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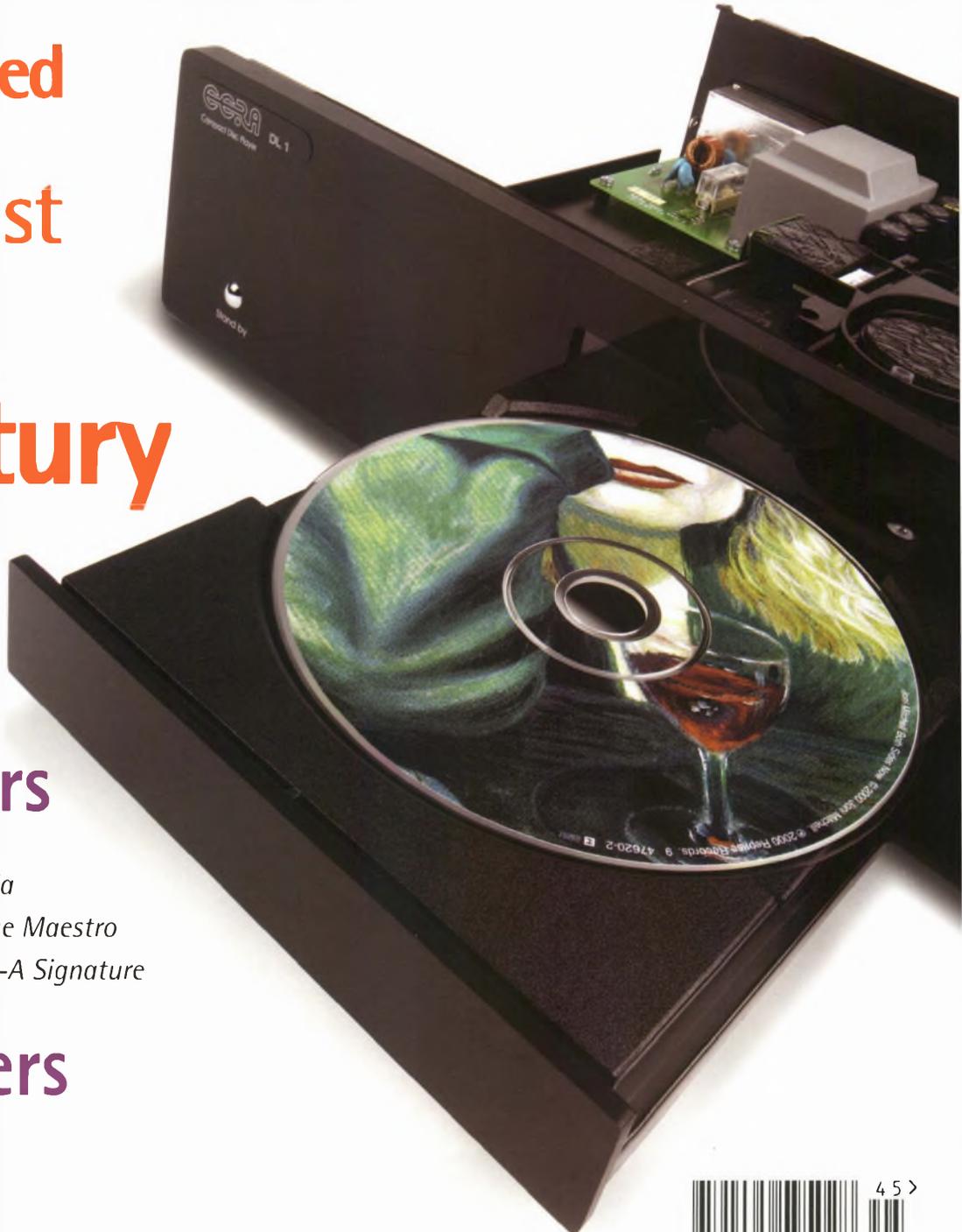
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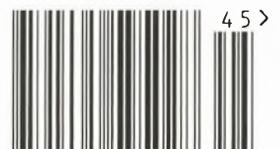


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- ▶ *EERA DL1*
- ▶ *Micromega Aria*
- ▶ *Audio Analogue Maestro*
- ▶ *Metronome T1-A Signature*

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- ▶ *Zu Druid IV*
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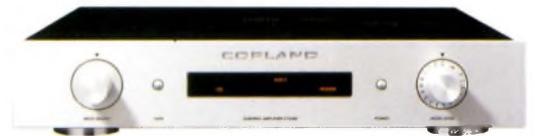
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Poole, Dorset
Tel. 01202 690990
E-mail. info@creativebyte.co.uk

Printed By

Stones The Printers, Banbury

Hi-Fi+ is published six times a year
by; Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd

ISSN 1465 5950

This week I spent a (very long) day watching David Wilson and John Giolas of Wilson Audio, ably assisted by Pedro and cheered on by Ricardo from Absolute Sounds, the Wilson importers, installing a pair of Maxx 2s in my listening room. That was just the set-up; delivery was the week before, and that's a whole other storey. To describe the process as meticulous is a major understatement, as you'll discover if you read the review in the next issue. But the thing that really struck home was the impact it had on the final sound. Here was a systematic and minutely honed process, designed to deliver the best possible performance from these speakers in whatever room they find themselves – and it did exactly that. What's more, it's a technique that Wilson go to great lengths to instill in their distributors and dealers. The Maxx 2 is a far from inexpensive product, and such attention to detail might be expected, indeed considered essential to justify the cost. Which begs the question, "What exactly are you buying?" In this instance it's a pair of very large and very black loudspeakers. But it's also more than that. It's actually the performance those speakers can deliver in your listening room that you are paying for, with installation, dealer back-up and guarantee all being critical parts of that package. And whilst the Wilson products are, by their very nature, super critical of set-up, many other products are just as particular, just not as obvious about it.

So, by all means, save yourself 25% of the purchase price, buying a grey import or the basic hardware over the internet. Just be aware that you may well end up with only 25% of the performance too! Doesn't sound like much of a deal to me...

So, customers give dealers a chance to demonstrate how much value they can add to your purchase before you clip them for price; dealers, make sure you can deliver the goods. That way we might have rather more, rather better sounding systems out there. Hi-fi systems are all about realizing potential performance. In reality it's amazing how many fail that basic test.





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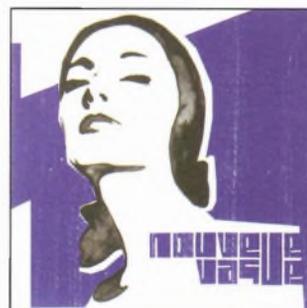
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Playing The System

by Roy Gregory



And What A System It Is...

On a recent trip to the states I got to hear the same system – three times. Nothing unusual in that you might think, except that this is one hell of a system and I got to hear it not just three times but in three different places; and that is unusual. Of course, there's more to it than that and therein lies the tale...

The system in question is neither unfamiliar to regular readers, nor in the truest sense, a system at all, because it includes no source components – those being left to individual preference. You'll have come across it before variously referred to as the "Sea Cliff" system, "HP's reference system" or elsewhere in relation to the absolute sound magazine; but that too is misleading. Although the various elements did indeed first come together in the surroundings of Harry Pearson's Sea Cliff listening room, it was as much as a result of the various manufacturers involved hitting a common stride, guided and encouraged by former Lyric supremo Mike Kay, as it was any Svengali-esque tendencies on the part of il maestro. Indeed people have tried to take advantage of the Pearson imprimatur before, often with shambolic results, and Harry is nothing if not twice shy. "Go forth and do as you will" I can almost hear him bellow, "but take not my name in vain!"

There are few people who could have pulled this off (or pulled it together) but Mr Kay is one of them. He founded Lyric, New York's premier hi-fi dealer as long ago as 1957. Along the way he's been involved with a host of different projects, the best known of which was probably Madrigal, owners of Mark Levinson Audio Systems. In a little pond with a few big fish, Mike Kay is one of the biggest and most respected. It's his impetus behind events that started the ball rolling, and if the various manufacturers have each been inspired to new heights, it's the collective effort that's produced the elusive magic that makes this set-up so memorable. It was that magic that Mike Kay first recognised.

Go forth indeed, for this IS a system in the truest sense of that word in that the whole is greater even than the considerable sum of its far from inconsiderable parts. As a time and space machine, a tool for transporting you back if

not to actual events, then an astonishingly convincing facsimile of them, I've heard no peer. Realism is a word I shy away from when it comes to discussing hi-fi, and it's a word I hesitate to use here, but there's no doubting the spooky, reach out and touch quality that this set-up brings to the best recordings.

The seeds of the system lie in the Nola Grand Reference speaker system, Nordost's Valhalla cabling and the ASR Emitter integrated amplifier. It was these that came together at Sea Cliff and their conjunction that pointed the way to a world of possibility. But the next step depended on Nordost developing and delivering the Valhalla mains cables and vitally, the Thor distribution box, allowing the creation of a totally coherent wiring loom. Meanwhile, ASR delivered a second Emitter (no mean feat when you consider that each "integrated" amp consists of four separate boxes, including two massive battery power supplies, and costs \$25000) and Carl Marchiosotto of Nola made huge strides in further developing the mid-bass performance of the Grand Reference speakers. Thus it was the manufacturers who in many respects drove the project, although that is now the system in residence at Sea Cliff.

However, that is not where this particular odyssey begins. That would be in Summit, New Jersey, at the house of Atul Kanagat. There aren't too many perks to being a barely paid consultant to the hi-fi industry at large, but one of them is that you get to have a nice system and you can call on magazine editors like yours truly to come and tweak it for you. Atul had developed a fascination for the various Vertex AQ products and wondered what they might do in his home system. No prizes of course, for guessing what that system comprises – in this instance fronted by a Zanden CD transport and DAC. Knowing my familiarity with the Vertex products he took advantage of my proximity to avail himself of an extra pair of hands and another pair of ears – the former essential when dealing with kit as heavy as this, the latter a useful backstop when it comes to parting with the hard earned green stuff. Besides, there was the small matter of a VPI TNT HRX to set-up and optimize, an activity which a quick glance at Audio smorgasbord might convince you ►

Up close and personal... Working with the beast

Armed with but a single example of the new Hi-Rez edition Super Kinibalu platform and a brand new HRX/JMW 12.6 combination, the prospect of a system containing no fewer than 15 boxes of electronics (including a two-box ASR Basis phono-stage) and four speaker towers tall enough that I can't reach their tops was pretty daunting. Total value of this little lot? Somewhere around the \$300,000 mark, by the time you've totted up the cable and Grand Prix Audio racks. But what you quickly learn in a situation like this is that the standard rules still apply. And there's also the enormous advantage that although mind-bogglingly complex in a material sense (why do think HP has a set-up guy?) the system is actually conceptually straightforward. Think of an integrated amp driving a pair of speakers and that's about as simple as things get. Okay, so in this case there are four speakers, with the bass towers driven through an additional filter and a second identical amp, but even so, this is hardly rocket-science. So, the amps are each four boxes and so's the CD player, but that's all smoke when it comes down to actually understanding the system. (And definitely smoke when it comes to wiring it up if you get it wrong! Fortunately the ASRs contain some seriously sophisticated protection...)

Well, we proved two things immediately: the Zanden performs significantly better via its I2S link than the AES/EBU option, and even then it has trouble competing with a good turntable at the top of its game. So we clearly aren't in a parallel universe after all, a fact reinforced as soon as we placed the Super Kinibalu under the CD transport. We systematically worked our way down the whole chain of active electronics, ABA listening to the slab with and without its matching cones and tripod arrangement. In every case but one we preferred the sound with the tripod in place, the exception being the transport itself, where I liked the cones and tripod but Atul preferred it without; hey, it's his system. But what was really impressive was the extent of the impact that even

this specific (as opposed to general) application of proper isolation and energy management had on the system as a whole. The improvements in resolution, dynamic range, separation and transparency were dramatic, all adding up to a significantly more expressive performance. They were also surprisingly consistent across the transport, DAC, phono-stage, digital power supplies and the main amplifier itself. But the biggest surprise of all was that it was the amp where the greatest difference occurred, perhaps due to its position nearest to the speakers.*

All of which left us all too aware that the fundamental issues of mechanical isolation and support apply with a vengeance as systems get bigger and more powerful. To an extent, designers can use part of their bigger budget to try and handle internal energy dissipation (something of a Japanese speciality) but there's still the question of all that extra energy to handle, as well as the ever-greater opportunities for internal interference as electronics get more complex and sophisticated. How aware? Well, there's a frighteningly large number of dollars heading Vertex's way to pay for four Super Kinibalus (a subsequent experiment proving the clear superiority of the Hi-Rez edition over the standard Super model) and a Silver Jaya parallel mains filter (which more than proved its worth in cleaning up noise and haze within the soundstage and further dropping the noise floor). And that's just the first wave; enough platforms to get an entire chain (analogue or digital) properly supported to investigate the cumulative effects. You just know that's going to trigger a second wave of purchases so that the entire set-up (except power-supplies – not even Atul will go that far) is permanently supported.

* A theory since borne out by its relocation, along with the bass amp, away from the direct soundfield of the speakers and sheltered to some extent by the stack of battery supplies, a move that has further improved the resolution and transparency.

▶ is fast becoming my second career.

Two-days of tweaking and adjusting, lifting, inserting or removing platforms, re-wiring and rearranging later (as detailed in the sidebar) left me with an intimate acquaintance with, and serious respect for the system – and the physical impression of three rounds, unrestricted with a Grizzly bear. When equipment gets this big just moving it about becomes a serious undertaking. (I don't think Atul will ever forgive me for insisting that the whole thing would sound a lot better with much shorter interconnects on the source components and with no electronics between the speakers!)

Even with a single Jaya, the Hi-Rez platform and the HRX, I think it's safe to say that we had the system really singing by the time we finished – which just goes to prove that the bigger the system the greater the potential (for failure or success). But more importantly, there's no substitute for hands-on fiddling when it comes to really getting to know any system – experience that was to prove

invaluable over the next few days.

But the first thing to realise is that if you pay attention to the fundamentals (wiring and mechanical support, straight-line electronics and the mains supply) and do it in a system with enough bandwidth, then something really special can happen. In many respects, this is a classic "budget esoteric" set-up writ large – and obviously ignoring the monetary rather than the conceptual simplicity aspect of the "budget" terminology. What it underlines is that it's no good just throwing money at the problem; the fundamental approach needs to be correct and that approach is basically the same whether you are spending \$3000 or \$300,000.

Next port of call was Sea Cliff and the next lesson on the learning curve. Having heard HP's system in its pre double-ASR days, I knew what to expect; expectation reinforced by the Summit experience. But that's not how it played out... The system was afflicted by an insistent and annoying buzz on its right channel, a fault we

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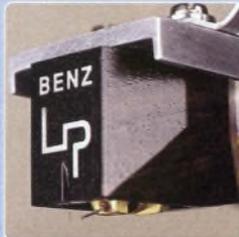
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▶ spent the day running to ground (and failing to cure) instead of listening and enjoying the set-up. It was doubly frustrating given the strides we'd made with Atul's system, and the chance to hear the same amps and speakers in a different room and with a whole host of different front-ends (HP was in the middle of a CD player overview) was too fascinating to give up on easily. As it was, despite the buzz, which was finally eradicated the day after we left, you could still hear what was going on. The Pearson version of this particular system excels in establishing an astonishingly coherent soundstage, standing totally free of the speakers. The Summit system never quite matched it in that respect, but made gains in terms of musical flow, intent and dynamic definition, especially from digital sources and at low frequencies. I could go on, but that's not really the point – as you'll see.

But lesson two was clear – conceptual simplicity and physical simplicity are two very different things. Clarity of thinking and clarity of purpose are essential in dealing with any system like this, because as capable as it is of scaling the heights, when it falls short it can be spectacularly obvious. That magical quality is fragile indeed and can be destroyed by something as prosaic as a poor arrangement of mains and signal cables or a damaged plug.

The third iteration of this system was waiting for us in Manhattan, in the (in)famous Green Room at Lyric Hi-Fi. Here, the same speaker, cable and electronics set-up was driven from the four-box Lector CD player. For those who haven't visited, the Green Room is a purpose built demonstration studio employing advanced acoustic analysis to create a no-compromise listening space. From the tapered walls and lack of windows to the aperiodic sine wave ceiling, this is every hi-fi buff's notion of a dedicated sound room – especially when it contains a system like this.

So taken are the various manufacturers and Lyric themselves with what they've heard from this combination of equipment that they've decided to make it accessible to the public. Okay, so we can see what a manufacturer gets out of this but think of it from the point of view of Mike Kay, one of the high-end's founding fathers, most significant and active contributors and of necessity and out of self preservation, an equipment cynic of the first order. And just consider the cost of real estate in Manhattan. For Mike to come out of retirement in order to supervise this project for his successor Lenny Bellezza,

it had to offer something special – and it does. It most definitely does. There are systems that you hear across the years that stick in your memory; this is one of them.

But the crazy thing in all of this is that there are many more ways than one to spend \$300,000 on a system. This may not be the best option out there – even if it's the best I've heard. But what it is, is the option that you can actually hear for yourself. If this industry is to survive in the face of increasing competition from other media, we need to excite people, we need to sell and demonstrate the experience that's possible from a great hi-fi system; and this is a GREAT hi-fi system...

We travel more and more these days and if you find yourself in New York, call Lyric, make an appointment and take a disc or two along for a listen. It's a shop that's there to make a living so idle curiosity will have to take a back seat to hard commercial interest (you can hardly expect to queue jump in front of the guy looking to spend six figures, even if he isn't going ALL the way). But they're also keen to let as many people as possible hear just what you can get out of a hi-fi system – if you try hard enough. They want to reintroduce the notion, the excitement and magic that can come from experiencing music; and in this system they have the perfect tool. You can read about it, you can imagine it, even crave it. In this instance you can actually go hear it. Don't miss it if you get the chance.

Oh, and one last thing – just to show that we never stop learning in this game. With four eight-foot high towers in the speaker system and upwards of 40 drive units, where are you going to sit? The answer is close, near enough at the point of an equilateral triangle based on the front two towers. That's well inside the near-field but it's where you'll need to be if you want to hear what this system can do. I know it's hard (the more so with it actually looming over you) but you need to think of it as a pair of mini-monitors connected to a really good little integrated... Sit down, shut your eyes and it'll all make sense!



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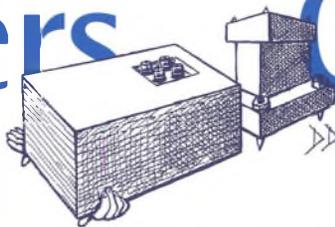
Dave Thomas, Stereotimes.com

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



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Speakers Corner



by Paul Messenger

It was way back last September, at the annual Heathrow show, that Naim first revealed its new flagship CD player, the CD555. It looked wonderful, sounded indifferent (at my visit) and cost a daunting £14295. Six months later supplies had started trickling through, and Naim called a press conference at one of its newest dealers – the castellated Ultimate Home Entertainment Solutions near Stroud in Gloucestershire – to describe and demonstrate its new babies.

I use the plural because there are actually three new bits to consider, either separately or all at once. All at once will of course cost the price of a new family car, but a major element in Naim's success over the years has been that it allows piecemeal upgrades along a well defined ladder, steps that are less likely to find the bank sending round the bailiffs. Like all Naim's top CD players to date, the CD555 is a two-boxer with a top-loading transport and the DACs in one chassis and the power supplies in the other. This flies full in the face of the separate transport and DAC norm, but

Naim prefer to keep all those bits as close to each other as possible, controlling this critical interface whilst putting all the noisy power supply circuitry and mains transformer in a separate box, called the NA 555PS.

The clever bit is that owners of four earlier Naim CD players – specifically the CDX, CDX2, CDS2 and CDS3 models – can upgrade existing players by purchasing one of the new NA 555PS power supply units. This itself costs a hefty £3995 (compared to £2550 for the ongoing XPS supply; £2925 for a CDX2 and £5325 for a CDS3), so it's a costly upgrade, but a whole lot less than stepping up to the complete CD555/555PS combo in one go.

Just prior to the press conference I had a chance to try the 555PS upgrade in place of the XPS powering the CDS3 I've been using this past couple of years. I was frankly shocked by how much better it sounded with the new supply. After all, this

was just a power supply change: the disc drive mechanism, the DACs and all the actual CD player circuitry was entirely unchanged. Yet the increase in apparent bandwidth, resolution at both ends of the audio band, and the increase in low-level resolution too was both obvious and dramatic.

Intriguingly, at the press briefing on the engineering subtleties of the CD555 itself, it emerged that this new player also uses the same disc drive and DACs as the CDS3, and that all the changes that had been instituted to improve the new player were directed towards enabling those core components to get closer to their potential capabilities, by using more substantial build and mechanical decoupling, many more power supply regulators, careful dressing of cabling, and the electrical shielding of critical components. We then got to hear a demonstration that used an active DBL system to work up the upgrade ladder from CDS3/XPS via CDS3/555PS to CD555/555PS, and it was quite clear that the second, final step was even larger than the first.

While the new 555PS had clearly improved the all round sonic detail resolution, and made voices clearer and more realistically human, introducing the CD555 itself seemed to transcend that sort of description. Its improvement was more to do with the way the whole musical experience came together as a coherent whole, somehow removing many of the cues that remind one that music is being reproduced via a mechanical device, rather than by the musicians themselves. When the dem was finished I managed to get one of my own familiar favourite discs onto the CD555 for about thirty seconds: it only took about ten of those to realise this was a singular improvement. It was almost as if, impressive as the 555PS's impact had been, it needed the CD555 to take those hi-fi benefits and bind them into a musically coherent whole.

Which brings me to the third element, the smallest, but at least the most affordable. When I returned home, I'd

The vertex approach to removing system faults releases untapped performance. This is not a proposition, its essential if you want the best from your hi-fi.

► managed to prise a sample of Naim's new DIN-to-DIN interconnect out of my hosts. The cable itself is called Hi-Line, and features rigid construction with PTFE and Kapton insulation around Litz copper conductors. But at least half the story is in the plug design. This special DIN plug, designed by Naim and called the Air-PLUG, is designed to absorb and dissipate any mechanical vibration passing down the cable itself. This cable costs a not inconsiderable

£500 (that's not inconsiderable in Naim terms of course; it's considered bargain basement by the Editor amongst others), but again the sonic improvement is not small compared to Naim's regular and rather rudimentary interconnect. In context it's probably the best value upgrade of all, though I haven't done exhaustive comparisons of all the alternative paths. So if a 555PS is out of reach, you can still treat yourself.



Music Matters



by Alan Sircom

Occasionally, when I meet people who don't know what I do for a living, I get that 'the doctor is in' moment.

It runs a bit like this:

"I sex toads for a living. What about you?"

"I prefer my toads unsexed."

"No, I mean what do you do for a living?"

"I review hi-fi."

"Re-a-l-l-y..."

At that point, I know I'm in for an evening of discussing the relative merits of one 1980s vintage Rotel amplifier over another, and a general "All that expensive stuff's overpriced rubbish, isn't it?" comment.

Occasionally though, within these conversations lie nuggets of hi-fi gold. One such emerged recently. It began with "Well, I still think vinyl's better than CD!" ... always a good start. The guy - who worked in the film business - had an old AR turntable and NAD amp on top of an Ikea cabinet. Although the cabinet was distinctly saggy in the middle, he'd levelled the deck using a bit of film tech that's a must have for any hi-fi set-up.

The key to levelocity is a jar of Wobble Wedges, 75 small

black ABS wedge-shaped shims designed to level up anything on a stage, a studio or a film set. The shims have little teeth on either side, so they stay in place. You can stack them up to raise one side of a product, you can apply a degree of tilt to your shimming, too. Stacked alternating with all the wedges the same way up, they present a flat surface; or, you can have them more wedge shaped. But the little teeth do hold, and hold well. I can see them being used to level out many an equipment table where nothing else will do. They are not the best solution as they introduce a degree of clatter and buzz into the system if not carefully controlled (blu-tack can help). But if the choice is between a Wobble Wedge'd system and one that tilts at a jaunty angle, go with the Wobble Wedges.

There's a slightly certifiable aspect to this. The guy - not a Wobble Wedges' rep, I should add - carried round half a dozen Wobble Wedges with him everywhere, to level up tables in restaurants. Apparently, at least one *Matre D'* has offered to waive the cost of the meal in exchange for a jar of the things. I ended up finding them in a professional photographic store (Calumet in Drummond Street, London NW1) for the princely sum of a tenner. I've yet to carry the things to



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▶ a restaurant, but time will tell whether the potential for food discount is merely an urban myth.

While we are on the subject of obscure things making it to hi-fi via other sources, try this for size – Ball Bungees. Ball bungee cords are generally sold to hold down tarpaulins or for keeping sails sailing, but I got the word on them thanks to an edu-blog about flash photography (Baltimore Sun staffer David Hobby's excellent *Stobist) and decided to see if there was any mileage to using these cords in hi-fi.



A ball bungee is exactly what you think it is. It's a length of bungee cord (typically 150-200mm long) hooked into a small black hard plastic ball, where the normal bungee clips would be. You tie it off by wrapping the chord around whatever it is you want to bungee and then placing the ball through the other end of the loop.

This means it's the perfect reusable cable tie. It's also big enough to be seen – which is useful given the amount of times I've tugged at a cable, only to find an attendant host of other cables following suit, connected by one well-hidden white plastic tie. Also, unlike real cable ties, it will never be so well bonded to the other cables that it requires a surgeon's skill to free the tie without severing one or all cables – in fact, the bungee's gentle grip means you can tie together big and delicate cables without stressing them.

Besides, it's made of bungee, one of the most attractive springy things a man can have. I believe bungee cord is in fact the means to end all wars – give all the politicians and generals bungee cords and they'll be so wrapped up with playing with the stuff, they'll forget about invading places. Certainly the Ball Bungee has a charm all of its own when it comes to play time. Yes, these are great for tying down cables (more on that later), but what other hi-fi accessory allows you to play a three-dimensional game of hide and seek – where's



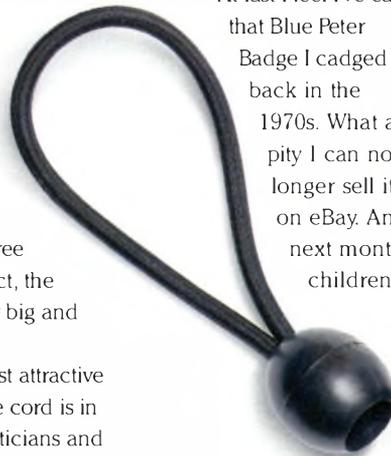
the mouse? Oh, you've Ball Bungee'd it to the shower rail. I see your prank and bungee your hairbrush to the door handle. And so on.



But, I digress (well, meander really). Once you've Ball Bungee'd your interconnects to one side of the equipment stand and your mains leads to the other (or you simply have them free floating, but bungee'd together for safe keeping), what's next? Here's where it

gets cool. Wrap the chords round you speaker cables every metre or so. Your cable can be raised off the floor easily by having it rest on your balls (there's a sentence I never expected writing). As the Ball Bungee ties are entirely non-metal, there's no magnetic interference problems to speak of. It may look a little kludgy, but fortunately no one who makes tarpaulins has learned to speak hi-fi prices. I managed to Ball Bungee my entire system with a dozen 150mm cords and the whole thing came to less than £20 (most of that was postal charges, too... the things work out at less than a pound each).

At last I feel I've earned that Blue Peter Badge I cadged back in the 1970s. What a pity I can no longer sell it on eBay. And next month children,



Val and I will make a thermonuclear device out of washing up bottles and sticky-black plastic, while John will go white-water rafting on a single sheet of kitchen towel and Shep will learn to be a forensic anthropologist.



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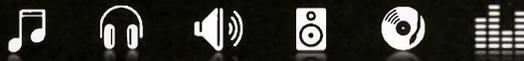
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Dear Sir,

I have been a faithful reader of your magazine for a couple of years and enjoy each issue. I do have one thing to criticize, that being the recent cartridge review in Issue 43.

At the price that both these fine cartridges, the Lyra and Koetsu, are demanding, I find it strange that the reviewer Mr. Foster could not tell what Ms Baez guitar strings were made of. The Lyra made them sound like steel strings, the warmer Koetsu made them sound like nylon. (There can be) Only one kind of strings on the guitar and if steel is made to sound like plastic then take the Koetsu off my list. In fact even back in the 70's it never was on my list. On the other hand could there be something amiss in the Foster set-up? This leads me to another question, Do you ever make the rounds of your reviewing staff and offer suggestions? Just a suggestion.

Chuck Lee

Via e-mail.

I do indeed (see Audio Smorgasbord in this Issue) but sadly Toronto is not a regular point on my travels. I think that one of the problems in trying to portray sound in words is the nature of impressionistic response. Sometimes we try to conjure a feeling or a sense but the words read too literally. Having had both cartridges side by side in my system at home I can hear what RSF is driving at – a presentational rather than a factual statement – and it's to do with attack and the harmonic shaping of notes. Even at this elevated price I'm afraid you pays your money and takes your choice. Ed.

Dear Sir,

In this day and age one has to be VERY careful about which dealers to do business with. I have recently had my pre-amp 'stolen' by my local hi-fi dealer.

Please let me explain: I used to own a PS Audio 6.1 pre-amp but it developed a hum problem when used with my 300B valve power amp (it was okay when used with my Albany S508 transistor power amp). Now, I couldn't ask my colleague (who designed and built the 300B amp) about the hum problem because he's off work with stress so I approached my local dealer and left the pre-amp with them. A few weeks later I returned to find that the dealer had gone into liquidation – there was no sign of him or my PS Audio pre-

amp! (And he seemed such a nice, friendly chap).

At the moment I am using a Marantz SA15 SACD player, a QED passive pre-amp, the 300B valve power amp (it sounds better than the Albany!) and a pair of Mordaunt Short Pageants. It seems very unlikely I'll be able to get my PS Audio pre-amp back. so what would you recommend up to a max. of £1500, bearing in mind I am willing to purchase second-hand? I am looking for a natural, dynamic sound free from treble harshness which I do get from time to time with some of my CD's. Ones which spring to mind are: conrad-johnson PV10, Music First pre-amps or any passive pre-amps which you think I should consider.

Any advice will be gratefully received

Yours Truly,

Ray

Via e-mail.

Easy to be wise after the event, but when leaving products for repair, make sure you get a receipt. That way, if the dealer should go out of business you can prove that the item is your property rather than one of his assets.

We don't generally make recommendations of specific items, but I would suggest that you look for a good line-stage rather than a passive controller. The latter will tend to have a sweet, pure mid-band, but the further you travel towards the frequency extremes the less dynamic control it's likely to have. A good passive might be preferable to a poor active stage, but a decent active one should be better on all counts. Buying second hand, £1500 should enable you to get something very handy from the likes of c-j or Rogue Audio. Just consider serviceability before being tempted by attractively priced exotica! Ed.

Dear Sir,

I was delighted to find my favourite audio magazine, Hi-Fi+, giving serious consideration to one of my favourite categories of audio equipment - headphones and headphone amplifiers ['Head First into Headphones' Issues 41 & 42].

However it did seem as if there was some uncertainty over method in these two articles. While it was no great surprise that the 'phones possessing the greatest synergy with their partnering amplification - the Stax SR404 -

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▶ came out best, the review also appeared to advocate using a standardized set of electronics [Naim Headline/ Sugden HeadMaster] for evaluation duties.

Would it be possible to continue the Head First series of articles, but to focus more closely on matching 'phones with amps? You could also cast your net [pun intended] a little wider and examine some of the many exotic headphone amplifiers available directly via the Internet. What about the mighty fully-balanced twin-box SinglePower SDS XLR or the recently released, and also fully-balanced twin-box, Rudistor RP1000? Alternatively, both these designs being valve-based, you might sample the solid-state virtues of the Meyer Audio Corda Prehead MKII SE or the Aural Audition.

Whatever combinations you chose from this embarrassment of audiophile riches please give headphones their head and deploy the same creative enthusiasm for 'phones and 'phone amps as you do for other audio equipment. It has been said that once you try a balanced headphone amp you never go back - well, dare you take the headphone challenge?

Yours expectantly,

Mark Hewlett

Via e-mail.

Thanks for the enthusiasm. JH has manfully shouldered the burden of headphone listening, but he (and we) are on a learning curve too. First up, it was necessary to establish a methodology that was both manageable and productive - hence the use of the two, contrasting amps. As knowledge and experience expand so too will coverage. Jason is currently working on more affordable options with portable systems and the ultra exotic in the pipeline. Ed.

Hi guys,
just a thought. How about publishing photos of the reviewer's listening environments? I for one love to see people's rooms, and I think it would also help readers get a handle on the particular situation each reviewer lives/listens in. Even just on the website would be cool!

Cheers,

Neil Young

Via e-mail.

I'm not sure the world is ready for that! We do publish schematics and system/preference listings in our annual Awards issue, the most recent being Issue 43. Ed.

Dear Sir,

I attended the HiFi show at Manchester in January and was very pleased with the arrangements, so it was successful from my perspective. I hear that the attendance was under

2000, was this satisfactory for the dealers? For the enthusiasts it seemed about right.

It was disappointing not to see much of Boulder, Bryston, Bel Canto, Audio Research, Conrad-Johnson, Mark Levinson, Audio Physic etc., but it is understandable. Memorable rooms were Midland Audio Exchange, Arcam and HiFi+. The penthouse rooms were, well just stratospheric. My lasting impression will be the HiFi+ demonstration of SACD in five-channel sound. Not practicable for most, but very impressive.

I hope that you have arranged for Mr. Newton to attend next year's show. A further demonstration and talk about the problems of re-mastering would be looked forward to eagerly. The magazine is excellent, and although your reviewers sometimes forget to use a checklist, assessments are well done.

Yours faithfully,

Mr. R. Tummons

Via e-mail

Dear Sir,

I am a dedicated reader of your publication from Alberta, Canada. Over the past couple of years I have been doing some major upgrades to my trusty LP12.

The Akito was replaced with an SME 309

Benz Glider was replaced with Lyra Helikon

Springs, grommets & drive belt replaced

Sub-chassis & arm board replaced with Extreme Phono carbon fibre items

Interconnect cable replaced with Extreme Phone Silver cable

Mains supply now from Isolation Transformer

The improvement in sound has been nothing short of spectacular and I feel a certain sorrow for those people that assume Linn must have it right therefore they will not consider such drastic modifications.

The final improvement would be to obtain a good used Lingo power supply. As you are probably aware these units still command a fairly high price tag. But recently I have stumbled across the Hercules power supply board which appears to replace the Valhalla board and offers 33 and 45 speeds. Have you had any experience with this device? The only source I have found for them so far is a company out of England advertising on E-bay. I think the units are actually manufactured in the Far East.

Thanking in anticipation,

Dave Bishop.

Via e-mail

We have no specific experience with this device, but under the impetus of the Funk modifications, we are gathering a whole host of LP12 tweaks. We'll add this to the list. Ed. ➤



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The Metronome T1-A Signature CD Transport and Renaissance RD-01 DAC

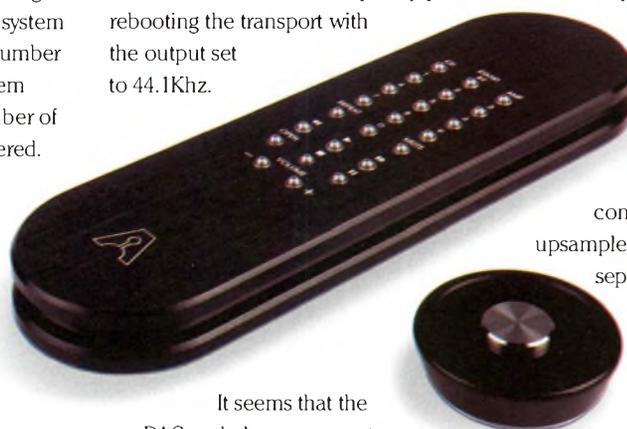
by Chris Thomas

For me, one of the more enjoyable aspects of reviewing audio equipment is in listening for understanding as well as for pure pleasure. A piece of equipment arrives by courier. You unpack, plug and play but what you hear does not always immediately fill you with joy or confidence. Back in the 80's I went to a number of group-listening tests which, by today's standards, were really naive affairs where failure to produce straight from the box into an established system meant the kiss of death for any number of products. Warm-up times, system compatibility and any other number of variables were, at best, ill considered.

Reviewing a piece of equipment sensibly and fairly takes patience and time; perhaps more than most of you would think and I personally feel that you have to listen with a fresh and open mind and understand the requirements of each and every component that comes your way by giving it the right circumstances in which to perform. Having a fixed mindset where you are emotionally committed to a single system as an embodiment of sonic truth is dangerous for a reviewer and limiting as a punter. As a rule you cannot simply trust in inserting a component into your home system and hope to make any meaningful assessment. But, sometimes the most obvious tweak is the farthest from your mind, as in the case of the Metronome T1-A Signature CD transport.

I have to admit that after its arrival I struggled to understand this player and the way it handled music. I had enjoyed

a Metronome I had reviewed before and knew that RG was enormously impressed with the top of the range Kalista, so I was at a bit of a loss as to why, after several days running, this particular machine wasn't ringing a few more bells. Suspicion began to fall on the previously unknown Renaissance RD-01 DAC that the importer had supplied, so I contacted them and the whole issue was resolved by simply rebooting the transport with the output set to 44.1Khz.



It seems that the DAC and player were not speaking the same digital language to each other but, as soon as I threw that switch, communication and full resolution was established and I was faced with a completely different proposition that left me much the wiser.

Constructed in France, the T1-A Signature is a very solid, slim line upsampling transport built behind a 1-inch thick faceplate. It is supplied with a small separate power supply though can be upgraded Naim-style with a full width version. This particular configuration is known as the T2-A Signature. This Metronome is based around the well respected Phillips CDM

Pro (version 6.8) CD transport which is modified in-house and solidly (non-compliantly) mounted beneath the smooth and substantial sliding lid. Discs are held in place by a chunky magnetic Delrin puck sitting on the stainless steel shaft and the whole black gloss tray is internally bathed by a blue led which Metronome claim allows for better extraction of information. This player is

superbly constructed externally and internally with the three main electronic sections being individually housed and powered. The disc reading mechanism, servo and user control and the digital and upsampler outputs are all powered separately from individual transformers in the power supply through a 10-wire umbilical.

At the rear there are different options for connecting a DAC. There is a BNC S/PDIF, an RCA S/PDIF plus an optical connection and an AES/EBU. There is also the switch which enables the digital output to be either standard 44.1 KHz or the up-sampled 96 KHz. Metronome have always been very good at getting the mechanicals of their CD players right and this solidity of construction certainly seems to make itself felt in the way that the player shapes the music by providing it with such a grounded and stable base. Clip-in Delrin cone feet are also supplied for the player and these are a great improvement over the standard three rubber feet and should be used at all ►



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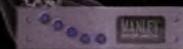
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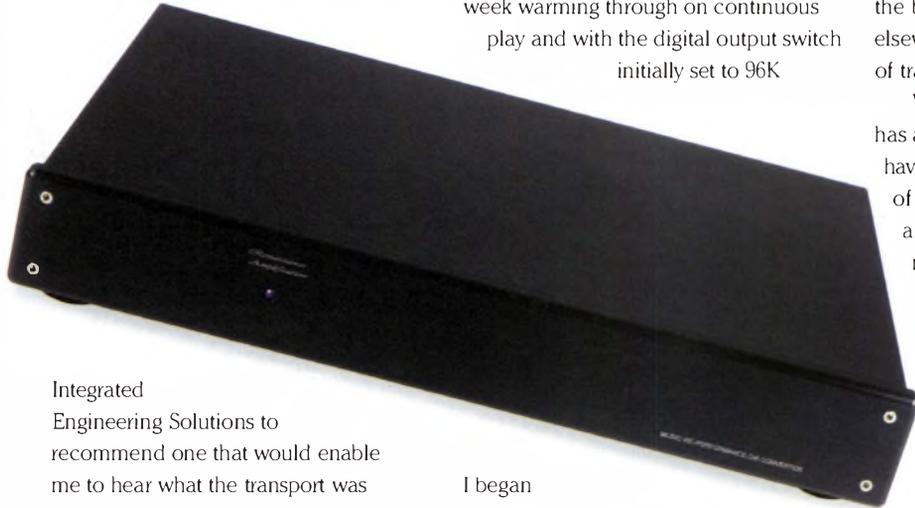
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► times. The metal remote is excellent and well thought out while the blue display is almost too small but just about gets away with being legible from across the room.

I needed a suitable DAC and so asked the importer,



Integrated Engineering Solutions to recommend one that would enable me to hear what the transport was doing in standard or up-sampling mode. Some DACs have such a strong sonic signature of their own that their character can overwhelm the transport and leave their own mark on it. The new Renaissance RD-01 duly arrived and apart from the initial communication problem, performed admirably. Like the Renaissance amplifiers that impressed JH so much and whose casework it shares, this is about as straightforward as it gets. There are no switching options of any kind, except the power button, and IES had no preference as to which input type I used either, so I settled for an RCA equipped Nordost Valhalla Digital lead.

I very quickly decided that this Metronome generally preferred a medite platform as opposed to the glass I usually use on the Naim Fraim. It also has too large a footprint for the standard Fraim shelf so I mounted an oversized medite board atop the Fraim and slid the DAC in a couple of shelves below. After a good deal of fiddly

experimentation I would say that the T1-A, like most quality equipment, is quite fussy about how it is supported but the good news is that it has such a clear, focussed quality to its sound that it is easy to make decisions here. So, after a week warming through on continuous play and with the digital output switch initially set to 96K

I began an intense month of listening. Resolution, bandwidth and an excellent tonal balance were the first things that grabbed me and these remained as lynchpins of the Metronome's performance for the duration. It's hard not to be impressed



by the sheer amount of information this player extracts from CDs in both 44.1 and 96Khz resolution. And it also has a real sense of ease and calm about it founded on that sense of absolute image solidity that seems the bedrock of all Metronome CD players. The only caveat

here is in the bass where I never managed to extract quite the grip that I was hoping for although sheer strength and weight was never a problem. It is actually tauter at these frequencies when sitting on a glass shelf which does tighten the bass nicely but you pay the price elsewhere. As per usual it's a matter of trade-offs.

With most music this combination has a pretty easy time of it. It does not have the sheer rhythmic drive and sense of movement that you will hear from a Naim CDS 3 nor does it have the mid-band liquidity and flow of the Burmester CD 01, but both of these are slightly more expensive machines. In comparison this is an information-based player that is full of space, texture and instrumental subtlety. It has tremendous front to back depth and will spread the musical picture wide across the room if your equipment allows it. But its sense of musical excitement and connection is enhanced by its bow-fronted presentation where the mid-band and vocals extend right into the room bringing an involving sense of presence.

I was quite amazed by Alison Krauss taking several steps

toward me to sing only a few feet in front of my face as I had seldom heard this shape of soundstage before. But the good thing is the notable dynamic detailing and ►

▶ subtlety of expression which makes the musical picture about as intimate and close as I have heard. I rather like this full-blown aspect of its performance and it has the effect of giving the soundstage and musicians an even greater sense of depth and space.



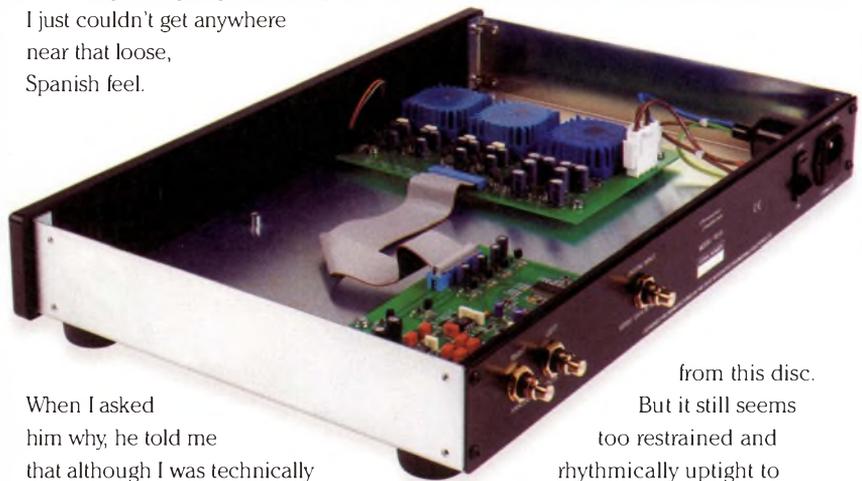
It can sound almost surgically precise, but undoubtedly offers the listener a different kind of involvement and relationship with the music.

Any component that can produce such fine and detailed resolution will ultimately be judged by how well it manages to stream the music into a coherent and characterful rhythmic flow and this is where the Metronome/Renaissance shows its Achilles Heel. Many times I would sit and listen, longing for it to loosen up a bit and shrug off its measured and pinpoint nature. Anyone who has lived with quality equipment will recognise how it can grow more musically supple and less rigid as time passes and perhaps this will happen to the Metronome and the Renaissance combination in time. It could take six months or a year; then again perhaps it will never happen. But my feeling is that, during my time with it, I really missed that sense of swing, that rhythmic ease when moving from note to note and from bar to bar. This is a highly subjective comment obviously and one that has everything to do with the "feel" of music as opposed to its science. And it is very difficult to point to. Sit next to me and we could count the beats and bars together with ease but we might not agree as to the style

that this tempo, rhythm or timing, whatever you want to call it, unfolds. I will admit to being particularly sensitive to this kind of thing both in live playing and listening enjoyment. In many ways, with so much good equipment available today, it marks out the extra special from the rest.

But, considering how difficult it can be to convey or explain this particular quality I'm forced to say that you either buy into it or you don't.

The world of Flamenco is one of those where rhythm is king. I once met a Flamenco player and asked for a few pointers. We kept it simple but although I could play the chords and had the right hand rasguado going reasonably well, I just couldn't get anywhere near that loose, Spanish feel.



When I asked him why, he told me that although I was technically proficient and that practice would improve things, he could tell that I just didn't have the Gypsy in me. I was more fish and chips than tapas and that's kind of the way I feel about the Metronome. Vicente Amigo is my favourite Flamenco player although this particular art form has many sinuous offshoots of style,

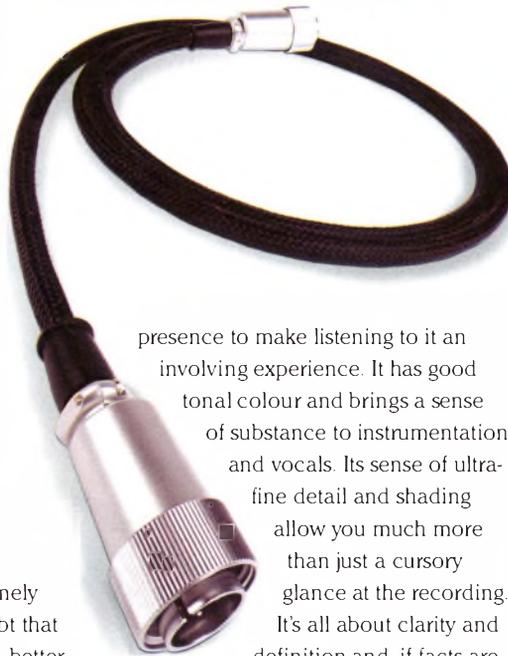
authenticity and flavour. Having seen him live I think the only album that comes remotely close to showing just what a powerful and muscular artist he is was made by Sony back in 1991. *De Mi Corazon Al Aire* (9468932 2) is not a great recording in many ways. Instead of capturing the guitar in an ambient situation the microphones have been pushed up close and as the pure Flamenco guitar is, along with the piano, one of the hardest things to record, the results are a nightmare for almost all hi-fi systems. I normally give it a go on most systems that pass my way and very, very few (perhaps two or three) manage anything other than a very average stab at it. But this Metronome was superb at controlling the extraordinary and unique balance between tone and percussion and was also notably calm and measured when Vicente peels off yet another of those machine-gun runs down the fretboard. But the flavour of the playing, that you should be almost able to taste was missing. It's still enjoyable of course and I have heard much more expensive players than this extract even less

from this disc. But it still seems too restrained and rhythmically uptight to really flow, despite having more than impressive dynamics. But perhaps a little context is called for here. On most music this is far less of an issue than listening to Vicente would have you believe. And I also think that it is an area that simply doesn't enter most people's frame of reference. ▶

► Perhaps it is an inevitable offshoot of listening to lots of equipment and sub-consciously comparing it all.

All I can say is that, to me, it is very, very real and one of the main reasons I have ended up with the equipment I have

This Metronome is an excellent transport that certainly deserves to be used in high-resolution systems. It partners very nicely with the Renaissance RD-01 DAC (which despite its plain exterior performs extremely well) although I have no doubt that it could be used with an even better partner to good effect. Its musical virtues are built on the solid and unwavering stability of its soundstage and its clarity and subtlety combine very nicely with unusually forthright



presence to make listening to it an involving experience. It has good tonal colour and brings a sense of substance to instrumentation and vocals. Its sense of ultra-fine detail and shading allow you much more than just a cursory glance at the recording. It's all about clarity and definition and, if facts are what you want then it knows few peers. Me, I crave a little more soul. However, those who don't accept my personal criticism will absolutely love it. Intrigued? You should be. ➡

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: CD Transport
 Output Data Rates: 44.1 /96kHz
 Transport: Phillips CDM PRO V6.8
 Outputs: BNC S/PDIF, RCA S/PDIF, TosLink Optical, AES/EBU
 Dimensions (WxHxD) –
 Transport: 420 x 80 x 390mm
 Power Supply: 95 x 60 x 305mm
 Weight: 14kg
 Finishes: Black or silver
 Price: £5995.00

Renaissance RD-01 DAC
 Chipset: 24 bit 192kHz Burr-Brown
 Inputs: 1x SPdif (32-192kHz) RCA
 Outputs: 1pr RCA Phono
 Output Level: 2V
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 450 x 65 x 340mm
 Weight: 5.5kg
 Finishes: Black or silver
 Price: £1195

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MICROMEGA

ARIA
CD PLAYER

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STOP

"Return of the Mic..."

The Micromega Aria CD Player

by Roy Gregory

If ever a company was a victim of its own success then it's Micromega. I first came across the French CD players at a Frankfurt show – many years ago, and from that point on the word "first" and the brand's moniker became seemingly inseparable. These were the first, properly engineered top-loading transports I'd ever seen (originally under Leedh and Goldmund branding). The original model, dubbed the CD-F1 Hi-tec, featured a sloping front-panel and a floppy suspension*.

This was soon joined and ultimately superseded by the bluff fronted CD-F1 Pro, built around a rigidly coupled, energy-sink transport. Perspex slab lids and mechanical disc clamps may seem commonplace now, but once again, in these important respects, the Micromegas broke new ground.

Then, of course, there was the sound. These were the first players that I ever heard that even approached the fluidity and musical expression of a decent record player. They were also the first company to couple the undoubted detail and sweeter top-end of early one-bit chipsets to the kind of dynamic integrity and substance that comes from multi-bit. And herein we find the seeds of chaos. That early one-bit success reveals the close working relationship that existed between Philips and Micromega supremo Daniel Schar, who worked as a consultant to the digital arm of the Dutch giant. That privileged

*Footnote: Perhaps not surprisingly, those original bouncy transport players enjoy cult status amongst certain sectors of the flat-earth society.

position led to the creation of Daisy, a company responsible for supplying Philips transports to OEM customers in the hi-fi marketplace – owned and run by Schar. So, when Micromega launched its next assault on the public's digital consciousness, the upgradeable Stage series players, it was only natural that the company would employ the latest transport technology available, thus stealing a jump on the competition. The Stage players were the first to offer internal upgrade-ability and



sounded excellent. They

started to sell in droves, not hurt by a five-star, Best in Test review in *What Hi-Fi*. At which point the wheel came off... That super-duper new transport proved to be chronically unreliable, with machines failing left, right and centre. Unfortunately, what should have been an advantage actually served only to forewarn the rest of the industry who thus avoided the same fate, and despite the efforts of both Micromega and their then UK distributor, the problems were enough to kill the brand, at least in this country.

The road back has been long and hard, but fortunately, despite those deviations into the Stage series and

a range of Micro components, it's the top-of-the-line top-loaders that people remember. Open the carton of this latest machine and that's exactly what you'll find inside. Extract the Aria from its cloth wrapping and it's almost like stepping through a time warp, so familiar does it seem. But almost is the word, and closer inspection reveals subtle changes that mark this out as a distinctly 21st Century beast. Gone are the hard edges on the aluminium chassis and Perspex cover, replaced by softer, radiused lines.

The display is bigger, more informative and far more legible. There's a choice of single-ended or balanced outputs and beautifully engineered soft click buttons recessed into the front-panel are a major operational and aesthetic step forward.

Given the company's track-record for innovative engineering, it comes as no surprise to learn that the five buttons on the front panel will actually permit you to perform multiple functions, such as dimming the display, choosing between English and French readout and switching the single co-axial digital output on or off. There's also a system remote that offers the full range of access and program functions, whilst an RS232 socket allows integration with a system/home automation controller as well as access to a second tier of even more obscure remote options.

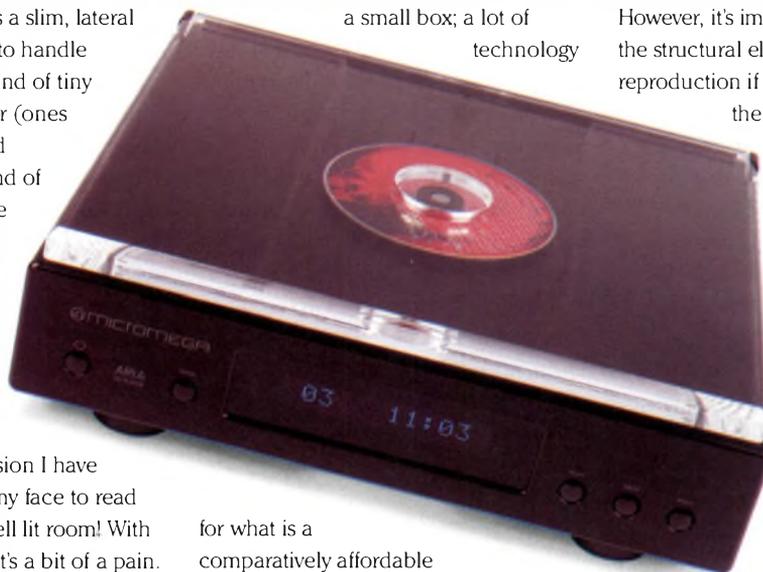
But this product wouldn't be French without a couple of little foibles. The first is the lack of finger dimples ▶



► in the front edges of that substantial and far from lightweight Perspex lid. I guess they don't fit with the new, softer aesthetic, but their absence demands some significant care in handling if you're to escape the odd slip and alarming (though ultimately harmless) drop of the lid. The other concerns the remote which is, in so many ways, a model of operational elegance and practicality. Disposed as a slim, lateral ovoid, it's light enough to handle easily, has exactly the kind of tiny dimpled buttons I prefer (ones that leave plenty of land around them for the kind of large fingers that fumble with mobile phones) and its range and acceptance angle are exemplary. The fly in the ointment? Control legends that are so small and indistinct that even with 20X20 vision I have to lift the unit close to my face to read them. And that's in a well lit room! With 22 identical buttons that's a bit of a pain. Still, at least they're logically laid out and you'll learn where they are over time.

The one other change from earlier incarnations that becomes apparent as soon as you open the lid is that Micromega have followed fashion by moving to a much smaller, magnetic disc clamp, similar in some respects to the Naim one. It's a good call and makes disc handling much easier, although I can't help feeling that a more precise fit (to aid centering) might help the sound. Load a disc and it also becomes apparent that this machine, Micromega's current range-topper and a significantly less ambitious model than the company's previous flagships, has reverted to a soft-sprung transport. Not as floppy as the almost Linn-like Hi-Tec, but distinctly sqwidgy and based

on an extruded silicon suspension medium. Inside, if you can decipher the puzzle that constitutes the casework, you'll find a proprietary clock (built around a j-fet oscillator), a synchronous 3x sample-rate convertor, a fully differential hybrid chipset and a sophisticated power supply involving separate transformers for the digital and analogue stages. It's a lot of technology for such a small box; a lot of technology



for what is a comparatively affordable machine. Daniel Schar suggests that this player incorporates everything required for high-quality digital replay and that it



sits on a peak in the cost/performance curve. Yes, you can get better sound but it will cost you significantly more; but is he right?

The Aria presents a beautifully refined and organized, if slightly understated view of the musical world. It gets awfully, awfully close to that reproductive ideal, 'A place for everything and everything in its place'. Its deviations from neutrality are far the most part those of omission rather than commission, erring if anything to a cooler, more detailed and slightly detached view of events. However, it's important to understand the structural elements behind the reproduction if you are going to get the best from this player.

The top-end is sweet and open with a slight softness that you'll hear on chimes and bells. Never, ever harsh it delivers long term, fatigue free listening. The mid is open and transparent, with excellent separation and depth. The onus here is on detail and that leaves the tonal colours slightly grey, even a little powdery, lacking

the depth of harmonic shading and texture that the best machines provide; so far so good, with carefully chosen trade-offs along the musical path. But once we reach the lower frequencies things start to unravel. There's plenty of bass weight but there's a looseness to the energy that leaves the all-important mid-bass sounding disjointed and uncontrolled, all the more obviously because it contrasts so starkly with the rest of the range. It's the ability to ameliorate this tendency whilst exploiting the player's strengths that will decide how successfully it works

in your system, so let's get a handle on the precise nature of the problem.

The first thing to say is that it occurs just about where most speakers are just starting to stop working. In fairness, the full-range Nola Pegasus is hardly a likely partner for this player ►

► and used with smaller speakers that don't go so deep the extra weight could be considered a welcome addition. But there's no such thing as a free lunch and even in that context you'll find the Aria strangely unrewarding on certain discs. It's understanding exactly why the potential costs of that unruly bass energy are that allows you to weigh the player as a whole.

So, smaller speakers (especially if you can give them a little extra space to the back wall) are a good starting point. Next, look at supporting the player with something that drains energy from its chassis: a Vertex AQ Kinibalu platform or the Symposium rack and Rollerblocks that I used clean things up dramatically, bringing much needed definition to leading edges with the bonus of quicker, clearer mids and highs as well.

Then of course, there's the music you play. Once recognised, the player's strengths are easily exploited, its weaknesses just as readily revealed. Take Lisa Ekdahl's *Back To Earth* as an example. The languid, cool grace and vocal purity of 'Stranger On Earth' is exquisitely presented, the poise and almost translucent quality in the voice beautifully captured. Two tracks further on you reach the up-tempo 'Now Or Never' which is certainly pristine and precise in its quick-firte phrasing, but also lacks the insistent urgency that really underpins the sense of the track. The chaotic low frequency riot of Mina Agossi's 'Ain't Misbehavin'?" Don't even go there... In the same way, the moody delicacy and space that opens the *Gladiator* sound track is fabulous, but once the going gets tough the sound

becomes heavy and stolid rather than urgent and threatening.

But, play Murray Perahia's beautiful Bach *Concertos* and the pristine shape and sense of the composition, the easy excellence of the playing and the masterful grip of pace and line in the piano parts all play into the Aria's hands. The result is fascinating and beautiful all at once. Even more so the King's College



Choir and academy of Ancient Music's recording of *Music For Queen Mary*. The huge acoustic space and height of this recording from the King's Chapel is beautifully captured, as are the range of voices, the delicacy of the harpsichord continuo and the precision of the orchestration. Getting the picture here? It's not really about genres; the Micromega will handle pop and classical, jazz or dance with equal aplomb. But real complexity and musical density at low frequencies can trip it up, obviously so on a full-range speaker, more surreptitiously with a little less bandwidth in play. It really depends whether you demand passion or precision from your music, drama and tension or structure and definition? Depending on your answer to this question, you will or will not love the Aria. What I do know is that if you use it, it will shape your listening and what you play. Of course, if you've already made that choice, then what could be better?

Micromega's Aria is a stylish,

beautifully presented and far from run-of-the-mill machine. Like any player it has its strengths and also its weaknesses and these you must weigh carefully. Its presentation is detailed and beautifully mannered, essentially neutral and devoid of irritating harshness or glare. It fastens on the beauty in music and its delicacy and it's music with those qualities with which it excels. If you want drama and the last word in attention grabbing rhythmic involvement then I'd look elsewhere. But if that sounds altogether too much like hard work and you'd like a more relaxed approach to your entertainment then this is a lot of player for the money. You can be grabbed or you can be stroked; at the end of the day the choice is yours. ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Integrated, top-loading CD player
Transport:	Philips VAM 1202
Disc Clamping:	Magnetic puck
Chip-set:	Crystal 5-bit hybrid
Resolution (with SRC):	24 bit
Analogue Outputs:	1 pr single-ended phono 1 pr balanced XLR
Digital Output:	1x co-axial
Output Level:	2V
Output Impedance:	600 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	340 x 100 x 300mm
Finishes:	Black or silver
Weight:	7kg
Price:	£2150

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Tel. (44)(0)1592 744779
Net. www.shadowaudio.co.uk

Manufacturer:

Micromega S.A.
Net. www.micromega-hifi.com



Rising Son...

The EERA DL1 CD Player

by Roy Gregory

Like any medium, CD offers a range of virtues. The question is, do you want to maximize its strengths or minimize its weaknesses. With most technologies the answer would generally be 'A little of both', but in the case of the original silver disc, many listeners consider the strengths so specific and (in some instances) the weaknesses so chronic, that the normal rules cease to apply. Why else would the term digital be used as often descriptively as it is factually?

The sound of EERA's DL1 player crystallizes not just one such dichotomy but two. Not only does it sound as unlike digital as any player you'll find short of five figures, it doesn't fit that other neat equation where the opposite of digital is described as analogue. Certain of digital's weaknesses are mirrored by analogue's strengths to be sure, but this is no yin/yang harmony of notionally perfect balance, closer to a happy (or unhappy) accident.

So, if the DL1 is neither digital nor analogue by nature, how exactly does it sound? Big, bold, dramatic and powerful – full of meat and menace. This isn't the most detailed player you'll ever hear, but its sound is all about how it uses its detail, the way it assembles its information and delivers the meaning within. Look no further than the Gladiator OST if you want to learn what this machine is capable of. Load the disc, advance the volume (but not too far – the EERA has a more than healthy output level) then sit back and let the music establish first a mood

of foreboding and then build into a threatening mass as layer on layer, level on level, it moves through stately and menacing to uplifting and ultimately to the explosive release, almost relief, of the shattering denouement at the finale of the third track. There's all those martial airs and themes pillaged so wantonly from the Classical canon, but you can't deny the power and skill with which Zimmer blends them, producing so much more than a simple



accompaniment for the onscreen action, an emotional catalyst that binds and elevates the whole. Sound like an exaggeration to you? That's because you've heard the disc on a CD player where I've had the pleasure of being pinned to my seat by the EERA. Now imagine the same performance off record (you'll need to imagine pretty hard as it's not available on vinyl); think of the dynamic demands, the huge slabs of musical energy heaped one on another and the record player that would be capable of keeping everything together and under control, all whilst maintaining the energy and life in the performance.

Some products just look the way they sound. The plain, glossy black front-panel, relieved by the glint of the small domed, polished push buttons and the bright blue display give a sense of squat, coiled power, kind of like a cross between a 2001 monolith and a panther waiting to pounce. It's a sense of solid substance that's underlined as soon as you pick the player up; it weighs a lot more than you expect it to. Lift the lid and you'll realise that that weight comes from the combination of a solidly built, proprietary energy-sink transport coupled to a heavy steel chassis acting as a mechanical earth. However, this is very much a case of more is better, and heavy though the chassis is, an additional, lossy support is essential. The more effectively you can lead that energy away from the disc transport the better the player

will sound. Once again, a structured support strategy pays dividends and the Symposium rack and Rollerblocks delivered obvious sonic benefits, sharpening up the focus and increasing the transparency, underlining the inherent sense of rhythmic integrity and musical purpose.

And if that slightly brooding exterior seems familiar then that should come as no surprise, for the EERA company is the spiritual descendent of the short-lived but brilliant Helios brand. But whilst the DL1 is externally all but identical to the Helios players, a lot of water has flowed under the internal bridge, this, the company's entry ▶

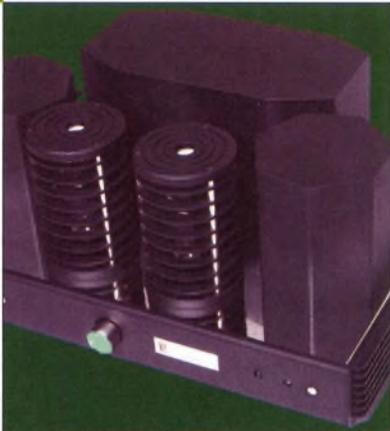
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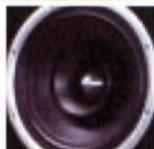
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► level player offering a level of refinement and textural detail that escaped the energetic but occasionally over-enthusiastic output of the old Model 3. No, this is much closer to Model 1 territory, which given the price is a pleasant surprise indeed. The price? Well, there's no UK distribution as yet, but the DLI sells for 2600 Euros in its home market.

EERA (and Helios before them) have always been extremely tight-lipped about the digital technology within their players, although extremely high over-sampling rates play a significant part, in tandem with high-bit filters. What is obvious though, as soon as you lift the lid is the massively engineered transport. Don't be fooled by the flimsy tray. As soon as this enters the chassis it is lifted and clamped by the massive transport sledge which slides up and back to hook over a large ball bearing mounted atop a steel post bolted direct to the chassis.

The whole transport is locked to this single-point energy sink and just watching the operation gives you an intuitive insight into exactly why this player sounds as solid and grounded as it does.

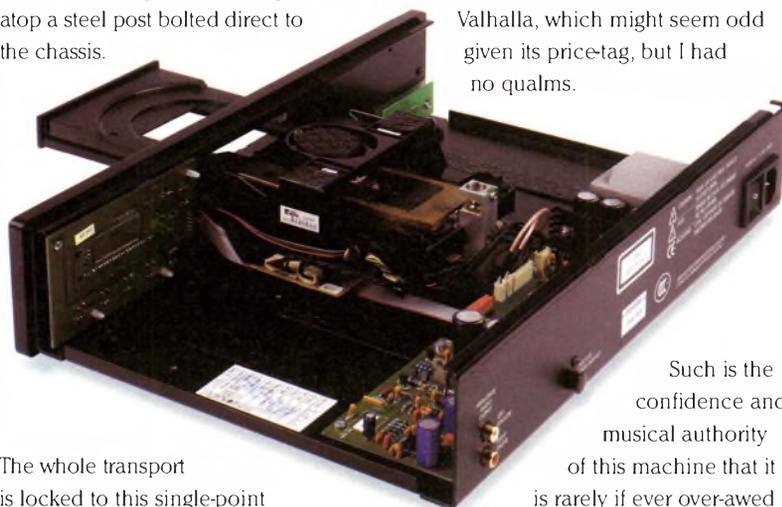
Externally, you get the bare minimum of socketry, with simple left

and right analogue output phonos and a single co-axial digital out – something which reflects the state of the market for add-on DACs rather than the DLI's worth as a transport, a role in which it actually excels. Once again, the Spartan array of buttons on the front-panel offer a range of search and skip functions, augmented by a simple, generic plastic remote offering all



the basic things you'd expect but none of the niceties: so no dimming the display or phase reversal options then.

I ran the DLI straight into the Connoisseur, RADIA and Nola Pegasus system, all hooked up with Nordost Valhalla, which might seem odd given its price-tag, but I had no qualms.



Such is the confidence and musical authority of this machine that it is rarely if ever over-awed (by the music or the matching system). I wanted to know just how far I could push it; the answer is, as far as you like.

I've already mentioned the astonishing power, substance and

intent the EERA delivers from the Gladiator soundtrack, and this is one disc where its sheer energy and seemingly limitless dynamic range make it preferable to the Wadia 861SE. Sure, the big American player has detail, subtlety and textural nuance to burn, but it simply can't match the muscular dynamism and sheer excitement that the EERA provides: The Wadia is impressive, but the DLI is enveloping. The question is, whether

less dense and dynamically demanding material will survive the broader brush that the French machine brings to its canvas? Art Pepper's 'Las Cuevas De Mario' is a wonderfully subtle and convoluted track, built entirely on a subtly insistent

rhythm motif that's set up by the bass and piano, before the drums start to add accent and prompts. Against that background foundation Pepper's sax and Jack Sheldon's trumpet play beautiful chorus and call and response melodies. Superbly understated, there's a lot going at once yet the instrumentation stays sparse. A long time collectible record, the most successful CD transfer I've come across is the Analogue Productions Gold CD (CAPJ 012). Which isn't the same as saying that CD players manage to map the sinuous evolutions of this meandering track. Too often there's plenty of meander but no track as a whole. The EERA nails it. Right from the weight and pitch precise notes of the opening bass bar, the sonorous complexity of the piano, the tune simply grooves. The brass injections are sublime, the odd explosive intrusion from the drum kit all the more meaningful for its suddenness and solidity. Pepper's

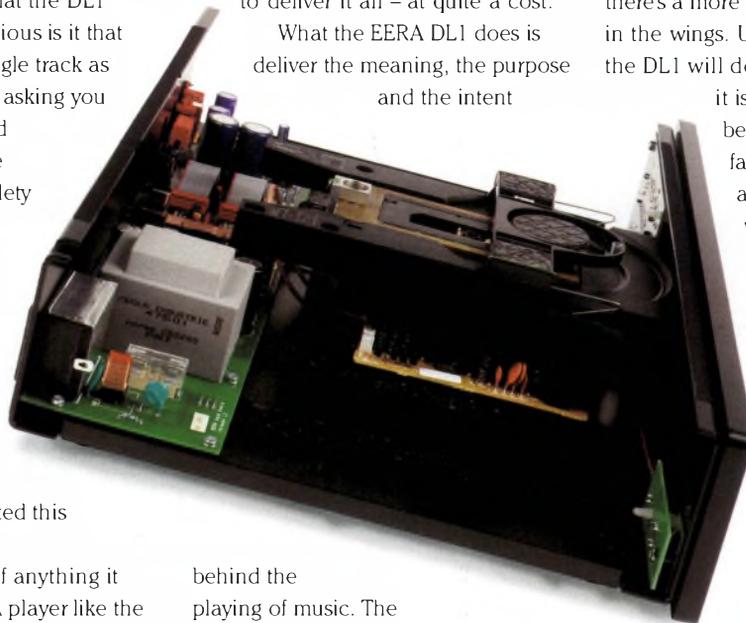
► lines are stretched out and breathe, toying with the orderly progress below. The playing is sublime but what makes the track make sense is the sense of ensemble, the clear intent that whilst everyone's doing their own thing, they're actually all doing the same thing. That elusive gel, the glue that connects a band is what the DL1 reveals. Indeed, so obvious is it that you could hold this single track as exemplar for someone asking you to explain jazz; this and Coltrane's 'My Favorite Things' where the subtlety and extended lines of McCoy Tyner's piano make their own claim. It matters not which – the EERA excels with both. Indeed, the up tempo 'A Bit Of Basie' simply underlines just how organized and surefooted this player is.

If I wanted more of anything it would be separation. A player like the 861 tells you more about the relative scale of instruments and the space between them, looks (even) more deeply at their texture and the technique of the player. But for sheer verve and enthusiasm there are few CD players that come close to this one. Rock and pop it simply laps up, while the banter and repartee that opens Ryan Adams' *Heartbreaker* has a compelling sense of energy, a natural timing that brings the humour to life in a way that once again escapes most players and serves to highlight the superb pacing and temporal sophistication of the EERA.

Bach's structures have never been clearer than they are with the DL1 playing Perahia's *Keyboard Concertos 1, 2 and 4* on Sony SK 89245, the purpose in the playing and the sense of progress through the themes perfectly declared. It is only here that the grace and poise of Perahia's playing eludes

the EERA, which whilst refreshingly robust and solid, can't quite grasp his precision, his shifts of weight and density the way that for instance the Micromega Aria can. Having said that, the Academy are rendered a pale imitation of their real selves by the top-loader and you need the Wadia to deliver it all – at quite a cost.

What the EERA DL1 does is deliver the meaning, the purpose and the intent



behind the playing of music. The finer aspects of an instrumentalist's technique might escape it on occasion, but not the use to which he puts it, or the physical presence and harmonic identity of his instrument. The old chestnuts of rhythm and timing are both present and correct in a way to gladden the heart of any analogue aficionado, yet to describe this player as sounding "analogue" is to miss the point. There are precious few record players (and none anywhere near this price) that can match the dynamic integrity, substance, energy and above all, bass linearity of the DL1. Nor does it possess the easy space that comes from vinyl records. This is an altogether denser and more purposeful reproduction, but one that draws you into the music and carries you along with it. If you want academic insight then you'd best look elsewhere, but if you want to understand why man has made music since the dawn of history,

if you want to kick up your heels or simply get carried away, the EERA DL1 is your ticket to ride. When it comes to sheer musical entertainment it sets a new standard at this price, and challenges players at far higher prices still. Indeed, the only reason I hesitate to declare its benchmark status is that there's a more expensive DL2 waiting in the wings. Until it arrives however, the DL1 will do nicely, and even if it is only keeping that bench warm, it sits so far above the competition at its price point that it will remain unmolested for quite a while. At last I can retire the old Helios Model 1; the Dauphin is dead, long live the Dauphin. Now – about the King... 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Integrated CD player
Transport:	Modified Philips CDM12
Digital Stage:	24-bit resolution with 128x software based oversampling
Outputs:	2x single-ended phono analogue 1x co-axial digital
Output Level:	2.7V
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 90 x 290mm
Weight:	7.5kg
Finish:	Black
Price:	2600 Euros

Manufacturer:

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Audio Analogue Maestro CD Player

by Chris Thomas

The range they call Maestro is at the top of the Audio Analogue tree and this CD player is the latest from the Italian company who have built a strong reputation in a short period of time based largely on build quality and sonic value for money. With the possible exception of a couple of Sonus Faber speakers my image of Italian audio equipment is of a satin smooth, rolling balance that never, ever becomes offensive. I can see why they like valves so much. Full bandwidth or a lean presentation is just not on the menu for the Italians who seem to prefer the audio equivalent of a well-worn but immaculate pair of Gucci loafers. Both the Pathos amplifiers I reviewed were among the easiest to listen to I have ever heard. In their own way they were subtle and informative but one could almost describe them as soft, with the treble rolling gently away long before any real high frequency extension came into the reckoning. If I were an audio purist obsessed with a full bandwidth representation of the original I doubt I would find too much to interest me in the Italian audio equipment catalogue but the fact remains that music lovers encompass a broad range of tastes and not every hi-fi owner is a rabid enthusiast forever looking to the next upgrade. Some people just want to listen to music, without drama. If so, with Audio Analogue they've certainly come to the right place.

The Maestro 192/24 CD player has new looks and new innards. It is now based around a CD-rom transport and a 192kHz/24bit Up-sampling DAC from

Analogue Devices. Internally it has twin transformers with eight regulators powering both the analogue and digital sections and like the Settanta amplifier from the same range has the ability to be used in a multiple-room installation via the RS 232 serial port at the rear. It certainly looks the part I must say, although some of the detail finishing is not quite so impressive when you get up close, especially around the display window. Connectivity is good though,



with both single ended and balanced outputs available and there is an RCA S/PDIF digital output in case you want to employ a separate DAC. If there was also some way of getting a digital signal into the machine then it could operate as an up-sampling DAC itself, which might be a useful addition. The front panel has a cluster of transport controls which are a bit diminutive to be ideal and you'll need to memorise their individual functions as the markings are too small to be read in anything other than the midday sun. The illuminated dot matrix display is also too small to be easily understood from any distance and the remote is a

neat little metal affair which again should be more clearly marked as the button functions are indented, barely legible and really should be stencilled as well. I have never understood why manufacturers cannot get these things right. It is not, after all, a matter of cost, just sensible design. These controls are our tactile link to controlling the player and they should be both clearly marked and easy to operate.

Being Italian of course the whole package has clearly been designed with La Bella Figura very much to the fore and it looks, at first glance, like a £5K machine. I have no problem with that but, to carry it off, the unit must also perform at that musical level and in this case, to a non-Italian ear. So I plugged it into a Moon i-5, one of my favourite integrated amplifiers and it sounded small and very, very soft. So, I thought, off to the upstairs system on repeat-play for a week. And several days later I tried again. Things had certainly improved somewhat but it became abundantly clear quite early on that I was never going to love this CD player and it was pointless to pretend otherwise. Its balance is just too muted for my personal tastes with its smooth as silk presentation and no sharp edges. I am inclined toward a much more realistically balanced view of the music. But it had undoubtedly grown easier to listen to, in a friendly kind of way, so I became intrigued as to whether I could really enjoy listening with it. After all I am always telling others to keep an open mind and

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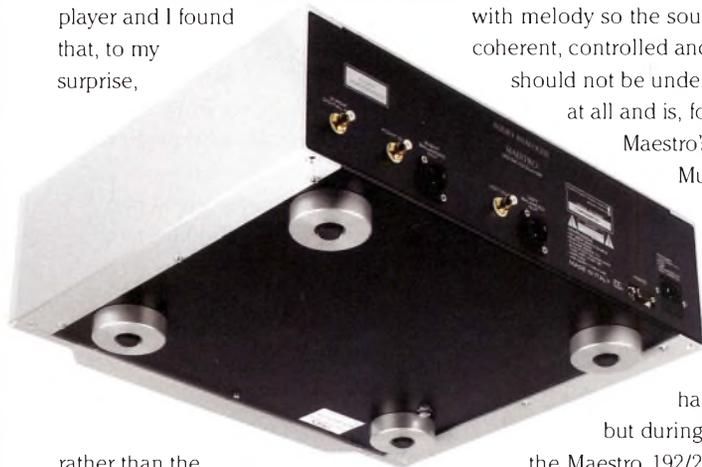


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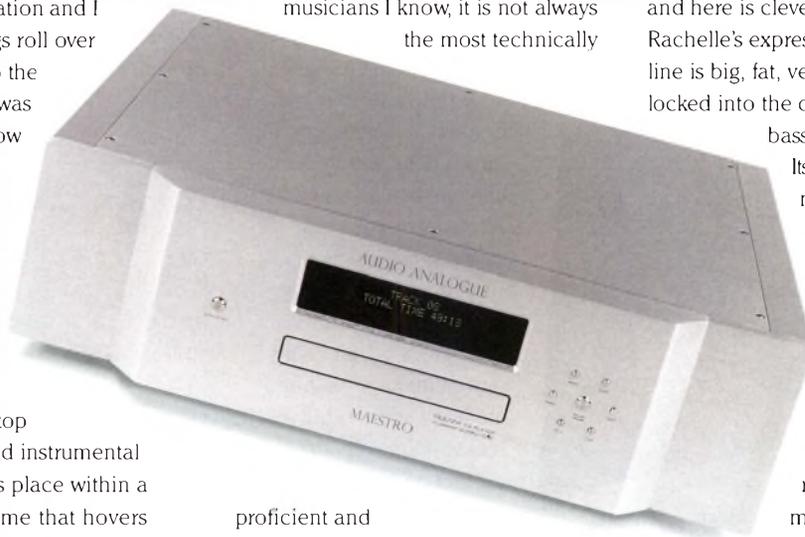
► never judge anything just because it doesn't immediately conform to that "ideal" sound you have in your head. So I listened to it exclusively for a couple of weeks resisting the temptation of reinstalling my domestic player and I found that, to my surprise,



rather than the Maestro evolving from a frog to a Princess I began to slowly warm toward it, with warm being the operative word. There was no longer any challenge or excitement or instrumental revelation and I simply let the songs roll over me and listened to the system for what it was without plotting how I could make it better. It took a while to get used to the compact nature of the sound. The bandwidth rolls off quite gently at both the top and the bottom and instrumental separation all takes place within a relatively small frame that hovers somewhere between the speakers but never really intrudes into the room. Leading edges are not as dynamic or transient as they should be though tonally the player can sound quite rich and colourful and this will be one of the major attractions to prospective owners. And, although it never had me on the edge of my seat there is an

ease and certain tunefulness to its character, which is largely down to its sense of rhythm and timing. It is not fast in the conventional sense; in fact it can sound quite slow. But it is in time with itself and has a very lyrical way with melody so the sound is always coherent, controlled and flowing. This should not be underestimated at all and is, for me, the Maestro's saving grace.

Musicality is a word that was over used in the world of hi-fi for many years until it no longer had any meaning but during my time with the Maestro 192/24 it kept popping into my head. Here is a CD player that, while possessing very few of the attributes I normally look for in any piece of equipment, always seems on the side of the music. Like many musicians I know, it is not always the most technically



proficient and advanced of them who produce the most musical results. Some people who are relatively limited in their abilities often seem to be able to pick out a melody line or a chord that is so beautiful in its simplicity and so obviously right that more techno musicians just would never think of it, or if they did they would discard it

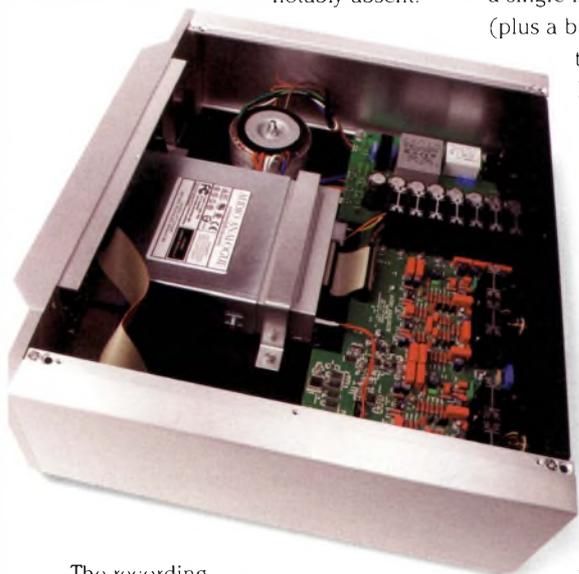
as being too obvious. The Maestro is a little like that in that it shows you a simplified view of the recording. It is not that it doesn't have resolution because it does. It just doesn't make a big deal out of it. It reminded me of the old Rega 3 turntable in that it always seems to get the dominant melody line right and this is what most people initially latch onto. Add to this a definite rhythmic ease and sense of movement and you have hi-fi that is both easy to listen to and easy to live with.

Individuality by Rachelle Ferrell (Capitol 94980 20) has some exciting music that puts a considerable strain on a system's ability to deal with any number of transient and dynamic musical strands simultaneously. But it also has some very gently flowing mood pieces that call for very different audio abilities. The track 'Sista' stretches the Audio Analogue Maestro 192/24 to its very limits. Nobody plays better synth bass than George Duke and here is cleverly used as a foil for Rachelle's expressive vocal. The bass line is big, fat, very meaty and perfectly locked into the drum figure and the bass drum in particular.

Its relentless sliding movement should feel as if it is operating somewhere in the pit of your stomach while the vocal dances in and around it. While the Audio Analogue player did a reasonable job of maintaining the track's integrity it never had enough in hand to expand the synthesiser's dynamic thrust and motion. It softens all the edges and while the vocals are fully understandable a lot of the inflections and breathing techniques she is so good at just don't have the musical impact. But, take a track like 'Gaia', which ►

► is a soft shuffling piece, almost Latin in its rhythmic base and the Maestro is a lot more agreeable. Now the intimacy and closeness of the track works in the CD player's favour and the coherence of its way with tempo allows much more room for exploration. You can hear that the drummer is pushing the high-hat figure along while the keyboard chord sequence is in no such rush and this gives the track a great and somewhat unusual feel which creates just the right atmosphere for a song about Gaia. The strains this track imposes are very different from 'Sista' and play much more to the Maestro's strengths.

It doesn't get much simpler than a pair of acoustic jazz guitars together with the odd mandolin and this is what we find on *Tone Poems 2* (Acoustic Disc -18) which features the superb Martin Taylor and David Grisman playing vintage instruments from the last hundred years. This is a showcase for the instruments themselves and flash or over indulgent playing is notably absent.



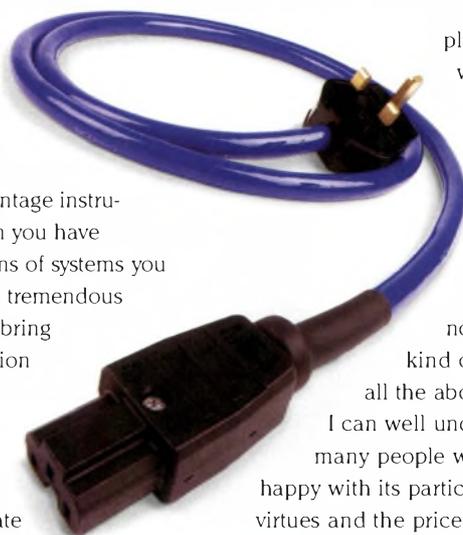
The recording techniques and equipment are documented. This is an all analogue (2-track Fostex at 30 ips) recording with no equalisation or (thankfully) compression and just a smidgen of spatial enhancement (reverberation).

It is about as clear a view as you will hear of the true tonal nature of these amazing vintage instruments. But, when you have heard it on dozens of systems you realise that it is a tremendous leveller and can bring some big-reputation systems to their knees. This is one disc where you can accurately recreate the original levels in your listening room.

Plucked stringed instruments are very focussed and dynamic and very old ones are quite clattery as well but the album title is *Tone Poems* and that is what it's all about and it is here that the Maestro is at its best. For once the player's lack of an expansive sound-stage and its overall soft balance actually work in its favour. With only a single instrument for each channel (plus a bit of mike bleed-through)

there is time and room to hear each musician working his instrument with plectrum and fingers. It has that touchability of presence and maintains the shape of both the guitars and the mandolin in a way that some mega-systems simply cannot manage as they bloat the sound until you feel you are listening to 10 foot guitar necks with bodies the size of cars.

These characteristics are fine with multi-track recordings, but give them some "simple" work to do and their built-in and predetermined monster soundstaging becomes a limitation. This is not music that will have you on the edge of your seat in excitement but it is beautifully



played material with depth and integrity and that is how the Maestro treats it.

As I mentioned earlier, this is not really my kind of CD player for all the above reasons but I can well understand that many people would be very happy with its particular blend of virtues and the price is attractive too. You can listen to it all day without a trace of fatigue and this is more rare than some might think. I would hesitate to use it with any amplifier that is itself soft in balance or any speakers that didn't have an extended high end as you might end up with some-thing that was altogether too much of a good thing. But my ears aren't yours and hi-fi is a very personal thing, so I'll leave it to you to decide; sweet and low-impact might be right up your street.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Single box upsampling CD player
DAC:	192kHz / 24 bit upsampling
Outputs:	1 pr analogue RCA 1 pr analogue XLR 1xS/PDIF RAC Digital
Other:	1xRS 232 serial port
Dimensions(WxHxD):	445 x 135 x 410mm
Finishes:	Silver
Weight:	15kg
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A Whole That's Greater Than The Sum Of Its Parts...

B&W's diamond tweeter and its impact on the 800D Loudspeaker

by Martin Colloms

Not much attention was paid to extended high frequency response during the early years of high fidelity. Indeed, even as late as the 1970s, a frequency response extending to just 15kHz was considered quite sufficient for most sources. The accepted view was that only a whisper of harmonics was either present or audible above that frequency, since the fundamental tones present in music cease long before this point is reached. Furthermore, pitch is not really discernible above 10kHz, the aural impression being closer to noise than specific tone.

Most listeners over thirty cannot hear that last fraction of the nominal audio range above 15kHz, and since extending the range to 20kHz and beyond was considered costly, many sources were deliberately limited to 15kHz. Multiplex FM stereo and cassette recorders did not reach beyond this frequency and most pickup cartridges showed treble droop especially towards the end of record sides. Only those with access to master tapes could benefit from extended high frequencies.

Around this time the BBC was pioneering new loudspeaker technologies. Extensive technical research was backed by painstaking listening tests, with results published in *Wireless World* (now *Electronics and Wireless World*) in 1976, the BBC having

the advantage of being able to compare live with recorded sounds. To complete work on larger bass and mid drivers and matching enclosures, the team chose a commercial tweeter, namely the Celestion HF1300, which was considered the most lifelike and consistent available. An acoustically loaded

was directed at the notionally limited HF range, nor was it considered an audible defect. In fact Celestion themselves had made several hundred thousand well-regarded loudspeakers using this tweeter, including the legendary Ditton 15.

Eventually tape decks improved in recorded bandwidth, cartridges improved in extension, CD gave us 20kHz, and ultimately SACD and DVD-A promise us up to 100kHz sparking the hunt for extended speaker bandwidth. But to what extent is this a mere marketing exercise rather than a musical necessity? After all, given the historical context, it's perfectly valid to question whether or not we need or want such extension. Is it simply too costly or complex to justify if it delivers little worthwhile benefit?

Hearing beyond 20kHz...

In examining this question, the evidence available from subjective tests to see whether sound reproduction reaching above 20kHz is worthwhile has not reached a general consensus. Yet despite this, the emergence of SACD material, some with extended bandwidth content, has nevertheless prompted the sale of costly accessory supertweeters, and also new loudspeaker designs with greatly extended treble response. ▶



38mm diameter pure piston, the unique acoustic

loading for the front cavity packs in at 14kHz, so that is the effective frequency limit for speakers using it. Not only did these BBC designs excel in sound quality, almost no comment or criticism

▶ An (unpublished) test for high-frequency acuity was devised by Laurie Fincham at KEF in early 1980, investigating audible bandwidth for a workshop at an AES Convention. He used a 19mm wide directivity tweeter with a calibrated response to 40kHz. Repetitive pulse signals were used with high quality elliptic filters free of ringing. For a legendary mixed audience of audio critics and professionals, I recall that 16kHz was the typical, informally reported audible threshold, with just a few individuals managing 20kHz with any reliability. Now, while there remain issues regarding the lower frequency harmonic impact of musical information at these extreme frequencies, as well as research that suggests that we might well sense such sound through bone structures rather than the ears, the work still highlights the inadequacy of the more popular arguments regarding the off-heard merit of a 100kHz reproducing bandwidth. Whilst we might be aware of such frequencies, the vast majority of us certainly can't hear them in the conventional sense.

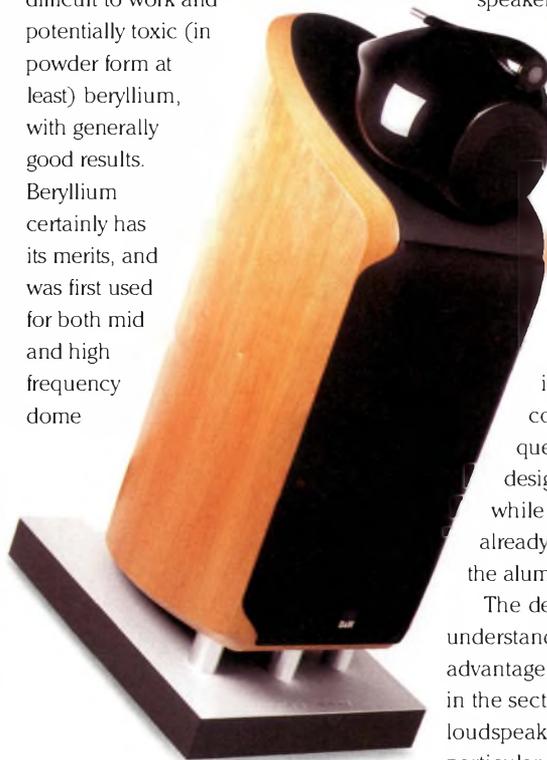
Playing the bandwidth card...

B&W's much-heralded new diamond tweeter has a substantially uniform frequency response to 40kHz, and extends effective output up to 70kHz, substantially better than the old model. This fine technical achievement might seem academic in view of the above, but I consider that there is rather more to this particular development than mere bandwidth considerations, despite the obvious marketing appeal of such nice, round numbers.

Evolutionary progress over more than a decade has brought a string of improvements to B&W's popular aluminium alloy dome tweeters. Refinements in shape and alloy composition, the use of carbon fibre reinforcement around the rim, and in rear loading and damping, leading to the tapered pipe with its extended, almost non-resonant absorption

characteristic. Each of these has resulted in incremental improvements which have been introduced in the various 800 series iterations, and many have subsequently found application in the company's less costly ranges.

Other manufacturers have also been experimenting, and in some cases introducing new high frequency units. For example Focal is using a superior metal to aluminium, in the form of the difficult to work and potentially toxic (in powder form at least) beryllium, with generally good results. Beryllium certainly has its merits, and was first used for both mid and high frequency dome



drivers by Yamaha in its radical NS1000 studio monitor. Introduced as early as 1975, here vapour deposition was employed to form the domes, whereas Focal stamp diaphragms out of metal foil.

Recent developments in vapour deposition have led to the commercial possibility of making a tweeter dome of pure (industrial – not to be confused with gemstone) diamond. This was first seen from German drive unit company Accuton, and is found in the costly 'Diamond' version of the Avalon Eidolon loudspeaker, the Lumen White, Marten

Coltrane and sundry other high-end, high-price designs. The Accuton device uses a 20mm diameter concave diaphragm, and is prohibitively expensive – single units are priced at about \$1,500(USD) – helping to explain the price-tag on the finished products.

However B&W has a long tradition of designing and building its own drivers, and the economies of scale available even for their audiophile speaker range are such that they looked at the possibility of manufacturing their own diamond tweeter for (relative) mass production. Whilst there would still be a significant cost burden, bringing the operation 'in house', combined with the number of units involved, would dramatically reduce it compared to the competition. However, the question remained, could the designers demonstrate a worthwhile improvement over their already impressive efforts with the aluminium unit?

The desire to use diamond is understandable. The marketing advantage alone should be substantial in the sector in which the 800 series loudspeakers operate. Add to that the particular benefits and extraordinary properties of this allotrope of the natural and abundant element carbon, and you should have a win/win situation, a promise that can actually be realised.

While diamond is structurally quite closely related to carbon's graphite alternative, the contrast could not be more extreme, and reflects the surprising results of particular molecular organisation. Graphite is a shiny, opaque, metallic grey material, soft enough to mark paper and electrically conducting. Structurally it is found in waxy layers which may also be employed for dry lubrication ▶

► of machinery. In contrast pure diamond is crystal clear, is an electrical insulator (though an excellent conductor of heat), and is uniquely and astonishingly, extremely hard and tough – in fact the hardest substance known.

The upper frequency limit for a rigid piston shell, a dome tweeter, is generally decided when the operating frequency approaches its first structural resonance or break-up. That is primarily determined by the stiffness-to-density ratio, E/μ , and here diamond is pre-eminent. The square root of the E/μ figures for available materials is instructive, relating quite closely to potential bandwidth. For example hard plastics score about 1.5, while plain aluminium is rather better at 5.4, slightly improved by anodising. Titanium is not particularly special at 5, while beryllium definitely represents a leap forward at 12. Diamond, however, easily wins the race with 18, despite its higher density. Thus a diamond dome promises the widest cleanest frequency range, soaring way beyond audibility, even in a 25mm size, and actually offers double the bandwidth of a pure alumina or 'micro-crystal sapphire' diaphragm.

The development of improved and lower temperature CVD (chemical vapour deposition) techniques – an ionic plasma process carried out in a near vacuum – was crucial for poly-crystalline diamond film production and its application in a diamond dome tweeter. Complementing the extended response of a dome made using this method, the magnet pole for the B&W unit is also heavily silver plated to reduce the effect of coil inductance and thus maintain the available high frequency response, a measure whose effective-ness can be seen in the astonishing lab results taken from the finished unit. These numbers do not lie and genuinely reflect the high-frequency bandwidth of the unit, at least in isolation.

Listening in the real world...

Given the historical background with which we started this discussion, if we were to take the view that the intrinsically greater bandwidth of the diamond dome is not directly audible, is there another mechanism which could explain the reported sound quality improvement over lesser tweeters?

Looking at the bandwidth question, one argument runs as follows.



Existing high frequency units are often compromised. They are reaching their limits by 20kHz, where encroaching break-up or loss of pistonic behaviour can result in distortion increases and irregular response, including high Q ringing, within or only just outside the readily audible range. Therefore designing for an extended frequency range may actually have real mechanical benefits simply by improving the smoothness and resonant behaviour within the range where we can directly hear output.

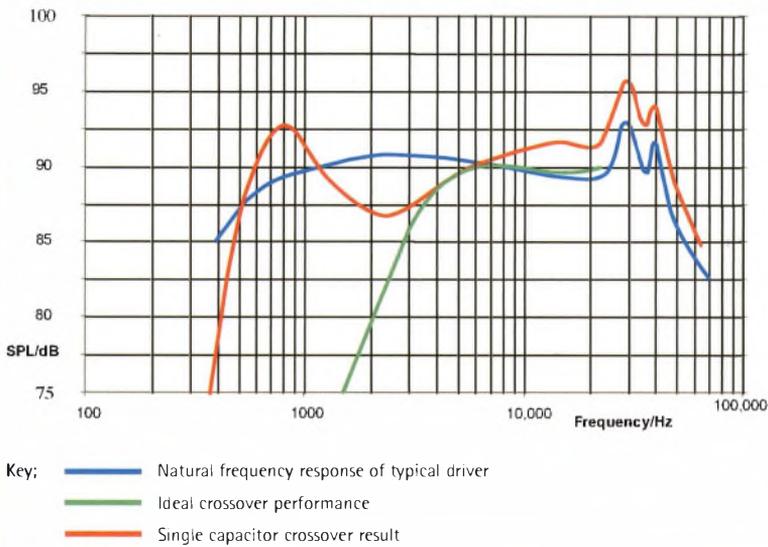
B&W successfully worked with a local UK producer to optimise the

design of their diamond deposited dome for quantity production – and then their problems began. Just as manufacturers (and too many customers) discovered when the metal dome craze bit hard in the early '80s, you can't simply substitute one type of tweeter for another, even if the numbers look the same. Put straight into an existing 800 design, the new tweeter sounded neither special nor right. Neil Patel of Avalon had had a similar experience when first trying out

the Accuton diamond tweeter in a trial version of his established Eidolon. For both companies, much additional work needed to be done before the intrinsic potential of the new technology was realised as an overall gain in loudspeaker system performance. Patel ended up painstakingly refining and realigning the Eidolon system design in order to create what is essentially a new model costing about 50% more. A similar degree of re-engineering appeared to face the B&W designers.

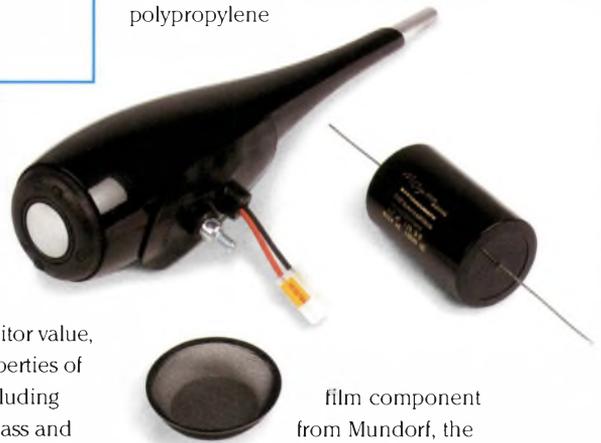
A key issue which confronts all speaker designers is the large potential disparity between the theoretical output of a tweeter design when mounted in an ideal plane baffle, and the actual output obtained when it's mounted in an enclosure, to which must then be added the effects of the necessary crossover. Any condition other than the classic plane results in large frequency-dependent changes in output, in some case adding severe irregularities. Interestingly, the other optimum practical mounting surface is a sphere, where the irregularities due to reflection and diffraction are at a minimum, and the change in frequency response is a smooth trend that is amenable to fairly simple correction. The 800 series tweeter is thus mounted in something approximating a small sphere. This is completed by a transmission line conceived as a tapered pipe, which as discussed, specifically addresses possible resonances in the rear

Figure 1. Effect of single crossover capacitor on a typical high frequency driver frequency response.



ment, resulting in greater clarity and resolution, complementing the near perfect mechanical behaviour of the diamond piston radiator – revealing rather than obscuring the benefits.

Having reduced the high-frequency leg of the crossover to a notional single element, no ordinary crossover capacitor would do. Sound quality variations between capacitors may be subtle but are real enough, and here was an opportunity to hear exactly how great their impact could be. Dozens were tried and the most neutral and transparent type for this position in the system design was found to be a German polypropylene



film component from Mundorf, the 'M-cap Supreme'. Certain

technical and constructional aspects support the validity of the choice though the price is high, (about £30 retail a throw in singles for a modest 2.2uF example). The voltage rating is an uprated 1,200V where 100V would normally do for a loudspeaker. The higher this rating, the less the electrical stress the internal insulating film is subjected to, with lower resulting coloration. The proof is seen in the loss factor, 'd' for this particular construction, and where ordinary polypropylene capacitors manage 0.003, this type attains an all time low of 0.00002. Finally the heavy, low-microphony construction utilises symmetrically wound, non-inductive, low-loss bulk metal foil rather than the usual vacuum deposited thin

► cavity and related acoustic loading.

At B&W's Research Centre, the team was spurred on to re-examine its whole approach to audiophile speaker drivers and system design. Having dealt with the mounting issue they still had the crossover problem to solve; how to raise the bar for the new project? One idea was to use a purist, first order crossover to the new tweeter.

The figure shows the output of a typical high frequency unit in favourable acoustic conditions (solid line) when fed direct from a power amplifier. As the designer intends, it is uniform. The dashed curve shows the required output when a matched, second order crossover has been installed, this carefully judged to combine smoothly with the acoustic output of the midrange unit.

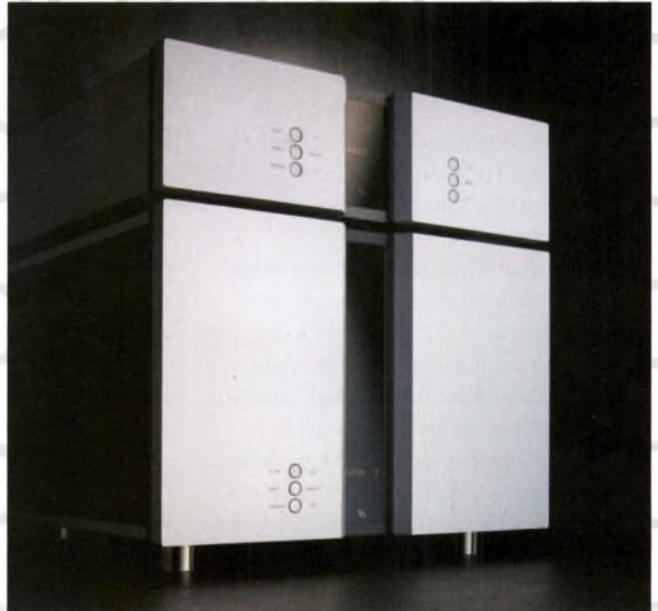
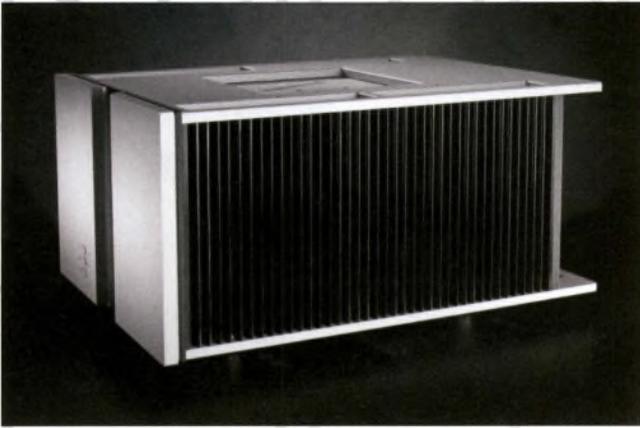
The dotted trace is the result when B&W's objective of a single crossover capacitor is used instead. A complex interaction has occurred between the mechanical and electrical elements of the tweeter and the capacitor, and the result is clearly far from ideal, at least in frequency response terms. Now the system designer has to use

all his skills to adjust the available variables cooperatively: driver coil inductance, voice coil resistance, the acoustically relevant form of tweeter mounting, the crossover capacitor value, and not least the dynamic properties of the dome's moving system, including suspension stiffness, moving mass and mechanical damping.

As the original manufacturer of the tweeter, B&W was in a position to take control of these parameters and balance them until a good frequency response, well blended to the mid-range, was achieved. The final step in the process was the determination of the resulting cumulative relative delay present between mid and high frequency drivers. This data allowed the critical adjustment of the relative fore and aft displacement of the tweeter relative to the mid for an optimum phase alignment and thus most uniform overall frequency responses. Consequently for the new design the treble driver is now physically placed forward of the location used in the last 800 series. The payoff for this work on the crossover network is the inherent simplicity of the arrange-

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Comments from CES 2006:

www.soundstage.com

SM-101 Highlighted as Showstopper – Focus Audio suite highlighted as standout demo by Doug Schneider:

It's easy to hear why Focus Audio decided to become the North American distributor of Vitus Audio electronics: life-sized scale, robust dynamics and a beautifully fleshed out midrange summed up the sound of Focus Audio's Master 3 floorstanders matched with Vitus Audio's monstrous SM-101 mono amplifiers. Vitus Audio-designed interconnects and speaker cables were also used

www.stereotimes.com

Highlighted as "The best of the best" by Dave Thomas:

This is the third year that I have enjoyed the offerings of Hans-Ole Vitus. His products are among the best built and best sounding that I have ever seen or heard. Build quality borders on fanatical and the sonics are superb. Partnering with Vitus at CES for the first time was Focus Audio (the new distributor for Vitus). The system featured new Focus Audio loudspeakers, the dCS P8i SACD player, and prototype cables created by former Argento cable designer Anders Grove. The beauty of this gear must be seen to be believed.

NEWS! – Setting the new standard in cables by introducing our new cables series "Andromeda"

► film metalisation. In addition, for this 4.7uF component, the foil is 99% silver, alloyed with 1% gold to improve the handling properties. Gold, silver, and diamond; my, this loudspeaker constitutes audio jewellery!

There's more to a speaker than just a fancy tweeter...

The original Nautilus 800 system grew out of the need to try and replicate the performance of the original but bulky Nautilus 801 (with its 15inch/380mm bass driver and commensurately large bass-reflex enclosure) in a more compact package. Benefiting from a large listening room, I certainly enjoyed that original N801 back in 1998, but it clearly wasn't going to work as well in smaller spaces.

Market feedback had indicated that a more compact model with an equivalent price and performance profile was required, so the single 380mm driver became two 250mm drivers operating in parallel, vertically mounted in a slimmer cabinet. A luxury finish Signature edition was also produced.

For the new 800D both the swept volume at low frequencies and the power capacity is equivalent to the big driver found in the 801D, while to maintain comparable bass extension in the smaller enclosure a small compromise in rated load impedance has proved necessary, down to a low 3.1 Ohms minimum from the rated 3.5 Ohms of the 801D. (If we are going to split hairs, the -6dB low frequency point for the bigger 801D is claimed to be 23Hz, compared with a slightly higher 25Hz for the 800D.)

However, whilst similar in height at 118.2 cm, including the integral cast alloy plinth, the slimmer design shaves 10% off the width to 45 cm, and 5% from the depth to 64.5 cm. This nevertheless remains an heroic device weighing in at a massive 275lb – even more than the 260lb of the 801, due mainly to the huge magnets

on the pair of bass drivers. Rated at 1000W maximum programme, the smallest rated amplifier which could sensibly be chosen for this task is about 200W/channel. Given the relatively cruel impedance load, this should have a high output current capacity. Fully calculated from the specification, and assuming low resistance audiophile speaker cable, a 1kW maximum '8 Ohms' input corresponds to no less than 40A peak, comparable with the power drawn by a starter motor from a car battery! Tight, low resistance connections and heavy duty cables are clearly going to be worthwhile.

Costing £13,000 a pair, the price increase occasioned by inclusion of the diamond tweeter is surprisingly modest, and remarkably, considering the international audiophile loudspeaker stakes, the 800D is actually competitively priced, taking into account the very high quality of build, engineering and finish.

Both 801D and 800D are 90dB/W (8 Ohm rated) sensitivity, while those double bass drivers of the 800D could prove to be a tad more dynamic at their limit than the single unit of the 801. Both models will be capable of awesome 115dB maximum sound levels in a typical listening room, given sufficient amplification.

There are major advances in the design of the bass drivers here. Terminated by large reinforcing caps of ultra-rigid carbon fibre, the cones

now employ a composite or sandwich construction, bonding carbon fibre skins onto an ultra-strong and light Rohm core material, Rohacell. These cones operate as pure piston devices to well beyond their required frequency range and this

is reflected in faster energy decay.



These drivers can kick

hard, and their exceptional capability was reflected in an articulate sound that delivered bass percussion with a distinctive precision.

Common to both speakers is the separated upper deck,



comprising that distinctive

gloss-black spherical-teardrop head for the midrange driver, surmounted by the Nautilus style bullet tweeter assembly.

The head is built from a rigid, highly damped mineral polymer with very low resonant coloration, and is partly decoupled from the bass enclosure to avoid unwanted vibrations from either mid or bass sections from interacting with each other. If this should occur, coloration would increase and a resulting unwanted form of mechanical jitter could reduce clarity. The head interior supplies acoustical back



► wave absorption through a sculpted, tapered line. The midrange driver continues B&W's woven Kevlar cone tradition, and has undergone further development in the fine-tuning of the edge termination of the cone for improved energy decay properties. In addition, the driver itself is gel-decoupled from the head enclosure. The tweeter is further decoupled from the mid unit at a very low frequency (around 10Hz) this pioneered by Naim and Roksan, via an anti-vibration mount.



A true three-way design, the crossover points are nominally set at 300Hz and 4kHz. Connections are via twin, heavy duty, palladium-plated copper terminal pairs arranged for bi-wiring, and are conveniently situated on the massive plinth at floor level. However, concerning this plinth, the sharp metal edges of its decorative alloy top plate might be thought too aggressive for small humans. Huge, floor-coupling cone feet are provided to avoid secondary resonances, and these speakers bed into your floor quite quickly! The accessory pack for this loudspeaker is impressive in its own right.

After some moderate experimentation, locations very close to those I normally use for my resident Avalon Diamonds provided optimal balance between uniform extended bass and fine imaging. By absolute standards the 800D has a full bass, suited to larger rooms and spaces, and might

be considered too rich in smaller rooms of rigid brick or concrete construction.

The bass is genuinely uniform and extended, and fully voiced right to the lowest available frequencies. In this sense the bass may be described as neutral, lacking particular emphasis, and like the Avalon seems to avoid any phasey quality or boom despite the reflex ported design. Other recent designs with this attractive low frequency character are the Krell

Resolution One and the Sonus Faber Stradivari Homage.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that all use heavy double 10inch bass units in generous enclosure volumes.

Significantly, some of the gain in performance, particularly the bass, owes something to the tweeter improvement. Certainly the adoption of the diamond dome has spurred on the designers who have worked harder on all elements, but there is another side to this. Our perception of bass quality, its precision and instrumental differentiation, is strongly based on the correct representation of harmonics. For bass percussion these reach well into the treble band. Stanley Clarke's bass guitar doesn't sound good at all when a tweeter is absent. Thus a genuinely better, clearer tweeter may well improve the bass as a whole.

When listening below the main mid-treble axis, the sound lacks some necessary bite and speed, and given the considerable height, the front spikes might need adjusting until the axis is tilted downwards slightly towards the head of a listener seated in a normal comfy chair.

While I could not explore the last 3dB of potential peak power handling capacity, I can confirm that the 800D remained effortless up to 450W, preserving its overall character and with prodigious bass power capacity. It did not go thin and hard towards maximum power; the speaker sounds so smooth that you're hardly aware when you arrive at a limit, here the onset of amplifier clipping.

Given the high current required for the bass section, it seemed logical to put the cables to the bass terminals first and use the bridge straps (which are of palladium plated copper) to the upper deck. But, when the alternative was tried, connecting the speaker cables directly to the mid/treble terminals and using the straps to the bass section, the gain in clarity, dynamics and image depth spoke well for the speaker's intrinsically high mid/treble resolution.

While you might well be fearful of injuring those ultra brittle diamond tweeter domes, formed as thin as a sheet of paper, the gain in micro dynamics, ►



The Driving System:

Naim CDS3 and Marantz CD-7 CD players
Linn LP12, Naim ARO, Koetsu RSII LP player

XTC Pre 2 pre-amp
conrad-johnson ACT-2 pre-amplifier
conrad-johnson 350SA power amplifier

Finite Elemente Pagode sound tables
Harmonics feet

Transparent Reference XL and Cardas Golden
Reference cables

► smoothness and resolution when their magnetically located grilles are removed is well worthwhile, and after hearing this change I never went back. (Do carefully replace the grilles after listening, to avoid accidents.) Though the speaker's appearance is improved with all its grilles in place, the sound is clearly better with them all left off: no change then from the majority of high quality loudspeakers.

Confirmed by the lab tests, this speaker has lower than average distortion, and some listeners may interpret this as a lack of aggression and attack, for example with rim shots and similar sounds. For those unaccustomed to the lower fatigue and greater clarity possible with a low distortion speaker, a design like the 800D may require a little acclimatisation, but it is well worth the effort. The 800D sounds full bodied, classically balanced and creamy, and has silky, grainless high frequencies. When working with natural sources, you are simply not aware that a tweeter is working here, so natural is its character, and so well blended its contribution to the midrange.

It has an ability to produce sound-stages on a large scale, well defined for width and depth, with natural perspectives and good placement of phantom images, and with a fine recovery of

recorded ambience and reverberation. A classical symphony orchestra is reproduced with substantial realism and convincing weight and timbre.

Some might consider that speed and rhythm errs on the polite side for jazz and rock material. However, this is largely rescued by that fast, impactful and dynamic bass, which is tuneful and expressive, and capable of explosive power when required. Vocals are not projected forward of the sound stage – indeed rather the reverse – but they're nicely articulate and convey much of the character of the artist, while the sense of being present at a performance adds greatly to the whole. With some material, such as Paul Simon's 'Rhythm of the Saints', recovering a sufficient sense of presence required a higher than usual volume setting.

The ability to play really loud is an obvious bonus with rock material, as attack and projection will increase progressively with level, though this speaker can never be made to 'shout'. By contrast the Avalons have a natural dynamic window in which they are exquisitely expressive, open and resolved, but if driven substantially beyond what might be regarded as 'natural' levels, that inner core of quality becomes increasingly eroded.

While the 800D is quite upbeat, quick on its feet, and certainly rock capable, its presentation is a little laid back, with a hint of Home Counties politeness. Conversely it seemed really at home with full scale orchestral recordings, performing well on the original Slatkin version of Mahler 2 for Telarc, for example, albeit with more distant violins than usual, and was even better on the more brilliant sounding Decca Montreal series of releases conducted by Dutoit.

I suspected that this loudspeaker would favour the more forward sound of CD sources, but was wrong. LP replay sounded free and easy with this B&W, nicely matching the Koetsu RSII

used with the very capable Aesthetix Rhea triode phono stage. Creamy, even voluptuous, vinyl replay showed no loss of involvement or innate tempo. Ricki Lee Jones' delightful 'Pirates' was particularly effective, the trusty Linn LP12/Naim ARO combo pointing out the manifest weaknesses of the CD version that was clearly not from Warner's best sound quality period.

In my room loudspeaker coloration was quite low – indeed, negligible from a tweeter that clearly ranks with the world's finest. This excellence might have pointed up a mild 'thickening' present in the lower midrange, with a hint of well-damped 'woven cone' sound, while the bass was a little 'woody' at times. For example, it was not quite as self-effacing as the Sonus Faber Stradivarius, and showed a mild tonal emphasis in the bass harmonic register, say 100Hz to 150Hz. However, given the generally high accuracy and uniformity of the 800D's low frequency range, this could well be a room specific effect. Taken overall, coloration levels are low enough not to present a problem.

Its evenhanded approach to all kinds of music is one aspect of its performance which encourages extended listening. The inherently high resolution, presented with some subtlety and delicacy, provides continued pleasure and reward. It makes a friend of your ears, caresses and beguiles them, and as you adjust to its particular accent you appreciate the layers of detail resolved, the calm inner focus, and the well-balanced timbre.

The 800D might have less appeal for those accustomed to a more excitable 'Hollywood' sound, oft presented with more razzamatazz, more obvious dynamics and attack, and it is also clearly more restrained than some high efficiency single driver loudspeakers. (realistically, if scaled against impedance, the 800D's sensitivity actually rates only

▶ around 86dB per real watt, so absolute efficiency is not particularly high.)

However, throughout the review period I continued to appreciate its inner strength and poise, its sheer listenability, and the overall scale and power of a speaker that clearly represents something of an iron fist in a velvet glove.

Lab test

Too heavy to move to a free-field location, appropriate in-room techniques were used instead to gain an idea of this speaker's technical performance. A high 90dB sensitivity is claimed (for 2.83volts, which represents one Watt into an 8 ohm load), and our review samples actually measured 90.5dB. B&W quotes a very good low frequency extension to 25Hz, and by using nearfield summation techniques I'd consider this accurate. This speaker has a truly extended low bass response, while the overall frequency range is also well tuned. Loudspeakers often have an asymmetric low frequency alignment in which the bass port has a skewed, over-wide output: not so the 800D, where the port shows a clean, symmetrical 27Hz contribution, free of secondary resonances and capable of really high power output.

The -6dB points for frequency range were measured at 25Hz and 25kHz, and met fine +/-3dB limits from 30Hz to 20kHz. Smooth on-axis output was present right up to my measurement limit of 40kHz. A spatial averaging method was used to assess how the complex output from the speaker sums with the listening room, and the 800D achieved a commendably uniform +/-4dB from 20Hz to 12kHz. A natural roll-off occurs beyond 12kHz as expected from this tweeter size, and there are no stray peaks in the treble.

This spatial, room coupled result indicates a strong and well-extended

bass plus a very smooth, peak-free mid-band and treble. These combine with a natural looking overall tonal balance, albeit with a mild loss of energy evident around 2.5kHz to 3kHz. This could be expected to 'soften' percussive sounds - rim shots, wood block and the like - but conversely may also reduce listening fatigue and impart an impression of greater spaciousness.

Our introduction included some discussion of low impedance loads. In fact the 800D measured a very



low 2.8 ohms at just one point, 110Hz, which is pretty much the bass power peak for program material. If fed its full rated power, the speaker will momentarily draw no less than 45 amps peak at this frequency. Given that this is a seriously capable loudspeaker, a commensurately fine and current-capable power amplifier is strongly recommended. To achieve the bass slam that is

certainly possible from this design, carefully selected low resistance cable is advised, say below 0.15 ohm for the whole loop.

Good off-axis frequency responses really help create stable stereo imaging and generate effective imagery beyond the central sweet spot. Considering the vertical axis or azimuth, this tall speaker is best heard on or slightly above the mid-treble axis. Consequently, it should be down tilted by about 5 degrees. Measured below axis there is an increasing dip near 3kHz, tending to further soften the sound.

Off-axis in the lateral plane, the measuring microphone found that the mid-band was very well maintained up to 1.5kHz, again with a mild energy dip around 2.5kHz. At high frequencies the 25mm tweeter size inevitably falls away above 10kHz, particularly since it is a pure piston. So at 45 degrees off axis, it has fallen by 12dB at 15kHz; conversely at 30 degree off-axis, there is still significant output at 20kHz, registering -6dB.

The off-axis responses are therefore generally very good.

With careful referencing of both axial, and the near off-axis responses, the 800D is seen to have a fine tonal balance, with the main frequency range from 80Hz to 20kHz aligning to a tight +/-2dB tolerance.

This is quite a feat in view of the first-order crossover chosen for the treble section.

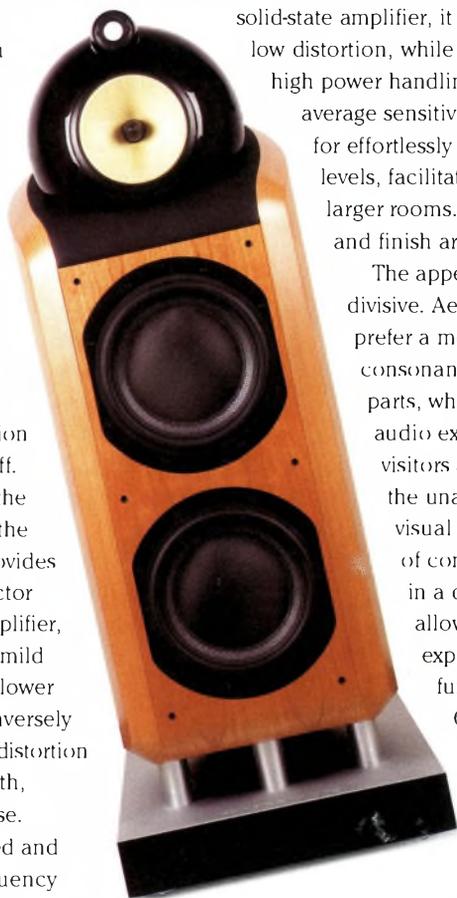
From normal up to quite high listening levels, distortion sounded genuinely low, and measurements confirm this. For example, spot checks from 500Hz to 5kHz, at quite a high 92dB spl, provided outstandingly low distortion levels of 0.08 to 0.03%, whereas 0.2 to 0.3% is typical for the industry. No wonder it sounded so clean! ▶

► Higher levels provoke an understandable increase to more normal distortion results, and for 102dB at 1kHz it measures a few per cent – not out of the ordinary, but this is already very loud. Distortion results are also very good through the bass region.

I examined the design for unwanted stored energy, both in terms of the acoustic output and that from the enclosure.

Confirming the excellent research done by B&W in this area, both were first rate, while that for the tweeter alone was quite clearly state of the art. All that attention to detail and the sophisticated cabinet construction has clearly paid off.

Summarising the technical results, the 800D certainly provides a difficult load factor for the driving amplifier, and also shows a mild energy dip in the lower treble output. Conversely it enjoys very low distortion and a wide, smooth, frequency response. That fully extended and powerful low-frequency range is perfectly complemented by the exceptionally pure piston tweeter, completely free from resonance to well beyond the operating range. Sensitivity is high; this speaker will play loud and can absorb huge power as and when required. In terms of prime issues of frequency response and avoidance of unwanted resonances, the 800D is a neutral and high accuracy transducer.



Conclusion

There is no 'you must buy' conclusion here, rather I would advise a careful consideration of the facts. First, the 800D represents fine engineering value despite its audiophile pricing. It's a technically accomplished design with a neutral and well-extended, powerful bass, a clean midrange, and a state of the art tweeter. While it is unusually difficult to drive and requires a very current capable, solid-state amplifier, it also has low distortion, while the very high power handling and above average sensitivity provides for effortlessly high sound levels, facilitating use in larger rooms. Build quality and finish are first rate.

The appearance proved divisive. Aesthetes may prefer a more coherent, consonant assembly of parts, whereas more audio experienced visitors appreciated the unambiguous visual differentiation of components, in a design that allows the expression of function as form.

On first sight our window cleaner commented on the 'nice bit of wood' for the bass enclosure, but 'shame about the black plastic lump on the top'!

The sound quality is generally very good, exceptional in the bass and treble and satisfying in the mid. It misses the target of absolute excellence by just a small margin, whereby a little more transparency, air and image depth is known to be possible for this class of speaker. That sense of mild restraint, where

musical transients are not quite explosive enough and rim shots are mildly dulled, will depend on the partnering system, and particular idiosyncrasies of inner balance.

Conversely this speaker is accomplished, sweet, upbeat, quite well timed, exceptionally low in fatigue, well resolved, and remarkably even handed with all kinds of music and sources. Large scale, well-layered sound stages are created with appropriate material. I enjoyed my several weeks with this enduringly powerful design. It proved to be a gentle giant, and I learned to appreciate its friendly, inherently musical nature. Without question it joins the select group of recommendable speakers in its class, which in sonic terms resides well above the 800Ds' asking price.

This is a much more successful loudspeaker than its predecessor, the N800 which I have experienced at home if not for review. But the improvements are about much more than just the new tweeter. Whilst you can't argue with the gains wrought within the diamond driver's range, one can't help feeling that its action as a catalyst in improving or reconsidering the rest of the design might have been musically even more important. While the older model sounded overly dry and contained, and required very hard driving, the new is somehow set free, and is clearer, faster and more expressive at all power levels. While the older model could sound disjointed despite its considerable, specific strengths, the new has managed to take those strengths and bind them into a single, musically cohesive whole. The results speak for themselves, just don't be too quick to decide what produced them...



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The Audio Research Reference 3 Line-Stage and PH7 Phono-Stage

by Roy Gregory

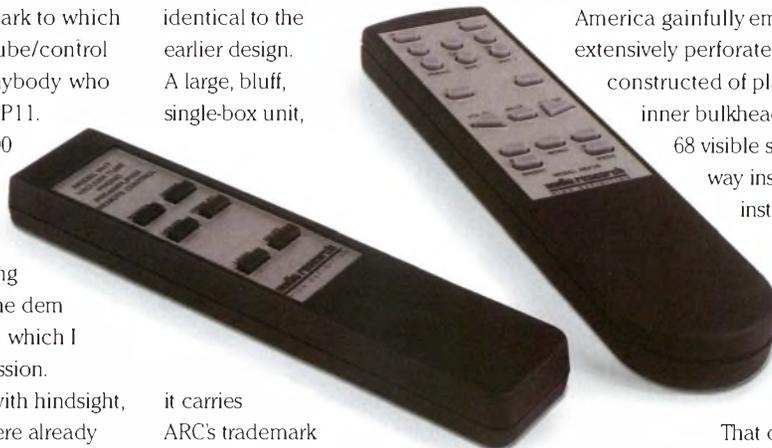
When Audio Research first really entered the consciousness of British audiophiles, it was as a manufacturer of valve (or tube as they would have it) pre-amplifiers. Whilst the venerable D79 power amp and various pre-amps had been around for a while, it was the SP8 and then the SP11 that firmly established the brand's credentials on this side of the pond. Indeed, for a while they stood Colossus like astride the high-end, the pre-amp benchmark to which all pretenders aspired, a tube/control equivalent to the LP12. Anybody who was anybody wanted an SP11. Of course, at just over £5000 nearly 20 years ago, wanting and owning were two different things, but just the pleasure of using the 11 on a daily basis in the dem rooms of the audio store in which I worked left a lasting impression.

Nothing lasts forever; with hindsight, the seeds of destruction were already sprouting in the shape of products that were to supercede the Audio Research giants. In truth, those emergent products and technologies more often than not represented an extension of performance in a particular rather than a general sense and two decades later we are re-learning the value of overall balance in audio reproduction. Nor were ARC themselves immune to the tendency, with the SP9, SP15, M300 and D125 all eschewing the holistic sound of the SP11 in search of greater resolution and transparency. It's been a long road but all the indicators suggest that Audio Research are back...

Firstly, there are the CD players; apparently modest machines whose outward simplicity conceal a musically convincing and authoritative perform-

ance. Secondly, on a recent trip to the states I found Audio Research components cropping up in manufacturers' reference systems once again, predominantly the Reference 3 pre-amplifier. Thirdly (and on a personal note) there's the new PH7 phono-stage – and I'm ever a sucker for a fancy phono-stage.

Spiritual and aesthetic descendant of the Reference 2, the Reference 3 is outwardly almost identical to the earlier design. A large, bluff, single-box unit,



it carries ARC's trademark fascia, grab-handles and a pair of their ovoid, rotary controls, in this instance flanking a huge, green LCD display that informs the listener of status, level, etc. It also offers balanced input and output options, although the all-tube audio circuitry does not employ a fully complementary topology. In all, there are seven line-level inputs (including a processor input with unity gain) a record and two main outputs, all switchable between balanced and single-ended connection. Somewhat bizarrely, the IEC connection is of the 20 Amp variety. Once again, in traditional ARC style, appearance is workmanlike and practical rather than stylish, with just a hint of 1950's comms gear to provide continuity with the company's previous designs (or evidence of a chronic lack

of imagination, depending on your point of view). I'd never describe ARC kit as attractive, but the resonance with the SP11 is somehow reassuring. Likewise, the front-panel is also available in black, but the traditionalist in me says that ordering one in that finish would be a bit like buying a yellow Ferrari...

The Ref 3's casework seems like a single-handed attempt to keep the machine screw manufacturers of America gainfully employed. The extensively perforated exterior is constructed of plates attached to inner bulkheads by no fewer than 68 visible screws. Fight your way inside (essential to install the tubes) and you'll discover neatly compartmentalized circuitry, based on vertically mounted PCBs.

That of course disposes the tubes horizontally (a subject of some debate). The audio circuit employs four 6H30P twin triodes, the same type used in c-j's ACT2, with a further 6H30P and a 6550C providing power-supply regulation. The input stage is arranged as a long-tailed pair to accommodate both the balanced and single-ended connections, whilst overall gain is 12dB in balanced mode and 6dB single-ended. The audio valves each come equipped with a pair of rubber damping rings around their elongated envelope, another sensible step.

The remote control is a compact plastic device that thankfully eschews the high-end penchant for handsets so heavy that mere mortals can't actually pick them up. ARC's offering might not impress your friends with its milled ▶

▶ from solid casing, but it is a model of practicality. Not over populated with useless functions, buttons are well separated and sensibly arranged making this one of the better efforts in a category I normally ignore. The Ref 3 remote actually made it into service, which is praise indeed. As well as the obvious volume and source switching options, it also offers balance, phase invert, mono and a six-step display brightness function. Finally, there's a button labeled 'Hours' that informs you just how long you've been running the current set of tubes.

Whilst ARC's claims for the Ref 3 are lodged firmly in its sonic performance, they isolate a significant drop in noise floor and increase in bandwidth as key factors in its advance over their previous designs, both criteria that can be readily measured on the test bench and traditional Achilles heels of valve designs. Indeed, in use the Ref 3 proved ghostly quiet, a fact that clearly underpinned its performance.

One big difference between the Reference 3 and the legendary SP11 is the absence of a phono-stage in the former (at which point some wags might point out that the medium-gain option fitted to the 11 barely qualifies either). Instead, ARC have chosen to offer a stand-alone device in the shape of the PH7, allowing owners to decide just how committed they are to the vinyl medium. Given that moving-coil output levels are way below the point where tubes are comfortable operating, Audio Research have sensibly opted for a j-fet input stage, feeding four 6922 twin-triodes. HT for the valves is tube regulated by a trio of 6H30s. However, even with the j-fets in the circuit, overall gain is only 57.5dB, low when compared to many solid-state designs. Low enough in fact to allow the company to describe the PH7 as both

MM and MC compatible. Ahhh, the shades of the past live on. Bear in mind also that the available gain will drop if you load down the input impedance. This is user adjustable through five sensibly spread values, ranging from 100 Ohms to the obligatory 47K, all via the remote handset (although the remote function is arguably the one area in both products where the "what if" factor has out-run actual practicality).



Inputs and outputs are single-ended only, with front-panel controls for mute, mono and adjusting the load. The remote also offers the same display and hours functions found on the Ref 3.

The Audio Research units were used in what has become a very stable set-up at home. The front-ends were the Kuzma Stabi XL/Airline/Lyra Titan and the Wadia 861SE, while power was supplied by the Hovland RADIA and sound by the Nola Pegasus speakers. Cabling was Nordost Valhalla throughout, for signal and mains. Resident line and phono-stages constitute the TEAD Groove Plus, Vibe (with the latest – and dramatically improved – Pulse 2 power supply) and the Lyra Connoisseur 4-2L SE line-stage. That's placing the bar pretty high! Of course, that's also exactly the kind of competition that these two ARC products will face out there in the

market place, but that doesn't make the prospect any less daunting.

Reference 3 line-stage

From the very first notes, two things were immediately apparent: ARC's claims regarding noise floor are clearly reflected in the sound of the Ref 3, and the resulting performance places it clearly in the front rank of available line-stages. Whilst I never had the Ref 2 at home in any of its iterations, I heard it in many other systems and nothing suggested musical performance even approaching what's

delivered by its newer sibling. The key word is of course 'musical' and as is so often the case with pre-amplification, it's not just a question of how much information or energy is delivered, but how much sense the unit makes of it. That's where the noise floor proves so significant.

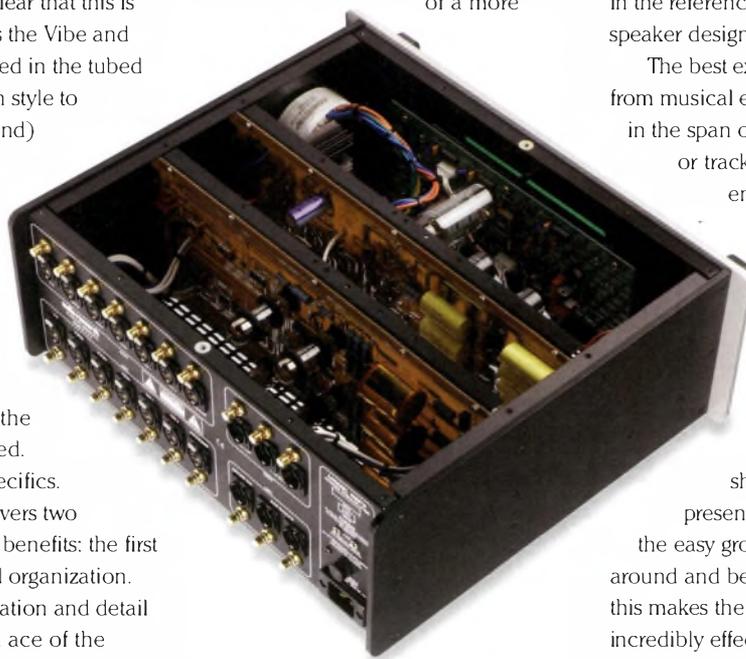
The first thing to remember is that this is a tube circuit and noise has always been their Achilles heel. Well, in some respects the Ref 3 is no different, compared to the best of its solid-state peers – but that it gets so close to them is impressive indeed. The second is that, if you go back more than five years, really good pre-amps were the rarest of breeds, which perhaps accounts for the recent blossoming of exceptional

▶ performers in the category. Back then, the Ref 3 would have been head and shoulders above the opposition; now, it's up there with the best, but with no clear winner, which can lead to a distorted response when it comes to reviews. In order to define differences and characteristics, it's essential to run close comparisons between the various units and then describe them. The resultant critique can give the impression of shredding a product when what it's actually doing is defining the subtlest of differences. Let's be clear that this is the case here. As well as the Vibe and Connoisseur, I also drafted in the tubed Herron VTSP-2 (closer in style to the Ref 3 than the Hovland) and ran the closest of comparisons. Yet in some respects the very fact that this is necessary (and worthwhile) indicates just how closely matched these products are. As I said, the Ref 3 is front rank indeed.

Now, back to the specifics. That low noise-floor delivers two immediate and obvious benefits: the first is resolution, the second organization. In terms of sheer information and detail the Ref 3 gets within an ace of the standard setting Connoisseur, while the firmness of its foundation brings phenomenal stability and coherence to its presentation. It can't match the stark clarity, the inky black contrast delivered by the Vibe, against which individual instruments and sound sources are focused pin sharp and against which they are so clearly separated. Instead there's a subtle graying haze that populates the acoustic space. The information is there, just not quite as clearly or easily resolved – at least until you stop the comparisons and go back to simply enjoying the music, when it ceases to be an issue.

The other area in which the ARC can sound a little exposed by the

competition is in terms of bass definition, transparency and texture. Here, the Connoisseur, with its amazing definition of dynamic strata and harmonic texture, leaves the Ref 3 sounding rounded and a bit woolly. And here again, listening in isolation, it's neither worrying nor intrusive. Interestingly, I tried a range of different support solutions underneath the ARC, but whilst I could improve transparency, focus and dynamic definition, those changes always came at the expense of a more



disjointed sense of musical flow and coherence. Ultimately I'll take the standard feet thanks.

However, these two aspects to the Audio Research, combined with its strengths, define its sound. Where the Ref 3 really scores is in terms of accurately reflecting the scale and extent of the soundstage and separating the instruments upon it. That slight haze I referred to almost helps to give a palpable sense of the enclosed acoustic space, which combined with the less immediate dynamic presentation (relative to the Vibe or Connoisseur) produces a classic Row G perspective,

with all the spatial coherence and holistic, organic qualities that suggests. The Audio Research doesn't sit you front and centre; instead you're slightly further back but with an easier overview of the orchestra as a whole. And the separation? That comes from the unit's astonishing neutrality, a self-effacing quality that lends instruments scale, dimensionality and individual tonal character, and one that it's definitely carried over from its predecessors. It's no surprise to see this product used in the reference systems of so many speaker designers.

The best explanation always comes from musical example and quite often in the span of a review a single disc or track steps forward to

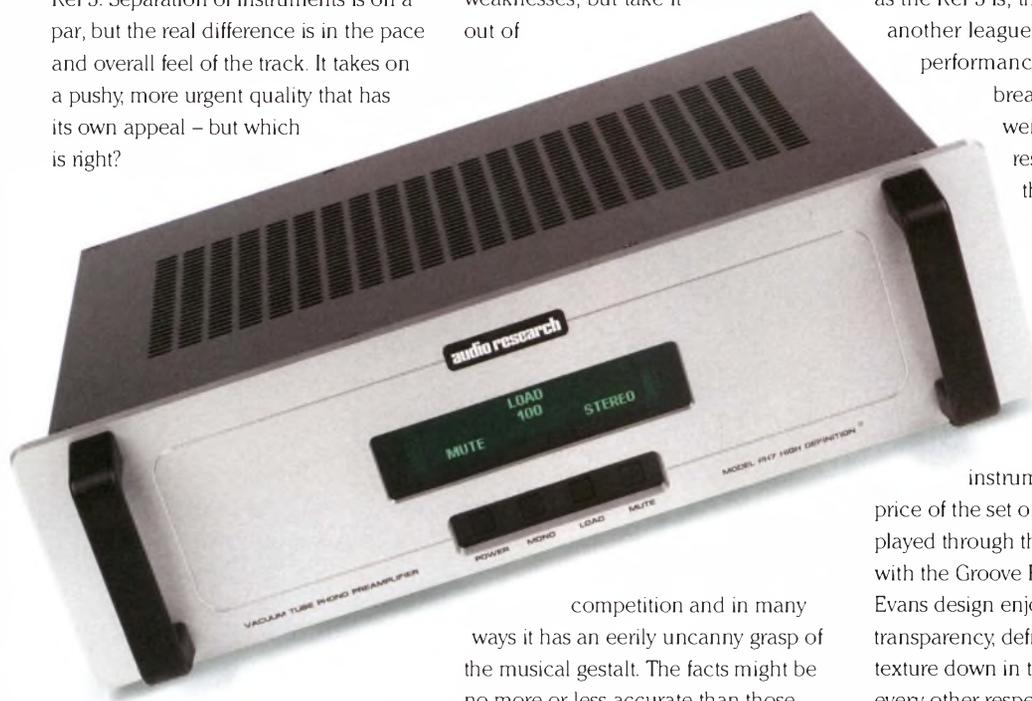
encapsulate a product's strengths or character.

In this case it was Art Pepper's *Smack Up* (the Analogue Productions Gold CD, CAPJ 012). Track 2, the laid back groove of 'Las Cuevas De Mario'

shows the Ref 3's relaxed presentation as it latches onto the easy groove. There's lots of space around and between the players and this makes the instrumental interplay incredibly effective and easy to follow. Despite the relaxed tempo, the track never wanders or loses interest, the tempo and subtle shifts within it, perfectly captured. And if the distance to the band has the effect of robbing the double bass of some of the tactile thrum and texture that I'm used to, the pitch and progress of its notes is never in doubt. On the other hand the piano is super solid, stable and weighty, with a real sense of its complexity and restrained power. So often the weakness that cracks the illusion, the ARC does piano in general superbly well and in this instance really captures the controlled genius of the playing. The brass instrument are tonally spot on, making picking their

► contributions in chorus simplicity itself, while the whole track has an inner life and coherence that binds it into a single, superb whole.

In contrast, playing the same track on the Herron delivers a blacker background, more immediacy and a more insistent quality from the rhythm section. The bass is tactile but the piano has lost that sonorous complexity and natural weight that made it so appealing on the Ref 3. Separation of instruments is on a par, but the real difference is in the pace and overall feel of the track. It takes on a pushy, more urgent quality that has its own appeal – but which is right?



The answer actually lies with the first track, the up-tempo title tune. A frenetic collision of contrasting input, you might assume that it would play into the hands of the Herron, but whilst that unit's presentation is undoubtedly exciting and full of energy, the Ref 3 brings a calm and easy separation to the piece that produces order out of impending chaos, without robbing the track of energy or the sense of pace. It's this quality that really underlines what the Ref 3 is all about; sorting the elements in music but maintaining their relationship. Structures are retained intact and beautifully fleshed out, the trade-off being some excitement and immediacy in return

for the enticing, seductively holistic appeal that results. Ultimately, you can criticise its absolute dynamic range and discrimination, areas in which the Connoisseur reigns supreme; you can comment on its level of transparency or focus; but these are simply aspects and the ARC needs to be understood as a whole. The exact shape it brings to proceedings is a product of its combination of strengths and weaknesses, but take it out of

competition and in many ways it has an eerily uncanny grasp of the musical gestalt. The facts might be no more or less accurate than those presented by the other units here, but the sense of the musical performance matches all but the Connoisseur in this group and the Zanden in recent experience. And at this level we're talking differences that will be defined entirely by personal preference.

The PH7 phono-stage

I ran the Audio Research phono-stage with both the Ref 3 and Connoisseur line-stages. It was perfectly happy with the solid-state unit, but there was no denying the synergy that existed with the Ref 3, where the sonic characters of the two units blended seamlessly to produce a result that was even greater than the sum of the considerable parts. Run with

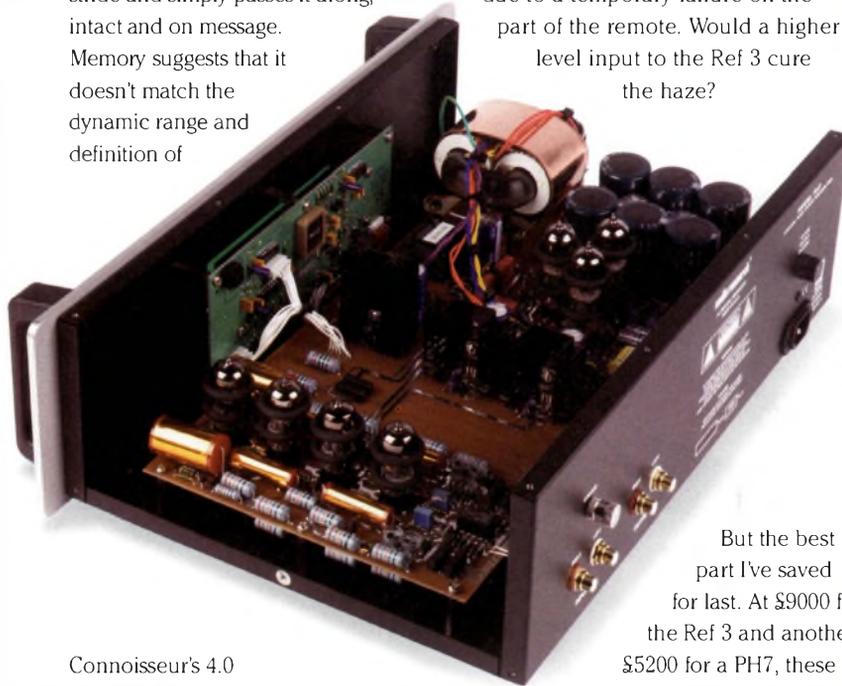
the Lyra Titan, gain was just about acceptable, although it meant wicking the volume up to 82 as opposed to 63 for the same level via the Groove Plus. I played with the loading and was unsurprised to discover a marked preference for the 100 Ohm value with the Lyra cartridge.

So much for set-up and partnering elements, the sound of the PH7 is what counts and it's a stunner. Impressive as the Ref 3 is, the phono-stage is in another league. Used together their performance on piano is simply breathtaking, the sheer weight, power and resonant complexity of the barely teamed beast brought fully to life. The newly arrived Speakers Corner re-issue of the Mercury *Pictures...* includes a second disc of Janis playing the arrangement for solo instrument and it's worth the

price of the set on its own, especially played through the ARCs. Comparisons with the Groove Plus reveal that the Tom Evans design enjoys slightly greater bass transparency, definition and harmonic texture down in the engine room, but in every other respect the PH7 is superior – and long term readers will know that that is praise indeed. The ARC is more fluid, with better phrasing and pacing, more accurate harmonic structures and far greater expressive range. The sophistication of its temporal dimension, the placement and arrangement of notes is supremely natural. Compared directly, somewhat astonishingly, the PH7 leaves the Groove sounding mechanical and dimensionally flat, slightly forced and graceless.

Indeed, stately grace is the ARC's forte. Whilst it projects a huge sound-stage and can deliver explosive dynamic swings of impressive solidity when required, it's the ability to do so without ever sounding pushed or flustered ►

▶ that really impresses. Seemingly, nothing disturbs its impeccable manners whilst it still retains the fullest range of expression. Playing the orchestral version of *Pictures...* really brings that home, but then so to does *Transformer, Way Out Basie* or Alison Krause. The PH7 takes whatever you throw at it in its stride and simply passes it along, intact and on message. Memory suggests that it doesn't match the dynamic range and definition of



important low-noise performance and the results are sublime. This I can't wait to hear with the Koetsu Jade Platinum, a natural partnership if ever there was one, and a fascinating counterpoint to the Kondo analogue replay chain. Furthermore, the Wadia 861SE is set to a lower output, locked due to a temporary failure on the part of the remote. Would a higher level input to the Ref 3 cure the haze?

But the best part I've saved for last. At £9000 for the Ref 3 and another £5200 for a PH7, these products are far from cheap, until you consider the

competition. Both compare extremely favourably with some seriously exotic and expensive alternatives and neither can be readily outperformed for less money – particularly the PH7. You may find products that handle one aspect of musical reproduction or another better than these ARC designs. Likewise the Audio Research option will offer its own strengths when it comes to staging, dimensionality and overall coherence. But few alternatives will be better the Ref 3 and PH7 when it comes to sheer musical expression and involvement. With the Koetsu now back in play, along with ARC's own Ref 210 monoblocks, believe me there's more - much more to say on this particular score. Meanwhile it's, "Welcome back to where you belong".

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Reference 3

Type:	Vacuum tube line-stage
Valve Complement:	6x 6H30P 1x 6550C
Inputs:	7x line-level (balanced XLR or single-ended RCA) (balanced XLR or single-ended RCA)
Input Impedance:	120 kOhms (balanced) 60 kOhms (single-ended)
Gain:	11.6 dB (balanced) 5.8 dB (single-ended) 0 dB (unity-gain on Processor input)
Outputs:	2x main outputs (balanced XLR or single-ended RCA) 1x tape out (balanced XLR or single-ended RCA)
Output Impedance:	600 Ohms (balanced) 300 Ohms (single-ended)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	480 x 178 x 394mm
Weight:	13.5 kg
Finishes:	Silver or black (if you must!)
Price:	£8998

PH 7

Type:	Hybrid J-fet/tube phono-stage
Tube Complement:	4x 6922 3x 6H30 regulators
Inputs:	1pr single-ended RCA
Input Impedances:	100, 200 or 500 Ohms, 1 or 47 kOhms
Capacitive Loading:	200 pf
Gain:	57.5 dB
Maximum Input Level:	70 mV
Outputs:	1pr single-ended RCA
Output Impedance:	200 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	480 x 132 x 305mm
Weight:	6.8 kg
Finishes:	Silver or black (if you must!)
Price:	£5200

UK Distributor:

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

Manufacturer:

Audio Research Corporation
Net. www.audioresearch.com

Connoisseur's 4.0 (The 4-2 SE is coming soon) or its immediacy, but I suspect that if you prefer the ARC's more mid-hall perspective and richer, slightly more mellow tonality, then there's little to separate the units in terms of musical expression.

A parting shot of sorts...

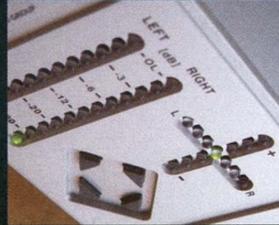
By now it should be apparent that I'm mightily impressed with these two units. The Ref 3 represents a genuine return to form for ARC; spiritual descendent of the pre-amps that propelled the brand to fame, it's finally also a more than worthy successor, restoring the company to a front-rank position when it comes to pre-amp performance.

The PH7 takes a step beyond even the Ref 3's impressive standards. ARC have played the low-gain card to perfection in order to achieve the all





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conrad-johnson PV15 Pre-amplifier (with a little help from the MV60SE...)

by Alan Sircom

Until recently, conrad-johnson had a stunning little entry-level pre-amplifier in the line-up – the PV10. It was entirely at odds with current thinking, eschewing even a remote control, but it was pretty and it was cheap and it sounded very good. All good things must come to an end, however and last year, the PV10 (in its final PV10B guise) finally went to the Big Valve Seat In The Sky, along with much of the then c-j range.

The PV15 is not quite a replacement for the PV10, but it is the current entry point to c-j valve pre-amplification. Shockingly, it does come with remote control and even has LED volume read-outs on the front panel. Is nothing sacred?

This is a line-level pre-amplifier in its standard guise (although unusually, there is an optional phono stage) designed from scratch to be remotely operated, and to slot seamlessly into a home cinema system if required. It has five line inputs (four if you use the phono stage) – all single-ended phonos – plus a tape/equaliser loop and a unity-gain locked Theatre loop for wiring in a multi-channel processor. The whole source handling and gain control stage is micro-processor controlled, and fully isolated from the audio stages.

Like all the best c-j pre-amps, the PV15's line-stage is an entirely zero feedback design. The circuit is effectively built around two M8080 single-ended double triode tubes – the first one being the gain stage, the other a direct-coupled buffer stage. This provides low output impedance for driving difficult cable and power amp loads. This is a deceptively simple circuit that might take some getting used to, especially

for those more familiar with multi-component, multi-tube designs.

The optional phono stage brings an additional necessary complexity to the circuit. No simple solid-state module, the circuit has two triode amplifier stages for voltage gain. The signal is then passed through a precision passive network for RIAA frequency compensation. A direct-coupled buffer stage then isolates the phono-stage from external cables and processor-like components connected to the pre-amp's outputs. Like the rest of the PV15, the phono module circuit employs no negative feedback. Not bad for an optional stage... many standalone

phono pre-amps aren't this well specified. The module for the PV15 is available in either low (MM) or high (high or medium output MC) gain guise.

Once installed, the gain of the phono stage can be changed (low gain to high or high to low) by returning the unit to the distributor.

A single-ended single gain block valve pre-amplifier has an added bonus in terms of heat. It runs cooler than many high-power transistor pre-amps in reality, although the phono stage will add to the overall heat output of the PV15. This is why the top plate of the PV15 is remarkably free from vents, save for the back 5cm or so.

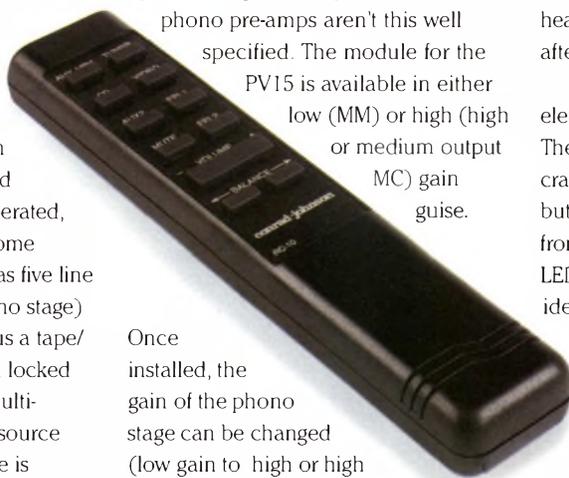
Given the emphasis placed on its remote functionality, the PV15 comes

with the dinkiest little remote you can find on a pre-amp. It's slightly wider than the two AAA batteries it needs to work and is a black plastic device about half of which is festooned with buttons. It looks like the sort of wand control used to operate slide projectors in the days when people used to operate slide projectors. It's fine for hi-fi, although something more substantial would be less likely to sink behind the sofa. Especially as it's the only way to control the pre-amp's channel balance. Adjustments to balance and volume are in 0.5dB steps – nice and linear, but this means there's a lot of travel from quiet to head-banging. Still, accuracy is king, after all.

There are three standard design elements to all c-j valve pre-amps, today. There's the gold front panel with black crackle finish case, the gold press buttons and the dark round hole in the front panel for the red numeric volume LEDs and the glowing model-number identifier in a heavily stylised font.

This is starting to look a bit old fashioned, it being a derivation of a design first started in the ART pre-amp a decade ago. There's a thin line between 'classic' and 'dated', and c-j's walking a tightrope here. That said, many still love the timeless quality of the design and too radical a change would disenfranchise the scores of happy c-j owners wanting to upgrade without tears.

The front panel is a minimalist's dream. There's a mute button on the right, volume up and down buttons. Then there are the five standard source buttons, selectors for source, EPL and 'Theater' modes, a power standby button, the volume display and



▶ that's it. Each button is clearly marked, although the markings aren't that big and the buttons are identical to one another, which can cause confusion to the uninitiated.

It's important to note that the PV15, like all current c-j pre-amps, inverts absolute phase. This can easily be compensated for by reversing the speaker terminals at the power amplifier. That said, if you use the PV15 with the Premier 350 power amp (which also inverts phase), use the speaker terminals as normal, as you've effectively re-inverted the inverted phase. Two 'wrongs' do make a 'right', after all.

Phase inversion notwithstanding, there is a natural partner for this pre-amp in the shape of the MV60SE power amplifier (\$2995). This takes the standard, EL34-based MV60 power amplifier and re-tubes it with Svetlana 6550Cs. Aside from a change in the bias voltage setting, the two amplifiers are functionally identical, but the difference between the two is striking. This is one of the high-end's true undiscovered masterpieces, one that belies its 60 watt rating. Perhaps it's too small, perhaps it's too cheap, perhaps it's because the MV60SE is eclipsed by bigger amps in the C-J line-up. Whatever, this amp deserves more attention than it gets. It's a deceptively powerful design with deep, beautifully defined bass, an extended, pristine treble and the sort of open midrange that makes transistor amp owners weep. Every time this amp hits my system, it sticks a smile on my face. Every time it leaves, the system takes a turn for the worse. If that ain't high praise, I don't know what is.

conrad-johnson pre-amps have a

distinct sound, which is changing with the times, but perhaps fortunately not as fast as some. It's a silken, filigree sound, full of depth and refinement. The change is that c-j's 2006 vintage is considerably more forward in the midrange than its predecessors and there is a hint of a lift in the treble which wasn't there before.

Why is it a fortunate thing that this is a gradual change?

Because, too many companies have changed their tune (literally) leaving their existing client base unhappy with the new sound.

Nevertheless, there has been an injection of pace to the sound through the PV15. The days of the slightly sloppy, rose-tinted, laid-back presentation of the PV10 are long gone; this is

up-beat, precise and rhythmically tight. If there is a trade-off, it's in the bottom end – where the PV10 was full and rich in the bass, the PV15 is distinctly tighter and drier. It's not bass light, as

deep bass notes are well-ordered, cavernously deep and visceral. But, don't expect the big, cuddly bass sound of old. This is where the learning curve hits its first toe.

And it really is a learning curve. You gradually become aware that the silken sound of the midrange now extends down to the bottom octaves, where before there was a slight change in audio texture, with a chunkier bass allied to the smooth mids and tops.

Now it's smooth all the way.

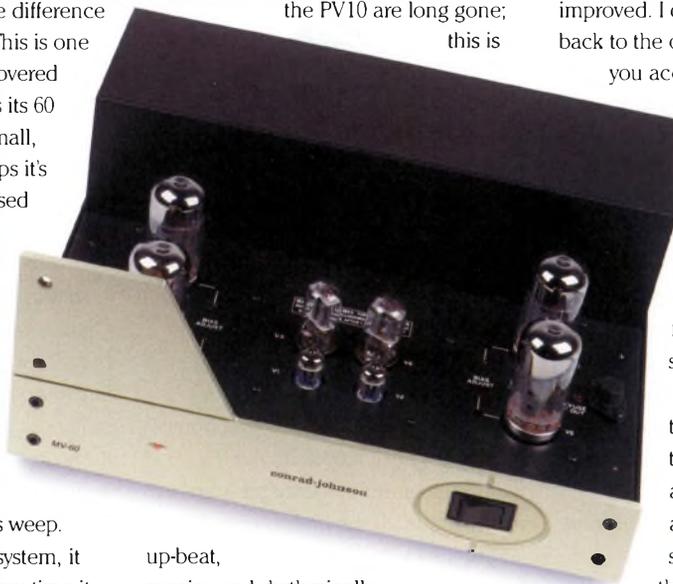
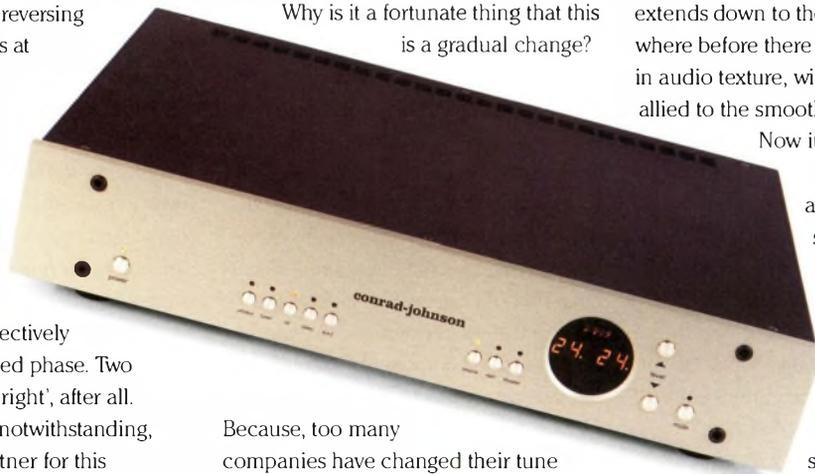
Paradoxically, although the PV15 seems at first listen to be lighter sounding than the previous generation of c-j pre-amps, it also has better solidity. There's a sense of structure and order to the bass which was

present in the previous models, but somehow not as precisely defined as the PV15. Here, sounds appear rooted in their three-dimensional space and the air around each instrument is greatly improved. I doubt there's much going back to the old PV10-style sound once you accustom yourself to the new

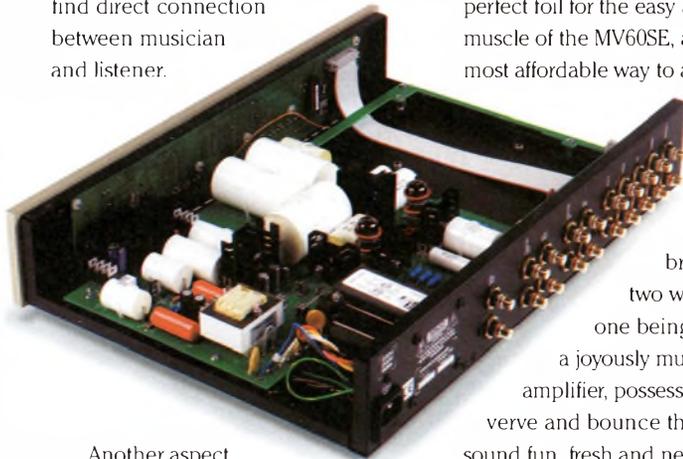
PV15 sound. That bigger bass sounds like excess fat once you've been through the acclimation process, while the PV15's added speed and creaminess from top to toe makes it a very, very seductive product.

What remains unchanged though is the beautiful depth to the soundstage, always a c-j trait. The imagery is attractively wide and has some stage height, but it's the image depth that really bonds you to the pre-amplifier.

And there's that 'creaminess'... a sense of sonic beauty that is rare at any price but will either leave you cold and ▶



▶ reaching for tighter, squeakier or bigger sounding amps, or have you hooked for life. There are discs that are made for this amplifier combination; the atmospheric, beautifully recorded *The Ghost of Tom Joad* by Bruce Springsteen springs to mind. Through the PV15/MV60SE combination, the close miked voice and subtle acoustic sounds in a naturally reverberant location doesn't just make a lot of sense, it gives you that hard to find direct connection between musician and listener.



Another aspect of the sound that would be hard to improve upon is the articulation of that midrange. It almost disappears, and what doesn't disappear sounds so rich and magical you kind of don't want it to disappear. Yes, this means the pre-amplifier isn't entirely neutral, there is a sweetening of mids and top, but it's such an attractive sweetening it's worth sacrificing some neutrality. That said, if your record collection begins and ends with the late Luther Vandross, this could pitch over into a touch of mid-range syrup. For most music, this just comes across as a bit of much-needed extra warmth in the system and nothing like the rosy glow of valve amps of old.

Part of the reason why this slight warming to the sound is benign is because of the excellent dynamic range, both in the macro and micro-dynamic fields. This, coupled with the good solidity of the sound, gives most music played through the pre-amp a palpable sense of being really 'there'. Those tiny

changes in dynamic range within the plucking of a guitar string or the sustain of a violin body can be clearly defined, but not at the expense of the greater dynamic information. This gets close to how the instruments sound in real life and – although the further up the high-end ladder you climb the generally better definition you'll find – the PV15 still has that high-end sheen; a patina of class.

All of which makes the PV15 the perfect foil for the easy authority and muscle of the MV60SE, as well as the most affordable way to avail yourself of

that amp's virtues.

Finally, a word to the 'valves cannot time'

brigade. Actually,

two words, the second

one being "... off". This is

a joyously musical pre-

amplifier, possessed of a natural

verve and bounce that makes music sound fun, fresh and new. Even old favourites that have been played and played spring back to life, which from experience is another sure sign of high-end products doing their funky stuff.

Yes, if the timing of a product exists simply to support the sales of early 1970s Funkadelic CDs, then there are pre-amps that deliver the goods in a more upbeat manner. But this is not all there is to timing in my opinion.

Where this pre-amp shines in a temporal standing is the interplay of musicians in a string quartet or in handling the complexity of Kraftwerk's difficult early experiments in tonality. Many pre-amps make these obscure early soundscapes (the tracks at the back end of *Autobahn*, for example) sound like incidental music to inexplicable 1970s Eastern European cartoons with characters that have names that sound like Ikea door handles. The PV15 brings out the humour and the precision that set Kraftwerk up for decades of leading-edge electronic noodling and

keep Ralf Hütter and Florian Schneider in bicycle parts to this day.

The PV15 enters a fast moving stream in hi-fi. There are a lot of extremely good pre-amplifiers at or around this price level and many of them are extremely competitive. From a purely material standing, the PV15 may not look like one of the big names. But this pre-amp has hidden charms. The PV15 brings much beautiful sound to the party and – although the rivals may have more features, inputs and functionality – this is a hard thing to match at the price. Like the MV60SE, I felt the loss of the PV15 more than usual, always a sign that there's something really right going on. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Vacuum tube pre-amplifier
Tube complement:	2 x M8080 (line stage) 3 x 12AX7 (PV15PH high); 2 x 12AX7 + 1 x 12AU7 (PV15PH low) phono stage
Inputs:	5x line-level 4 x line level + 1 phono (see text)
Processor and Theatre inputs	
Outputs:	2x main outputs
Processor and Theatre outputs	
Gain:	28.5 dB
Maximum output:	5.5 Vrms
Output Impedance:	less than 500 Ohms
Phase:	Phase inverting
Dimensions (WxHxD):	483 x 84 x 350mm
Total weight:	6.8kg
Prices –	
PV15:	£2800
Optional Phono Stage:	£800
MV60 SE:	£2995

UK Distributor:

Audiofreaks
Tel. (44)(0)208 948 4153
Net. www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Manufacturer:

conrad-johnson design inc.
Net. www.conradjohnson.com



The Melody SP3 Integrated Valve Amplifier

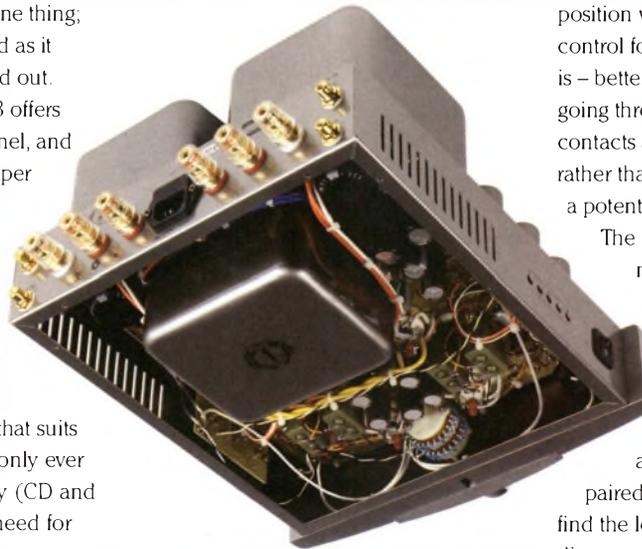
by Jimmy Hughes

What a gorgeous looking amplifier! That was my first reaction on taking the Melody SP3 from its box. It's so compact and beautifully styled, smart-looking and very well built, that I just assumed it probably emanated from China, but it's actually built and designed in Australia – just one of a range of Melody valve amplifiers that really look the business. But looking the business is one thing; would the SP3 sound as good as it looked? I couldn't wait to find out. Despite its small size, the SP3 offers a fairly robust 38W per channel, and certainly has an excellent paper specification.

It's a truly simple, minimalist design; just a power on/off switch, volume control, and an input selector switch to choose between two sets of inputs. Speaking personally, that suits me fine. For the most part I only ever listen to two sources anyway (CD and LP) and therefore have no need for rows and rows of inputs. There are no tape outputs by the way, and (needless to say) the two inputs offered are line-level only – there's no built-in phono-stage. The amp sits on three hard, pointed feet, which help ensure plenty of ventilation for the underside. It's also surprisingly (reassuringly?) heavy – all those transformers.

The SP3 has a lively forward sort of presentation. It sounds bright and energetic, with plenty of brilliance and immediacy. Warm and laid back it isn't. So, if you're expecting the clichéd smooth/rich valve sound, you'll be deeply disappointed. This amp sounds sharp and incisive, with excellent attack

and crisp detail. Yet, partly because it has a transformer-coupled output stage, the presentation remains smoothly integrated and clean. Bass is very firm and tight – unusually so for a valve amp. The bottom end is clean and extended, but not especially warm or voluminous. The overall impression is one of crisp attack and keen focussed detail.



Presumably, to keep costs down, the SP3 employs printed circuit boards, rather than being hard-wired like the more expensive Melody amplifiers. Build quality is very good though, and the finish is excellent – smart silver/grey hammer-crackle paint creating an attractive Post Modern Industrial sort of look. The volume control is a stepped resistive switch giving discrete increases in volume levels from one step to the next. Speaking as someone who likes to set volume levels very precisely, I prefer continuous track potentiometers. But Melody presumably choose a resistive switch because it gives better sound

quality than a typical carbon track pot.

The downside is the gaps between each discrete point. Perhaps inevitably, the 'steps' at the lower end of the volume control scale grow rather wide – the only way around this is to have a lot more positions on the switch, which complicates matters. But they're acceptably fine towards the mid-way position where most of us will set the control for normal listening. The upside is – better sound quality. The signal is going through a switch with high quality contacts and high quality fixed resistors, rather than having to travel through a potentiometer with a carbon track.

The result should be a cleaner more dynamic sound.

The other good thing about having a resistive ladder switch arrangement is accurate channel balance. Providing the resistors for left and right channels are closely paired in terms of value, you won't find the left or right channel prematurely disappearing as you reach the lower levels. All in all, there are 24 discrete volume level settings and no means of adjusting left/right stereo balance. There are some bias adjustment pre-set pots on each side of the amplifier chassis, but the instructions say nothing about these or how to adjust them.

In terms of noise – both mechanical and electrical – the SP3 is very very quiet. Ear close to the amp, there's a faint, just discernable buzz audible from the mains transformer. Going up to the loudspeakers and putting an ear close to the speaker drive units, I could hear nothing. So, residual noise would seem to be very low – useful for those

▶ planning to use this amplifier with ultra-sensitive loudspeakers. Either that, or I've gone totally deaf. Although the rated output wattage is not high by Transistor standards, subjectively the SP3 has plenty of welly. The fact that it actually sounds gutsy and immediate means you don't have to play things loudly to create a sense of presence and immediacy.

But the best thing about this amp; better than the looks, better than the sound – is the price. The Melody SP3 costs just 750 Euros, an almost unbelievably low figure for something as well finished and great sounding as this. Of course, until a UK distributor is established (which might push that price up) you can add shipping from France, but even so, this is an absolute bargain by any standards.

During use, the amp gets reasonably (but not excessively) warm. It seems to need little or no time to warm-up, sounding good pretty-much as soon as it's up and running. There's maybe a small improvement after half an hour or so, but it's not massive. There are outputs for 4 Ohm and 8 Ohm loudspeakers, and the 'correct' setting for your speakers is the one that sounds loudest – indicating the best power transfer and correct impedance match. However, do listen to the difference in sound quality, and see if the 4 Ohm setting doesn't sound slightly firmer and better controlled.

The 4 Ohm output has a lower source impedance, and this creates a slightly more solid sound with improved control. The downside is a

slight loss of power – maybe 2dB or thereabouts. In my case this wasn't an issue – using fairly efficient Impulse H1 horn loudspeakers the SP3 had power to spare. But if you partnered the amp with low

efficiency speakers – say 87dB/1W – you might need every last scrap of power to avoid peaks clipping.

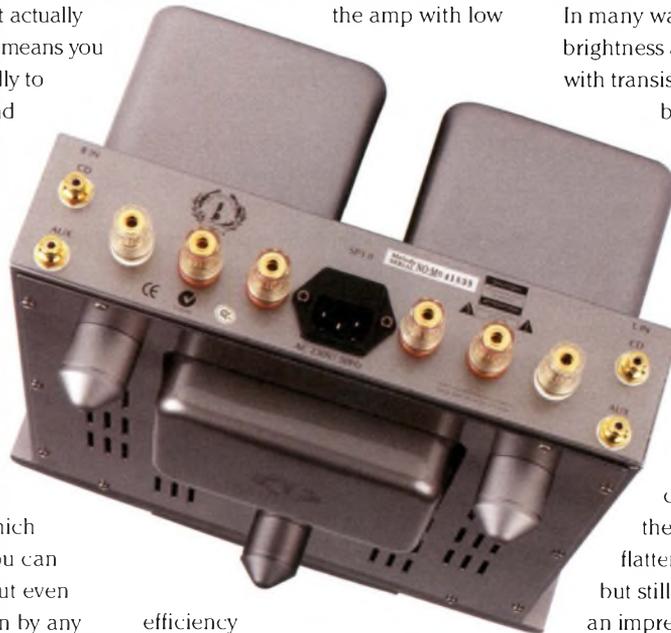
Incidentally, the SP3 doesn't 'hard clip' when driven beyond its limits – it tends to coarsen rather than break up when you really turn it up.

Internally the SP3 is laid out in separate left/right mono-block style. This, coupled with the amp's fairly dynamic forward presentation, contributes to the vivid stereo imagery. In many ways its tonal balance has the brightness and neutrality you associate with transistor amplifiers. All the same, being transformer coupled, the top end is much less inclined to 'lead' the midrange and bass in terms of transient attack – tonally, the amplifier is well balanced and very integrated.

The SP3 sounds quite holographic, especially in a system with sub-woofers connected. Without subs, the presentation is noticeably flatter and less 'out of the boxes', but still good. The tight bass creates an impression good control, but you don't get that full voluminous bass that some valve amps produce. Nevertheless, for what is after all a 'small' amplifier, the SP3 creates a surprisingly big soundstage. It's definitely an amplifier that punches above its weight. If you heard it without knowing what you were listening to, you'd definitely assume you were auditioning a much bigger more powerful amplifier.

The tonal balance is very open and impressively neutral. As previously stated, this is not a rich/warm sounding amplifier. It's crisp and detailed, with impressive impact and immediacy.

Incidentally, I came to the SP3 after a couple of weeks spent listening to Audio Research's Ref 210 mono-block power amps. I mean – how ridiculous does it get? From an amplifier so big and heavy I could hardly lift it (and that's just one of the power amps of course!) to a tiny integrated about a quarter of the



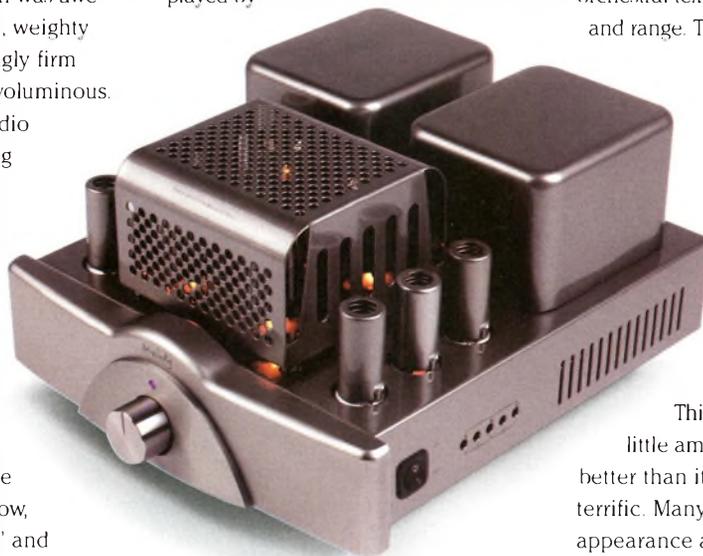
► size – even less than that if you factor in the pre-amp needed for the Audio Research...

Of course the bigger amp has lashings more power and a much bigger sound; in particular, the bottom end of the Audio Research was awesome, giving a rich, solid, weighty quality that was surprisingly firm despite being warm and voluminous. Having lived with the Audio Research, I wasn't looking forward to going back to something more modest. But, going straight over to the SP3 wasn't quite as jaw-droppingly dreadful as I'd half feared. Sure it wasn't as good, but listening to it I did not feel let down or short-changed. The little Melody put on a brave show, sounding surprisingly 'big' and gutsy. I have to say, I was both surprised and impressed. It's testimony to how far you can go by getting the basic things right. Of course there are situations where a true heavyweight like the Audio Research will leave the little SP3 for dead – for example, those circumstances where you have inefficient difficult-to-drive loudspeakers and really do need bags of reserve power. But, in many situations – playing normal music at normal domestic volume levels with speakers of medium/high efficiency - the SP3 will be fine.

In the latter stages of the review I partnered the Melody with the Consonance Reference 2.2 Linear CD player, and the two made a winning combination. The smoothness and clean refinement of the CD player proved a perfect foil for the amplifier's immediacy and brilliance. The two could have been made with one-another in mind. I tried all sorts of music, and never was there a disc that left me feeling disappointed – indeed, quite the opposite. I found myself digging out discs that previously

hadn't sounded quite as I'd have liked, and in many cases finding the sound greatly improved.

One set that really took on a fresh lease of life was the Teldec cycle of Mozart *Fiano concertos* directed and played by



Daniel Barenboim with the Berlin Philharmonic. I bought the set a few months back on special offer, but hadn't liked the sound much. The recordings are all digital and fairly recent (1990s), but the sound proved disappointing – somewhat thick and lacking in separation, with poor clarity. Yet via the Reference CD 2.2 Linear and SP3 these recordings were transformed. The orchestra in particular sounded much fresher and more 'present', with greater clarity and detail.

There was much better separation between piano and orchestra, with the piano sounding nicely focussed and separate from the orchestra. One consequence of this was being able to hear more easily when the soloist wanted to integrate with the orchestral part, and when he wanted to stand out from it – take centre stage so to speak. Before, the piano had sounded a bit recessed and 'distant', without much dynamic inflection or detail. This made Barenboim's playing sound much more interesting and involved. As I say, the set

was transformed, yet I didn't feel that the Amp or CD player were falsifying the sound by artificially brightening it. The recordings still sounded full and weighty, but there was a much improved sense of transparency that endowed the orchestral textures with greater space and range. The SP3 has a very open, uncoloured sound, and this really helped with the recordings in question. Maybe a less refined CD player might spell trouble with a dynamic assertive amplifier like this, but there are no problems when it's partnered by the Reference 2.2 Linear.

This is an absolutely great little amp; one that sounds even better than it looks – and it looks terrific. Many will want one for its appearance alone – the sound will come as a bonus. Me – I loved it. Throughout this review I found myself assessing this product irrespective of its price and that's the greatest compliment of all. Given the cost it's an absolute steal. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Line-level integrated valve amp
Valve Complement:	4x 5881, 2x 12AX7, 2x 6922, and 2x 12AU7
Inputs:	2x line-level
Input Sensitivity:	380mV
Weight:	20kg
Dimensions (WxHxD):	275 x 185 x 350mm
Finish:	Slate grey
Price:	750 Euros

European Distributor:
Melody Europe
Tel. 0033 478 561 888
Net. www.melody-europe.com

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The Phase-Tech P-1 Moving-Coil Cartridge

by Curtis Leeds

Phase-Tech's P-1 moving-coil cartridge is a heavyweight in many respects. At 12 grams, it's physically heavy. Its sound is "heavy" (in the best sense of the word) with weight and authority... when called for. And it's a heavyweight as a competitor. This is one of those rare audio components that could change your thinking about the nature of your entire audio system. At its \$1800 price, this phono cartridge gets you very, very close to what's on an LP, and much closer than many other cartridges at this price level.

But why should you take my word for it?

Let's face it. Recommending audio equipment, and reading equipment reviews, has always been a tricky business. Personal taste is always part of the equation. We all have our own preferences and their indulgence doesn't require the approval – or even understanding – of others. Then there are equipment input and output variables; wildly differing room acoustics; distinct venue preferences (you like row 'M' sound, I like row 'C,' she likes the sound of an intimate club); and differing tastes for the music itself. (If your tastes run to the baroque or 50s vocal groups, you might not insist on faithful bass response the way those of us who love Pink Floyd do.)

And of all audio components, the phono cartridge has to be the trickiest to review or recommend. Obviously,

it must be properly matched to a pickup arm for optimum performance, be suited to its pre-amplifier, the turntable, the phono cable itself, and so it goes. Who can expect to know what cartridge is right for you? Certainly not an audio equipment reviewer you've never even met.

To be fair, this is essentially the challenge facing the high-end audio industry today: how can consumers be convinced about what equipment is right for them, or that higher audio performance is worth higher cost? Answering that isn't my job, thankfully. This is just a phono cartridge review. (Although I'd go as far as to suggest that for those seeking an answer to the industry dilemma, maybe there's no substitute for a good dealer.)

The starting point for phono cartridge evaluation is setup and with a phono cartridge, setup is everything. This is where the Phase-Tech design excels on the one hand but fails on the other. It fails because the P-1, while not a nude cartridge, does lack a dust cover, leaving its coil exposed and vulnerable. It is also sold without a stylus guard, an absence I find confounding. Without a guard, what should be a routine matter of fixing cartridge to headshell becomes an exercise in catastrophic mishap avoidance. This is especially hard to understand when the P-1's body shape makes providing stylus guard simplicity itself. How can

manufacturers who lavish time and money in the design and testing of their products not give greater consideration to how their customers will actually use them? Why should installation of a \$2,000 consumer product include an inherent risk of total product self-destruction? It all sounds so reckless in an age when some cars have six airbags and you may need to show photo ID to get on a public train. Perhaps Phase-Tech's assumption is that their products will be installed by a professional dealer, but it seems like a bad excuse. (Besides, since when were dealers immune to the odd act of clumsiness?) That's the failure part of the P-1's setup. To be fair, the Phase Tech is hardly the only phono cartridge supplied without a stylus guard, but it's my job to underscore these failings.

More successful aspects of the Phase-Tech's set up includes the sheer heft of its 12 gram weight, because that mass helps steady the hand while mounting to the headshell, and once mounted, the P-1's square edges and clear stylus reference line help simplify getting accurate alignment.

If there's a single word to describe the P-1's sound, it is precise. This is a cartridge that is neither lush nor analytical, but instead allows each LP to take on a sound of its own. Unusually for a phono cartridge, it sounds convincingly neutral. ▶

► Part of what makes the P-1 sound so neutral is its dynamics. In my system, dynamic shadings large and small were tracked with equal ease – the quality that some audiophiles mistakenly call “speed.” Listening to it doesn’t offer revelation of nuance previously concealed, but it does draw you irresistibly into the music itself. These precise dynamics are part of what gives high-end listening an addictive element, where hearing one LP leads to the next in a meandering path of musical adventure. And once you know that your LPs can sound this good, you’ll be hard-pressed to ever settle again for less.

On The Meters’ *Look Ka-Py Py* (Josie JOS-4011), the dynamics are so exact that the brothers Neville seem to be jumping off the turntable. It’s not just easy to follow the organ and its shifting from lead to rhythm, but it’s natural. It’s almost unavoidable. Once your ear is drawn to an instrument or voice, it’s difficult to do anything but continue to follow it. This is a big part of the P-1’s appeal. This is a cartridge whose sound is difficult to characterize because it works to reveal an LP for what it is.

The Phase Tech lets warm recordings sound warm. One of my favourites is Bob Dylan’s *Oh Mercy* (CBS OC 45281). This whole album is lush, lush, lush, but ‘Man In The Long Black Coat’ is so wet it will wash all over you. The enveloping physical presence of this atmospheric Daniel Lanois production starts with the moment the stylus drops into the lead-in groove of ‘Political World,’ and lasts through the slow decay of ‘Shooting Star’ on side two. Neil Young’s *Harvest* is the same way. (The Japanese pressing of this, Pioneer-Warner P-10121R, is superb, by the way.)

Set-up Considerations

One thing to consider about the P-1 is that its weight and very low compliance means you’ll probably need to move your pickup arm counterweight further away from its pivot than it is now, and that isn’t likely to improve tracking on warped records, especially in medium mass tonearms. If your turntable uses a vacuum or clamp system, or you’re among the blessed few who really don’t have any warped records that may not matter to you. It didn’t cause me any problems. I installed the P-1 in an SME V (with no damping applied) tracking at 1.9g and it sailed through my standardized warp test records. Of course, my VPI TNT series III turntable uses Harry Weisfeld’s simple, central reflex clamping system, and it is

quite effective at managing moderate warps. You could certainly argue that any record it can’t manage doesn’t belong on a high-end playback system in the first place. I do have a nagging concern about the P-1’s exposed coil, and its long-term susceptibility to dust and a possible future decrease in performance, but only time can tell. Again, it’s far from the only offender in this regard. Like any good cartridge, the P-1 requires precise alignment, and like all line contact stylus cartridges (which I prefer) it is especially demanding of proper VTA. My ARC SP11 allows me to vary the input impedance and I definitely preferred the low, 100 Ohm setting. Either way, you or your dealer will need to be an expert to get the best from it.



concertos (exemplified on the 45 rpm Angel SS-45013) will be revealed for sounding cold and analytical; the P-1 will not add the ambiance and presence to Tuckwell’s horn that is missing from this LP. Cold sounding recordings sound downright chilly. Perhaps that explains why Pink Floyd’s *The Wall* is so listenable on CD – the music is suited to the sterile treatment that is the hallmark of compact disc. It’s also why this music is so convincing on the CBS-Sony Japanese-pressed LP (40AP1750). The

Phase-Tech lays bare this album’s contrasting harshness and beauty, without imposing its own character on top of it.

Recordings of power and complexity will not disappoint. Wagner’s *Die Walkure* may be the audiophile’s prototypical power-play and the RCA Shaded Dog (LSC-2692) will have you rising from your seat. It isn’t that the drum attacks on James Taylor ‘Fire And Rain’ (*Sweet Baby James*, Warner WS 1843) will send shock waves

Sure this LP is multi-tracked and lacks a convincing realistic acoustic space. That’s the point. The warmth of the band’s instruments and voices shine through regardless, carrying the emotional power that makes this album timeless.

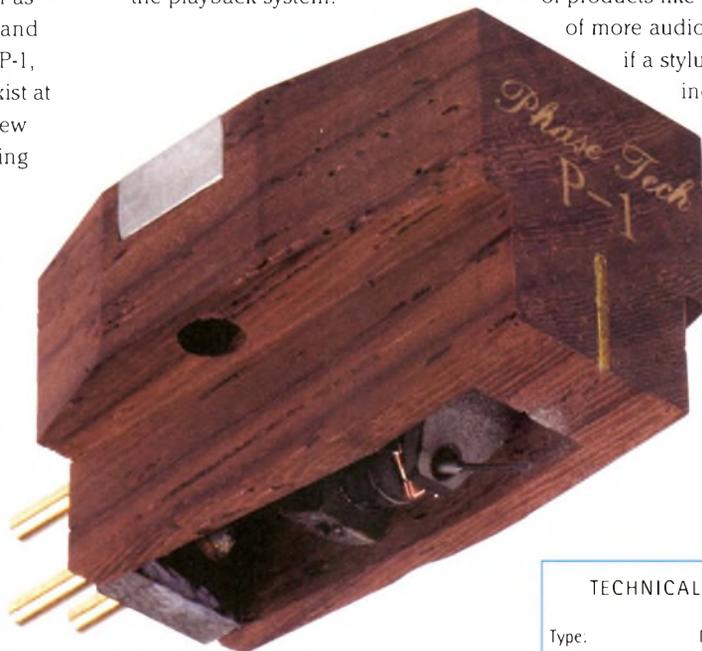
But the P-1 is not a warm-sounding cartridge. Cool sounding recordings, such as Barry Tuckwell’s sometimes too-cool Mozart *horn*

► through your listening room (they can), it's that the whole drum kit stands poised to erupt, and does. If you have friends who don't understand how LP can be thriving in the digital age, introduce them to a decent pressing of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side Of The Moon*, such as EMI Toshiba's (EMLF-97002) and they'll understand. With the P-1, power and subtlety can coexist at the same moment in a way few cartridges permit. The resulting tension is part of the very essence of music.

Neutrality isn't a characteristic often attributed to phono cartridges, but it definitely applies to the Phase Tech P-1. Perhaps its neutrality is part illusion, a benefit of its high-mass design and a consequence of its apparent absence of resonance. Perhaps that's why notes start and stop without lingering and acoustic instruments can emanate from such a believable space. That it achieves this sense regardless of the complexity or subtlety of the recording itself only helps cement the illusion that you are hearing the music as it was intended.

The Phase Tech P-1's neutrality puts it in the upper class of the high-end. At this level, much of the best audio equipment starts to sound alike. That isn't to say that great differences don't exist. Whether because of equipment or room interaction, sensitivity to RF interference or any other of a myriad of factors, audio components often aren't directly interchangeable, and that's especially true of phono cartridges. Nevertheless, the best equipment leans towards accuracy and the P-1 is no exception. Its sound can as easily be described using the terms usually

reserved for an amplifier as those more generally applied to phono cartridges. No, it is not perfect, and will eventually reveal to the listener all the ills to which vinyl is vulnerable. But most of those flaws will be of the specific LP itself, and not inherent to the playback system.



But don't take my word for it – this is something you'll have to confirm in your own system. If you give it a demo, you may discover that the P-1's most notable achievement is that it puts to rest the canard that an audio system's weakest links are invariably its transducers, where sound is converted from a wave to an electrical voltage (such as in a phono cartridge or microphone) or that voltage is converted back into a wave (such as in a loudspeaker or headphone). Sure, a loudspeaker must be matched to a room just as a phono cartridge must be matched to its system. But the P-1 shows that when proper attention is provided to every detail, today's best equipment can be so remarkably transparent to the source that differences become increasingly subtle. That is great news for

audiophiles – just as long as you actually want to hear what's on the record, free from rose-tinted hues. The challenge is always in finding equipment that will deliver in your system. The industry would make that easier if it put demo samples of products like this in the hands of more audiophiles; especially if a stylus guard was included. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Moving-coil cartridge
Body:	Red sandalwood, stainless steel base
Cantilever:	Boron
Stylus Profile:	Line contact .04 x .007 mm
Magnet:	Samarium cobalt
Output Voltage:	0.25 mV
Compliance:	6 cu
Tracking Force:	1.7 to 2.0 g.
Internal Impedance:	5 Ohms
Weight:	12 g.
Price:	\$1800

Review sample supplied by:

Axiss Distribution
Gardena, CA 90248, USA
Tel. (001)310 329 0187
Net. www.axiss-usa.com

Manufacturer:

Kyodo Denshi Eng Co., Ltd.
Tel. (81)45 932 2400
Fax. (81)45 932 7885
Net. www.phase-tech.com



The Avalon NP Evolution Series 2.0 Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

There you are, an established manufacturer. You've developed your own techniques and practices; you've evolved them from a single original model, extending their application both up the range and as far down it (in price terms) as you can. You've got products extending from \$8000 all the way to the stratosphere. There's a new flagship that's creating quite a buzz. Now all you have to do is come up with something down around the \$2K mark...

It's every loudspeaker designer's nightmare, yet it's also exactly what Avalon's guiding light, Neil Patel, has set out to do. You've got a boutique operation with an enviable reputation, a product that's instantly recognisable and a formula that's hard to copy. From a business point of view, the appeal of a more affordable model is clear; but from a design point of view it's a daunting prospect. Slashing the retail price by 75% moves you into an arena where your tried and trusted technology and techniques can no longer be applied, excluded on grounds of cost. Whereas the existing (and undeniably expensive) Avalon products have followed a meticulously evolved formula, mating the best available drivers through sophisticated cross-overs, honed for sonic performance and built from components matched to an almost psychotic degree, all assembled into rigid, laminated and complex cabinet shapes, designed to be as discrete (sonically and visually) as possible, the new project would require an entirely different approach. But at the same time it would carry the weight of the company's credibility, any failure denting not just that product but their

most valuable yet intangible asset of all. Anyway you read it, it's a high risk strategy, which makes the NP2.0 (as the new speaker's called) all the more interesting.

Denied access to his familiar toolbox of construction techniques and technology, Patel wisely set out to reach essentially the same goal achieved in his other designs, but by an entirely different route. Unpack the NP2.0s and, apart from the strikingly angular grille and the sumptuous sheen of the finish over the real wood veneer, there's little to suggest that this is an Avalon, or indeed, that it isn't one of a hundred other compact floor-standers jostling for attention in an overcrowded marketplace. But listen and they're unmistakable. As readily identifiable as the bigger Avalons are visually, it's their shared sonic characteristics that are responsible for their reputation. Whilst superb integration, neutrality and musical coherence are their trademarks, what really makes them special is their absence from the process. There are very few loudspeakers on the market that disappear so convincingly that they leave less of a thumbprint on the passing signal than the electronics driving them, yet it's a trick that every Avalon from the Ascendant on up, seems to manage with aplomb. In fact, it's so disconcerting to

some that they actually want a speaker with a little more "character", but that is not the Avalon way. What's more,

it's all too easy to equate that performance to the

sum of the meticulously assembled parts that make up the speakers. The challenge facing the NP2.0 was to achieve a similarly refined and unobtrusive performance by other means, a challenge the sonic results declare well and truly met.

The NP2.0 cabinet is a conventional, rectangular design, constructed from carefully selected, 18mm HDF in Avalon's Pennsylvania plant where the Symbol, its matching centre channel and the Studio Monitor are built. Internally it's critically braced, and if that bracing is less extensive than in its (almost Matrix like) elders and betters, the simpler shape of the cabinet has made its behaviour far more predictable and more easily handled. As I've already mentioned, the heavily lacquered veneer is absolutely beautiful, and although the review pair, drawn from the first batch, don't sport book-matched graining, current pairs do.

So, the cabinet is far simpler and, despite the visual effect of the grille, devoid of Avalon's hallmark facets. But the real change in approach comes with the drivers. The NP2.0 features a pair of 130mm Kevlar drivers, which, like



► the ceramic composite tweeter, are designed specifically for this speaker system and the other models in the range (there's a smaller NP1.0, featuring the same driver line-up, as well as a horizontally disposed version of it for use as a centre channel). That has allowed Patel to build far more of the drivers' behaviour into their mechanical design, allowing him to rely far less on the crossover. It's an unexpected benefit of the lower transparency levels that come with less sophisticated drivers, but one that allows superb system balance from a simpler and less fanatically matched cross-over. The bass-end is reflex loaded by a small, rear facing port, placed just above the single pair of input terminals. High frequencies are handled by the 25mm dome tweeter mentioned above. The company are guarded about its precise composition but bullish enough about its performance to lead me to expect its appearance in more models, further up the range as time goes by. Aside from the rather fetching white dome, the motor is a carefully shaped toroidal structure, built from neodymium, creating an unusually strong and uniform field in the magnetic gap. Both the tweeter and the mid-bass units are surrounded by felt surfaces to minimise diffractive effects, while the grille interfaces snugly with these. One common factor with their more expensive brethren is Avalon's suggestion that you listen with the grilles on.

On paper at least, there's little to separate the NP2.0 from all those other

slim floorstanders. Their sensitivity of 90dB allied to a 4 Ohm load is a little stiffer than average, but explained by a -3dB point at a very healthy 36Hz. It's when you listen that you begin to realise just what they do, but before that you've got to get them set-up. That 36Hz figure isn't there for fun, which means that the 2.0s don't need the rear wall reinforcement that some of their competition

require. Indeed, what you rapidly realise is that they are unusually flat,



top to bottom, for a speaker at any price, let alone

£2K. The evenness of their frequency response and the seamless integration of their drivers are what marks them out as Avalons, and to get the benefit you want to give them as much room as you can to breathe. It's almost a case of the

further away from room boundaries the better they'll sound, and what really defines their placement is room nulls rather than distance to the rear wall. The upside of this is that, given the space it's pretty easy to get them sounding pretty good; the downside (if you can call it that) is that further systematic refinement of their positioning, laterally and in terms of tiny amounts of toe-in, will pay real dividends in terms of soundstage depth, coherence and dimensionality, but also rhythmic integrity. Hit the spot and these little speakers really start to sing as the temporal and spatial aspects of their performance click together.

The other thing you'll need to consider is what you're going to drive them with. Bigger Avalons are, by their very nature, if not critical then certainly revealing of the driving electronics. The NP2, thankfully, is far easier to live with (and satisfy). Its main requirement is good clean power, preferably 100 Watts or so.

I didn't try it but I've a sneaking suspicion that the top of the line Rotel integrated would make a surprisingly successful pairing. I drove them with the Hovland RADIA for the most part, but a brief foray with the Levinson 383 was enough to demonstrate that high quality integrated amps of the Moon i-5/Karan KA I 180 are the NP2's natural partners, both in terms of price and performance. An amp like the RADIA stretches them, but ultimately they can't match the transparency and lucidity available from amps of that quality.

In a way, realising that is the key to understanding these speakers. A speaker with a single, standout capability will just go on responding to better and better amps. You'll go on getting more and more of what it's good at – which ►

► often convinces people that they're getting better sound. But in reality this rarely if ever makes sense from either the financial or the musical point of view, as the weaknesses are still there and getting more and more obvious. The NP2.0 is a very different animal, rare at its price-point in that it puts equal emphasis on all aspects of performance. Or to use the reviewer's cliché, it goes for a balanced presentation. But what does that actually mean?

Well, when discussing set-up, I touched on the relationship between the temporal and spatial aspects of musical reproduction. Often, these are realms that only really meet in far more expensive products; budget speakers tend to image a bit and try and impress with a bit more bass than you expect for their size. With the advent of AV, sadly the next tier of products in which Avalon's NP Evolution Series (as the range are officially known) find themselves are rarely much better. Louder and with more dynamic range, but barely more sophisticated. Yes, there are exceptions like the little Neat Motives, a few Castles and the like, but nothing I've come across that's as ambitious as these Avalons in terms of all round achievement.

To do spatial reproduction properly you've got to reproduce the recorded acoustic in all three dimensions; then you've got to people that space with correctly proportioned and dimensional images of the instruments, defining their position and the space between them. In temporal terms you've got to make sure that the contribution of all the various instruments occurs in the right

place and at the right time, maintaining the dynamic relationship between them. All of which the NP2.0s can manage – most of the time. If you really try, you can overpower them with really big and complex music, but you will have to try. Anything else and they present you with a beautifully stable and coherent soundstage, a real sense of life and pace to performance, and arguably best of all, an unforced easiness to dynamics. This last is in no small part down to the sheer quality of the tweeter, which is crisp, clean and open, without any trace of glare or break-up. Just listen to the astonishing purity of triangle's decay to hear what I mean. Interestingly, removing the grilles will deliver a greater sense of immediacy and clarity, but as soon as you replace them you realise that the coherence and integrity have returned. Stripping the speakers of their cosmetic covers leaves the sound jagged and raw, initially impressive but ultimately less complete.

Not surprisingly, vocal performance is exceptionally natural, while acoustic recordings are allowed to breathe, the music flowing with its own interior pulse, dictated by the players rather than the system. Familiar acoustic spaces are in proper proportion, performers a sensible scale. In fact, the NP2.0s do an incredible job of mimicking the performance envelope of their more expensive brethren. They just don't extend it as far, almost as if all

the pieces are in the right place, without their surface texture being quite as clearly defined. It's a mightily impressive trick, trading a little transparency and focus, some texture and dynamic zip in return for three-quarters of the price. To do it so precisely that the musical balance remains undisturbed; that you fail to notice the subtle losses unless you go looking for them is even better. And to make the speaker easier to drive and easier to live with, that's the icing on the cake. Short of direct comparison, the NP2.0 disappears in a musical sense just as effectively as its bigger brothers. In this important respect it knows no peers at or near its price.

Neil Patel may have taken Avalon's original recipe to new heights with the Isis, but to take a completely different route with the NP2.0 while reaching the same goal, that shows a real depth of understanding. This is Avalon's most approachable speaker yet, in every respect; treat yourself to a listen. ➤+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way reflex loudspeaker
Driver Complement:	1x 25mm ceramic composite dome tweeter 2x 130mm Kevlar bass-mid units
Bandwidth:	36Hz – 22kHz ±3dB
Sensitivity:	90dB
Impedance:	4 Ohms nominal
Dimensions (WxHxD):	190 x 890 x 305mm
Weight:	19.5kg
Finishes:	
Price:	£2000

UK Distributor:

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

Manufacturer:

Avalon Acoustics
Net. www.avalonacoustics.com



The ProAc Studio 140 Loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

ProAc has a formula and it sticks to it like a very sticky thing, covered in honey and superglue. In fact, it has three formulae – the Tablette formula, the Studio formula and the Response formula (there's also the Hexa formula, but this is limited to small home cinema systems thus far). The 140 is just the latest top of the range Studio speaker so, you might think, "No big deal."

Except it's a very big deal. ProAc's big Response series has routinely taken the top slot in reviews the world over and the little Tablette speakers are giant-killers that have graced this reviewer's system off and on for many a season. The Studio range fits snugly in-between these two poles. It's the near budget range from the company and offers staggering value for money. These are the ProAc's for people who want high-end hi-fi names without the high-end hi-fi prices.

And it's not exactly dull speaker design. It may have three drive units, but this is a straight two-way speaker, featuring what ProAc class as a 'HQ' crossover network and oxygen-free copper internal cabling. Those two 165mm coated cone drive units, with a raised spider assembly are working as one mid-bass unit, while the coated silk-dome 25mm tweeter acts on its own. The speaker is ported, but ProAc uses a downward-firing port to eliminate obvious chuffing. It also means the plinth and spikes are mandatory, but this is only a good thing, all round.

This design has one of the highest sensitivities from any ProAc to date, a

claimed 91dB. Add in a nominal impedance of eight ohms and a minimum of four ohms and it is an ideal match for the Arcam and Marantz amplifiers it's likely to be partnered with (it can cope with anything from 15 to 250 watts, according to the blurb). The speakers can be bi-wired or bi-amped, with extremely high quality rhodium-plated terminals at the rear.

There's a small trade-off to be had between these speakers and similarly-sized, like Response speakers like the D25. These are not as substantially built or as beautifully finished as many ProAc designs. Well, sort of... ProAc's build quality is sans pareil at all times, and this is Jaguar to the Response's Aston-Martin. Rap your knuckles on the side of the 140 and it's satisfyingly dead, but you don't get that so-dead-your-knuckles-hurt kind of damping. This is why the Response D25 weighs in at 26kg per cabinet and the Studio 140 is 'only' 20kg apiece. Also, the range of finishes is slightly curtailed on the Studio 140. It comes in maple, cherry, black ash and mahogany veneers, but the stunning burr finishes found elsewhere in the ProAc line aren't an option. But, compared to

many other brands, this is top-line build quality. Finally, unlike most ProAc designs, they aren't 'handed' in the tweeter, so there's no distinct left or right speaker.

The Studio 140s are not best up against the wall. They need a small amount of breathing space between them and the side and rear walls, ideally half a metre or so.

Otherwise, that two-for-one bass driver gets a bit overstated and thumpy. Also, the speakers require a moderate amount of toe-in to get good imagery. In fact, the level of toe-in is greater than used for other ProAc speakers, if the soundstage is to come alive.

The soundstage is never going to be as holographic as Response models (aside from the more advanced driver tech and crossover network, the lack of tweeter 'handedness' will always spell a less sublime image)

but the speaker does make a decent three-dimensional stage if the axes cross over slightly in front of the listener. I also found that they worked slightly further apart than is common with ProAc designs, for the same reason. There's always a happy medium between good, wide and deep imagery and a stereo sound with a dirty



▶ great hole in the middle – I felt the Studio 140's imaging properties were at their best when that happy medium was pushed to the limit. This isn't in the manual, though, and other listeners in other rooms may come to different conclusions.

The speaker needs a substantial run in, it seems. Of course, 'substantial' to a £1,400 speaker design is almost an eye-blink compared to the months-long run-in required for some stratospherically high-end designs. That bass driver, stretched across two units, takes a lot of energy to get up to speed and the first few hours might just send you slightly crazy. First, the bass comes on strong, filling the room with comparatively ill-defined, boomy bass. Then it goes away almost entirely, leaving a sound not dissimilar to a compact bookshelf design. Only then does the bass start to come back as it should. Here's a trick, then. Position the speakers almost randomly at first, let them do the running in thing, then position them with great care – you'll find the optimum position changes as the speakers run in.

One thing this speaker has is oodles of bass, for so small and relatively cheap a speaker. That one/two bass driver combination is claimed to reach down to 25Hz and that seems wholly likely in listening. The 140's move a lot of air down there, and the bass impact is almost reminiscent of TDL's organ-loosening low-frequencies. It doesn't have that foghorn intensity of TDL, but neither does it have the foghorn one-note properties of the late, quasi-lamented bass-meister. Instead, what we have is

deep, controlled and wholly natural sounding bass that perfectly matches the insightful midrange and exciting, extended treble. In the wrong room with the wrong system and the wrong disc, this could deteriorate into all-bass, all-treble, not much in-between sound. But, you'd have to commit some quite serious crimes against hi-fi to find the Studio 140's Achilles Heel.



You see, actually the midrange is subtle and vibrant and isn't one to be over-

awed by the upper and lower registers. It's a deft, articulate midrange that brings out vocals (especially female vocals) extremely well. It's good enough to make you think one half of that, er, split bass driver was actually a secret midrange unit. This has always been a ProAc strong point and it looks as if there's no change here. It may not

be as electrostatic-like as the little Tablette or small Response stand-mount, but the speakers do their level best to sonically disappear across the midrange. *Lunático* by Gotan Project is a fine test of this mid-band; the combination of traditional Argentine instruments and electronics, coupled with a sexy Parisian feel and

a sultry voice or three make this a recording that stands or falls by its midrange. Through the Studio 140s, it made you want to smoke Gauloise and dance the night away like a wet BBC One Ident. There's a very definite lift to the top end of the speaker, but one that's mostly benign. Again, ProAc cites a 30kHz upper limit to the Studio 140 and – from listening – I'm not going to quibble. The soft dome tweeter is refined and enticing-sounding and neatly extended, but sometimes that extension can become strident, especially with early CD recordings. I have a secret torture disc that I use. It was from a partwork, the cover and booklet of which is long gone, but it's soundbyte Handel seemingly played on bits of broken glass and out-of-tune bagpipes, recorded in a dentist's office. It has two uses – most of the shiny stuff has fallen out of the polycarbonate, so it's great to test the error correction of any CD player and it's good to test just how grating a treble lift can be – if you can make one minute, the speaker passes muster. And the ProAc passed the minute test. It was still high in the treble, emphasising the chainsaw and nails-down-chalkboard sections of this particular (and sadly – but wholly understandably - unnamed) 'orchestra'. But, even under such shocking duress (the Geneva Convention forbids me ▶

► from mistreating loudspeakers more than this), the Studio 140 stayed just short of aggressive.

One of the big aspects that ProAc has improved upon immensely in the last few years is that nebulous thing called timing. In the past, those who judged every product exclusively by how well or ill it kept a beat would dismiss all ProAc speakers for being unable to 'time' properly. And, they had a point; ProAc's of old sounded beautiful, but never quite kept up with the sort of speakers that would have you tapping your foot to a sine wave. But that was old-school ProAc – the Studio 140s demonstrate just how well ProAc has addressed that issue. These speakers are very ordered rhythmically. They 'time', perhaps not so well to keep the Noddy Brigade happy, but well enough for the rest of us to enjoy our music. To my mind, if they are rhythmically tight enough to cope with 'Backyard Betty' by Spank Rock without sounding shallow or tired, then they are good enough for most music.

I guess part of this rhythmic improvement is due to that rock-solid bass underpinning. But solidity alone doesn't cut the musical mustard. In fact, the Studio 140 could easily tip from solidity into stodginess. Fortunately, it has an ace up its port – dynamic range. This is a dynamically free speaker, not quite to horn loaded levels of dynamic freedom, but one of those speakers that can deliver the dynamic swings of an orchestra ripping into Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances*. At the price, this is rare and heady stuff, as most rival speakers would take the wag out of Wagner, from a dynamic

standpoint. Perhaps some of this dynamic range is bass heft, but the speaker breathes just as convincingly with less overtly percussive music. Play through the sublime Old-School Country of Van Morrison's 'Pay The Devil' and the delicate changes and nuances are reproduced with finesse.

Naturally, there is a limit to this dynamic range. The very subtle dynamic shades are painted with a broad brush. Micro-dynamics – those tiny changes within the sound of a particular instrument, the little cues we strive for to make the sound seem more like the real thing and the very stuff of high-end speakers – are not as naturally presented as they are in even the Tablette Reference Eight Signature stand-mount. There is still more than a modicum of micro-dynamic information on tap – the fingerpicking of Nick Drake's guitar does not lose those subtle nuances of tone and resonance, swamped by the notes and the finger noise – but the really deft sonic touch isn't quite 'there'. But this much is clear; the

Studio 140s are hardly lacking finesse, and I can't think of a speaker that manages to deliver the same combination of sheer balls-out energy and subtle touch at anywhere near the price.

That's the big bonus of the Studio 140 – it's a compromise in all the right ways. It makes a good sound for the

money. It looks good for the money. It's easy to drive for the money and it is easy to install for the money. You could get a speaker that will improve on one of these aspects at the same price, but one of the others has to give. You want a prettier speaker – no problems, but don't expect it to sound good. How about a speaker that sounds a million dollars? No worries, apart from it looking like a bag of spanners.

If this is compromise, then I'm happy to compromise. I'd happily and heartily recommend these speakers to anyone after a pair of decent floorstanders, who wants good sound and decent – but not stunning – looks. OK, I'd hesitate to recommend them to Timing Nazis, who would doubtless find them unable to play a rhythm exactly to their specifications, but some of us have moved on from there. The Studio 140s show that ProAc have too. 



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way, floorstanding reflex loudspeaker
Drive Unit Complement:	2x 165mm proprietary mid/bass units with coated cone, raised spider and shielded magnet 25mm coated silk dome tweeter
Bandwidth:	25Hz to 30KHz ±3dB
Nominal Impedance:	8 Ohms, 4 Ohms minimum
Sensitivity:	91db
Recommended Amplifiers:	15 to 250 watts
Dimensions (WxHxD):	190 x 1040 x 280mm
Weight:	20kg ea.
Finishes:	Black Ash, Mahogany, Cherry, Maple real wood veneers
Price:	£1,400

Manufacturer:

ProAc Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1280 700147
Fax. (44)(0)1280 700148
Net. www.proac-loudspeakers.com



The A2T Maxium Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

Trekking systematically around hotel hi-fi shows is rarely a pleasurable experience, especially after you've been doing it for thirty odd years. The rooms are too small and the mains too polluted to deliver the sort of sound quality one regularly enjoys at home. But it does often deliver the payoff that you meet new and interesting people and brands that you wouldn't otherwise encounter.

That was the case at the Autumn 2005 Heathrow show. Tucked away in one of those anonymous rooms somewhere along the endless Renaissance first floor corridor, were a couple of French brands I'd not encountered before. The speakers looked and sounded interesting, came from a brand that called itself A2T, and had clear pro audio overtones. I left a business card with a very pleasant young Frenchman called Cedric Torossian, who is handling UK distribution, moved onto the next room, and thought little more about it.

Some weeks later I had a phone caller with a pronounced French accent. It was Cedric reminding me of our Heathrow meeting and asking whether I would like to review one of his speakers. I pointed out that I wasn't a magazine and therefore couldn't publish a review, but asked him for more background on A2T. The company pedigree looked rather interesting, so I suggested he brought a pair round for a quick listen, and these were certainly good enough to deserve taking things further.

A2T was founded by Patrick Thevenot and Bernard Torossian (Cedric's father), whose initials together inspired the A2T name. In the mid-1980s, Patrick was in charge of the electro-acoustic research laboratory of the INA (France's National Audiovisual Institute), and in that role he set up a programme to study and try to measure the subjective listening experience involved

in the sound recording process. The company literature refers to finding three important characteristics over and beyond basic frequency response: distortion; the phase response curve function of the directivity; and acoustical energy flowing speed function of time. Although phase response and directivity control are clearly important elements, exactly what is meant by the latter two is uncertain – something seems to have been lost in translation here. Cedric is more musician than acoustician, but should I meet either of the other Ts, I'll try and find out what they're on about.

Bernard brought 30 years of practical experience in the hi-fi and professional sound industries to complement Patrick's theoretical skills, and the pair embarked on a project to build prototype monitors for the INA, based on specifications arising out of Patrick's work. These were so well received, they generated demand from other professional users, so the 2Ts decided to put their 5025 Monitoring Studio loudspeaker into production.

Other ProMonitor models followed, and their success in a Pro environment led to professional users asking for versions they could use at home. The logical next step, in 2004, was to launch a series of hi-fi speakers directly derived from the professional line: Premium, Mezzo and Maxium are the hi-fi versions of B3017, B4027 and M3117. (Matching Subpremium, Submezzo and Submaxium subwoofers were also

developed, most requiring extra amplification, especially for use in larger rooms.)

Although it's only a little tiddler of a speaker by any standards – a genuine miniature, enclosing just six litres of air – the Maxium model under scrutiny here is actually the middle model of these three. It also carries a hefty pricetag for one so small – £1,460 for the satin finish, or £1,710 in high gloss piano lacquer

A2T

black. Our samples came in the painted satin finish, in a pale yellow colour that is officially called 'ivory' (tsk tsk!), though the more prosaic 'jaune' was scrawled on the box.

It's difficult to come up with anything original when designing a two-way miniature, but the Maxium manages to incorporate several radical features, which is quite an achievement in itself. Like Frankenstein's monster (or was it Herman Munster) it has a metal bolt

through its neck (OK, bracing the mid-points of the two side panels). The professional heritage is seen in a little LED pin-hole next to the tweeter, which is only relevant to the active version, and in the use of a Neutrik Speakon input connector – a good quality system, no question, but hardly convenient in a market dominated by 4mm socket/binders. (Alternative 4mm or XLR connectors may be specified, according to the leaflet.)

However, the most interesting feature is the way the drivers have been mounted, partly to achieve the required time alignment, but also the desired dispersion characteristics. While the



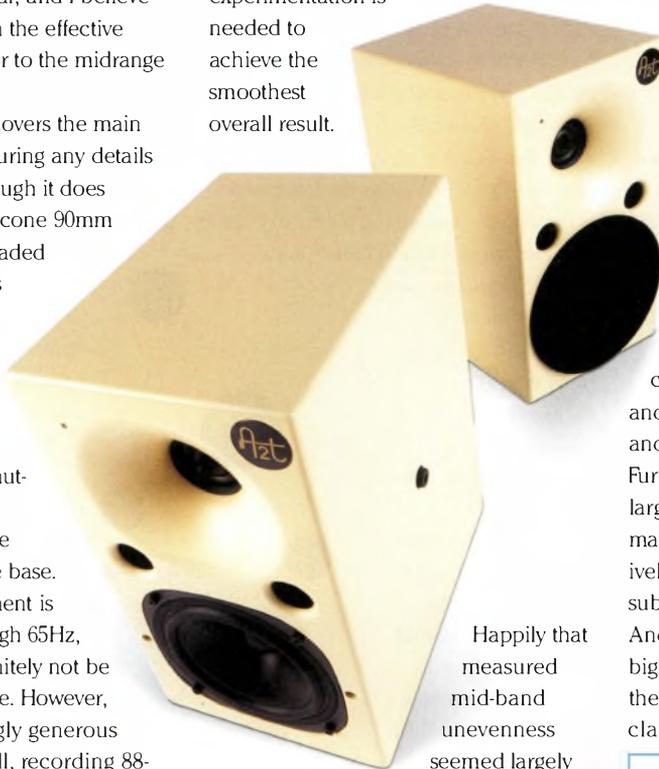
► bass driver is front-mounted with a spacer, so that its frame is slightly proud of the front baffle, the tweeter is recessed and loaded by a wide flared horn that's elegantly incorporated into the front baffle construction. This technique of horn loading seems popular amongst French designers – Triangle does something rather similar, and I believe one reason is to match the effective diameter of the tweeter to the midrange at the crossover point.

A fixed grille just covers the main driver, effectively obscuring any details of its construction, though it does appear to use a flared cone 90mm in diameter. It's also loaded by two little front ports symmetrically situated between woofer and tweeter. The tweeter is one of those classy Scandinavian annulus devices with a doughnut-shaped doped fabric diaphragm. Three spike sockets are set into the base.

The port arrangement is tuned to a relatively high 65Hz, so deep bass will definitely not be part of the agenda here. However, sensitivity is surprisingly generous for something so small, recording 88-89dB using my far-field technique, which is especially impressive since the impedance never drops below 6ohms so the load is relatively undemanding. (The spec actually claims 92dB, which should be taken with several packets of salt!) A slight difference in impedance between the two samples of our pair is mildly worrying from a pair matching point of view.

A speaker combining good sensitivity and small dimensions often benefits from close-to-wall siting, and in-room measurement certainly indicates that's the case here, the traces giving very decent output down to 50Hz under these conditions. The frequency response isn't the smoothest around,

especially through the upper midband, where there's a clear tendency to emphasise the zone around 700Hz – 1kHz, and a modest downward step between upper-mid and treble proper. Peaks and troughs in this area are strongly influenced by near-wall reflections and cancellations, so careful experimentation is needed to achieve the smoothest overall result.



Happily that measured mid-band unevenness seemed largely innocuous and

unobtrusive, and the sonic behaviour of these little speakers was immediately and obviously impressive. I've never been particularly fond of miniature speakers as a breed, but the Maxium has done more – much more – to change my predilections and prejudices than any other in recent memory.

The factor that distinguishes it most obviously from other tinies is that it simply sounds much bigger than it looks. I put the little Maxiums on, supported by a pair of Partington Heavis, immediately after some weeks spent with much larger speakers. I wound the wick up a little and suggested my partner look up from her newspaper and check out what we were listening to. She was as surprised as

I that such a small speaker pair could deliver such a big sound. I don't know why or how it manages this particular trick – perhaps it's something to do with superior phase accuracy, or maybe that horn flare around the tweeter – but it just seems to deliver dynamic expression with more realism than others of its ilk.

Obviously bass power and weight is somewhat limited here, leading to a slightly 'cool' overall sound, but in other respects there's very little to criticise. Boxiness and colorations are very well controlled, and imaging is spacious and precise with very good consistency on- and off-axis. Perhaps the top end could have been a little sweeter, but the crossover zone is superbly coherent with excellent integration, and the whole provides a very involving and delicate musical experience. Furthermore, even though Maxium's larger and more costly Mezzo stablemate is the superior performer objectively, I actually found the Maxium subjectively more entertaining overall. And although I still believe a good biggun will beat a good littlun, amongst the latter this French baby is a very classy contender indeed. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way stand-mount loudspeaker
Drivers:	tweeter mid-bass
Bandwidth:	
Sensitivity:	Claimed 92dB, measured 88.5dB
Crossover:	2kHz 24dB/octave
Power Range:	50 – 150W
Internal volume	6 litres
Size (WxHxD)	175 x 310 x 230mm
Weight	6kg ea
Price	£1,460 satin, £1,710 black lacquer
Active version and matching subwoofer also available	

UK distributor:
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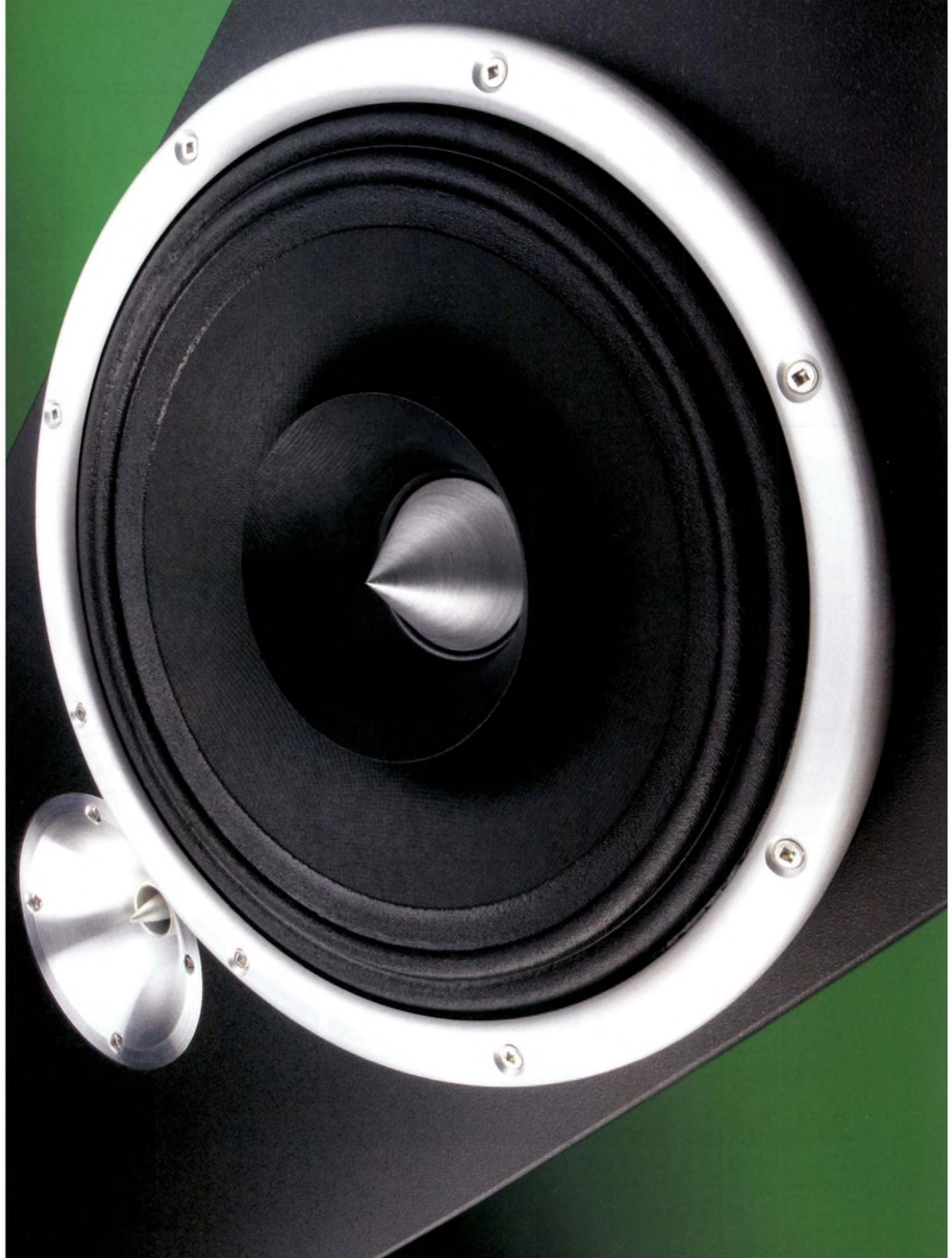
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The Zu Druid IV Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

Zu is a relatively new company that emerged from the state of Utah around about the start of this millennium. As the website address suggests, cables are an integral part of the original mix, but the loudspeakers the company makes are downright radical and therefore particularly interesting.

All are based around a very unusual main driver – that rarest and most old-fashioned of devices, the dual-cone 10-incher. Indeed, 10-inchers of any kind are exceedingly unusual these days, and only a handful of examples have come my way (from Tannoy, Rehdeko and Russ Andrews) in the past decade and a half. That's might seem a little odd, because this was one of the most popular driver sizes back in the 1950/60s, but its subsequent unpopularity probably started because the move from mono to stereo pushed us towards making speakers smaller and more discreet, and has been reinforced by the fashion to keep on making them slimmer and slimmer.

The Zu philosophy was borne out of a belief that hi-fi had become "clinical and dead", and that "high-end audio had also become deaf to the music that had once inspired it". Believing hi-fi had lost its way the company "is pushing back to the pioneering days of playback and sincere investigation, and acknowledges the inspiration of the early giants like Lansing, Tesla and Edison". Even though I'm no retro-nerd, it's an attitude that rings a chord with yours truly, and I daresay a number of readers too.

That's not to say that there aren't a great many good speakers out there

today, nor that considerable improvements haven't taken place in numerous aspects of speaker performance. But it's equally valid to point out that loudspeakers are compromises, and that improvements in one area often have unwanted and unexpected consequences elsewhere. There are lots of variables involved in speaker design, and I'm sure we only know about some of them. Then there's the simple fact that certain fifty year old classic designs from Tannoy and Lowther remain in production to this day, simply because there's still a demand for them. In a marketplace dominated by speakers with 6.5-inch (165mm) main drivers, opting to design your entire range around a 10-incher would seem to be brave bordering on foolhardy. That's partly because it's so hard to design an attractive looking speaker around such a wide drive unit, and one of Zu's significant achievements lies in overcoming this very tricky hurdle. The £2,395/pair Druid IV – one of Zu's three stereo pairs, and the smaller of two floorstanders – is both tall and wide, but very slim from front to back. It's never going to look particularly discreet, but it does have an attractively purposeful elegance in the way the silver finished drivers contrast with the matt black laminate. The whole thing sits on a

square silver-laminate plinth, which is essential to complete the aesthetics and also ensure stability.

This is actually a one-and-a-half-way design, as no obvious attempt is made to roll off the upper end of that large main driver. Its large 190mm paper cone, terminated in a double-S doped fabric surround, will naturally have restricted and very directional high frequencies, but the smaller 95mm 'wizzer' cone should help extend things a little. Ultimately, however, the large diameter voice coil used will (in addition to conferring generous power handling) have a relatively large inductance, which will introduce its own natural first-order roll-off. It's logical therefore to add a tweeter to extend the top end, and Zu has gone for a rather smart looking horn-loaded device with machined alloy outer horn and moulded plastic waveguides.

The tweeter is mounted at ear level, and beneath the main driver, which is why the whole thing stands nearly 1.3m tall. Zu's literature is not particularly forthcoming about the precise nature of the bass loading system employed here. There's certainly some form of vent, covered in a metal grille, located in the base of the enclosure (so either the studs or spikes supplied must be used to keep the plinth clear of the ground). ▶



► The loading system used is attributed to one Ron Griewe, who is known for motorcycle exhaust tuning techniques; it's apparently different from reflex or transmission line approaches, and based instead on 'alternating velocity theories'. Note that the spikes/studs have a US type thread and are roughly 9mm diameter, so cannot be substituted by European types. Electrical input is provided by a solitary five-way Cardas terminal pair, and Zu's own cable is used internally.

The specification is also a little unorthodox, at any rate in the way it arrives at a sensitivity of 101dB. One normally only encounters this sort of figure with the highest efficiency horns, and it's considerably higher than the c95dB recorded by my normal method. The discrepancy is all to do with the impossibility of accurately defining a speaker's impedance, when in practice it varies significantly with frequency. Sensitivity is nominally expressed as dB ref 1W; however, since 1W is the power consumed by an 8 Ohm resistor when fed from a 2.83V source, for the sake of convenience sensitivity is normally measured at 2.83V. Under these circumstances a 4 Ohm load will actually consume 2W, while a 16 Ohm load just 0.5W. The Druid IV's impedance only falls below 8 Ohms at very high frequencies, and varies between 10 and 30 Ohms across most of the band, so there is some justification for Zu's claim, even though it somewhat exaggerates the figure compared to normal industry practice.

While its bass loading may not use a traditional reflex port, the impedance shows a similar 'saddle', suggesting maximum bass reinforcement will be

provided around 40 – 55Hz; a rather obvious extra 'blip' is visible around 150Hz. The main driver impedance is already starting to rise from 500Hz, so it's not surprising that the main driver starts rolling off fairly obviously at higher frequencies. The 'whizzer' cone clearly plays its part, but output falls away quite steadily above 2.5kHz when measured under far-field conditions, and much more rapidly above 6kHz, where the tweeter

Close-to-wall siting lifts the bass up to the mid-band level, but leaves the upper bass and lower mid a little lacking, and the treble distinctly shy. Genuinely flat neutrality looks difficult to achieve here, though it's certainly worth taking plenty of time and care to experiment for best results.

While a neutral balance is obviously a worthwhile goal, it says nothing about less tangible and more emotional virtues.

The sheer fun factor of this speaker may not disguise its balance limitations, but it does transcend them, offering the sort of righteous dynamic expression that makes all kinds of music, and voice rendition in particular, exciting and involving. Whether that dynamic advantage is a function of the high sensitivity, the large driver area, or the good phase coherence that comes from using a single driver over most of the range, is impossible to say – probably it's a combination of all three.

The Druid IV may not be a true single full-range driver design, but it gets a lot closer to that concept than most, yet it also avoids the high frequency unruliness that often plagues such speaker systems. Indeed, rather the reverse: the top end of this speaker rolls off very smoothly, and if anything the overall sound is a little too dull. Sibilants and consonants lack a little incisiveness, and some harmonic richness is lost from violins and cymbals. Air and transparency is also mildly curtailed, but the top end is at least smooth and notably free from intrusive resonances. Perhaps Zu's own speaker cable might have ►



effectively takes over.

As is often the case with high sensitivity designs, the in-room response traces are neither particularly smooth nor flat. With the speakers well clear of walls, the broad mid-band is rather prominent.

► helped here, but unfortunately the available lengths were too short for my installation.

Where this speaker really shows its strengths is lower down the audio range, where it combines fine power with an unusual crispness and freedom from overhang. Percussion was particularly impressive for delivering considerable punch with obviously superior drive and timing. Imaging is precise and coherent, with the added bonus that the high-set above-the-listener main driver gives extra height and spaciousness. The Druid IV's wide dynamic range and expert timing also proved very adept at distinguishing the qualities of components further up the front end of the hi-fi chain, for



example easily highlighting the advantages of Naim's new 555PS power supply (discussed in more detail in my column this issue).

It's certainly possible to criticise Zu's Druid IV on strict grounds of neutrality, but this thoroughly engaging and communicative design places musical literacy at the top of its list of priorities. Strict notions of accuracy give way to creating emotional involvement, and the result is a very enjoyable package, despite fun. The styling is unusual and interesting, and the easy load and high sensitivity would make a good partner for low powered valve amps. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	One and a half way loudspeaker with proprietary porting
Drivers:	Zu260FR-G2 10 inch Zu-T1 horn-loaded tweeter
Impedance:	8 Ohms min, 12 Ohms nom
Sensitivity:	101dB claimed, 95dB measured (2.83V)
Power Handling:	300W
Group Delay:	<5ms
Enclosure:	20mm MDF with laminated phenolic skin.
Finishes:	Black Satin or Tokyo Frost
Internal Cable:	Zu B3 silver alloy
Size (WxHxD)	280 x 1270 x 160mm
Footprint:	300 x 300mm
Weight:	28 kg ea
Price:	£2395/pair

UK Distributor:
 Musicology
 Tel. (44)(0)1273 700759
 Net. www.musicology.co.uk

Manufacturer:
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The Neat Motive 2 Loudspeaker

by Jason Hector

When it came to providing great sound from a speaker with minimal domestic impact, few designs appealed as much to my ears as the no longer produced Royd RR1 (reviewed way back in issue 13) and its predecessor the cheaper Royd Minstrel. Because these speakers were small floorstanders they avoided the dust trap of ugly ironwork so necessary to extract the full performance from a quality stand-mounter and they avoided the extra cost as well. Both had an excellent sound per pound ratio, provided you were careful not to push them outside their operating envelope, and both could be expected to deliver top quality performance when plonked down pretty much anywhere. The Motive 2s are (conceptually and visually) a very similar product to the RR1 at a similar (actually lower) price. They do pretty much everything that the Royds could do, but the Neats trade off a little bit of the Royd's exuberance for more realistic tonality across the frequency spectrum, far superior, low-distortion treble and a capacity to go louder, especially with bass heavy content, without complaint.

High frequencies are so well handled by these speakers that on first listening it's easy to get drawn into the upper registers and almost ignore the rest of the range. Play Victoria Williams – *Happy Come Home* – which was a great recording on Geffen – and the Neats bring the high pitched, quirky and eccentric vocals to life with a wonderful clarity. Similarly the power in the upper reaches of a large choir like the one found on Rachmaninov – *Vespers* (Naxos 8.555908) is a room filling joy. Distortion seems to be non-existent with the treble reaching well into bat territory before there is any

break up. Tweeter technology seems to have come on in leaps and bound recently with superlative efforts from Focal, Seas and B&W to name but three. The Motive range makes use of a Neat designed derivative of the perennial Focal inverted dome recipe. These tweeters are frankly phenomenal and either Neat are losing money on every speaker or they are incredibly good value devices. Luckily for Neat (and for us) the Motives are the happy beneficiaries of technology trickle down and the low cost of labour in the Far East. I am going to harp on about treble response quite a lot in this review and this is because mediocre treble should, at last, be becoming a thing of the past. Before digital sources poor treble was still acceptable in a speaker because of the more forgiving nature of the recording medium. With CD however many speakers were simply exposed as over-bright, relentless and lacking in extension, unable to handle the extra energy present in a flat frequency response. In recent times serious improvements in tweeter performance through materials and design mean that the very best dynamic devices can rival much more exotic devices in their purity. Finally, we're beginning to reap the benefits of those advances at more modest price points.

The Motives 2s, like the previously mentioned Royds, manage to sound far bigger than they look and the only time the size of these speakers becomes aurally noticeable is when they are asked to produce some serious transients in the bass and lower midrange. Take the first, eponymously titled, album from Garbage where many tracks gain much of their propulsion and hence excitement through powerful bass transients that really have to be felt to be fully appreciated. The Neat's small bass-mid unit, small cabinet and port are simply incapable of pressurising enough air to give the visceral result you get with bigger drive units in bigger boxes. What you do hear are transients that never outstay their welcome, even when the air movement is produced via the port, and that means razor sharp timing, low congestion and excellent harmonic consistency all of which is both obvious and welcome on the Kings of Leon's first album – *Youth And Young Manhood* or the first Gomez album, *Bring It On*, two unusually excellent, consistent and low compression rock recordings. If you need a bit more power and bass then the Motive 1 could be an option since it goes deeper through an additional bass-mid unit and some extra cabinet volume. There is also a petite



► stand-mounter, the Motive 3, which shares the 2s driver compliment. To complete the model line up there is also the obligatory centre channel speaker (which unsurprisingly shares drive units with the other Motives) for those who like to have extra speakers in the listening room. I can see a combination of these speakers making a really excellent multi-channel system and because of the diminutive nature of the cabinets and their room friendliness people might even have the room to house them.

Compared to the kibri Naima speakers (review in issue 44 and about twice the price) they replaced, the Motives offer more explicit but cleaner treble and increased resolution, but they are more reticent and do not render scale as well. This is especially noticeable at lower volumes where the kibri speakers excel; playing the Fauré – *Requiem* (Naxos 8.550765) we can glory in the beauty of the vocals and especially the soprano content, but the sheer size of the choir and the acoustic space around the performance was curtailed. Similarly the Neats rendition of spaces and the space between and around performers was also less well portrayed but because of the Motives' clarity and resolution of instruments and voices this was less of an issue than it might have been. It's very clear how an instrument is being played and differences in timbre are obvious but it is less noticeable how big a space it is in and how far it is from the other performers – the sense of relative scale so strongly portrayed by the kibri's was diminished. Turning the wick up gains a little more excitement and scale but the reticence, or distancing, is never really banished; it is a consistent trait

in their performance. The flip side is that it makes the Neats very even handed performers across recording quality and genre.

So the tweeter is a tour de force, but what about the other driver? Neat are asking a lot of the small bass mid unit.



While it doesn't reach the dizzy performance heights of the

tweeter and I have mentioned the limitations in sheer air moving ability, it is clearly capable of plenty of expression in the mid-band and a surprising amount of bass. Ah bass; some can't live without it, whereas others find it all too much trouble.

Neat like a bit of bass, so their recent speakers tend to reach surprisingly deep considering driver and cabinet size. The Motive 2 is no exception and Neat have decided to sacrifice some efficiency to extract a bit more low-end extension. But they also appreciate timing and pace, so their bass tends to err on the dry side; far better than a fat, wallowy sound to these ears but others may miss the bloom that passes for neutrality and bass depth in much of the competition. The lower frequencies can get a little one note and the mid-range thickens when asked to work really hard (back to Garbage, the Kings of Leon and Gomez) and you

have effectively reached the limits of the bass-mid unit. This tends to unbalance the sound at high levels since the tweeter never seems to give up and always sounds very transparent and open. At more modest (typical?) volumes performance and integration are far better, to the extent that you no longer notice the join.

As with most speakers they benefit hugely from an amplifier with a bit of control and quality and bearing in mind the pretty low efficiency more than a few clean Watts are essential. A Creek 4340SE that I use as a typical integrated at the lower end of the amplifier spectrum had no problem in generating good and enjoyable sounds. It did have to work a bit but like many similar class B amplifiers (those from Naim, Rotel or Rega being prime examples) it tends to thrive on that sort of treatment.

These speakers are a ported design but at first glance you could miss that fact because the port is mounted in the base of the cabinet. This location and the control it offers the designer

► over port termination has helped create a very room friendly speaker. They sounded great just about anywhere, even pushed hard back against the rear wall providing party music for a room full of hyperactive toddlers (not a pretty sight), but it is still worth spending some time optimising the set-up to



extract the last bit of performance possible. Get them right and the soundstage expands and the speakers disappear. Imaging in the 3-D sense is pretty reasonable for the money. Laterally, sounds aren't locked to the speakers, but depth and height are limited. This isn't a great problem for

me but might be a drawback for you. The Motives are mounted on small plinths that serve to increase the footprint for stability, but they also provide a forward facing shaped vent for that downward firing port. The plinths are bolted securely to the main carcass of the speaker. Some really chunky spikes are supplied which should result in good mechanical support. The adjustment available will also allow some tuning of the port to the room since the gap the port vents through will be affected by spike length. During the initial set-up I was surprised at how good the Motives sounded without the spikes. But adding them did provide a bit more clarity and weight to the sound but at the expense of some cohesion. I think in my room, with carpet over floorboards, the speaker benefited from a reduced port opening. I can't honestly say in which configuration I preferred them since it was program dependant and very much a personal choice but I would recommend some experimentation if you try a pair in your room.

Each cabinet leans back a little which points the drivers toward the listener, achieving some time alignment, and really completes the visual look of the speakers making them look even smaller. The cabinet is very solid and non-resonant, making an excellent foundation for the drivers.

The MDF carcass is clad in a choice of quality veneers, with special finishes, including those available for the ultimatum series, on request and at additional cost. The plinths are always black. Overall product feel and finish is very impressive at the price and their diminutive stature allied to the range of finishes will allow them to fit almost any living space.

Electrical connection is to four chunky multi-way posts per speaker, with shorting bars for single wire operation. I'd prefer to see a single

set of connectors rather than the bi-wire option but a speaker at this price has to cater to market expectations and the market expects the bi-wiring option. That said, with their pretty low efficiency bi-amplification might be an interesting option and allow a stepped upgrade path, something Neat recommend for all of their speakers. Either way, I'd ditch those shorting bars at the earliest opportunity!

The Motives prove that it's not just the big boys who can make a really good value, high performance and very attractive product at this end of the market. Add in the room friendliness and this speaker is clearly a winner. They do need a bit of decent power, so if your budget is tight choose with care.

Alternatively, if you are trying to put together a really good system for a small room, don't be afraid to partner these Neats with much more serious electronics. They'll let you hear the quality and won't fail to entertain. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way Reflex
Drive Units:	25mm inverted metal dome 134mm doped paper cone
Impedance:	8 Ohms
Sensitivity:	85 dB/1 watt
Bandwidth:	35Hz - 30kHz (claimed)
Dimensions (Wx HxD):	160 x 713 x 200mm
Footprint (WxD):	220 x 260mm
Weight:	11Kg Each.
Finishes:	Oak, Maple, Cherry and Rosenut, Others available to special order
Price:	£850

Manufacturer:
Neat Acoustics Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1833 631021
Net. www.neat.co.uk

Speakers

Origin Live OL-2 speakers
BKS Hybrid 107 supreme speakers
Mordaunt Short MS 10 speakers
Mordaunt Short MS-815 speakers
Spica TC-50 speakers
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Perfect Balance...

Clearaudio get it right with the Cartridge Weight Watcher

by Roy Gregory

Electronic stylus gauges are hardly new and could never be described as inexpensive. Nor are they without their foibles, operational intricacies and an incredibly irritating habit of running out of juice just when you need them most – a problem compounded by the fact that most of them use flaky rechargeable cells that you need to plug in overnight or watch batteries of a type so obscure you need to order them a week in advance.

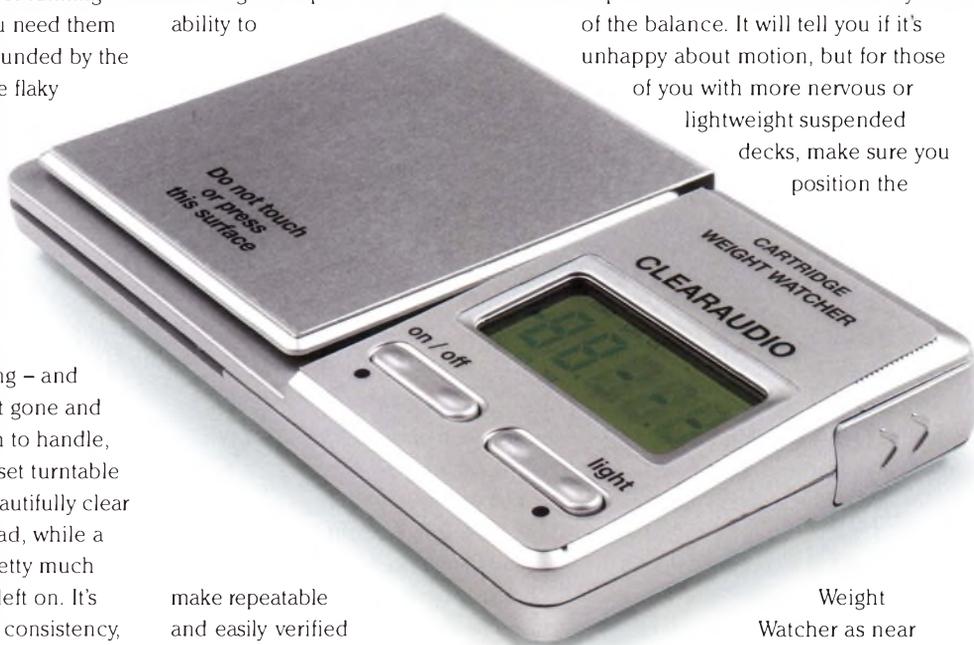
Well, now we have Clearaudio's latest offering – and hallelujah! If they haven't gone and got it right. Large enough to handle, it's not so heavy as to upset turntable suspensions unduly. A beautifully clear LCD display is easy to read, while a blue backlight should pretty much ensure that it never gets left on. It's self-calibrating to ensure consistency, as a result measures accurately and repeatably to 100th g and does so as near as dammit at record surface level. The wide measuring platform ensures no problems with bizarre cartridge shapes or obscured styli. And best of all? It's cheaper than the competition and runs on a pair of good old AAAs available from garages and convenience stores everywhere – even in the outback or somewhere on the high veldt.

Of course, stylus down-force needs to be set by ear and varies from one cartridge to another, even within a

range of examples of a single model. Such is the joy of working with hand assembled micro engineering. But part of the process of optimizing any cartridge set-up is the ability to

practicality. Anybody who sets up or fiddles with their own cartridges should consider it an essential tool.

One word of warning; accuracy depends on the level and stability of the balance. It will tell you if it's unhappy about motion, but for those of you with more nervous or lightweight suspended decks, make sure you position the



make repeatable and easily verified steps, which is exactly where the Cartridge Weight Watcher comes in. And whilst an electronic balance might be considered frivolous outside the hands of a professional who regularly works with customers' decks, an accurate alternative is very hard to find. (Don't even think about suggesting the Shure, which is neither accurate nor repeatable!) Well, at £115 the Clearaudio offering is considerably cheaper than most of the competition whilst at least matching them operationally and trouncing them for

Weight Watcher as near the sub-chassis centre of balance as possible. Aside from that one caveat, this is about as near to the perfect product as you have any right to expect. ➤

Price: £115

UK Distributor:
Audio Reference
Tel. (44)(0)1252 702705
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Using Symposium's Svelte Shelf and Rollerblocks under loudspeakers

by Roy Gregory

When I wrote my magnum opus on support systems back in Issue 41, I promised to look further into the question of using these devices under loudspeakers, a subject I'd avoided in a (somewhat vain) attempt to keep the scope of the project manageable. Besides, I knew that there were developments in the offing from both Vertex and Stillpoints, both of which would impinge directly on the subject. We'll get to those in due course, but meanwhile, the review of the Coincident Total Victories gave Symposium distributor Simon Mantele of Musicology another opportunity to push their cause when used under his speakers. As a not inexpensive option I elected to treat the 'upgrade' as a separate subject and reviewed the speakers exactly as delivered. Here then is the follow up, dealing with the Symposium floor interface arrangement.

Musicology supplied a pair of Svelte Shelves the right size to carry the large footprint of the TVs, along with a set of eight Rollerblock Jrs, and threaded studs to connect them to the Coincidents' outrigger feet. Clearly this constitutes a two-stage process, so initially I placed the speakers directly on the platforms, using the original spikes and footers employed throughout their review. Sounds simple I know, but don't try this by yourself. Managing to place the platforms below the conically anchored, 100kg speakers whilst keeping them in the same place is a feat of organisation and teamwork:

Make sure you are well rested and relaxed before attempting, especially if relying on ones wife to provide the extra hands! We actually managed to get everything arranged just so, without gouging the bare-wood floor once in the process – you should be so lucky... Oh, and don't handle the shelves with bare hands, as they finger mark just as quickly as you look at them! Yes, you can clean



them, but it's a lot better not to have to.

The labour, however, is well worthwhile. The speakers, atop the platforms sound immediately and obviously better. Separation of instruments and coherence of the soundstage both improve, as does dimensionality and focus. Now you can hear the space between instruments more readily, locate them more precisely in space and identify their particular tonality more easily; all results of the improved bottom-end linearity and foundation. Bass goes deeper, with more weight and power, greater transparency and more defined edges to notes. Dynamics, especially dynamic distinctions, are much more clearly and precisely delineated, while overall dynamic range is also improved.

How's that for a string of clichés? Right, let's relate that to music. Taking a hoary old chestnut like the Johanos/Dallas Rachmaninof *Symphonic Dances*, the opening section opens out before you, the acoustic more coherent, the various instruments more clearly located within it, important when you consider the short contributions that are drawn from all over the orchestra. The acoustic space helps bind them together



and give them sense; the platforms help you hear that acoustic far more easily. As the piece grows and the instrumental density starts to fill out, you'll also notice an increased sense of purpose and momentum in the music, heightened drama and a far more emphatic delivery. The special combination of restraint and pent-up energy builds far more inexorably, in more obvious stages, towards the release of the first great crescendo. These differences are far from subtle or musically trivial. In the context of a \$10K speaker they constitute a no-brainer.

Adding the Rollerblock Jrs in place of the cones is a far simpler process, although sonically the results are less immediately apparent. Indeed, at ►

► first the sound seems flat and turgid – a real disappointment. What's required is a couple of adjustments: the Rollerblocks are about a centimetre shorter than the spikes, dropping the bass units nearer to the floor. You need to compensate with speaker position. Remember that the platforms increase bass weight and power, but used with the existing spikes they also raise the speaker by 16mm, which does the necessary – at least in the case of the TV2s. Dropping the speaker back down whilst also adding the extra bass impact and definition that the Rollerblocks deliver demands moving the speaker forward – about 25mm in my room – in order to restore the correct balance. Secondly (and contrary to normal practice) you're going to have to increase the volume slightly. Why? Because the Rollerblocks do such a good job of cleaning up leading edge dynamics and removing edge and overshoot that these artefacts that made the system sound edgy and exciting (as well as loud) are banished. You don't want the nasties back but you will need to increase the level to achieve the same apparent impact. Sounds wrong I know, just wait until you try it. The end result is that the system can be played louder with less fatigue. You don't have to play it louder – it's just that in this case you need to match your previously set reference. In fact, you'll end up playing it quieter.

Why? Because it's so much easier to hear into the music. Adding the Rollerblocks to the equation seems to extend the bass rather than simply adding weight, bringing greater texture and clarity to lower register instruments. The nature and reverb applied to the "smack" in Jackie Leven's 'Single father' is a case in point, the single impact being revealed as distinct elements, much more than just a whack. Likewise,

the soundstage is deeper, more defined and its space blacker, lending greater dynamic integrity and tonal character to individual instruments. This is starkly apparent on the *Symphonic Dances*, where the disparate instruments are more clearly separate, but more important, clearer too is the way they combine, the interlocking phrases and structures that build inexorably from single instrument to orchestral tutti, so quickly and inevitably.



The extra life and sparkle, air and tension invests the performance with a verve, a pulse, that make it a real thing.

Not only does it bring the orchestra to life, but they in turn conjure up the composer's vision and intent.

So yes, I consider the combination of Svelte Shelves and Rollerblocks a great success, at least under the Coincident TV2s. Experimentation also suggests that the order of priorities should be shelf first, as without the platform, the Rollerblocks tend to simply thin the sound and pull it apart. (I didn't get the chance to try the speakers sitting directly on the Shelves, the way the manufacturer recommends. This may be better still than with the spikes in place, so you'll need to suck it and see if this approach takes your fancy.) What's more, the Svelte Shelves are relatively impervious to surface, working equally well between speaker and almost any kind of floor short of really deep pile carpet. However, I suspect their main application might well be beneath speakers standing on

the increasing number of bare wooden floors. Elegant in appearance and available in a wide range of sizes, they offer the icing on the cake of already excellent speaker performance, as well as a healthy dose of practicality. Given their sonic virtues and modest price (in the context of floorstanding speakers costing several thousand pounds) I'd recommend their early audition.

Where does that leave the Rollerblocks? They're the cherry on the icing on the cake... If like me you always eat round the bun and save that cherry for the last bite, then just like me, you'll want them too. They may not make as obvious a difference as the Svelte Shelves, but in many ways the effect is ultimately even more important, adding the layer of subtle nuance that finally convinces.

In combination the blocks and shelves simply promise to let your speakers work better, unshackled from the burden of cabinet effects. That's exactly what you'll hear – although presumably those effects will vary some-what with different speakers, and let's not forget just how much mechanical energy a speaker like the TV2 actually produces. But as an externally applied and easily tried tweak, the Symposium approach to speaker support seems hard to resist. Go on – I really think you should... 

Svelte Shelves: from £265/pr
Rollerblock Jrs: from £240/set
of four

UK Distributor:
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Tel. (44)(0)1273 700759
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Starting From Scratch...

Facing the terrors of an unknown environment

by Roy Gregory

Moving house is pretty stressful at the best of times, but for audiophiles the angst is compounded by the inevitable new listening room that comes with it. Of course, for the lucky few, a whole new listening room might be the driving force behind upping sticks in the first place (even if the rest of the family believe otherwise), but there's still a chill that settles somewhere around the kidneys when you first confront that open expanse and wonder what's going to go where. That's exactly the feeling RP got when he finally opened the door on his newly converted double garage (the one appended to his newly purchased house that's so far from anywhere else it's meaningless to explain. His solitary, nay positively anti-social, tendencies came to a screeching, shuddering halt and he promptly grabbed the phone to call home – or in this case, yours truly as his mother's not too keen on hi-fi – to elicit aid in return for empty promises that seemed to revolve around scenery, walking and cycling. I was sure that beer figured in there somewhere too but I was promptly corrected on arrival.

For anyone who missed his update in Issue 43, I'll recap. Mr P's new listening room started life as a double-skin garage, which by the time it had been boarded and plastered, rewired and had a brand new stone floor laid, rendered up a space 17' x 14' with a 7.5' ceiling. Somehow, into this he had to shoehorn not just the Eminent Technology LFT VIII hybrid dipolar loudspeakers, along with the amps to drive them, two digital front-ends and the daunting bulk of the TNT HRX, but 6000 records and not a few CDs: Oh, and somewhere to sit of course. A glance at the accompanying diagram shows that the practical

demands of housing such an enormous vinyl collection mandated the use of at least one long wall, racked floor to ceiling, which in turn meant that the logical way to fire the speakers was across rather than down the space, allowing plenty of room on each side to breathe. Once that had been decided, the placement of everything else more or less fell into place, although the more we discussed layout the more the essential conundrum emerged. The System was going to have to go on the short wall, to the right of the listening seat, but the sheer volume of equipment meant that accommodating everything was going to be a problem – begging the question as to where best to site the power amps. A quick squint at the equipment listing in the sidebar will show that Reuben (never one to do things by halves) uses four Trichord Alecto mono-blocks – each up-rated to 250W/Ch – to deliver the grunt required by the wide bandwidth and moderate efficiency of the

ETs. Having gone to the time, trouble and expense of creating a dedicated listening room, it seemed crazy to compromise the performance of the amps by siting them less than optimally. So, should they be on long interconnects and close to the speakers, or short interconnects and next to the system?

Moving the system as a whole had made a nonsense of the previous cable loom, so it seemed like a good opportunity to put this particular chestnut to bed. Contacting those nice

people at the Chord Co. elicited a set of cables that would provide a coherent loom throughout the system, with the extra lengths to allow us to ring the changes. Mains supply was taken care of by a Shunyata Hydra 8 for the analogue elements, fed by a Taipan mains lead and using Python Alphas to feed the equipment. The Tube Tech Fusion 64 CD player was fed with an Anaconda Vx while the McCormack UDP-1 used a Python Vx, both hooked into a Hydra 2/Taipan combination. We haven't visited the Shunyata leads for a while and need to report on the latest versions, but suffice to say, outside of the context of an all Valhalla set-up, these are the best and most adaptable power cords and distributors I've used – a view supported by their widespread presence at CES this year. Combined with the dedicated spur (and remote location free from neighbor generated pollution) this is about as good as raw power can get.

Working on the advice of Nigel Finn at Chord, the signal cables were Chameleon Silver, matched to



▶ Odyssey 2 speaker wires, a relatively modest combination given the cost of the electronics, but one that he's found to give excellent results with the Trichord electronics that constitute the heart of the system. The only exception to the Chord theme was a Hovland tonearm cable used with the VPI JMW 12" arm – a dedicated application that Chord are yet to address.

First order of business was to create space along the short wall sufficient to accommodate the VPI HRX and two RDC Aspekt Racks to house the electronics. The other reason that Roob gave ME a ring was the sure and certain knowledge that he'd be able to rifle my garage for redundant goodies, a serious bonus in a field where the more bits and pieces you've got to play with, the more likely you are to get a solution – at least as long as you can stay focused. First item to find its way into the gaping maw of his waiting 4x4 (Louise says he only bought a house a mile up a track at the top of a very big hill to justify his prior purchase of the enormous gas-guzzling SUV universally derided as "The Beast") was an aged but perfectly



serviceable Arcici Lead Balloon. This tripod stand dates from the purchase of my original TNT, so we knew it could do the job. The base unit was positioned 2/7ths of the way along the wall, which puts it nicely in the zero output side-lobe

of the nearest speaker as well as a null in the room's energy pattern. Carefully leveled, the two-inch diameter legs were filled with SoundBytes ballast, capped and the top frame, complete with its two lead bars, put in place. In theory, the deck should sit directly on the lead, but the HRX is way



too big and its standalone motor precludes that possibility. We used two sheets of fabric wrapped HDF to create a rudimentary constrained layer.

Next task was to install the turntable. This involved replacing the original air bladder suspension with the upgraded version. Plagued by leaks that let the 'table sag out of level, VPI's Harry Weisfeld has developed an ingenious solution based on that round and readily available suspension medium, the squash ball. With a foam belt around their

middle to centre them in the corner tower, these are inserted and then the whole sub-chassis lowered onto conical feet with cups machined in their upper faces. These cups screw down into the foot proper and have

a large knurled ring that allows adjustment for leveling. It's hard to imagine a simpler or more elegantly executed design, and it's retrofitable to all TNT derivatives that employ the air-bladder suspension. Fitting it to earlier decks will mean replacing the corner towers for the later version, but that is also available as an upgrade.

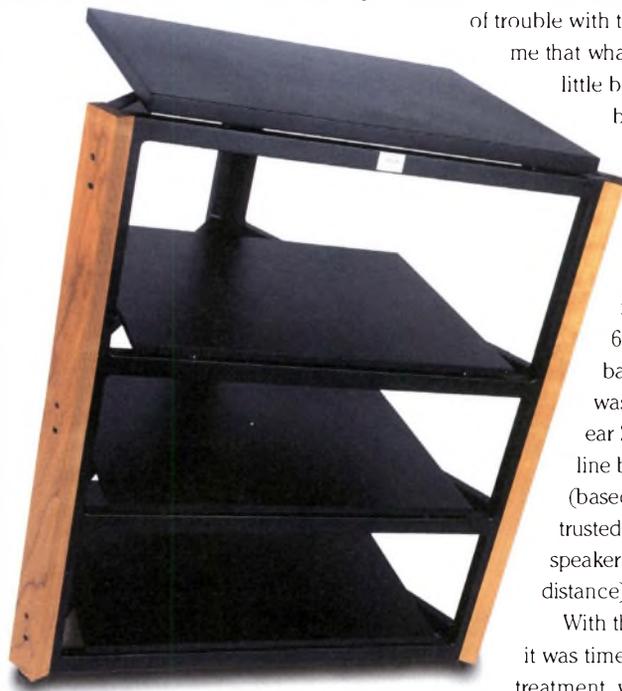
With the new suspension in place, setting up

the deck becomes even simpler. The bearing was cleaned and oiled with a magic solution, courtesy of AJvdH, and with the motor and belts in place, speed was checked on the SDS. Next, the brand new Lyra Titan was installed in the arm-tube, carefully aligned using the WallyTractor and VPI azimuth bar. Tracking force was set at 1.8 using the Clearaudio stylus balance and the deck and cartridge were left to run while we set up the rest of the electronics.

The RDC racks were placed either side of the turntable, SDS and Hydras placed on the right, Hera, Argo, Fusion 64 and UDP-1 on the left. The MicroGroove Plus phono-stage was placed on a Torlyte shelf, directly under the HRX. Despite the substantial girth of the Shunyata mains leads, their weight and flexibility makes for a neat and very tidy installation, while allowing us to keep mains and signal cabling as separate as possible. ▶

► We could also keep all cabling feeding into the pre-amp down to short 1m runs. Initially, the mono-blocks were installed on 1.5m interconnects feeding 5m speaker cables. They were supported on the small, square Quadraspire tables, two amps to the stack and fed from an Experience Filtration 6-way block via their own mains leads, essential because of the right-angle entry IECs they use.

Finally, with everything hooked up it was time to work on positioning the speakers. The LFT VIII's are capable of some serious, deep-bass output, especially when bi-amped. Given the dimensions of the room I was concerned that we could be running into trouble, but experience was to prove otherwise. The LP storage has the effect of narrowing the



room slightly, making the dimensions multiples of 13, 15 and 17, which is just enough of a spread to get nice even response. Placing the speakers on the ugly but undeniably effective Sound Anchor stands designed for them also helps, coupling the speaker much more effectively to the floor as well as

lifting the bass units an inch or two clearer. As a result, simply marching the speakers across the room until they provided even, nicely weighted bass was simplicity itself. I used a mixture of sweeps and well-known recordings for this, my old stand-bys being *This One's For Blanton* and *We Get Requests*. Once you're close, you're talking about increments of half a centimeter or so, but it's painstaking rather than difficult.

The speakers ended up 102cm from the back wall. I'd started them symmetrically placed 180cm apart, simply because it looked about right. Application of the LEDR tests (computer generated blips that walk around the soundstage) showed that actually they needed to be an extra 8cm apart, placing the tweeters 176cm from the sidewalls. At first I had a lot of trouble with this, until it dawned on me that what I really needed was a

little bit of toe-in to stop the blips clumping around the speakers.

Swinging the rear feet of the Sound Anchors out by 3cm was perfect (bear in mind that they protrude 66cm behind the speaker baffle). The listening seat was positioned to place the ear 207cm from the centre line between the speakers (based on the tried and trusted 1/1.1 ratio between speaker spacing and listening distance) and hey presto...

With the speakers positioned it was time to look at acoustic treatment, with a plethora of RoomTunes, EchoBusters and other toys on hand. Ultimately, we settled on a minimalist solution of a pair of EchoBuster BassTraps in the rear corners behind the speakers, and a pair of the RoomTunes triangles in the top corners above them. The former cleaned up the bass, making it more even and tactile still, while the

The System

VPI TNT HRX
VPI JMW 12.5 Tonearm
Lyra Titan MC Cartridge
Hovland Tonearm Cable
TEAD MicroGroove Plus Phono-stage

McCormack UDP-1 Universal Player
Tube Technology Fusion 64 CD Player

Trichord Argo Line-stage
Trichord Hera Power Supply

4x Trichord Alecto Mono-blocks

Eminent Technology LFT VIII Loudspeakers
Sound Anchor stands

Chord Co. Chameleon Silver Interconnects
Chord Co. Odyssey 2 Speaker Cable

Shunyata Hydra 8 and Hydra 2 distribution blocks
Taipan, Python Alpha and Vx, Anaconda Vx power cords
Experience Filtration 6-way block

Arcici Lead Balloon
RDC Aspekt Racks with heavy duty shelves
Quadraspire Racks

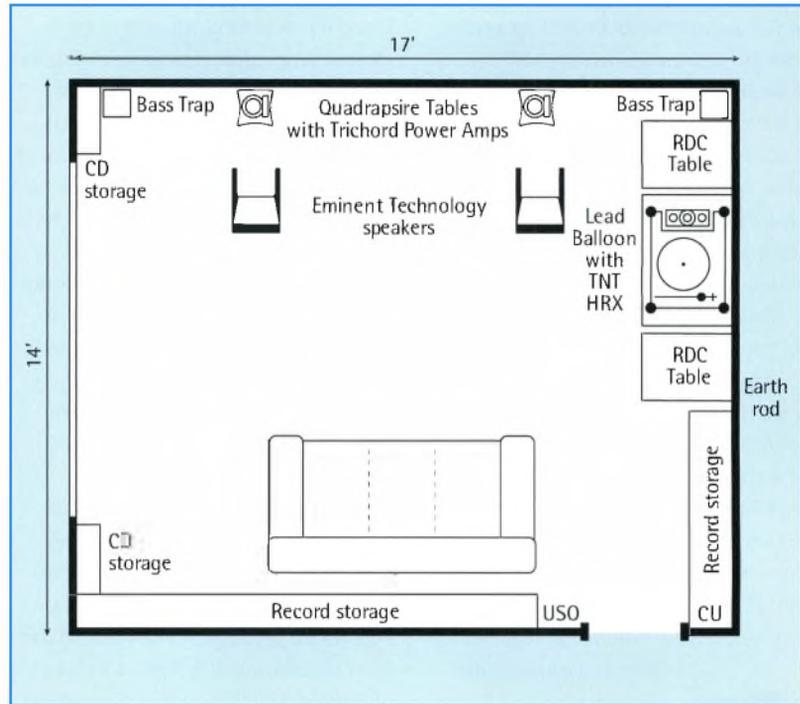
latter added a little air and height to the soundstage, as well as focus to high frequencies. Combined with the software storage on the walls behind the listening position, creating a disruptive, damped end to the room, the overall balance was far better than I'd expected to achieve.

With everything playing it was time to sort out the positioning of the amps. By now we were pretty familiar with the short interconnect/long speaker lead option. Inserting 5m interconnects and 1.5m speaker cables allowed us to place the amps just behind and outside the speakers. Returning to familiar tracks we noticed a clear improvement in the grip, transparency, dynamic range and energy at low frequencies, with all the expected benefits further up the range. The mid-band opened out, with vocals and percussion work much more solid and immediate. There was no going

► back so obvious were the benefits, even if they created a logistical wiring nightmare caused by the length of the mains leads.

Now, I was somewhat surprised by this, as my previous experiments as regard this question had produced the opposite result – albeit some 15 years previously. So I sat down and worked through the logic and I think I've managed to sort this one out, at least on an intuitive level. Back in the day the amps in question were my much loved (and still cherished) Jadis JA30s. With its ECC82/ECC83 input stage, the 30 struggles for gain at the front-end. It's adequate but certainly no more than that. You could add an extra tube but the sonic results destroy the special directness and musical magic that you otherwise get from this amp. Better to work within the limitations and given that the output transformers on this amp are absolute gems, it's better to get them driving long speaker cables while the input gets all the help it can from the short interconnects – hence the marked preference for this arrangement. In the case of the Alectos, there's no shortage of gain or input sensitivity, but the LFT VIIIs represent significant power sponges, with their wide bandwidth, power hungry planar magnetic drivers and lowish sensitivity. Giving the amps the shortest possible speaker leads is giving them every chance to grab hold of the speaker and impose some authority. In other words, in the same way that bi-amping is so effective in the case of the ETs, the various wiring configurations match the characteristics of the amps and the system context, delivering help where it's most needed.

So, the conclusion seems to be that there will be a real advantage in optimizing the different cable lengths, but you are going to have to experiment in the specific system to get the best results; and yes, it will be worth the bother. Oh, and there's a final option that we didn't try, which is equal length leads. I can certainly see that



working well in less extreme scenarios than the two I've just discussed. So, with that sorted at least for the time being, it was time to leave the system overnight to settle down.

Next morning, with things starting to bed in it was time to check the speaker positioning and set about optimizing the set-up of the source components. Both digital front-ends were already supported on double thickness RDC shelves, but further experimentation with interfacing wrought significant improvements. The McCormack UDP-1 was sharpened up and snapped into focus with a trio of finite element CeraBall feet, one beneath the transport and two to the rear. These offered by far the best compromise over a multitude of alternatives, including various RDC cones and feet, building on the player's considerable musical coherence by adding crisper dynamics and greater transparency.

The Fusion 64 was a far more complex problem, with considerable time spent on various supports and damping treatments. However, by far

the greatest benefit was to be had from applying Caig Deoxit contact cleaner to the pins of the 6922 output tubes, along with a pair of duende creatura tube dampers. However, it wasn't until I tried a version of the Vertex approach that I finally achieved superior support. A single CeraBall beneath the transport, teamed with a pair of softer supports to triangulate it finally delivered the combination of bass weight, articulation and clarity that other options had hinted at, but never managed to deliver without upsetting some other aspect of performance. The combined effect of these tweaks was to elevate both the hi-fi and the musical performance of the player by several significant steps. Improvements in detail and resolution were matched by similar gains in dynamic and musical coherence.

By now, the digital side of the system was really starting to sing, so it was time to turn to the analogue elements. The large Hera transformer for the Argo was placed on a BrightStar sand-box, which removed a subtle layer of grain from the sound-stage. But the real benefits ►

► were to be had from balancing incremental adjustments of VTA and tracking force. We ended up running the Titan a little lighter, adding agility and articulation to instrumental dynamics and phrasing, an increased sense of presence and subtle detail to vocals. At the same time we dialed in the VTA for a range of records and labels so as to provide a crib sheet of suggested starting points for any given disc. Of course, with the JMW, such adjustments are child's play, but once again, it was incredible how musically significant tiny shifts in VTA could be, with single increments on the vernier scale producing an audible shift. It's interesting that so many people deny or laugh at such a suggestion, yet I've never yet failed to demonstrate the effect, and once heard it's hard to ignore. What's even more interesting is the way you develop a sensitivity to the influence of VTA that doesn't just tell you when it's not spot on, but gives you a good idea of just how much adjustment it requires.

By now the system was really singing, which was just as well as we'd run out of time. A return visit

for stage two is clearly required, which will consist of several steps. First will be the support under the turntable; I fancy trying a chopping block, especially one constructed from different cubes or rectangles of wood. That I'd place on an MDF shelf, with a thin layer of felt between them. I might also experiment with some Stillpoints as an



interface. Cartridge set-up would need revisiting to allow for running-in, along with the addition of a second armwand to carry a mono cartridge.

The speaker positioning would need another check, just in case the cables' spectral balance or energy distribution had changed with time and all connections (mains and signal) would be cleaned. But the real areas to look at are the support



of the Argo and provision of longer mains leads for the mono-blocks, allowing us to ease their placement and dress the cabling better. So far so good, but there's more to be had yet. The thing to remember is the essential rule; be systematic in your approach and always check back to verify any change. That way you reduce the risk of missteps and mistakes. Bear in mind too that something that worked at one stage in the process may not deliver the same benefits later on, once other aspects of the system have been optimized.

I've described starting from scratch with a new room and new elements in the system, but the same approach will reap dividends on almost any existing set-up, especially the simple cleaning, leveling and cable dressing steps. We also tend to accept that just because something worked when we first tried it, it still does, even though the system has changed. Go on... Rip it down and start again. You never know what you might discover.



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Record Reviews

How To Read Them



In The Country

This Was The Pace of My Heartbeat

Rune Grammofon RCD2045 

In The Country is a Norwegian jazz trio formed by pianist and musical tour de force Morten Ovenlid, who seems to have a finger in all that is good on the Norwegian music scene. In The Country was formed two years ago and features bass player Roger Arntzen and drummer Pål Hulsken both of whom met up with Morten at the Norwegian Academy of Music. ITC is a band that likes to improvise. It keeps things calm most of the time despite influences which include Olivier Messiaen and Morton Feldman, but there is plenty of density and you are never sure which way they will twist the tune. The album starts out in serene style, some might say typically Scandinavian in its sparseness, but by the second track this peace is broken by deviations from the norm that undermine certainty. Stand out tracks here are the anthemic 'How To Get Acquainted' and the following 'In My Time Of Need'. The Ryan Adams tune is very straight and pure, just Ovenlid and his piano with no improvisation or apparent twisting of what he considers to be a remarkable melody. The way he plays it, that is certainly the case. If you are beginning to find EST's take on Scan-jazz trios a bit too predictable this makes a refreshing and soulful change.

JK

RECORDING	
MUSIC	

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.

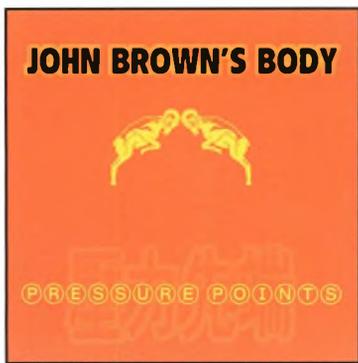
The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information the scale rates a standard,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

The reviewers are identified by their initials.

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

Key to Icons

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



John Brown's Body

Pressure Points

Easy Star Records ES-1013 

John Brown's Body are an upstate New York reggae outfit who while obviously indebted to and inspired by a Jamaican tradition also possess enough nous to musically draw upon English beat movement sources of the late Seventies and early Eighties like The Specials, UB 40 and the Special AKA. Song structures are poppy, accessible and atmospheric, with a catchy resonant reggae groove that daringly stretches into the realms of sampling, programmes and electronica. Through this process they prove that they are not a band that is completely enslaved to the successful mediums of the past. These efforts to move significantly forward will probably offend the Marley purists, but this is still a rhythmically strong album, vocally built around the funky voices of Elliot Martin and guitarist Kevin Kinsella. Their firm grip on proceedings and a precise and deft handling of production values can be heard in progressive tracks like 'Bread', 'New Blood', 'Full Control' and the closing and quite rebellious 'Pressure Points'. The song writing, throughout, has a freshness and relevance about it. On top of this there is the synergy, assurance and unity one would expect from a group of musicians who have worked together for over a decade, bringing a real sense of security and purpose to the fore.

Supplier: www.hotrecords.uk.com

RP



Nouvelle Vague

Nouvelle Vague

Peace Frog Records PFG051CD 

Is it sheer madness, or does it take a brilliantly insane and outrageously ambitious vision to score some of the darkest and most unsettling lyricism of the post punk era and place it within a cool, bossa nova styled salon setting? You decide. But this is exactly what two French musicians Marc Collin and Oliver Libaux have done to thirteen cover versions which include songs like The Undertones' 'Teenage Kicks' and the Cure's 'A Forest'. Amazingly, the mysterious yearnings and painfully desperate images in these songs are underpinned with shaker and bass rhythms and sung by Melanie Pain and Marina Celeste in an accented, most knowing and sexually charged of Gallic ways. The bold and sharp-edged lyrics heard in 'This Is Not A Love Song' (Melanie Pain), 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' (Eloisia) and The Dead Kennedy's 'Too Drunk To F**k' (Camille) left me wide eyed and speechless. In each instance the smouldering vocal threads are mischievously disorientating. Ironic, playful and compositionally just about as unfaithful to the originals as you can get - these are crazy yet truly affectionate covers that work really well because they appear to be so far removed from the originals. Beneath the surface, though, their intensity and passion remains. Stunning!

RP



Linda Ronstadt

Hummin' To Myself

Verve Records 0602498605219 

Linda Ronstadt's return to the Great American Songbook has been long awaited. Her recordings during the 1980s with Nelson Riddle were nothing less than delectable and that degree of unforced elegance, poignancy and the perfectly assured delivery of a beautifully and sensitively produced song is repeated here. Praise too for pianist and composer Alan Broadbent's arrangements and those telling contributions from accompanying A-list jazz musicians like Christian McBride, David "Fathead" Newman and Lewis Nash simply cannot be underestimated. Well-known Cole Porter favourites 'Miss Otis Regrets' and 'Get Out Of Town', Duke Ellington's 'Day Dream' and Frank Loesser gems 'I've Never Been In Love Before' and 'Never Will I Marry' are superbly realised. Genuine affection for this material allied to a wonderfully pretty voice that teases out piquant flavours and the last ounce of intimacy from these scores are not the only reasons to get excited about this CD. George Massenburg's high-resolution 96/24bit recording is equally articulate. Accurate throughout, its levels of transparency, the depth, texture and timing of the varied instrumental and vocal timbres successfully reveals all the interpretative delicacy that Linda and her sidemen bring to this music. It makes for an immensely satisfying programme.

RP





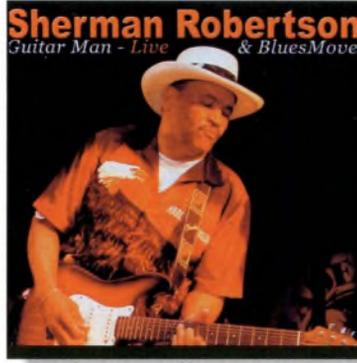
Jaga Jazzist

What We Must

Ninja Tune ZEN103  

Jaga Jazzist are a ten piece Norwegian band that has been in action for ten years and taken almost as many different musical paths over that time, however none of them have been well beaten. Their last and most successful album *A Livingroom* *Hush* had a strong electronica feel but one that made little impression on this reviewer. *With What We Must* the band has produced a much more interesting and powerful piece, one that showcases their ability to pull cohesive and energised tunes out of a dense fusion of sounds. The instrumentation gives some idea of what to expect, amongst others Jaga play vibes, trumpet, trombone and even tuba backing up guitars, keyboards/synths and some of the most ferocious drumming outside of heavy metal. Half the band members are adept at picking up another instrument and their live performances feature at least twice as many instruments as musicians. This album manages to capture much of the power of the live event if not quite the dynamic range. This is a band that likes contrasts and one that's so well honed that it can stop and start on the proverbial dime. The strongest track on the album for my money is 'Oslo Skyline', which builds into a maelstrom of glorious proportions and intensity.

JK



Sherman Robertson

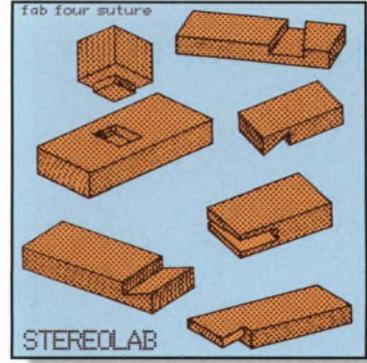
Guitar Man Live!



I caught Sherman Robertson at the Wedgewood Rooms in Southsea about ten years ago, an experience still well and truly embedded in my memory banks. The venue wasn't full but those who did turn up were treated to an explosive display of powerful singing and stinging guitar from a top notch performer. Unfortunately the two albums Sherman cut for Mike Vernon's Code Blue label failed in their attempt to capture the rawness of his live shows, and instead of becoming the superstar he surely deserved to be, Sherman all but disappeared from the radar. So, when ... *Live* dropped on the mat a little tingle of anticipation swept through my body. Could they have possibly captured that magnificent roar of a voice, and had they managed to replicate the full bodied rasp of his guitar playing as I remembered it at the Wedgie Rooms all those years ago? You bet they did... and then some!

From the opening notes of 'Out Of Sight, Out Of Mind' Sherman and his band Blues Move treat us to some of the tastiest music this side of the Texas border. He calls his particular brand of blues 'Loutex', a fusion of Louisiana gumbo and raw Texan strut, and it's potent, foot-tapping stuff guaranteed to put a smile on the most jaded of blues fans' faces. Yep, this is how I remember it - all kickass and rockin'! Blistering stuff.

AH



Stereolab

Fab Four Suture

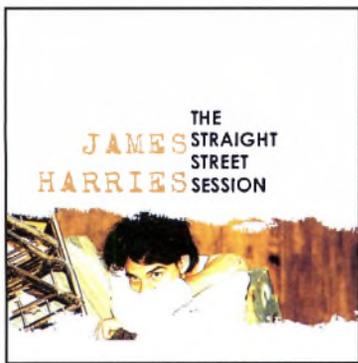
Too Pure 190CD 

Stereolab have a knack of producing new albums seemingly from thin air. In reality, *Fab Four Suture* is the result of hard graft between tours, and this is reflected in the immediacy of the arrangements. It's a studio production, but sounds very much like the band were trying to capture something of their live presentation on disc. In this respect the album succeeds: the sound is upfront enough to create the illusion that Stereolab are right there, in the room.

The downside to the live feel is the impression, on first playing, that the band's experimental urge has been in held in check. There is less ornamentation than on previous albums, fewer cosmic burbles and vocoded beatboxes. When these elements are present, in 'Vodiak' and 'Excursions Into "Oh, a-oh"', they serve mainly to add a touch of Raymond Scott sonic dressing. Yet repeated listening brings out the new twists in the Stereolab approach, with the framing tracks 'Kybernetica Babicka Pt.s 1 and 2' making the strongest impression. This is systems music delivered via rock ensemble; huge blocks of sound, repeating, shifting and turning back on each other. Finding such uncompromising yet rewarding music on any album in 2006 is strangely comforting.

RC





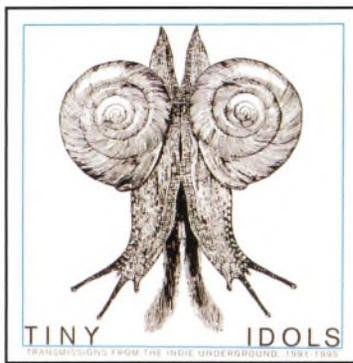
James Harries

The Straight Street Session

Dekkor Records DRCD007 

It seems you can't pick up a music magazine these days without some writer raving about the 'new' Jeff Buckley. Since we lost him we have been desperate to find a suitable replacement for a man who became an icon in his tragically short life. It's unfair to label James Harries the new Jeff Buckley but you'd have to be deaf not to hear the similarities in his music. Harries has that torture in his voice, and although he doesn't have the range Buckley had, he does display like-minded traits which make it hard not to draw comparisons. Harries has played saxophone in jazz bands, fronted garage rock bands and sung in two US country blues bands, so diversity is no stranger to him. For *The Straight Street Session* he employed Celebrated Czech pianist/composer Emil Vicklicky and respected bassist Petr Dvorsky as back up, playing all the guitar parts himself. Given the musicians' background it's unsurprising that the results have the feel of a jazz trio, albeit one with a contemporary rock singer at the helm. Harries resides in the Czech Republic and has amassed a large following in Eastern Europe where he recently achieved platinum sales for a soundtrack for a Czech comedy, something he has every chance of repeating on these shores with this album, especially if he can get the necessary exposure.

AH



Tiny Idols

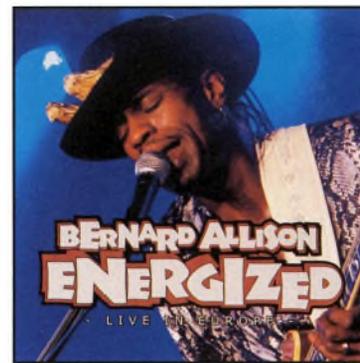
Transmissions From The Indie Underground, 1991-1995

Snowglobe Records SG10 

Tiny Idols is a twenty-track compendium of unique sub-genres that showcases a rich and diverse body of barely known U.S. talent. It spans navel gazing indie pop, alternative country, avantgarde psyche and grunge rock styles. These obscure, outrageous and sometimes under cooked grooves which might have remained as little more than distant memories for some Stateside music lovers, have been resurrected as a pertinent antidote to the bland and unappetising musical diet normally associated with much of the American scene in the early 1990s. These bands, like The Sneetchers, Uncle Wiggly and The Lettuceheads cut their singles and produced albums for the smaller labels, enjoyed their fifteen minutes of fame, but for most the major record deal remained an elusive pipedream. Freedom of expression, vibrant primitivism and certain lack of self-control are all good and well, but these are characteristics not always limited to the performances alone - though ninety percent of these transfers were taken from original master tapes, inevitably they are inconsistent sources from which to work. Perhaps that is the price of creative independence. It's certainly one worth paying for a CD that is so much more than just a time capsule.

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RP



Bernard Allison

Energized (Live In Europe)

Ruf Records RUF 1113 

Bernard Allison is the son of the late, great Luther Allison, one of the blues world's most vociferous performers. Luther tragically succumbed to cancer a few years ago, but he left behind a sumptuous back catalogue of incredibly powerful recordings for us to savour. Just before he died he entrusted his beloved guitar to Bernard so he could carry the torch and his son has responded well with a cluster of fine releases, this being his latest. A double CD recorded in Germany with his fabulous touring band, *Energized* proves that Bernard is a chip off the old block, not just in the way he attacks the guitar with the same ferocity as his father, but also in the way he sings. He's not afraid to dip into his father's vast repertoire either; he covers four of the great man's tunes with the same kind of spooky intensity that must have Allison Snr. roaring with approval up there in blues guitar heaven. Bernard's own 'Don't Be Confused' marks him out as a pretty good tunesmith too, although a couple of the lengthy instrumentals definitely outstay their welcome and are just an excuse to show off his prowess on the guitar. Still, it's a wildly exciting romp and comes to the punter at a single CD price, representing sterling value for anyone's pound notes.

AH





Idgy Vaughn

Origin Story

CD5170

With a name like Vaughn and coming from Texas one might be forgiven for thinking that Idgy Vaughn is a new hotshot guitarist destined to take the blues world by storm. Er, no. Idgy (a nickname that stuck when her little sister couldn't say Audrey) is more in the Lucinda Williams mould, a storyteller par excellence with an authentic voice who sees the world in all its varied shades and textures. She is a sublime lyricist too. Idgy's packed a lot of living into her tender years and on her debut album she's decided to share some of those experiences with the listener. Subjects covered range from the rejection of a mother's love (the autobiographical 'Good Enough') and the joys of motherhood ('Pearl Of Georgia') to murder (the menacing 'Dragging The River') and the unbelievable tragedy that unfolds in 'Saint Francis Fire', a true story about 12 little girls burnt to death during a Christmas play at a Catholic school in 1899. If all this sounds a little bleak don't despair, Idgy still finds time to have a little fun. 'Mister Wrong' is a fine piece of twanging country rock and 'Small Time Girls' is a saucy little number too. It took a few plays but I'm rather taken with this wonderful little record. I think she's going to be big.

AH



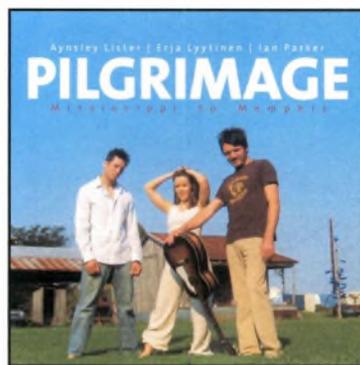
Max Roach

We Insist! – Freedom Now Suite

Pure Pleasure Records Candid 9002

Abbey Lincoln joins Max Roach in her most intense vocal performance on record. Like John Lennon's *Plastic Ono Band* and Marianne Faithful's *Broken English*, Lincoln's performance is gut wrenching and emotionally raw. Unlike them, Lincoln is not responding to personal wounds such as maternal or sexual rejection. Roach and Lincoln, who were married for part of their career, were both activists of the first degree, and this powerful statement about black history and racism is their most articulate expression of the effects of oppression. They are joined by Walter Benton and the great Coleman Hawkins on tenor sax, Babatunde Olatunji on conga, Booker Little on trumpet, Julian Priestler on trombone, James Schenk on bass and Thomas Du Vall and Ray Mantilla on percussion. Hawkins, Little and Priestler provide outstanding backing and solos. This is an indispensable album. Pure Pleasure has been mining the Candid catalog to good effect, and this is one of the gems. This re-issue was mastered from the original tapes by Graeme Durham at The Exchange and pressed by Pallas on 180-gram vinyl. I'm used to listening to the original in mono, but this stereo issue does not make pine for mono sound. It's an excellent disc with only a faint trace of tape bleed-through in a few places. My highest recommendation for this classic.

DDD



Lister/Lyytinen/Parker

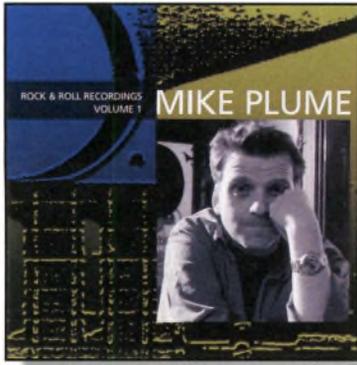
Pilgrimage

Ruf Records RUF 1113

Ian Parker and Aynsley Lister are at the forefront of British blues, and here they join forces with Finland's Erja Lyytinen for a magnificent album packed to the rafters with great tunes and some of the tastiest playing this side of the Mississippi delta. Ruf Records' head honcho Thomas Ruf flew our three heroes out to America's deep south to capture the mood. There, under the watchful eye of Jimbo Mathius in Mississippi they cut the majority of *Pilgrimage*, the rest being recorded with legendary producer Jim Gaines in Memphis. The results speak volumes for this gifted trio. *Pilgrimage* is a rich contrast in styles; Lister's earthy vocals and rockier guitar approach, Lyytinen's gospel wail and authentic slide and Parker's majestic voice and emotionally supercharged playing. Together they breeze their way through 11 originals and one cover with a youthful exuberance befitting their considerable talents. Every track positively sizzles with energy and it's difficult to pick out the highlights, but if pushed I'd plump for Erja's smoky ballad 'Last Love Song', 'You Don't Know' for the way it swings, '10 10' for the sheer grit and 'Twinkle Toes Willie' for its sunny disposition. It's rare to get three distinctly different talents to blend so effortlessly, I hope that the three of them get to repeat the exercise again in the not too distant future. Miss this one at your peril.

AH





Mike Plume

Rock 'n' Roll Recordings Vol. 1

Clann Records CLAINMP0103 

Mike Plume hails from Alberta, Canada and has been releasing tasty heartland rock 'n' roll records for a number of years now. He favours a sound steeped in the Springsteen, Mellencamp, Petty and Earle traditions, and although not as strong lyrically as those artists he makes up for it with sheer infectious enthusiasm and a really good understanding of what makes a song crawl right under the skin. His latest release finds him resting his normal touring band and hooking up with some old friends to kick a little ass - Canadian style. There's little sign of rock 'n' roll in its purest form here; these are road songs, plain and simple. 'Birmingham 3am' gets proceedings underway in slightly subdued fashion before making way for a full tilt slab of driving rock by the name of 'One Of Those Days', straight to the point and clocking in at all of two and a half minutes. He does a pretty good job of emulating Springsteen with 'Somewhere Over The Rainbow', a mid-paced rocker that New Jersey's finest would be proud to call his own, but for this listener the highlights are two beautiful ballads, the sad lament 'Lock It Up' and the gorgeous 'Dancing On The Wind', an ode to the joys of harmonious love. 'Rock 'n' Roll Recordings' is an honest little record, heartily recommended for anyone with a penchant for guitar driven Americana.

AH



Bruce Springsteen Et the E Street Band

Hammersmith Odeon London 75

Columbia 82876 77996 2 

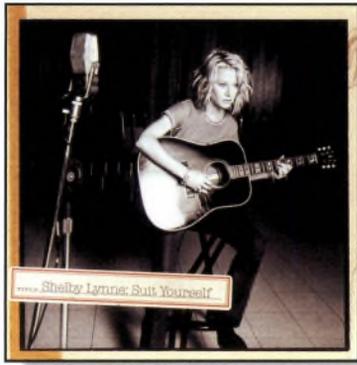
This is a marvelous release. It's about time Bruce Springsteen's audiences started getting access to live recordings from the vault. There can be little doubt that Springsteen is one of the greatest - if not the greatest - live rock performers of his generation. The extraordinary number of offerings on the bootleg market has long made it plain that there continues to be great demand for documents of his performances, notwithstanding the 5 LP/3 CD compilation *Live 1975-85*, released 20 years ago.

Hammersmith Odeon London 75 documents a complete show from Springsteen's first visit to England, an early performance by the definitive edition of Springsteen's E Street Band (with drummer Max Weinberg and keyboardist Roy Bittan). The album captures a previously under-appreciated artist coming off the recording of a modern masterpiece (*Born to Run*). He had a magnificent band rehearsed to the teeth, and big things to prove. Springsteen was still growing to maturity. As a lyricist he talked a bit too much, and that dilutes the musical force of 'Lost in the Flood' and 'Kitty's Back' from his debut album. Yet throughout the performance captured

here, his soul and dedication carries the day. And when Springsteen is in the sweet spot of newly minted classics such as '10th Avenue Freeze-Out', 'Born to Run', 'Backstreets' or 'Jungleland' there is simply no stopping him. This album also captures fine performances of the encore oldies that helped make this band a road legend - Gary U.S. Bonds' 'Quarter to Three' and Springsteen's storied 'Detroit Medley' of Mitch Ryder numbers. As live concert recordings go the sound here, mastered by Bob Clearmountain, is exceptionally good. The presentation strikes an effective balance between the clarity of the studio and an authentic representation of theatre ambience. The sound is so good, in fact, that it could be argued that the *Born to Run* tracks come off better here than on the studio album. That record is a musical masterpiece, but hardly a sonic one. Hopefully Springsteen will follow the path of his mentor Bob Dylan and release more such performances from his archives - a choice show from the tour for *The River*, or from the period of the under-appreciated *Tunnel of Love* would be nice. Whether or not that happens, get this one.

DDD





Shelby Lynne

Suit Yourself

EMI 094631205729

Shelby Lynne's has had her fair share of record company moguls attempting to mould her into 'the next big thing'. The Nashville money making machine tried it with the early albums and as good as they were they hardly gave any indication to Shelby's true identity. The direction changed with 2000's *I Am*, a fine stab at Southern Soul that received many accolades from the world's press and made her a lot of new fans, and although the next two albums had their moments they didn't quite hit the spot. *Suit Yourself* is a much more personal record. She's been left to her own devices with this one and as such has come up with her best ever album. Half of this record began life in her home studio with just her and her guitar, the rest coming together at the house of bass player Brian 'Brains' Harrison. Everyone sounds like they're having a blast and you can almost hear the crickets and the rocking chair creaking on the back porch on a hot, sticky evening, such is the atmosphere. Tony Joe White pops his head round the door and lends a hand with some trademark swampy guitar, the rest of the band are dynamite and the song writing is never less than exhilarating. Let's hope that Shelby gets many more opportunities to suit herself because it certainly suits her. Cracking.

AH



Super Furry Animals

LoveKraft

Sony BMG 5205016

First things first: if you're a multi-channel maven seeking another disc to wow neighbours and friends, this one's not for you. LoveKraft makes for impressive listening alright, but not for its spatial effects. The Super Furies and Sam Wetmore have spun something more subtle; a living, breathing surround mix that draws you into the music, and doesn't pummel your eardrums with spinning guitars, OTT sub-bass and slap-back echo ad nauseam. If you're a newcomer to SFA, this album makes for a pretty decent introduction. This is rock with an experimental twist, laced with the anarchic humour of chief Furry, Gruff Rhys. Standouts include 'Zoom!' with its threatening choir, the frazzled 'Oi Frango' and the come-down closer, 'Cabin Fever'. 'Lazer Beam' is a shout-out to hardcore SFA fans, quite literally, with Gruff rapping over a topsy-turvy groove. Arranger Sean O'Hagan makes a welcome return (is this man capable of writing anything bad?) and the traditional SFA electronic fizzes and twangs are all present and correct. One listen should be enough to reveal the album for what it is: intelligent, well-produced rock. It also makes a strong case for multi-channel SACD, something which can't be taken for granted with 5.1 music.

RC



Tom Russell

Love And Fear

Hightone Records HCD8190

Following hard on the heels of a splendid retrospective and the well received *Hotwalker*, comes Tom Russell's brand new release *Love And Fear*. Unlike *Hotwalker*, which was very much a concept album, Russell returns to what in my opinion he does best; writing some of the most intellectually challenging and thought provoking music one would expect from someone with a degree in criminology and who, in his spare time, is a more than capable artist and author. Ably assisted by his long time musical partner Andrew Hardin, and with a band including Lucinda's ex-guitarist Gurf Morlix and Gretchen Peters on bass and background vocals respectively, Russell tears into 11 pristinely written snapshots from deep within his psyche which allow the listener the chance to understand what it means to be an American in the USA today. Song dissection is almost pointless but one deserving a special mention is 'Four Chambered Heart', a snarling, spoken diatribe containing the immortal lines: "We pay out millions of dollars to defend paedophile priests... meanwhile, people are living in the gutters, holding signs that say 'have you hugged your kid today?'" Right now, in a world that seems to continually get its wires crossed, Tom Russell stands as a true visionary, and for any music fan wondering who will fill the void left behind by Johnny Cash, I say look no further than this man.

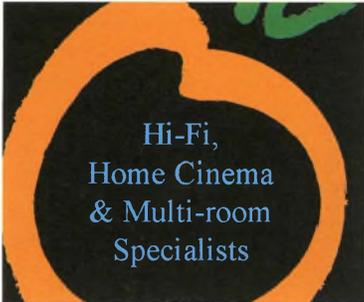
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Can the Dead Dance?

by Dennis Davis

I'm a huge fan of what is generally called "World Music" and I'm honoured to write this review. And the answer is yes. The Dead Can Dance (and much more)! You see, many people attribute the origination of "World Music" to Dead Can Dance. And it's quite likely you've heard their music and had absolutely no idea you were listening to them. So a bit of a history lesson is in order; and oh, what an interesting history. Dead Can Dance have travelled a remarkable artistic road that began with Goth roots to the creation of what is now called World Music to finally writing and producing music for major Hollywood blockbusters: They have scored or contributed to *Gladiator*, *Insider*, *Ali*, *Whale Rider*, *Heat*, *Baraka*, *Mission Impossible 2*, *Black Hawk Down*, *Tears of The Sun*, *Nadro*, *One Perfect Day*, *Man on Fire*, *Layer Cake* and *El Nino de la Luna*.

The two principals of Dead Can Dance are Lisa Gerrard and Brendan Perry. This talented duo began their incredibly fruitful relationship in 1981 and produced nine amazing albums until they disbanded in 1999 to pursue individual projects. Then they reunited for a tour last fall, so who knows what's in the future?

Ms. Gerrard was born in Melbourne, Australia and lived in London, Spain and Ireland before returning to the Snowy Mountains of Australia. In addition to the stunning music she has produced with Mr. Perry and Dead Can Dance, she has received Golden Globe nominations for *Insider* and *Ali*, Grammy and Oscar nominations and a Golden Globe award for her score of *Gladiator* and four international awards for *Whale Rider*. She also wrote music for the mini-TV series *Salem's Lot* and the San Francisco Ballet has performed to her work.

Mr. Perry hails from London and later moved to Auckland, New Zealand when his parents relocated to this far reach of the British Empire. He currently resides in Quivvy Church in Belturet, Ireland, a 150-year old church, where the group's two most critically acclaimed albums were recorded and produced.

Hollywood aside, Dead Can Dance has written, created and produced nine absolutely stunning and extraordinarily unique albums that flout categorization, causing one impressed but perplexed reviewer to describe it [their music] as "ambient, orchestral, folk and new age all at the same time." Well, it's really more: This music transcends categorization and incorporates elements from multiple musical yardsticks and integrates them with both modern as well as primitive cultural traditions. Most of you are likely

familiar with a range of musical genres but Dead Can Dance cannot be correlated with any musical genre you currently know, and this, I believe, is the key to their intrinsic musical appeal.

Think of music as Performance Art and you'll begin to grasp just how talented Dead Can Dance are.

Many of us have long bemoaned the lack of any real new musical break-

throughs since the birth of Rock

and Roll and the later super-groups of the 60's and 70's. Sure, Country and Western crossed over traditional boundaries in the 80's and Rap and Hip Hop assaulted our ears in the 90's, but they are but mere diversions when compared to the super-group rocket fuel of the music industry: The Rolling Stones still tour and sell out their concerts even with \$300 ticket prices and Pink Floyd put aside their differences



► and played for the first time in years for a Live8 concert. And for many record labels, their most profitable releases are more re-mixes, re-masterings, and re-releases with newly discovered "lost" tracks and/or alternative mixes of these groups the Baby Boomers never out-grew.

So whilst most audiophiles complain about the lack of new musical talent, kids, Generation Y and Generation X download crappy-sounding 128Kb MP3's, and the music industry just doesn't get it: Their \$18 CDs with maybe 60 or 70 minutes of music have already lost the entertainment war to like-priced DVDs containing three hour movies and maybe another three hours of extra features.

But then a musical paradigm shift like *Dead Can Dance* emerges and rekindles the audiophile hope for both good music and new music. Yes, *Dead Can Dance* produced their last album in 1996 and announced a breakup in 1999, but we have their nine stunningly good albums you can still buy (even a few on used vinyl). So belly up to the bar and quit complaining there's no good new music and give *Dead Can Dance* a listen: It will be a musical encounter unlike any you've ever experienced.

The albums

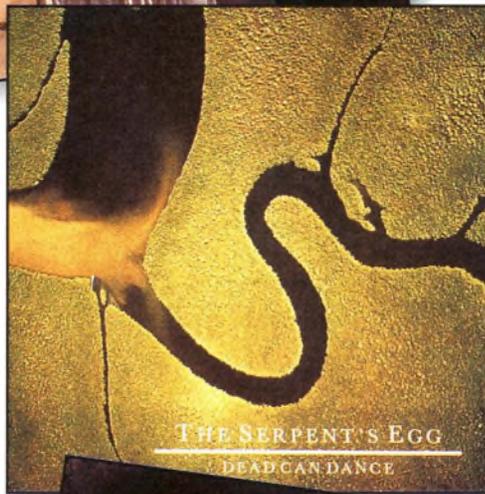
CDs were the basis for this report as vinyl LPs of their work are scarce and non-domestic for me, meaning I have to hunt for UK copies. Thanks to the generosity of a certain gentleman in Libby, Montana, a loaner copy of one elusive vinyl LP was compared to the CD and the comments are duly noted overleaf.

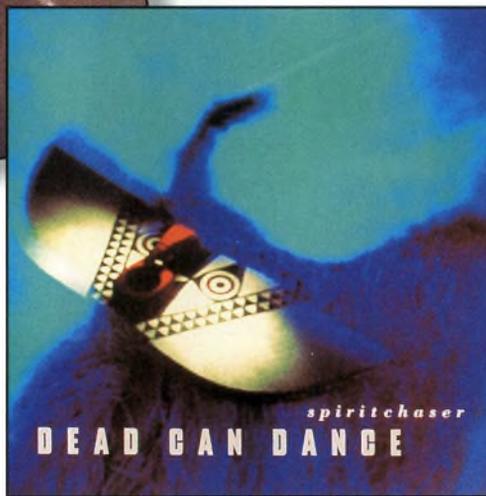
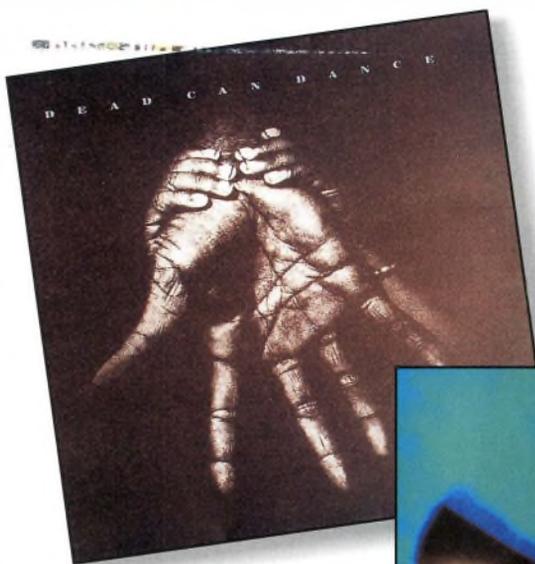
Their first widely available CD was simply titled *Dead Can Dance* (1984) and I find it their least impressive work. Some believe it paved the way for groups like *Deep Forest*, but I find this album a bit too "Goth" for my personal taste. But you can hear the roots and foundation for their future work presented in this disc. I found the recording quality and dynamics rather tepid and no producer is listed: This is not surprising given the rather bland sound quality of this disc. Recommended only for the OCD collector.

Now, their next effort, *Spleen And Ideal* (1986) is a strikingly better recording. This album really begins to forge *Dead Can Dance*'s credentials as the founder of World Music genre with its hints of the Bulgarian Women's Choir intermingled with Persian melodies. It's almost as if they re-invented themselves and became an ISO9000 certified World Music group when you compare this work to their previous album. And this disc begins to really showcase what Ms. Gerrard can do with her voice; several of the cuts are stunning. Try the second track, 'Ascension', if you want to really hear some ambience on your system. It is a studio recording, but a very good studio recording.

Their next release was *Within The Realm Of A Dying Sun* (1987) which one critic reported they "actually manage to out-shimmer the Cocteau Twins . . . which finds their beautiful minimalism adorned with increasingly developed compositional genius." I agree. And if you have an A/V system, try this particular album in the DTS Neo:6 mode – You will be astonished at what you hear, but it is equally stunning in stereo.

Next was *Serpent's Egg* (1988) with some extraordinarily excellent





(better macro-dynamics and much better micro-dynamics) and the midrange sounded more natural.

Toward The Within (1994), a release of live recordings from their concerts was their next release and does contain several previously unreleased cuts and it is quite good.

Their final album of new work was *Spiritchaser*, released in 1996 and if anything, is even more ethereal than *Into the Labyrinth*. These two are my particular favourites and are simply must-have recordings.

Dead Can Dance's record company also released a four disc compilation of their work (3 CDs and 1 DVD) titled 1981 – 1998 highlighting Dead Can Dance's best work over the 17 years they collaborated and this one is worth owning just for the DVD.

Finally, late last year another compilation of their work was released the month their 2005 tour ended. This album is titled *Memento*, and it is indeed a fitting memento to their combined 17 years of work together.

One can only hope that they may tire of scoring music for Hollywood and perhaps give us one or two more original recordings.

Yes, the Dead Can Dance (and they are!).



▶ drumming. In particular, listen to the fifth cut, 'In The Kingdom Of The Blind The One-Eyed Are King' where Mr. Perry's songwriting ability is highlighted. This track is immediately followed by Ms. Gerrard's eerie Persian-influenced vocals where she actually uses her voice as a musical instrument. It almost makes you wonder if Dead Can Dance carved a niche for the later Tuvan throat singing albums that were released in the World Music genre.

Aion (1990) was their next release and this album encompasses a style of ranges from polyphonic chorals to bagpipes and more Persian-influenced music thrown in for good measure. A must-have for the serious fan.

1990 also saw the release of a compilation of previously released work, *A Passage In Time* and I can only assume this was their label's effort to reach out to the newly growing World Music audience that was not familiar with Dead Can Dance. Much of their best work is included in this album plus they added two new cuts, 'Bird' and 'Spirit' to entice existing fans into a purchase.

Into The Labyrinth (1993) is their most famous album and it was their first album recorded at Quivvy Church in Ireland. Several companies at this year's CES were using it as a demo album. It is so well produced that more than a few attendees actually confused it with Margo Timmins and The Cowboy Junkies' *The Trinity Sessions* album recorded at The Church of the Holy Trinity in Toronto, Canada. A UK pressing of this album was also available for comparison and the LP was the better sounding of the two media. Interestingly, the dynamics on the LP were greater

Discography:			
Title	Year	Label/#	Notes:
Memento	2005	Rhino/WEA 73264	A compilation of their work
1981-1998	1996	4AD - CAD 6008 CD	A 2-Disc compilation of the 3CD/1DVD 1981-1998 summary of their work.
Spiritchaser	1996	4AD - 6008 CD	Recorded at Quivvy Church
Toward The Within	1994	4AD - 4015 CD	Live Recordings From Concerts
Into The Labyrinth	1993	4AD - 3103 CD	Recorded at Quivvy Church
A Passage In Time	1990	4AD - 0007 CD	A collection of previously released works, but includes two new songs Bird and Spirit.
Aion	1990	4AD - CAD 0007 CD	Studio Recordings in Ireland and the UK.
Serpent's Egg	1988	4AD - CAD 808 CD	Studio Recording
Within The Realm Of A Dying Sun	1987	4AD - CAD 705 CD	Studio Recording
Spleen And Ideal	1986	4AD - CAD 512 CD	Studio Recording
Dead Can Dance	1984	4AD - CAD 404 CD	Studio Recording



Maucha Adnet

The Jobim Songbook

Kind of Blue KOB 10003 

'Oh No', I can almost hear you saying, 'not another bland set of Bossa Nova covers - how much can one self respecting audiophile take?!' Well, take heart, this is a very classy production indeed, and are more than strong enough to stand repeated listening. Another CD from the new Swiss based label, Kind of Blue, this is from their initial batch of releases. Maucha Adnet is very popular in Brazil and has gained an international reputation. Jobim credits her as 'A marvellous singer. Her voice is deep rich and mysterious. She is a great artist. He's right you know. Accompanied here by a stellar cast of musicians including Randy Brecker and Joe Lovano, whilst taking a conventional approach she casts a fresh light on these lovely songs. Try 'Insensatez' for a definition of languorous sultriness. Even the hoariest chestnut 'Garota de Ipanema' comes up like new with her vocals dancing lightly over Lovano's tenor sax. As ever, English language vocals such as the treatment here in the first part of 'Desafinado' don't come over as strongly as the original Portuguese - but maybe that's just me. This is a very classy and nicely recorded set. Just the thing to get you into the Summer. Go on, you know you need it!

DD

RECORDING
MUSIC



Mina Agossi

Well You Needn't

Candid CCD 79841 

This is the second album from the talented French-Beninoise singer. Recorded "one-take" in the studio and supported by just bass (Alex Heile) and drums (Ichiro Onoe) fleshed out on a few tracks with trumpet (Rob Henke) and sax (Archie Shepp), this is a riveting full-blooded set. Opening with her version of the Peggy Lee classic 'Why Don't You Do Right?' the tone is immediately set by her languid, half spoken vocals over against a hypnotic groove from Heile and Onoe. Her treatment of Thelonious Monk's title track quickly makes it her own, her staccato half-spoken vocals interspersed with distorted spoken French. Sounds crazy but it works and whilst nothing will supersede Monk's original, Agossi makes a valid case for her own very individual and very engaging approach. A particular favourite track is the gentle, laid-back 'May I Sit At Your Table?' With its African Rhythms and walking bass line it's totally hypnotic. She also takes on Hendrix' 'Voodoo Chile' in a way that both shows respect to the man himself whilst casting her own stamp on the song. This is a very fine set and is strongly recommended. Apparently Mina is also electrifying in live performance (She is! Ed.). Catch her if you can. Something tells me this girl is going far.

Supplier: www.candidrecords.com

DD

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Jaco Pastorius Big Band

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Heads Up HUSA 9110  

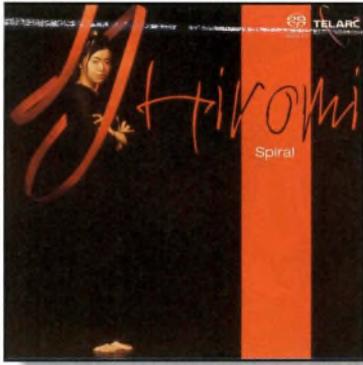
Following their splendid 2003 debut release *Word of Mouth Revisited* (HUSA 9078), this set features an even wider selection of guest artists to complement the roster of bassists on call. Naturally it's the bass payers that are showcased here, but what a setting they get. Led by Peter Graves this is extremely proficient and impressive ensemble playing, a fine platform to allow some of the world's finest contemporary bass players to shine. Standouts include the opening 'Dania' powered by Gerald Veasley's bass and featuring a high-octane tenor solo from Bob Mintzer. The funky 'Beaver Patrol', frequently featured by Pastorius in live gigs but never recorded by him, showcases the great Victor Wooton (of Bela Fleck's band) on bass and a tasty solo from guitarist Hiram Bullock. This workout is offset by the tender, lyrical treatment of 'Cannonball' penned by Pastorius for his friend and mentor. This features in addition to Richard Bona's fretless bass, a searing sax solo from Mike Stern and a fine keyboard solo from Mike Levine including a sly reference to 'Teen Town'. Pastorius is featured in 'Reza' his bass extracted from a mid '80's live performance with the whole band recording around it. This works very successfully and fits right into a well-recorded set that will help keep the Pastorius flame burning for many years ahead.

Supplier: www.headsup.com

DD

RECORDING
MUSIC





Hiromi

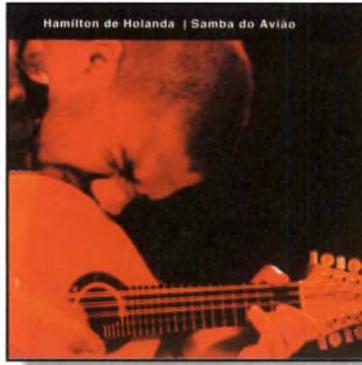
Spiral

Telarc SACD-63631 **SACD**

This follows Hiromi's 2004 album *Brain* - a tall order since that was a very fine set indeed. The opening title track draws you immediately into the music with a subtly changing percussive theme that evolves and repeats through the course of the piece: "Some things seem to change but actually always keep coming back. One tries to let go, but cannot; when one forgets about it, it always comes back to haunt you. Life is like a spiral" to quote Hiromi. This is followed by the centrepiece of the album; a four-piece suite entitled 'Music For Three Piece Orchestra'. With elements of almost classical playing amongst the edgier stuff, this subtle engrossing music will reward repeated listening. Hiromi's band members are no slouches either Tony Gray's bass keeping pace and subtly underpinning the most complex themes, and Martin Valihora equally impressive on drums. The album closes with a delightfully insane counterblast to 'Kung-Fu Champion', a track originally on the previous album: 'Return of the Kung-Fu World Champion'. With crazed electronic keyboards, piano, powerful drumming and loping bass a series of totally nutty themes are delivered with panache to provide a refreshing contrast to the subtleties of all that has gone before. Play this piece in particular loud! A finely weighty recording from Telarc brings the best from this powerful set.

Supplier: www.telarc.com

DD



Hamilton de Holanda

Samba do Avião

Kind of Blue KOB10002 **CD**

Now here's something a little different: An album of largely solo mandolin with the occasional accompaniment of an accordion, that is packed with invention and brimming with jazz, classical and Brazilian popular music influences. Hamilton de Holanda is regarded as one of the world's most accomplished mandolin players and a master of traditional Brazilian street music or 'choro'. He has toured regularly in Europe. Strictly speaking he plays a 'bandolim' (simply the Brazilian name for a mandolin), although his instrument has gained a fifth double string. The set comprises five original compositions along with pieces by the likes of Jobim and Hermeto Pascoal. Three numbers see him joined by the equally accomplished Richard Galliano on accordion. A musician who was mentored by the great Astor Piazzolla and has played with the likes of Joe Zawinul and Charlie Haden, earning a global reputation as a true master of his instrument. This is a set that immediately engages, the mandolin seems a little more full-toned than usual, maybe it's the addition of that extra double string but it's the extraordinary versatility and invention that grab you from the very first number. When in the last three numbers he is joined by Galliano the experience becomes richer still, with sinuous notes exploding across the soundstage. Refreshingly different, nicely recorded and recommended.

DD



Taj Mahal

Recycling The Blues & Other Related Stuff

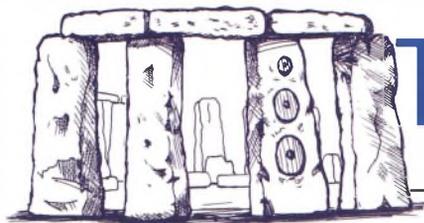
Pure Pleasure/ Columbia 31605 **180g**

Here's an old favourite dating back to '72 when I was but an art student. I can vaguely remember donating £1.50 of my not so hard earned grant on my original copy, which has remained in my collection to this day. Whilst not the very best of Mahal's releases - I've always held a particular affection for *Giant Step/ De Old Folks at Home* - it's a hugely enjoyable set. Side one is a live recording from the Winterland Ballroom ranging from a gentle kalimba instrumental through to a rousing 'A Free Song (Wake Up Children Shake The Devil Out of Your Soul)', and the old favourite 'Corinna'. But the fun really starts on side two with the studio stuff. The boisterous tuba rich 'Cakewalk Into Town' spreads a silly grin across your face. The good feelings are sustained through 'Sweet Home Chicago' graced with raunchy vocals from The Pointer Sisters, and a jazzy 'Texas Woman Blues' before easing out with a gentle instrumental piece 'Gitano Negro'. Pure Pleasure have done a great job in bringing renewed life to this album; bass is fuller and tighter than the original and the whole thing is more solid and 'in the room'. Looks like I'm set for the next 30 years.

Supplier: www.purepleasurerecords.com

DD





The History Man

by Richard S. Foster

The Mikrokosmos Labelography

First, a brief disclaimer. While I have been involved with Péter Fülöp on this project, it has only been in an advisory capacity and to supply, when required, labels from my own collection.

This project began in theory almost a decade ago.

Péter Fülöp is a friend of mine and also the owner of the Mikrokosmos Mail Order Company. We've known each other for over a dozen years. He and his family moved to Toronto a few years

published a Mahler discography through the (Gilbert) Kaplan Foundation.

He began talking to me about a labelography in the mid-1990's. The idea behind this was to simplify and co-ordinate a label standard for important labels he was selling through his business. Many of you, of course, have seen lists from various record dealers. Space is usually very limited



before that from his native Hungary. Even though Péter owned a record store in Budapest (Concerto), his main occupation was in the medical imaging industry. Records and record collecting have always been a passion in his life and while his personal collection is wide and varied, his main interests have always been the works of Gustav Mahler. He has tried to collect, and pretty well has, every performance of a work by Mahler since recordings were first issued. In 1995 he

as to what one can say, and by the time you list the item number in your selling catalogue, the name of the record company, catalogue number of the record, composer, orchestra and conductor and instrumentalists and whether the record is stereo, mono, a box set, has a booklet or text and price...you're pretty much out of room.

Péter already had a coding system to use consisting of an alphanumeric code of 3 letters and numbers, i.e., ED1, but when it came to presenting the vast array of labels and information, cost and consistency became dual stumbling blocks. Not only would a book be huge, but the sheer volume of information (much of it

► unreliable or spurious). would sink the project before it even got started. Eventually he moved away from the notion of a book and hit on the idea of using mylar pockets for cards that could be moved around (if he discovered an earlier label variation that was significant). The cards would be about half life-size, colour and keyed to an insert that sat next to the 'page' of illustrations. The concept was, once a label was given its identifying nomenclature, it would never change, but the arrangement would allow the project to be divided into a number of individual, updatable and rearrangeable volumes. Here is a brief overview to explain in greater detail:



The first letter in the labelography coding always stood for the Country of Origin: E for England, J for Japan, Z for Czech, U for United States of America, D for Denmark and so on. The second letter always stood for a colour. A for ash, B for blue, D for Dark (Black), G for Green, S for Silver, Gold, Metal, W for white. The number stood for the issue we've used to identify the label. For example, if you refer to the English Decca labels, ED1 would stand for English, Dark, 1. There are sheets included in the labelography that explain this in greater detail. So if you were trying to determine what the first Decca Classical Stereo Issue was, the long description would be: Original Recording on the label at 10 o'clock and Made in England on the label in the 6 o'clock position with a deep groove (from the pressing ring when it was pressed). For all intents and purposes, this was the FIRST label. It was so much easier to put ED1 in a catalogue than to try and explain every nuance of the label with all the other information required when you didn't have the space to do this.

The beginning of each section of the labelography starts with an index sheet that has a breakdown of the labels represented in that section and the order in which they appear in the 24 pouched mylar sheet (12 labels per facing page). These mylar sheets came with a custom

black hard plastic three ring binder. So, for the first labelography, it was pretty easy, ED1, ED2, ED3, ED4, ED5, EB1, EW1, ER1, H(olland)D1, FO1, FY1, GD1.

This was the order that you would place the small 2 x 2 cards in the sheets. This was indicated on the tabbed index divider marked 'Decca'. As we began to learn more about issues and we came across more important variants, this order could be changed, with a new index sheet and thus placement of the labels in the mylar sheet accompanying the specific label. But again, once a label was given a number in the labelography, it would not

change even if the order of



release of that label was changed.

In time we learned about two other early Decca wide band labels that were important: ED8, Original Recording-pancake pressing and ED9, Original Recording with no deep groove. When these variations and their associated cards were issued by Fülöp, a new index sheet for Decca was also issued. There was also an additional narrow band label that came to light, that did not contain the "FFSS" logo. So now the order of these labels would read: ED1, ED8, ED9, ED2, ED3, ED4, ED5, ED6, EB1, EW1, ER1, HD1. This is now the order of the first page of the current Decca Labelography Index page and the first side for the first mylar sheet. So when volumes 3 and 4 came out, appropriate

► changes to the order of the Decca releases were indicated by a new tabbed index sheet (you threw the old one out). New labels were provided where applicable and you shuffled along or replaced the labels in the mylar sheets as indicated, thus correcting or updating the information provided.

After eleven years there are now six volumes of the labelography. The number of labels has increased from an initial offering in volumes One and Two of 144 labels from six record companies (this has now been increased to 192 labels and eight companies) to the current level of 588 different labels

(ED2) after SXL 6368. Regarding EMI's, the last White/Gold label (EW1) is ASD 575, the last old half-dog label is ASD 2477 and the last coloured postage stamp, no white outer ring (ER2) is ASD 2812. I do not think this will ever happen

as this was not the purpose Fülöp had in mind for his Labelography and would



on behalf of 17 different companies.

The project continues to grow.

When first released, many record dealers were reluctant to endorse or support the project, but I think it was widely misunderstood. However, the labelography has been extremely successful as far as many private collectors and resellers are concerned, an increasingly influential group in these days of eBay. They see the wisdom in standardization and the coding system devised by Fülöp has been widely and successfully adopted.

Many people have asked me if the Labelography is going to eventually include a page for each company it represents, listing when label changes actually occurred. For example, there is no wide-band label (ED3) after SXL 6448 and there is no grooved-wide band label



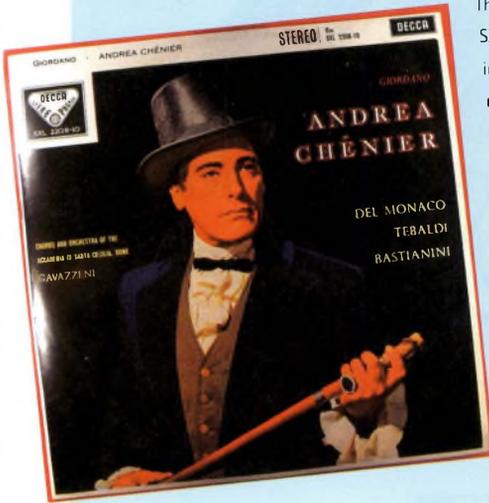
take complexity and updates to a whole new level. Personally, I believe this information is up to the collector to find out on his own. Too many people feel they need to be spoon fed the information about records and pressings and they never really learn the basics and the small minutiae that make collecting fun. So take this tiny bit of information about change over numbers, but the rest, I'm afraid, is up to you.

The companies listed in the Mikrokosmos Labelography are: U.S. Columbia, Decca (including issues in the SXL series by the UK, France, Germany, Australia, Spain and South Africa. The SET

Decca SXL 2000 Series Box Sets

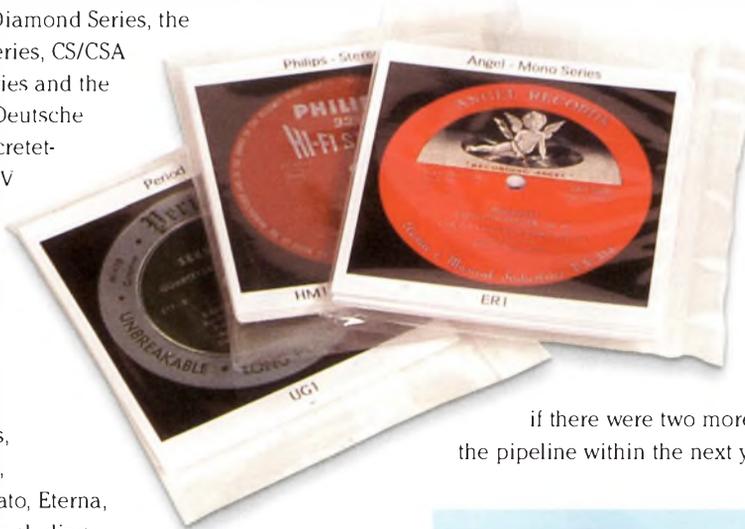
In the last issue I described the various labels and identifiers for the early Decca issues. However, space precluded the inclusion of the important multi-record sets. In one sense the collector's task is considerably eased by the fact that the earliest editions often appeared in plastic wallets. Simultaneously however, these were released in coloured boxes, i.e. the outside of the box may have been (mostly) gray, red or cream. The last wallet/pouch I own is SXL2225/7 (*La Gioconda*). I'm not sure I've ever seen SXL2281/2, Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* in anything other than a box - mine is gray.

There are these notable two exceptions: SXL 2101/3, *Das Rheingold* always came in a black box. Something important to note on this issue is that there is an early re-mastering done by Decca and which adds an additional letter, "R" that follows the normal letter next to the lacquer number, i.e. "-5GR" instead of just "5G". This is highly unusual for Decca but it does appear on several issues throughout the catalogue. SXL 2160/2, *Sleeping Beauty*, also always appears in a box. The first box is gray. There are no other box sets in the 2000 series after SXL2281/2. The multiple issues then move to the SET series.



► series, the Ace-of-Diamond Series, the London OS/OSA series, CS/CSA series, PFS/SPC series and the mono LXT series. Deutsche Grammophon, Ducretet-Thomson, EMI/HMV including the ASD series, SAX/SBO series, CX/C series, SXLP/LP series, CSD series, SAN series, SCX/CX/S series, COLH series, Angel mono series, ALP/BLP series. Erato, Eterna, Everest, Melodiya including dozens of variants, Mercury SR/AMS series, Philips stereo series, RCA Victor LSC/SB series, Soria (LDS) series, Victrola series, LM (mono) series. Remington, Supraphon stereo series, Telefunken mono and stereo and finally the Westminster labels.

What the Labelography has done for collectors is to make life much simpler when they purchase an item. It's always nice to know what you're getting with no



surprises. With the release of all six volumes, the mylar sheets are inserted into three Labelography binders for easy storage. I find the Mikrokosmos Labelography to be an indispensable tool and I hope you will as well. It's priced right and I wouldn't be surprised

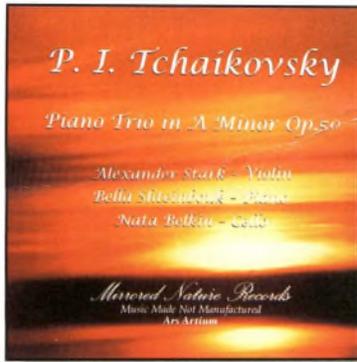
if there were two more volumes coming down the pipeline within the next year or so. ➤

Volumes 1 Et 2: \$78. USD
 Volumes 3 Et 4: \$58. USD
 Volumes 5 Et 6: \$68. USD

Postage listed on the website.

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 Tel: (1) 416 224 1956 Fax: (1) 416 224 2964

Mikrokosmos Mail Order Company
 314 Churchill Ave, Toronto, Ontario, M2R 1E7, Canada



Tchaikovsky: Piano Trio in A minor, Op.50
 Alexander Stark, violin; Bella Shteinbouk, piano; Nata Belkin, violoncello.

Mirrored Nature Records, MNR5001

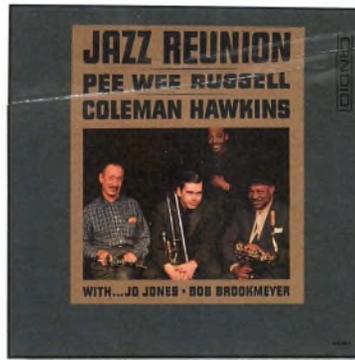


Tchaikovsky composed his only *Piano Trio*, "In Memory of a Great Artist" -dedicated to the great pianist Nikolai Rubinstein (1835-1881) - in 1882. It's a lovely work, somber and brooding in the first movement, there is varying drama in the second. While the piano opens with its main theme, the composition then moves into a set of around a dozen variations.

I'd not heard these artists before, but have been immensely satisfied by the calibre of playing on this hybrid SACD. You can clearly hear how well they play together, a unified stance, if you will, as you listen to the emotional course Tchaikovsky has charted for you. Mirrored Nature Records sports the logo 'Music Made Not Manufactured' on their releases and while they've only three in their catalogue right now, I'm looking for more great things from them in the future. I would strongly suggest that if you are unfamiliar with this beautiful chamber music, you investigate this release further. Not only is the playing outstanding, the sound quality, both in the two-channel SACD layer and the down-converted CD layer, will captivate you the moment you begin to listen. Highly recommended and not to be missed.

Supplier: www.mirrorednaturerecords.com
 RSF

RECORDING
 MUSIC



Pee Wee Russell

Jazz Reunion

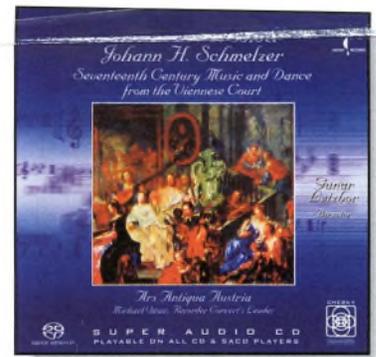
Pure Pleasure/Candid 9020



Clarinet has never hit the big time as an accepted instrument in jazz, but when it's good, it's very, very good. While I played piano in the school orchestra, I also spent many years in the school band playing the clarinet. Perhaps for that reason, Pee Wee Russell has always been one of my favourite, under appreciated jazz artists. The reunion referred to in the title is that of clarinet player Russell with tenor saxophone superstar Coleman Hawkins, and it's an unqualified success. Pee Wee and the Hawk are joined here by an all-star cast. Given that the record was released on Candid, you can be assured that this is no Dixieland session. These old pros laid down a sophisticated set of smart, straight ahead jazz, with the timing nicely defined by the bass line of Milt Hinton. This is the epitomy of "toe-tapping" music. Beautifully recorded, this stereo release sounds much fresher than the mono original I've been listening to for years. There's no artificial left-right separation, and the instrumental solos are beautifully presented – there is an enormous amount of air surrounding the vibration of the reed sound on the solos, resulting in a startling facsimile of these legends standing between the speakers, replaying these tunes. I'm quite familiar with (and a big fan of) the Candid house sound. Pure Pleasure has done a great job in improving on an old master.

DDD

RECORDING
 MUSIC



Biber, Schmelzer: Seventeenth Century Music and Dance from the Viennese Court.
 Ars Antiqua Austria, Letzbor, Michael Oman, Recorder.

Chesky Records Hybrid SACD 262



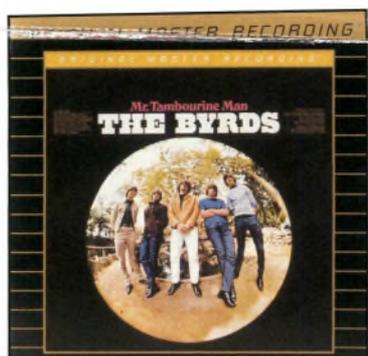
What a surprise. Not only is this release something one normally would not expect to see on the Chesky label, the disc has been around for nearly three-years! While I don't hear about everything, I would have expected to read about this recording somewhere. I guess I don't get out enough. This is out and out party music, albeit from a few centuries past. While I am very familiar with Biber's *Rosenkranz Sonatas*, the dances on this release were completely new to me. This is also the first music I've heard from the Austrian composer, Johann Schmelzer. The recordings are really wonderful and on this disc is some of the best music for recorder I've ever heard. The recording venue is the Marienkapelle at the St. Florian Monastery, Austria. Gorgeous acoustics are captured with, according to the liner notes, "strictly minimalist microphone placement utilizing the very best of high-end digital and analog audio components. This fare is very easy to digest and not only is the music interesting, the sound is simply heavenly. While not something I was expecting from Chesky, I'm delighted to have this addition to my collection. While I've not explored early music as many others have, this is certainly one stunning disc. Highly recommended.

Supplier: www.cheskyrecords.com

RSF

RECORDING
 MUSIC





The Byrds

Mr Tambourine Man

Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2014 **(SACD)**

One of rock music's undisputed classics from one of the most important groups of the '60's, delivered in a pristine SACD version of the original mono along with a roster of six bonus tracks, mostly in stereo. What's to dislike here? From the opening chimes of McGuinn's 12-string Rickenbacker, the album still sounds as fresh as if it were written yesterday. Throw in classics like Gene Clark's 'I'll Feel a Whole Lot Better' and the band's special take on Dylan including 'Spanish Harlem Incident', 'All I Really Want To Do' and 'Chimes of Freedom'. The only thing that falls flat from the original album's tracks is their humorous take on 'We'll Meet Again' - probably fine in their live performances at the time but for me at least a quick edit here. The bonus tracks include a nice alternate take in stereo of 'I'll Feel A Whole Lot Better' and of Clark's ballad 'You Won't Have To Cry' along with the single edit of their superb take on 'All I Really Want To Do'. The closing instrumental, whilst fine in its own way, demonstrates just how much the bands vocals add; you find yourself expecting their entry at any moment.

A very nice version of a superb album.

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk
DD



Saint-Saëns:

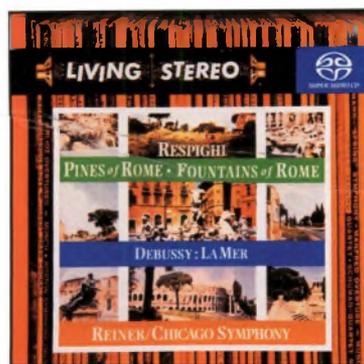
Symphony No. 3 in C minor, Op 78 (Organ Symphony) etc. Bélanger, org. Orch.Métropolitain du Grand Montréal, Nézet-Séguin.

Atma Classique SACD2 2331 **(SACD)**

Recorded in December, 2005, this Hybrid Surround SACD is my first introduction to Johanne Goyette's Atma Classique label. And what a fine introduction it is. We're all familiar with Saint-Saëns' *Organ Symphony*, and the remaining works on this disc are all delightful snippets for organ and orchestra. The performances are excellent and the sound quality on the SACD and CD layers is rich, layered and well recorded. *Opus 78* is one of my favourite works and I've heard some that have left me wanting. Not so here. We're given an insightful performance with a rich, but not too reverberant acoustic. The Guilman, Viere and Widor are also wonderful additions. These are classic works for Organ and orchestra, carefully crafted and extremely well presented. This disc is quite a treat for me as I'd visited Oratoire Saint-Joseph when I lived in Montreal and I was never fortunate enough to hear the organ played. There was always some reason why it wasn't working. As an aside, the notes accompanying this disc are some of the finest and most comprehensive I've ever come across. I've enjoyed this disc very much and I hope you will as well.

Top recommendation!

Supplier: www.atmaclassique.com
RSF



Claude Debussy: La Mer

Ottorino Respighi: Fountains of Rome, Pines of Rome. Reiner, CSO

RCA Living Stereo SACD 82876-71614-2 **(SACD)**

This is a release I've been waiting for since this series began. What I got (in terms of superb sound quality) was much more than I bargained for! While I'd not been a fan of Dr. Reiner's *La Mer*, what I heard on the SACD layer really surprised me. The original U.S. Shaded Dog has had this 'dry' acoustic. It sounded, not lean, but somewhat 'midrange challenged'. It was a fine performance spoiled by an un-involving recording. Well, this transfer is very involving. It's a great example of a timeless performance now afforded the sound quality it justly deserved. I'm sure something happened in the three-track to two-track transfer for LP purposes. The other huge ear-opener was the final track of *The Pines*. Again, on very early pressings of this recording, you could clearly hear the tape saturating during the last climax: that, or distortion from the cutting head. Well, here again, it's not there! The recording is clear as a bell and as exciting as ever. Whatever has happened, this is a stunning example of not only what RCA recorded (and Sound/Mirror has brought to life) but the artistry and majesty of Fritz Reiner and his Chicago Symphony. Indispensable!

Supplier: www.livingstereo-sacd.com
RSF





Max Bruch. Violin Concerto in G minor; Scottish Fantasy. Henry Vieuxtemps. Violin Concerto No. 5 in A minor. Heifetz, NSO London, Sargent

RCA Living Stereo Hybrid SACD, 82876-71622-2 **SA 2D**

This release brings to new life, two original U.S. Shaded Dog recordings on one excellent Hybrid SACD. Bruch's works for violin and orchestra are among my most favorite recordings and there has never in my mind, been anyone to come near Heifetz in his performance of the *Scottish Fantasy*. These performances show not only the superb technique and craftsmanship Heifetz was known for, but the emotional contrasts he creates in the *Fantasy*, certainly put holes in the argument that, 'while he was a great technician, there was no emotion in his playing.' One listen and you're absolutely hooked. The *Vieuxtemps*, offers a fine reading of a work we don't hear often these days. Because they were recorded in the United Kingdom by the legendary Kenneth Wilkinson and Allan Reeve, sadly they were taped in two-track stereo only, meaning that no three-track tapes were ever recorded. However, we are offered superb sound in both the down converted two-channel CD layer and the richer SACD layer. These are legendary performances with stunning sound quality and another 'must have' for your library. Highest recommendation.

Supplier: www.livingstereo-sacd.com
RSF



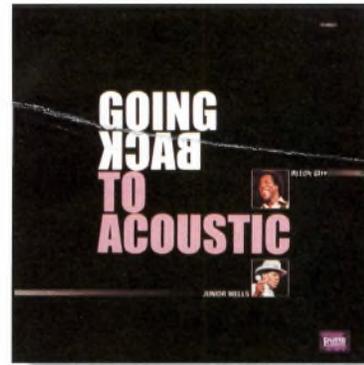
Nat King Cole

After Midnight

Pure Pleasure/Capitol PPAW W782 **180g**

For those who have never heard anything but his later records on Capitol, such as *The Very Thought Of You* or *Love Is The Thing*, this will be a revelation. It's a real jazz album, with Cole supported by a trio plus solos from five other players, notably Stuff Smith, Harry "Sweets" Edison and Juan Tizol. Cole was an extremely influential jazz pianist and recorded extensively with a jazz trio before developing a broader base with his wonderful crooning albums. Of his jazz recordings, which generally have disappointing sound, this one presents the best marriage of great performance and sonic merit. Cole's singing is just that much better with these great jazz arrangements and this new package by Pure Pleasure spreads the original album's 12 tunes across two 180 gram LPs whilst adding an additional 6 numbers from the 1956 sessions. Nat King Cole records have become something of a sub-specialty for Steve Hoffmann. His three albums on DCC were some of his best work, and these long out-of-print LPs are now collectors' items. He also issued one LP through S&P Records, which is still available. Mastering credit is shared here with Ron McMaster and Kevin Gray, whose chain of mastering equipment is far better than that available during Hoffman's DCC days. Those factors, coupled with the choicest of Nat King Cole material, make this an unqualified success.

DDD



Buddy Guy & Junior Wells

Going Back To Acoustic

Pure Pleasure Records PPAW001 **180g**

This album, recorded on May 15th 1980 at the Sysmo Studio in Paris for the French Isabel record label, once again reunited two of the greatest blues men for an inspired, wonderfully instinctive and brilliantly improvisational session. Guy on guitar and Wells on harmonica give magical acoustic performances, right from the opening 'Boogie Chillun' and 'Give Me My Coat And Shoes' to 'My Home Is The Delta' and 'Wrong Doing Woman'. These classic songs are matched by an impeccable re-master of the kind of recording which constantly reminds me exactly just why I own a turntable. Fantastic transparency, a jaw dropping presentation of rough hewed vocal dynamic shifts and the kind of inner details that scream "intimacy" recreates the atmospheric roots of the Deep South - making this a must own record from a sonic perspective as well. Guy and Wells chew over those gristle and bone themes that have preoccupied generations (both through their own songs and those penned by the likes of John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters and Sunny Joe) and in the process they reveal the full width, depth, scale and cultural impact of the blues legacy.

Supplier: www.purepleasurerecords.com
RP





J. S. Bach
Solo and Double Violin Concertos

Andrew Manze and Rachel Podger, violins, AAM

Harmonia Mundi HMU 807155 

It's truly amazing how much beautiful music J.S. Bach wrote. Manze and Podger bring a gorgeous, rich and harmonious style to these works. While this recording was first released in 1997, the stereo/multi-channel Hybrid SACD sounds exceptionally satisfying on either the CD layer or the SACD two channel layer released in 2003. These are outstanding performances and I rate them as near reference quality. I am exceptionally fond of an early EMI vinyl release with Ferras and Menuhin (ASD 346) but these performances by Manze and Podger rival those. Partially, I'm enthralled with the original instruments used, but the performances are insightful, lyrical and extremely engaging. If anyone is intimidated or feels that Bach may not be the composer for them, I challenge them to spend the 56+ minutes with this Harmonia Mundi release and then tell me Bach is a bore! What fascinates me even more about the playing of these two very gifted artists is how well they play together, yet I know, from other recordings, how different their styles are. Some of the accolades by the 'major' critics and magazines are listed on the back of the case and I will rubber stamp them absolutely. This is music making that is very exciting and oh, so grand.

Supplier: www.harmoniamundi.com

RSF



Louis Armstrong

Plays W. C. Handy

Pure Pleasure/Columbia CL 591 

Pure Pleasure has remastered one of my desert island discs – my favorite Armstrong recording and one that shows him at his best musically and sonically. Obviously, dreams do sometimes come true and now we have a two-disc re-issue of the original LP with the addition of five extra songs added on the CD version of the album in 1997 (CK 64925). These tracks were recorded in 1954, except for one of the bonus tracks from 1956 and an excerpt from an interview with W. C. Handy by record producer George Avakian. Unlike some titles, where it is obvious why certain numbers were excised, this is a strong album front to back. How does this new release stack up against the original maroon label Columbia vinyl? Almost from the moment that the stylus first touched down, I heard subtle and not so subtle details that I had never noticed before, and I have listened to this recording in various incarnations hundreds of times. Add to that the fact that the harmonic texture is captured spot on, and this new re-issue is an instant candidate for my Record of the Year. Taking into consideration the bonus tracks, and I am putting this into contention for Re-issue of the Decade. Mastered by Ray Staff from the original tapes and pressed by Pallas, don't miss it!

DDD



Ludwig van Beethoven
Complete Sonatas and Variations

Pieter Wispelwey, 'cello; Dejan Lazi, piano.

Channel Classics CCS SA 22605 

A multi-channel recording, this set was recommended to me by Channel's Canadian distributor, Greg Pastic of SRICanada. I've known Greg for over 20 years and he said he was looking forward to my reaction to this set. He was not surprised when I said, quite simply, "WOW!" It's always exciting when I discover new artists that have great technique and are afforded excellent sound. What more could one ask? Both artists have an extensive international background in orchestral and solo performances. They've played, either together or separately with almost every major orchestra on every continent. There is no doubting their skills; just listen to them play! I've compared this set to some of the other Beethoven violoncello works I own including the Rostropovich/Richter, Fournier/Gulda, Fournier/Kempff and Maisky/Argerich issues. What excites me about these interpretations is the equality between the players. There is energy, passion, delicacy and excitement I don't often find in "sets". With complete sets I normally feel that the artists get some of the performances right... but also some of them wrong. Well, there is nothing wrong here. The CD layer sound is outstanding as well. The set is a real treat and I cannot recommend it highly enough. Superb!

Supplier: www.channelclassics.com

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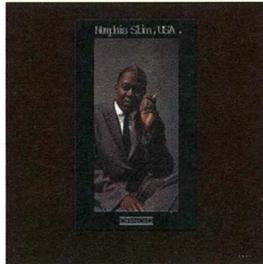


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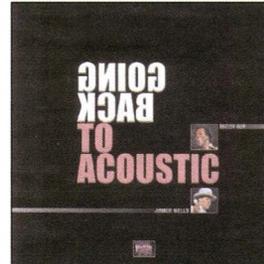
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Off to meet the Wizards... Proof that pros really do care

by Richard S. Foster

Trying to get the bottom of some of the sampling rate and conversion issues that surround DSD (and the lesser known DXD) I'd come into contact with the genial and super-informed Bert van der Wolf of Northstar Consult. And very helpful and enthusiastic he was too. Little did I know that the enthusiastic response I'd received was only the tip of the ice-berg. "Oh boy," I heard again and again, "wait until you see his studio!" Uhhh, just one small problem guys; his studio is in Holland and that's not exactly on my way home.

But, it's strange how things come around, and with a trip to the UK (for the Northern Sound & Vision Show in Manchester) in the planning stages, I was too close to give up the opportunity. For all those who believe that the pro side of the industry has descended into a mere post production sausage machine, here was a real, working example of a studio that demonstrably cares about quality. In fact, two examples, because Bert was taking me to see Galaxy Studios too...

I flew into Eindhoven and was met, early in the morning by Bert. It was great to put a face to the voice. Bert had kindly offered to be my guide during this whirlwind trip. We spent the hour it took to drive from the airport to Galaxy Studios near Mol, Belgium, talking about things digital and how the high-resolution formats have really changed and enhanced the recording engineer's bag of tools.

At Galaxy we got to meet Ronald Prent, resident engineer. Prent has been with Galaxy approximately seven years and has worked with groups and individuals as high-profile as Elton John, The Police, Sade, UB40, Robert Palmer and David Bowie to name just a few. According to the Galaxy website, "He was very much involved in the development of the DSD & SACD technology by Philips & Sony and the development of the API Vision Dedicated Surround Console and a special mastering console by SPL for multi-channel mastering." He's a very knowledgeable and interesting person to talk to and as you can imagine he really knows what he's doing. A highly creative engineer, he's worked some magic on many a project and continues to be recognized for his work on a worldwide basis. I got the whole guided tour, but as a poor substitute I would advise any of you with internet access to go to <http://www.galaxystudios.com> and spend the time looking at their set-up. This is no small-time audiophile studio; Galaxy is serious and seriously mainstream.

The studio started in 1982 in an old garden shack in Mol. The brothers Wilfred and Guy Van Baelen established themselves a solid reputation in the studio business and have grown and developed Galaxy into a highly professional recording venue. Approximately eleven years ago they built, with the help of some highly skilled engineers and technicians, Galaxy Hall which was followed in three years by their new offices and the beginnings of the studios.



The stunning Galaxy Hall

Galaxy hall is itself, a unique structure. It is an eight-metre high studio with a total space of 330 square meters. It boasts a reverb time of 1.6s up to 2.6s making it outstanding for all types of live recording – from solo piano through orchestral.

There are actually four separate control rooms that all have visual access to the hall. In order to achieve a low noise floor, the whole damn place has been built on springs and each of the rooms and studios floats as an individual element. Just stop and consider the architectural implications of that for a moment! As a result, the hall and studios are unbelievably quiet. It is actually quite disconcerting hearing your breathing quite so clearly. Galaxy can actually house the entire creative process, from recording through post-production.

Prent took me through all the different studios and we discussed the capabilities of each. While on this tour I saw the way everything was "incorporated together" from the basement up through the studios and into the ceilings



Doesn't every studio come with suspension?

► where the air conditioning units are always on and are phenomenally quiet. While crawling through the basement or looking down from the 'attic' you can see that each room is actually a separate structure. If you can imagine, control rooms one, two and three weigh 252 tons each and have 78 springs per studio for support. Prent said that as the springs continue to settle, Galaxy Hall will become even quieter than it is now.

loudspeakers. The sound in the room was excellent.

Galaxy is clearly one of the World's leading studios with extraordinary facilities. It was a very interesting day and it gave me a sobering understanding of the extremes at least some engineers and artists go through to get their product to market.

The next morning I was picked up again by Bert, but this time it was going to be a visit to his studio, Northstar Consult. Bert has a very interesting website: <http://www.northstarconsult.nl> and again I would strongly suggest that those interested spend some time looking around his very informative venue.

Bert's a very busy guy. His website gives us only a partial insight into some of his duties. Bert is a practicing recording engineer/producer based in The Netherlands and has run NorthStar as Audio Recording Services – and Consulting, since 1999. He trained in Electronics at the Higher Technical School in Enschede and after that Music Recording, Piano and Classical Guitar at The Royal Conservatory in The Hague, where he gained the internationally recognized Tonmeister qualification in 1990.

He worked for the Dutch recording companies Channel Classics from 1989 to 1996 and Kompas CD Multimedia from 1996 to 2000, making several hundred recordings for numerous international record labels. He also works as a consultant for many recording studios



Ronald and Bert at work and play – be afraid, be very afraid!

While on our travels through this extremely impressive complex, I met Darcy Proper, a DSD engineer in the Reference Master studio working on some SACD releases for Donald Fagen. Proper has done everything from restoration, editing and mixing to having been an SACD/DSD engineer for Sony. She was working in an impressive (and for the pro world, unusual) studio equipped with high-end audiophile equipment, cabling and five impressive Ecclestone Works

and professional audio equipment manufacturers.

He has been making High Resolution recordings since 1996, starting initially with the 24/96 formats and then moving on to 24/192 and DSD. He engineered the world's first 24/192 recordings in 1996. He specializes in acoustic recording techniques and has numerous award winning recordings to his credit. The most recent was an Edison Award, received in 2001 for recording the Dutch Bass player Tony Overwater's SACD *Op*, for the Turtle Records label, of which he is a co-founder. ►

▶ When Bert is not recording or into post production work, he also represents various companies in Europe for the European studio market. Included in this list are dCS Professional, Sonodore microphones, Avalon Acoustics, Nagra, Pass Labs, Siltech Cables and Spectral.



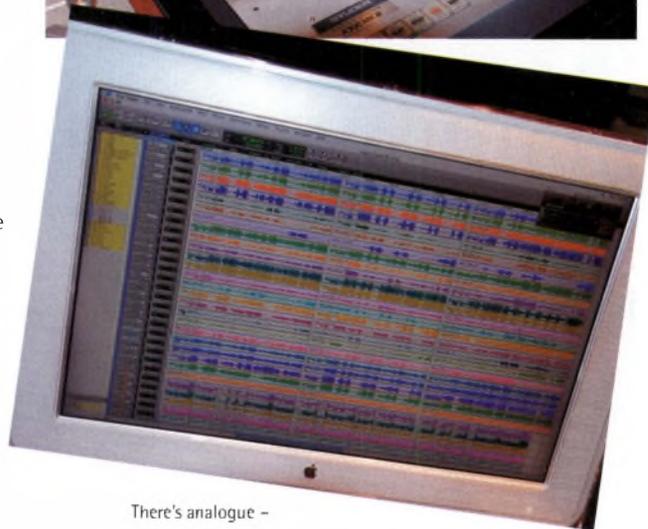
The system at Northstar

His post production studio is absolutely out of this world. When you visit his website you'll see what I mean. The Avalon Eidolon speakers installed here were voiced especially for Bert, a project he and Neil Patel worked on together. There are also three of the small (but extremely expensive) Avalon Mixing Monitors as well as a sub-woofer in this room, allowing full surround mixing. Cabling is by Siltech and amplification comprised modified Spectral mono-blocks. We listened to a variety of material that Bert has recorded. Source material had been dumped to hard drives and we listened not only to 16 bit/44.1kHz, but all the way up to the 352.8kHz of DXD. I can tell you that there are components to sound that I heard in this studio I've never heard anywhere else. Of course I realize this is a studio environment, and it's impossible to create this set-up at home, but what it showed me was what the digital medium, at various sampling rates, can really sound like.

Bert has really gone overboard to create astonishing sonic quality in his studio, and it's not just the quality of the source material; the system has got to let that through. One of the things that really impressed me was how he has matched and set up the components in this studio exactly as the most demanding audiophile might. What I'm realizing now, having done the rounds of Sound/Mirror in Boston, Emil Berliner Haus in Hannover, Galaxy in Belgium, Northstar in The Netherlands and Alchemy in SOHO with Ray Staff – is that not all studios are created equal. Not everyone is spending the money required to put not only first class studio equipment in, but also a first rate playback chain to hear what has been recorded – and it shows in t

heir results. My biggest disappointment was what I heard at Emil Berliner, and what is reflected all too clearly on the Mercury SACDs that they've mastered. Sound/Mirror and Galaxy both have superb rooms with Galaxy having the advantage of more post-production studios due to its size. Meanwhile, Northstar has only this one studio, but it was, in my opinion, in a league all by itself.

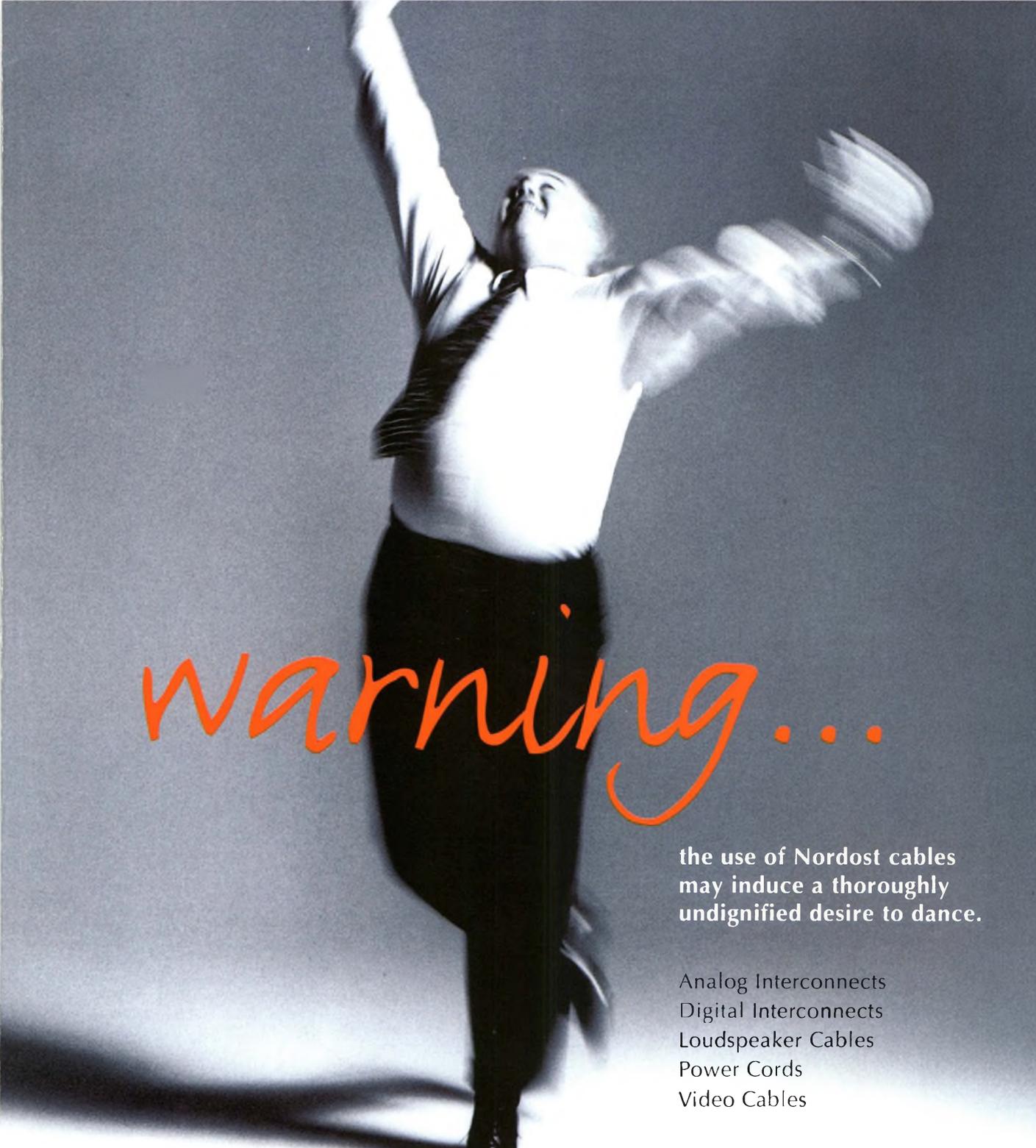
I heard playback of digitally recorded works, up-sampled to DXD that were so real, you could reach out and touch the instruments! The equipment, the whole replay chain, totally disappeared in this studio, leaving just the performers and their instruments. A few hours of this and I was left totally in



There's analogue –
and then there's Pro-Tools

awe of what I was hearing – and somewhat chastened too. (Don't worry Richard, I'm sure that's purely temporary. Ed)

But there's more; I spoke at length with both Ronald Prent and Bert, and this lightning tour serves only as a taster. Next time round we'll be getting down to the digital nitty-gritty, the techniques and processes that helped produce those stellar recordings. Believe me, people who go this far with their studios do it for a reason. ➤



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