have never really heard what SACD can do, partly because much of the initial reviewing of SACD focused more on expectations than actual sound quality. SACD players got praise despite mediocre upper octaves, dynamics and dynamic contrasts, and analog stages. Re-mastered and older recordings got praised that at best reflected better re-mastering rather than the sonic benefits of SACD.

It still isn't easy to separate the wheat from the chaff. Only a handful of recording companies – notably Telarc – make a serious effort to identify those recordings that are actually made using the bitstream process on the outside of the SACD package. Most companies still provide almost no data as to date, venue, and technology on the inside. While it

isn't necessary to have the business ethics of a syphilitic hyena to market SACDs, it certainly hasn't hurt Truth in packaging seems to have almost totally escaped the recording industry. You have no idea of what you are really paying for in terms of recording quality or the level of digital technology involved.

That said, I still found that the Meitner CDSA-SE produced cleaner results than the other SACD players I have auditioned, even when I played older SACDs that were based on early digital masters or which were clearly based on 16/48 recordings, like some on the Naxos label.

The sonic differences between the Meitner CDSA-SE player and the best competing SACD players I have heard where not as dramatic in reproducing low to medium quality SACDs as the improvements the Meitner CDSA-SE made in CD playback. I still, ▶



Pedigree performance...

The Meitner CDSA-SE brings the same general sonic attributes to reproducing SACD recordings that it does to reproducing CDs. Everything depends, however, on the quality of the recording that goes onto the disc. A low grade or mediocre digital recording or analogue master won't sound much better – if at all – on SACD than it does on CD. This is particularly true if the stereo layer of the recording is an afterthought while the engineer has concentrated on the multi-channel mix, or if the mastering engineer gets careless with his handling of the upper octaves in the final mix. It is also a fact of life that a 48-kHz recording is not going to sound much better on SACD than in a really good transfer to CD.

This may explain why many serious

converters

Several years later, the great sound of the BiDAT was the reason that Sony/Philips commissioned Ed to build professional converters with which to drive recognition of their new DSD format as an audiophile and archival quality technology.

For that 1997 Sony/Philips DSD commission, Ed went beyond the BiDAT and invented a discrete D-to-A converter which do not require any of the monolithic converter chips the entire audio world is stuck with. Ed's unique EMM converter is the only audio converter meeting today's high-resolution requirements which is made from discrete components, allowing Ed a degree of quality control and fine-

▶ however, kept coming back to the upper octave clarity and harmonic integrity of the Meitner.

Almost all of my home listening is classical or jazz, and much of it is to chamber music or vocal recital. I want acoustic instruments and voice to sound as live and unprocessed as possible, and I am particularly sensitive to the residual problems in digital sound with violin, viola, clarinet, and flute. Once again, the Meitner gave me superior realism to the extent the recording permitted it, as distinguished from artificial detail or "digital sharpening." This superiority also increased significantly during the review period when Meitner sent me a new upgrade to the firmware in the player. (It has both an Ethernet input and a replaceable internal board layout.)

As for the best SACD recordings, the Meitner is the first player that I have heard that competes with, and sometimes surpasses, the sound quality of the best DVD-As played back through Meridian players. I don't mean in saying this that the best SACDs are better than the best DVD-As. I still don't hear any reason for creating a proprietary SACD technology instead of making 24/96 or 192 recordings. The best Chesky, AIX and Tacet DVD-As and Classic Records 24/96 or 192 HDADs are as good as any SACDs I have ever heard.

That said, the Meitner CDSA-SE was still so good that I couldn't stop re-exploring my Telarc and Chesky SACDs, and I now have a much larger collection of new classical SACDs, with issues from Bis, BSO, Challenge, Channel Classic, Chesky, Harmonia Mundi, Etcetera, Linn, Pentatone, and Telarc, as well as Chesky and Telarc jazz recordings.

I can't tell you how most such recordings were miked, processed, and mixed. Only Telarc explicitly advertises Pure DSD on its SACDs. (Try Los Angeles Guitar Quarter, Lago Brazil Telarc SACD 60686 and Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Vaughn Williams, A Sea Symphony, Telarc 60588). No label – no matter how "audiophile" it

claims to be – provides the necessary level of detail or a diagram showing how the musicians and singers were placed or mixed to provide a given kind of imaging. As a result, some may be digital hybrids or really good 48-bit recordings. What I can tell you, is that most of the newer SACDs on these labels came close to the best 24/96 recordings, and their sound quality is notably higher than CD.

With the best SACDs, I could get a level of musical life and natural harmonic realism that I have not yet heard from any other SACD player. Dynamics were outstanding at every level, and once again, bass detail seemed superior. These are all matters of nuance and limited superiority – not "night and day," epiphany causing, or "life changing" differences – but real enough to allow the performance to compete directly with my best LPs, while offering all of the advantages of digital in terms of noise, background, and signal to noise ratio.

The Meitner isn't just for Christmas...

The sincerest form of flattery or praise a reviewer can give a product is to actually buy the review unit. This is particularly true given the £9495 a pop cost of the Meitner CDSA-SE. I did buy the review unit, and I'm glad I did so. It does the best job of elevating CD to its upper mid-fi potential of any player I know of, and when playing top quality SACDs it helps define the digital state of the art in the home. Only the best Meridian equipment seems to provide similar musical realism.

As for caveats, I would like just a touch more bass energy and dynamic life. I have heard units that provide this, although none that provide as good an overall mix of sound qualities. The Meitner is also a stereo player, not a multi-channel unit: it is not a universal player and can't play DVD-As. It has a pretty basic display with little data on the recording, and the remote is one of

the few I've ever encountered that only controls by full track rather than has a forward and reverse capability within a given track.

That said, it works just fine for stereo listening. And, the future of multi-channel almost certainly lies with Blu Ray and combo players that can directly input bitstream, True Dolby, and DTS-HD to a high-end processor via HDMI. At least for now, this is not a viable alternative. Until new units with these playback features become available, there isn't a single piece of high-end multi-channel digital playback equipment available to consumers that isn't obsolete. Some current units may be upgradeable, but this has yet to be demonstrated. If you are into high-end multi-channel, wait. Patience may not be an audiophile virtue, but buying an instant antique is not the answer. Fortunately, at least as far as two-channel goes, the Meitner certainly does deliver, and whilst there's still life in stereo, life is just what it will deliver from your discs. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	CD/SACD player
Outputs:	1pr XLR balanced 1pr RCA mono 1 x AES/EBU XLR digital
Output Level:	4V/7.2V (balanced) 2V/3.6V (unbalanced)
Software Port:	USB
Dimensions(WxHxD):	435 x 140 x 400mm
Weight:	12 kg
Price:	£9495

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The Rountree OmniMon Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

New loudspeakers debut at every hi-fi show, but nearly all of them are no more than fresh variations on well-worn and familiar themes. Encountering a new loudspeaker with even one genuinely original and radical idea is very rare indeed, so it came as quite a shock to encounter something called the OmniMon 1 which was simply stuffed with all sorts of fresh and unusual ideas, lurking in one of the smaller dem rooms at last Autumn's Heathrow show.

So what's an OmniMon, and what's so special about it? It's the creation of Rountree Acoustics, which comprises the very experienced speaker designer Paul Burton, plus his partner Fiona Rountree, who handles the administration. Burton has a remarkable track record for coming up with very unusual speakers. His CV includes the Suno Aria dynamic panel speaker and the on-the-wall Sequence. He also had an important hand in the Cyrus Icon NXT hybrid, and the large area Podium. The \$6,600/pair OmniMon 1 is entirely different from any of these, and arguably even less conventional too; so much so that it's very difficult to know just where to begin the description and explanation.

Let's start by looking at the biggest bit – the enclosure. For a decade, from 1996 until fairly recently, flat panel speaker developer and licensor NXT was a hot bed of British loudspeaker design talent – a veritable think-tank employing a number of the best known and most respected people in the field. Burton spent some years there, and got chatting to Graham Bank in the canteen one day. At Celestion in the 1980s, Bank came up with the classic SL600 compact stand-

mount, famous for using a super-light enclosure made from Acrolam with the idea of avoiding the energy storage that is endemic with conventional high mass enclosures. Bank commented that it was a shame no-one had subsequently taken the concept any further. Burton started getting ideas, and twenty years after the SL600, he's done just that.

The OmniMon 1 might be a floorstander, but its 44 litre enclosure actually weighs less than 2kg. That's because it's made from a rigid but super-lightweight structural foam, covered by a paper-like laminate. This enclosure reaches down quite close to the floor, and performs at least two important acoustic roles, but plays no part in the structural integrity of the speaker. Indeed it's quite deliberately engineered to be excited by the 180mm ScanSpeak Revelator bass/mid driver, but because it's an ultra-light structure, it doesn't store this energy for any appreciable time. It also includes no fewer than 16 carefully placed internal braces, partly to add strategic stiffening, but also to control and spread the inevitable breakup modes across a wide range of frequencies, the net result being that the whole enclosure acts a little like an NXT panel, adding an uncorrelated contribution to the total sound output.

Besides this sonic augmentation function, the well damped interior of the enclosure acts as a (rather short) transmission line, terminating an inch or so above the plinth, loading the front(!) side of the bass/mid driver (while also preventing front-to-back phase cancellation). It can do this in spite of its miniscule mass because it plays no part in supporting the drive units. Instead it's actually 'hung' from the frame of the main driver, which itself is mounted on the end of a thick steel rod, rising up from a similarly massive steel plinth. This combination, totalling something like 40kg, is literally the backbone and foundation of the design: the threaded

top of the rod passes right through the central pole-piece and back plate of the up/downward facing main driver, which is secured by a large nut, hidden beneath a polished decorative boss.

This of course means that the bass/mid diaphragm moves vertically rather than horizontally, so the direct output heard by listeners is actually radiated omni-directionally from the back of the cone.

It also means that mechanical forces generated by the main driver operate vertically, so they don't risk modulating the tweeter output, and are 'grounded' in the high mass plinth. ▶



▶ with no need for spikes: Definitely very unconventional.

So where does the tweeter go? This is not an omni-directional device – indeed rather the reverse, as it's a high quality ribbon with a 63x9mm diaphragm, based on the Aurum Cantus unit and modified by Rountree. This forward-firing device is mounted on a perforated metal collar that fits snugly against a rubber decoupling gasket fixed around the main driver's exposed magnet, giving a measure of time-alignment between the two drivers.

That classy Scandinavian main driver has a slit'n'fill paper cone diaphragm, the better to control resonances, and natural directivity means that any high frequency break-up modes are automatically directed upwards, rather than towards listeners. Faraday rings on the voice-coil former and top of the mounting post reduce distortion and inhibit over-excursion. The crossover network, operating with fairly gentle slopes at 2.2kHz (acoustically), is housed in an external metal box, which is sand-filled to prevent or damp any vibration effects. It's equipped with two pairs high quality five-way terminals, permitting bi-wiring or bi-amping, and links to the speaker enclosure by a single Neutrik Speakon terminated umbilical. Although not in our pre-production samples, regular production will have high quality LFD internal wiring.

Summarising the story so far, what

we have here is a two-way floorstanding design. Two top quality drivers are mounted very close together, providing near point-source integrity with good time-alignment. Probably uniquely and certainly interestingly, sound output is omni-directional below 2kHz but directional above. Probably uniquely too, the transmission line enclosure weighs next to nothing, avoiding energy storage and augmenting the main driver output in a carefully controlled manner.



Given all the above strangeness

and unique-nesses, it's no surprise to encounter a few oddities when attempting to measure the OmniMon I. Sensitivity is a relatively low 85dB, partly because the main driver output is omnidirectional rather than being primarily directed towards listeners. By way of compensation, however, and thanks to the extra assistance from the line/port, the bass extension is thoroughly impressive for a two-way, registering -3dB at 20Hz under

far-field in-room conditions. And the impedance is very benign from an amplifier's perspective, staying above 5 Ohms throughout.

Although the impedance traces of our samples show pretty good pair matching, the low frequency region (above 20Hz) doesn't show the double peak normally found with transmission line (and reflex) designs; instead there's just a single peak (sealed-box style) centred on 53Hz. According to Burton this is because the lower peak is both subsonic (c16Hz) and very well damped, while the line itself is broadly tuned to 28Hz. While the trace is mostly smooth and progressive, mild resonance effects are visible around 800Hz–1kHz.

Judged by my usual far-field in-room averaging technique, the mid and treble frequency balance is smooth and beautifully judged, but I did encounter some problems over the bass alignment: output is quite generous in the 30-60Hz low bass octave, but correspondingly a little weak in the mid and upper bass between 60Hz and 200Hz. This consistently proved to be the case in spite of trying the speakers in a number of likely and less likely locations. It's difficult to say whether this is a 'real' effect or an unavoidable consequence of room reflection cancellations. Best results were obtained with the speakers as far from room walls as was practically feasible.

If the measurements were a little strange, the sound quality of the OmniMon I was quite shocking – in an entirely positive way, I hasten to add. Hearing this speaker immediately makes one aware of the considerable negative impact that wooden boxes have on the sound quality of nearly every other monopole speaker on the planet. The OmniMon's super-light box is probably not actually inaudible, but its activities are certainly undetectable in practical terms, simply because ▶

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▶ its inability to store energy means that any contribution is effectively combined with the sound output of the drivers.

In a very real sense one is reminded of the wonderful freedom from boxy effects encountered with panel speakers like Quad's electrostatics, but the OmniMon 1 sounds very different from a dipole panel in other respects, so the parallels don't extend any further. Panel speakers are anything but omnidirectional, and dipoles don't have deep bass, so the OmniMon has a very different character than its freedom from box coloration leads one to expect.

In fact this speaker's ability to confound the usual stereotypes is perhaps its most obvious characteristic, and this can lead to some confusion when first confronted with such an unusual combination of qualities. We're simply not used to hearing genuinely deep bass alongside a panel-like freedom from boxiness; we're unaccustomed to the mix of omni midrange with tightly focused treble. You could almost say that Burton had re-invented the hi-fi loudspeaker. Certainly he's come up with something that sounds as unique as its build and appearance might suggest.

As with all loudspeakers, an element of compromise is involved, and I'm not going so far as to say that the OmniMon 1 is perfect or that it makes all other speakers redundant. Such claims were made for the original Quad Electrostatic when it first appeared in 1957, and while it quickly established itself as an all time classic with a reputation that persists to this day, I doubt whether companies like Tannoy and JBL were adversely affected commercially. Like that Electrostatic, the OmniMon is wonderfully free from boxy character; like the Electrostatic it has limited power handling, low sensitivity and loudness capability. Unlike the

Electrostatic, however, it has genuinely deep bass and omnidirectionality, so the overall character ends up sounding very different.

Omnis have been a minority interest for many years, and a notably controversial topic here in Britain since the early days of Bose and Sonab. The sound reaching a listener from a pair of speakers will always involve a mixture of direct and room-reflected sound, a mixture that depends on the characteristics of both speakers and room. Hi-fi speakers can be plotted on a 'direct/reflected ratio' spectrum, with the omni design at the 'high



reflectivity' end, and the full-range dipolar panel somewhere near the opposite end (just above the Stax 'Earspeaker'); most conventional speakers fall somewhere in between.

It's pretty obvious that the greater the ratio of direct to reflected sound, the less you hear the listening room and the more you hear the recording. The vice versa is that the sonic signature of the listening

room becomes significantly more obvious, which tends to increase the illusion of musicians actually performing in the room. Which is not to say that one or other approach is superior. After listening to hundreds of speakers over the years, I can hear the difference between the two extremes easily enough, but don't believe it's possible to state that one is 'right' and the other 'wrong'. Ultimately, I reckon it comes down to personal preference. However, there is one caveat: because the omni involves a much greater contribution from the room, the performance of the room will play a significant role, and that of course adds some unpredictability.

In my particular room (4.3x2.6x5.5m), which has a good basic character but with quite reflective surfaces around the speaker, the OmniMon 1 certainly delivered the big and spacious soundstage one expects from an omni. It's been quite a while since I tried an omni here – they're not all that common these days – and I have to say I rather enjoyed its 'differentness'. One plus side is the way the sound remains largely consistent and somehow more 'solid' as one moves around the room, which is in itself closer to reality than more conventional speakers – interestingly, the inevitable variations in the more directional tweeter output seemed surprisingly inconsequential.

Including more of the room in the overall sound does lead to rather more coloration arising from reflections, even though this is mitigated because the sonic signature of one's room has a familiar and known character.

Stereo imaging is perhaps the most contentious issue with omnis, and while some listeners analyse stereo soundstaging to the nth degree, I should admit it's never been a particularly high priority in my

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▶ personal listening pleasure. That's partly because in my experience it's all too rarely 'natural' in origin, and nearly always an artificial studio construct. The OmniMon 1 worked fine for me most of the time, though I should add that centrally placed voices seemed a little large and less tightly focused than a conventional forward-radiating design. Indeed, image focus generally seemed a trifle weak, though still adequate enough in my book.

A further source of unpredictability with this particular speaker could well be the floor, which in my case is wooden and suspended on joists. That's because the driver is firmly mechanically coupled to the floor via the intervening mass loading of the steel rod and plinth, and the combination has to resist the mechanical reaction forces of the main driver's motor. In the early stages of preparing this review, Burton brought down an alternative plinth made of slate, which sounded altogether less impressive than the steel version. Although I can't change my floor the way the plinth was changed, it does suggest the speaker might be sensitive to the floor construction, notwithstanding the mass loading.

Although nearly everything about the OmniMon's sound is positive, especially the lack of boxiness and the exceptional consequent clarity of voice reproduction, I did find the lack of some energy in the mid and upper bass audible. Electric basses have plenty of weight but are a little weak on drive and punch, and also lack some harmonic richness. I was also sometimes conscious of some mild hardening to the upper mid-band especially when the speaker was being driven hard – which one is tempted to do because the sound is so clean. Perhaps this was the enclosure becoming audible, or the slight resonances seen in the impedance

trace (or both).

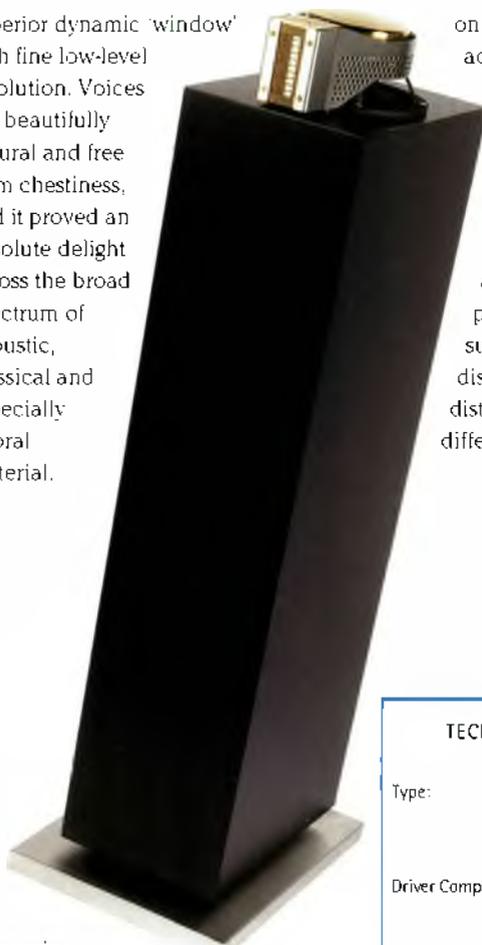
The bottom end might lack a little warmth, but the sound as a whole is astonishingly clean, very quick on its feet, and musically very informative. Dynamics might have a bit more drama, but the low 'hash' floor and freedom from boxy overhang and time-smear ensures a rather superior dynamic 'window' with fine low-level resolution. Voices are beautifully natural and free from chestiness, and it proved an absolute delight across the broad spectrum of acoustic, classical and especially choral material.

Percussive music, such as the dramatic high-energy guitar playing on Rodrigo y Gabriella's *Live in Manchester and Dublin* CD, was startlingly realistic, though the speaker can be ruthlessly revealing of poor quality recordings with high levels of compression.

It's almost impossible to try and sum up the OmniMon 1 in a single paragraph. It's certainly the most interesting speaker to come my way in a very long time, with an all round performance that is indeed

genuinely unique. Combining high-quality materials with innovative and precisely executed engineering, at £6,600/pair it's far from cheap, and probably won't be the first choice for listeners who like loud rock material. But that's neither its aim nor exploits its considerable strengths. Its freedom from boxiness is quite magical

on speech and all forms of acoustic music, including choral and orchestral, and it probably gets closer than anything else to combining seriously deep bass with the innate simplicity of a two-way and the best qualities of panel designs, all from a surprisingly compact and discrete cabinet. As I said, distinctly and impressively different indeed. ▶+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way hybrid omni/monopole with transmission line bass
Driver Complement:	1 x 63mm ribbon hf 1 x 180mm slotted paper cone bass-mid
Sensitivity:	85dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms (5.2 Ohms minimum)
Bandwidth:	30Hz – 40kHz ±3dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	210 x 1050 x 320mm
Footprint:	290 x 390mm
Weight:	48kg ea.
Price:	£6,600

Manufacturer:

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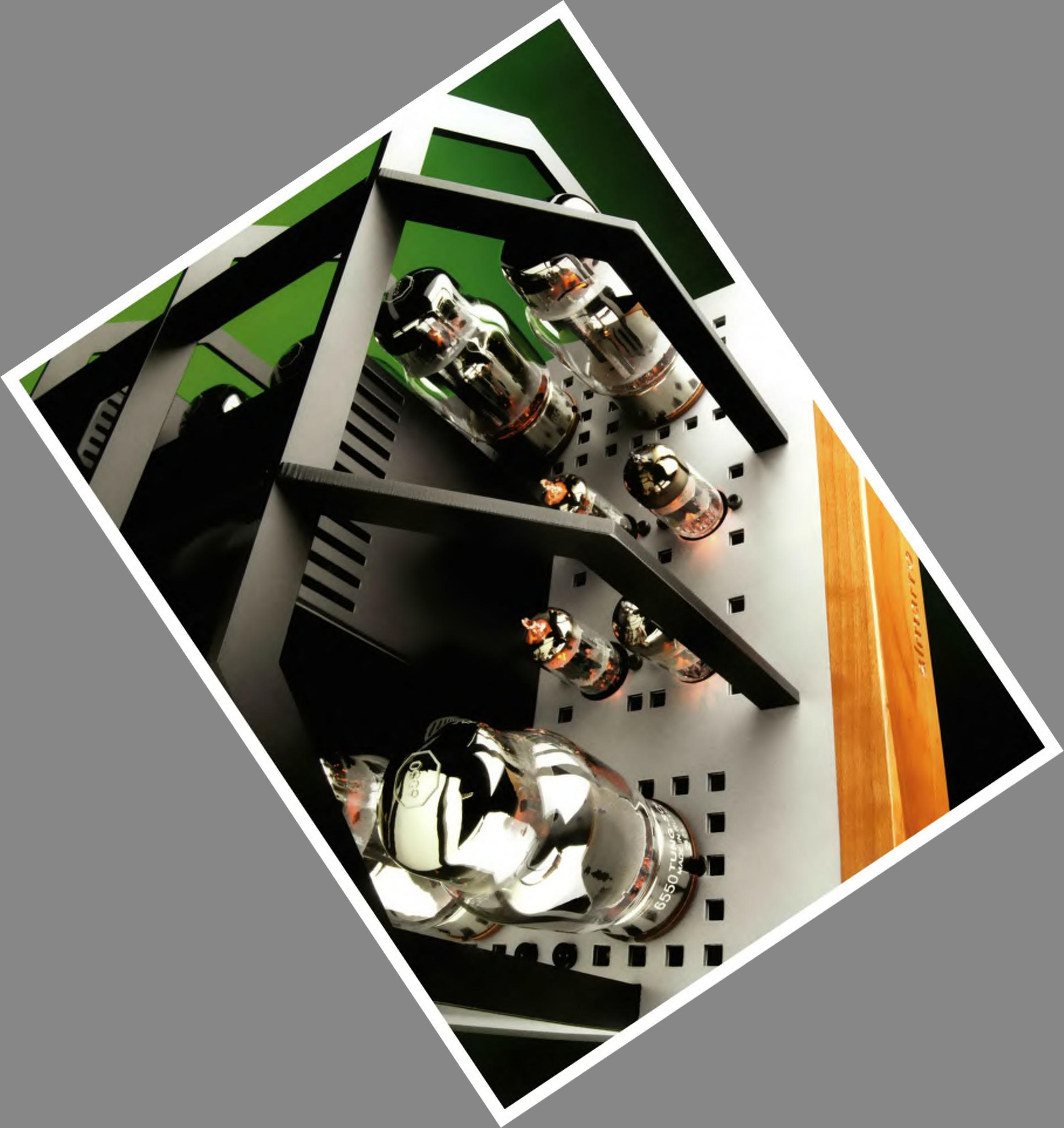


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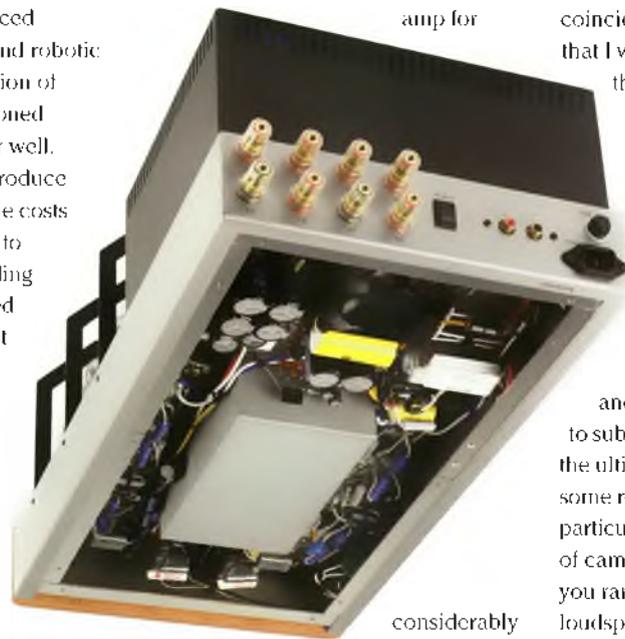
The Almarro A50125A Power Amplifier

by Chris Binns

The recent explosion of audio products manufactured in China seems to have included a high proportion of valve based equipment; in itself no mystery if one considers the amount of hardware involved in an average tube design when compared to its solid state equivalent. The necessity for output transformers, chokes and bulky components rated for high voltage and elevated temperatures around valve bases veers off in the opposite direction to miniaturised, mass produced surface mount technology and robotic construction, but the utilisation of cheap labour suits old fashioned construction methods rather well. Well enough to be able to produce equipment that even after the costs of shipping and import duty to Western shores, allows a selling price that as one ex-UK based amplifier manufacturer put it "has completely shafted the idea of manufacturing valve amps in the UK".

While a lot of the indigenous Chinese valve amps do not stray very far from the path of predictable and rather unimaginative design, there are a number of companies that have been quick off the mark in combining the low cost material and production skills of the far east with design carried out closer to home with interesting results. But while there are plenty of integrated designs and power amplifiers to choose from, they tend to be single-ended or single pair push-pull designs of limited power. What is missing from my personal radar is product with the more usable output of a hundred watts or so. Sure, there are

highly desirable – and expensive – examples from Audio Research, Conrad Johnson and the like, but there seems to be a shortage of more adventurous designs at an affordable price. It might have been no more than coincidence, but shortly after lamenting this fact with RG, the Almarro arrived on my doorstep. The somewhat awkwardly designated A50125A would seem to fit the bill almost perfectly, a chunky 125-watt per channel stereo power amp for



considerably less than three

grand, although ironically it doesn't come from China, but Japan.

With no prior knowledge of the company or the design, I had no preconceptions regarding the Almarro's sound, but within a very short space of time it was clear that it was going to appeal to me. Driving the little B&W 805s and fed from the Audio Research SP10, there was an immediate and palpable sense of excitement; the

Almarro has a body and drive that readily kicks into gear, endowing music with life and a sense of purpose. I will admit to a sense of déjà vu with this particular combination, as the Almarro reminded me very much of the Audio Research D115, an amplifier that seemed to have boundless energy, or to put it crudely, a real sense of balls when the occasion demanded. That it was often partnered at the time with small Sonus Faber loudspeakers was no coincidence; it was a similar synergy that I was hearing with the Almarro and the 805s.

With the arrival of the big Spendor SP100 loudspeakers the A50125's abilities at the bottom end were thrown into focus, and it proved an illuminating combination. The extra bandwidth revealed more of the enthusiastic drive that the amplifier was capable of,

and although it did not reach down to sub-type frequencies, nor possess the ultimate grip and control that some really good solid-state amps are particularly good at, there was a degree of camouflage that in practice, meant you rarely noticed it. Upon hearing his loudspeakers in the system, Philip Swift, the MD of Spendor (and previously responsible for Audiolab – about as solid state as you can get) was heard to comment "I don't generally like valve amplifiers" but I am fairly sure he thoroughly enjoyed himself listening to music for that afternoon! While admittedly the Spendor is an easy load, the Almarro had no problems in generating really quite antisocial levels without losing control and more importantly, maintaining that

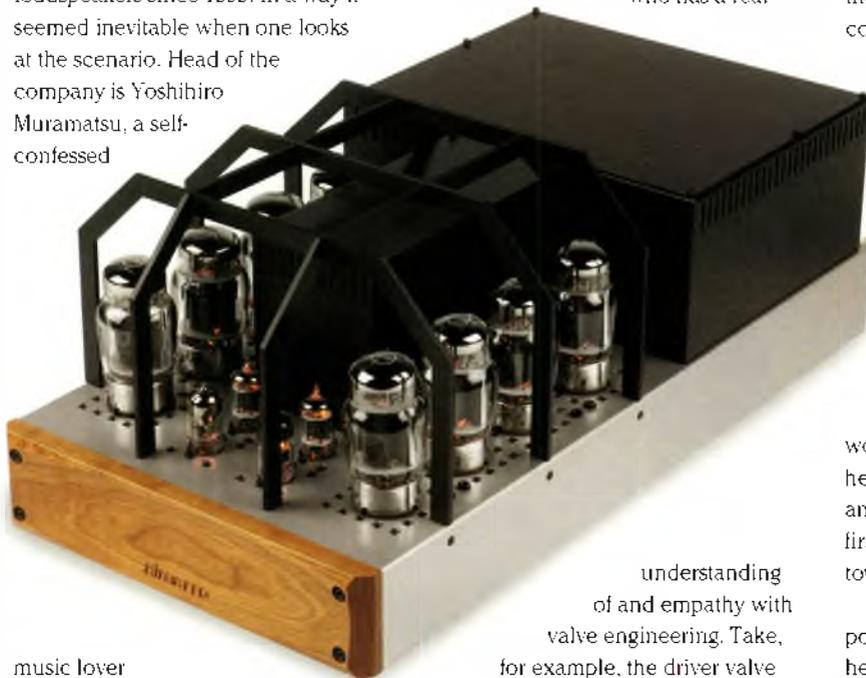
▶ infectious sense of kick that makes it genuinely fun to turn the volume up occasionally – an occupation I thought I'd grown out of.

Almarro is an offshoot of a small, family run business that for thirty years has specialised in the design and production of OEM electronics for the communications industry; they have been quietly making amplifiers and loudspeakers since 1999. In a way it seemed inevitable when one looks at the scenario. Head of the company is Yoshihiro Muramatsu, a self-confessed

music lover and audiophile who is not averse to building truly scary amplifiers using enormous industrial Russian transmitting tubes. Combine that with long experience of sourcing electronic components and the constructional expertise gained from his commercial enterprise and the results begin to look interesting, particularly as Muramatsu-san has some refreshingly down to earth views when it comes to high-end hi-fi. He has a preference for well-specified, easily available components from large companies as opposed to 'audiophile' grade types, where he considers consistency and quality control to be an issue. Similarly there is a refreshing lack of 'glitz' or additional cosmetics to flatter the basic construction; what you

see is what you get.

A similar approach applies to the circuit design; while there's nothing in the Almarro that we haven't seen before (bear in mind that the comparative simplicity of valve circuitry and hundred year history sees to that) there are enough unusual features to elevate it from the run-of-the-mill, and the signature of a designer who has a real



understanding of and empathy with valve engineering. Take, for example, the driver valve – with the exception of some more contemporary American products, most designers would have opted to use something along the lines of a ECC82 or '88, and on paper it would seem to have ample characteristics for the job, certainly for driving a couple of output valves and in theory, multiple pairs. In practice, I have never been convinced. I think that transient demands are not accurately reflected by data sheets and anything over 50 Watts or so requires a different approach. To this end, the Almarro uses an American 5687 valve to do the job, a tube originally developed for use in televisions and rated at three or four times the dissipation of an ECC88 whilst possessing a particularly high peak current capability (pulse current)

which marks it down as ideally suitable for a driver stage. Not surprising then that we also find it used in the Kondo Ongaku and Gakuoh and the sadly now departed MFA 120 and 200s.

The output stage is based around a quartet of 6550s a side, running (I'm fairly sure) in straight pentode mode rather than the more conventional ultra linear configuration, while the cathodes of these valves are coupled via the secondary of the output transformer in a fashion favoured by Audio Research until relatively recently. Like most valve amplifiers of this sort of power the Almarro uses fixed bias to set the operating conditions for the output stage: measurement points and adjustment are conveniently located on the top plate avoiding the necessity to delve inside, although the use of a digital voltmeter is required. I would hazard a guess by the amount of heat generated that at the set-point the amplifier is working in class A for the first twenty Watts or so before running toward AB1.

While relatively compact for its power output the Almarro is pretty heavy, and the long thin chassis makes placement a little difficult when it comes to conventional racks and supports. The large enclosure at the rear houses the two output transformers and a smoothing choke. Extending in front of this, between the two rows of output valves, a smaller box hides the slim but substantial C-core mains transformer. Over this sits an arrangement of metal strips that are not close enough together to offer any real protection to the valves (or prying fingers) but do serve to lend an interesting architectural air to the amp's aesthetics. Connections at the rear are pretty much standard with single-ended RCA inputs and five-way loudspeaker outputs offering matching to 4, 8 and 16 Ohms, while a small switch defeats the internal ▶

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▶ fan (which is not obtrusively loud) but this should probably be left on where possible. Internally the construction avoids circuit boards in favour of tag strips and hard wiring, and while the amplifier circuit is relatively simple the sheer amount of components reveals the considerable attention that has been paid to the power supply and general housekeeping.

Having created a favourable impression, the Almarro stayed in my system for quite some time,



allowing plenty of opportunity to play with partnering equipment. The combination of the Almarro with the SP10 pre-amp was thoroughly engaging and highly musical, but substituting the new LS17 provided both a greater degree of detail and a much cleaner presentation, particularly at high frequencies. As I have already suggested, the bottom end is not the deepest or most taught, but is conveyed in such a positive fashion that it does a good job of laying the foundations for everything else. It has a good sense of rhythm and timing that works well with rock music, while the larger instruments of the orchestra have a reassuring sense of body with a mild hint of 'fruitiness' that swamps a little of the texture. The mid is again quite full, and although I would be reticent to label it with the typical 'valve' character

it is both liquid and informative, with just an occasional tendency to lose its grounding with the bottom end. The top end has a degree of 'presence' giving a good sense of detail, albeit with a slightly fuzzy quality that reads on paper far worse than it sounds; and while it doesn't give the impression of tremendous extension, it's nicely in proportion to the rest of the spectrum.

Worth noting however, is that the Almarro responds well to the addition of some

form of mechanical isolation, whether through feet or specialist support. The result is a sound that is altogether cleaner with less grain and smear at the top end. In terms of soundstage, and some further interesting evaluation with the Quad 2805, the Almarro effortlessly projects away from the loudspeakers, and is capable of a solid, palpable image which is certainly three dimensional, but indistinct and lacking focus when it comes to the detail within it. In all other areas, the Quads positively wriggled with delight being driven by the Almarro, the attributes of each unit complementing and balancing each other well, only slightly bettered by the Audio Research Ref 110 at more than three times the price, and even then it might well be a matter of personal taste.

At the end of the day, I don't think that there is any question that the Almarro is good value for money, and the minor criticisms I have would not deter me in an amplifier that was far more expensive. With enough power to drive a wide range of loudspeakers, it manages to present a coherent envelope that enfolds the music and delivers it to great effect, together with a genuine sense of enthusiasm that is particularly appealing. And if there is a small trade off between resolution and 'cleanliness' over sheer enjoyable musicality, it is one that I will happily accept.

Particularly as I have a sneaking suspicion that the substitution of the supplied Electro Harmonix valves with something along the lines of the rarefied EAT KT88's might provide the ingredients to elevate performance in exactly the right areas; given half a chance I'll be doing it, so watch this space. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Push-pull stereo valve power amp
Valve Complement:	2x 6DJ8, 2x 5687, 8x 6550
Input Sensitivity:	1 Volt for 125 Watts
Power Output:	125 Watts into 4, 8, or 16 Ohms
Bandwidth:	15Hz - 30KHz / 6dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	290 x 570 x 200mm
Weight:	29.2 Kg
Price:	£2750

UK Distributor:

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The Revolver Cygnis Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory



The revitalized Revolver brand has made quite a splash since its reemergence. Their range of highly regarded budget loudspeakers have recently been joined by an elegant turntable, echoing the company's original name and roots. But standing astride these worthy and definitely high-value offerings we find the Cygnis loudspeaker, an ambitious three-way floorstander with a price-tag of £8000. That's quite a leap in anybody's language – especially when your point of departure is built on low-cost two-ways.

We first covered the Cygnis back in Issue 54 where it's fair to say that they met with a mixed reception. Time and further experience have allowed us to gain a better understanding of both the speaker and its specific demands when it comes to set-up, mainly centering on the low-frequencies and their integration with the rest of the range. Indeed, looking at the Cygnis it's hard to ignore the uncomfortably large area of front baffle between the midrange driver in its curved housing and the low-slung 10" bass unit. What quickly becomes apparent is that it's all too easy to mimic that separation in the sonic performance if you don't get things just right.

My first mistake was to employ a set of the generally reliable Symposium Rollerblocks in place of the speaker's own substantial spikes complete with large, conical bosses. Motivated by tears for my wooden floor, this dropped the speaker a minimum of 25mm nearer to the floor, and in this instance, that's critical. You see, Revolver have chosen 2pi loading for the bass driver, meaning that it receives reinforcement from both the baffle and the floor boundary. Alter the relationship to the floor and you start to interfere with the bass weighting and voicing and in this case the results can be ruinous. What's more, interfere with the bass and you affect the entire range, but particularly the treble timing. Partly to offset sensitivity to placement relative to the back wall, designer Mike Lewitt has sensibly chosen a distributed port for the bass enclosure, exiting through ►

► the gap between the cabinet and base. Even so, the Cygnis will deliver disproportionate rewards for care spent on positioning. Fortunately it's a one-time chore and once it's right, it's right, the speaker finally delivering the sort of performance it's fair to expect at this elevated price level.

The rest of the speaker shows similarly innovative thinking and attention to detail.



The one-piece head unit is a composite molding sandwiching a structural foam core, delivering low-mass and excellent self-damping. The resultant 15 litre enclosure exhibits very low stored energy and thus low levels of mechanical and intermodulation distortion, while the asymmetrical shape helps kill internal

standing waves. It's also physically isolated from the main cabinet on shallow spacers. The results are heard in the speed, transparency and clarity of the speaker's mid-band.

The drivers are all in-house designs featuring double magnet assemblies. The 26mm aluminium dome might seem somewhat dated but it has been carefully executed with considerable care paid to the damping of rear reflections. The midrange is delivered by a 130mm woven fibre-glass cone built onto a substantial cast chassis. Bass is delivered by a 254mm paper coned driver housed in its own 50 litre enclosure, the cabinet built from 25mm MDF throughout and heavily braced. The three-way crossover is constructed from quality components and wired up with decent cable. It also enjoys its own isolated enclosure to minimize mechanical interference, while the bi-wire terminals arrive bridged with excellent Chord Co. links.

The end result is a system offering a bandwidth of 45Hz – 22kHz \pm 3dB, with –6dB points at 30Hz and 30kHz, a sensitivity of 91dB and a nominal 8 Ohm load. In fact, the minimum impedance is 4.3 Ohms, but the characteristic is non-reactive, making the speaker easier to drive than that number suggests. I got excellent results with both the Almarro and VAS valve mono-blocs, the latter boasting a mere 40 Watts, and once carefully positioned the Cygnis seems remarkably accommodating of

partnering products – which isn't to say that it's without preferences. I'll leave the appearance to personal opinion (avoiding any of the cruelly obvious "swing-bin" jokes) but the grilles have really got to go, at least as far as listening goes. Replacing them for protective purposes is hardly a chore, but I simply dispensed with them altogether. The Cygnis needed minimal toe-in to



achieve image focus and leveling them was considerably eased by the accessibility of the spikes.

Despite running them with a range of excellent solid-state amps, there's no escaping the fact that these speakers really come to life with a good thermionic design doing the driving. Their virtues of clarity and unencumbered separation can leave

► music sounding a little exposed and harmonically threadbare if the amplifier has any leanings in that direction. The fruity weight and warmth of a really good, traditional push-pull valve amp delivers just the mix of energetic shove in the hind-quarters and flesh on the bones that really brings the music to life. The VAS Citation Sound mono-blocs did a sterling job, but there was no ignoring the extra sheer urge, energy and enthusiasm that simply leapt forth once the Almaro's 100 or so watts was hooked up to the speaker terminals.

The almost prototypical simplicity of the drum, bass and guitar opening to Bill Malonee and the Vigilantes Of Love's 'Goes Without Saying' has the energy, agility and drive that characterize a really tight three piece, but driven by the Almaro the Cygnis deliver the track with a rollicking, seemingly unstoppable sense of presence and momentum, filling the stage with the three instruments. Yet later, in the quieter moments of a track like 'Solar System', with its more measured, reflective mood, there's no missing the plaintive sense of loss in the vocal, the poignance of the deceptively simple melody – or the way it builds in density and complexity across the track. The joyous romp of 'Hard Luck & Heart Attack' is full of life and humour, precoded by the beautifully realized balance of the ballad 'Nothing Like A Train'. This isn't the uncontrolled enthusiasm of a boisterous, clumsy puppy. This is a sense of energy, carefully applied – serving the music in all its forms.

Nor is it limited to rock and pop. The recent FMI Classics release of Purcell's *Music For Queen Mary* is full of joy and colour in the 'Birthday Song...' the speakers disappearing into a faithfully captured King's College Chapel acoustic, space around and above the choir and Academy of Ancient Music, the side and rear walls clearly defined. Later, the progress of the funereal drum procession is clear, defined as

much by the instrument's changing relationship with the acoustic as by its shifting location. The distance to the drummer, the shifting balance of direct and reflected sound is fascinating and beautifully unraveled by the Cygnis, the speaker easily allowing you to separate the actual beats and the multiple reflections. Likewise, that special quality that defines the sound of a boy treble as opposed to a female soprano is clearly apparent.

In many ways it's the latter disc that tells us more about this Revolver



speaker and the demands it places on partnering equipment. Indeed, if ever a speaker brought home the folly of considering a speaker in isolation from its driving amp, this is it. The wonderfully, entertainingly obvious attributes of the Vigilantes certainly tell us just what sort of amp you want, but it's the Purcell which will tell you why. The Cygnis requires both care and respect: care in set-up and positioning, respect when it comes to its capabilities, for this is a genuinely transparent and high-resolution device. There's a lucid clarity to its presentation, a lightness of balance that on the one hand delivers detail and separation, underpinned by a deeper bass than you expect from the box, but on the other can tip over into coldness, even an almost glassy leanness if provoked. The good news is, that with resolution to burn you can afford to trade some in against the body and presence an amplifier can supply, a combination that makes the best of both. Hence the success of the Almaro, with its enthusiastic energy and drive; listen to this amp with the Cygnis and that's what you'll hear. But never forget that it's the speaker that's letting you hear it. Likewise, the Hovland RADIA

delivers a crisper, more focused and transparent sound, which offers its own appeal and definitely plays to the speaker's midrange agility. So it's not that you can't use a solid-state amp, but I wouldn't want to go any leaner in balance than the Hovland's sweetness...

The Cygnis may lack the harmonic accuracy and development of some competing designs, offering instead a combination of coherent bandwidth and clearly defined musical detail, but it wears its heart well and truly on its sleeve. That means that you can hear

all too clearly just what the driving amp is doing – and when you've got it right.

With the flood of high-value valve amps currently hitting the market, Revolver couldn't have timed things better. Purists might argue that it's a case of two wrongs making a right; those who listen and like the result won't be bothered. Revolver's Cygnis is both adventurous and different; get it right and it's very right indeed. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Three-way, divided cabinet, reflex loaded loudspeaker
Driver Component:	1x 25mm aluminium dome HF 1x 130mm woven fibre-glass MF 1x 254mm doped paper LF
Sensitivity:	91 dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms (4.3 minimum)
Bandwidth:	45Hz – 22kHz ±3dB 30Hz – 30kHz ±6dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	310 x 1000 x 350mm
Weight:	35kg ea.
Price:	£8000

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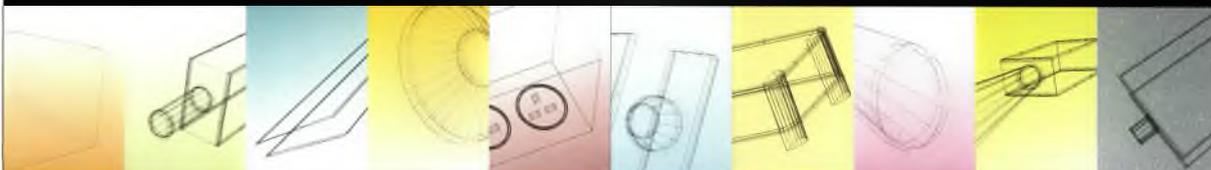
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The Aspara Acoustics HL-2 Loudspeaker

by Jimmy Hughes

I honestly can't remember the last time I reviewed a pair of loudspeakers. It was almost certainly a decade ago - probably more. Why? The main reason is purely practical. I've lived happily for the best part of twenty years with a set of Impulse H-1 horns. They're pretty big, and not easy to move. So - with space at a premium - it's not been easy to accommodate extra speakers for review purposes. But, there are other reasons. When you live with a pair of big speakers, and get used to the way they do things, it's hard to go over to something smaller (however good) without feeling a wee bit disappointed. There's a distinct difference between the size and scale of sound produced by small speakers and larger ones. It's a different quality of sound. Once you get used to a bigger speaker, it's hard to downsize...

Although some good small speakers seem to punch well above their weight, to me they're always flattering to deceive - creating an impression of scale and weight by forcefulness and aggression. You have to play the music loud to get it to fill the room. And while this can be quite impressive in one sense, it's worlds away from a big speaker that effortlessly fills the room, even when the music's quiet.

Actually, to be fair, we're talking degrees here. All speakers flatter to deceive. No speaker can fully recreate the massive breadth and scale of (say) a large orchestra and chorus in a big hall. The apparent recreation of vast forces in your living room is an illusion - an acoustic con trick. But some speakers are better liars than others. And big efficient speakers are invariably more convincing

than smaller less efficient types.

Aspara Acoustics are Brian Taylor and Julius Hyde, the team responsible for the original Impulse H-1. So there's a certain kinship between my old speakers and this new design. Although Brian and Julius have generally designed fairly large and ambitious loudspeakers, they wanted to see if they could come up with something smaller and cheaper without sacrificing too many of the qualities that distinguish their bigger no-compromise designs.

The HL-2 is a diminutive floorstander. It's approximately 1/6th the cubic capacity of the H-1 - almost as tall, but much less wide and deep. The bass loading is unusual, and might best be described as a Ported Pipe. Basically it's a Port with an exponential opening. Apparently, Brian got the idea from reading an old loudspeaker book by the legendary Gilbert Briggs, founder of Wharfedale. However, it seems the great man himself never actually designed any loudspeakers making use of the principle, preferring instead other more familiar forms of loading. Anyway, Brian liked the Ported Pipe idea in principle, and was intrigued to see if it could be made to work. He was pleased with the results when he experimented with the early prototypes.

The HL-2 employs two drive units - a SEAS ferrofluid-damped soft-dome tweeter,

and a 5in diameter doped paper cone Bass/Mid driver. The speaker offers medium levels of efficiency (about 92dB @ 1m and 1W), and the crossover has been designed to present amplifiers with a simple, easy-to-drive load. The makers claim satisfactory results can be achieved with good tube amplifiers having an output of just 10-15W, providing you're not looking to shake the walls or rattle the rafters.

The cabinet is made from 1in thick Oak veneered plywood, with a one inch thick solid oak front baffle. This solid baffle is attached to the ply cabinet front, making the whole thing around two inches thick. The baffle itself is slightly wider than the cabinet. Possibly this was done for purely aesthetic reasons, but in my experience it affects dispersion and actually helps improve stereo imaging. Oakwood is the only finish offered, albeit in a choice of Light, Medium, or Dark. Styling is simple and functional, and there is no grille to cover the drive units. A single set of gold-plated 4mm terminals can be found on the back of the speaker. Inside, is a simple hard-wired crossover laced using cryogenically frozen solid core cable. There is some internal wadding in the port (pipe?), and the walls are lined with Deflex polymer panels to control unwanted reflections and resonances. The tapered port exits on one side of the enclosure, and it's recommended ▶



▶ that you have the ports facing each other – in other words, pointing inwards. The makers recommend placing the speakers about 18ins from rear and sidewalls, but say this isn't ultra critical.

First impressions were of an open, lively sound that was crisp and quite forward. Efficiency is similar to that of the H1, but after the bigger speaker

there was (inevitably) some loss of scale and fullness. The soundstage had shrunk somewhat, with voices and instruments sounding 'smaller'.

The HL-2 has quite good bass for its size, but it cannot match the breathy voluminous bottom end of the H-1. On a more positive note, I was immediately taken with the HL-2's integration and homogeneity. The tonal balance is bright and lively (in the best sense) but there's no hint of discontinuity – the sound has a totally seamless quality from high treble, through to the midrange and bass. Even when sat quite close to the speakers, you can't 'hear' the individual drive units. There's no break in the response – no part of the frequency range that obtrudes.

In this respect the little HL-2 had something over my H-1s, which lack comparable evenness in the upper-middle/lower treble region. Brian reckons the Impulse H-1 (and H-2) had a slight suckout near the crossover point, caused by the impedance dipping. This results in a slight discontinuity in the frequency response, and also makes the speaker

harder to drive – faults addressed by his newer designs. Now he tells me...

Being a relatively small speaker, the HL-2 does not produce trouser-flapping levels of deep bass, although its sense of scale and expansive soundstage belie its limited dimensions. However, what bass there is, sounds very clean

and well behaved. There isn't the false 'one note' bass you can sometimes get with conventional ported designs, nor the dry tightness



that can afflict infinite baffle types. The HL-2's bass is clean and impeccably well behaved, if not massively full or rich. It's the sort of bass that's only there when it's there, if that makes sense. For the most part, the lower frequencies sound clear and open. There isn't a constant 'drone' or sense of false fullness or weight caused by a distinct resonance around

the 60-80Hz region. Some listeners may hanker for a little more grunt – a greater sense of low frequency power – but better a light clear clean bass than one that's soggy and thick. Those wanting deeper bass could rectify matters by the addition of a good small sub-woofer – or (better still) two. This would give extra heft at the lower frequencies, without spoiling the HL-2's fast articulate upper bass. If I were going to live with these speakers, I'd definitely investigate a good sub-woofer – it really will make things sound bigger and better.

Tonally, the HL-2 has a very smooth open sound, but there's a slight lower midrange coloration apparent from time to time – a slight 'boxiness' that robs the sound of its warmth and richness. It's not serious, and with most music and much of the time there's barely a hint of it. But I did notice it on solo piano music, for example, and the lower string instruments like cello and double bass. Possibly the cause is down to the relatively narrow width of the enclosure (just a little over 4.5ins) and the closeness of the cabinet sidewalls to the bass/mid driver. I had a quick peep inside and spotted a Deflex damping panel on the rear of the cabinet, but nothing either side of the drive unit. My guess is that a bit of Deflex to the left and right of the bass driver should all but eliminate the coloration problems spoken about.

Stereo imaging is very good. The simple narrow/tall design creates clean precise placement of images in space, without the soundstage becoming over-clinical. The speakers sound excellent on naturally-miked classical or jazz recordings, but also work well when fed with multi-miked pop and rock. Vocals sound nicely 'present' and forward – another area where the original H1 and H2 were sometimes criticised. ▶

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► The HL-2 is definitely brighter and more forward than my H1s, but not excessively so. On the plus side, the smaller speaker has a far smoother and more integrated frequency response in the critical 'presence' region where it crosses over. As a result, the HL-2 tends to produce stronger, more solidly-focussed and better projected vocals. Yet there's never any sense of things not integrating.

After I'd lived with the HL-2s for a couple of weeks,

I returned to my H1s just to see how the bigger speaker compared. The extra weight and amplitude of the H1 was immediately apparent, and yet – surprise!

I really missed the HL-2's mid/treble smoothness and integration. While the H1s sounded bigger and more solid, the upper treble seemed less focused and precise – it had a slight wispy quality. Crikey! The HL-2s do detail superbly well. They really are excellent at revealing subtle changes of pitch and micro dynamics. Clarity is outstanding. Especially inner clarity – the way subtle instruments or voices can still be heard while more dominant ones hold the stage. While my H1s sounded fuller and more solid, they seemed less homogenous and not so integrated.

The little HL-2 definitely highlighted several areas where my H1s could stand improvement – no doubt about it. Which is interesting. Going back again, I really appreciated just how



clean the HL-2 sounds – how free from 'edge' the treble is – and how smooth and integrated the music sounded; and all this despite having a fairly forward and analytical tonal balance. My H1s might be fitted with a far more expensive Focal tweeter, but the SEAS driver in the HL-2 seemed to equal it for detail and attack, while (if anything) sounding just a tad cleaner. Apparently the SEAS tweeter has an extended upper frequency response to about 25kHz, and perhaps as a result many

of its resonances fall beyond the range of the human ear. It certainly sounded very clean and clear.

Anyway, while I'm not quite ready to chop up my H1s for firewood just yet, the little HL-2 demonstrated areas where improvements could be made.

Indeed, due to having experienced the HL-2s, I actually got my soldering iron out and made a small modification to the crossover of my H1s – aiming for similar integration and cleanliness.

I really can't pay the HL-2 a higher or more sincere compliment than that.

On a practical note, the original H1 was not a success commercially – mainly down to size and price. And while it has some distinct sonic advantages over smaller upstarts like the HL-2, it's larger than most people want in their living rooms. In this context, a pair of HL-2s partnered with a decent sub would give the H1 a good contest without taking up vast

swathes of living room space. For the well-heeled without size/price considerations, Aspara offer two other speakers – the £3600 HL-6 which sits immediately above the HL-2, and the £6000 HL-1 - a sort of modern day Aspara equivalent to the old Impulse H-1.

The Aspara HL-1 features a compression driver for the mid/top, and a fully horn-loaded bass driver. Efficiency is said to be around 102dB, which is pretty high. I hope to obtain a pair for review in the not too distant future, and am looking forward to the encounter. Well - sort of. Having just experienced what Aspara have achieved with just two drive units in a (relatively) small enclosure, I have an inkling the HL-1 is going to blow my H1s into the weeds. Although very happy with the H1s (especially since making that crossover modification inspired by the HL-2), I wonder how they will seem after living with a pair of HL-1s. There's only one way to find out... ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way ported pipe enclosure
Driver Complement:	1x 25mm SEAS soft-dome 1x 135mm paper cone
Sensitivity:	92dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms
Bandwidth:	40Hz-30kHz ± 3dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	152 x 1054 x 305mm
Weight:	17.2kg
Price:	£2650

Manufacturer:

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Simaudio Moon i-3 RS Integrated Amplifier and Moon Equinox RS CD Player

by Chris Thomas

Back on July 1st 2006 a new ruling that would affect the manufacture of virtually all audio equipment became law. The RoHS directive restricted the use of certain hazardous substances in electronic equipment that meant that Hi-Fi makers could not, among other things, use leaded solder anymore. This slipped by almost unnoticed by the hi-fi buying public but has had a marked effect on manufacturers and the sound of their equipment. Some took the opportunity to introduce new models that are RoHS compliant and others just made the required changes quietly and hoped that no one would notice. But inevitably the sound of many well-established electronics did change and not always for the better.

Designers I have spoken to tell me that the switch to RoHS compliance was far more profound sound-wise than was initially envisaged. Simaudio, the Canadian company who produce the Moon range of equipment were more forthcoming. Both the i-3 integrated amplifier and the Equinox CD player from their Classic series of products now carry the RS suffix which indicates that in making them compliant with the new ruling Moon have taken the opportunity to redesign major parts of both components. The printed circuit boards in the RS models have been upgraded to those with a higher temperature grade than the military specified FR4 of the earlier models and the traces on the boards are now gold-plated as opposed to the previous lead/tin composite. Moon have also taken the trouble to initiate other improvements as well, like the incorporation of improved dielectrics in all capacitors. But on the outside the i-3 cosmetics remain the same with only the small RS logo signifying the changes.

A couple of years ago when I reviewed the earlier i-3 integrated amplifier I was so impressed with its vigour and dynamic vitality that it became something of a benchmark product for me. Sure, it was a tad on the bright side and grew a bit confused when you tapped heavily into those 100 watts, but there was a real core of stability, rhythmic bite and enthusiasm that endeared it to me. The more expensive i-5 was slightly less powerful on paper, but was a smoother and a more polite sounding amplifier that remained unflappable in situations where its little brother was more on the edge. I like the accomplished balance of the i-5 but always had a sneaking respect for the slightly unkempt youth of the i-3. In RS form it still has six inputs plus tape and pre-amplifier outputs. There is no rotary volume control on the fascia but instead a small pair of buttons selects the output level. A single button scrolls through the inputs and both this and the volume setting are easily legible through the sensibly sized display window which you can choose to leave illuminated or not.

Unfortunately, the old bone-shaped metal system-remote control, which was one of the best around and gave a quality feel to the amplifier, has given way to a rather unremarkable plastic type. I am told that the metal version is still available as an option. What remains though is the way in which both amplifier and CD player operate. The input selection and smooth adjustment of level are helped

enormously by the quite amazing angles of acceptance achieved by the remote control.

The Equinox RS CD player is an equally uncluttered and straightforward device. It was developed from the Nova player but is a perfect visual match for the i-3 RS. The front panel has the usual transport buttons and the rear contains just a pair of analogue connections and a single RCA connector for the digital output. It uses a Phillips L1210/S transport, Burr Brown D/A converters and was unfortunately also supplied

with the latest plastic remote control.

Because I always associate Moon equipment with being so smooth and slick in operation it would have been nice if this trait had been maintained with a more

damped feel to the drawer that clatters in and out a too little rustically for a \$2000 CD player.

Like all Moon hi-fi that I have tried, these components really do need running in for an indecent length of time. In their literature it is claimed that they will go on improving for 400 hours but I think this is a conservative estimate. Although previously run, I do not know exactly how many hours use the review units had on them. They certainly lacked the rather clenched, mean and tonally brittle sound of brand new units though experience tells me that they may well evolve and sound even better several months down the line.

For such a physically compact amplifier the i-3 RS is rated at a healthy 100 watts but don't expect brute muscle. The newer amplifier seems to have moved a step closer to the i-5 in terms



► of its smoother and more rounded balance and this has certainly made it a more versatile unit. Perhaps it is slightly softer around the edges but its approach to music is now more considered and some would say, mature. It certainly maintains better composure when you drive it hard and I think that the bass in particular is more extended and weightier, though it probably doesn't have that pure leading edge punch that so typified and flavoured the older amplifier. But it is still a lean and articulate performer, totally solid-state in its sense of drive and cool tonality. I believe that it also has more natural resolution too, particularly through the treble that is now noticeably more textural and perhaps also less two-dimensional though it certainly no holographic imager. There is a dryness to the sound and certainly no artificial warmth in the way it portrays instrumental harmonics and that means that cabling will need to be carefully considered alongside speakers.

When you do pair it with the Moon Equinox RS CD player you are presented with an interesting conundrum. In many ways the CD player is very like the amplifier in its slightly stark, no-nonsense view of the music. It too is a little dry and has no sense of added tonal warmth, although it produces very good resolution within its bandwidth and delivers it in a cool flow of dynamic information. So, mating them really serves to enhance both of their individual characteristics into a distinctive style. This meant that

I had to search for the right system environment in which to realise their potential.

First of all, they are very fussy where they stand. I didn't like the effect that glass shelves had and there was little improvement when they were sat on the acrylic

shelves of a Quadraspire two-tiered table either, because even though their speed and exuberance remained a constant I was still having real problems understanding just what the musicians were actually playing. I had begun my listening by using

Nordost speaker cables and while the sense of fine resolution, articulation and speed was impressive, it did leave the amplifier very exposed tonally and the music often seemed bleached and somewhat colourless. It could well become a bit of a juggling act to achieve the right balance of flavours as the i-3 RS does lean towards the

analytical, especially when coupled with the Equinox RS. A move to Vitus Andromeda speaker cable left the music sounding more rounded and comfortable and when I sited the electronics on a medite support they found their feet (excuse the pun) and I could better appreciate both the technique of the individual musicians and the structure of the songs. It was as though the sound, rather than the music, had lost a bit of tension and was less hurried. Sometimes you just open the box, site the equipment, plug it in and it's pretty good from the word go. With this particular Moon combination I had to work at it, but I was glad I did because once you get it all under control there is an interesting experience to be enjoyed.

This is not feet-up, pipe and slippers hi-fi. The Moon combo drives the music from the speakers in a continuous stream of sharply resolved dynamic episodes. It is unwavering in its personal portrayal of the musical picture and has transparency but limited depth. The soundstage is filled with succinctly etched morsels and details of musicianship which hang together just fine as the tempo and sense of progressive momentum is extremely good. There is no superfluous flab at all and this helps no end in portraying the rhythmic shape of whatever you are listening to. Instruments are handled crisply and dynamically with control right through the envelope of each and every note. The amplifier shares these traits with its predecessor but the shift in tonal emphasis has made it a less ►



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Installing them individually into other systems was interesting. The amplifier is the more notable and interchangeable of the two. I think as it responds to higher information levels from far better quality CD players with ease. Fed by Naim's CD555, which is a much more organic and resolute performer, it was, chameleon-like in its ability to respond to its surroundings. It still maintains its impressive speed but is more relaxed through the mid-band and has

being fast. There is a certain amount of personal taste involved here and the Equinox RS and the i-3 RS amplifier need serious consideration if an acceptable balance is going to be achieved. But, together, they do have a pronounced flavour and their strong points must be weighed against the criticisms.

Simaudio have been manufacturing audio equipment for more than twenty years now and the Moon range has gone from strength to strength. Their components are impeccably constructed and totally pain-free to own.

amplifiers in its exuberance grip, agility and sheer willingness to drive a loudspeaker. I think the changes that Moon have introduced have made it even more appealing and better value for money. The price for good CD players is coming down all the time so the Equinox, at the same retail price as the amplifier, does not represent such good value. But get it into the right situation and I guarantee that it will hold your attention. ➤+



more time and space to resolve the vastly increased levels of information, both instrumental and ambient, that the Naim provides. The Equinox though, being a source component, imposes its view of the music more profoundly through the system. It is finely detailed but tonally a little monochromatic and can come across as a mite soulless and lacking subtlety and shading. When I installed it in my home system it was too black and white, with very little sense of front to back depth. The music was spread into a flat plane between the speakers and there was little real harmonic colour around the instruments. But I certainly would not criticise the bandwidth or the extremely tight focus that the Equinox RS has in abundance. In the bass it is dynamically imposing, as well as

But the sound that characterises their smaller integrated amplifiers and certainly the Equinox RS CD player does not indicate the style of the whole range. When I tried the i-7 integrated amplifier last year I was surprised to hear how smooth and warmly balanced it was, like the big, expensive W-5 power amplifier. It seems to me that the smaller model has a very different way about it and does exactly what such amplifiers should by being sharp, open and musically to the point. While I have certain reservations about the Equinox RS CD player, I am not going to criticise it for having such a deliberate and overt style as there is no doubt that when you pair it with the newer i-3 RS they will definitely kick life into your music. The amplifier still reminds me in some ways of the early Naim

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

i-3 RS:	
Type:	Integrated amplifier
Inputs:	6x line-level
Outputs:	1x tape 1x pre-out
Power Output:	100 Watts (8 Ohms) 160 Watts (4 Ohms)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 76 x 395mm
Weight:	10 Kg.
Price:	£1990
Equinox RS:	
Type:	Single box CD player
Transport:	Phillips L1210/S
D/A Converter:	Burr Brown PCM 1730E
Outputs:	1pr single-ended (RCA) 1pr S/P-DIF digital out
Dimensions (HxWxD):	430 x 110 x 395mm
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Karan Acoustics KA L Pre-amplifier

by Alan Sircom



Karan Acoustic's range of high-end amplifiers from the former Yugoslavia is growing. The company still lacks a CD player, but there's a DAC, a phono stage with a reputation to die for, several power amps (most of which we've reviewed) and now a pair of pre-amps. The KA L Reference was first, a two-box masterwork; it's recently been joined by the KA L, also a line-level design, but this time housed in a single box.

This single-box design saves a lot of money, but you'd never guess there was any cost saving by the look of the KA L. It retains the solid, almost monolithic look of all Karan products, with just a red glowing logo separating this pre-amp from utter blackness. Otherwise, it is just a reassuringly solid block of aluminium, complete with volume knob at one end, channel selector at the other. Balance – pah! Displays and indicators – you must be joking. You get a remote, what more do you need?

This is a fully balanced, fully dual mono circuit. Unlike many products that share balanced and single-ended pathways, the KA L takes the long route, translating the three single-ended inputs into a fully-balanced architecture rather than sticking to dragging balanced sources into a single-ended world. The KA L also sports a single, balanced input as well as single-ended and balanced outputs. The nearest we get to a display is a red light indicating whether the pre-amplifier is running the balanced or line level inputs.

Open the casework and you'll reveal a board layout that's as logical and as thoroughly engineered as you will find anywhere in audio. There's a no-quarter approach in there – with things like three separate power supply stages, for the front-end and for each channel (which is surprising when you think how little circuit each one of these supplies is ►

▶ driving: most preamplifiers would lump these power supplies together). Given that Karan build everything in-house (rather than sub-contracting to China) this uncompromising build is stunning. Then there's the finish – it's cinematically deep; think *Spinal Tap* ("none, none more black") or *2001 – A Space Odyssey* monolith black. Not that you'd want to scratch the thing, but you'd really have to go at it with a cold chisel to ding it. Given that this pre-amplifier weighs in at 20kg – healthily heavy for a small power amplifier – this build quality builds confidence. Right down to those three feedback-reducing feet.

In proper Karan tradition, the KA L eschews global feedback, uses bipolar output devices to drive the gain stages and is DC-coupled. It ships with a funky braided mains lead and an equally funky remote control. This is a volume controller alone, with a pair of buttons to raise or lower the gain. However, it makes up for the limited functionality, because it's so cool – the thing looks like a hockey puck and fits the hand surprisingly well. There's a fair chunk of running in to plough through before this amplifier comes to life. Meaning, you have to sit through hours on end where it gets better and better. Karan suggests a 100 hour run-in before the pre-amp comes on song. That said, it's pretty good to begin with.

I used the KA L with one of the best power amps in the business – the Karan KA S 180 stereo amplifier

(tested here in July 2006). Armed with a CD player with balanced outputs, this gives a completely front-to-back balanced option. But this highlights the one potential short-coming of the Karan system – it's not a whole system yet. The company desperately needs a CD transport or player; if nothing else



as a PR exercise. There's a modern perception (seemingly among new audiophiles) that there's some magic synergy in using a one-brand system and companies that lack one of those key components in the chain simply don't sell as well. The Karan KA L should be better known, as should the KA S 180. It should be better known because



it's one of those amplifiers that signed the Hippocratic Oath. It has the words 'First Do No Harm' burned into the circuitry somewhere. It means whatever you play through the KA L doesn't get radically altered by it. This sounds trivial, but too many pre-amplifiers are 'dark' sounding or

'warm' sounding, 'woody', 'clean', 'steely' or one of possibly dozens of different flavours of pre-amp sound. This is one of the few exceptions, one with a seeming absence of character. The power amplifier is slightly dark and the two together act as a perfect foil for musical replay.

This absence of pre-amp sound is addictive. It's also very hard to describe, because you find yourself talking about the recordings and the music, not the properties of the pre-amplifier itself.

Although this is a very good thing for music – let's face it,

a product that gets out of the way so sublimely that music becomes uppermost is extremely good for replaying music – it doesn't make for good copy.

There's a sense of focus here in spadeloads, but this is a two-way focus thing; it causes you to focus your attention on the music and in turn it pulls the music into tighter focus.

Continuing with the optical analogy until it's firmly dead from overuse, this is a wide-angle field of view, not a close-up (or macro) viewpoint. The KA L takes in the music qua music, not as a series of notes to be carefully analysed. Yes, the close-up detail is there if you want to, but this is not the sole purpose of the KA L. It's more intent on delivering a ▶

► musical performance in its entirety than forcing you to study the playing of the second viola.

Perhaps the best description is one of a Zen-like calm over the face of the KA L. Nothing perturbs the pre-amplifier and anything that approaches the product is reflected perfectly.

So you can put just about everything you can think of through the pre-amp – whether it's smooth sounding Wes Montgomery guitar solos from the early 1960s played softly, or Turandot at full wig-out levels. Everything is in its right place, nothing seems lost or altered and the sound is remarkably unsullied by the experience. This bestows on the sound a profound sense of 'right' that comes along but rarely. The late, lamented Pink Triangle PIP was one such pre-amplifier. This is like the PIP, but with more bass and no batteries to break down at a moment's notice.

When you start reeling out classic old pre-amps that were indescribably good 20-years ago and still fondly remembered today, you know the KA L is on to something good. In fact, to some extent, it may even be 'better' than the bigger brother. I've only limited experience with the bigger Karan – the two-box

KA L Reference – but there are strong similarities between the two. In many respects, the one-box KA L is the more approach-able of the two; the KA L Reference is ultra-precise, ultra-detailed, ultra-focused... all of the things the



KA L does, but more so. So why 'more approachable'?

Because the KA L has a wider comfort zone. It will not tear a bad recording limb from limb. I suspect this might be a 'PRaT' thing: both KA Ls are very good at keeping time – even crazy modern jazz time signatures – but where the KA L Reference is so focused on delivering the absolute last stretches of detail in the bottom octaves, the KA L just seems happy to let nature and rhythm take its course. More research – and a lengthy direct comparison – is needed

In fact, a lengthy demonstration is highly recommended here. Its honest approach is not an immediate hit and even the highest of high-enders can sometimes be swayed by more up-front

'bling' products. This is the antithesis of bling. It's a calm, collected and smart pre-amp choice, which will give listeners decades of pleasure. Perhaps that's why Karan is not better known – second-hand Karan products are almost unheard of because the owners are so reluctant to sell them on.

On no account take this the wrong way, what follows is a wholly positive statement: it's hard to be impressed by the Karan KA L. Which is just how it should be. This pre-amplifier never draws attention to itself, whether through its sonic actions or some mercurial fit of electrical pique. It simply plays music, letting you enjoy the sound all the more.

That it's softly spoken is a better statement of long-term quality than any sonic fireworks. There are precious few products so 'intelligently' designed.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Fully differential line-stage
Inputs:	3x single-ended RCA 1x balanced XLR
Input Impedance:	30 kOhms single-ended 30 kOhms/polarity balanced
Gain:	9dB single-ended 6dB balanced
Outputs:	1x single-ended RCA 1x balanced XLR
Output Impedance:	30 kOhms
Dimensions (WxD):	500 x 90 x 340 mm
Net weight:	20kg
Price:	£3800

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Accoustic Arts Drive I Mk 2/ DAC I Mk 4

by Alan Sircom



Accoustic Arts is a poorly spelled but very well made audio range from Germany. In addition to the Drive I Mk 2 CD transport and DAC I Mk 4 converter, the brand has an integrated amp, a pre-amp and three power amps, a CD and universal player and – most recently – a reference class valve DAC. There are speakers and a range of accessories, too. The products have a consistent theme: a very clean sound and build quality second to none. And yet, the products are little-known, even among high-end enthusiasts – I suspect there might be some anti-Euro xenophobia at play. If these two products had a big British or American name on the front panel, they'd be on every audiophile's Most Wanted list. Or maybe it's just a very contended market. Whatever the reason, this particular transport and DAC combo deserve more recognition, because they work particularly well. Both in combination or taken on their own.

One of the biggest bonuses of the transport mechanism in the £2,895 Drive I Mk 2 CD transport is that it is perhaps the quietest we've ever (not) heard. Once you close that thick shiny cover on the top of the player, having put the mag-puck over the spindle of the disc, you won't hear a thing, even if you stick your ear to the side of the transport. You can barely even feel the vibration. Of course, the top-loading mech – a Philips CDM Pro 2 LF; good, hardcore stock built on a mechanically decoupled cast metal chassis – does mean the player makes crucial demands on placement. You must position this on the top shelf of the rack, because not only is the transport set back from the front panel, but it's also got an inch-high knob on the lid of the transport (and it's not powered).

Inside the thick chassis is the sort of solid engineering you would expect to find inside an amplifier (or possibly a Naim CD player), with a heavily

► shielded 75VA toroidal transformer and 45,000µF of smoothing capacitance. The player has no less than four separate power supply stages, feeding drive, DSP, display control and display heating stages. A brace of transformer-coupled coaxial phono, BNC and balanced AES/EBU XLR connections form the sockets on the back panel of this heavy aluminium chassis.

There is a touch of bling about both transport and DAC. The transport has a blue glowing logo on the sliding draw – this can be defeated, but is bright enough to light up a small room. Then there's the overall look, with brushed aluminium cases with shiny chrome knobs. This stays just the right side of garish... but only just. In contrast, the old school Philips display is understated, but not the most informative around.

The DAC is styled similarly to the transport. It has a pair of big shiny knobs (gratuitous on a DAC, surely) and three indicator LEDs in between. It's a multi-bit affair, but uniquely works to 66-bit precision and 1.536GHz sampling. This comes from using a pair of multi-channel DAC chips parallel-connected for fully balanced operation. That said, we preferred the sound of the Drive to DAC through the single-ended BNC connection with analogue output in balanced. With four XLR inputs, two phonos and a BNC connector, plus both XLR and phono output, you have room to experiment. There is also an unbalanced version, that shaves £200 off the base £3,100 price. The DAC 1 Mk 4 also sports a high-grade filter stage, with 60,000µF of Panasonic filtration and a Class A output that's

claimed to be nabbed from the pro studio world. Once again, a toroidal transformer – a 100VA model – provides the motive power.

Normally when checking out combinations of CD transport and DAC (or pre-amp and power amp for that matter), one side is better than the other. It's rare to find a matched pair, but the Accoustic Arts duo are just that. Yes, the

Moving over to the DAC, it's a minor revelation. Music here seems fundamentally 'right' through the partnership. It's difficult to pin down, because – like the very best products – it seems to do little more than the merely good kit, but that last degree of 'rightness' to the sound is what separates the Wadias and Zandens from the rest.

In particular, there's an absence of 'ringing' to the sound that only manifests itself when you go back to regular



transport is also a perfect partner for the company's Reference converter and if you upgraded the transport, you'd still be able to squeeze out better performance from the DAC 1 Mk 4, but the two go together perfectly. So well, in fact, it's a shame to break them up.

The drive is a timing hound. It adds a degree of precision to the sound of the digital output that is exceptionally hard to find elsewhere; not just in tempo like an old Linn turntable, but spatial and temporal precision. Sounds have a tangible 'space' in the soundstage and hang together beautifully, eliminating some of the artifice of the replay chain in the process.

CD playing. Suddenly, after hearing it through the Accoustic duo, CD sounds shiny and as if it's played through a ring modulator (the thing that gave the daleks their voice, albeit not to anything like that extent). This pairing strips back the brightness of digital without sounding dull in the process. There are a few players that do this, but often at the expense of some bottom end energy. This one manages to keep the integrity of the sound intact right across the frequency range, delivering a potent mix.

Of course, this description makes ►

▶ the AA duo sound a bit sterile. Not a bit of it. These two play with fire and energy when the disc demands it, grace and subtlety when it needs those elements and a lot of balls when spanking through Led Zep. Truth is, we put a range of discs down the Accustic chain – everything from old 'leccy noodling from early Kraftwerk to the most mellow slice of Wes Montgomery guitar its possible to hear without falling into a coma and everything in between. Nothing foxed this pair, every piece of music fell into place beautifully, and kept coming back for more.



As suggested in the review of the Bryston CD player in the last issue, most high-end CD players seem to fall into either the accurate-but-dull or the entertaining-but-wrong camps. This is one of the very few exceptions. Accuracy and entertainment can be bed-fellows, but not very often it seems. The Accustic duo manages to combine the precision and exactness of the most accurate players with the sheer sense of musical fun of some of the more beat oriented designs. No, it will not out-resolve a Resolution Audio or out-pace a Naim, and neither will it provide that seemingly endless musicality of a Wadia or

Zanden. But it gets close to all these things.

Slightly garish looks aside, there's not much to find fault in the Accustic duo. It does what all good players try to do... get out of the way of the music. Which makes it perform remarkably well in a wide variety of systems and with all kinds of music. You could easily plonk the Accustic Arts Drive and DAC down at the head of a soft, comfortable valve system or a tight, upbeat, small-speaker, solid-state system and the result would be the same... you get to bypass any

encroachment on the sound by the digital stages. In fact, arguably the only real downside to the duo is their integrity. It's not the sort of performance that lends itself to two-minute snap decisions. Instead, it's the slow build, as it dawns on you that this combo is playing the long game and those more immediate-sounding players begin to sound peaky and wrong.

Of the two, the DAC is always going to appear the more exciting product, because of that super-high sample rate and word length. It shouldn't; the two both offer improvements over the norm and in combination, they are an unstoppable force, requiring a large cash injection to better the sound.

It'll take a few days to burn into your psyche, but the Accustic Arts Drive I Mk 2 and DAC I Mk IV turn in a memorable performance. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Drive I Mk 2	
Digital outputs:	1 x AES/EBU XLR (balanced - 110 Ω) 1 x S/P-DIF; RCA (unbalanced - 75 Ω) 1 x S/P-DIF; BNC (unbalanced - 75 Ω)
Dimensions (WxDxH):	482 x 100 x 375 mm
Weight:	15 kg
Price:	£2895
DAC I Mk IV	
Converter technology:	66 bit/1536 kHz (max. sampling rate)
Digital inputs:	1 x AES/EBU; balanced - 110 Ω (XLR) 2 x S/P-DIF; unbalanced - 75 Ω (RCA) 1 x S/P-DIF; unbalanced - 75 Ω (BNC)
Digital outputs:	1 x AES/EBU; balanced - 110 Ω (XLR) 1 x S/P-DIF; unbalanced - 75 Ω (RCA)
Analog outputs:	1pr balanced XLR 1pr unbalanced RCA phono
Dimensions (WxDxH):	100 x 482 x 375 mm
Weight:	10 kg
Price:	£3100
UK Distributor: Audio Reference Tel. 44(0)1252 702705 Net. www.audioreference.co.uk	
Manufacturer: Accustic Arts Net. www.accusticarts.com	

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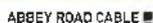
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Shanling CD-T1500 CD Player

by Jimmy Hughes



What an amazing-looking piece of kit. That was my initial reaction to Shanling's CD-T1500 CD player. It's rare to find equipment as well-made as this. The top and bottom plates are made from solid alloy some 2.5cm thick, creating a structure that looks like it could stand being run over by the proverbial Tank.

As you can see, it's a top-loading player, the disc clamp system being raised or lowered by hand. The CD itself is visible while playing, but it's protected by a clear acrylic cover. The transport section and feet have clear acrylic mouldings that light up blue when the player is turned on, creating a striking high-tech appearance. Essentially though, the CD-T1500 is a very simple machine. It has a minimal number of controls, with most functions being accessed from the remove handset. The player is built around a high-quality Philips CDM-12 Pro 2 transport and employs Burr-Brown SRC4193 44.1kHz/192kHz up-sampling chips.

Two PCM1794K chips are used for D/A conversion, one for each channel. Four 6922 tubes are employed for the analogue output stage, giving balanced and unbalanced audio outputs – the former via XLR sockets. Three separate power transformers are used for the digital, analogue, and tube sections. The sturdy build quality of the CD-T1500 results in a player weighing about 10kg. Finish is excellent, and the player immediately inspires confidence. It looks and feels like a quality item, and I was intrigued to see if its sound matched its superb appearance. I began by using the player via its unbalanced outputs.

Early impressions were of a sharp clear sound that had good detail and definition. Clarity was excellent, and the sound seemed smooth, and well-balanced, yet immediate and focused. It wasn't especially rich or 'tube' like, though the top end was ▶

▶ certainly clean. The CD-T1500 offers listeners a choice of sampling rates - standard 44.1kHz or up-sampled to 192kHz. The ASTINtrew At-3500 CD player I used until recently offered something similar, and (once again) I found it far from easy to decide which of the two options sounded best. The up-sampled output definitely gives more detail, creating a sharper more immediate presentation, with slightly greater dynamics and separation. The bass seems a shade leaner and less voluminous too. On immediate switch-over, the response is one of 'that's better'. But, after a while, doubts start to surface. When you switch back to 44.1kHz, the reaction is often one of relief - the music sounds smoother, and more evenly-balanced, with better integration. It's maybe not quite as brilliant and sharp, but it seems more together and nicer to listen to. The bass is fuller and more 'woody' sounding - less dry and electronic. It's easy to get carried away here. If you're not careful, you can end up switching between the two options all night - each time (seemingly) getting a big improvement... Generally, I preferred to stick with 44.1kHz - though, for some recordings, the 192kHz up-sampling option definitely improved things.

Although Shanling make strong claims regarding the quality of the Philips CD transport used, it has a couple of drawbacks. The first is agonisingly slow 'fast' search. It seems to search in four or five second jumps, and if the point you want to reach is several minutes into a track, it takes a fair while to get there. Indeed, it's so slow, it reminds me of the very first Philips CD players from 1983 - yes, that bad. The second concern is

tracking. Playing a Chinese Pirate CD (James Blunt's *Back to Bedlam*) which has a nasty radial scratch, the CD-T1500 jumped quite severely, and lost a couple of minutes' music. To keep things in perspective, the CD-T1500 did not jump or misbehave with any other discs.

Unfortunately, not long before the CD-T1500 arrived, the ASTINtrew At-3500 CD player I'd been using was recalled. It would've been nice to compare the two, but it wasn't possible. Nonetheless, the Shanling made a good first impression, and I lived with it



for a couple of weeks before making any serious comparisons. Eventually, I tried it against the UK-made Arcam's DV-135 DVD/CD/SACD player. This costs less than the Shanling, and (rather obviously) lacks its lavish build quality. But it is a much more versatile machine, playing CDs and SACDs, as well as DVD Movies, yet with CD source material, the Arcam and Shanling sounded surprisingly close. The Shanling was sharper and perhaps a shade more focused and immediate. The Arcam sounded fuller, with a deeper weightier bottom-end and sweeter more airy

treble. The Arcam seemed to image better, producing a greater sense of 'height' and depth. To be honest, at this point in the listening if forced to choose I slightly preferred it over the Shanling.

The Arcam is all solid state, compared to the hybrid transistor/tube Shanling. However, had I not known, I'd have thought the Arcam was the tube component. It had a certain richness and warmth compared to the Shanling. On Richard Thompson's *Keep Your Distance*, I was impressed by the Arcam's solid cohesiveness. All the various instruments could be heard clearly, and the vocals sounded clean and prominent, without seeming

exaggerated.

This track has a deep solid bass, which the Arcam reproduced very convincingly. On the CD-T1500, the bass seemed to lose some of this weight and authority - especially when set to 192kHz.

The differences between the two players were not huge, and I daresay if you couldn't live happily with one, you probably couldn't live with the other. Nevertheless, I had a consistent preference for the

► Arcam. However, the Shanling has a built-in *Get Out of Jail* card in the form of balanced outputs. Now, it's been a fair while since I used a CD player with balanced outputs – so long, in fact, I'd mislaid my cables and had to make up a fresh set. But the effort was well worth it. Suddenly, the Shanling was calling the shots.

The increase in output level seemed bigger and more strongly projected.

Of course, I reduced amplifier volume levels to compensate. But it went further than that. The Shanling's soundstage seemed broader and deeper, and the music had greater tonal body and dynamic presence. Going over to the Arcam, the sound now seemed somewhat 'smaller' and more contained. Back listening to the Arcam, I felt I wanted to turn up the volume - past the point where I'd originally had it set – trying to match the Shanling's bigger broader deeper soundstage. Doing this certainly helped, but did not fully compensate. The Shanling sounded bigger, not just louder. Via its standard outputs the Shanling had sounded very good, but not exceptional. Using the balanced outputs, it was much, much better – often close to outstanding. So, you need to use the Shanling balanced to hear it at its very best. The difference is pretty significant.

Another thing that made the CD-T1500 sound better was switching its display lights off. You do this from the remote handset, and the result is a cleaner slightly more focused sound.



reduced it by a big margin. Now it might've been imagination, but I reckoned there was a further small but noticeable improvement in focus and clarity...

The Shanling CD-T1500 is a very nice-sounding CD player - one that sounds very good unbalanced but much better once its balanced outputs are used. Combining extraordinary detail with real substance its sound is extremely impressive. I love the CD-T1500 for its looks and build, and reckon there are many who will want one for its appearance alone! But set it up carefully and the sound is more than a match for the wrapping. ➤

There's a richer 'darker' quality to things – as though the music were emanating from an inky-black backdrop. I also wondered about the 'open' transport, which allows light to reach the surface of the CD. Years ago, I used to reckon that CDs sounded better if played in a totally dark environment. Most are, of course, simply because of the way that CD players are designed and engineered. Back in the 1980s I had Pioneer's PD-75, which played discs upside-down on a platter. There was a little window in the drawer, so you could see the disc spinning, and this allowed light to reach the playing surface. That player definitely sounded better with the window taped up. I wondered if the Shanling might also be affected. So, having nothing better to do, I found a suitably sized box and placed it over the transport. It did not cut out 100% of the light, but certainly

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	One-box up-sampling CD player
Sample Rate:	24 bit with 192kHz up-sampling
Valve Complement:	4x 6922
Outputs:	1pr RCA Phono (unbalanced) 1pr XLR (balanced) 1x coaxial S/PDIF digital (RCA)
Output Levels:	2.2V (unbalanced) 4.4V (balanced)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 180 x 290mm
Weight:	10 kg
Price:	£2000

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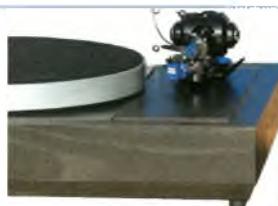
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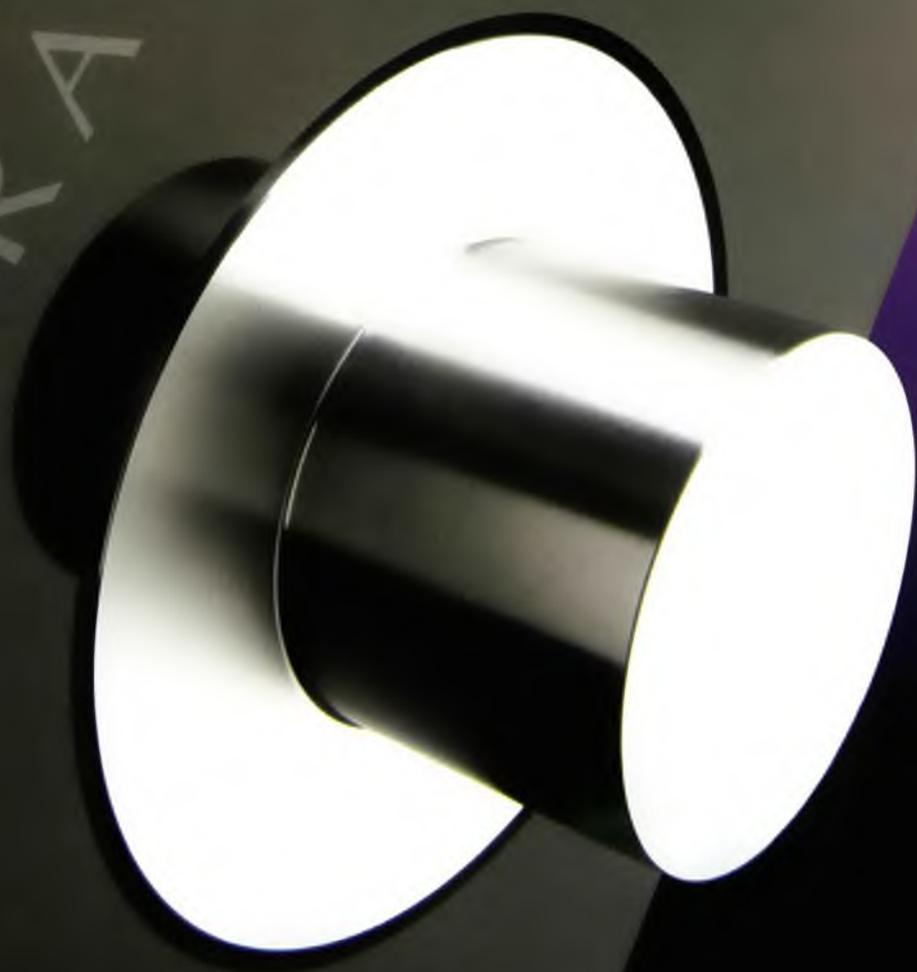
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Function



CARRAT



The Carat A57 Integrated Amplifier

by Chris Thomas

It's an old chestnut I know, but at what level does true hi-fi begin and how much does it cost? What constitutes a "real" music system, as opposed to something that merely produces a sound through a pair of speakers? I have my own opinion but these are very difficult things to define, let alone pin down with hard and fast rules. I say the answers lie in the music, but ask ten people and you will get as many different views. There are very few real bargains I could recommend in the world of low-cost audio equipment but the Carat A57 integrated amplifier is certainly one because, despite its relatively modest price, this is a component that has changed my conception of what such an amplifier can achieve, given the right operational circumstances.

Carat is the electronics wing of Inovadis, the French company who already manufacture Highland speakers, the Norstone range of AV furniture and cables as well as Lumene projector screens. The A57 integrated amplifier is built in the Far East and named after a famous style of diamond cut, presumably with 57 facets. The amplifier I have been listening to is part of a three-piece system comprising of matching tuner and CD player (more of which in a coming issue). These are beautifully made and finished components, physically distinguished by their black acrylic fascias and brushed alloy

controls. There is more than a hint of the "lifestyle" product about them, but for once they are as impressive in use as they are svelte in appearance. The amplifier is extremely versatile, having phono inputs for four line-level components, a tape loop and even a set of inputs for a turntable with switchable moving

this is a French-designed amplifier and there is always something slightly off-the-wall with their designs; you will soon get used to it. You can scroll through the menu with the function button and then make choices and adjustments with the



coil or moving magnet cartridge selection. There is also a set of line out sockets for driving a separate power amplifier and enough gold-plated 4mm sockets to connect two pairs of speakers that you can drive together or individually. On the front panel you will also find a jack socket for a set of headphones and the now de rigueur mini-jack to connect some sort of MP3 player.

All switching is achieved by combining the function button and the continuously rotating volume control. At first it does seem a bit quirky, but bear in mind that

volume knob, all of which are viewed in the display window. Bass, treble and balance controls are a little superfluous in my opinion as the A57 is so well sorted tonally anyway, but this is designed to be an amplifier for all seasons. Power output is a healthy 80 watts into 8 ohms, which almost doubles into 4 ohms and the A57 is more than happy to drive speakers that one might initially consider well out of its league. All this is remote controlled from a single system unit that can operate the entire 57 range.

What will certainly impress you is the way that this amplifier goes about its business when you give it some hard work to do. From the opening bars of music the first thing that grabbed me, even from cold, was the sheer presence and strength of the musical image it produces. I have ▶



► seldom heard such a strong, solid central focus and sheer in-the-room projection, especially from such a modestly priced amplifier. It is a little forward but transparency is excellent and there is a tremendous sense of depth and space around the instruments. This extends not only to the dimensions of the soundstage but is matched by the Carat's resolving powers too. Feed this little amplifier with high levels of musical information and it really thrives. It not only has real driving power and a superbly extended and dynamically controlled low-end, but it produces a very balanced tonal view with no undue emphasis or harshness anywhere across the bandwidth. Speaking of which, I have to mention the refinement, purity and extension through the treble. Amplifiers at this price seldom have any real quality here but the A57 exhibits a level of subtlety both tonally and texturally that is quite exceptional.

Usually with such amplifiers the shortcomings are only too evident and you are left pondering whether

(or not) these are acceptable at the price. But the only thing I can find to criticise about the A57 is that the acceptance angle for the remote operation should be broader.

Use it at any volume level and the lack of the compressive nasties that plague so many of the competition are virtually non-existent.



The way it can open up the rhythmic elements within the music with its fine sense of drive and controlled deployment of its quite considerable power reserves deserves comparison with amplifiers I have recently heard that cost twice the price. I used it with indecently high quality equipment and was amazed at the response. Its ability to unravel complex multi-track recordings,

it into any musical situation. The danger is likely to be that it won't be asked the right questions by its partnering equipment and will be wrongly judged for the answers it comes up with.

In other words, used out of the context I can imagine the A57 finding itself doing the bidding of cheap CD players and few fates are quite as horrible as that. That would also be a criminal waste as this is a genuinely smart and very accomplished integrated amplifier that really engages you with the enthusiastic way it makes music and certainly deserves serious consideration. It produces that music with a smile on its face, so if you are shopping in this area of the market then ignore it at your peril – and if you already have a main system of high quality and are looking for a second one for the bedroom, study or office, then look no further. Where does serious audio begin? It begins here. This is a great little amplifier and cheap at the price. ➤



even when fed by an information grabber like the \$10k Esoteric X-01 D2 CD player, is utterly impressive. It has a lightness and delicacy of touch, which it maintains regardless of the kind of music you ask it to play, and this soon gives you the confidence to push

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Integrated amplifier
Inputs:	1x phono (mm/mc) 3x line-level 1x tape
Outputs:	1x MP3 on front panel 1x tape
Speaker Outputs:	2prs 4mm (switchable)
Output Power:	2x 80 W/8 Ohms, 2x150W/4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x100 x 360mm
Weight:	10.2kg
Price:	1200 Euros

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One Step Beyond...

A quartet of mid-priced turntables from Funk, Michell, Pro-Ject and Roksan

by Jason Kennedy

With the explosion of interest in record players and the ever-increasing availability of new software, the mid-market for turntables (a financial and performance step up from starter decks) has become a lively place. I gathered four contenders for this review but could have easily added another four. Which is a good thing in some ways but does not make the choice any easier for you the vinyl enthusiast.

What I can say at this point is that none of them are dullers. They have all benefited from the digital age inasmuch as they are pretty neutral and easy to use once you've persuaded your dealer to fit the cartridge. On that front I got hold of the Editor recommended Dynavector DV10X5 high-output moving-coil cartridge from Pear Audio, to use as a common reference on all of the turntables. In its current allen bolt unfriendly guise (apparently threaded inserts are coming) it's a pig to install with the supplied aluminium fixings, but it delivers a high-energy sound that's strong on detail and bandwidth, which can't be bad for £250. I also encouraged manufacturers and distributors to supply a cartridge of their choice and most did, which kept things interesting.

All the players were auditioned on a solid wood and metal equipment support from (the now defunct) Treble A and the Towshend VSS (versatile seismic stand), which offers decent isolation from the resonances that a pair of B&W 802D speakers transmit into

the floor. Amplification was a Trichord Dino+ for phono EQ, exactly the sort of standalone stage that these tables will be paired with, connected to a Classé CP-700 preamp and CA-2200 power amp for the speakers. The latter, along with the speakers might be unlikely bedfellows for a sub-grand turntable, but it was their resolution I was after.

Software wise the length of the project and number of turntables and cartridge variations meant that I got to play a huge variety of albums, but for the comparative listening the central core consisted of Keith Jarrett's *Standards, Vol. 1*, Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances* from Classic Records on CD and vinyl, The Pointer Sisters' *That's A Plenty* and Tracy Chapman's eponymous debut.



Pro-Ject X Pack

Pro-Ject is the most aggressive company in the affordable turntable world. Over the last ten years it has achieved a position of dominance in the budget sector that is the envy of the industry. This is because it produces decent turntables that usually come ready fitted with Ortofon cartridges

and can be used straight out of the box, which makes them very appealing to dealers who can treat them as the analogue equivalent of a CD player, at least as far as set-up goes. Pro-Ject is also highly competitive on price thanks to manufacturing base in the Czech Republic and a UK distributor, Henley Designs, which also sells Ortofon cartridges.

Not satisfied with beating the budget end of the market to a pulp with its Debut and Xpression designs, Pro-Ject has also been having a go in the next sector up with designs like the acrylic Xperience under consideration here. This is not only a great looking turntable for £750, it is also equipped with a carbon-fibre tubed tonearm and an Ortofon Rondo Red MC cartridge, something which purchased alone

would set you back £300! Margins on cartridges must be better than I thought. Whatever the reason, on paper at least this looks like the best value in this small group, if not the sub £1,000 turntable market as a whole.

What you get is a neatly finished slab of 20mm thick clear acrylic which sits on three decidedly chunky pointed metal feet that are adjustable height-wise and damped with Sorbothane to achieve a degree of isolation from the supporting surface. An AC motor is suspended in a rubber cradle reminiscent of early Rega decks, and drives a square section ▶

▶ belt with an acrylic pulley, the belt looping around the periphery of the platter. Despite the presence of two gears on the pulley, speed can be changed with the press of a button on the Speed Box. This is an upgrade of sorts that sits in between the wall-wart power supply and the motor and can be placed pretty well anywhere convenient. On/off is achieved on top of the plinth so you rarely have to touch the Speed Box except to change the speed.

The platter itself weighs two kilos and is made of MDF with a 4mm layer of flat-ground vinyl on top. Then there's a felt mat which seems a little strange given the supposed low-impedance nature of vinyl-to-vinyl interfaces and the presence of a screw down clamp to keep the two together. The main bearing consists of a chrome plated steel centre shaft that runs on a Teflon bearing in a sintered bronze housing. Our pre-used sample came without lubricant, nor is it suggested that you use any in the set up manual, so presumably the Teflon is enough (it isn't though, see below).

The Pro-Ject 9c tonearm has gimbal bearings that consist of stainless spikes in sapphire beds and sports the

aforementioned slightly tapered carbon-fibre armtube with an aluminium headshell bonded to the end. As with all Pro-Ject arms there is the option of rotating the tube to align azimuth and the anti-skate is achieved the old skool way with a thread and falling weight. Downforce is achieved by rotating the counterweight on its decoupled shaft using calibrations marked on it. These are close enough to accurate but not one hundred per cent, so check tracking force by ear (as always). The supplied counterweight is a heavier than usual variety selected for the chunky Rondo Red (10.5g). Another Pro-Ject habit can be seen in the phono socket outputs

upgrading but does



seemed a bit odd as it's not something I've encountered with Projects in the past, nor any contemporary turntables above the most basic. Henley sent me some oil for the bearing and a new belt which cured the problem. However, it was van den Hul Spindle Oil, which is probably 50 times the price of the variety supplied by Project. Either way it did the trick and the X-pack delivered an impressive result that was not dramatically swayed by the supporting furniture. It did produce a calmer and more appealing result on the Townshend VSS but (impressively) there were no serious issues when it was on the solid stand.

Its character is clearly enhanced by the sophistication offered by the Rondo Red. This has a degree of refinement not encountered with the other needles in this group and while it's not as dynamic as the Dynavector it is precise and capable of solid three-dimensional sound. Timing is about

average for this group of players so it neither sounds slow nor has you dancing around the room, a great relief for the couch potato and reviewer alike. Although similar in character to the Roksan it is a little more open but less sophisticated. Enthusiastic is a more appropriate description, the musical results being reasonably convincing if not always compelling.

In order to fit the Dynavector cartridge I had to get hold of a lighter counterweight to suit its 6.6g mass and spent far too long fiddling with the aluminium mounting bolts it requires – they're so light that one floated off whilst I struggled and never reappeared!

Thus equipped the Project produced a lively and upbeat sound, although one that was not as well judged as it manages with the Rondo Red, both turntable and Dynavector being quite energetic components. This means that the reverb and bass kick on

introduce a junction for the low output of the cartridge to navigate. A basic cable is supplied to get you started and this is what was used for the review.

The Ortofon Rondo Red cartridge supplied with this deck seems rather grand, even for a good-looking turntable of this price. Its body is made out of "finest powdered Japanese hardwood combined with resin and cindered at exceptionally high temperatures". Call me cynical but that sounds a bit like sawdust and glue that has been baked, but it's results that count and the Rondo looks promising on that front. It has an elliptical tip on an aluminium cantilever and punts out 500µV when tracking at between 2 and 2.5grams.

Initial experience of this record player revealed a degree of wow which

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Solid plinth turntable with sorbothane isolation
Platter:	Acrylic and MDF mix with felt mat and clamp
Motor:	AC synchronous
Speeds:	Switchable for 33 and 45 r.p.m.
Cartridge:	Ortofon Rondo Red included
Dimensions (W x D x H):	460 x 360 x 133mm
Price:	£750

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▶ Tracy Chapman's 'Mountains O' Things' are clearer and more powerful, but there is a little too much mechanical energy in with the audio. Next to the Funk, the Project has a more dynamic sound with better bass extension but a slight bloom in the upper bass that can make instruments like double bass seem a little exaggerated and out of shape. At the other end of the scale, the treble is slightly smoothed which means the deck rarely sounds aggressive.

The Xpack is a very competitively priced record player with a decent cartridge and the luxury of a dust cover, something that doesn't exist in the traditional form for the assembled competitors. It is also capable of working well on a standard rack, which makes it easier and cheaper to site. All in all it's a hard act to beat on sound per pound grounds and it looks good too.

Funk Firm Funk Turntable

The Funk Firm is the current project of Pink Triangle founder Arthur Koubesserian, a man for whom a new idea is rarely far away. The Funk is the base model in a small range that recently expanded to three with the all-acrylic Saffire. The principle remains the same throughout: use a simple, unsuspending plinth to support an inverted bearing under a lightweight platter and drive it with a DC motor. Some of these ideas come from the PT turntables, the bearing and motor specifically, but where PTs had a suspended sub-chassis the Funk relies on sorbothane to keep external resonances at bay.

The Funk is pretty well as basic in concept as a turntable can get, but it's the details that count with such things and some of these are quite unusual. Most obvious is the Achroplat platter, named because achromatic means colourless. There is also the inverted bearing with its sapphire thrust pad, not a feature you will find on many sub \$500

turntables I assure you. The Achroplat is made of expanded PVC and combines two useful qualities: it's the same material as the vinyl that is used to make records and thus offers a good impedance match, and its aerated core is said to have self damping properties. This is combined with the low mass, which should avoid the problems of energy storage that Arthur considers to be a problem with high mass platters.

Against this is the argument that the platter will have little inertia to iron out the fluctuations in resistance caused by changes in the signal. Funk would argue that these are overcome by the torque of the DC motor that drives an acrylic sub-platter beneath the Achroplat, making it the only deck in this group that doesn't drive at the periphery. This means that manual speed change would require platter removal so Funk has



included electronic speed control via the white on/off knob on top of the plinth. The similarity between this knob and a drawer handle are purely coincidental I'm sure. The same white knobs are used for feet underneath and when decoupled by Sorbothane they raise the whole thing nearly 50mm off the deck. Because of the soft nature of the decoupling you need to tweak the feet to make them stand upright. Funk provides O-rings which help them stay put once you've done this, which helps.

Power is supplied via a wall-wart style transformer which plugs into the back edge of the plinth, all the wiring is routed into the underside so it does not look unsightly when viewed in profile.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Solid plinth turntable with sorbothane isolation
Platter:	Expanded PVC
Bearing:	Inverted with sapphire thrust plate
Motor:	DC
Speeds:	Switchable 33/45 rpm
Dimensions (W x H x D):	430 x 115 x 335mm
Prices:	
	Funk turntable £450
	Rega RB300 £198
	Denon DL 103 £100
Manufacturer:	
	The Funk Firm
	Tel. 44(0)20 8697 2705
	Net. www.thefunkfirm.co.uk

The standard arm cut-out on Funks is for Rega pick-ups, but that company's decision to

change its arm base design from the threaded column with a large lock nut to a three point top fixing means that Funk is looking for alternative tonearm options. While stocks of old Regas last, Funk makes a collar that can be used to adjust VTA which was supplied for this review. Funk also supplied a threaded RB300 to use for the review along with Arthur's preferred choice of affordable cartridge the Denon DL 103, a \$100 MC with a spherical tip and a history that goes back almost as far as I do!

I have used the Funk and the subsequent Funk V with its three-point drive system for a couple of years and have always had dynamic and entertaining results. It was quite alarming therefore to hear how poorly the Funk coped with the energy in my basic equipment support, resonances delivered by a nearby B&W 802D it



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► has to be said. This had the effect of making the bass sound lugubrious and overblown and the mid-band crude and uncomfortable at serious listening levels. In the past I've always put this turntable on a Townshend support which provides the sort of isolation it clearly needs. Moving it over to the VSS stand brought about a dramatic increase in focus across the band and especially in the bass where the increase in definition changed things from loose to tight and from relaxed to timely. Here once more was the enthusiastic, upbeat sound that had got me so excited about this design when I first encountered it.

Having used a Funk V for some time, the junior model sounds a little overblown at times and lacking in refinement, but the flipside is the thrill power that it brings to all your favourite pressings. Its key strengths are timing and dynamics, the two qualities that digital formats have so much difficulty replicating (although models like Cairn's Fog3 are catching up fast). These results were achieved with the Dynavector 10X5 cartridge as the first



sample of a Denon DL103 arrived sans cantilever. When Arthur managed to get me a new Denon it was not hard to hear what he likes about this remarkably affordable moving coil (\$100 or less). Out of the box it's a bit keen in the treble department but with a bit of run-in the top end smooths out somewhat and reveals an impressive mid-band. The bass is rather appealing too, with excellent articulation and decent welly but what stands out is that the music hangs together so well. Keith Jarrett's trio seem to gel just that little bit better than usual and one's attention is drawn to

the musical rather than the sonic content of the material. A useful antidote to audiophilia nervosa.

After a night's run in I noticed that the Funk didn't have quite as much pep as it had done and when it went up against the Project Xpack it was clear that the speed was a little slow. When this was confirmed by a strobe disc, I found a small Philips screwdriver and adjusted it via a hole next to the on/off knob. I don't know if this was a result of the motor and power supply running in or some change in the belt or its relationship with the sub-platter, but it's something new Funk owners might want to keep an eye on.

The funk sounds calmer than the Project which surprised me, but this was also a comparison of Dynavector versus

Denon and the former is definitely a more upbeat cartridge. On its own terms the Funk/RB300/DL 103 is a remarkably revealing and musical turntable for the money. It does the midrange better than the frequency extremes and requires first class isolation for best results, but under such circumstances it will keep you riveted to the music.

The Michell TecnoDec

The late John Michell was a lovely chap whose approach to turntable engineering was not so dissimilar to that of SME; both use precision machined components made largely



in their own factories and both aim to produce as neutral a result as possible. The biggest difference is that SME is a little more ambitious and its creations rather more expensive. At £716 including an RB250 arm, the TecnoDec is easily the best value turntable on the market in engineering terms. If Michell's sales and marketing skills came anywhere near its manufacturing ability the competition would be in real trouble.

The TecnoDec is the only Michell turntable that has a solid plinth. Unlike the Gyrodec (and its siblings) there are no springs to decouple the platter and arm from the world around them. In this instance the motor is free standing and the deck is supported on three aluminium legs with sticky compliant feet, so the degree to which the motor resonances are able to get into the platter-arm-cartridge loop will depend upon the nature of the support surface. The new Creek Wyndson turntable has a similar construction and on that deck I was surprised to be able to feel resonances from the motor that had travelled through the feet and acrylic plinth to the arm base via an MDF support surface. In the case of the TecnoDec no resonances can be felt on the motor casing, let alone any part of the turntable.

Acrylic forms the core here, an IImm slab supporting the arm base and an inverted bearing on the aforementioned turned legs. It's a simple and elegant approach, but the legs themselves could be a bit ►

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Solid-plinth turntable with standalone motor
Platter:	Acrylic/vinyl compound
Bearing:	Oil-pumping inverted bearing
Motor:	Standalone DC
Speeds:	33/45 rpm
Dimensions (WxHxD):	48.5 x 8.5 x 31.5cm
Prices:	
	Michell Technodec £592
	Rega RB250 £124
	Michell Technoweight £70
Manufacturer:	
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	Net. www.michell-engineering.co.uk

► sexier. The armbase is a particularly nice machining with a cut-out for the lift/lower device on Rega arms which might be necessary with some shallow bodied cartridges. As it turned out, with our reference Dynavector DV10X5 moving coil the arm base is raised so that no cut out is required, but it still looks good. Rather than delivering its TecnoArm, a revamped Rega costing just over four hundred pounds, Michell supplied an RB250 with a VTA adjusting collar and TecnoWeight, which keeps the overall turntable and arm price down to £808.

The motor is a DC variety and comes housed in a beautifully machined aluminium housing which greatly adds to the aesthetic appeal of the turntable overall. Conveniently the on/off switch is on the top so you don't have to have a separate box in an accessible space – very few turntables are small enough to sit with a separate PSU on a normal size rack. Speed change is manual and easy, just flip the round section belt up or down a gear, or like most of us, leave it where it is 99% of the time. Burnt Friedman's *First Night Forever* did confuse me a bit on the speed front

recently by being an unmarked 45rpm album, but fortunately such things are reasonably scarce.

The main bearing is a Michell favourite, an inverted design with a spiral track machined into the phosphor bronze housing which draws oil up to the load bearing interface between thrust ball and shaft, a hole in the shaft top allowing the lubricant to return to the well beneath. The idea with bearing inversion is to place the point of rotation above the centre of gravity of the platter and at the same height as the drive belt so that the system is balanced. The platter itself is a compound of carbon and vinyl loaded acrylic that is very close in mechanical terms to vinyl itself and thus should offer the minimum of resistance to the transmission of energy away from the record being played, the theory

being that this energy can be dissipated as heat thereafter.

The TecnoDec comes with a standard power supply with a captive mains lead and a socket for the cable from the motor. This part of the turntable can be upgraded to the HR power supply with its Never Connected circuitry for £335. Another upgrade/accessory option is a record clamp, a device which usually improves sound quality at the cost of slower disc flipping. Michell does not recommend any particular cartridge so most of the listening was done with the Dynavector DV10X5 MC.

In use the Tecnodeck suffered from the same sensitivity to stand

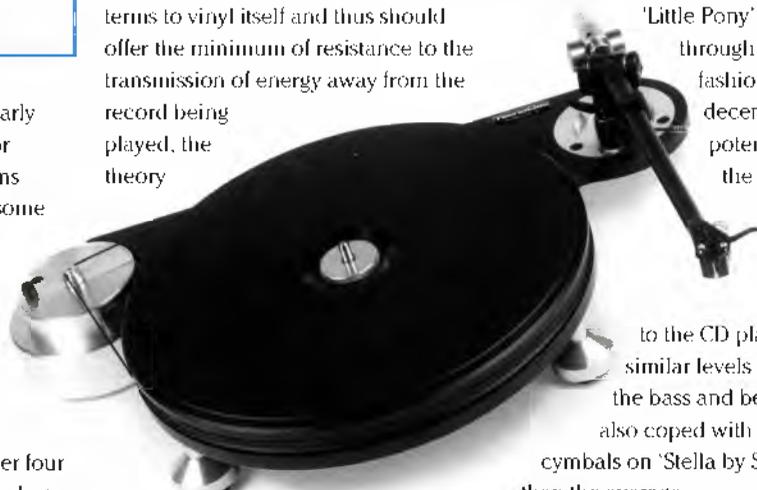
resonance that afflicted the Funk with the bass sounding soft and loose and undermining definition on drums and double bass. Moving it on to the well tempered Townshend brought focus to the sound, lightening up the bass and revealing precisely what is going on in the mid-band and treble. The top end is a little harder sounding than the other decks assembled, something I initially thought might be linked to the basic arm, but it's not a quality that I've encountered in any Rega in the past so is more likely to do with the turntable. On the plus side it does lead to a sense of precision that lets you hear an awful lot of detail. It also revels in high-energy material such as the Pointer Sisters'

'Little Pony' which shines through in exuberant fashion thanks to decent dynamic potential from the turntable.

It also compares very favourably to the CD player delivering similar levels of solidity in the bass and better timing and also coped with the splashy cymbals on 'Stella by Starlight' better than the average.

For a change of angle I fitted the Ortofon Rondo Red from the Project. This also sounded quite precise and tight, more so than it had on the X Pack, but delivered good bass extension and a sound that was pretty assured given the cost of its parts. Keith Jarrett's poise was clearly audible and the high notes remained in control, avoiding the tendency they have to become glassy in the wrong hands.

The Tecnodec/Rondo proved a dynamic and powerful pairing, but in fact something a little smoother would probably be an even better choice. There is a slight hardness to the Michell's sound that requires some calming. Moving the



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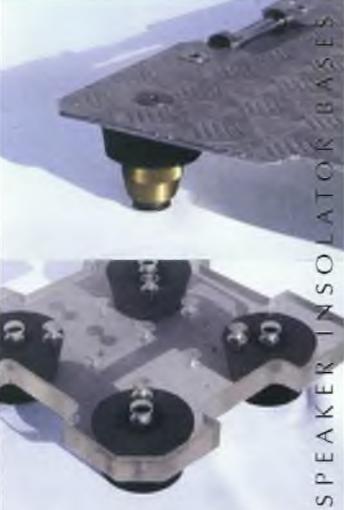
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► Tecnoarm and Rondo onto the Funk for instance, results in a more relaxed sound albeit one that doesn't extend as deeply into the bass. Mitchell's most affordable creation is extremely well-engineered for the price and with the right cartridge it will provide the basis for a stonking analogue system. Just be careful not to expose the midrange too much – and use effective isolation for best results.

Roksan Radius 5 Turntable and Nima Tonearm

Roksan made its name with the original Xerxes turntable back in the late eighties, a rather ugly deck with a black lid and sombre wooden plinth, also generally black. But with its motor mounted on a bearing it produced a distinctive, upbeat sound that got the fledgling company off the ground. What designer Touraj Moghaddam sought to achieve by putting the motor on a bearing and retaining it with a spring was to counter fluctuations in torque which would disturb the synchronous motor if it were fixed down. In the Radius 5 there is no bearing because it would raise the price too much, but the motor is mounted on a compliant rubber like material that allows it to have lateral movement and attempts to achieve the same result.

The Radius 5 appeared in 2004 and replaced the preceding Radius 3 which was becoming too costly to produce, so much so that it would retail for nearly twice what the current unit does if made today. It is built around two slabs of what is in this case 20mm acrylic but can also be maple or walnut veneered MDF. The lower slab is supported on three chrome finished, spiked feet and supports the motor housing. A sub plinth is supported on three compliant mountings which raise it up a small amount and introduce a degree of decoupling for the arm, cartridge and

bearing/platter; very similar in fact to the stiff suspension of the original Xerxes. Roksan supplies brass pucks to place under the spikes should you be disinclined to pierce your equipment support or wall shelf.

The bearing is a stainless shaft running in a brass housing which arrive already on the turntable, ready to accept the acrylic platter and its round section, peripheral drive belt. Speed change is achieved manually via a standard two-level pulley system. This is the only turntable in the group that does not have an external mains transformer, because the



motor runs at 120v and does not need a major step down like the rest. It means that you have a straightforward mains cable like any other piece of kit, which is nice.

The Nima tonearm is uni-pivot design made from an attractive combination of polished acrylic and matt aluminium. Unusual features include PCB track in place of arm-wiring in the tube and a locking pin that acts as a transit bolt when shipped but then holds the counterweight stub when in use. The counterweight has an off centre hole so that it can be rotated to align azimuth (get the stylus sitting upright in the groove when viewed from the front). Anti-skate is combated the old fashioned way with a thread and weight and the arm base can be adjusted for height to achieve correct VTA. Roksan also provides an easy to use alignment gauge, which has parallel lines on it to

make the job a lot easier.

Downforce is achieved dynamically and Roksan provides a basic Ortofon style seesaw scale to set the right amount. The company also provides two sets of decent cartridge bolts, an optional fingerlift, extra tube and a cotton bud style cleaner for the main bearing. All in it is the most professionally presented turntable in the group, but also the most expensive.

Touraj suggested that the Nima, while it is a great arm, can be upgraded fairly easily by replacing the plug in arm cable. The only issue I found with the arm is that because there's no clamp on the arm rest it is a little vulnerable to accidental knocks – so it's best to keep the arm lift in the up position when it's idle. Distributor Henley Designs provided an Ortofon 2M Bronze MM cartridge to use with the Radius 5, a fairly new £200 design with a fine line stylus.

With the Ortofon cartridge in-situ the Radius delivered a smooth, sophisticated and attractively well-timed performance that while it may not have reached the high

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Split plinth turntable
Platter:	Acrylic
Bearing:	Stainless steel standing
Motor:	24 pole synchronous
Speeds:	33/45 r.p.m.
Dimensions (WxDxH):	400 x 350 x 150mm
Finishes:	Clear acrylic, maple, walnut

Prices:
Radius 5/Nima £995
Ortofon 2M Bronze £200

Manufacturer:
Roksan Audio Limited
Tel. 44(0)20 8900 6801
Net. www.roksan.co.uk

► frequency heights available from an MC was never short on musicality. The smooth treble of the 2M means that Keith Jarrett's Standards are not quite as open as they might be but this is more than compensated for by the high levels of energy on offer, this alongside weighty bass notes from all members of the trio but especially the double bass in this instance. It's clear that the recording quality is superb and while the treble may not be as clear cut as the Michell/Dynavector DV10X combo this pairing delivers a convincing rendering of the acoustic on everything you play. You can easily appreciate the quality a trio (Jarrett, Peacock, DeJohnette) that operates at a level way above intuitive, the music is totally engrossing when things come together.

By the time I'd got to the Tom Waits disc I was beginning to hear just as much space as had been apparent on the Technodek which made me wonder if the cartridge had taken that time to warm up. With the track 'Shore Leave' the voice is good and gritty and it stands out strong and solid against the brilliant percussion playing from Victor Feldman and vital guitar notes of Fred Tackett. Next to CD the Radius offers a richer timbral result that, while maybe not as tight in the bass, is smoother overall despite seeming to make more of cymbal detail than the digital cut. It will also play louder with comfort than a Cambridge 740C disc spinner, which although relatively affordable is capable of good results by the standards of the format.

Moving over to the Dynavector DV10X cartridge seemed to be less successful initially as tracking was not as assured as it had been with the Ortofon MM. Touraj didn't think that there should be any incompatibility with this cartridge however and

suggested removing the finger lift which had a beneficial effect and let the turntable deliver a similarly vital and full bodied result albeit with a bit more definition through the mid-band and stronger dynamics. Voices are also strong with plenty of character and colour; that is voice colour not turntable colour of course. Switching between the standard wood and metal rack and Townshend VSS revealed the lower tech solution to produce the more relaxed sound. This is possibly because the brass pucks and spiked feet



are less well damped on the glass shelves of the VSS, and some other interface would probably help.

The Radius/Nima has a sophisticated sound by the standards of the assembled competition. There's an ease about the way it can reveal the expression and timbral detail of each voice or instrument. Clearly the effort put into decoupling the sensitive parts of the system from the outside world are effective as this was the only deck on test not to derive at least some benefit from the best isolated support – something that is useful in real world circumstances where placement is often compromised.

Conclusion

Turntables in the £500 to £1000 ballpark are pretty competently designed and built these days. All of those I rounded up turn in a sound

that will out-entertain CD players in the same price bracket so long as your vinyl is in good condition. The digital alternative usually has the upperhand when it comes to bass power and noise levels, but turntables of this grade are more entertaining, dynamic and richer in tone.

Of those assembled the best all round performer is (perhaps unsurprisingly) also the most expensive. The Roksan Radius/Nima is a more sophisticated beast than the alternatives in both design and execution and that is reflected in the finesse that it brings to the performance. It doesn't have a dust cover and that uni-pivot arm is tricky to use without the lift/lower lever, but its ability to work on a standard rack is a real bonus. Second place is much harder to give; the Funk is a real charmer that can extract so much musicality that you really don't need more, but it doesn't have the bass extension of either the Michell or Project and it needs serious isolation. The Michell wins the engineering award for the finish on the motor casing alone, and if you like a tight and precise sound it will definitely be for you. Again though, those rubber feet do little to keep out resonance so a well placed wall rack or Seismic Sink is a necessity to keep the bass in check. Which leaves the aggressively priced Project; a great looker with good vibration control and a very slick cartridge ready fitted, this is a well-judged set-up with a dynamic sound but not quite as much charm as the Funk/RB300/DL 103 at much the same price. If you like your welly full-on, the Project has it, whereas those more into music than bass will love the Funk. If on the other hand you prefer a more neutral sound the Michell will suit, so long as you can keep it away from the vibes.





IN MEMORIAM OSCAR PETERSON

PIANIST, COMPOSER, LEGEND

INTERVIEWED BY ANKE KATHRIN BRONNER

When does someone become a legend? What qualities must an artist possess for them to achieve immortality? In my opinion, it is not just a question of technical perfection. In fact, sometimes a great player's technique might not be their greatest attribute. For true greatness depends on combining technical ability with a profound understanding of musical communication and humanity. It is this balance that characterized Oscar Peterson. He had so much more of these worldly, human qualities than many other artists. Just one look in his eyes and you could see the depth of his wonderful character.

We had the honour of meeting this great pianist in Germany during the 2005 tour that marked his 80th birthday. Despite suffering a stroke in 1993, which had diminished both his mobility and the power of his renowned left hand, he was still able to walk out onto the stage and meet his audience, the surge of warmth and affection that greeted his appearance absolutely unmistakable, a moving moment indeed but not the last that evening. Nothing could touch the sadness with which, later in the concert, he took time to list and remember the terrible losses of the last few years, the tremendous setbacks for Jazz: Ray Brown, Roy Kral, Russ Freeman, Barney Kessel, Stanley Turrentine, Milt Jackson, J. J. Johnson, Lou Levy and Niels-Henning Orsted Pedersen.

At 80 years of age there was no escaping the loss of drive in his playing, the loss of that precision and easy mastery over the most complex of rhythmic patterns, yet his magical ability to enthral an audience remained undiminished. Those listening marvelled at his range, happy to forgive his occasional transgressions just to witness and experience his musical talent. But whilst we forgave he too could not escape and you could sense his underlying frustration, his knowledge that his powers were slipping inexorably away. In some ways it was almost as if he felt lonely, the last survivor of a great generation, ambassador for an era that echoes even today, an era that produced names like Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie and the Duke. Now that he too has gone, will that era die? A fitting issue with which to open our discussion...

AKB: Mr. Peterson, what do you think of current developments in jazz music? It seems that Swing is back!

Oscar Peterson: It never left!!!! (laughs)



AKB: But there are new voices.

OP: And there always will be... That's the real beauty of jazz: It keeps rejuvenating itself with the arrival of new players who respect the older players. That gives them grounding, but then they also have something of their own to say. But you can't just jump into jazz straight from a pop group! You can't suddenly start playing jazz. It doesn't work like that.

AKB: As you know, Ray Charles has recorded *Genius Loves Company* with friends and musicians from across all genres. Could you imagine planning something similar with Pop, Country and other Jazz musicians playing with you?

OP: I don't know that much about Country and Pop. I know when I hear it, but I must admit that I'm dedicated to the Jazz world. I have to be honest with you: No! It's a different medium. You know, just like I don't think they would want to sit in with my group. Because we would be too different – it's too different.

AKB: It's too special? ▶

► **OP:** It's another medium.

AKB: How did you first find your way into the jazz business?

OP: I was listening from the time I was aged twelve to some of the great jazz artists – listening with real dedication. At fourteen, my elder sister Daisy registered me for a competition at CBC (the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Ed.) and I actually won. So that got me a spot playing each week at the radio station in Montreal. The show was called *Fifteen Minutes Of Piano Rambling*. That went on until Norbert Granz heard me playing. It was actually the era of the great pianists: Errol Garner, Bud Powell, Teddy Wilson, Nat Cole. I was young and suddenly I had to deal with these guys. There I was at sixteen and I used to try and play with them.

AKB: Your father was a very strict man. How did he react to your plans to leave school and become a professional pianist?

OP: Well, he regarded Art Tatum as the best pianist of the time. And he said: Don't become any pianist, become THE pianist! And I pursued that objective seriously..

AKB: How did you personally react to your success? Did you have the feeling: "Look at me, Dad, I made it?"

OP: No, not then. I did not have the feeling that I'd really achieved a lot. I had the feeling that I'd left a sign, maybe that I'd made it within that scene, to put it that way.

AKB: What advice would you give today to a young artist, to a young musician wanting to make their way in the music business?

OP: First of all I would advise working with the classics. 'Cause they are the basis; they provide the foundation.

AKB: The technique?

OP: That too, but also the real understanding of harmonics and expression.

AKB: You have studied classical piano. Did you ever wish to become a classical pianist?

OP: Actually no. It was my sister Daisy – it was her idea. I wanted to be a Jazz pianist. So she brought me to the gentleman who was a great inspiration: Paul Demarki. He's a classical teacher. And I studied with him.

AKB: What did he teach you that you can also use for jazz?

OP: The melodic phrasing. When I first played for him, he said: "Well, I don't hear the melody sing!" Once he thought that I had understood this, he gave me Debussy to play to get a sense for the chords. In addition, I owe to him my technique and the flying fingers. He gave me Chopin for that! But the most important thing that he told me was: "If you have a natural talent for fingering and harmonies, they can't play wrong!"



AKB: But why did you turn back to Jazz music?

OP: Freedom. (laughs) Freedom of expression! If you know what I mean!

AKB: It comes from inside? Is it a feeling?

OP: Yes it is. At that exact moment, how you feel and what you say. Each performance, each time you try to say something a little different.

AKB: When you were a young man, what were your influences? Which artists, which kinds of music?

OP: Well I was a great admirer of some of the classical pianists, but it's hard to pick out just one name. They were all so great. But I also had my people, my favourites amongst the jazz artists, and my greatest influences there were Art Tatum, Nat King Cole and Teddy Wilson.

AKB: You have played with all the big names. Please tell me about playing with Ella Fitzgerald. ►

► **OP:** Well, it was wonderful! It was a pleasure to play for her. Ella was so great! You didn't play for her, you played with her. She just led you in the same direction she was going. An enormous talent!

AKB: And what about Count Basie?

OP: Basie... I loved him, and I still love him. I miss him so terribly! We sat together one night and resolved the world's problems. He said to me after a gig: "Why don't you come to my room?" This was in his later years. And we sat and had a drink or a coffee and talked. He told me so many things that I could have repeated in my book, but in some way I have the impression he directed them to me personally. I think that they are actually too personal to make public.

AKB: And did you ever sing, or do you only play the piano?

OP: Well, I did a couple of albums singing, but I'm not a singer. I don't pretend to be.

AKB: But there are other jazz musicians like Little Walter. He is not a singer but he sang and it's great, because his voice is so special.

OP: Well, let me say this: It's great to have a voice, it's great to have a tremendous technique, and it's great to have a great instrument. But you have to have the heart. You have to have the background, and you have to have the desire and – most important – the respect of the great players that went before you, you know? The only way we have history today even in politics is because of the great men that went before. And it's the same in music!

AKB: Which would you personally say was your best – or your most important – recording?

OP: Oh, that's hard... I would say Stratford Festival.

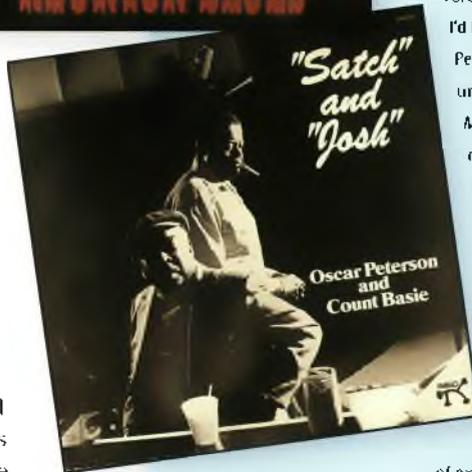
AKB: And what has been the musical success that you are most proud of?

OP: My trio!

AKB: And what type of concert do you like the most: The atmosphere of a bar, of a concert hall, or an opera ►

Oscar Peterson, The Recorded Legacy... by Denis D. Davis

Oscar Peterson enjoyed one of the longest recording careers in jazz, stretching from the birth of the LP on well into the twenty-first century. He recorded untold sessions on every Norman Grantz label, from Mercury, Clef and Verve to Pablo. He recorded in Europe on the MPS label, and late in life recorded several CDs for Telarc. Together that constitutes an awesome volume of work and while a case could be made that he never made a bad recording, there are certainly some sessions where the trio seem to be simply going through the motions, and others where Peterson simply embellishes too much for my taste. Fortunately, that still leaves quite a selection of outstanding recordings, mainly on Pablo and MPS, that are easily available on both vinyl and CD, have great sound and in many cases are available on premium audiophile pressings too.



Forced to create a very short short-list, I'd have to settle on the following:

Peterson released six LPs for MPS under the series *Exclusively for My Friends*, all recorded by MPS owner Georg Brunner-Schwer before an audience in Brunner-Schwer's villa. Peterson felt these were his best work, and I will not disagree. My first choice among them is *My Favorite Instrument* where Peterson plays unaccompanied – and his debt to Art Tatum is obvious. Original MPS vinyl is

of excellent quality (the US Verve re-

issues are not). The set is available as a CD box titled *Exclusively for my friends* and individual releases are available on SACD. Speakers Corner has also released a 180g LP of unreleased tracks.

Pablo's back catalogue represents another treasure trove. Among the best of these is a series of duets pairing Peterson with other great soloists, my favorite being *Oscar Peterson Et Harry Edison*. All the Pablo releases have first-rate sound and Acoustic Sounds has released several as 45-rpm double albums (*The Timekeepers* and *Ella and Oscar* come to mind) that are beautifully played and recorded.

However, if I had to limit my collection to just one Peterson disc it would have to be *Night Train*, a 1962 trio recording on Verve, with Ray Brown and Ed Thigpen. Find an original (VG-8538) or get a Speakers Corner re-issue and you'll experience Oscar at his smoothest, most sophisticated best—a desert island disc in every way.

► house like this one we're sitting in? Which do you prefer?

OP: I like the one where my group sounds the best!

AKB: And where's that?

OP: Whether they have you in a concert hall, a club or a recording studio: if they are happy and confident, they sound good! You know that – you're a player!



AKB: Would you rather be regarded as a composer or as an interpreter?

OP: Well, I started doing more composing later in my career; but I think I am a pianist first. Playing gives you the greatest control over the music, over the expression. Yes, I think I think as a pianist!

AKB: You play exclusively on Boesendorfer pianos. Do you also have a Boesendorfer at home in Toronto?

OP: Absolutely.

AKB: Which model?

OP: The Imperial! And I love it. That's my instrument! Well, I played a lot of various pianos, you know. I've played the Steinways, I've played the Danish pianos, also the French, I have played almost all of them, so what. But for me it's a very personal thing. Just like... You are a violinist: What you feel when you play your own personal violin, nobody else would feel! It's very personal to you. That's how the Boesendorfer is for me.

AKB: What is it? Is it the sound, or is it the action, the feeling of the keys, the key strike, what is it?

OP: It's everything! It's the communication! I think when I play my piano – and I try to play that way on pianos other

than the Boesendorfer too – I try to show them love. And in return, they show me love by sounding great.

AKB: Ah, I understand! It's like a person.

OP: That's right. It's like a love affair!

AKB: But you as a pianist you have a problem: You can't travel with your personal piano.



OP: No, you can't. But you see, there's the difference: You have to make friends and gain an understanding with each new instrument you play on. It's a different challenge. You're very fortunate; you have a very personal and lasting relationship with the same instrument. You have the same wife or the same husband for life. It's like never getting divorced, isn't it?

After more than six decades on stage, and hundreds of recordings, Dr. Oscar Emmanuel Peterson died on December, 23rd, 2007. I have never met (before or since) an artist as charismatic and warm-hearted as Oscar – with the eyes of a young boy and his warm, sweet smile. He didn't only capturing our hearts with his music, but also with his humanity. Now he is lonely no more and in his music, and its influence, he will live forever. We miss you.



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, David Stirling.

Key to Icons

	CD		120g LP
	Gold CD		150g LP
	HDCD		180g LP
	XRCD		10" LP
	Double Disc		Availability As S/H LP
	DVD		Vinyl Double Album
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	Multi-Channel		



Highway Dave And The Varmints

Bucket Town

New Mountain Music NMM 2007/4

Affectionately described as "rebel renegade purveyors of finest Black Country and Western music" Highway Dave and The Varmints are a six piece band with a pair of percussionists who play an authentic sounding and high octane alternative country groove with a dash of bustling Americana thrown into the mix. A dozen up tempo and rhythmically evocative songs with titles like 'Tailgatin'', '88 Cubic Inch V Twin', 'Hard Shoulder' and 'Folsom Prison Blues' atmospherically recreate that sense of dusty back roads, diners, hard knocks at a woman's hands and a healthy disregard for the law. The analogue recording made at the Norfolk Grange Studios, supervised by Dave Williams and mastered by an ex-Sony engineer, David Mitson is clean as a whistle and has a fleetness that does well to keep pace with the band's foot stompin' momentum. Its bedrock guitars, mandolin and lightly delivered vocals are presented accurately and with endearing warmth. As a concept, albums such as *Bucket Town* and bands like Highway Dave and The Varmints provide an unexpectedly likeable and credible take on music owned by their peers across the pond. And they're fun too...

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RP



Ryan Bingham

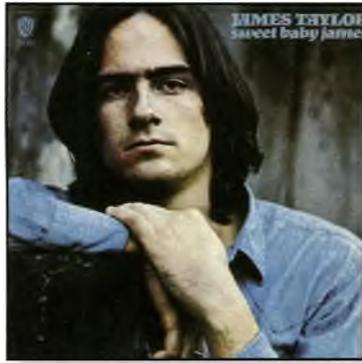
Mescalito

Lost Highway 0602517396746

I always worry when I see guys in cowboy hats on the front sleeve of a record, just in case the contents harbour more dross from country's bland brigade. Heavens above, the last thing the world needs right now is another Alan Jackson or Garth Brooks. Fortunately, this young man is a million miles away from the aforementioned pap. He heads more into weather-beaten road warrior territory. A disciple of the Joe Ely, Steve Earle, Terry Allen songbook of life, 25 year old Bingham spins stories rich with imagery and fractured hearts. He describes making music as having a conversation with someone, and judging from the 14 tracks on parade here, a conversation with Bingham would never be boring. His songs, when allied to his life worn voice, breathe with passion, guts and glory, and they have a freshness and originality that's so welcoming in this dumbed down era we find ourselves in. Pulling on the sounds of old, he spits them out and spins them into something altogether darker and more menacing, and the results are capable of putting a smite on the most jaded listener's face. *Mescalito* isn't instantaneous, more a slow burn to the senses, but these songs have longevity at their centre and improve with every listen, as all great songs do. It's one of the best debut's I've heard in years...he's destined for great things.

AH





James Taylor

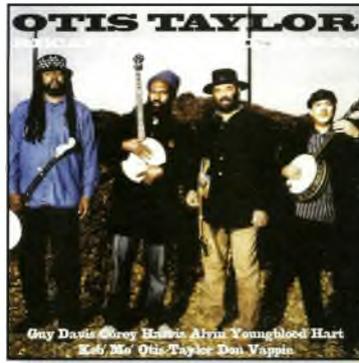
Sweet Baby James

Warner Bros. Records 274300 

In the late 1960s James Taylor was the embodiment of a riven and angst-filled American singer-songwriter. Addicted to heroin, physically drained and suffering from depression, he wrote the songs for *Sweet Baby James* while undergoing treatment at the Austin Riggs Mental Institution. Today's generation of musicians should be so troubled, because this is one finely crafted album with some terrific moments that express myriad emotions, from fear, loneliness and longing to euphoria, detachment, emptiness and yearning. Emphasis is on the darker, more dislocated places where sweet relief is the next fix away. A brilliantly evocative 'Fire and Rain' encapsulates Taylor's life up to this point, and it's clear both here and elsewhere through lyrics in a track like 'Steam-roller' that the music and the drugs are irrevocably linked... "I'm going to inject you soul with sweet rock 'n' roll and shoot you full of rhythm and blues"... is pretty unequivocal. The arrangements featuring Carole King (piano), Russ Kunkel (drums), Randy Meisner (bass) and Danny Korte (guitar) share a tremendous understanding for where Taylor is coming from, and this latest Warner re-master does well to uncover it all.

RP

RECORDING 
MUSIC 



Otis Taylor

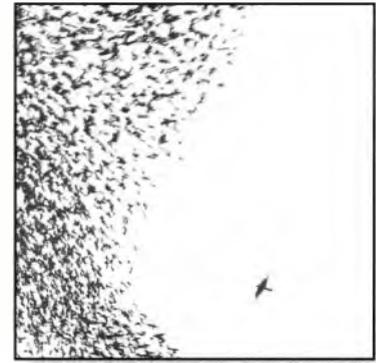
Recapturing The Banjo

Telarc Records CDR3662 

Otis Taylor's last release, the mighty *Definition Of A Circle*, was one of his finest recordings to date. His version of the blues (he calls it 'trance blues') is built around hypnotic riffs which are often banjo-led, but *...Circle* was a harder-edged affair and featured some pretty awesome guitar work from Gary Moore. This time around Taylor decided to pay homage to the banjo in its entirety. The instrument still isn't widely used by blues musicians, but there are some pretty important artists beginning to bring it to the fore. Taylor shares this album with Keb' Mo', Alvin Youngblood Hart, Corey Harris, Guy Davis and Don Vappie, all fine exponents of the five-string banjo. In amongst a mix of Taylor originals and traditional tunes, here the banjo is king. That would normally fill me with dread but the talents on display never allow the songs to descend into the bluegrass abyss. The artists share the vocal duties, and once again Taylor's daughter Cassie anchors the sound with sympathetic bass and haunting backing vocals. I really do think it's time this young lady cut an album of her own, because she has the most beautiful voice. While musicians hi-jacked the banjo for bluegrass, but Otis and his drums reclaimed it and took it back home to the blues. It most definitely has its place.

AH

RECORDING 
MUSIC 



Wilco

Sky Blue Sky

Nonesuch Records 131388-1  

Wilco's sixth studio album has courted controversy. Many have found it to be slick, over-polished and for its sins, lacking in musical experimentalism. It's a case of condemning Jeff Tweedy for delivering a thoroughly absorbing, smooth-sounding and accomplished folk-rock album that blends soulful poetry and painful sincerity with a dose of healthy and pragmatic directness. In this realm, his explicitly sparse vocals are a telling asset. There's certainly nothing insipid about them as they carefully and almost conversationally pick away at the most personal of sentiments. Half-speed mastering by Stan Ricker to audiophile standards reaffirms *Sky Blue Sky's* production credentials. This is an important facet of the album because in successfully revealing the cohesive instrumental balance of guitars, keyboards, bass and drums it gives us substance and structure, so that songs like 'Either Way', 'Hate It Here' and 'Impossible Germany' have solid musical foundations from which to melodically and thematically explore these hard-learned lessons of love, loneliness, despair and dysfunction. Forget the Wilco albums that have gone before. This one requires some careful absorption and assimilation before concluding that we might just have a modern classic on our hands.

RP

RECORDING 
MUSIC 



Tegan And Sara

The Con

Sire Records 257468-1 **150g** CD

The Con is the Canadian twins Tegan and Sara Quin's fifth album and it's been heavily plugged in the press. Its fourteen songs or chapters (because the Quins have literary aspirations and each track is given a consecutive chapter number) loosely follow a linear structure from the opening 'I Was Married' to the finality of 'Call It Off'. Their brand of Americana pop/rock traverses a typically dysfunctional modern relationship that is pretty much encapsulated by the often repeated line "I'm not unfaithful but I stray" in the song 'Back In Your Head'. Forcing this subject matter through both sides of an album is either brilliantly sustained and wryly observed music making or slavishly beating a theme to death and then unimaginatively beating it some more. In a conscious effort to pull it off, the girls mix and match their tempos; sometimes the arrangements are simplified and the softer vocal harmonies switched to more strident solos. Sadly, their lightweight and poppy voices do not capture the depth of passion and emotion suggested in titles like 'Knife Going In' and 'Dark Come Soon'. Vocally they lack the range, variety and maturity to make you care. This storyline is definitely more *Mis Is Et Boon* than *Barbara Cartland* and if that isn't damning with faint praise then I don't know what is!

RP



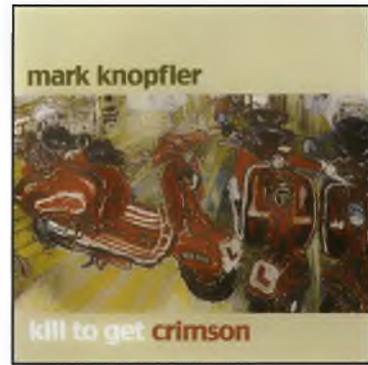
Ben Reel Band

Sweet Victory

Ben Reel Music CD

I reviewed Ben Reel's latest album *New Horizon* a few months ago, and I was so taken with it that I decided to grab a copy of this earlier release. Reel grew up in the midst of Northern Ireland's troubles and saw music as his escape route to a happier world. He's a terrific singer and songwriter who generally writes from a strong spiritual perspective, and his band are absolutely top-notch. *Sweet Victory* likes to get deep down and funky and has no trouble capturing the groove: 'The Virus' has it going on in spades, with the lyrics celebrating music's ability to make people get up and dance ("I got a critical condition, can't fight the infection, my body needs a vaccination, I'm coming down with a groove") and it has a stonking guitar solo in amongst the beat, courtesy of Gerald Black. Reel's a lot angrier on this album and vents his frustrations on 'Propaganda Radio', but he shows a tender side and no doubt a fondness for Bob Marley with 'Wil You Be My Woman', which is not a million miles away from the vibe of 'No Woman, No Cry'. The subject matter in 'Devil's Town (Las Vegas)' speaks for itself and is yet another highlight on a superb album by an artist good enough to hold his own in rock's premier league.

AH



Mark Knopfler

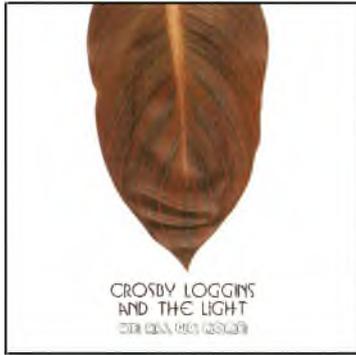
Kill To Get Crimson

Warner Bros. Records 281660-1 **180g** CD

From a sultan of swing to a troubadour for the new millennium, Mark Knopfler's transformation as a solo artist has produced consistently well-crafted and engaging music. His voice suits the folk rock style, yet the edginess suggested in this particular album title is absent and somewhat undermined by safe tempos, generally tame subject matter and the reluctance to leave the personal comfort zone. Call me hard faced but songs like 'Heart Full Of Holes' that concern themselves with confidences and broken promises, with its allusions to politicians and the family are lacking in bite. It is the character studies such as 'The Scaffolders Wife' which work much better, especially in the recreation of that incongruous gulf which exists between a working class mentality and the aspirations brought about by the easy acquisition of money. The study in class inequality and that chasm dividing worker and manager in 'Punish The Monkey' is also a success, though I would place a small question mark against its underlying premise in an age where legislation has been heaped upon legislation in the protection of the disadvantaged. If this song was written twenty years ago that might be a different matter - which is a telling comment on its author.

RP





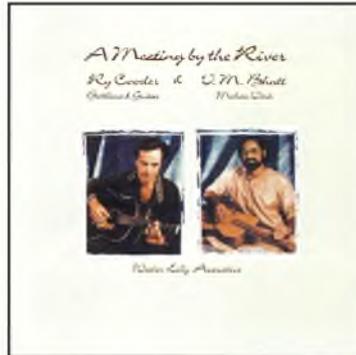
Crosby Loggins

We All Go Home

Prologue Records PRD72392 (CD)

Crosby Loggins is a very fortunate young man. As the eldest son of 70's legend Kenny Loggins, he grew up immersed in music, particularly the west coast sounds of the era. The likes of Jackson Browne, Graham Nash and Michael McDonald were regular visitors to his father's house, so it's no surprise that the music he's making is rooted in those artists' traditions. Unsurprisingly his singing style isn't a million miles away from his dad's, although at times I found myself being reminded of Green Gartside, lead singer with 80's pop combo Scritti Politti. Loggins has assembled a fine band and he's not the only one with a famous father, multi-instrumentalist Jesse Siebenberg being the offspring of Supertramp drummer, Bob Siebenberg. *We All Go Home* shows a lot of promise but occasionally drifts into bland pop/rock territory. Mind you, when the band get it right and fire on all cylinders, the results are pretty impressive. 'March On America's military drum call and stop/start acoustic thread is highly engaging, and 'We All Go Home's late night meanderings are a pleasant distraction. Also to be commended is 'Same Old Song', a gentle tune soaked in acoustic guitars, strings and glorious harmonies. Loggins isn't the finished article but shows plenty of promise; he just needs to sharpen up the song writing and play to his strengths and he'll be fine.

AH



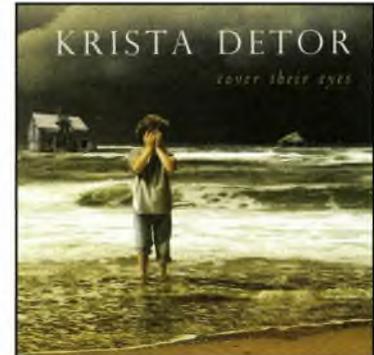
Ry Cooder & V. M. Bhatt

A Meeting By The River

Analogue Productions/Water Lily Acoustics/AAPW 29 (45)

Master recording engineer Kavi Alexander's Grammy Award winning CD from 1993 has always seemed an obvious choice for an audiophile vinyl reissue. Cooder's bottleneck guitar paired with Bhatt's mohan vina, an instrument of his own design, are backed by two percussion instruments—tabla and dumbek—in one of the best records of the 1990s and you could not inhabit the audiophile world of the 1990s without hearing this CD many times over. There are those with an aversion to anything approaching world music, but I've always found this combination of Ry Cooder's American blend of flavors with Bhatt's less familiar, plaintive Indian strains particularly mesmerizing. The CD has never been completely out of my play list, and last year after I found myself flipping through the bins of my local record store next to Ry Cooder, the CD again went into heavy rotation. The original CD was an outstanding recording. Comprised of four cuts of similar length, it seemed custom made for a four-sided 45-RPM release. The sessions were originally recorded on one-inch analog tape and mastered to CD by Paul Stubblebine. Now, Kevin Gray and Kavi Alexander have gone back to those master tapes to create this awesome 45-RPM release that eclipses the digital version. I can't imagine this not being on my list of favorite releases for 2008. Don't miss it.

DDD



Krista Detor

Cover Their Eyes

Corazon Records 255102 (CD)

There are plenty of good singers out there, as there are good songwriters and good lyricists, but to get them coming together under the same roof is something that doesn't happen that often. That is why Krista Detor stands out from the pack and shines like the wonderful star she undoubtedly is; she has all those qualities in abundance. The first thing you notice is the voice; a seductive, sensuous instrument as pure and crisp as freshly fallen snow, and with a beautiful grasp on control. It makes not a halfpence worth of difference what this girl sings, she does it so effortlessly and has the dreamiest range. Then there are the songs, sensitively written mini-epics laced with Americana, folk, country and South American influences, liberally dusted with some of the best lyrics to be found this side of Leonard Cohen. Detor paints with words and allows the listener into her wonderfully abstract world. So descriptive are they that it's a crying shame they aren't included in the package. A host of top musicians back Detor's vocal and piano talents, and the vast array of instruments used aren't there just to make up the numbers or smother the beauty in the songs, they enhance and enrich the sound and are all played to perfection. *Cover Their Eyes* is as striking as its cover art and as delightful as its creator. It deserves your ears.

AH





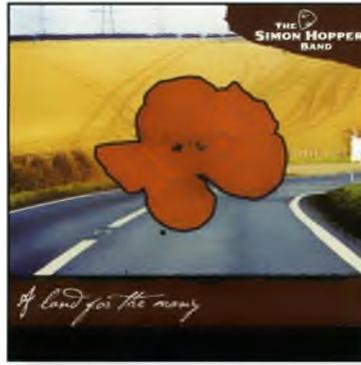
Larry Miller

Outlaw Blues

Big Guitar Records LML05CD 

Sometimes our lives just seem mapped out for us. Take Larry Miller for instance; at seven years old he was introduced to his first guitar, and it didn't take him long to realise he'd never have a long and fruitful relationship with his chosen instrument at the time – the violin. From that point on, the guitar was king, and since turning professional he's shared a stage with many of his heroes, including the one he reveres the most, Irish wizard Rory Gallagher. The two became firm friends, so much so that Rory featured Miller on the sleeve of his *Stagestruck* album. It's Gallagher's fierce style and boundless energy that exudes from the pores of Miller's soul, and anyone who's seen this guy play will testify to his sheer love of and total mastery of the six strings. It's not always easy to transfer that energy to the studio but it's definitely been captured on this set. *Outlaw Blues* is a high-octane record fuelled by the blues but injected with liberal doses of classic rock vibe, most notably on the thumping 'Writing's On The Wall' and the AC/DC inspired 'Only One Woman I Want'. With Miller's perfect-for-the-occasion vocals and a super tight rhythm section to boot, it's easy to hear why Larry Miller is talked about as the natural successor to his hero.

AH



The Simon Hopper Band

A Land For The Many

Control Shift Music CSMCD02 

British folk/roots artists rarely get the air-play they deserve and Simon Hopper is no exception. His songs are topical, wordy and intelligent. They do not pull any political punches and they try their damndest to seek a deeper context or reference point in a quest for understanding. They fearlessly draw upon instruments and rhythms from outside the accepted canon. The title track for example, is a traditional picker's ballad about immigration. The media's knee jerk responses to Eastern European migration are countered by a timely reminder that Britain has always been a cultural melting pot: be it an influx of West Indians in the 1950s; the Nineteenth Century Irish navvies who constructed much of our Victorian infrastructure; or as far back as the Celts and Anglo Saxons who've all contributed to and are a part of a nation that loves to wrap itself in the cross of St George. Yet all at one time or another were regarded as foreigners. Elsewhere in 'Bodies in the Way' he urges us to physically oppose oppression. Pertinent references to Kristelnacht, bloody dictatorship, sadism and religious zealots distance this music from the usual folk offerings. The protest songs are punctuated by more typical tales of love and loss, often with a slinging twist to the tale.

Supplier: frontieruk@btconnect.com

RP



Rod Picott

Summerbirds

Welding Rod Records 134842 

In 2000 Rod Picott co-wrote 'Broke Down' with Slaid Cleaves, which went on to become that year's most played song on Americana radio. The pair could well pull off the feat again with their collaboration on this record, the lovely 'Sinner's Prayer', an ode to not living a wholesome life. Although Picott managed considerable success in his hometown of Maine, it wasn't until he relocated to Nashville that his fame began to widen. He hosted a radio show there and made a number of influential friends, including bluegrass queen Alison Krauss. 2002's *Stray Dogs* enhanced his growing reputation and featured a guest appearance from Krauss, and that was followed in 2004 by the critically acclaimed *Girl From Arkansas*. This latest release showcases those marvelous writing skills. It's a gorgeous record overflowing with memorable rootsy rock and some terrific and poignant ballads. Picott's voice has a rustic and breathy charm, the perfect backdrop for his shot-through-with-heartache tales of love and loss. Like Slaid Cleaves, he has a poet's eye for detail and a great ear for melody and structure. Highlights are many, but particularly noteworthy are 'Something In Spanish' and especially 'Worry Doll', surely destined to appear on a Trisha Yearwood album sometime soon. That said, there are half a dozen others likely to achieve recognition from others, which I'm sure his bank manager would be thrilled about.

AH



who am i?

Gaynor O'Flynn

Who Am I?

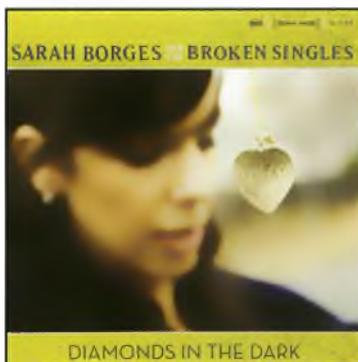
Being Human Records Cat. No. 001 

Law school drop out, Gaynor O'Flynn cut her teeth working on the now legendary music show *The Tube*, progressed to directing major concert performances and films for MIV and has built up a loyal fan base around the country as a live artist. *Who Am I?* is clearly a rhetorical debut album and its distinctly down tempo and late night contemporary beat showcases O'Flynn's lightly breathless and hauntingly simple vocals in nine sultry songs of an overtly personal nature. Comparisons to Martha Wainwright and Fiona Apple (without all the angst) are not misplaced, as she does not so much strike out indiscriminately at her subject matter (love, liberation, longing and our Lord) but instead beautifully dissects them in understated, yet evocative and lyrically expressive songs such as 'Fear Versus Love', 'Praying' and 'Flames Of Freedom'. It would be wrong to ignore the devotional dimension informing much of her work - she is, after all, the daughter of an excommunicated Irish Catholic Monk and Liverpoolian ballet dancer - and with this must come a degree of spiritual self-examination. But to her credit, this is handled in a wry, unobtrusive yet musically satisfying way.

Supplier: frontieruk@btconnect.com

RP

RECORDING
MUSIC



Sarah Borges

Diamonds In The Dark

Sugarhill Records SUGCD402B 

Massachusetts native Sarah Borges relocated to Boston in the 90's and swiftly built up a cult following in the coffee houses. It was a time when indie rock ruled the airwaves; bands like *Throwing Muses* and *Morphine* were on constant rotation and quickly found a way into Borges' inner psyche, colliding with Wanda Jackson and Merle Haggard along the way. This unlikely fusion of styles forms the underbelly of Sarah Borges' sound, that and a gentle twist of punk's couldn't-give-a-shit charm. As soon as you put this disc in your player and 'The Day We Met' comes crashing out of the speakers, the urge to dance will become irresistible. With her voice pumped to the max, she and the band roar their way through this country rocker with youthful aplomb. It's worth hearing for the guitar solo alone, a short sharp burst of infectious notes you find yourself eagerly anticipating every time. In fact, the sound of this record harks back to the 'Stiff' era and is particularly reminiscent of Rachel Sweet's 'Fool Around' - big voice, tight band and instantly memorable country-inflected pop. Sarah Borges is a girl with attitude, balls and a great voice. She's got herself a smokin' band in the *Broken Singles* and songs that have quality stamped all over them. Whenever the blues comes calling stick this on, it's a guaranteed misdisperser.

AH

RECORDING
MUSIC



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Hunting That Elusive Disc... And where to find the bands making them

by Andrew Hobbs

The office receives a constant stream of calls and e-mails from readers seeking discs that the magazine has reviewed (and all too often, it's me that's the culprit). With that in mind, RG has asked me to pen a small article, not just explaining where I source the discs themselves, but also where I uncover many of the artists whose work I write about.

A lot of the music I review is on small independent labels, such as Ruf and the Dutch label, Provogue. Although in no way can they be considered large, these labels are pretty widely distributed in the UK and abroad, and can be found in the record shops, assuming you can still find one of those in your town! With some of the really small labels, independent in every sense of the word, the task of tracking them down requires a little more detective work. Most, if not all of the artists have their own website, and if you visit them and click on discography you'll find that, more often than not, purchases can be made directly from there. Because the overheads are low, the prices are generally pretty keen.

If this approach fails, then the next port of call has to be the label the artist is on. Again, most sell online, and some provide the customer with the opportunity to listen to a few sample downloads, too. Try before you buy, as it were. The other alternative, and the one most customers use, is Amazon. Their selection is huge, but one problem I have encountered is availability - especially with the very small labels. They might advertise the album but that doesn't mean they have it in stock, and if they haven't the wait can be anything up to six-weeks. That is why a trip to the artist's website in the first instance is the best policy. Let's face it, said artist is hardly likely to be out of stock of his/her own album!

Which brings me onto another frequently asked question: what magazines do I read, and which ones are the most informative? Well, that obviously depends on what music interests you. Some, by the very nature of their title, let you know what field they work in. *Classic Rock*, for instance, covers a wide spectrum of all things rock (especially the bands who

have earned the right to be



blended with Americana, country, roots and singer/songwriter and is responsible for pointing me in the direction of some pretty obscure but hugely rewarding music. Sadly it is about to cease publication, but will hopefully be replaced by an online edition. Either way, back issues are available from the website and are well worth considering. *Blues Revue* is America's premier magazine dedicated to all things blues and is also worth seeking out. Their review section often runs to 100 albums plus, with writing that's always very well informed and (usually) a pretty accurate representation of the music. *Maverick*, like *No Depression*, handles country, alt-country, roots and Americana, and although

called 'classic') and has a pretty comprehensive review section covering new releases and re-issues. It must be doing something right because it's the fastest growing music magazine in Britain right now. *Maja*, on the other hand, dips its toes in a bigger pond, and does so with some of the best writers in the business. It very often dedicates ten or more pages to one artist, which is fine if you are a fan of who they're writing about. However, because the writing is so good and the artwork's so appealing to the eye, you can find yourself sucked in and reading about people you had no interest in! It remains my all time favourite



magazine. Three of the lesser known magazines, *No Depression*, *Blues Revue* (both American) and *Maverick*, cover their respective fields brilliantly. *No Depression* is a great



it's put together on a pretty tight budget by the editor, Alan Cackett, it's always very informative and well presented. Their gig guide (who's on and where) is excellent and tends to focus on fringe artists and small venues - perfect if you're not into vastly inflated ticket prices and big egos but prefer your music at grass roots level. All of the above-mentioned magazines are run by people passionate about music, and as such deserve to be supported by kids, ageing hippies, hi-fi freaks or anyone else interested in keeping this most wonderful pastime of ours alive.

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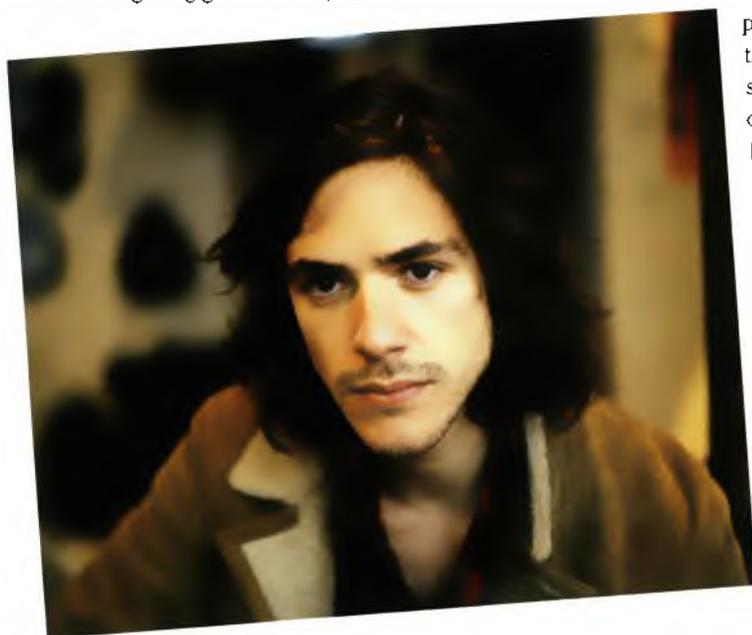




TRANSCENDING HIS SURROUNDINGS... JACK SAVORETTI

INTERVIEWED BY ANDREW HOBBS

This job has its moments. I'd organized this interview with Jack Savoretti and was scheduled to meet up with him at The Regal Rooms, a little one-room club above The Distillers pub in Hammersmith. Arriving 20-minutes early (a major achievement in itself!) I was mortified to find he wasn't doing the gig on his own; this was an



open-mic night, and one of the other bands was sound checking on the small stage. I asked the sound engineer if there was somewhere quiet we could go to do the interview as my recording machine picks up every little bit of background noise. His reply? "We've got a cupboard mate, you can do it in there". Oh my God I thought, what will Jack think of that? Anyway, he sauntered in unannounced and after exchanging pleasantries I told him nervously we had to do the interview in a cupboard. His reply? "Drew, that's rock 'n' roll". More like a scene from Spinal Tap methinks but hey, we settle in the cupboard and get down to work.

Savoretti has an amazing voice, husky and whisky-soaked but with a rarified tenderness at its core. I asked him when he first discovered it, and he chuckles. "I'm still discovering it! A few years back I sang my family a few songs and they said they were great but I should get someone else to sing them,

someone who can sing. Just the fuel I needed! Now they're the first to say 'well done'. I love singing but my voice will change, it won't sound the same in five-years time. I don't nurture it in that way - it's just a tool to say something. I feel I have to say something, more than I have to sing it".

I was intrigued to get his views on the recording process. Does he enjoy the studio environment? "I love the recording process. I have a great producer in the studio, and however much he wants to take me out of my comfort zone, and I'm always looking for ways to take him out of his. Good songs need to be a good listening experience - not just an emotion - and working with great musicians allows me to take advantage of that. So yeah, I love the studio".

This seemed like a good time to ask when we might see a new album? "As far as that goes, we have about 25 potential songs recorded, but it's all about picking the bunch and making the right bottle of wine!".

What stands out on Jack's album *Between The Minds* - apart from his wonderful voice - are the lyrics, especially on the title track. I wanted to know where the line "between the minds" came from? "I wrote this with my producer Rick Barraclough. He played me the initial riff the day I walked in the studio. It made me start thinking about the relationship I had seen whilst growing up, of how easy it is to see the soft side of a woman but how hard it is to see the soft side of a man. I don't know if I was fortunate, or unfortunate, to see the weaknesses of a man, and how through silence and pure pride a man can hide all of those so-called weaknesses. However, every now and again you meet somebody who can say that without you having to say something. So, I guess 'between the minds' means being understood without having to say anything".

Savoretti has a deep understanding of the song-writing craft. Where did that come from, and who influenced him most when he was growing up? "I lived in America when I was seventeen" he replied, the lilt in his voice betraying the fact, "so I listened mainly to American stuff: CSNY, Simon and Garfunkel, The Eagles, solo Paul Simon, James Taylor". Not much influence from the UK, then? "Apart from Pink Floyd...no. I didn't have that Beatles, Stones, Weller upbringing, so doing what I'm doing over here feels pretty weird. Sometimes I do feel like ►

▶ a fish out of water, but you know, it's fun to try and knock on every door".

And what of the current music scene, what does he make of that? "Oh, there's a lot of real music coming back. Twenty years ago hip-hop was the truest spoken word - politically involved and very real. Twenty years down the line and it's turned into something that was made in a sweet shop, but that happens to all music. They die out and they come back... the truth comes back". So is there light at the end of the tunnel, I ask? "Well, time tells the real players and the ones in it just to make a quick buck. These days 'the song' is back, and people are listening because they like the song, not because of a flashy video or what's being worn. The ones impressing me are artists like Jose Gonzalez, Iron and Wine, Ray LaMontagne and Willy Mason; those guys are coming out with some great stuff".



There was time to squeeze in one more question before his sound check. I asked if there was one question he'd always wished a journalist would ask him? He took his time before answering. "I guess it would have to be: 'Do you find there's pressure to deliver, now that there are people who are listening?' That's the question I would like asked the most".

And the answer? "My answer would have to be yeah, there is a lot of pressure, and I'm trying to figure out if it's good pressure or bad pressure. I guess time will tell".

It's amazing what you find in cupboards. Sometimes you come across a load of old junk, but sometimes

Savoretti might only be 23 but he's wise beyond his years. He's in possession of a rambling spirit and walks this earth with eyes wide open and his ear to the ground. So if he were to die tomorrow, I asked, what would he feel was his greatest achievement, and his biggest regret? "Hmm... good question" comes the reply. "I think my greatest achievement is just trying to get everything down, and not just this album. I try to record everything I do and don't write anything down; I'm pretty dyslexic and my attention span doesn't work that way. But I do press record and try to capture everything on a laptop, and they're the things that make me smile when I hear them. They're not there to be sold, they're just songs I put down at three o'clock in the morning, and they're the things I'm really proud of".

And his biggest regret? "Probably not to listen more, not to ask more questions of people who are more experienced".

you happen upon something magical, something you weren't expecting to find. To be honest, I wasn't sure what to expect when the tape machine started rolling in The Regal Rooms cupboard, but what I found was a very humble and personable human being, a charming and articulate man who knows, understands and appreciates the phenomenal gifts he's had bestowed upon him. There's no doubt in my mind that Jack Savoretti has what it takes to become one of the most revered and respected singer/songwriters of his generation. That might be a bold statement given he's only one album into his career, but having seen him live and watched the jaws drop around me, and having played and recommended the album to others and been privy to the feedback, I can say it safe in the knowledge that sooner or later his star will shine. Having the dark good looks of a screen god won't do him any harm either.





REEL TIME...

THE EVOLVING WORLD OF THE CINEMATIC ORCHESTRA

by JASON KENNEDY

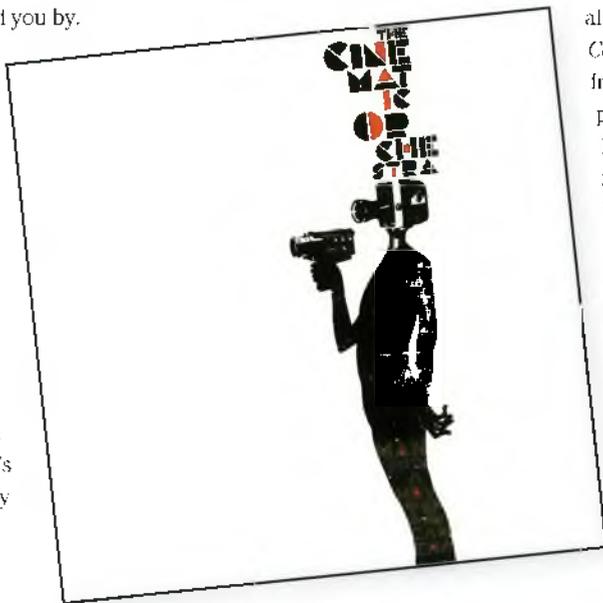
The Cinematic Orchestra is the name that Jay Swinscoe coined for a band of jazz playing, soundtrack aficionados that he pulled together in 1999. Since that time TCO has produced four albums and toured extensively in Europe and America. Strangely enough you may have heard their music without even knowing it; if you've watched a home improvement show or gardening series on TV over the last few years, you will have heard a TCO track. But they won't have been credited so it might well have passed you by.

Jay Swinscoe was formerly the export sales man at Ninja Tune, the record label started by Coldcut, a good base from which to gather ideas and forge them into what has become one of the label's most interesting acts. He worked his way down from Scotland via Yorkshire and Cardiff in the nineties and continued his nomadic life over the last eight years going from London to Paris and now New York. It could be that this rootlessness is what keeps TCO's music alive and diverse; he certainly credits the cities he has lived in as having influenced the music.

TCO's first album *Motion* did however set the style to which all subsequent albums including the latest offering, *Ma Fleur*, relate. A style that is indeed cinematic and reminiscent of film noir from the fifties and sixties. The other influence is clearly the world of jazz, hardly surprisingly given that Swinscoe's creative partner is double bass player Phil France and that the key members of the band include free jazz sax player Tom Chant and drummer Luke Flowers. The current line up also includes pianist Nick Ramm and Stuart McCallum on guitar.

Swinscoe also makes fine use of samples, for instance taking vocal snippets from Nina Simone's version of 'Strange Fruit' to produce the aptly titled 'Durian' – the only fruit that smells like rotting meat. Latterly he went on to record Fontella Bass, a singer who had a massive hit in the sixties

with 'Rescue Me' and then married Lester Bowie, going on to record with his Art Ensemble of Chicago, a rather more 'out there' combo than TCO. Swinscoe and France went to St Louis to record Bass for their second outing, *Every Day*, an album which also included a contribution from label-mate Roots Manuva in 'All Things To All Men', one of the best tracks he has ever committed to record.



Inspiration for the next album, *Man With A Movie Camera (MWAMC)* came from a commission to produce the music for the 1929 silent film of the same name by Russian Dziga Vertov, a 'remastered' copy which was to be shown in Porto, Portugal as part of the European City of Culture celebrations in 2001. TCO subsequently recorded and toured *MWAMC* alongside the film to great effect.

Swinscoe is unusual in being more of a band-leader than member, but as he

explains in the following interview *Ma Fleur* was much more of a solo project than the relatively collaborative productions that preceded it. This is probably why it has tracks that are not in TCO's familiar style, such as opener 'To Build A Home' which features the fragile vocals of Patrick Watson. *Ma Fleur* also seems rather more serious and whilst it is clearly the most up to date TCO album, it's *Motion* that I find myself returning to and enjoying the most. This may be to do with familiarity or just the fabulously muscular double bass on tracks like 'Night of the Iguana'; that and the fact that it has the most girth.

While sound quality is clearly a big issue for Swinscoe, TCO albums often use samples that don't always come from the cleanest of sources, so there's an earthiness to the sound that makes it less than audiophile. That said Ninja Tune ►

► is very good at issuing its artists work on vinyl and I believe that the TCO back catalogue is still available on the king of formats.

Half way through the *Ma Fleur* tour I caught up with Jay Swinscoe and asked him what he's been up to...

JK: Its taken three or four years since *Man With A Movie Camera*, what has been keeping you busy?

JS: It's three years since we stopped touring, four years since *MWAMC*. We toured that album for about a year on and off and we took the film back to Moscow where part of it was made. An old friend of [Dziga] Vertov's came; he said Vertov would have been very proud and happy with the soundtrack and that was the penultimate show before the London date. Then we put that to bed, and we took some time off from what felt like two years of touring. It wasn't so intensive but it was every weekend, and it killed my home life. I started writing again and found myself producing things which were a little bit like *Every Day* and I needed to get that out of my system and find a new something, a new chord. I found it in Paris and it became the title track of the record, a track called 'Ma Fleur'. At the time I moved to Paris the rest of the band were in London and Manchester except for Tom [Chant] the sax player who was also in Paris, so I started working with him on that track. Because only one musician was around I used just one or two instruments like tenor and soprano; it gave me a new way of looking at constructing music rather than having the whole band on any tune.

JK: So you did it all together?

JS: It was kind of going into the studio together but keeping the musicians separate, so you'd have separate recording spaces for separation of sound. So it would all have to be done on headphone mixes, which is not good for the visual vibe but it's good for getting a live recording where everybody interacts. This time around it was about taking musicians one by one into the studio.

JK: Which has what benefits?

JS: You get a much more focused performance, you get dedicated time to work with the one musician and you don't get influences from other sound sources or other voices and opinions. It's about starting from the simplest of ideas and building those up. Because Tom was in Paris he came round to my studio and we just worked on 'Ma Fleur' together. I added a synthesized double bass and a sampled piano to build it up and get the ideas. That was the tune that struck a chord with ►



► me, that helped remould the start of finding a new voice for the record.

JK: An interesting way to start with only a sax, the kind of thing usually only sax players do!

JS: I had loads of things that felt like they were influenced by *Every Day* and I wanted to move forward and change it. Also what I was hearing at this time was a lot of new folk music, a lot of soul jazz and the music that the Cinematics were bundled with was petering out a bit and people were finding other things to do and the market was dropping. I was hearing a lot of folk, things like José Gonzalez and a young guy from Brooklyn called Suljan Stevens and people like Regina Spektor and so I was hearing a lot of different things. It seemed that rather than being self referential in terms of listening to the genre that you've been put in, listen to things outside, be much more open. I wanted to change the music anyway and the folk thing came along and became the most predominant new music form and I was kind of using that as a reference. So I was building in guitars on the record, acoustic and electric, having the piano sit back a little so that rather than playing jazz it's comping behind the guitar, being more textural rather than soloing. Just trying to shift things around. Experimenting with the combinations, then with that simplicity I heard in folk music. I wanted that simplicity, it's almost like starting again. It's not about finding a new music style, we use the same musicians, the band is the same, but trying to find a way to get them to communicate in a different way.

JK: That must be difficult?

JS: If you take them into the studio one by one they don't really know what's going on. For me it was like getting back to a very simple song form.

JK: The folk influence is not all that obvious in the album, the simplicity is there but it's still clearly a Cinematic record.

JS: It was always going sound Cinematic anyway, I

have my own sound now and style. It's just changing the instrumentation, the influences from the vocalist have helped change the perspective a little bit. Working with Fontella [Bass] again was great, but she's a little frail and ill, she had two strokes.

JK: How old is she now?

JS: She must be in her early seventies. The strokes caused short-term memory loss so she didn't even know the name of her daughter, she forgot how to play piano, she forgot how to sing, she had to teach herself again. The singing came

back pretty quickly and she remembered things like the first telephone number she had with Lester Bowie back in the sixties in New York. She had to rebuild herself, so it was a slow process working in the studio with her but it was also rewarding, she still wants to write music and to perform.

JK: When you originally 'discovered' her was she still working?

JS: I heard 'Theme de Yo-Yo' and thought I'd love to work with someone who went from the soul pop hit 'Rescue Me' to working

with the Art Ensemble. She was self-managed because she got shafted by Chess Records; it took thirty years to get paid for 'Rescue Me'. She was releasing records on a Canadian label called Just In Time which was easy for Ninja to get a contact for and I spoke to them and they gave me a number for her. So I called her up and spoke to her about her music and her husband's music. I sent her some of our music and I think she was intrigued and charmed by us getting in touch with her. She worked in a free way in the studio like the Art Ensemble, which is how things happened for 'Evolution', and I cut it up and put it together. For 'All that You Give' it was more structured but even that was based on different takes. Actually the track from the new album called 'Familiar Ground' uses outtakes from 'All That You Give'. That's why her voice sounds very different to the way it does on 'Breathe'. There's still loads of material that I could use from that first session. Now she's getting much better, she still sounds fantastic, she's got even more depth and weight to her voice. She wants to do more, it's been her life. ►



► **JK:** What's the deal with the screenplay that was written for *Ma Fleur*?

JS: While I was in Paris I had a rough version of the record which had every track pretty much and I was at the point where I felt like I was getting bored of it. So I asked an old art director friend who I was at college with years ago if he was interested in writing a script based on the music.

JK: It was a source of direction?

JS: I felt like I didn't really want to write music for music's sake, it had to have something else, giving it to somebody became a way of stopping it becoming self indulgent by letting them put a twist on it. Then some things needed refining but it helped in every way, the arrangements, the length of tracks, which were instrumentals, which were

vocals. 'To Build A Home' was written after the script was put in place and became a synopsis of the whole story. So it was a great creative inspiration and source of material.

JK: Is the guy that wrote the screenplay credited on the album?

JS: He's not but actually should have been. There's going to be another release toward the end of the year, a DVD release which will include him. He influenced and wrote the script as a visual piece but not really as an influence of the music directly.

The record [*Ma Fleur*] will come out initially as a limited edition with a series of photographs which are meant to give you a rough story board; each piece has a photograph but then each photograph is not tied down, you can make your own mind up, it's quite open. For the London show at the Barbican some of the photographs will be animated to give a sense of narrative and

some will be projected as still images by the lighting director and animator and some of that material will end up on a DVD at the end of the year. Maybe next year it might go into production with a film company; then I could re-orchestrate some of the music and remix it for a soundtrack. *Movie Camera* was the birth of *Every day* which then became the studio version of *MWAMC*, so they're all part of a process, it's a concept that you can do many things from. I studied fine art, visual art so I feel the need to have the two to work off each other.

JK: Frank Zappa called it conceptual continuity. I notice that even though you play on stage you don't credit yourself on the albums as playing on them. ►

I always wanted, as a continuation from *MWAMC*, to work on something which could be changed during the creative process rather than working with an artefact like that film. He was interested and took the record away, spent three weeks listening to it and came back and had a script for a film in a rough form. We worked on that and refined it and I worked on the music at the same time and it became this really good collaborative process. It helped define everything about the new record in a way, there was a narrative based on three or four characters and the three characters have become vocalised in the record. There's a young guy, there's a mature woman and there's an old lady and we needed to find those voices and we had to find the lyrics to correspond to each scene. Each scene had a piece of music.



► **JS:** I have played a lot of things, some guitar parts, a bit of piano but mainly I get the musicians to play, that's why they've all been credited. I also play samples live but these are from the studio not from old records. I sit down with Phil the co-writer and we bring ideas that we build into the structure of the music and then bring the musicians into the studio one by one and get them to expand in their creative field on the motifs of harmony and melody. Then take that away and rework that into the form, so its all much more considered and thought out rather than being a jam session. It's more about finding a simple idea and expanding on it. A lot of ideas get left behind and trashed because they don't seem to have the legs or aren't that interesting. Out of the whole record there are probably 30 or 40 tracks but ten make it, some last for ten minutes others for two days.

JK: What are you listening to now?

JS: I'm listening to a singer called Karen Dalton a sixties friend of Dylan who sounds like a white Billie Holiday: she's got a wonderful voice, plays an acoustic guitar and a banjo. She had just one or two releases but had a wonderful voice. I'm also listening to Sufjan Stevens, Clap Your Hands and Say Yeah from Brooklyn and a local guy called Gray Reverend.

JK: This album is a lot less happy than its predecessors; is that a reflection of the script or is it a reflection of your own state of mind?

JS: For me it's about sensuality, about things that are delicate and tender, I don't think it's sad. It can come across as being melancholic and introspective but for me it's about beauty, about love. Those sensual things, not so much about being overtly happy, there's nothing really happy on the record or comical, it's a little deeper. Is it a reflection, party sure, but it's based on the script about struggle and life, to know and really understand love you have to understand loss. It's about the yin and yang we have to deal with every day that make us stronger or more open and generous people or make us close up. That whole thing of communicating and being here, it's about that. It's too big a thing to put down in words, so I try to express some of those thoughts and words

through music. That's what the script was about. It's not too defined and wasn't meant to be, it's too complex and music is really good language to express things like that. Because music is a vibration, it's a physical thing that we feel – certain frequencies touch different parts of our bodies in different ways. This record's not about making us dance its about other things. It's a negative response to say it's sad, whether its sad or happy it's just as relevant, we don't all need happiness.

JK: To what extent do you get involved with the sound quality on your records?

JS: 100% of it. I produce it; it's all recorded to two inch in the first instance which is expensive. I have about ten reels which I recycle. Once I've recorded the different takes you bounce them down onto hard disc. A process which happens for each instrument and then I mixed this album in a studio called Chung King in New York which is the original Def Jam studios where it's all analogue outboard and vintage mic pre-amps and compressors, all high end kit. It gives it much more depth in the sound, it's a more creative way to mix rather than mixing 'in the box'



as people call it; 128 channels of audio which get quashed out of a stereo output. Analogue is particles, its physics. So the quality of sound is part of the thing that's inspiring, if you hear a really interesting guitar, you play that guitar according to the way its going to sound, the instrument speaks. It's imperative, the quality of sound through all of the processes.

JK: Do you have a decent hi-fi?

JS: I used to have a great a great hi-fi, it was a QUAD with a Bang and Olufsen turntable. I think it was a QUAD 303 amp. That was my best hi-fi and now I don't have a hi-fi at all. I still have my Technics turntables and I have a nice gramophone – a 100 year old French Pathé. Nowadays everything's just going onto the Mac. I would love to have a music room with a library and a good hi-fi system. But when I'm not in the studio I prefer to rest my ears – listen to the birds in the morning and a little bit of radio.



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Jimmy Cleveland

Introducing Jimmy Cleveland and his All Stars

EmArcy/Speakers Corner MG36066 **180g**

This was the first of only a handful of recordings led by trombone artist Jimmy Cleveland, a disciple of the much more prolific J. J. Johnson. The "All Stars" in the title is no exaggeration and a list of the great band members would exhaust my word count for this review. Three 1955 octet sessions are preserved here, consisting of mostly Quincy Jones arrangements with upbeat swinging material. While Cleveland gives space to his band members to solo, he remains the featured star throughout, and his artistry is on par with his company. Do not let the fact that the Penguin Guide includes no listing for Jimmy Cleveland sway you—this is great music not to be missed. Making it even better is the top-notch sound, some of the best captured by the recording engineers employed by Emarcay and Mercury, whose work ranged from indifferent to quite good. Speakers Corner reproduces this one brilliantly. It's mono, of course, and the contemporary pressing with proper RIAA allows those without a mono cartridge to savor just how good mono can sound with a stereo cartridge. Kudos to Speakers Corner owner Kai Seeman for selecting this great sounding but little-known recording for reissue. Jazz trombone is underappreciated and this record is among the cream of the repertoire.

DDD



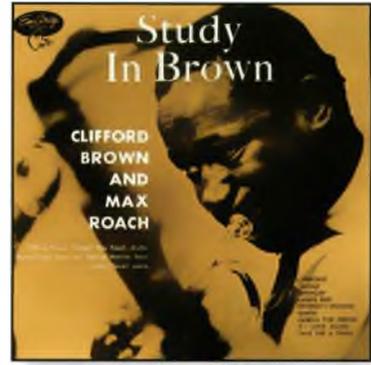
Gabriela Montero

Bach and Beyond

EMI Classics 0946 3 67359 2 **CD**

Johann Sebastian Bach's music has, for decades, been a real challenge and playground for many musicians trying to convince their audience (as well as themselves) that they could outperform that baroque master of architectural composition. It has often been said that the world of properly played Bach and, even more, properly improvised Bach has started to fade away. If anyone thought the vocalese supremacy of The Swingle Singers or majestic arrangements and performances of The Jacques Loussier Trio were the final statements on the genre, I am delighted to let you know, they were all very wrong! Gabriela Montero is a young woman from Venezuela, formally educated and trained as a classical pianist, a brilliantly creative, talented and technically capable improvisational instrumentalist and, by far, the very best "transformer" of Bach's music for keyboards. Her *Bach And Beyond* CD released by EMI a couple of years ago is a textbook example of how well a wisely assembled collection of Bach's most popular keyboard pieces can be converted into a blissful and totally original atmosphere of expressive phrasing, perfect articulation, of clarity for every note and passage. If forced, I could say her improvisations contain influences from Chick Corea or, perhaps, even Keith Jarrett in his most musical and lyrical moments, but - above all, this beautifully recorded disc offers a true breath of fresh air in a musical direction we have missed for a long time.

DS



Clifford Brown & Max Roach

A Study In Brown

EmArcy/Speakers Corner MG-36037 **180g**

Clifford Brown, one of the greatest jazz trumpet players, died young and left a pathetically small legacy on records. One Blue Note, one Pacific Jazz, one GNP and a handful of Emarcay titles account for everything except later issues of unreleased tapes. Probably the strongest sessions are the group recordings with Max Roach on Emarcay. This 1955 session also included Harold Land, Richie Powell and George Morrow, and like all the original releases of Brownie's sessions, is an essential part of any serious jazz fan's collection. The collaboration between Roach and Brown beginning in 1954 was one of those magical moments in history when everything seemed to click—and it all ended in a fatal automobile accident in 1956. This album preserves Brownie's brilliant playing in one of jazz history's classic ensembles. Compared to the sound of other contemporary jazz labels, the sound preserved by Emarcay, while not bad, can sometimes seem indifferent, and the Roach/Brown discs are no exception. You won't mistake this for a Contemporary or Blue Note. However, Speakers Corner has done an excellent job of remastering this title, and you will not find a better way of listening to this classic music. They've even reproduced the back cover in the early pressing blue ink, although I had to wash this disc twice to remove the Pallas MRA. Now, could we get *At Basin Street*, the only Brown/Roach session with Sonny Rollins?

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NEW 45-RPM RE-ISSUES FROM ANALOGUE PRODUCTIONS AND MUSIC MATTERS

by Dennis D. Davis

The years between 1955 and 1965 are in some ways the golden age of jazz recording, and one label's catalogue – Blue Note—is considered by many jazz buffs as the pinnacle of this recorded legacy. Three developments around 1955 were instrumental in shaping what we think of today as the Blue Note sound – Rudy Van Gelder became the label's exclusive recording engineer, the label started releasing 12" LP records, and a host of new artists came to the label, including Horace Silver, Art Blakey, Jimmy Smith and Lee Morgan.

Until late 1965, when the record label was sold to Liberty Records, Blue Note created the cornerstone of recorded modern jazz.

Now two companies have launched new series of Blue Note re-issues from this golden age on 45-RPM vinyl. Chad Kassem's Analogue Productions pioneered the large-scale release of jazz titles on 45-RPM vinyl with its series of Fantasy releases, and is now applying those same principals to the Blue Note catalogue. At the same time, Ron Rambough, whose company Music Matters has a long history of selling top jazz rarities, has teamed with Joe Harley (ex-AudioQuest), and they are following Kassem's 45-RPM model. Steve Hoffman and Kevin Gray will be doing the mastering for both programmes, and they will all be pressed at RTI. Where the two series will depart will be in title selection and packaging. Music Matters is using a more luxurious approach to sleeves and artwork, sparing no expense on high-quality paper stock and reproduction costs. Departing from the original jackets, they are releasing gatefold sleeves and the inside covers are illustrated with reproductions of Francis Wolff session photos. These are some of the finest record sleeves ever produced, rivaled only by the beautiful jackets used by Venus Records (of Japan) and Pure Audiophile Records (in the US). Simply put, they are awesome.

Analogue Productions has announced its first 25 titles (<http://tinyurl.com/3yla3f>), and Music Matters

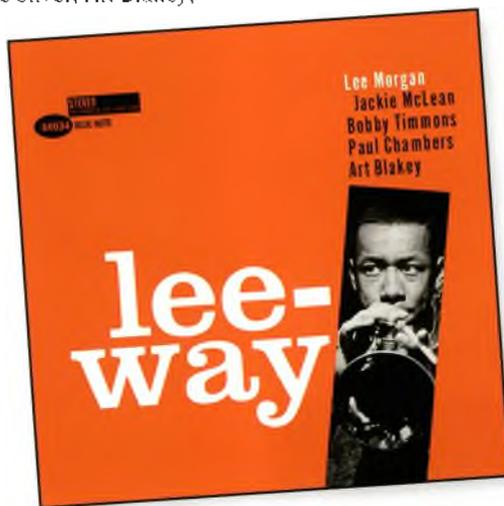
has published a list of 63 intended titles (<http://www.musicmattersjazz.com/titles.html>), more than enough to keep them busy for the next few years. As both will be waiting in queue at the same pressing plant, these schedules will be like rules – made to be broken. However, at least the first three releases will be available by the time you read this. The early titles, and the weight of the rest, tend towards the mellower, less avant-garde

side of Blue Note. The first two cut by Music Matters are Horace Parlan's *Speakin' My Piece* (84043) and Art Blakey's *The Big Beat* (84029). Analog Productions' first outing is Lee Morgan's *Lee Way* (84034). All three were recorded in 1960.

Blue Note aficionados will recognize that the catalog numbers start with an "8" denoting a stereo release, notwithstanding the fact that collectors prefer the mono issues. The mastering team decided up front to go with the master tapes. Blue Note

only recorded in stereo from October 1958. After that, mono issues were produced by summing the stereo channels in the mastering process.

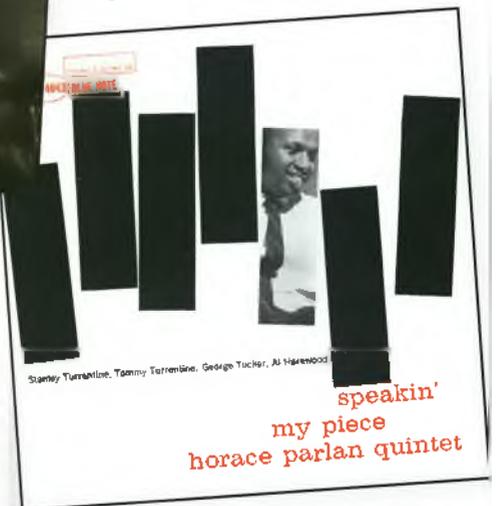
How do these new deluxe re-issues stack up to the alternatives? To evaluate the new releases, I listened to a wide range of Blue Note originals of these and other titles—both stereo and mono, Mosaic re-issues, Classic Records re-issues, and the recent Cisco issues. The two recent Cisco issues were mastered by Kevin Gray, half of the mastering team here, and cut at 33-RPM, and both are excellent. The later Mosaic boxes were mastered by Ron McMaster at Capital Records, and in listening anew to the Horace Parlan box, I found the sound to be quite good, but not in the same league with these new issues. Classic Records somehow missed the boat, making the smoothest Blue Notes sound a little too "hot". The timbre is not right, and the presentation sounds congested next to the new issues by Cisco. Analogue



► Productions or Music Matters. Not surprisingly, the big difference comes from the 45-RPM cutting. The faster cutting speed creates greater dynamic range and the sense of more air around the instruments, which stand out in better relief and give that you-are-there feel. The trade-off requires you to flip the record twice as often, a small price to pay for this level of enhanced realism.

Blue Notes are not audiophile recordings. But there is something special about the best Blue Note issues that immediately define the sound. They combined dynamic impact with a horn sound that persuades you that this is the way it should be. The timbre seemed truer than most other releases of the day.

These new issues maintain that timbral accuracy and at the same time bring out the piano sound like never before. Van Gelder's piano recording always



seemed to compress the piano into too narrow a band, often sounding like either a blanket was thrown over the sounding board or the piano was sorely out of tune. With these re-issues it sounds more piano-like than ever before. I've listened to the first half dozen Music Matters titles briefly, and to the first two titles at least a half dozen times each. The Parlan title is an easy-going blues drenched quintet with Stanley and Tommy Turrentine, George Tucker and Al Harewood. I've never heard a more realistic Blue Note piano sound than on this re-issue. Parlan's tune "Wadin" is worth the price of admission on its own. The Blakey session includes his great 1960 lineup of Lee Morgan, Wayne Shorter and Bobby Timmons. The gospel feel of 'Dat Dere', and the whimsy of 'It's Only

A Paper Moon' share space with three Wayne Shorter compositions, which introduced a more modern feel to Blue Note's sound in the 1960s. This title was recorded a bit hotter than the Parlan set, and the re-issue replicates that sound. This is among my favorite Blakey albums and this new mastering does not disappoint. Acoustic Sounds' opening entry teams Lee Morgan with Timmons, Blakey, Paul Chambers and Jackie McLean — an awesome lineup and a great set of hard bop with great sound.

There are more spectacular sounding releases in the catalogue, and they are on their way, but these three opening titles are each "five star" releases that any collector would snap up from the used record bins at twice the price of the re-issues — and these sound at least as good or better than the originals.

Based on these three initial entries, both series should be a stunning success.

All three initial releases exhibit similar attributes — accurate timbre, superior dynamic snap and perhaps most noticeably, a sense of air around each instrument that produces an impression of real instruments inhabiting the space between and around your speakers. The decision to release these in stereo does not bother me — and I expected that it would. The re-masterings seem to have collapsed the hard left/right stereo image (found on many Blue Note stereo originals and re-issues) into a more realistic acoustic, and the holographic soundstage sometime found on the best mono pressings is evident on these new issues. Most importantly, Hoffman and Gray have got the timbre spot on and for the first time Blue Note re-issues sound right. Kudos to all concerned for a spectacular success. ➤

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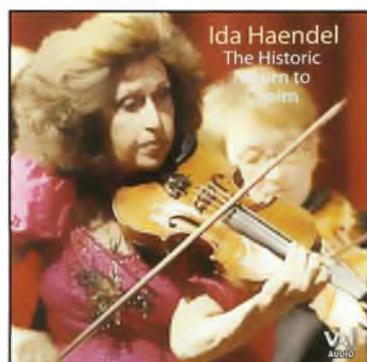
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Ida Haendel

The Historic Return to Chelm

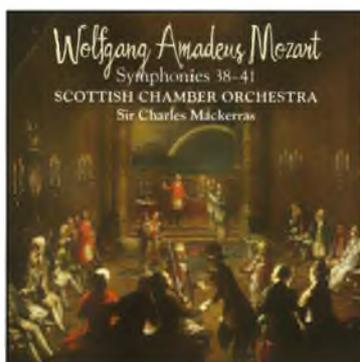
Stanislaw Galonski conducting the Capella Cracoviensis

VAI Audio VAIA 1264r (CD)

At three-and-half-years old, Ida Haendel first picked up her sister Ala's violin and played by ear the song her mother had just been singing. So began the prodigious career of a performer who by the age of ten was seen at The Queen's Hall, London playing the Brahms Violin Concerto under Sir Henry Wood's baton. Those impoverished Polish roots though have never been forgotten and a return to Chelm, the town of her birth for an emotionally-charged live recital must have been a truly cathartic experience for a virtuoso approaching her seventy-ninth year. A spectacular programme including *Partita No.2*; *The Devil's Trill*; Sarasate's *Zigeunerweisen*; the Wieniawski *Legende and Polonaise*; *Kal Nidrei* and Bach's *Andante from Sonata No.2* was planned and it could not be more technically or musically demanding. While those stamina-sapping concertos may now be beyond her, she is quite superb here in the shorter pieces, with no sign of any frailty, loss of dexterity or tonality. These are the most deeply personal of interpretations, characterised by bold colours, poignant emotional leaps and a clear-sighted purposefulness, her technique always keeping you anchored to the music. This recording has plenty of inner detail including Ida's breathing and audience noise, giving it a "you are there" quality just right for the passion and intensity this woman with a violin still has for her art.

RP

RECORDING
MUSIC



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Symphonies No. 38 (Prague); No. 39; No. 40; No. 41 (Jupiter).

Scottish Chamber Orch. MacKerras Cond.

Linn Records Hybrid SACD (2 discs) CKD 308 (SACD)

Sir Charles Mackerras presents a regal account of Mozart's last four symphonies. The playing of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra seems more like a much larger group and they should be proud of the high calibre of the performances on these two discs. I must admit that I am enthralled with the playing of this 37-member chamber orchestra; they are quite brilliant. This is Mackerras' third outing with these symphonies and I feel it may be his best. The 'Prague' is truly majestic and is perhaps, in the truest sense of the word, the most exceptional performance here. I'd venture to say the runner up in this set is definitely the 'Jupiter'. I must advise, however, that if you love your Mozart less spirited, you might not warm to Mackerras's readings of the 39th and 40th. Don't get me wrong. It's not that I dislike what he's done, it's that I find the more measured approach of conductors like Bruno Walter and George Szell excels in this repertoire, whereas here they seem a little rushed. But, Mackerras and ensemble provide superb reading of both the Prague and Jupiter and these two alone are worth the price of admission.

Supplier: www.linnrecords.com

RSF

RECORDING
MUSIC



Puccini La Bohème

Moffo, Tucker, Merrill, Tozzi Leinsdorf / Rome Opera Orchestra & Chorus

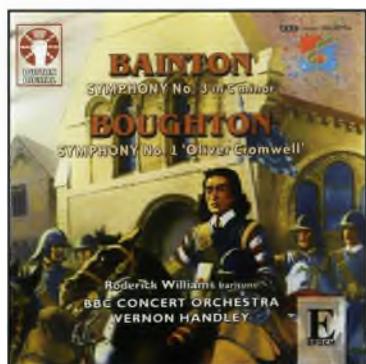
RCA Living Stereo 02876 02621 2 (SACD)

Tuneful, articulate, lyrical and tautly scored, *La Bohème* (unlike many of its flabby counterparts) amuses with its boisterous bohemian opening; delights in the bewilderment of the young lovers Mimi and Rodolfo; recreates a dazzling Paris cityscape – and still has time to break your heart not once but twice, both in the third act when the affair ends and again later with an emotionally draining death scene – all in under two hours. Here, Leinsdorf and the Rome Opera players are remarkably sensitive in their support of the vocalists: enthusiastic, subtle, ambivalent and impassioned when required. Richard Tucker (poet and lover), Robert Merrill (painter) and Giorgio Tozzi (philosopher) are an accomplished triumvirate who cannot be faulted in their characterisation of these roles. Anna Moffo, in one her earliest recordings, has given us an invitingly seductive and tragically affecting performance as the flower girl, Mimi. Consistently good and frequently excellent vocal and orchestral interpretations warrant an insightful acoustic solution and in this the SACD transfer does not disappoint. Its transparency, frisson, airiness and delicacy are never less than illuminating.

RP

RECORDING
MUSIC





**Bainton – Symphony No.3
Boughton –
Symphony No.1 “Oliver Cromwell”**

Handley / BBC Concert Orchestra

DUTTON CDLX 7185

The transfer of historically significant classical recordings has been the mainstay of the Dutton catalogue, so much so that it's easy to overlook their contribution in the field of new productions. They, much like Lyrita before them, also champion the works of lesser known 20th C. English. Here, we have in two stylistically contrasting Symphonies, Edgar Bainton's *Third Symphony*, completed in 1956, is a courageous, cathartic and emotionally charged piece with harmonically and melodically pastoral overtones that mirror life's progress in overcoming adversity, from a dawn-like opening passage to those exultant closing chords. Between them there is a slow movement infused with the grief and choking pain drawn from the death of the composer's wife. This is a deeply personal musical portrait when set against Rutland Boughton's compelling character study of Oliver Cromwell. Here too, Handley and the underrated BBC players develop an intuitive understanding for a composition that traverses moments of serenity, spirituality and sweeping climactic majesty – all cemented in the regular repetition of the opening “Cromwell” motif. Compositional delicacy, most notably in the form of a duet for violin and cello soloists, permeates the second movement constructed around the theme of a letter written after the battle of Dunbar.

RP



**Beethoven: “Kreutzer” Sonata
Bach: Concerto for Two Violins,**

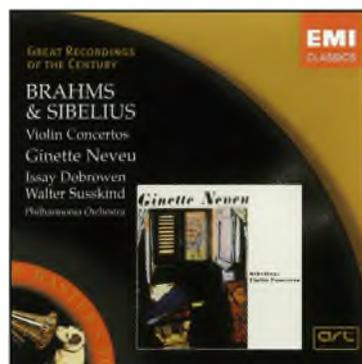
**Heifetz; Brooks Smith, pno;
Erick Friedman, violin;
Sargent cond. New S.O. London**

Cisco Music/RCA Living Stereo LSC 2577.

Originally issued in 1961, this record never sounded as good as it does today! The Beethoven “Kreutzer” Sonata has often been recorded but few have come close to the electrifying tour-de-force we are given in this outing by the 20th century's most technically perfect violinist. RCA's John Pfeiffer and John Norman give us a well balanced view of the Heifetz/Smith performance. While the star of the show is of course Heifetz and his violin, Smith truly is in his element and shows off his technical skill as well. All you have to do is sit back and thoroughly enjoy this performance – perhaps one of the finest ever committed to record. Erick Friedman was a pupil of Heifetz (later to become a professor of music at Yale University) and the Bach Double is a favourite work of mine. While there are several performances I enjoy – Erlih and Merkel for one – the Heifetz/Friedman collaboration is as fulfilling a performance as one could ask. These are accessible works and should not be missed by anyone who enjoys (or thinks they might enjoy) classical music. If only all Living Stereo re-issues sounded this good.

Supplier: www.ciscomusic.com

RSF



**Brahms & Sibelius
Violin Concertos**

**Dobrowen / Susskind /
Philharmonia Orchestra
Ginette Neveu, violin**

EMI 7243 4 76830 2 2

On October 28th 1949, while travelling to America for a concert tour, Ginette Neveu and her brother Jean were killed in a plane crash on a mountainside in the Azores. At the age of thirty she was approaching the height of her powers and thus was an appalling, almost incalculable loss to the world of classical music. Who knows what she may have achieved? Neveu, the violinist, had an unrestrained, often fiery temperament and was by reputation an expansive, hugely passionate, emotionally intense and hugely dramatic soloist whose playing possessed fleet footedness, robust tonal qualities and enviable vibrato. These historic Abbey Road recordings, produced by Walter Legge in 1945 for the Sibelius and in 1946 for the Brahms, are still adequate enough to reveal those strengths. Audiophile, of course it is not. But that is not the point here. This is about interpretation and execution. Neveu excels in a dashing Brahms *Concerto* where the Philharmonia are conducted by the sympathetic Russian conductor, Issay Dobrowen. Her playing showing us that greatness and maturity was at her finger tips. It is an enthusiastic Walter Susskind who accompanies Ginette for a wonderfully fluid, resonant and exuberant rendition of the Sibelius *Concerto* that bursts asunder with beauty and physicality, the moments of engrained musical sadness being amplified by our knowledge that she was not long for this world.

RP





Liszt
12 Études d'exécution transcendante

Claudio Arrau, pianist.

Pentatone Classics PIC 5186 171

Claudio Arrau recorded these works when he was in his seventies; a formidable achievement indeed. Extremely demanding, these are the third and final versions Liszt produced, dating from 1851. These exceptionally complex works are deeply melodic and while you may think they are presented purely as studies for the mature pianist to show off their technical skills you would be way off the mark. As a soloist you must dig below the virtuoso surface to understand the meaning of these 'practical pieces'. Usually études deal with specific technical problems; these are works that are considerably more encompassing – symphonic compositions with their own poetic ideas. This disc is not for the casual listener. Each study represents a different sound and colour and Claudio Arrau is the perfect soloist for Liszt's formidable work. Not only is his playing masterly and quite poetic, he is able to convey a deep meaning to the listener as to what Liszt's Transcendental Studies really mean. While I've owned the original LPs for many years, I find the sound quality of this Pentatone disc to be of a much higher standard. Whether you enjoy the excellent CD layer or the richer SACD version, it is good to have these works presented on one disc. I hope you take the time to explore them.

Supplier: www.pentatonemusic.com

RSF



Prokofiev –
Romeo and Juliet Suite No.2
Getty - Joan and the Bells

Alexander Vedernikov, cond.
Russian National Orchestra

Pentatone PIC 5186 017

Prokofiev's masterpiece is a tasty sprat to catch the mackerel. Though it may lack the last drop of lyricism heard in the benchmark Skrowaczewski's Mercury recording, this is still an impressively intense and ravishing response to the romantic sweep and expressive range of the score. Its presence here bolsters the case for owning Gordon Getty's three-part *Cantata* for soprano, baritone, chorus and orchestra entitled *Joan and the Bells*. The Los Angeles horn composer, better known for his Emily Dickinson song cycle *The White Election*, takes us back to the Hundred Years War and the trial of Joan of Arc in 1431. The narrative begins with the court judgement of her as a heretic; continues with a scene where Joan recalls her religious visions and voices that were heralded by the church bells of the title and then goes on to reflect upon the well-known story of the *Maid* of Orleans' fight against the English. The *Cantata* closes with the execution of Joan in the square at Rouen, where the chorus provides a dissenting voice. Soprano Lisa Detan evocatively recreates the role of Joan in a moving account that goes some way to prove you can't heat a good old fashioned burning at the stake to get the adrenalin flowing.

RP



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EVERY HOME SHOULD HAVE ONE

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

by Roy Gregory

Bob Marley remains the only Jamaican reggae star to truly crossover and capture a place in the mainstream musical consciousness – and even the charts. With mixed parentage and a slight build Marley was an unlikely star, but that's to underestimate the power of circumstance. Not only could he write a mean lyric but he had a way with a hook that allowed his songs to connect across cultural boundaries. Throw in the independence movements struggling in Southern Africa and an emerging black youth culture in the UK and the Wailer's perfect reggae/pop seeds fell in fertile ground. Of course, Marley was to crown his ideal rock star career with an untimely demise, but a recording career that didn't really hit its stride until 1973, and was only to run for eight years until the release of 'Redemption Song' in November 1980, still produced eight studio albums and a pair of live outings too. Marley was indeed prolific and maintained a surprising quality across his recorded output, a fact underlined by the sheer number of *Best Of* and *Rarities* discs on offer. But if I had to choose just one Wailers album the one I'd opt for might come as a surprise – the wonderfully, evocatively named *Babylon By Bus*, a double-live album released in December 1978 gets my vote.

With no 'Redemption Song' or 'No Woman No Cry', no 'I Shot The Sheriff' or 'Could You Be loved' the core repertoire that everybody knows might be missing, but that's part of the album's strength. Leaning heavily on *Catch A Fire* and *Exodus*, arguably the best of the studio discs, *Babylon By Bus* is a broadband assault of unrelenting quality, not a bad track here, not a track played badly. For as unlikely as it might seem, what Marley embodied in fragile form was sheer charisma, and never more than when playing his music live. With the growing pains over, the Wailers were a seasoned outfit by 1978, the group taking on its final and most musically accomplished form with the addition of the I-Threes on backing vocals. Their close harmonies and extra range added a new dimension to Marley's work, extending the repertoire after the loss of original members Peter Tosh and Bunny Wailer.



These tracks were recorded by the Island mobile studio across four nights in London, Paris, Copenhagen and Amsterdam, produced by Chris Blackwell and cut at Town House. The results might not be audiophile but they capture the energy and atmosphere of those pulsating gigs perfectly. Aston

Barrett's pre-dub bass-lines are full of energy, life and sexuality, while Marley's abbreviated, patois lyrics add a directness to the anger and angst, the emotion and rebellion they embody. The vocals and backing are sublime, the playing tight, the performance joyously captivating. This is what Marley's music is about, life affirming and uplifting, and this is the best recorded legacy he left of much of his best music. Put on, play loud and enjoy. I was lucky enough to catch that tour in London; this record takes me back – every time. ➔

Bob Marley and the Wailers

Babylon By Bus

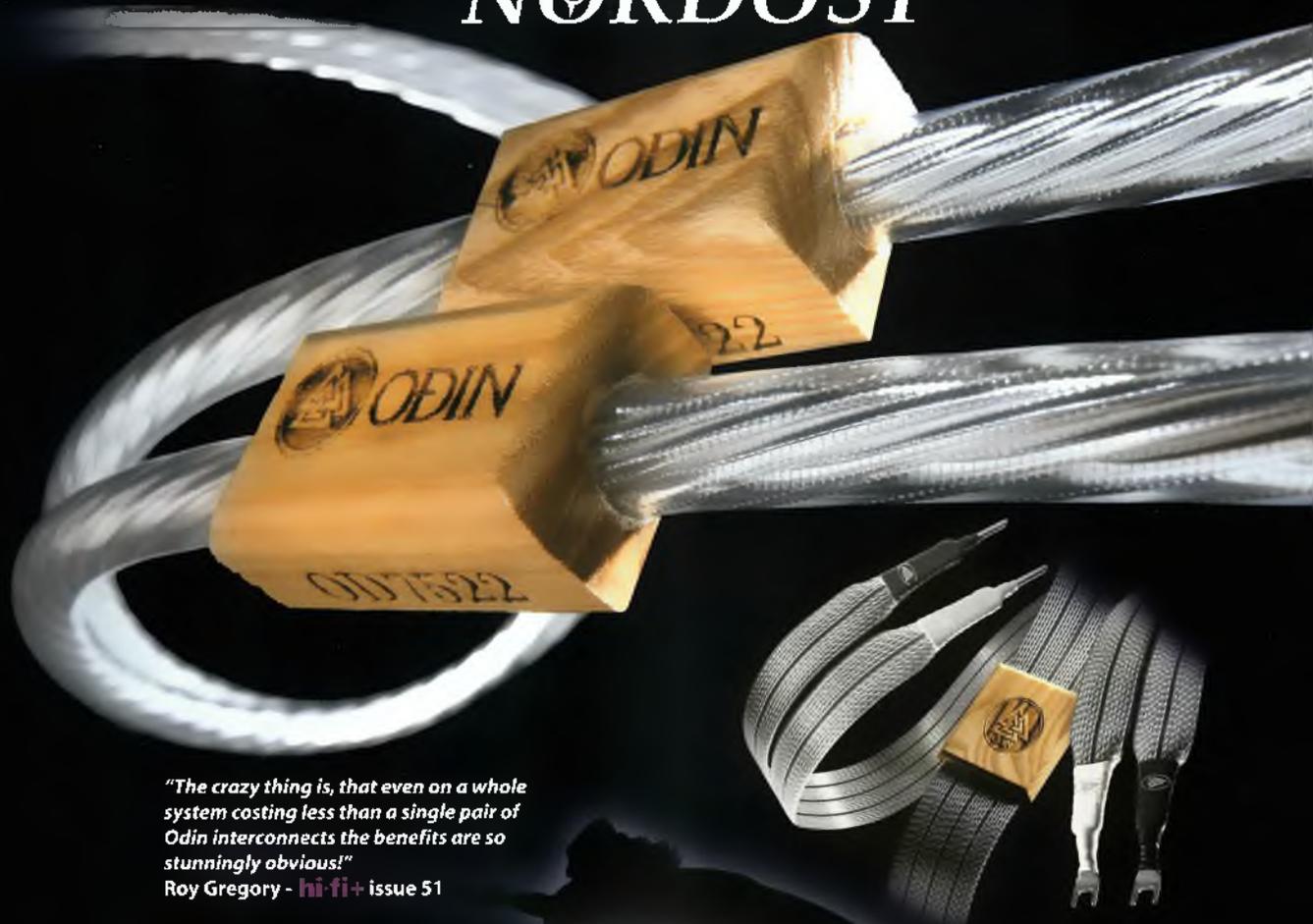
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Exodus
Stir It Up
Rat Race
Concrete Jungle
Kinky Reggae
Lively up yourself
Rebel Music
War
No More Trouble
Is This Love
Heathen
Jamming

Personnel

Bob Marley	Lead Vocal and Rhythm Guitar
Junior Marvin	Lead Guitar
Al Anderson	Lead Guitar
Tyrone Downie	Keyboards
Wire Lindo	Organ and Clavinet
Alvin Patterson	Percussion
Aston Barrett	Bass
Carlton Barrett	Drums
I-Threes	Backing Vocals
(Rita Marley, Judy Mowatt, Marcia Griffiths)	

Double LP – Island ISLD11 – Dec '78
CD – Island CIDD11 – Feb '87
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