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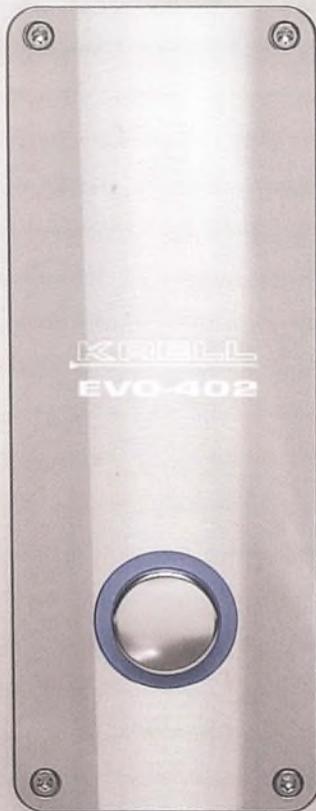
▶ **Passing Through -**

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# Editorial

It's strange how the printed word has the power to convince. We read it so we tend to believe it; after all, isn't that why we're reading in the first place – for information? As to the value of that information, well, that depends on the source – at least it should. However, even the best intentioned efforts occasionally go astray, as happened in the last issue of *Plus*.

First PM stated that the A2T speaker he was reviewing had a fixed grille while the accompanying pictures definitely showed that it didn't (proof perhaps that photographers are either more mechanically adept or rather less protective of products than reviewers). Then AS managed to confuse his notes regarding the physical details of a Sonus Faber with that of the ProAc Studio 140, thus robbing it of its mirror imaged tweeters – again, despite photographic evidence to the contrary. Finally, in a rush of editorial blood to the head, just about every piece of copy that came from the US got attributed to Dennis Davis, to the chagrin of PD and TB. Believe me, a manufacturer thwarted has nothing on the vengeance of a writer spurned. Hey guys, at least we sent the cheques to the right places!

Apologies have been made and large helpings of humble pie duly consumed. So why the account of all this error and embarrassment? Perhaps because it serves as a timely reminder, to writers and readers alike, that we are only human...





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# CLASSE

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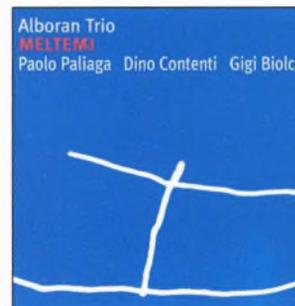
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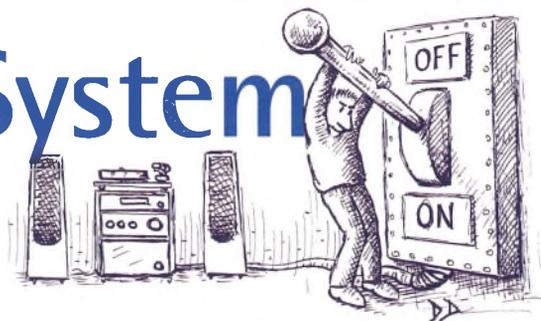
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# Playing The System

by Roy Gregory



This month I flew to Denmark to visit Lyngdorf Audio, once TacT, a trip that occasioned more than its fair share of navel gazing. The object of the exercise was for them to demonstrate their spanking new acoustic correction system, dubbed Room Perfect and the subject of various patents as well as considerable OEM interest. But we're getting a little ahead of the curve here. Why "Lyngdorf" is probably the question you should be asking.

Well, whilst you might not be familiar with the name, Peter Lyngdorf has been one of Europe's major players in the domestic hi-fi scene since the late 70s. Along the way he's been a prime mover in or owned Denmark's largest high-end retail chain, NAD, Snell Acoustics, Gryphon, Dali and of course Tact, amongst others. The latter still exists in the US, run by Peter's former partner, hence the name change. The significance of that name lies in the fact that here you have one of the hi-fi industry's most influential and successful personalities demonstrating just how important he thinks this technology and developmental direction is. Add to that the fact that, faced with a rather messy divorce from Tact, his response was to hire that system's biggest critic to develop its successor and you realise that the man is as creative as he is far-sighted.

Enter then Jan Abildgaard Pedersen, the engineer behind the revolutionary Beolab 5 loudspeaker and chief designer on the Room Perfect project. Now Jan is a mightily impressive guy in a soft-spoken and quietly confident sort of way. Given my natural tendency towards things analogue and conceptually simple, anything involving huge amounts of DSP is always going to be a pretty hard sell as far as I'm concerned, but I'll happily admit to being impressed by the results. I'm not going to bore you with details about the system, its advances over the competition or the demonstration

itself. Suffice to say, the Room Perfect compensation was dramatically more effective than any other such system I've experienced, as well as being far less obtrusive in musical terms. But the question I found myself asking was, did I actually need it?

The problem with any demonstration is achieving the desired result without distracting and confusing side effects rearing their ugly heads. In this respect at least, this demo was only partially successful, succeeding mainly in demonstrating just how complex a system it really is, and how fragile the cues are that separate meaningful music from meaningless noise. Working at its best (and one of the real breakthroughs offered by Room Perfect is the simplicity of the set-up procedure) it's capable of excellent results. But the devil is in the details and the layers of options, the sheer complexity of the technology itself (as opposed to its operation) creates the opportunity for error. Sods law can be relied on to do the rest.

Initially then, results were less than stellar, which is the aural equivalent of being two-nil down after five minutes; it requires quite a comeback. That subsequent investigation banished the gremlins and achieved the desired result is thus, in its own way, even more impressive. So why wasn't I clamoring to get my grubby little mitts on a review sample? Fact is, whilst the demonstration was audibly conclusive – Room Perfect definitely left you with a smoother, more neutral presentation, I can't honestly say that it was actually musically more enjoyable than a well set-up system running in bypass mode; different certainly, but better, more communicative, more real? Of that I was not convinced.

What I couldn't do, however, was put my finger on the reason why: until later that is.

Moving on we were discussing with Peter the Lyngdorf ►

**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.** ►

▶ digital amps and the subject of digital interfacing. I expressed surprise that the company put so much effort into extracting decent performance from RCA interconnection, when BNC offers a superior basic standard with which to work. 'Ah', came his response 'nobody has BNC cables so they just end up using RCA to BNC adaptors. That's no benefit at all. What I want to do is make sure that 99% of people get 90% of the music, all of the time.' Which is when it struck me... As impressive and laudable as Lyngdorf's achievements are (and make no mistake about that) they're not shooting for the same goal as me. As far as I'm concerned, high-end audio is almost diametrically opposed to Peter's stated aim. It's all about getting 100% of the music to 1% of the people – some of the time, if you're lucky.

Now, one is not superior to or more worthwhile than the other; they're just different. Why does that matter? Because if Lyngdorf's achievements are viewed through a high-end glass then the conclusion tends to be that they offer a

solution to a non-existent problem. Not only do they start from the assumption of a badly placed speaker in an acoustically problematic space (when most serious audio nuts achieve something considerably better than that) but their own demonstration actually serves to show just how adaptable human hearing can be.

But, if we allow them their premise; if we assume that we want to get great music out of less than great systems with far from ideal positioning – that's another matter. Suddenly Room Perfect looks like bicycle repairman's magic toolbox; compact, lightweight and capable of solving any problem faced by man (well, any problem on two wheels, anyway). Looked at in that light, I might not be desperate to get the Room Perfect system into my listening room, but I am intrigued. In an industry that risks dying from the bottom up, we could do with all the help we can get. In the end Lyngdorf Audio might not be high-end; they could just be a lot more important than that. ▶+

# Music Matters



by Alan Sircom

Roy Gregory wasn't the only Hi-Fi+ type invited to a flat hotel just outside Copenhagen to get our heads round the Lyngdorf concepts. I was there, too. And the pair of us tried hard to steer clear of falling into 'naughty schoolboys on a class visit' syndrome. It almost worked, although there was a minor rebellion during the England v Trinidad & Tobago World Cup play-off. And another one involving random pickled herrings in the Tivoli Gardens, but I have been sworn on pain of death never to recount that one.

Largely what we heard from the systems played

concluded; that Room Perfect was in many ways a high-end solution to a problem automatically solved by applying a high-end mentality and using high-end products. That the demonstration was interesting, but slightly hobbled by aspects potentially extraneous to Room Perfect itself. And that we all came away with a sense of heightened interest in the whole Lyngdorf schema, but not entirely convinced this would be a system we'd deploy in our own homes.

But perhaps we were all doing the Room Perfect system, and the greater Lyngdorf DSP system entailed within the ▶

**" But the proof of the pudding lies in the dramatic effect they have on sound quality, lowering background 'grunge', improving dynamic contrasts, cleaning up colorations, reducing 'boxiness' and enhancing the stereo image depth, coherence and precision. "**

Paul Messenger, Hi-Fi+

**" ...they all put evacuating internally generated energy at the top of their mission statement. Their sonic impact is not subtle. My advice; investigate sooner rather than later. "**

Roy Gregory, Hi-Fi+

**" I'm impressed by the way Vertex AQ adopts a holistic system-oriented approach, underpinned by a consistency of philosophy and methodology. Good results may be obtained without going the whole hog, as I have done here, but the bottom line is that this stuff really works... "**

Paul Messenger, Hi-Fi+

Put one Vertex Component in your system to start with - listen - then ask yourself if you can now listen without it.

▶ products, a bit of a disservice. At one point in the test, we were given a chance to set up the system ourselves, to see how easy it really is. Stick a microphone (connected to a Room Perfect-equipped Lyngdorf TDA2200 amplifier) in the listening position and a few randomly-selected points around the room. The amp then runs through five minutes of what seems like BBC Radiophonic Workshop sound effects from 1970s *Dr Who* episodes in each position and then displays just how close to the optimum Room Perfect sound you are (the front panel displays a percentage score – over 90% and you have pretty much achieved good equalisation). Even an idiot could equalise their room in about 10 minutes... unless you hire a crack team of hi-fi reviewing idiots, who will take three times as long.

Peter Lyngdorf and the team were keen for us to hear how well this worked in equalising Lyngdorf's own speakers to the room, as well as how good it is at transforming a pair of large B&W 802D speakers. And, with varying degrees of success, the Lyngdorf boys achieved their goal. But the power of playtime was too great to resist; out went the huge floorstanders, in came a pair of mildly midrange B&W DM602 S3 stand-mounters.

Now the use of Room Perfect became a bit clearer. That "99% of the people get 90% of the sound" claim Peter Lyngdorf made to Roy made a lot more sense. In terms of the room interaction, it raises the bar on all speakers by a couple of notches. But if the bar is already set pretty damn high thanks to the design of the speaker, this improvement is hardly noticeable. Worse, the loss of the extremely fine detailing that high-end equipment is so good at resolving could potentially undermine any improvements in room interaction. That's not a worry with middle market systems and the DM602 S3 with Room Perfect was a much greater success than more upmarket systems.

It would be a huge mistake to denigrate the Room Perfect concept and dismiss it as a lo-fi DSP sound improver. It's far more than that. There are many high-enders who, by virtue of being unfortunately lodged in a room with a reverb time measured in aeons or having a room so dead anechoic chambers get jealous, simply cannot make the most of their systems. Room Perfect goes a long way to redress the balance and is a lot cheaper than moving house. Those with less high-end aspirations will find a lot to recommend in the Room Perfect concept, too. It won't

make a Wilson out of a Wharfedale, but it will make the best of a bad job and bring a speaker to life where no life was hitherto possible.

Actually, where it works best is when you aren't in the hot seat. If you are the one and only listener sitting in your Eames chair in the perfect position in an acoustically good room, then the chances of Room Perfect yanking your music chain is slim. If you sit off axis or enjoy walking round your room while listening, you'll end up finding what Room Perfect does to your tastes. In fact, the improvement becomes almost laughably big when listening in the rear corners of the room (why you'd do this in reality is beyond me, however).

But there's another aspect of Lyngdorf DSP that's even more anathema and even more useful. There's a move to provide custom curves for recordings within the digital decoding inside the amplifier itself. These curves can be used to brighten up dull recordings, slug bright recordings and maximise the potential of MP3 recordings with low sample rates.

This is exceptionally dodgy territory for the audiophile. We like our music unsullied... but deep down we know this is impossible. In fact, mild DSP tone shaping can help cut through the limits put upon the recording by the studio or the transmission method deployed. This is another double-edged sword; careful DSP can improve the lot of an almost unplayable recording, but less careful applications mean a sound far removed from either 'enjoyable' or 'accurate'. Still, never fear, Lyngdorf also had an AtoD converter on show, including an optional phono-stage. DSP does wonders when it comes to all the various replay curves that record companies have applied over the years. What could have more audiophile cred (or be more ironic) than that...

I suspect these two DSP functions are actually going to be far bigger than we give them credit. What better way for someone to make the jump from iPod to hi-fi than to have the hi-fi make the best of those nasty downloads and improve the sound of the room in the process.

Hopefully, by the end of the year, I shall be moving to a bigger house, with a larger and new listening room. That will be the time when the Room Perfect system comes into play. If I use it after the move for a while, without acclimatising to the sound of the new room, will I ever be able to live without it? 

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# Munich High-End 2006

by Roy Gregory

I always loved the Frankfurt Show, by far my favourite event of the year. So when the High-End Society in Germany announced, three years ago that the event was moving to an exhibition centre in Munich, I greeted the news with dismay. In both 2004 and 2005 I had to visit the New York show, an event that clashed with the German show, so now, in 2006 I finally got to visit my first Munich event, and whilst that hiatus was hardly planned it was, on reflection, a wonderful thing. Teething troubles over and growing pains relieved, High-End 2006 was the finished article, blossoming into a different but in many ways superior event to the old Frankfurt Kempinski version.

What makes the difference? Well, clearly the ultra modern, airy interior of the MOC exhibition hall is a far cry from the rambling corridors of the Kempinski, but it's not just the environment but the use to which it has been put that's so impressive. With two huge halls, subdivided into stands and prefabricated listening rooms, along with two more floors of conference/exhibition suites, the accommodation is expansive, while the simple, modern interiors offer the perfect backdrop against which to present a brand or product. This is a far more professionally presented show than any other I've attended, the standards of display

material and overall appearance way beyond what this industry normally manages. Okay, so that's down to the exhibitors but they have to have the space to work with and this one actively encourages them to do so.

Sonically, the notion of prefabricated sound rooms is pretty frightening, but in practice they seem to work surprisingly well (no doubt helped by the comparative absence of overly loud AV systems). The conference suites delivered some surprisingly good results and this is in no way a step down from a hotel venue.

But the real benefits are seen in the space and facilities that allow the organisers to offer a far more complete and multi-faceted event. Three separate restaurant options is a step in the right direction, as is the vast space given over on the first floor to easy chairs for conversation and relaxation. But most impressive of all was the range of additional attractions on offer. Regular live concerts in the first floor seating area were reinforced with live music sessions from B&W, while both Elac and Bosendorfer offered classic live versus recorded



Soprano Antje Decker gets close to an Elac - or should that be the other way round?

comparisons. Add to that a program of no fewer than 15 lectures on topics varying from "The Sound Of Cables" to "6dB filter slopes in crossover theory and practice" together with a further four demonstrations organized by magazines including an HD-DVD versus BluRay discussion and comparison, and there was plenty to keep visitors entertained and up to date.

Of course, over the years different shows have each developed their own distinct characters, and happily, the feel and mix that made Frankfurt such a great show has transferred to Munich intact; which means plenty of analogue and speaker systems as impressive as they are impractical. Here then are the highlights, as decided on an entirely arbitrary by yours truly.



The spacious, airy atrium at the MOC.

► **Analogue**

This year was no different, but in amongst the many turntables that will never reach these shores (even if they reach the market) there were a couple of items that really stood out. Axiss Distribution showed an extremely neat electronic stylus balance from Airtight. Not exactly news you might think, but next to it and built into the same compact casework was a neat little device that purports to run in cartridges. Its stylus support pad is vibrated at various frequencies between 600 and 800Hz which works the suspension without wearing the tip. The effervescent Arturo claims that it does the job in a single, 15 minute application; we shall see when the review sample arrives. At around 900 Euros this is more of a dealer tool/rental proposition than for individual ownership, but boy will it be great if it does what it says on the tin. And from the man who has everything, at least as far as cartridges are concerned, news of two new, up-market Shelter models, the 7000 and 9000, similar in appearance but differing in price and output. Heavy, compact designs they weigh in at around 11g, but are relatively high in compliance at 9cu, which makes for an interesting combination of mechanical virtues. Expect them to flank the £2000 price point when they reach these shores, the higher 0.6mV output 9000 being the more expensive. ([www.axiss-usa.com](http://www.axiss-usa.com))

Brinkmann, manufacturer of those most Germanic of precision engineered turntables, showed a 12" evolution of their 10.5 "Breuer-alike" tonearm. But whereas the earlier version was a little too close an homage to sit comfortably with my sensibilities, the new 12" arm is much, much more than just a longer tube and the same bearing set-up. Everything from headshell to counterweight has been redesigned and reprofiled, finally giving the arm its own distinct identity to match the flawless finish. At 4000 Euros (a mere 500 more than the 10.5) this looks like something of a bargain and I can't wait to try one. ([www.brinkmann-audio.com](http://www.brinkmann-audio.com))



The Brinkmann 12" arm – a new take on stretching the truth?

Last but by no means least, Audiodesk – manufacturers of the CD lathe and washing machine we've recently reviewed – have finally turned their inventive talents to the question of cleaning vinyl. Their solution is, as you might expect, suitably different. Albeit only a prototype, it also looks incredibly sensible. Imagine a shoebox with a slot cut in it in which you stand a record, label deep. As the record is rotated, both sides are cleaned using a combination of fluid and ultrasonic vibration, and then dried. Quick, quiet and efficient, if they get this into production, expect the copyists to be working overtime. ([www.audiodesksysteme.de](http://www.audiodesksysteme.de))

**Electronics**

For me, the most peculiar omission at this show was the absence of new, value for money solid-state amplification ranges. Normally I'll see one or two such products at a German show, but this time round, the honours rested firmly with the likes of the familiar Cayin and Melody valve ranges. Indeed, the most interesting new home-team products came from the ultra establishment. Burmester showed a new up-sampling CD player, the 061 which seems set to usurp the position of the 001 belt driven model that we liked so much, and to do so at around a third less money. It was making especially sweet sounds with the new B30 loudspeaker (but more on that later). Open, detailed, relaxed yet rhythmically coherent, there was none of the anti-septic leanness that can afflict up-sampled digital sound, so both sonics and aesthetics look like a chip off the old block; chrome then, lots of chrome... ([www.burmester.de](http://www.burmester.de))



Burmester's new 061 CD player.

Equally interesting (to look at) were the previously unseen – by this reporter at least – Lindemann pre and power amps. I've long been impressed by the sound and presentation of the company's 820 SACD player, so I was really looking forward to hearing the rest of the range. The 830 line-stage and 850 dual-mono power amp share the same, cool styling as the disc player and the same superb standards of finish. I've long maintained that the knobs can make or break the appearance of a product ►

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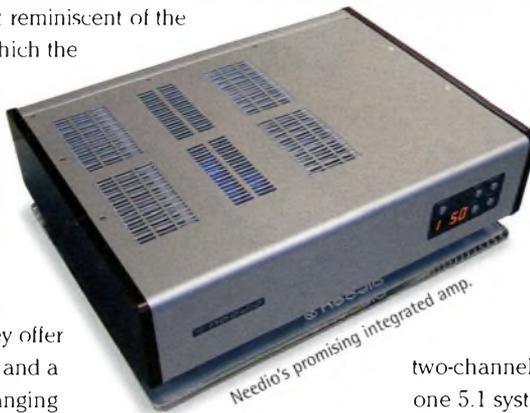
w: [www.symmetry-systems.co.uk](http://www.symmetry-systems.co.uk)

▶ and the 830 sports some of the nicest I've come across. The sound? All I can report on is the sound of the guy "running" the room – dull, monotonous, with very poor dynamic range and a limited tonal palette. On three visits to the room that's all I heard. If this guy had once shut his yap and pushed the play button on the remote control he kept threatening the equipment with, then I could tell you more. Sadly, the Lindemanns' sonic potential remains a mystery –but boy, it looks lovely. ([www.lindemann-audio.de](http://www.lindemann-audio.de))



The stylish Lindemann 830 Line-stage.

The other interesting range of amplification I happened across comes from France and a new company called Neodio. The plain, almost industrial/instrumentation external appearance hides complex internal circuitry specifically designed to offer exceptional thermal stability, rejection of interference and a novel "error correction" system in place of negative feedback. Indeed, the company eschew all audiophile componentry in favour of the reliability and consistency of the highest grade industrial parts. The sound in their prefabricated room was wonderfully clean, clear and transparent (via Kelinac speakers) and perhaps not surprisingly, somewhat reminiscent of the Lavardin amps with which the Neodios share so many features. As regular readers know, that is praise indeed and I'll be looking to get my grubby hands on a sample just as soon as possible. Currently they offer three integrated amps and a CD player, the amps ranging from 60 to 150 Watts per channel.



Neodio's promising integrated amp.

So, after the 2005 vintage and the Tour, yet another reason to visit Bordeaux in July! ([www.neodio-hifi.com](http://www.neodio-hifi.com))

Finally, Gryphon showed a prototype pre-amp with a detachable, freestanding control panel, readout and remote receiver that communicates wirelessly with the actual control unit, allowing you to place it anywhere or even carry it to your listening chair. In these days of Bluetooth technology you have to ask why someone hasn't done this before. Execution in this instance, is well up to Gryphon's normal, stunning standards, adding extra kudos to the concept.

## Loudspeakers

So, no great surprise that there were more interesting new loudspeakers than anything else at the show. An especially pleasant encounter was Piega's flagship model, the TC 70 X, driven by a full suite of Cyrus digital front-end, X-DAC and mono-blocs. The Cyrus electronics never sounded so sweet, whilst Piega showed excellent taste in their broad choice of both



Piega's impressive TC 70X.

two-channel music and AV demo material. This was one 5.1 system that sounded superb, even without the pictures to distract the senses – another testament to the Cyrus DVD player. Whilst the sound never plumbed the true depths of deepest bass, tending to finesse and agility in place of sheer grunt, the unforced ease of the presentation, its clarity and ability to allow music to breathe was refreshing indeed. At 4.5K Euros for the speakers, this was an exceptionally good value system in combination with the Cyrus shoeboxes, one that put many, far more expensive set-ups to shame. I found myself popping in for a little (aural) refreshment each time I passed the room – and each time I stayed longer than I should have. ([www.piega.ch](http://www.piega.ch))

# Meridian's G06. Higher Fidelity.

"...assured, detailed and refined...  
this is a really music-loving piece of  
hi-fi equipment.

"Meridian has achieved a high and  
consistent standard with this player...  
a highly recommendable item.

"Overall score: 90%."

—Richard Black, *Hi-Fi Choice*, July 2006

Meridian has been  
at the forefront of Compact Disc  
since the beginning. In 1984, we released the  
world's first audiophile CD player, and since then, we've  
never looked back.

Compact Disc remains the world's most popular music  
medium, and the format is capable of exceptional quality  
– but only with the right player.

The Meridian G06 is a fine example. Based on the G08, the  
premium CD player in the popular G Series range, the G06 is  
an exciting, affordable and above all *musical* CD player.

Inside the G06 is a ROM drive that can read the disc up to  
ten times faster than normal speed, for absolutely accurate  
data recovery. Triple reclocking circuitry minimises jitter,  
for extended highs and stable, precise stereo localisation.  
Bass is awe-inspiringly real.

Multiple power supplies and  
true audiophile-grade components ensure that the audio  
performance of the G06 is second to none in its price range.

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▶ Revolver were present at the show, demonstrating a new move up-market with the help of the Melody electronics. The Cygnis is quite a departure for the company; a three-way, four box system employing a curved carbon fibre skin for the head unit. The projected £6K price tag is quite a departure too, and only time will tell whether the market is ready for Revolver's brave new world. First impressions are promising and this is one to watch when the prototypes finally reach production. ([www.revolveraudio.co.uk](http://www.revolveraudio.co.uk))

Duevel, makers of those lovely, turned ply omnis, showed but didn't play a pair of new budget floorstanders, the Planets. As the name suggests, the upward facing drivers fire their output at a pair of chrome spheres suspended on rods, immediately above them. Price (and performance) is yet to be decided, but they will certainly get your guests talking. ([www.duevel.com](http://www.duevel.com))

Burmester have long produced loudspeakers, but their latest, slightly softer looking offerings based on slim fronted towers with concealed, sideways firing woofers are particularly successful, sonically and visually. The expensive B100 model has much impressed HP at TAS, but at the show



The Burmester B30 speaker (in silver).

I was drawn to the new and far more affordable B30, offering superb sound for its 7900 Euro asking price. It seems that Burmester are poised for a return to the UK market, and with offerings like these it's not before time.

AvanteGarde showed a completely revised range, building a variety of bass options onto their existing mid and treble trumpets. The end result is now no fewer than 14 different configurations, however, the big news has to be the spread of the so-called Short Basshorn (SBH), both up and down the range. This upright, folded horn, active bass unit was first seen stacked in pairs and supporting a set of Duo trumpets to create the Primo system at 49K Euros. Well, now you can combine the same mid and treble with a single SBH in the form of the Mezzo, a far more elegant and affordable (31.5K Euros) option. However, the one that caught my attention was the combination of the Trio three-way trumpets with a pair of free-standing SBHs, priced at 44.5K Euros. For anyone who has heard the Trios with the full complement of six of the semi-circular Basshorns and wants that all horn quality without the massive physical presence and equally massive price, this is a seriously attractive compromise. It also offers an attractive upgrade to users of Trio systems with the conventional subs originally supplied. ▶



Avantgarde's new baby- the Nano. Smaller than it looks!

# shadow audio :)

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## B&W, Sonus Faber & Wilson Audio beware!

A new high-end reference loudspeaker has just reached this shore and its making huge waves!



### JAS Audio PLATO has arrived (£13,995 / £18,931)

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JAS-Audio wanted to create a loudspeaker of unparalleled performance that would make the whole world sit up and listen. PLATO does this in a such an effortless way, it makes it practically impossible to live with any other loudspeaker in your system. Seriously!



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Nordost Flatline Cables technical specs and speed are very impressive, but what really matters is how they sound. Each speaker cable and interconnect in the Nordost range is designed to let the music and emotion shine through. If you want to really hear your system for the first time, the addition of Nordost into your system will do that for you.

Unlike our competitors, whose product offerings are not sonically consistent from model to model, there is a discernable difference and enhanced level of performance as one progresses through our line. Clarity, detail, and emotional involvement are taken to new levels with each improved model. Music is about enjoyment, pleasure, and emotion.

► For those of us (myself included) for whom those prices sound more like telephone numbers, take heart; there's a new entry-level hybrid in the shape of the Nano. Taking the horns from the Uno design of old and combining them in a far more compact array with a new sub-woofer design, the result is cute as a button, far easier to accommodate and just as visually arresting. At 11K Euros it's also an awful lot more affordable (if not exactly cheap). ([www.avantgarde-acoustic.de](http://www.avantgarde-acoustic.de))

But the most impressive performances at the show belong to two of the high-end's most established brands. The Wilson Audio Duette was unveiled to the press at the Las Vegas CES in January. Here it made its public debut. And make no mistake, this is a Wilson speaker with a very real difference. An approximately two cubic foot, 8" two-way, it was designed from the outset for book-shelf mounting – or as Dave Wilson euphemistically puts it, hostile acoustic environments. Externally, many of the details are familiar, but the thing that really impresses is the unbelievable attention to detail that has gone into every single aspect of this speaker's design.

From the separate crossover, to a purpose built in-wall kit, from the free-space stand to the set of multiple cones designed to tilt the speaker precisely depending on its height and the listening position, all held in place (with the speaker mounted vertically or horizontally) by tiny magnets buried under the immaculate lacquer finish.

Of course, all that would be meaningless if the speaker didn't sound good, but this is where the Duette really scores. Experience with WATTs and Puppies, and

more recently with the MAXX 2 has demonstrated the extent to which the performance of these systems is critically dependent on precise set-up. Even then, the sound can tend to the more clinically revealing with its scalpel like dissection of the recordings played, making partnering equipment and cable choices equally crucial to the end result. Fabulous if you get it right, look out if you don't...

Well, the Duette comes from a different mindset, one that wants to produce the best possible sound in the widest range of conditions. And that is great news for domestic listeners who often endure less than perfect acoustic conditions (the small matter of domestic décor and maintaining a long term relationship intruding to an entirely unreasonable degree). The Duette is not cheap, at \$8,900 for the speakers, extra for the stands. However, it is capable of an astonishingly convincing performance of incredible scale and authority from its modest dimensions. It's understated appearance and immaculate finish mean that it will blend unobtrusively with most environments, and best of all, it will deliver



The Wilson Duette (with optional stand).

its performance with surprisingly affordable

electronics. 20 years ago, Wilson launched the original Watt, a \$5000 miniature of limited bandwidth and cruel drive characteristics that nonetheless took the critical world by storm. Two decades later, the Duette costs less than twice as much yet offers superior appearance, bandwidth, musical accessibility and drive demands. That's what I call progress, and whilst bargain isn't a word that springs to mind in association with Wilson Audio, this is as close as they (or you) are ever going to get. ([www.wilsonaudio.com](http://www.wilsonaudio.com)) ►

► The other major contender, this time on the grand scale, comes from Gryphon. The Trident represents a half way house between the compact Cantata (reviewed in Issue 27 and winner of a Product Of The Year award) and the massive, four box Poseidon. With a seven driver, symmetrical array, this is always going to be an imposing design, a fact underlined by the near 1m depth of the



Gryphon's mighty Trident.

cabinet. But Gryphon have done a good job of softening the visual impact, while the massive (250kg) enclosure contains four actively driven 8" bass drivers and delivers a -3dB point of 16Hz. The Trident offers the same q-control as the Cantata, but the use of active bass means that level can now also be balance against the room characteristics allowing optimization in almost

any situation, the whole set-up being remotely controlled. The high efficiency and easy drive characteristics of the mid and treble enclosure means that a modestly powered but high quality amp can be used to drive the beast, while the superb finish, hand built cross-over components and Gryphon's in-house amplification performing active duty help to justify the 70K Euro price. Musical performance was everything you'd expect, and having asked the Gryphon guys to shift over

a metric tonne of speakers so that I could sample them in place of the Poseidons, it was a bit embarrassing when it took all of four notes to appreciate the stunning performance on offer. The next 20 minutes of listening was for pure pleasure (and to help ease their aching muscles). This is definitely one to add to the high-end, cost-no-object short list. I'd love to get them home, but installation might be a little daunting! ([www.gryphon-audio.dk](http://www.gryphon-audio.dk))

### Software

Finally, on an entirely personal note, record of the show has to be MoFi's 180g vinyl release of Aimee Mann's *Bachelor No.2*. Great music well served by a superb pressing, this continues Mobile Fidelity's march back to enlightenment from the dark days of greatest hits albums. Fantastic.





# Wilson Audio MAXX 2 Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

So much has been written about the (in)famous Linn Sondek and its response to variations in set-up that I'm hesitant to add any more. However, the most sensible thing anybody ever said to me about the LP12 went something like this; "Because the Sondek comes out of its box in one piece, people think that it's fully built and just needs a tweak or two. In fact, what you're getting is a kit of parts that have been loosely assembled simply to make them easier to transport; strip it down and start from scratch and then you won't get all the problems."

By now you'll probably have glanced at the top of the page to see if you're reading the right article. What, you might well wonder, does the LP12 have in common with Wilson's massive MAXX 2 loudspeaker system? Well, the answer is, "More than you might think". Just as the Linn required a deal of knowledge and care to get the best out of it, so too does the MAXX. Just as the Linn constituted a performance benchmark against which others were measured, again so does the MAXX. But most importantly of all, as vociferously as the Linn divided opinion, that debate looks like a garden party cake contest compared to the views I've heard expressed regarding the MAXX. If ever there was a love it or hate it product then this is it; which is why I was initially reluctant to review it, but why, ultimately I'm glad I did. You see, oddly enough, both camps in this particular debate can be right – and wrong – which is what makes the MAXX so interesting.

Whilst I'd hesitate to describe the MAXX2 as a kit of parts, it's certainly worth starting from scratch. That includes the physical elements that go together to make up the speaker, but

also the room they're going to be sited in and the system they're going to be connected to. In hi-fi everything matters; with the MAXX it matters more than ever.

How long does it take to set-up a pair of speakers? In this instance the best part of a day to actually get them into the house and then another day to optimize the positioning. The speakers themselves arrive in four parts: two bass units and two head sections. The real problem is the bass cabinets. Each containing a 13" and a 10.5" driver reflex loaded by a machined aluminium



port of MI Abrams calibre, they are built primarily of Wilson's proprietary M material, a mineral loaded micro-layered composite selected for its sonic properties and self damping. Even out of the huge crates they arrive in they're seriously heavy. I'm no shrinking violet when it comes to humping around heavy hi-fi but moving the MAXXs instilled a sense somewhere between respect and awe. They come on casters, but those aren't a lot of help when it comes to stairs. I'm large, Pedro (from Absolute Sounds) is considerably larger and he brought a helper who fits somewhere in between, size-wise. The three of us seriously struggled

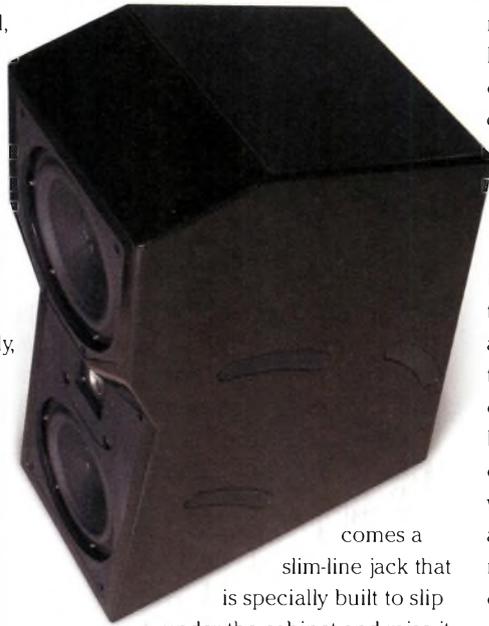
getting these things into the house!

Once they're in the room, you have to add the head units between the upright wings that grace the tops of the bass units. These contain a pair of 7" midrange drivers and the inverted titanium dome tweeter, sourced from Focal. They stand on a machined blade at the front edge and a particularly vicious spike at the rear. A block of steps milled from satin-chromed solid brass can be slid fore and aft under the spike altering the tilt of the head, which is then fixed by a trio of grub screws that clamp it between the side wings. That's the basic assembly done; the positioning and adjustment of the speaker, together with the various tuning options on offer I'll leave to John Giolas (of Wilson) to explain. What you need to know is that John and Pedro worked like Trojans for a full day to get the speakers sounding the way they wanted, with Dave Wilson on hand to add the benefit of his experience if required. By now you'll be wondering not just whether any speaker could be worth the effort involved, but

whether a speaker demanding this level of care is a practical proposition. After all, were you to buy a set of MAXXs then you wouldn't have the Dave and John show rolling up to install them. But what becomes very clear very quickly is that the set-up procedure employed is extremely systematic, a system that Wilson are at great pains to instill in their distributors and dealers. So, whilst the lead role in my particular set-up might be ascribed to John Giolas, that was at my insistence and he was helped every step of the way by Pedro, who would be tasked with the installation of any speaker sold to a UK customer. ▶

► So with listening position defined, ear height measured and upper range module tilt calculated there were still a few extra steps considered necessary over and above the standard procedure in this particular instance. This pair of MAXX2s has done the rounds for both review and demonstration, meaning the normally flawless finish had suffered a little. More importantly, the resistors located beneath a hatch in the head unit and used to trim the treble output were replaced, not for value but simply for new examples. Likewise, the bass output can be similarly adjusted, and in my room (somewhat surprisingly given its modest dimensions) it was decided to go with reduced bass damping, more in line with US voicing. Once again, these adjustments might not be necessary but it's nice to know they're available if required.

You might be wondering just how, once the speakers had been rolled, shoved, shunted and re-shunted into the perfect position, it's possible to spike something this heavy and awkward to get hold of. Never fear, these guys think of everything. Out



comes a slim-line jack that is specially built to slip under the cabinet and raise it enough to remove the casters and install the substantial spikes.

Once the speakers are finally positioned, you're confronted by a pair of imposing, four-way cabinets, widely spaced but standing well into the room. As tall as a person and significantly bulkier, their overhanging heads give them a brooding, almost menacing countenance, kind of like the bastard offspring of a black Dalek and a Cyber-

man. It's not a look I really go for, but hey, that's entirely personal. What it does do is send a message, loud and clear; I'm serious about my music and don't you forget it.

Despite their four-way configuration and separate head modules, the MAXX2s are single wired to a pair of terminals placed at the bottom rear of the bass cabinet. The upper range units are connected by a pair of umbilicals that extend from the rear of the bass cabinet's top surface. At 92dB efficient but with a 3 Ohm minimum impedance coupled with a 20Hz to 21kHz bandwidth (0-3dB), they present the driving amplifier with a somewhat schizophrenic requirement; on the one hand they demand speed and agility, on the other, current and control. Not a combination you often find within the confines of a single box. With this in mind I'd equipped myself with the audio equivalent of a garage full of Ferraris: supplementing the Hovland RADIA were the VTL S400, a pair of Karan KA M1200 mono-blocs, a pair of ARC Ref 210 mono-blocs and the Tom Evans Linear Bs. The only thing missing was the Lamm ML2.1s, a low powered design that does work with the MAXX, so long as you

## Installation and optimization

As described in the review, positioning and optimizing the MAXX2s in my listening room took the best part of a long day. Rather than trying to recount the sequence of events I thought it was far more sensible to have John Giolas explain what is an extremely systematic process, and the rationale behind it. Ed

The Wilson Audio Setup Procedure (WASP) is an empirical approach to speaker setup. Dave Wilson developed this process in the eighties as he began to demonstrate his new loudspeakers at trade shows. He discovered that the sound of his voice changed as he moved about the room. Some areas of the room distorted and colored the sound of his voice, while in other locations it sounded neutral; he dubbed the latter areas "Zones of Neutrality." This phenomenon is caused by the interaction of the sound with the room's boundaries and its recognition allowed Dave to develop a systematic regimen for speaker setup.

This is the process that I used at Roy's house to

setup the MAXX Series 2.

We start by clearing all objects from the area of setup. Starting at the back wall on the speaker side of the room, I stand against the wall BEHIND the location in which I intend to position one channel of the MAXX. Speaking in a moderately loud voice and at a constant volume, I project my voice out into the room. Near the rear wall, my voice has an overly heavy, "chesty" quality. As I progress into the room I observe the point where there is a sonic transition in my voice, where it is tonally correct and less spatially diffuse. When I hear this transition, I have entered the inner edge of the Zone of Neutrality. I place a piece of tape on the floor to mark this location.

I then want to discover where the Zone ends by progressing further into the room until I begin to hear my voice lose focus and correct tonality. This is caused by the return of the room's boundary contribution; my voice is now interacting with the opposite wall. I have reached the outer edge of the Zone of Neutrality. I place a piece of tape on the floor and mark this location too. The distance

between the "inner" and "outer" edge tape marks is usually between eight inches and fourteen inches. In Roy's room, it is approximately eight inches. Standing between the two tape marks, I position myself against the sidewall perpendicular to the intended speaker location. Using the same procedure as above, I begin moving into the room toward the opposite sidewall, progressing between the two pieces of tape. I mark the edges of the lateral Zone of Neutrality. The four pieces of tape now form a rectangle that establishes the Zone of Neutrality for this side of the room. I repeat the same process for the other side of the room. Using the four marks as my guide, I tape an outline to define the rectangular boundaries of the zone. This process eliminates a large chunk of real estate and leaves me with a small, sonically neutral area that I can work within far more efficiently. I roll the MAXXs back into position and begin the next step of the process.

I position each MAXX so that the baffle is within the front third of its corresponding rectangle. I run another piece of tape along the inside front corner

▶ respect its operating envelope.

Source components included the VPI TNT6/JMW 12.5 and Koetsu Oblue Onyx, Lyra Titan I and Olympos cartridges, the Wadia 861SE and the ARC CD7: Phono amplification was delivered by the ARC PH7 and TEAD Groove Plus, while volume was set using the Lyra Connoisseur 4-2L SE, the ARC Ref 3 or the TEAD Vibe with the latest Pulse 2 power supply. The whole lot was supported (not all at once you understand) on finite-element and Symposium stands, while mains and signal cabling was Nordost Valhalla throughout.

Two words sum up the MAXX2 listening experience: power and precision. These qualities are central to the very nature of the beast, but perhaps more so than with any other speaker in my experience, it's necessary to appreciate not just what that nature is but the why as well. Understanding the MAXX2 means more than just



recognizing its sonic signature: it's about appreciating the cumulative process that results in that performance, a process which once deviated from will start to undermine and dilute the performance potential of the product. These are strong words with significant implications, but the more I live with the MAXX2s the more I'm convinced of their truth.

Let's start with "Precision." If you haven't read John Giolas' sidebar (overleaf) on the set-up procedure he employed, now's the time to do so. Next, consider for a second the fact that the optimum performance for the speaker depends on the exact height and distance to the listener's ear. That means, that if you sit forward or back, slump a little or sit up straight (God forbid you should lie down on the sofa) or move slightly to one side, you will effect the sound you hear. But hey, it can't make that much difference, can it? Don't you believe it!

Just under the front edge of my sofa there's a bit of tape, a bit of tape that marks the optimum position for the listening seat. On that tape is a red mark that tells me the precise centre line for my head. Okay, so it happens to line up with one of the junctions in the floorboards but it's there as a reminder, just in case I get confused as to which knot hole or floorboard represents what. Now my boards are 125mm wide – five inches in old money. What happens to the

sound if I move that distance to the left or right? Playing a familiar track

like 'Way Out Basie' (*Farmers Market Barbeque*, Analogue Productions APJ 023) make that movement and Danny Turner's sax loses its brilliance and impact, becoming duller, almost muted. The brass tutti likewise, with the whole upper mid-band energy level slightly depressed, enough to remove that sudden quality and natural "blat" that makes them so impressively realistic. Drum punctuations are robbed of



of each MAXX. The corner provides an accurate indicator of the front-to-back location of the loudspeaker. I mark the tape in half-inch increments.

Next I set the proper angle of the MAXX midrange/tweeter module for correct propagation alignment. Since Wilson has "done the math," this is a simple matter of measuring the listening distance and ear height and referring to a calibrated table for the correct head alignment setting.

Finally, the listening begins. I use a piece of music that contains the set of variables I am looking to optimize – midrange beauty and accuracy, dynamic expression, deep bass extension, mid-bass balance and impact, soundstage focus and resolution, and so forth. I am also listening for a sense of flow and musical involvement. Great systems convey the musical intent of the performer.

I set the CD player to repeat a section of the chosen track so that I can more immediately hear the changes made with each move of the speaker. Within the Zone of Neutrality, I begin by moving

the MAXX forward and aft, first in one-inch increments, then in half-inch, and ultimately in movements as small as a quarter-inch. Each step is documented so that I can return to and re-explore a spot that showed promise. Through this process, I arrive at the front-to-back position of the MAXXs in Roy's room.

Through a similar process, I optimize the side-to-side location for each MAXX individually. Now that the MAXXs are optimized in the room, I carefully install the spike/diode (foot) assemblies, using Wilson Audio's customized jack.

In almost all cases, Wilson loudspeakers perform optimally in fairly untreated rooms. However, the proximity of the right sidewall to the right MAXX was such that the system benefited from a small amount of absorbent material in this area. This was positioned empirically, moving a six-inch wide piece of room treatment incrementally (again, half an inch at a time) until the undesirable characteristics caused by this section of wall were mitigated. In Roy's room we also made some other adjustments to the speaker

itself, but whilst an available option in all cases these are outside the normal procedure. Roy has thus detailed them in the main text.

The WASP procedure takes considerably longer to carry out than it does to describe. Seen in the context of a single day, it might seem unnecessarily time consuming, almost pedantic. But what it delivers is a reliable, repeatable procedure for efficiently achieving a neutral, musical result with Wilson loudspeakers – a result that will benefit every day of their working life. A loudspeaker's musical performance is highly dependent on how well it is positioned in the room – far more so than any other part of the system. Time spent in this regard is always well invested, as a loudspeaker installed improperly, without consideration for the characteristics of the room, will not realize its sonic potential. For this reason, Wilson trains its dealers and distributors in the art and science of loudspeaker installation, using the WASP system, and contractually requires them to install each Wilson loudspeaker they sell into the client's home.

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## Comments from CES 2006:

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### ***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

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### ***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.

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▶ snap, the soundstage of transparency, the performance of its life and intent. These are not subtle changes, marking as they do the difference between hi-fi and a truly memorable musical event.

Stand up and the difference is shocking. The treble becomes hashy, bright and intrusive, the brass – wince inducing. The spectral balance tilts dramatically as the high-frequencies start to shout and draw attention to themselves. A glaze drops over the soundstage and the music becomes disjointed and confused.



Suddenly, all that life and energy (and these speakers generate a lot of energy) becomes a problem instead of a benefit.

What order of difference are we talking about here? The difference between something which is direct, authoritative, engaging and exciting at its best and in the case of standing

listening, potentially rather unpleasant. Moving one plank sideways robs the sound of its magic, moving two renders it merely ordinary as the confident sense of coherence simply evaporates. What this means is that these speakers actually perform at their considerable best for a single listener in a single position. Which makes them the biggest, personally tuned headphones in the world – in which role they perform admirably. So, when I describe the sound of these speakers bear in mind that I'm talking about this set-up, this system and this room. With more space the results might be more forgiving, but somehow I don't really think that's what these speakers are about. They're all about sitting there and giving them your full attention. This is one of the most challenging products I've ever lived with. In every sense, the more you put in the more you get back. Understanding that and being sure that it's what you want is the key to a fruitful relationship with the MAXX2s.

As an aside, translate this scenario to a show environment, the situation in which most of you might have heard the MAXX2s. One guy, in one seat might get the benefit (as long as no one's in front of him); the rest of you are on the slippery slope somewhere between mediocrity and damnation. No wonder so many people think these speakers sound bad. It's because they do – if you're not in exactly the right place. But just like the little girl in the nursery rhyme, when they're good they're very, very good. Let's concentrate on that now...

The art of loudspeaker design is the skill of balanced compromise. The perfect speaker, the perfect speaker technology is yet to be invented, which means that, whatever route you take, each strength attributable to your chosen approach will come with an associated weakness. Examine Wilson's history and it quickly becomes apparent that it's a story of successive evolution and

refinement. Indeed, in many respects, the essential ingredients that constitute the MAXX2 share considerable common elements with the original WATT/Puppy system: the inverted dome tweeter, 7" midrange unit, low-diffraction housing and separate bass cabinet. And whilst the MAXX2s make no pretensions to monitor status, there's no mistaking the common DNA either. That's where that precision comes in again. These speakers tell you a lot about the recording as well as the performance.



Where appropriate they establish a huge soundstage of tremendous transparency and positional focus, yet the acoustic space and the images that inhabit it are still carefully scaled. Crucially, playing solo acoustic instruments the speakers disappear, managing to sound much smaller than they actually are. This ability to match the physical scale and dynamic ▶

► scope of a recording, large or small, is one of the Wilson's key attributes.

The other is to capture the dynamic range, the energy spectrum of real instruments. One effect of this capability is that you can, if you wish simply play everything really loud, especially if you've got the kind of power I had on tap. But that misses the point. Do that and you won't get the best from the speakers; instead you get a shouty and far from subtle exaggeration that gets less impressive the longer you endure it. In fact, the MAXX2s are super-critical of both exact level and correct phase. This is one speaker that could finally convince me of the merits of remote control. The need for such precise control comes down to balancing the midrange presence and treble balance, but it starts in the bass.

Let's talk about physical and musical "power". On the face of it, sticking a pair of very large (but different) drivers in a huge box, loaded by a port built on a similar scale seems like a recipe for disaster. In practice, Wilson has achieved a level of bass power, control and definition that sets the standard for full-range loudspeaker systems. The MAXX2's ability to render pitch, to float rapid acoustic bass runs, to let the listener hear beneath the lowest notes is exceptional. Now, you don't just hear tube trains beneath recordings, you can actually tell what they are as well as separating them from the enclosed acoustic. The bass breathes effortlessly, even driven by the relatively modest Linear Bs; it's fast, tactile, agile and sure-footed, making even the most submerged bass lines apparent and musically relevant. It's also the foundation for the phenomenal stability and transparency of the speaker's soundstage.

Matching the sheer energy generated by that bass cabinet, which means, incidentally, matching the energy experienced from real instruments, puts quite a strain on the midrange; hence the twin 7" drivers where much of the

### "How much?"

More than anything else, it's the price of the MAXX that fuels dissent. The repeated cries of protest become so monotonous that you feel almost like installing a tape loop to save people the bother. As big as they are, and as impressive as they appear, there's no getting away from the fact that £33K is a lot of money; especially when you consider that there are plenty of products that can match the Wilsons for physical bulk and plenty more that exceed their technological content and which all cost considerably less. To understand why the Wilson products cost what they do, you need to appreciate the mindset behind them.

Visit the Wilson factory and one thing becomes abundantly clear; Dave's a VERY hands-on guy. There is no aspect of the production of his speakers that is governed by or dependent on anybody else. Okay, so the drivers are bought in, but it's from external sources with whom Wilson have worked for years (the original WATT was one of the first products to use the Focal inverted dome, and Wilson have been refining and using ever since) and once they arrive they're exhaustively checked and matched and in some cases modified. The cabinets are all constructed in house, CNC machined and built from raw sheet, whether from M material or the other specifically developed X material, Wilson's highest density cabinet material. Everything is also filled, painted and finished in house. Crossover components are checked, matched and wired and all final assembly is also, you guessed it, in house. Once passed for QC, the speakers are hand wrapped and packed in crates (built on-site, naturally). So, every aspect of every process, from raw component stage onwards, is carried out at

competition use single, smaller units. The need to move air demands cone area and efficiency. The upside is the convincing life and dynamic range generated by the MAXX2: the downside is a less controlled cone, poorer dispersion as you approach the tweeter crossover and ultimately, higher levels of colouration. The combined demands of realistic dynamic response and pinpoint spatial definition leave the mid-band sounding slightly hollow and a little cupped in contrast to the power and substance of the vital mid-bass frequencies. It's a deliberate trade-off and one that I can both understand and support. But what makes the speaker so critical of volume is the similar dynamic demands placed on the tweeter.

The inverted titanium dome looks

Wilson's factory. From the sheet material that's cut for the cabinets to the source of each crossover component and the type of solder used to connect it (Wilson actually use two, one on bass legs and another on mid and treble) everything is checked and controlled by Wilson.

Now consider the scale of manufacturing we're talking about here. In numbers terms this is a boutique operation. You could save a fortune by sub-contracting the cabinetry, more by including the finishing. And Wilson are paying US pay-scales to get it all done. Hell, why not go the whole hog and have the products built in China? Because each step you move away from doing it yourself relinquishes a measure of control and with it, consistency and repeatability in the final product. If someone else makes your cabinets you can say you want them made from this particular fibre-board, but once its cut, glued and painted, who's to know? Hey, a resistor's just a resistor, right?

The flawless finish that covers the surface of a Wilson speaker is a visual metaphor for the care and consistency that's gone into its creation. By keeping absolutely every aspect of production in house, Wilson achieve a level of sample to sample variation that's vanishingly small. Each product is an extension of Dave Wilson's personal experience and approach to loudspeaker design. That's what you're buying into. The way he chooses to build those products ensures that each one approaches, as nearly as humanly possible, that personal model. It also ensures that these are pretty much the most expensive speakers on the planet to build. What you have to decide is how much value you place on that consistency, but one thing's for sure; buy a Wilson speaker and you and Dave Wilson both know what's under the paintwork.

almost quaint in comparison to the highly touted and high-tech offerings sported by much of the competition – and let's be clear, in several important ways it lags behind their performance too. Focal's own Beryllium units are beguilingly sweet and unobtrusive, the various diamond offerings refreshingly free from the endemic dome colourations we've all lived with for years. But Focal are keeping Beryllium to themselves for the moment, whilst the diamond offerings lack the efficiency and impulse response of the titanium unit used, making that the lesser of the various evils (and believe me when I say that pretty much all high-frequency units are evil in one way or another). The tweeter used in the MAXX2 can match the dynamic range and energy ►

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

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▶ spectrum of the midrange units. The cost is that in doing so it can start to draw attention to itself, hence the absolutely critical relationship between the ear and the tweeter axis; too high and you'll start to hear it ring, which is why the speaker can sound so glaringly obvious if you stand up. Likewise, drive it too hard and its output starts to get unruly, although whether this is down to mechanical shortcomings or cabinet effects I'm not sure. Certainly, that overhanging upper midrange unit looks ominous, despite the careful contouring and surface treatment of the baffle.

Combine all this information and what you discover is that each recording has a sweet spot, a precise level that maximizes the midrange presence without over exciting the tweeter. Likewise, absolute phase becomes critical to the energy and presence across the mid-band. Get it wrong and you'll need a shade more volume in an attempt to compensate and the treble will start to harden. Switch phase, back off the level and suddenly the soundstage locks in and the energy levels and musical impact actually go up.

Just how easy it is to get music from the MAXX2s wrong also demonstrates how right it sounds when you get it... err, right. These are not the most seamlessly integrated speakers in their price bracket. Nor do they excel in the areas of timbre and instrumental colour; the Nola Pegasus easily exceeds their sense of instrumental texture and character, both at low and high frequencies. But what they can do better than the competition is sound real. They manage to capture, in some cases frustratingly fleetingly, the sense of real people and instruments in a real space. Along the way they'll tell you more about the driving system and the recordings you play than almost any other speaker – possibly more than you want to know. As a reviewing tool they left me in no doubt regarding

the relative merits and nature of the equipment I partnered them with. At the same time they demanded my total attention and ruthlessly punished liberties taken over system set-up or equipment changes; it's almost as if they demand you take the task as seriously as they do.

Living with Wilson's MAXX2 has been a challenging and in some respects a daunting experience – it's also been rewarding, educational and one I'd



hate to have missed. It has been littered with moments and passages of musical majesty, breathtaking insights into performances and recordings that serve to remind one just what the high-fidelity promise is supposed to deliver. This is no, and will never be an easy product. Instead it throws down a gauntlet to all comers, listeners and competitors alike. Which is exactly why it enjoys benchmark status in an industry

as notoriously fickle as ours.

The MAXX2 asks questions of its potential purchasers. It wears its heart on its sleeve and demands you share its values. It makes no secret about why it costs what it does. There's no mystery about the technology it uses or the emotional investment it will require. In many ways it represents the ultimate, affordable example (the Alexandria makes anything look affordable) of one man's vision. If you share his values and his musical perspective there's probably no other speaker that will satisfy you. Even if you don't, the MAXX2s will challenge your own position, offering a stepping-stone to even greater glory. But then that's what setting standards is all about... 

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Four-way reflex loaded loudspeaker
Driver Complement:	1x 25mm inverted titanium dome 2x 180mm pulp cone midrange 1x 265mm mid-bass 1x 330mm bass
Bandwidth:	Flat to 20Hz, -3dB at 21kHz
Efficiency:	92dB
Impedance:	3 Ohms minimum
Dimensions (WxHxD):	412 x 1630 x 605mm
Weight:	187kg ea.
Finishes:	Many (see product information)
Price:	£40000

#### UK Distributor:

Absolute Sounds Ltd  
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▶ instruction manuals are exactly that, with no background or additional information at all and the Company's relative anonymity becomes less of a mystery. The background and technical details in this review rely almost entirely on web research and the work of Robert Harley at TAS. Rarely if ever have I come across a manufacturer so intent on maintaining their privacy! Perhaps they are relying on the products to speak for themselves...

If that's the case, then they should provide some guidance when it comes to suitable partners for conversation. The Calypso proved unusually critical of matching components – especially sources – partly a result of its sheer quality, partly as a function of its own character.

What is immediately obvious is that this is a studied, organized and dynamic line-stage, giving music plenty of drive and direction without

itself getting over-excited or losing control. What threw me at first were two contrasting factors in its performance. The first concerns its overall transparency; the Calypso has an excellent and extremely natural sense of perspective and staging – which is another way of saying that it is neither exaggerated

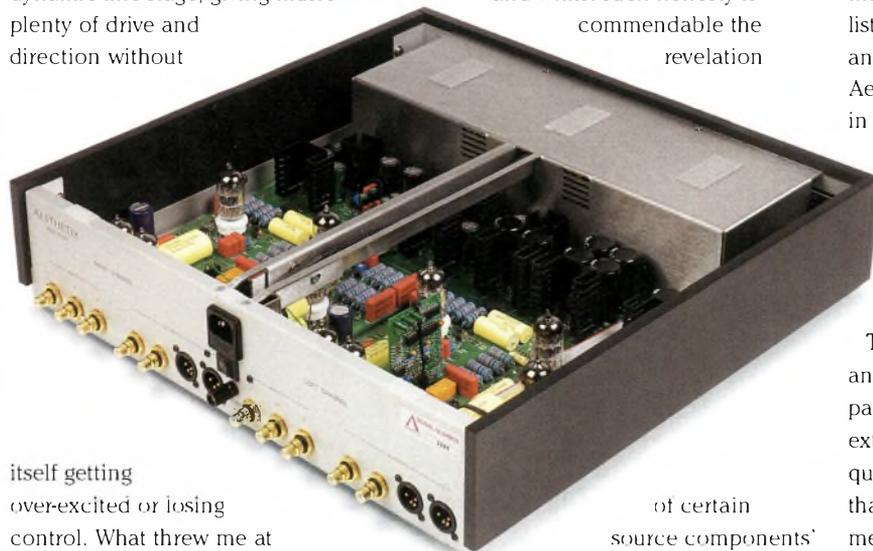
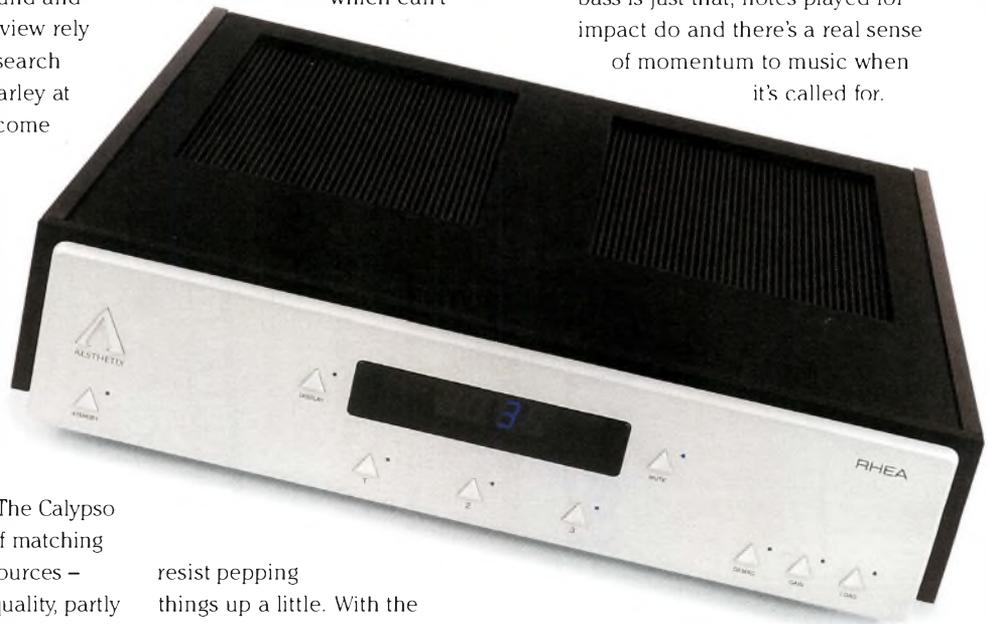
when it comes to soundstage dimensions, nor etched when it comes to focus and separation; unlike a great many other line-stages on the market which can't

resist peppering things up a little. With the Aesthetix, if the space and resolution doesn't make it off the source then it doesn't make it out of the speakers, and whilst such honesty is commendable the revelation

of certain source components' shortcomings can come as a nasty reminder of the complexity inherent in any hi-fi system.

The second thing that took some getting to grips with was a character that was at once cool yet explosive.

On the one hand there's a subtle (and I do mean subtle) bleaching of tonal colours, a sameness to instrumental harmonics; on the other, thunderous bass is just that, notes played for impact do and there's a real sense of momentum to music when it's called for.



Now normally these two characteristics are mutually exclusive, but extensive listening with a variety of sources and different amplifiers suggests that Aesthetix have been extremely clever in shaping the bottom end response of the Calypso. That power and energy, the sense of solid presence and drive, comes from superb mid-bass dynamics, dynamics that exceed those across the rest of the range.

The deep bass is lighter in touch and less powerful (lending finesse, pace and texture) while the superbly extended upper frequencies can't quite match the presence and energy that punches lower down. Don't get me wrong, this is an impressively dynamic performer, but the best is definitely where it matters.

If that sounds like a damning catalogue of errors and failings then you'd be much mistaken. The Calypso, carefully matched (in this case with the Wadia 861 rather than the

# When two boxes seems conservative...

## The Aesthetix Rhea Phono-stage and Calypso Line-stage

by Roy Gregory

Who in their right mind would consider dropping nearly six and a half grand on a phono-stage and line-stage combination from some US manufacturer they'd never heard of? Well, stranger things have happened in hi-fi, and whilst Aesthetix might not be a name on the tip of everybody's tongue on this side of the Atlantic, they're not without a history, a pedigree and a good few heavyweight friends in their own home market. Not that you'd necessarily know that...

Aesthetix started life as a side-line/creative outlet for Jim White, at that time a lead designer at Theta Digital and major contributor to the Casablanca project. It's tempting to surmise that all that deep-dipped digital hardware left him with a need in his soul to appease the tube and analogue Gods; why else produce a six-box, 122Kg, ultra-finicky, all tube phono/line stage combination, as demanding of space as it was of attention and attached to a \$20000 price-tag? The large, and frankly ugly chassis that made up the Callisto and Io combination (dual mono with dual-mono external power supplies) might have been huge, unwieldy and impractical, but they were also sonically glorious, drawing praise from some of the industry's sternest critics and pushing the envelope of front-end electronic performance. Mind you, that's no kind of trick at \$20K a copy.

Well, some years on Mr White has departed the Theta camp and Aesthetix has become a full-time occupation, not that super expensive units like the

Callisto and Io are going to put much bread on the table. Enter then the Rhea and Calypso, single-box designs which have taken the innovative circuitry and concepts from the flagship products, simplified them and built them into slim, and devilishly attractive boxes costing less than half as much. There's also the

Janus, a single-box pre-amp that combines

a further simplification of the Rhea phono-stage with the Calypso circuitry, although this I haven't seen.

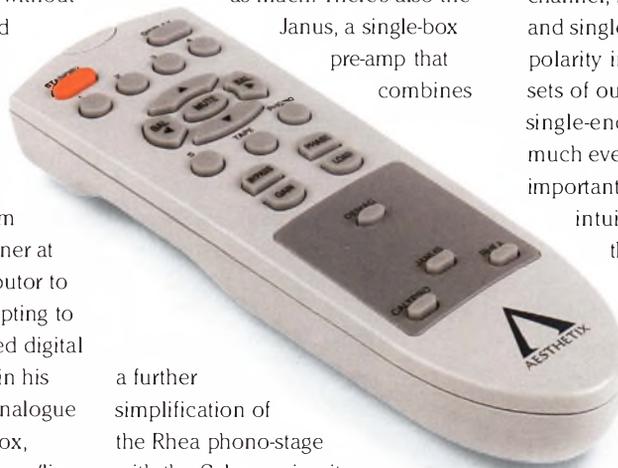
The Rhea and Calypso are as far removed from the blocky, rough exterior of their predecessors. The casework is slim but broad, the sculpted front-panel visually lifted from the black body, and graced with a single large display and a scattering of distinctive and beautifully executed triangular buttons that mimic the company logo. Given Jim White's background it's no surprise to find extensive micro-processor control employed to deliver the versatility that's demanded from even high-end valve electronics these days. Take the Calypso: whilst the stepped resistor

network, separate power supply for the control electronics (dead whilst not actually in operation) and dimmable display are all about par for the course these days, Aesthetix ticks all the right boxes and then some. Factor in a fully differential circuit based on a 12AX7 gain stage and a 6922 buffer per channel, five line inputs (balanced and single-ended), a tape loop, polarity inversion and balance, two sets of outputs (both balanced and single-ended) and you've got pretty much everything you want. More importantly, it's easily and reasonably intuitively accessible from both the front panel and the single (rather nasty) remote.

Volume? Simply press one end or the other of the central display, which is actually a giant rocker switch; neat – and just clever enough to add a little personality to what

is externally at least, a technocratic tour de force.

The Rhea phono-stage goes a step beyond even the Calypso. Each channel of the dual-mono circuit is based on a pair of Sovtek 12AX7LPs employed for gain. These feed a 12AX7WG which adds more gain and also acts as a phase splitter. RIAA equalization is passive, followed by a 12AX7WB for more gain and a 6922 output buffer. That's 75dB of gain available from an all tube circuit! In addition, the Rhea offers three separate phono inputs, all single-ended and all individually



► configurable for gain and loading from the front panel or the remote. You get to choose between 75, 62, 56, 50, 44 and 38dB of gain and 75, 125, 250, 500, 1k, 2.5k, 5k, 10k and 47kOhms loadings. There's also a mute function, display dimmer, internal demag circuit (brilliant) and two-pairs each of both



Of course, noise is always going to be an issue in any all-tube phono-stage, especially one with as much gain as the Rhea, simply because you're asking valves to operate at voltages below which they're really comfortable. It can be done, but you need good glass and a following wind. It also means that a unit

like the Rhea is ripe for tinkering with high-quality, NOS valves, which will effect both its noise spectrum and tonality. For the reviewer, that way madness lies, so I stuck to the standard set-up. But owners, given the ease of access and modest cost of even really good nine-pin equivalents will reap

dividends through experimentation.

Which brings me back to the single most perplexing thing about these otherwise extraordinarily impressive units. With products this versatile and configurable, whose very make-up you might consider encourages user experi-

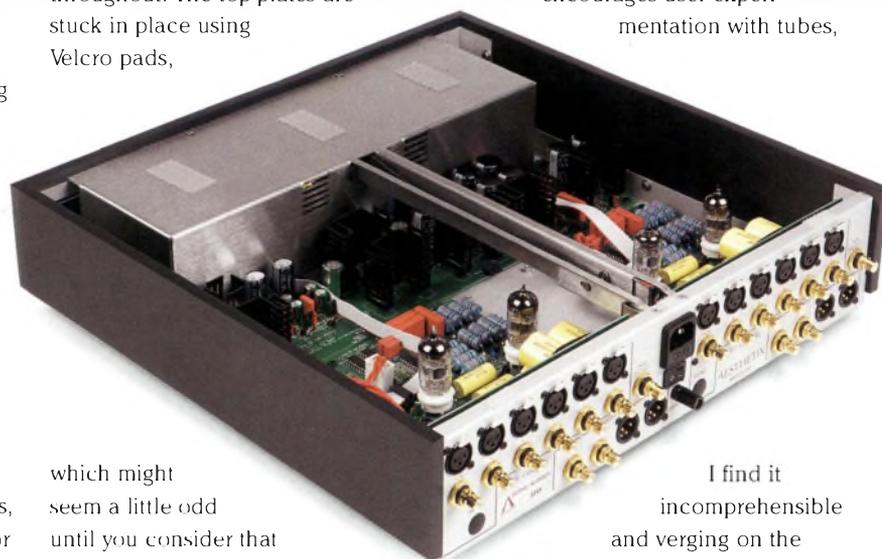
mentation with tubes,

single-ended and balanced outputs (superfluous).

Internally, construction is superb, a large stainless-steel tunnel separating the AC elements from the sensitive low-level circuitry as well as bracing the heavy-gauge aluminium chassis. Built onto a separate isolation deck, the power supplies for both units are based on a pair of transformers, one for the low-voltage, high-current heater supplies (dormant with the standby switch engaged) and a second for the high-voltage, low-current tube supplies. Between them these offer no fewer than seven separate windings, including one for the micro-processor switching functions and another for the front-panel display. Not surprisingly, each supply and especially those for the audio circuit, is heavily filtered and regulated, while parts quality for both power supply and audio boards is first class.

The dual-mono circuit boards are beautifully executed on glass-epoxy PCBs with heavy copper traces. As I've already said, components are carefully selected and internal

construction of both the boards and the chassis is best described as confidence inspiring. Construction is absolutely first class throughout. The top-plates are stuck in place using Velcro pads,



which might seem a little odd until you consider that these are tube units and the old Io and Callisto used to snack on glassware for fun. Thankfully, the Rhea and Calypso show no such tendencies, and the choice of selected Sovtek tubes is sensible in terms of noise and reliability.

I find it incomprehensible and verging on the unforgivable that Aesthetix offer no contact details over and above a fax and telephone number; no website, no e-mail address. That this is a US based company makes the omission even more astonishing. Add to that the fact that the

▶ other CD players I have in house, the Koetsu Blue Onyx atop the TNT and connected to the RADIA) delivered a performance that suffered only in direct comparison to the likes of the ARC Ref 3 and the Connoisseur. Given its price, simply holding its own in such company is impressive indeed; to do so with the added virtue of such extensive operational flexibility makes it doubly so.

Which brings us to the Rhea, and in many respects an even stronger performer. I've touched on its astonishing adjustability already and that's a good place to start because you'll need to tune things to get the best out of this phono-stage. First up is overall gain; 75dB from a valve circuit is astonishing and in truth it's a little too good to be true. Run wide open the Rhea is unacceptably noisy. Fortunately the Calypso has gain too, meaning that you can afford to back off the phono-stage. My advice would be to go for a cartridge of 0.4mV or greater output (not hard these days) and run as little gain as you can get away with without crimping dynamics. I ran the Koetsu at 56dB with no problems at all. Loading I'll leave to you, but be aware that you need to listen (not just blindly follow a recommendation) and it too will vary with gain. If I was being hyper critical I'd want more options between 50 and 500 Ohms and fewer above 2.5k, but hey, we're all different...

Once you've got the Rhea dialled in, hold onto your hat and prepare for a ride; this is one seriously exciting phono-stage. The mid-bass character of the Calypso extends right across the range in the Rhea, which is bolder and more colourful to boot. It still stays on the accurate side of warmth (if never getting close to the almost "counter-tube" colouring of the line-stage) but for sheer pace and an unstoppable sense of musical power and momentum the Rhea knows few

if any peers. The result is a high-energy and vividly exciting performance that simply fizzles with life and vitality. Judged by the highest standards this is also its weakness, with the best alternative units making the Aesthetix sound hurried and almost coltish in its enthusiasm, lacking in ease, grace and transparency. It scales the dynamic graduation of the Montoux *Enigma Variations* with a boundless almost contemptuous energy, but the ARC PH 7 brings greater space and control, an ease and sense of structure to the music that makes more of the piece and more of Montoux's direction, an exercise in controlled power rather than pedal to the metal exuberance. The subterranean rumble of tube trains is far more audible and separate, the emotional range of the music more apparent.

Now, far be it from me to complain about musical enthusiasm in a world where worthy has become synonymous with boring. But it doesn't take a genius to see that these two products will be highly complimentary. Used in isolation you must (as with any product) work with their strengths and be conscious of their weaknesses. Used together they dovetail, if not perfectly then certainly in a musically convincing way. So much so that whilst they don't necessarily deliver absolutely everything, you'll not be left wondering what's missing. Whilst neither has a classical tube signature, they steer well clear of audio sterility and both punch well above their price in sonic terms, a fact that becomes even more obvious when you use them in tandem. There's a belief amongst many manufacturers that readers never remember the many positives in a review, they just fasten on the one negative. Well, I've spent some time on the vagaries of these Aesthetix pieces – perhaps you'll all fasten on a single positive; they're a bargain.

Normal caveats apply, but this is an awful lot of beautifully built product and even more performance for your money. 

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### Aesthetix Calypso

Type:	Vacuum-tube line-stage
Valve Complement:	2x 12AX7, 2x 6922
Inputs:	5x line-level (balanced XLR or single-ended RCA) 1x tape (balanced XLR or single-ended RCA)
Outputs:	2prs single-ended 2prs balanced 1x tape (balanced XLR or single-ended RCA)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	457 x 111 x 447mm
Weight:	17.5Kg
Price:	£3600

##### Aesthetix Rhea

Type:	Vacuum-tube phono-stage
Valve Complement:	8x 12AX7, 2x 6922
Inputs:	3x variable sensitivity
Outputs:	2prs single-ended 2prs balanced
Gain:	38 – 75dB
Loading:	Variable, 75 Ohms–47kOhms (see text)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	457 x 111 x 447mm
Weight:	17.5Kg
Price:	£3175

##### UK Distributor:

Reference Imports Ltd  
Tel. (44)(0)1252 702705  
Net. [www.audioreference.co.uk](http://www.audioreference.co.uk)

##### Manufacturer:

Aesthetix Audio Corporation  
Net. [www.musicalsurrroundings.com](http://www.musicalsurrroundings.com)



Mute

Tape/Non

HT/BD

↑↑

# The ModWright Instruments SWL 9.0 SE Line-stage

by Roy Gregory

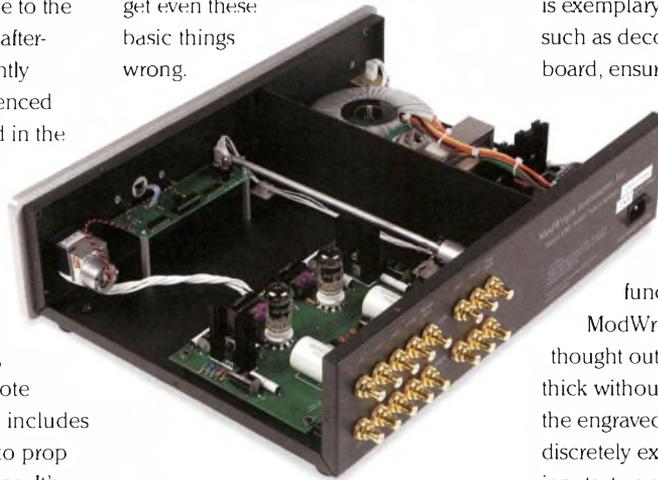
ModWright is not a name that is familiar on this side of the Atlantic – at least not yet. That could all change if the performance of the SWL 9.0SE is anything to go by. The name, as well as being a clever play on words (and owner/designer Dan Wright's name) offers a clue to the company's origins, which lie in after-market upgrades to predominantly digital products. I've not experienced these but they are well regarded in the marketplace. ModWright Instruments is a separate arm of the business, established to produce this, their first entirely in-house design.

The SWL 9.0 is a solid-state regulated, tube line-stage, available in standard, non-remote guise and an SE version which includes the (seemingly essential) potato prop as well as better, Teflon film caps. It's the SE that I have for review.

I first came across the ModWright at last year's Rocky Mountain Audio Fair. Pleased by its outward simplicity and clean, unfussy styling, closer inspection revealed excellent if understated fit and finish and unusual attention to detail. Image then my surprise when I discovered that I was looking at a £2200 unit; for once the company slogan, World Class Performance at Real World Prices promised to be something more than mere marketing speak!

Everything about the SWL 9.0 SE smacks of high-class, high-priced product. The packaging is sensible and solid, using high-density foam in place of nasty, cheap polystyrene. The unit itself is reassuringly heavy, but more importantly is the solid, inert feel you get from it. The thick casework is internally damped and held in place by ten high-quality

machine screws. Not only do the holes in the lid and chassis line up, but the screws fit the 5/64 Allen key perfectly, and thread in smoothly. All of which might not seem like much but it's incredible how many really expensive products get even these basic things wrong.



Under the bonnet the news just gets better. Internally the chassis is neatly, physically divided into power supply and audio sections. The power supply accounts for around 40% of the internal space, and is based on a massive toroidal transformer larger than the items found in many wannabe muscle amps. With a choke regulated input, high-speed Schotke diodes are employed to further regulate individual feeds, including the discrete B+ supply. The audio circuit is beautifully laid out on a well-spaced, single circuit board, while the topology employs a pair of 5687 tubes in a Mu driver/Mu buffer arrangement related to the buffer found in the Hovland pre-amps. Given the company's pedigree, it's no surprise to discover high-quality, audiophile parts in critical positions, with Vishay resistors and Solen and Sonicap capacitors

alongside an ALPS pot and good quality socketry. Signal paths are kept short while the valve bias is supplied from hardwired, rechargeable Lithium cells – an elegant solution that is both sonically and cost effective. Internal construction is exemplary, while attention to detail such as decoupling of the audio circuit board, ensures that all the audiophile

boxes are duly ticked and checked. What's more, those impressive internals are backed by a full five-year guarantee.

Externally, in terms of function and facilities, the ModWright is just as neat and well thought out. The front panel is sensibly thick without over doing things, while the engraved legends are beautifully and discretely executed. There are four line inputs, two sets of main outputs and a tape loop, all single-ended, while front panel switches allow you to monitor your recorder and switch the HT/BP input from its standard guise into a unity gain, by-pass connection should you want to integrate the SWL 9.0 into a home-theatre set-up. Rotary controls give you source select and allow you to set the level (which auto-matically returns to zero at switch-on). The remaining switches are power on and mute. In the SE version, the remote control handset allows you access to the volume and mute facilities but nothing else, which is fine by me. In fact, the only slightly jarring note in the whole package, is the provision of a generic OneForAll remote handset in place of some hewn from solid billet aluminium device. Functionally it's perfect and I can appreciate the cost saving, but when everything else seems to belong to a much pricier ►

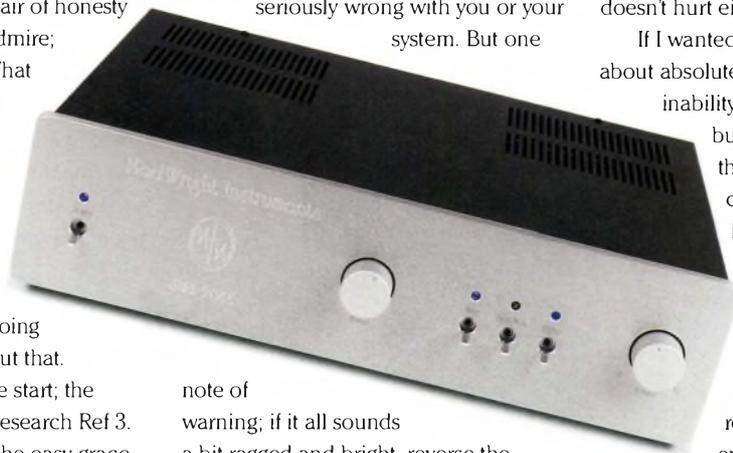
► unit, it would be nice to see at least the option of a fancier version for those who use remote and want to pay the difference.

In use, the ModWright is a model of clarity and common sense, even down to the input legends mirrored above and below the sockets. Whilst I'd never describe it as beautiful, it does have a purposefully uncluttered air of honesty about it, which I rather admire; almost as if it's saying, "What you see is what you get". Well, in that spirit and taking the designer at his word, I had no qualms about hooking it up to the RADIA or VTL S400. As to its sonic impact, well, the MAXX 2s were going to leave me in doubt about that.

Let's be clear from the start; the SWL 9.0 SE is no Audio Research Ref 3. It lacks the total control, the easy grace and absolute spatial coherence of a unit like that. Nor does it possess the finesse and delicacy, the deftness of touch I find in the Hovland HP100. But at half the price of one and a quarter the price of the other it would be remarkable indeed if it did compete. What's more important is that the ModWright makes a strong case on the basis of its own musical credentials. Its presentation is bold, emphatic and vivid – full of presence and energy. It makes music a solid, living thing, driving the notes rather than opening the spaces between them. The easy grace and poise of a pre-amp like the Ref 3 might escape it, that sense of relaxed, walk in stability, but in its place you get a grab your attention and hold it immediacy, a compelling quality, a nose for a groove that brings purpose and meaning to a performance, fleshes it out and puts meat on its bones.

Take an album like Corinne Bailey Rae's debut effort; limpid summer fare, it can sound a little lacking, too delicate for its own good and rather two dimensional. Not via the ModWright. The arrangements gain structure and

presence, the voice a solid sense of purpose and previously unsuspected strands funk up the bass, bringing identity and interest to the proceedings. Suddenly those brass motifs become more than just doodles, now they have a groove to drive them. And if Gnarl Barkley's 'Crazy' doesn't get your whole body moving then there's something seriously wrong with you or your system. But one



note of warning; if it all sounds a bit ragged and bright, reverse the phase of your speaker cables. The SWL 9.0, like most c-j's, is a phase inverting design and in a decent system its nature means you are really going to hear that.

So, we know it can rock, but what of more complex and difficult material. Barbirolli's Tallis Fantasia is a quintessentially English expression of restrained power which depends absolutely on constrained energy for its effect. It's a challenge that the ModWright meets head on, and if its presentation is more about power and less about translucent poise, it also manages to throw excellent instrumental texture, staging, transparency and air into the mix. Play to its strengths with something like Testament's live version of the Du Pre, Elgar Cello Concerto with Sir John at the helm and the results are spectacular. That instrumental substance combined with unfettered dynamic range reveals the dramatic and emotional weight carried in a performance, and this performance above all. The impression of real energy coming from real musicians in a real space is palpable, the performance spell-binding.

Interestingly, despite the absence of a mono switch, the SWL 9.0 SE is an exemplary performer with mono recordings. The purposeful substance and presence it brings to good stereo recordings carry over to the single-channel format, adding to the life and vibrance that can make old mono discs so impressive. That sure-footed timing doesn't hurt either.

If I wanted to get picky I'd complain about absolute delicacy, resolution, the inability to hear below bass notes, but that would be to miss the point. The ModWright can't match the very best in these regards, but it sets an enviable standard when it comes to the message rather than the simple facts in a performance. In that regard it follows a welcome emergent trend and one

that leaves systems sounding more like music and less like an academic exercise. The more I listen to the SWL 9.0 SE the harder I find it to argue with its approach. At this price it's exactly the shot in the arm a great many systems could all too audibly do with. ►+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Vacuum-tube line-stage
Valve Complement:	2x 5687
Gain:	15dB
Input Impedance:	50kOhms
Inputs:	4x single-ended RCA (1x by-pass option) 1x tape
Outputs:	2x main out, single-ended RCA 1x tape out
Output Impedance:	600 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	17 x 4 x 12
Weight:	11kg
Finish:	Silver
Price:	£2200

**UK Distributor:**  
Angel Sound Audio  
Tel. (44)(0)1923 352479  
Net. [www.angelsoundaudio.co.uk](http://www.angelsoundaudio.co.uk)

**Manufacturer:**  
ModWright Instruments Inc.  
Net. [www.modwright.com](http://www.modwright.com)

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# The Teac Esoteric X-01 SACD Player

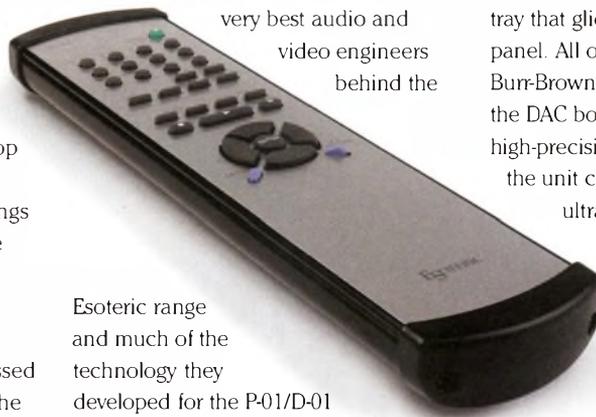
by Chris Thomas

For a couple of months at the end of last year I had the opportunity to play with Teac's X-01 SACD player, just one of a whole range of products marketed under the Esoteric label. Apart from many a long night spent with a Teac 4-track reel to reel tape recorder years ago I realised that I had heard next to nothing of this company's products in all the time I had been involved in audio. Esoteric by name, esoteric by nature; this is the high-end flagship wing of Teac's audio business where the company design and manufacture the very best that they can. At the top of the tree sits the P-01/D-01 player which is a multi-box system that brings shuddering resonance to the phrase "cost-no-object". Back in Issue 43, John Bamford wrote an excellent article describing this machine and one of the things that deeply impressed him was the quality of build. Well, the X-01 I used was simply sensational in the quality of its assembly and finish. You often see products costing many thousands of pounds and you hear them described as being well built. Well, this Teac shows what that should mean, but so rarely does and I have never seen a physically better made component. In this area it actually embarrasses some other high-end companies.

The X-01 was due to be reviewed by me sometime earlier in the new year but just as I was about to begin the article it was put on hold as there was now a new updated version of the player called the X-01 Limited. Here we go again, I thought. No sooner have I got the player than there is a new one available. How would I feel if I had just gone and bought one of these only to find that it has been superseded? Things though were not quite as they first seemed and my cynicism was entirely misplaced. Any X-01 can be

upgraded to Limited status and for surprisingly reasonable money too. Far from being any sort of marketing exercise, the newer version makes that extra outlay extremely very well spent indeed as it directly addresses the small areas of performance where I thought the player might be improved.

As JB mentioned in his article, there are only a dozen or so of Teac's very best audio and video engineers behind the



Esoteric range and much of the technology they developed for the P-01/D-01 has trickled down into other components like the X-01. Every individual section of the new model is technically interesting and the mechanical parts in particular are beautiful to look at too. The heart of the player is the VRDS-NEO (Vibration-free Rigid Disc clamping System) transport and this exemplifies the kind of machine we are talking about. This clamps the disc to a full-diameter plate in order to remove vibration and to ensure that there are no variations in the reading angle between the optical pickup and the disc due to warping. SACD playback means high rotational speeds, up to 4.5 times that of conventional CDs, so Teac have equipped the transport with a magnesium turntable. Considerably less weighty than aluminium, this reduces inertia. The bridge, which supports the spindle motor is made from 20mm thick SS400 steel and this is directly coupled to a 5mm thick iron base plate to mass

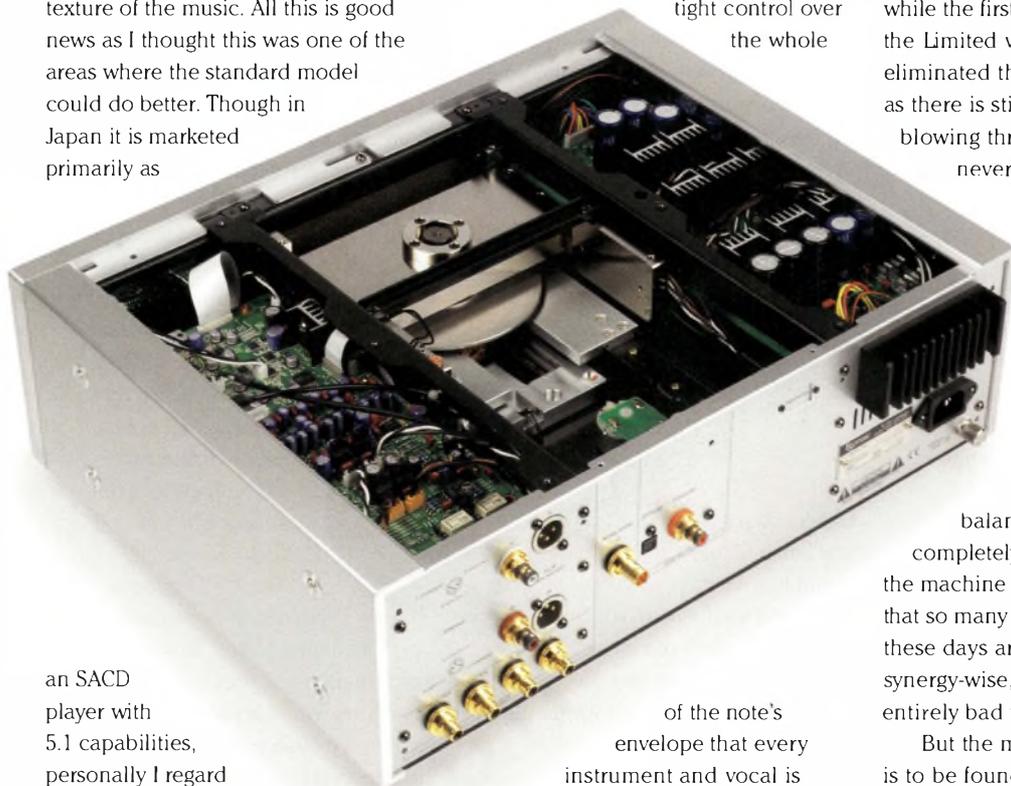
damp any spindle vibrations that dare to manifest themselves. The combined weight of these two pieces alone is more than 4kg. Each section of the X-01 Limited sets an enviable standard for construction. Both the pick-up module and the thread servo control are equally impressive and are individually mounted in their own resonance-free housings. The discs are loaded via an aluminium tray that glides silently from the front panel. All of the audio channels use Burr-Brown 24-bit DA converters while the DAC boards themselves contain a high-precision crystal clock (although the unit can also be used with an ultra-precise external master clock - an interesting and perhaps tempting proposition, until you check the price).

The X-01 Limited is clothed in thick, brushed aluminium plates, finished to watch quality and presents an ultra clean look which is helped by the uncluttered facia which carries only the transport controls, display (slightly too small) and the switch for the separate clock. All program features are accessed through the excellent remote, which also allows you to get into the menus that you will need if you intend to configure the outputs to use the player with 5.1 surround discs. The rear panel enables you to output for this format and also has a single pair of both single-ended and balanced analogue outputs plus both coaxial and optical digital outs. One of the X-01 Limited upgrades is the inclusion of WBT's Nextgen RCA sockets for both audio and digital connection while other improvements include generally upgraded audio output circuits that bring better performance from the D to A converters. But perhaps the biggest addition ▶

► comes in the internal wiring that Esoteric now offer across their Limited range. This was jointly developed by Mitsubishi Cable Industries and Acro Japan and is designated as high purity 6N copper class wire that has noticeably improved both the resolution (always impressive in the X-01) and the general texture of the music. All this is good news as I thought this was one of the areas where the standard model could do better. Though in Japan it is marketed primarily as

bandwidth that I have heard from CD to date and you soon realise that the Esoteric places a huge strain on the rest of the system purely by giving it so much work to do. It is bold in its presentation too – I could almost describe it as forward. The leading edges are so clean and the player exerts such tremendously tight control over the whole

a system with both the bandwidth and the resolving powers then you will be more than happy with the challenges that this player sets the tweeters in your speakers. Where the first X-01 I used was slightly too lean at high frequencies, this one has added welcome substance and weight and while the first one was a bit too steely, the Limited version has almost eliminated this. But not completely as there is still a cool tonal breeze blowing through the music and this never really goes although



an SACD player with 5.1 capabilities, personally I regard it as a CD player than happens to play SACDs.

I doubt that my SACD collection is going to expand too rapidly (unless I owned one of these players) and I can't see that I will ever have any use for the surround sound feature. So my primary concern was how well it did with bog standard Compact Discs. Was it a really serious contender in that sub £10K range or was it just another technical tour de force?

The first thing that strikes you about the sound is the sheer amount of information this machine gets off the disc. If pure resolution is your thing you will be struck with admiration at what you are hearing. Couple this with just about the best, really useable

of the note's envelope that every instrument and vocal is superbly defined with excellent separation. The result is a really no-nonsense and slightly analytical view of the music, which is presented with impact and real vigour. But one of the most notable characteristics is the way in which it maintains this level of muscular grip right across the bandwidth. Through the bottom end the X-01 Limited is as taut and controlled as I have heard coming from Compact Disc. There is no sense of the bass just fading away or loosening up as the frequency drops, just pure grip and even at very low frequencies the Esoteric rarely relinquishes its command over the pitch. This is the story at the other frequency extreme too. If you have

there are some things one can do to minimise it. I don't think the esoteric works so well sitting on glass and I have also tried an acrylic shelf with mixed results before settling on a medite board. The tonal

balance never really vanishes completely as it is a characteristic of the machine itself, but bearing in mind that so many amplifiers and speakers these days are somewhat portly this, synergy-wise, may not be an entirely bad thing.

But the most notable improvement is to be found through the midrange where its improved subtlety really captures the ear. Not only is it extremely good at showing musical and vocal technique and inflection but it also has an uncanny sense of stability. The soundstage, once established, is set in stone and while the front to back depth may not be its strongest point, it impacts on your imagination with the pure nakedness of the musicians and the concentrated energy of their instruments. There is nothing flabby or superfluous about the way it opens the playing up before your eyes. It is therefore a high impact machine when it needs to be and yet, when the musical atmosphere calls for it, there is superb delicacy and nuance set against an inky-black backdrop. ►

► There have always been pieces of equipment that have excelled in high resolution and instrumental detail but very few of them ever managed to put everything together into a really enjoyable musical performance. Mysteriously, some people seem to believe that high-resolution automatically means that the music suffers and it is true to say that often such components are

Intimacy and connection for the Esoteric must come from what is within the music and the musician's abilities, so don't expect any sugar-coating. What you get is coherence in the broadest sense of the word and this extends right from note level where the resolution is striking through to the way the X-01 Limited portrays the overall picture of the recording by preserving different levels of reverberation and space for each instrument or voice and not congealing them all

everything else, but its potential is enormous. In the final analysis it sets such high standards that it deserves to be judged in the same way. It is slightly chilly tonally and there is a hint of steeliness in its balance. Character-wise it doesn't have that flowing liquidity that distinguishes the Burmeister CD-01, nor does it have the meatiness of the Naim CDS 3 (the two CD players that I know best in this general price range) and in many ways it is the opposite of both of these models. But it is strikingly forthright and to the point and I have to admit that the level of detail that it can provide is incredibly addictive. If you can afford a machine in this price range then you simply must hear this one. 



weak rhythmically and although they may be interesting to listen to in a somewhat academic fashion, they never stir the soul. I feel that, if you are going to spend this sort of money, then it has to bring you some sort of spiritual connection to the music, or what is the point? Some equipment relies on a warm and generous tonality, others on a certain foot-tapping bang-bang impact, but the Esoteric X-01 Limited is rather more cold blooded in the way it goes about things. Rhythmically it is very good although I can imagine that some might find it slightly impersonal. I also believe that the system it is used with will have an enormous bearing on the way you see this aspect of its performance. It does not caress the music and nor does it achieve musical communication through being tonally cosy. Instead it gives you a huge amount of detailed information, in exactly the right order. It's up to the rest of the system what it does with it.

into a gloopy mass. I should also mention in passing that this is by far the finest SACD player I have yet heard and if you are a big fan of the format then put the X-01 Limited at the top of your list. I think that if I owned this machine I would very likely investigate SACD releases with a fervour that has so far eluded me.

When considering an investment of this size you really need to be very careful and take an honest, dispassionate look at your system as a whole. This Esoteric is a source component that makes extreme demands on the amplification, cabling and speakers by pushing so much information into the pre-amplifier that, anything inadequate will simply be swamped and if this happens you could easily point the finger at the wrong culprit. Don't shoot the messenger. It has its own way of doing things, like

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Integrated, front loading SACD player
Formats supported:	CD, SACD
Transport:	Teac VRDS-NEO
Analogue Outputs:	1 pr single-ended Nextgen WBT phono 1 pr balanced XLR
Digital Outputs:	1 x optical 1 x coaxial nextgen
Additional outputs:	1 x Word Sync for use with external clock 4 x RCA for 5.1 surround
Dimensions (WxHxD):	442x152x353mm
Weight:	25kg
Finishes:	Brushed aluminium
Price:	£9495

#### UK Distributor.

Symmetry

Tel: (44)(0) 1727 865488

Net: [www.info@symmetry-systems.co.uk](mailto:www.info@symmetry-systems.co.uk)

#### Manufacturer:

Teac Corporation

Net: [www.teac.co.jp](http://www.teac.co.jp)



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# Linn's Majik System...

## The Majik CD player, Kontrol pre-amp and 2100 power amplifier

by Jason Kennedy

The company which once employed 12 people to make a turntable that the music appreciating world was convinced that it had to have, now has a staff of 200 and builds a bewildering array of components at its Waterfoot facility. Whatever you think of Linn products it's hard not to be impressed by the way the company has grown and the way in which it uses research and development to create its own distinctive designs. The rhythm and timing ethos that the LP12 went forth and multiplied still underpins the way Linn engineers tune their creations but products like the Artikulat active speaker show that there are more strings to Linn's bow these days. The question is, has the company been able to imbue its more affordable separates with these same, broader based qualities?

Linn's latest electronics, the Majik range, might bear more than a passing resemblance to existing components in the Glasgow based company's ever expanding range, but in fact mark a reassessment of its two-channel approach. The Majik CD player replaces the Ikemi which had output socketry aimed at the US market but an otherwise similar basic spec. The Kontrol pre-amp takes over from the Kairn, which had a few more sockets on the back but less in the way of multi-room connections, while the Majik 2100 replaces the LK range of power amplifiers, which had more conventional output stages than this Chakra powered replacement.

The Majik Kontrol pre-amp is a fairly innocuous silver box (or black with silver highlights if you prefer) that offers six inputs via a row of gold plated RCA

phono sockets. One of these can be used to access an onboard phono-stage that has both MM and MC stages alongside a line option. This board is cunningly designed so that a single mounting screw fits through one of three holes with corresponding electrical connections being made by a multi-pin bridge.

So selecting MC is a matter of undoing the screw, carefully removing the board and turning it until the connectors go through the MC section and the screw fits through the earthing point for that input. It doesn't encourage you to do this in the manual however; in Linn world the dealer is encouraged to take care of all such details for you.

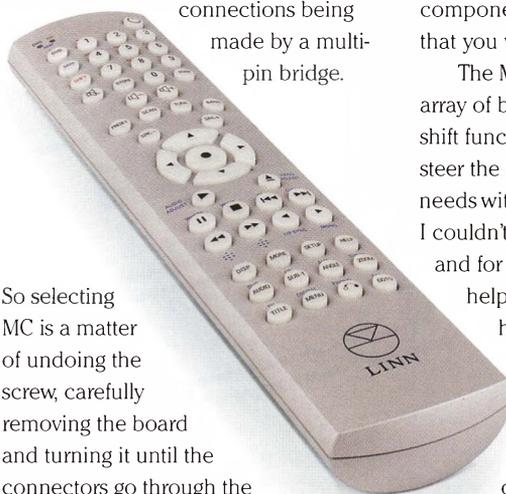
The remaining RCA phono sockets are both outputs, one for the pre-amp dubbed only slightly confusingly "Line Out" and another for recorders. Fortunately you have to instruct the Kontrol which input to send to the tape output otherwise my cavalier assumption that the Line Out was not the pre-amp output may have ended in painful ears and broken speakers!

The Kontrol is designed for multi-room systems so there are RJ45 sockets for up to four rooms in the context of a

Linn Knekt system, there are RS232 in and outputs for integration with non Linn multi-room kit and remote in and outputs which are also Knekt oriented. The IR sockets send signals that the Kontrol receives onto an IR repeater which can pass it on to third party components, such as a DVD player, that you want to hide away.

The Majik remote has a baffling array of buttons and alternate coloured shift functions. Nonetheless I was able to steer the thing adequately for most of my needs without resorting to the manual. I couldn't find a repeat button though and for a while even the manual didn't help. Then I struck upon the idea of hitting shift and 1 sequentially rather than simultaneously which did the trick. Linn is a little bit like B&O in that it has created its own logic, or Logik, and occasionally this takes a bit of adapting to.

The drawback with the remote is that it's designed to operate pretty much any piece of Linn kit and as a result has to cover all the requirements of a DVD player. However, once you guess that SRC+ and SRC- change inputs you're away (SRC stands for source, see it's obvious once you know), that and spotting the two speaker icons with + and - beside them for volume. It would be helpful if this most fundamental control, for the Kontrol, were more obvious. The switches onboard the pre-amp are rather on the wee side but there aren't too many of them so it wouldn't take long to remember where they are. Volume is still button controlled which is a pain but



▶ that's what remotes are for.

Although it's not initially clear it is possible to adjust balance, alter display brightness, content and time-out, and name your inputs with up to 12 characters. Tempting as that might be there's something to be said for choosing one of the eight names that appear on the handset so that direct access can be achieved rather than having to scroll through the alternatives.

Each source can have its gain offset by +/- 15 on the 0-80 scale and the rate of volume change is available in ten steps. The list does go on but these appear to be the most likely things you might want to change. Clearly there is a CPU at work inside this light-weight beast.

The mass of the Kontrol (and the rest of the Majik for that matter) is unusually low due to the use of switched mode power supplies throughout. Opening up the Kontrol to change the phono stage around I was surprised to see very little in the way of a mains transformer, which makes you wonder where all the money is being spent – presumably on the R&D dept which managed to come up with such an efficient and multi-talented design.

According to Linn, switched mode technology is actually more expensive than the conventional approach because the silicon needs to be that much more precise, utilising high speed diodes and low impedance FETs. The benefit that this approach is said to deliver is a far greater immunity to noise and voltage fluctuations in the mains supply. It's claimed that Linn power amps can cope with a range of

90 to 264volts and are so good at keeping nasties out of the power supply that outboard mains 'improvers' will have no effect on their performance.

The Magik CD player uses technology developed for the late Sondek CD12 player which you will also find in the current Unidisk range topper. This includes switch mode power



supplies, PCB layout that's optimised to maintain signal integrity and an oversampling DAC that runs at 24-bits and uses sigma-delta conversion. Linn's own single-stage interpolation filter provides its preferred filter profiles while a low jitter crystal oscillator provides the master clock. In other words this is a carefully put together but hardly ground breaking design.

Connections are provided in the usual flavours, albeit with two pairs of RCA outputs and a smattering of component linking sockets. Oh and an earthing post, that must be a first? According to the guff, Majik CD will play a good variety of disc types including CD-R and RW (though not one CD-R of mine which gives many but not all players a hard time), HDCD

(now owned by Microsoft) and both MP3 and 'dts 2.0+digital out'. The latter presumably for all three or so of the discs released in this format back in the nineties, or am I missing something?

Functionally the player offers two programming options, a good variety of display choices, switchable digital output and unit information. The latter, amongst other things, racks up the total length of time that the player has spent powered up, a bit like an audio

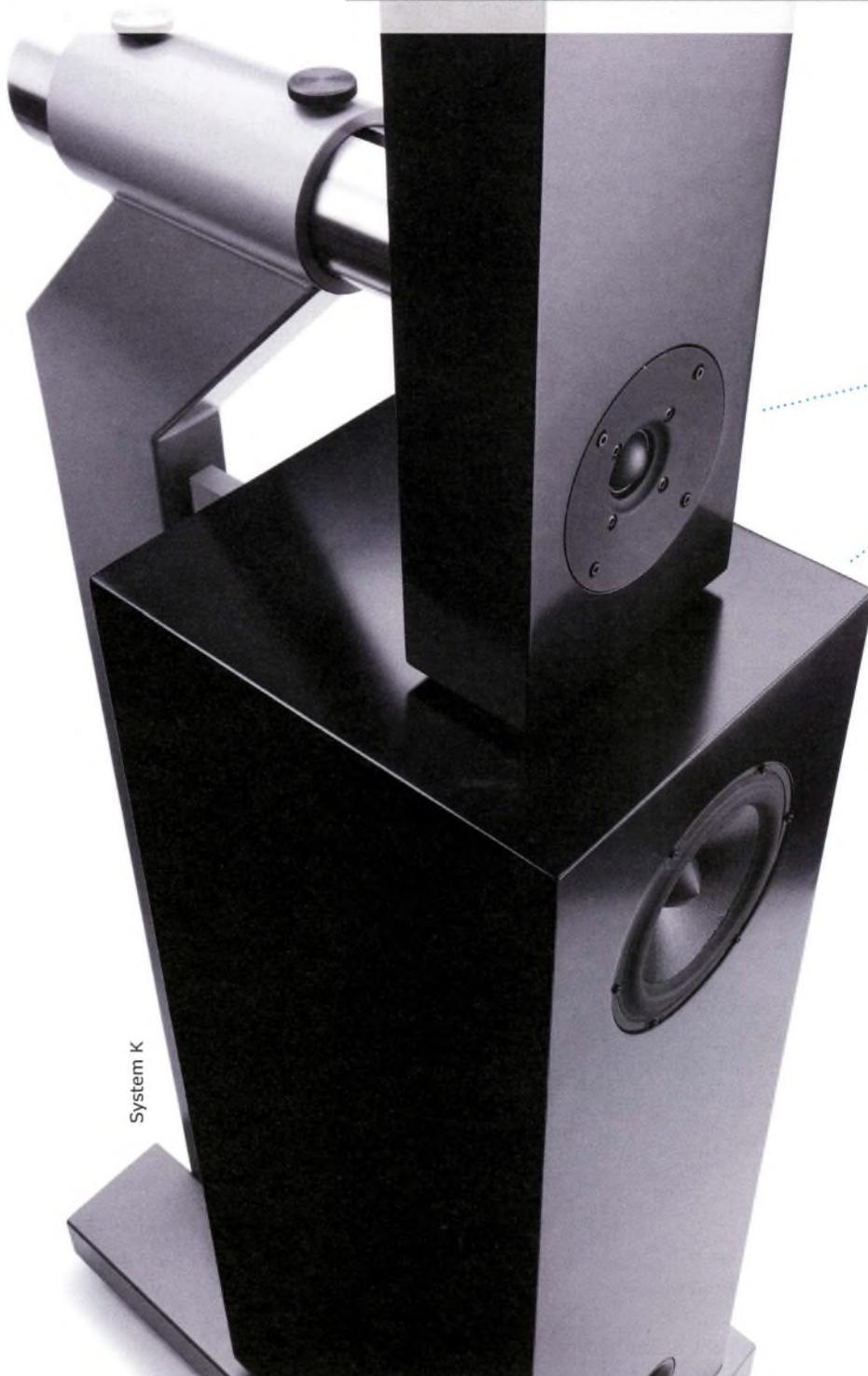
odometer. There is no indication of service intervals however.

The Majik 2100 power amplifier indicates its capacity in its name, 2 for channels and 100 for watts per; the only confusing aspect of this is that it specifies watts into four ohms whereas everyone else gives the figure into eight. Which means the Majik is less powerful than it suggests as the eight ohm output is quoted as 56watts. The 2100 uses Linn's Chakra topology

which is a hybrid of MOSFET and bi-polar output devices where a monolithic, power op-amp delivers the first few amps and the bi-polars provide a supporting role, increasing the current, efficiency and damping factor. This is not a new idea but Linn has applied for a patent on its particular execution of the approach where the bi-polars are arrayed around its high power monolithic chip. The 2100 will also accept crossover boards for Linn's Activ systems, offering a ready made upgrade path for those wanting to go the whole hog...

Listening commenced with the Living Voice OBX-R loudspeakers because A – they were already in situ and B – they are the more sensitive ▶

# ASCENDO



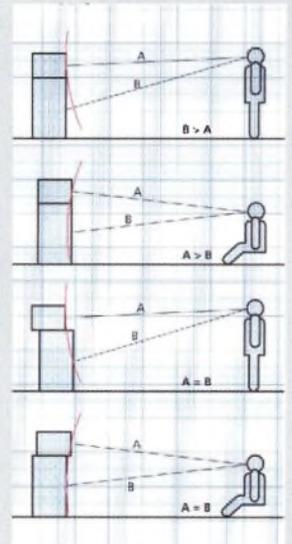
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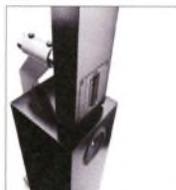
C5



C7



System M-F2



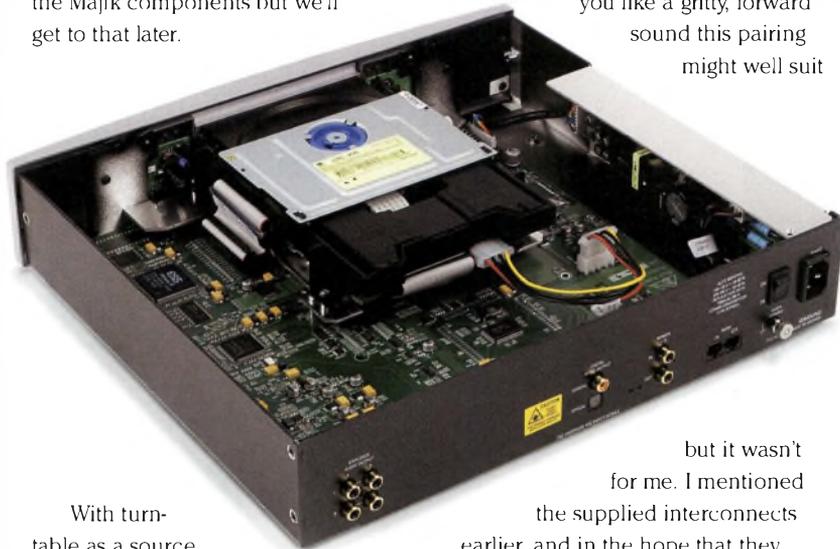
System Z-S



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▶ of the reference speakers I have on hand. Cabling was the usual combination of Living Voice interconnects and Townshend Isolda DCT speaker cable. Linn supply interconnects with the Majik components but we'll get to that later.



With turntable as a source, the SME Model 20A and vdH Condor connected directly to the Kontrol's phono stage, the result was resolute and highly sensitive to factors like phase and compression. The presentation is a little smaller than usual but proved quite sensitive to the source in scale terms with good differentiation between recordings. Voices are very forthright; with Taj Mahal's 'Cakewalk Into Town' the system throws his sonorous tones out into the room in emphatic fashion. Sensitivity to timing is also good, and there is plenty of differentiation between tempos as a result of a slight but clear inclination to emphasise the leading edges. Captain Beefheart's *Trout Mask Replica* fared less well, the system making no bones about its compressed state and the oft difficult to penetrate nature of the material. 'Pachuco Cadaver' worked well despite its rhythmic complexity but other tracks were less successful.

Bringing in the Majik CD player reinforced the slightly electronic character of the system in the context of the OBX-Rs, to the extent that a

change was clearly required. It must be something to do with the explicit midrange of the speaker combined with the warts and all presentation of the Majik system. Of course if you like a gritty, forward sound this pairing might well suit

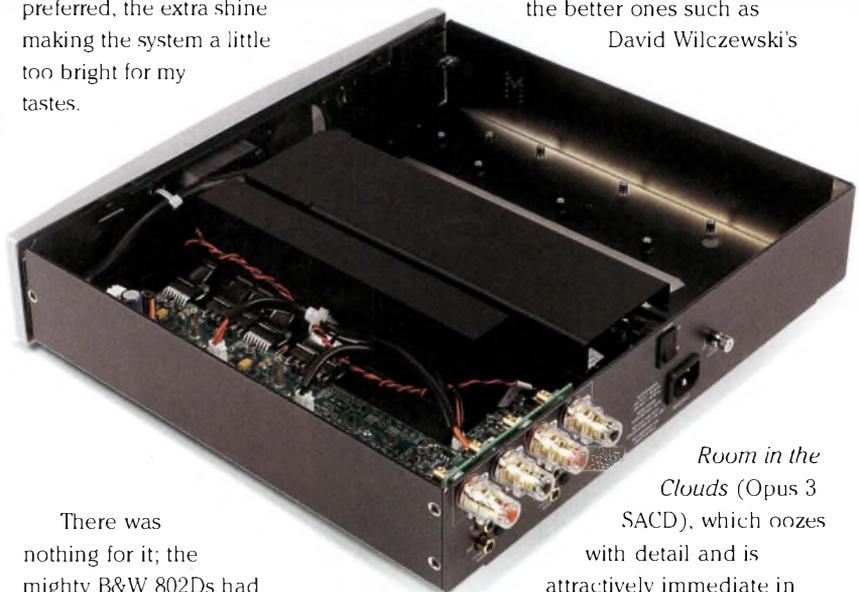
but it wasn't for me. I mentioned the supplied interconnects earlier, and in the hope that they might provide a useful balancing act with the system I used them to replace the Living Voice. The result was a shinier and marginally more lively sound but not one that was preferred, the extra shine making the system a little too bright for my tastes.

There was nothing for it; the mighty B&W 802Ds had to be wheeled in. With their relatively reticent mid-band and impressive extension at both frequency extremes they proved rather better suited to the Linn

electronics. I was surprised that the 2100 was powerful enough for the task, given the difficulty that other similarly powered amps have shown with these speakers of late. Output specs are a pretty crude indicator of real power of course, and the Linn proves as much by delivering deep and controlled bass from a speaker that presents a tricky load despite reasonable sensitivity.

Linn's claims about the quietness of these amplifiers are born out in practice. One is frequently surprised when the music kicks in. Just sometimes it seems as though there is some sort of delay and that the first note has been clipped a little; this happens when you switch inputs on the pre and sounds a little like a signal sensing process. But in the general scheme Majik is spookily quiet. Even the phono-stage is pretty good; there's a little low frequency hum but no more than I get with a decent outboard phono-stage.

The system differentiates recordings extremely well and loves the better ones such as David Wilczewski's



*Room in the Clouds* (Opus 3 SACD), which oozes with detail and is attractively immediate in its delivery. While tonally a little on the dry side there is plenty to grab hold of in terms of instrument texture. There is also no getting away from the fact that rhythm and

▶ timing is well served whatever the music; be it Brendel playing Beethoven or Lamb Chop doing their thing you know what the tempo is and how the different musicians are working together. To a large extent this is related to that emphasis in the mid-band that pulls out instruments like snare drums and hi-hats and seems to give them a more immediate feel than usual. Separating out the CD player suggests that this is not coming from the source in particular but is more a flavour of the amplification. The player alone times nicely and images well with an open, light and nimble sound.



Adding the Kontrol to the mix brings rim shots and banjos up in the mix and diffuses the image to a degree. Putting the 2100 in place of the (rather more expensive) Gamut D200 power amp reduces the image scale and delivers a less juicy balance but gives a greater emphasis on detail.

It's a distinct approach and one that suits certain musical types better than others. In the Country for instance sound far more like a trio than their ethereal music usually does, the Majiks pulling out the leading edges of the acoustic instruments and producing a rhythmic gel that more ostensibly evenhanded components can miss. There is a strong sense of hearing right into the mix; with tracks like 'The Grand Wazoo' (Frank Zappa) it seems like

you can hear every last element, including some that you wouldn't expect to be there, such as the odd spoken word in what is an instrumental piece. At the same time there is a shortfall in three dimensionality which seems to be down to the player. Switching to another machine did seem to elicit a lot more shape and body to the image so it's not being held back by the amplification.

With three distinct components in play, the reviewer always faces the conflict between the individual and the collective. There's a strong sense of system about the Majik, one that leads me

to suspect a happy match with Linn's own speakers.

They also represent an astonishingly versatile and capable package, which nonetheless confidently presents its own perspective on music with their snappy, engaging sound. I was especially impressed by the way in which the compact 2100 was able to get to grips with the big B&Ws; there seems to be something in this Chakra technology after all. It seems that rhythm is still what Linn is about, but nowadays that means delivering healthy levels of detail in a nimble fashion that you'll be hard pressed not to enjoy. Cute, compact yet expandable, together the Majiks set an enviable standard which could be hard to beat.

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Majik CD**  
 Disc compatibility: CD / CD-R / CD-RW / DTS AUDIO / MP3 / HDCD  
 Analogue output: 2pr RCA phono  
 Digital outputs: 1x coaxial S/Pdif RCA phono  
 1x Toslink optical  
 Weight: 4.90 kg  
 Price: £1,950

**Majik Kontrol**  
 Inputs: 5pr single-ended line-level RCA phono  
 1pr MM/MC/Line-level input RCA phono  
 RS232, RJ11, IR: 3.5 mm jack, RJ45 remote in RCA phono  
 Outputs: 1pr pre-out RCA phono  
 1pr tape out RCA phono

RS232, remote out RCA phono  
 Phono Input impedance: MM 48 k ohms 68 pF  
 MC 180 ohms 10 pF  
 Phono stage gain: MM +40 dB  
 MC (LOW GAIN): +54 dB  
 MC (HIGH GAIN): +64 dB  
 Output voltage: 5.3 V, 7.5 V peak  
 Weight: 4.90 kg  
 Price: £1,750

**Majik 2100**  
 Maximum output power: 100 W rms into 4 ohms,  
 56 W rms into 8 ohms  
 Load tolerance: Unconditionally stable into all loudspeaker loads  
 Weight: 5 kg  
 Price: £1,400

**General**  
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 381 x 80 x 355mm  
 (incl. feet)  
 Finishes: Silver, black

**Manufacturer:**  
 Linn Products  
 Tel. (44)(0)141 307 7777  
 Net. www.linn.co.uk





PRE-TT

# Audio Zone Pre-T1 & Amp-2

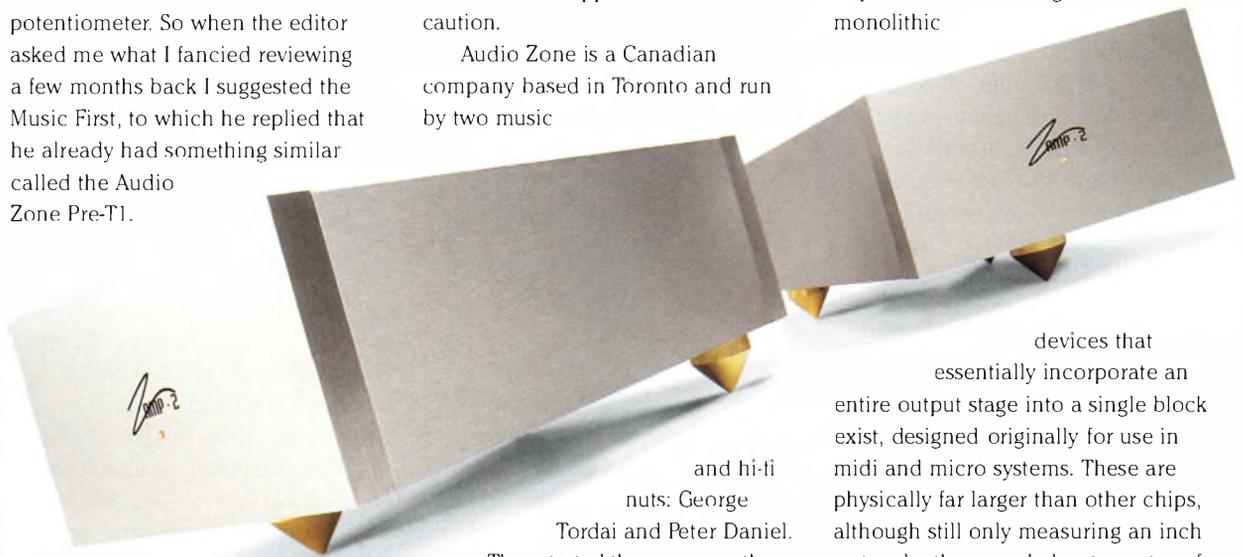
by Jason Kennedy

It must have been going on a year ago now, that I first started to hear good things about an unusual passive pre-amplifier called the Music First, a device that differs from the norm because it uses transformers to achieve steps in attenuation rather than the variable resistance of a potentiometer. So when the editor asked me what I fancied reviewing a few months back I suggested the Music First, to which he replied that he already had something similar called the Audio Zone Pre-T1.

has more inputs and comes in a relatively conventional bit of casework. But as of course we all know, it's the small things that matter and just because the building bricks are very similar does not mean the result will match. Such simplistic assumptions should thus be approached with caution.

Audio Zone is a Canadian company based in Toronto and run by two music

becoming the hardcore hobbyist's output stage of choice on many of the busiest forums. Op-amps are amplifiers that are built into a chip and are generally used as gain stages within CD players, pre-amps and the like where only small voltages are required. However, larger monolithic



Both units use Stevens & Billington TX-102 transformers as a volume control; in fact the Music First is made by the Hastings based company which probably explains how it is able to offer its ostensibly better equipped passive for £200 less than Audio Zone. I've yet to try an MF but given that both these units use the same transformers you might suspect that the sonic results will be very close, the only obvious differences between the AZ and MF being that the latter

and hi-fi nuts: George Tordai and Peter Daniel. They started the company three years ago using Peter's background in mechanical engineering and George's experience as a retailer of vintage and used hi-fi as a basis for the new venture. Their first product was the AMP-1 a two box 'integrated' with outboard power supply based on an Op-amp output stage that AZ says it derived from Junji Kimura's 47 Labs Gaincard design. They say that by using "better parts [and] better chassis design" that the AMP-1 takes "this technology to the next level".

All of which makes it sound like the Gainclone Op-amps that are

devices that essentially incorporate an entire output stage into a single block exist, designed originally for use in midi and micro systems. These are physically far larger than other chips, although still only measuring an inch or two by three, and about quarter of an inch thick. Using them as output devices in high quality systems is a bit of a third way but one pioneered to staggering effect by Japanese high-end mavens such as 47 Labs and Final Laboratories. Audio Zone likes these devices because they offer a very short signal path and very few parts. They also claim that they offer the "best of both worlds, (the) speed, detail, dynamics, control and bass of solid state without the glare and dryness", but then they would, wouldn't they. The AMP-1 was followed by the DAC-1 and the AMP-2 mono-blocs

► (reviewed here and using the same technology as the integrated). AZ doesn't say when the Pre-T1 turned up but it was presumably made to go with the mono-blocs.

There do appear to be limitations on power however; the 47 Labs amp is of modest output and the AZ AMP-2 mono-blocs only claim 50watts. Which is not a problem so long as you have speakers that don't make life difficult. George recommends the following: Avantgarde, Reference 3A, Triangle, JM Labs, ZU Speakers, or anything else that's 91dB and up with a stable 6 – 8 Ohm impedance. I have Living Voice Avatar OBX-R2s which, happy to be used with low powered valve amps, meet all the necessary criteria.

The Pre-T1 is a solid little lump thanks to the aluminium slab into which it's built and the weight of those transformers. Connections are limited to two inputs and as many outputs which could come in useful if you doubled up on power amps. Input selection is via switches at the back of the unit's top-plate, an approach that must be the simplest and shortest that could be achieved. All of AZ's amps are built in Canada as are all the components save the transformers. The gold plated feet give them a hint of "made inChina" but this is not the case; presumably they are there to appeal to markets that like a bit of bling with their hairshirt audiophilia.

As Stevens & Billington points out, the advantage of using transformers as a passive volume control is that you avoid the potential impedance mismatches that passive potentiometers inevitably face. Or as S&B puts it "the resistive volume control employed in passive control units must navigate a course between the Scylla of excessively loading the source, leading to increased distortion and the Charybdis of excessively high

output impedance". In other words the passive pot lives between a rock and a hard place in terms of being able to avoid high frequency roll-off caused by source, load and cable impedances. Of course if these don't get in the way PPs have a lot to offer for the money but it's more difficult to predict which combinations of source, amplifier and cable will give the best results.



The transformer approach is designed to offer a more flexible volume control that will work with a wide range of components and cables. They are not perfect of course and the TX-102 does run into bandwidth limitations at the point where it is offering the least attenuation. Ordinarily however, if your source has an output impedance of 1 kOhm or less, the transformers will provide a bandwidth of 10Hz – 10kHz.

These transformers have as many output taps as there are volume levels on the stepped attenuator, that's 18 plus 0dB or no attenuation, with a two decibel difference between the majority that increases to 3dB at the top of the range and 6dB at the bottom (maximum attenuation is

46dB). If more gain is required a further 6dB can be added at the flick of a switch marked, appropriately enough, high and low gain. Looking at Stevens & Billington's specs for the TX-102 it would seem that impedances of both input and output varieties improve with attenuation, in other words input impedance is at its lowest, or hardest to drive, at 0 attenuation and highest at -46dB.

Output impedances go the other way but as you want them to be as low as is practical the same rule applies – more attenuation means more driving power. Essentially so long as you avoid running the thing at full chat you won't have any problems, or to put it another way, only use the extra gain if you need it. Not too long ago we would all have marvelled at the AZ AMP-2s' diminutive dimensions (77x152x 230mm HxWxD without feet) and most subtle of on lights.

These days, a host of tiny, high-powered digital mono-blocs like the Flying Moles have rather stolen its thunder, and given how cool the AMP-2s run you'd be forgiven for suspecting some kind of digital output stage but that's not the case. Build, as with the pre-amp, is very good; simple but nicely executed. Once again we have the gold plated cones but only three per block. Specs include output protection against inductive loads, 30dB of gain and a signal to noise ratio quoted as being greater than 95dB. Internally you'll find a hand wired circuit, Plitron transformer and an Op-amp output chip that delivers 60watts into an eight ohm load with 100watts available for peak bursts.

Before I launch into a detailed analysis of this amplication's sound it seems appropriate to underline one fact; passive preamps, with or without transformers, are

**All the legendary presence, involvement and sheer "musicality" of single ended triode valves but with solid state power and reliability.**

## New technology cool amplifiers

"They lend music almost physical presence." was the opinion of US reviewer Six Moons, writing about Bel Canto's REF1000 monoblocks.

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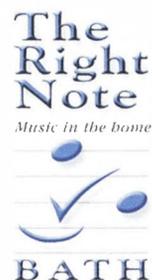
The result? Disarmingly compact **COOL-RUNNING** amplifiers with astonishing clarity, presence and musical involvement.

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**CD:** ACCUSTIC ARTS, BEL CANTO, DCS (ELGAR, DELIUS, PURCELL, VERDI, VERONA, P8), RESOLUTION AUDIO, STELLO, WADIA. **VINYL:** AESTHETICS, AVID, CLEARAUDIO, DNM, GRAHAM, THE GROOVE, LEHMANN BLACK CUBE, MICHELL, ORIGIN LIVE, SUMIKO BLUE POINT SPECIAL, TRANSPIGURATION. **AMPLIFIERS:** BEL CANTO, CAT, DK DESIGN, DNM, GAMUT, HALCRO, HOWLAND, SONNETEER, STELLO. **LOUDSPEAKERS:** AUDIO PHYSIC, DALI, GAMUT, ETHOS, NEAT, TOTEM. **CABLES:** ARGENTO, CHORD Co., DNM, NORDOST, SILTECH, VERTEX AQ, ETC. **MAINS:** VERTEX AQ. **SUPPORTS:** ARCICI, STANDS UNIQUE, VERTEX AQ



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▶ shockingly transparent. As we plunge into the minutiae of product sound, keep that given in mind.

If there is a drawback with the species it is that they are not usually capable of driving long interconnects and as mentioned above are subject to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or otherwise, when it comes to impedances. The transformer approach gets around this to a very large extent and leaves just one minor gripe, which is that there is no remote volume control; but that's just the moaning of my inner couch potato. When you can have the transparency that would cost five grand plus from an active unit for under £1,700, the occasional wander across the room is a small price to pay.

Slightly more inconvenient is the basic input provision; two inputs might be enough for a purist, and let's face it who else buys things like this, but you can get three times as many including balanced from the Music First. Still two's enough for the sources that count, whilst some would argue it's one too many.

As I have a home made passive equipped with a Penny & Giles 5k pot it seemed sensible to contrast it with the Pre-T1, a process that brought to light the difficulties that the P&G and its ilk have with impedances. Both offer similarly high level of transparency in terms of detail, imaging and, yes, dynamics, but the extra bass power offered by the AZ suggested that the power amp's input impedance – in this case Classé CA-M400 mono-blocs – was not helping the pot.

Using the AZ AMP-2s to drive B&W 802Ds was also a predictable non-starter. This speaker, though reasonably efficient has some nasty phase angles and an impedance that drops to 3.2ohms, a combination of factors that stopped the AZs delivering well controlled bass. The mid and high frequencies were appealingly open and resolute if a little over exuberant in a struggling to control the speaker kind of way.

under her accompanist David Rawlins' fancy picking. You could also hear much more clearly, his failures to completely harmonise with her voice, intentionally or otherwise.

That track and many others have a slightly 'loud' quality with these amps that when compared to more powerful designs seems like a slightly unnatural effusive-ness. To what extent this will appeal or



distract will depend on your tastes, but if you have not lived with the comparatively calm sound of a big power amp it's unlikely to be an issue. In fact it's not dissimilar to the sound of single-ended power amps when played at highish levels, albeit without their silky smooth top end. The AMP-2s have a similarly open character but none of the bloom that triode's are inclined to produce and rather more bottom end grip. Despite their diminutive size these amps can deliver a solid and fruity bass when fed an appropriately phat signal. I found some on Burnt Friedman and Jaki Liebezeit's *Secret Rhythms* and the way that the gorgeously treated bass guitar sound contrasted with shiny vibraphone notes was entirely delicious, thanks to a taut delivery that lets each note decay in a ▶

Moving over to the Living Voice speakers allowed the AMP-2s to come into their own. There is still a limit on how loud you can comfortably play the system but the combination proved well matched in all other respects. The level of transparency continued to impress, peeling back layers on music of all shades. I particularly liked the way you could now hear what the quietest instruments were contributing to a mix. With Gillian Welch's 'Everything is Free' (*Time (The Revelator)*) her guitar notes could now be clearly heard plucking out the rhythm

► precise yet organic fashion.

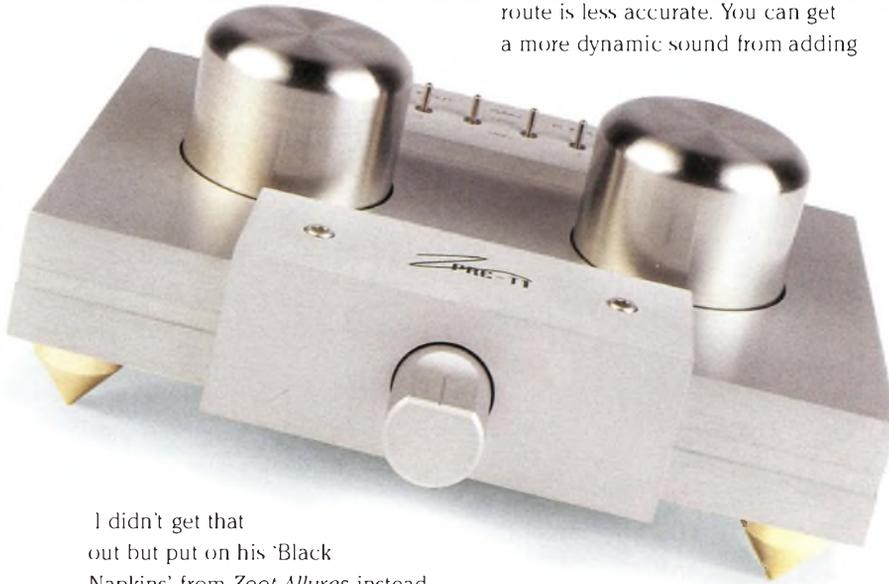
Less spectacular recordings had to be reined in a bit. For instance *Who's Next* (Classic Records) is just plain dirty sounding and turning it up just makes this more obvious.

The version of 'Chunga's Revenge' on the Gotan Project's *La Revancha Del Tango* proved rather more appealing, if not quite as juicy as Zappa's original.

engagement with the music which is ultimately more important than well, anything, if no arbiter of fidelity per se.

The Pre-T1 is an exceptionally good sounding piece of kit for its asking price, and whilst some will always feel that you can't beat the energy and life that an active pre-amp brings to the sound it's very hard to say that the passive transformer route is less accurate. You can get a more dynamic sound from adding

their products to such a high standard. These are beautifully presented yet tiny little boxes that pack a surprising musical punch. All they need is speakers to match. Now, where did I put my copy of *Chunga's Revenge*?



I didn't get that out but put on his 'Black Napkins' from *Zoot Allures* instead. Here the AZs opened up the recording to reveal the live nature of this track. Zappa frequently mixed live and studio takes on his albums and it's not that now you can hear fans shouting but rather that you can hear the size of the auditorium thanks to an acoustic that reverb units could never reproduce.

Next to a more conventional solid-state amplifier in the shape of Ayre's AX-7e integrated, the Audio Zone pairing delivered the expected increase in transparency alongside a slightly drier presentation that made the Ayre sound positively bodacious. Which is surprising because the AX-7e generally seems like a pretty neutral amplifier with a good deal of refinement for a single box. The AZ's extra precision makes for more immediacy and a strong sense of

gain but there is a good chance that the active devices are adding something of their own that just happens to appeal, rather than giving you more of the signal. It's interesting to note just how often passive controllers crop up in the most critical design and studio applications. Meanwhile, the Op-amp powered AMP-2 is undeniably engaging and musical. It could be a little calmer perhaps and head-bangers will want more power but it has a resolution and nimbleness that will let you right into the music. They offer the perfect foil to the transparency of the Pre-T1.

Audio Zone has to be congratulated for sourcing technologies which are some way from conventional and for building and finishing

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### Pre-T1

Type:	Passive control with transformer coupling
Transformers:	2x Stevens Et Billington TX 102
Inputs:	Optional - 2 or 3 line-level RCA
Outputs:	Optional - 1 or 2 line-level RCA
Volume Steps:	24 via Elma switched attenuator
Guarantee:	10 year manufacturer warranty
Dimensions (WxHxD):	216 x 125 x 165mm
Price:	£1,695

##### Amp 2

Type:	Solid-state mono-bloc with monolithic op-amp output stage
Output Power:	50W continuous into 8ohm
Gain:	30dB
Input Impedance:	10kOhms
Guarantee:	10 year manufacturer warranty
Dimensions (WxHxD):	165 x 100 x 216mm
Price:	£1,795

##### UK Distributor:

Shadow Distribution  
tel 01592 744 779  
[www.shadowdistribution.co.uk](http://www.shadowdistribution.co.uk)

##### Manufacturer:

Audio Zone  
[www.inthezonenet.com](http://www.inthezonenet.com)



# The Karan Acoustics KA S180 Power Amplifier

by Alan Sircom

A few years ago, Milan Karan of Karan Acoustics came up with one of the best integrated amps on the market, the KA I180. Smaller and lighter than previous Karan designs (although that's not saying much – the integrated weighs a healthy 27kg in its own right), this amp has gained the attention of those seeking out good amplification without all the bright shiny lights of fame or fancy.

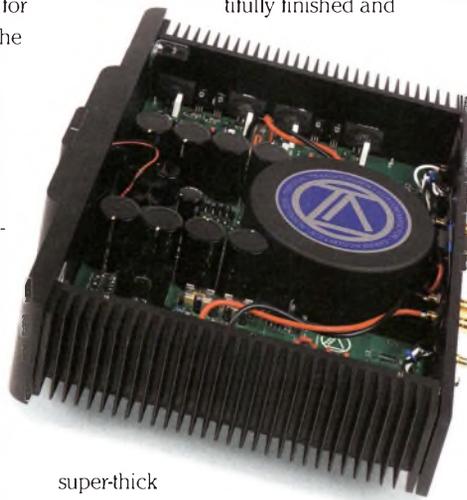
Given that this integrated was a fraction the size or weight of Karan's traditional stereo power amps, it seemed an obvious move to use it as the basis for a new, slimmer stereo power design. The £3500 KA S180 is the result. Take the basic integrated, remove the control amp stage, build up the power amp circuits accordingly and bingo! Instant stand alone power amp.

Of course, this is a pithy oversimplification of an extremely thorough design. It is a dual mono design delivering 180 Watts into eight ohms (300 Watts into four ohms), with both balanced and single-ended inputs, running off fully balanced architecture. It's also a zero-feed-back design, which goes some way towards explaining the speed of the amplifier. The lack of capacitors in the signal path will also help the speed, too. Then there's the frequency response, which is quoted as DC-300kHz with only a -3dB limit. And, as you might expect for a power amp that's pushing 27+kg or so, there's a beefy 600VA transformer, custom-made for Karan.

Karan Acoustics also lists its amps as pure Class A designs, but a quick comparison of physical size to power rating tells you they're not talking about the output stage. Although the amp runs warm, it doesn't run 180 Watt Class A warm (i.e. It doesn't turn a room into a

sauna in minutes). That said, the sweetness and richness of the sound does suggest Class A operation and in fact the KA S180's driver stages as well as a musically significant proportion of its output stage do operate in Class A. That could mean as little as five or so Watts, but then Karan are taking no more liberties with the terminology than the rest of the industry.

There's a confidence about the build quality that takes some getting used to. It's not simply the gently curved, beautifully finished and



super-thick front panel, the butch WBT sockets throughout, the solidity of the rest of the case, the brute force yet not sharp edged heatsinks that run along the sides or the trio of solid, high grade audiophile feet it rests upon. It's not the bold red on black glowing logo in the front and centre of the amp, it's not even the form factor (slightly wider, quite a bit deeper and not much higher than standard amps) or the big wooden crate it comes packed in. There's something physically confident about the amp that sort of remains indefinable, like being in the presence of a zen sword master. It exudes authority.

But it doesn't exude details. There's not much information forthcoming about this amp as yet; no website information, no press release... nothing. Perhaps part of the reason for this über-minimalist approach is down to the serial number of the review sample – 001. Yes, this is the first KA S180 out of the starting blocks, but there's no sign of prototypism. So, everything we have about the KA S180 is largely extrapolated from the KA I180. Which is no bad thing; among those in the know, the KA I180 integrated is one of those amps (like the Lavardin models) that command infinite respect, both for the product and for the discerning taste of the owner.

One of the great things about the KA S180 isn't the sound, it's the absence of sound. This has one of the lowest noise floors of any amp available for this sort of money, whether used balanced or single-ended. In fact, temper that; the balanced connections are as noise-free as any other good balanced design, but so's the single-ended operation. This makes most single-ended amps sound noisy by comparison. Normally, a low noise floor creeps up on you, but here the absence of noise is so profound, you end up with an ear in the speaker wondering if the amp has blown a fuse. Then you hear noise, but it's from the pre-amp. This can have its downsides – you could end up wicking up the volume control too high and damage speakers if you judge volume level by background hiss levels. Of course, if you do this on a regular basis, you deserve a 24-hour section and a spell in the rubber room.

Once you get past the lack of hiss, what's left is extremely fast and extremely natural sounding. The natural

▶ sounding aspect comes through first. This isn't an amp with character, yet nor is it characterless, it's just that the character of the disc, player, pre-amp or cables seems to come first. If there is a Karan signature here, it's a touch of sweetness, but this is purely beneficial and helps when exploiting those 180 Watts. This isn't the sort of amp that demands being pushed to the limits and isn't the sort of design that returns a hard-edged sound. Instead it's the transistor amp owners fantasy valve sound and the valve owner's fantasy transistor sound – big, powerful and clean like the best transistors, sweet and open and almost euphonic like good valves.

There's a spaciousness about the sound that is reminiscent of tube amps, with the sort of dimensionality and relaxed naturalistic mid-band presentation and clean, unforced dynamics that are usually associated with hollow state audio. But there's also the pace and rhythmic properties, the solidity of image and the fine, extended treble detail that only a valve amp can do. All of which makes it academic picking out fine passages of music to highlight aspects of the performance. So long as you steer clear of those late and thoroughly unlamented Top Of The Pops awful reworkings of dreadful 1970s pop songs by Z-list musicians, every disc you play will be lofted up to reference class.

Perhaps there's one aspect that stands out above all others. It's the coherence of the sound. Often understated because it's rarely notable, the way music and the individual musicians in the mix hang together is sumptuous and highly enticing. Perhaps this is what all those dread hi-fi test discs are crying out for... play some unrehearsed group of session musicians churning out jazz standards in a large venue chosen for its beautiful ambience and you start to hear

the band gel. Play something like *James Brown's Funky People* (a compilation of all those who used to play with the Godfather of Soul, including Fred Wesley, Maceo Parker et al) and you'll think these guys are psychically linked.

Like any good small, reactive amp, the KA S180 is fast and musical. Like any big powerful amp, the KA S180 is muscular and seemingly endlessly powerful.



But it's not a bitza sound, with elements of big and small amps. Unlike almost every other amplifier, it spans both aspects of amplifier output simultaneously. It has the dynamic shading to cope with complex classical pieces, the brute force to play Led Zep at eye-denting sound pressure levels. This is the mark of true high-end amp greatness – the last power amp that delivered the same sort of cover-all performance was the stunning DartZeel, and you can buy almost four KA S180s for the price of one of those!

There's a downside here. There must be. Trouble is, I can't find it. Or rather, I can only find it if I compare this to the really stunning amp designs that are far beyond the Karan's league and price. Which means it's not a Krell Evolution or a Hovland RADIA. But you wouldn't expect that for £3500, would you? Put up against the competition at its price point, it's embarrassingly good, like someone shaved five grand off the price by mistake.

There's a high-end bargain at play here. If this Karan had another badge –

also beginning with 'K' – it would command a considerably higher asking price. But, just because it's a less well-known product doesn't make it any the less worthwhile. This is a beautifully built, supremely powerful and wonderful sounding amplifier for those who want a dynamic, refined and – above all – musical amplifier. But it's much, much more than that. It's one of those amplifiers that has a built in time machine – you play music and hours

dissolve like minutes, and the time between amplifier upgrades stretches into years and decades. In all, the Karan KA S180 is beautifully made, looks the part and more than delivers the goods, in a top of the tree high-end package that costs a fraction of what it should. What are you waiting for? Buy one before the fame sets in and the price goes up to what it's really worth. This is the cheapest £6,000 amp on the market today.



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Karan Acoustics KA S180	
Type:	Dual mono power amp
Inputs:	1pc each, balanced and single-ended
Frequency Response:	DC-300kHz +0, -3dB
S/N Ratio:	Better than -112 dB
Damping Factor:	Greater than 1,200 into 8 Ohms, 20Hz-20kHz
Power Output:	180 into 8 Ohms 300W into 4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	500x90x310 mm
Weight:	27 kg
Finish:	Black (as night)
Price:	£3500

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### INTRODUCTION

After almost three decades in this industry I have some perspective, and I can say that the high-end is not a shrinking industry; and in terms of quality and value we are living in the Golden Age of Hi-Fi! Real Hi-Fi has always been the pursuit of the enlightened and minority; today's iPods are bought by yesterday's owners of rack systems. What I find surprising is the commercial success in Britain of the usual suspects. If you look just a little beyond the magazines and the High Street, the same money buys crafted and calibrated products with pride of possession, long-term currency, value and most of all pleasure.

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service; indeed we think ours is the best in the land; with no grey imports, no phantom products, six month guarantees on Hi-FiShop.com, what you see is what you get. Two floors up from our bargain basement (or clearance cellar!) The Audio Salon's spacious Victorian Drawing Room people travel from near and far to hear, for example, the fabulous Gryphon Poseidon system, which redefines the state of the art.

In Tom Brown's schooldays, six of the best was to be avoided at all costs. This month we proudly debut Hi-Fi that redefines investment opportunities, and getting in before the rest!

### ATC SCM-40

Launched in May 2006 at £1,999, this speaker lets you hear your music the same way most musicians heard their recordings in the studio.

### Ayre Acoustics MX-R

With amps that outperform behemoths costing more than double, you wonder what the forthcoming £11,590 monoblocks will do....

### Brinkmann Oasis

Mr Brinkmann has come up the fast lane to produce turntables with a vengeance and a long waiting list too! They are the best.

### Esoteric X-03se

TEAC decided to keep UK customers waiting for the special

version of this player and it really has been worth the wait.

### JPSLabs

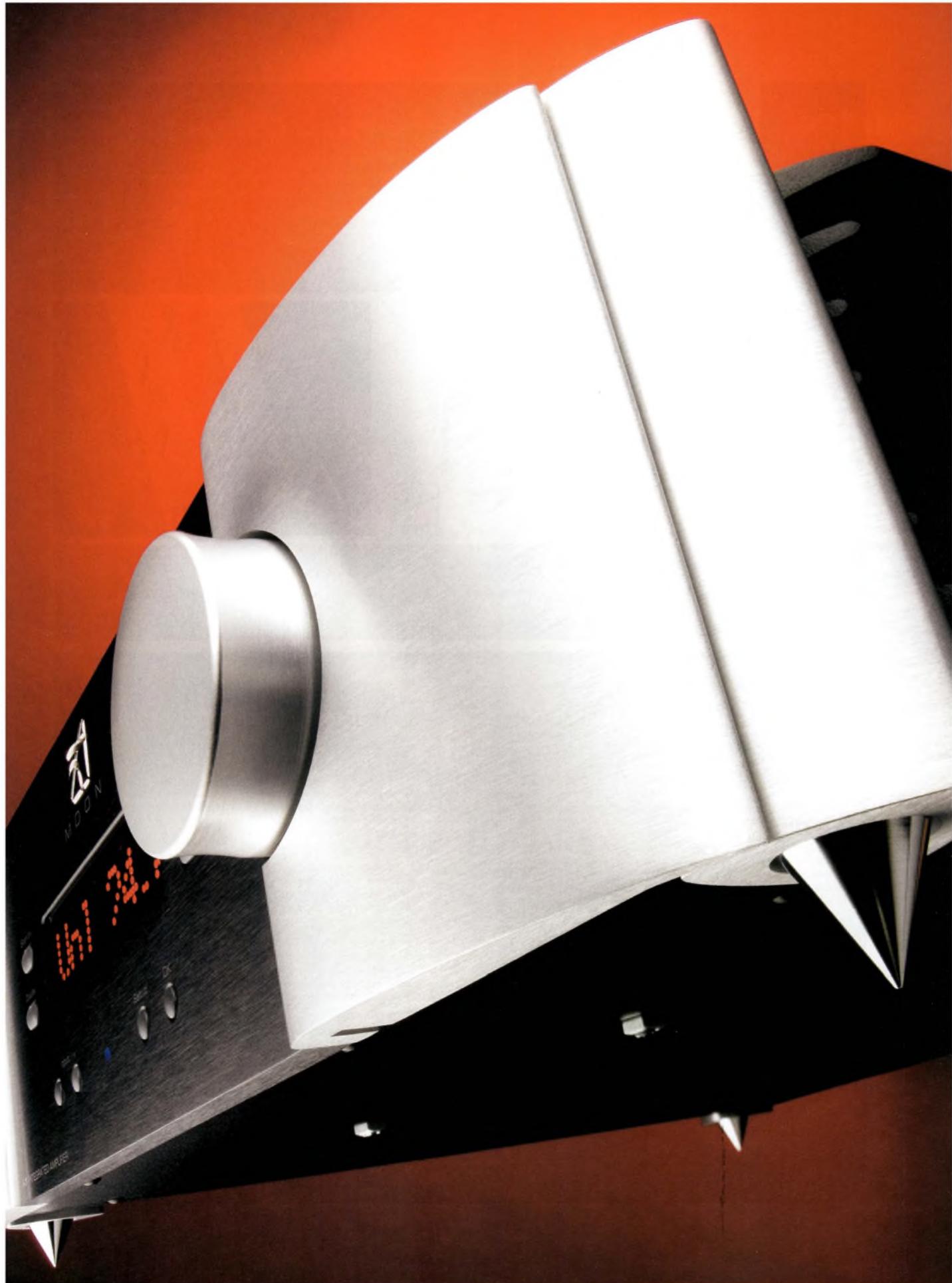
Jilt your girlfriend, divorce your wife if she moans about "a bit of wire that costs a grand." The new SC-3 interconnect is available on sale-or-return; a nasty trap for the unwary. Barely legal.

### Pathos Endorphin

And then there comes along the long-awaited Italian CD player. Comparisons with Alfa Romeos and Ferraris convey the excitement of a product of passion; stimulating and absolutely sensational.

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# The Moon i-7 Integrated Amplifier

by Chris Thomas

The Canadian company Simaudio are perhaps best known in the UK for their Moon integrated amplifiers the i-3 and the i-5, both of which I have reviewed and enjoyed over the past couple of years. They offer serious musical qualities at their individual price points with the i-3 being the wild child of the range and the i-5 its more sophisticated and refined big brother. While both can provide decent paper power outputs they each have slight limitations with high quality speakers of less than average efficiency, with the i-5 in particular just lacking that extra bit of instrumental weight that would give it the real sense of drive and power that would make it ideal. Well, now Moon have upgraded both these amplifiers as well as introducing a new range called the Evolution Series that includes several new products including CD players, separate pre/power amplifiers and their latest integrated model, the i-7. But those thinking that this is a beefed up version of the 3 and 5 should think again. The concept for the new range is different. As their advertising shows, these products are "The leading edge in music & film reproduction". And when I see the words Film Reproduction applied to a piece of audio equipment I have to admit that my heart sinks a little.

Thus far, equipment marketed as being designed for AV has generally disappointed me and I have avoided it like the plague after a couple of big let downs. I don't know what it is about AV gear but, when applied to two-channel music systems, it always seems to have

been voiced very conservatively with limited dynamics, bandwidth, limited everything in fact. In trying to be all things to all men it tends to fail in both endeavours and what you usually end up with is a loud but soft sounding system that squeezes the life



out of music and can be monumentally boring and uninviting to listen to. Quite why this is so I have never quite understood. Perhaps the abundance of electronic gadgetry and in some cases processors mitigate against ultimate sound quality. I am trying not to be too hair shirt about this but *Hi-Fi Plus* has always been about reproducing music in the home. Hardware for home cinema seems to have become something completely different.

The i-7 carries no AV processing software but is still a fairly complex design. But Moon are amongst the very best at ergonomics and have come up with what, functionally, must be one of the easiest and most agreeable amplifiers I have ever used. I really like the look and feel of this amplifier and build quality, finish and aesthetics are truly superb. The i-7 is eminently configurable and provides four single ended and one balanced

set of inputs plus a separate tape loop section. There is a pair of RCA line outputs in case you want to isolate the pre-amplifier section to drive a separate power amplifier and there is a single pair of gold-plated heavy-duty WBT speaker connections. The inclusion of an RS 232 port means that incorporation into multi-room systems is possible but there is also a SimLink in/out connection that enables the amplifier to communicate with other Moon products and a 12V trigger socket. This enables you to assign any input to the trigger so that when that input is selected it automatically activates the appropriate external device.

The software set-up feature gives you comprehensive control over each input. You can, by using the set-up button and the volume control, individually label each input either from preset names or through a custom feature. You can assign each input its own maximum volume setting and even adjust the offset which allows you to compensate for the different output levels likely to be coming from each source component. Completely bypassing the volume control lets you use the i-7 in home theatre systems with processors and source components that have their own volume controls and you can even switch off any of the inputs that are not being used. The status of all this is visible via what must be one of the best illuminated displays currently available and I say this because you can actually read it from anywhere ▶

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► in the room. It shows input selected and the current volume setting and can be scrolled through different levels of brightness or switched off altogether, illuminating only for the duration of the command. When you consider the sheer electronic complexity of the i-7 and the stripped-down simplicity of the i-3 and i-5

I think you can see that Moon are aiming this amplifier at a completely different customer. What continues though is the excellent remote control and the superb build quality.

This amplifier sits on 4 screw-in steel cones but, be warned, this is a bigger unit altogether and may be difficult to site on some smaller equipment supports.

Being a Moon amplifier has come to mean lengthy run-in times during which the amplifier will certainly go through several changes. Even Moon themselves, in their manual, claim 400 hours and I say that is a conservative estimate. Listen to it from the box and you will have no idea whatsoever of how the sound will develop over the coming weeks and it could improve for months. For an age the i-7 delivers its musical message in great clumps of left and right information with very little sense of refinement or instrumental separation. There's power but nothing to suggest any great articulation. But this is nothing new as both the smaller integrated amplifiers suffer in exactly the same way. Painfully slowly its true character starts to emerge and the amplifier begins to use its considerable muscle in a more musical way. With 150 watts per channel into 8 ohms and 250 into

4 ohms to call on there is an immediate sense of weight and scale but it is delivered with a velvet glove. Even after weeks of working the amplifier hard I would still characterise the overall tonal balance as slightly soft but, to be frank, I have no idea if it has yet fully completed its burn-in period.

It has a very decent



useable bandwidth but, even when fed from the extraordinarily resolute Teac Esoteric X-01 CD player, it still fails to totally impress with its subtlety or ability to illustrate the finely etched detail and texture that the player excels at. Nor does it respond that sharply to the speed and



rhythmic clarity that is also the Esoteric's forte. It is not bad rhythmically. Everything is in time but it just seems to impose something of a brake on the tempo so music you know well appears to be playing a bit slower and with less rhythmic verve and anticipation. In this

area I believe it lacks the agility and lighter touch of the i-5 and it feels as if its considerable extra power reserves do not allow it to change musical direction with quite the same speed or sharpness.

Everything comes easy to the i-7 which refuses to be flustered regardless what music you are asking it to deal with and I think this is one of the defining characteristics of the

amplifier and will likely be a major selling point. Put simply, it handles everything in a thoroughly competent way but with its own particular flavour and shading and this seeps through everything it does.

The i-7 is not alone in this and it might be argued that every amplifier ever built does this to some level or another. But the Moon remains very, very easy to listen to. One might even call it cosy and nobody is ever going to find it tonally irritating. But is it ever going to grab your attention, challenge you to investigate a song or wonder at the musicianship or

the construction of a chord sequence? You will need to be the judge of that and perhaps that is not what you are looking for anyway. But it will let you sit

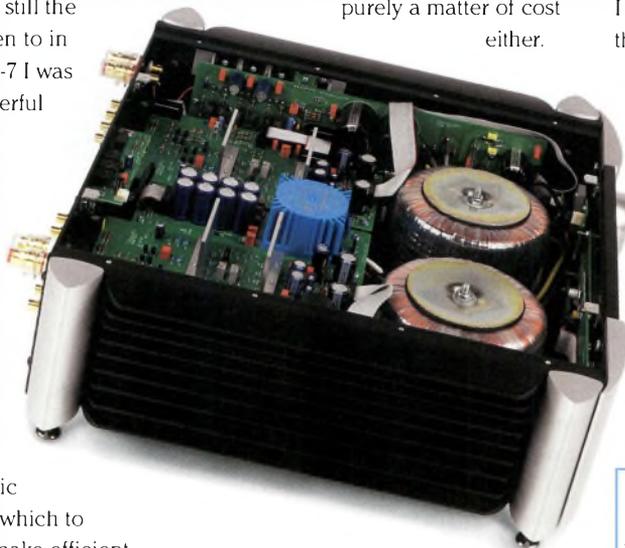
back and enjoy whatever music you love in a completely relaxed and slightly laid-back way and for many this is no bad thing.

Once you have accepted the fact that there are not going to be too many uncomfortable moments when living with the i-7, it will provide a totally consistent and easy view of proceedings. But, with so many

▶ watts to call on, it is quite dynamic and can swing hefty transients without strain so when you add to this an impressive feeling of scale and weight you realise that, at level, it can go places where the i-3 and i-5 can't and can certainly drive a speaker like the JM Labs Micro Utopia Be with an extra degree of authority and ease that would be welcome in the 5 in particular. But the i-5 is still the more interesting to listen to in many ways and in the i-7 I was hoping for a more powerful amplifier but with the smaller amplifier's compact sense of musical focus.

As the amplifier burns-in it begins to use its clean power much more to the benefit of the music by providing vocalists and musicians with extra individual dynamic potential and space in which to operate. It really does make efficient use of the power and weight that it holds in reserve in that it never really sounds overtly loud. You can just keep pouring on the watts and there is no drama or that feeling that the amplifier is operating on the edge of its comfort zone. It is impressive in the general grip it has over its bandwidth but could do with a little more impact and distinction around the leading edges of notes where I feel it is soft and a little lazy. This, for me, is the single biggest failing of the i-7 in a two-channel music system and the main reason why it doesn't feel like the more powerful version of the smaller amplifiers. That critical instant when the instrument and musician show their quality and relationship is quite often the difference between being good or great as far as amplification goes. Too soft and muted and it's boring, throw in a little leading edge compression and it will be heralded as having great

timing, but musicians will know that this is a far too simplistic view of an instrument's responsiveness to input. Get this wrong and the whole structure of the music is compromised. The control over each part of that expression is what can elevate a piece of audio equipment into that "special" category and where music moves into the area of emotional connection. And it is not purely a matter of cost either.



I am not saying that the Moon is any worse than the norm in this respect. It just isn't special and I find that it makes the musical experience less involving and certainly less intriguing.

This Moon i-7 is an interesting and apposite amplifier in many ways. I need to take my reviewer's hat off for a moment and admit that where I tend to judge every component in a musical context through a quality two-channel system I am fully aware that the i-7's potential owners may not. Were I to be in the market for an integrated amplifier then my sole criteria would be its musical performance with aesthetics way down the list and electronic gadgetry off the agenda completely. Others will not. I don't want multi-room music nor am I interested in AV applications for my home system but others are. I see this as an ongoing theme in the coming years with two-

channel music systems becoming more and more the domain of specialist manufacturers as the inevitable trend toward the Integrated Digital Home Entertainment System continues. But I have a feeling that Moon know their market a lot better than I do and that the i-7 is going to find its own niche. Me, I'd go for the i-5 and live without the power, though I must add that I have not yet heard the latest version of that amp. But, as an amplifier for all seasons, the i-7 is strikingly competent and reasonable if not striking value for money. ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Dual mono integrated amplifier
Inputs:	4x single-ended (RCA), 1x balanced (XLR) 1x tape
Input sensitivity:	200mV
Outputs:	1x tape (RCA), 1x pre-out (RCA)
Output Power:	150 watts (8 Ohms) 250 watts (4 Ohms)
Weight:	23kg
Dimensions (WxHxD):	476 x 140 x 419mm
Price:	£4750.00

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# The VPI Super Scout Master and JMW 9.0 Signature Tonearm

by Roy Gregory

Lift the lid on an amplifier or a CD player and the interior is complex and confusing. Littered with components it's far from clear what they all do, in which order or how they contribute to the purpose as a whole. Even the relative simplicity of a valve amp is daunting to the uninitiated.

Not so turntables; few things in life are as conceptually simple or intuitive as the good old belt drive record player. Okay, so we might be a bit hazy on the inner workings of the pick-up cartridge, but the rest of it, that's child's play. There's a platter, supported on some sort of main bearing: There's a motor and belt to drive it: There's some sort of plinth to keep everything in the proper relationship, which may or may not include a suspension system. Hey, even the theory and design issues are straightforward, revolving around noise transmission and mechanical stability.

Of course, once you realise that there are so few basic parts in a turntable (something it's hard to miss if you manufacture them) making all the external dimensions and fixings the same between models immediately creates a kind of giant swap-shop in which simply exchanging one or more parts for the equivalent bits from the next model up the line creates an interim design. Suddenly, three models become five and you've discovered the holy grail of hi-fi marketing – upgradability. Indeed, so obvious is this that it's easier to list the manufacturers who haven't followed this path rather than those who have. Still, one of the

first was Harry Weisfeld, with both the HW19 and the original TNT. It's a concept that's still central to the range, with the Scout and the various steps to the Scout Master being the obvious example.

So, if it's all so obvious, how come the explanation? Well, as far as the Scout Master, everything is hunky dory – but right around there is where the train leaves the tracks. You see, the Super Scout Master (SSM) isn't so much the next

the various TNT models simply can't be shoe-horned into space left by the single motor pod that's used by the Scout and Master. The solution is simple; lop the side off the plinth so that the motor assembly can stand in free space. It's effective enough but pretty it definitely isn't, especially as the lump containing the motors and flywheel doesn't match the front-to-back dimension or height of the plinth. Instead it looks like exactly what it is – an afterthought. To compound things, the curtailed real estate on the left-hand side simply makes the space required by the arm on the right look unbalanced. No, I'm afraid that even its parents couldn't consider

the SSM a thing of beauty. However, looks aside, the ingredients are certainly promising. The motors, flywheel and SDS speed controller are drawn from the TNT, as is the thick acrylic platter (complete with peripheral clamp) and main bearing already "loaned" to the Scout Master. The constrained layer plinth and steel tipped conical feet that come from the Scout Master are simple but surprisingly effective, as is the underrated JMW 9.0 arm, supplied in this instance in its Signature edition.

The JMW arm fitted to the Scout and Scout Master started life as a chopped down and simplified version of the 10" and 12" versions of the JMW Memorial arm. Building the entry-level deck demanded significant savings in the cost of manufacturing the arm – hopefully without compromising performance too much. The original 9.0 used a shorter and far simpler arm-tube construction (one piece in place of three and the mixed materials of



step in a logical path of mix and match components; it's more of an identikit product, grafting the motor and flywheel assembly of the TNT onto the plinth and platter of the Scout Master. The question is does the rift in the mechanical progression produce something that clings to the performance shirttails of the more expensive models, or does it, like most identikits create a picture that never seems quite natural?

Well, on an aesthetic level at least the answer is clear. This could never be taken as anything other than the bastard child of two different product lines. The problem is that the oblong, twin-motor and central flywheel block that drives

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▶ the 10.5 and 12.5). The shorter effective length allowed a smaller plinth, whilst the termination box was now screwed directly to the deck, dispensing with the large metal base plate. The most obvious omission was the complex and precise VTA adjustment tower with its Vernier scale, replaced by a conventional post and collar arrangement, albeit with a threaded collar for height adjustment. Less apparent was the absence of the damping well around the pivot bearing, saving further machining cost. Despite the changes, the arm performed exceptionally well, the tube construction going on to feature in the 12.6. And there things might have stayed if it hadn't been for the SSM.

The Super Scout Master really originated when Harry Pearson wanted to know why he couldn't put the better motor from the HRX onto the Scout Master that had impressed him so much. Of course, the answer was simple, even if it did depart the rails of upgradeability, but the resultant hybrid found its way into the monster Sea Cliff system – where the 9.0 started to look a little out of its depth. The answer, given the physical constraints of the SSM plinth, was a beefed up 9" arm; thus was born the 9.0 Signature.

First up came Nordost Valhalla internal wiring for the arm and termination box, to match the rest of HP's system. This was installed in a new three-piece arm-wand assembly, combined with the deeper bearing housing, longer pivot and damping trough from the 10.5 and 12.5. The termination box was fixed to a simple plate out-rigger, allowing it to double

as a mount for an optional simple falling weight bias arrangement (for all those freaked out by the absence of conventional bias on the JMW arms). There's also a large diameter grub screw in the rear of the counter-weight stub that is used for making precise downforce



adjustments.

However, what comes as standard on all VPI arms is the excellent set of set-up tools, including a dedicated single point protractor and a light-weight alloy rod for judging azimuth. The end result in the case of the 9.0 Signature is an arm



which can be set-up and optimized with considerable precision in all regards, offers replaceable arm-wands and can be purchased for the very reasonable sum of £1450. The only thing missing is the VTA adjustment from the longer versions – which in price terms represents a step too far.

This really is a TNT writ small, the question is whether the differences in plinth material (the TNTs use either Acrylic or an Acrylic/ aluminium sandwich) and suspension will favour the flagship or the upstart – and to what extent?

Direct comparisons between the resident TNT6 and the SSM are not as easy as it might seem. Firstly,

there's the question of space; although the SSM is smaller in footprint than the TNT, small enough indeed to sit directly on the top shelf of the finite-element stand, small it is not, so with two

large decks at hand, real estate was at a premium. More importantly, as much as you can keep things identical in terms of support, cabling etc, the internal wiring of the 12" arm has inevitably had more use than that in the 9.0 Signature. Remember, this is Valhalla we're talking and that takes a lot of running in. Finally, in the absence of two £12K Koetsus (or any other suitable pair of cartridges) I had to swap the pick-up from arm-wand to arm-wand. Still, at least that eliminated the variation between cartridges...

So, let's cut to the chase. The SMS is not a TNT on the cheap; actually, it's not even that close. It simply can't match the scale, energy, focus and transparency of its big brother. Nor can it match the sense of life and enthusiasm that the big VPIs bring to their music making. But that's not the whole story and the bigger deck doesn't get things all its own way. In common with the Scout from which it grew there's a steadiness and confidence to the sound of the SSM, a quiet that brings a stable, unflustered quality to music. ▶

▶ In part, this is down to the deck's superb bass definition and separation, the one area in which it exceeds the TNT. Indeed, the sub-terranean intrusions that underpin the quieter moments in the Monteux Enigma are more readily heard and identified (as well as discarded) with the SSM. If it can't match the majestic power and energy of the 6, then it brings a stately calm to proceedings which is equally appealing.



A simple experiment leaving the 12.5's VTA at a single setting demonstrates the essential difference. Do so and you'll hear the individual character of the two decks; start to adjust the VTA on the 12.5 and suddenly the Elgar has you conducting along, Nanci Griffiths' Storms has seasoned listeners wanting to know where they can get a copy. And that's what a really great system should be about – the difference between music and a performance that simply immerses your senses and sucks you in.

The Super Scout Master offers a definite step up

sonic signature. (Either that or the new Skala and a Dorian Mono plus a spare tube, if that's the way your tastes lie...)  
Frankly, if you want the biggest sonic bang you can get for your buck, then look no further.

But for the true vinyl addict the SSM's importance lies in highlighting the added elegance and sonic benefits that come from the full-blown TNT. There will always be those who can't help themselves, the ones who can't see a dustsheet without wanting to know what's under it. For them the decision is equally clear except for one thing; how about a full TNT with a constrained layer chassis? Don't fret, it already exists, it's called the HRX and in its latest guise it really does offer more than the best of both worlds. ▶+

The Super Scout Master also has a fuller and weightier sound, a little warmer and rounder, which contrasts with the slightly hollow transparency that comes with an all plastic deck. Indeed, there's much to like and nothing to dislike in the delivery from this table. I preferred the arm used with minimal anti-skate (no weight) which helped focus the image a little, without blurring, sitting on or smudging the low-frequencies. Likewise, I preferred the peripheral clamp alone, without the central record weight, which brought the best balance of transparency and mid-band life. Used with care and with time spent on the cartridge set-up, the SSM will teach a good many far more expensive decks a trick or two.

So, thus far honours might be considered even, except for one thing. So much of the TNT6's life and energy, focus and transparency are tied to its ability to adjust VTA so precisely and repeatably on a record by record basis. There's also the open, low tracing distortion benefits of the 12" arm to consider, an option that's not available on the SSM at present. In practice, these things more than tip the balance.

in performance from the decks below it in the range. The combination of its constrained layer plinth and the Signature version of the arm deliver superb low-frequencies and low colouration sound. The resolution and textural information delivered by the better arm are particularly worthwhile – but there's the rub. The clear benefits of the 9.0 Signature merely lead inexorably towards the 12.5 or its shorter 10.5 relation. Drop the tracing distortion, optimize the VTA and suddenly you've got the last two pieces in the jigsaw and the whole picture is musically complete.

Which leaves the SSM in a slightly unusual position. It's an evolutionary dead-end that none the less offers superb value for money in performance terms. At £3000 less than a TNT6/JMW12.5 that's a huge monetary saving and many will take one look at the sums and draw their own conclusion. After all, that price difference will buy you a Lyra Titan i, a cartridge which offers an almost preternatural match for the SSM's

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Belt-drive record player with twin motors and flywheel
Bearing Type:	Inverted with Teflon thrust pad
Speeds:	User variable via SDS electronic supply.
Clamps:	Peripheral clamp plus record weight.
Dimensions (WxHxD):	565 x 210 x 355mm
Tonearm:	JMW 9.0 Signature
Effective Mass:	8.1g
Wiring:	Nordost Valhalla
Interchangeable Arm-tubes:	Yes
Prices –	
Super Scout Master:	£4995 inc tonearm
JMW 9.0 Signature:	£1450
Spare Arm-tube:	£700

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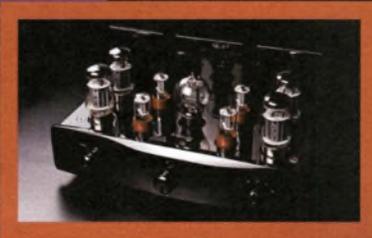


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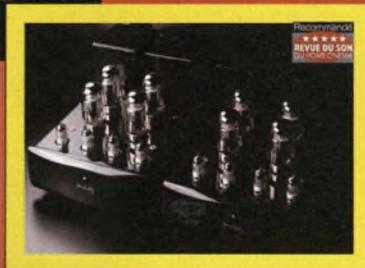


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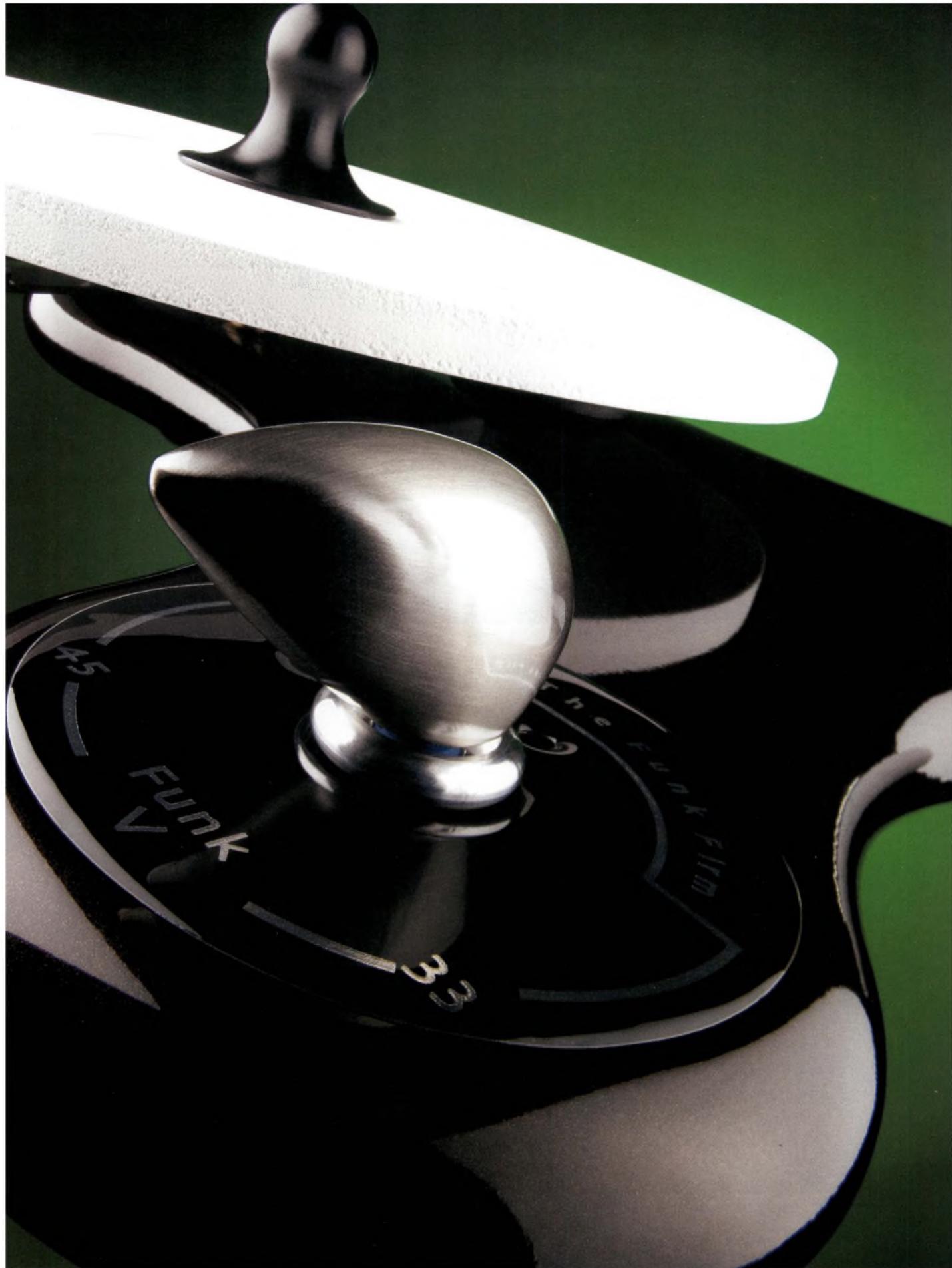


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# The Funk V turntable and Rega RB300 tonearm

by Jason Kennedy

When I was wandering the busy corridors of the Bristol show last year I came across a room with no music playing and one of the most bizarre looking turntables I've encountered. I suppose it shouldn't have come as a surprise to find that this oddball design should have had something to do with Arthur Koubesserian, one half of the team that used to make Pink Triangle products in the eighties and nineties. Since PT's demise he clearly hasn't been sitting on his backside, instead coming up with yet another new angle on the age-old problem of getting more information out of a vinyl groove. He jokingly claimed to have gone to the top of the mountain and meditated until the ideas behind the Funk came to him, so perhaps he was sitting on his arse after all. Still the result while hardly convincing to look at is in fact quite startling in its ability to extract music from a vinyl LP.

To be honest, at the time I wished him luck and left things at that, but later in the year I was commissioned to review this turntable, one of two that were advertised by Arthur, the other being the basic Funk model. When I called him up to see if I could get a sample production was not quite up and running, Bristol it seems, was a toe in the water for Funk, to see whether there was any point in turning the ideas into a commercial product. Arthur says he was overwhelmed by the support and encouragement he received and so by late last year the basic Funk was available. Not the V or Vector version though, that has only recently been finalised.

The basic Funk looks very rudimentary; in fact it looks much like

the Vector, a weirdly shaped piece of MDF supported on white plastic ball feet and matching on/off/speed switch with a bearing, sub platter and white platter next to a motor. My sample had a Rega RB250 of indeterminate vintage with a dodgy plug connection. Not very inspiring, until you put a cartridge on it and played some records. Which was very inspiring, thrilling in fact.

There are a number of reasons for this, the most significant being that white platter that Funk has dubbed Achroplat – after achromatic, which



means colourless.

This is made of expanded polyvinyl, or vinyl as we know it. Yes, the same stuff used to make the LPs it spins but in an aerated form so that the platter weighs 340grams, which is less than three regular LPs. This low mass combined with a belt drive that is run as loosely as is practical means that the Funk is not relying on inertia to maintain speed stability. Rather, with the combination of a Pink Triangle style DC motor and a similarly influenced inverted sapphire bearing it is designed to offer the minimum potential for energy storage.

These parts when combined with that weird plinth and its Sorbothane damped feet makes for an exceptionally dynamic sounding turntable, one that is

more than a little reminiscent of acrylic-plattered designs from PT and others back in the day. Expanded vinyl is softer than acrylic however so the resulting sound avoids the rather lively character of that material. There are similarities to be sure but vinyl in this form is clearly a more neutral and even sounding material.

The Funk V is essentially the same as a Funk except for the inclusion of the so-called Vector drive system, this consists of a pair of pulleys placed

asymmetrically around the acrylic sub-platter. These tension the belt so that it drives the sub-platter in three places rather than wrapping around most of it as is the case with a normal belt drive. Arthur's reasoning for this is that a normal motor and pulley arrangement will pull the bearing toward the motor and any deviation from true in the bearing will cause the whole platter to move back and forth by a very small amount. Though small this deviation will be greater than those found in the ▶

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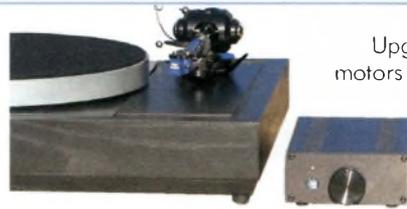
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▶ groove wall, often significantly so and is therefore 'a bad thing'.

In the base model, Funk try to minimise this with low belt tension but the triple pulley Vector drive balances the drive system rather more effectively. It's not dissimilar in theory to the three motor design espoused by Voyd except that Arthur considers the multi-motor route to be all wrong; but then he was never one to follow other turntable makers' leads.

Speed selection and control is electronic and trimmable; remove the little plugs next to the on/off switch and you can make fine adjustments to the RPM. I found that both speeds needed a little tweak on the sample supplied. The Funk V does have some other differences to make up for its c£300 price increase over the plain Funk. The Achroplat

for instance is dished and supplied with a screw on clamp which despite its fine pitch thread is easy to use thanks to its highly ergonomic shape. The plinth is finished in a metallic paint finish and the feet are transparent rather than white which makes a big aesthetic difference and stops you thinking that they are cheap door handles. They are still inclined to sit at odd angles because the Sorbothane bed between foot and plinth is pretty soft but Funk has come up with the idea of using O rings to seat them vertically which work well. Another aesthetic upgrade is the speed/off switch, which is metal and slightly pointy with a distinct similarity to one of Phillipe Starck's designs, but there's nowt wrong with that. What could be aggravating is the proximity of this knob to the vulnerable dangly bits of a cartridge. Make sure you set up the arm so that the cantilever is close to the platter to minimise any danger of the two coming into contact.

On the arm front the Funk is cut for Rega tonearms and can be purchased with an RB300 onboard for £950, or you can take the deck alone and fit an alternative arm. I got remarkable results from the old RB250 on the Funk and better ones with the RB300 on the V so my advice is stick with this option unless you can afford an RB700 or RB1000. It might seem silly in price terms but the deck warrants this sort of silliness and more. If you do go for the standard arm option Funk supplies a threaded collar which allows VTA adjustment and is a real boon for



those that use anything taller than a Rega cartridge – ie. anything that's not a Rega cartridge.

With the original Funk I kicked things off with the Denon DL103 supplied and got results that suggested that the needle was the limiting factor, so I put on a van den Hul DDT moving-coil, which sounded a lot better but gave the same impression of creating a sound quality ceiling. So I threw the works at it in the form of the vdH Condor and Cartridge Man Isolator from my reference turntable. This meant jacking the arm up as high as it would go and hanging the counterweight on by its fingernails but it did the trick in spectacular fashion.

Mentioning this cartridge choice in my original review led to criticisms that I had gone over the top, which on paper I had – the Funk costs £450, the Condor £2,750. But this meant that I knew what

the turntable and arm were contributing and I wasn't limiting the deck's potential. For this review I cut straight to the chase and put the same needle on and had to go to the same lengths with set up. Maybe a heavier counterweight would be useful!

The result this time around is decidedly more sophisticated. The Vector drive and clamp eliminate spurious energy in the drive system and the vinyl being

played which makes for a calmer and more resolute

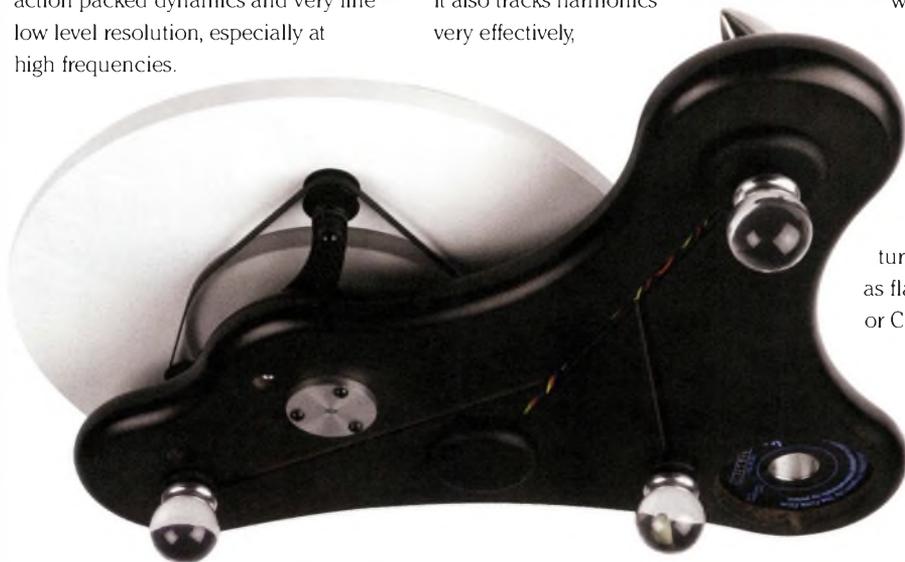
result. It's not as exciting

as the Funk but you can hear more and get the impression that what you are hearing is more to do with the groove walls than the playback system.

I should point out that despite the generous lumps of Sorbothane between feet and plinth and the way that the plinth's shape is designed to keep the bearing at the point of minimum resonance, this turntable requires good isolation to give of its best. This is true of most turntables of course but those with a solid plinth are more easily upset than their suspended cousins. I put the Funk V on a very floaty Townshend Seismic stand, the original hanging variety with air cells. On the later, stiffer version of this stand you can hear the effects of the nearby B&W 802D loudspeaker rather clearly, which is hardly surprising, ▶

▶ so if you intend to site this turntable and a speaker in close proximity (which is not a good idea but reviewing doesn't always encourage best practice) make sure you have a well isolated platform for it.

Under these circumstances the V turned in a gripping and highly revealing performance with every LP I clamped onto it. This is because it manages to combine calmness and assurance with action packed dynamics and very fine low level resolution, especially at high frequencies.



What you hear is big differences in the scale of individual instruments within a mix. With Keith Jarrett's *Eyes of the Heart* album the saxophone and drums have a much bigger sound than the piano, while the audience's applause is very distinct in character, revealing the scale of the auditorium. I've not encountered these contrasts before which suggests that the V digs good and deep into the groove. It also tracks harmonics very effectively,

and earthy, so much so that you get a sense of being behind the control desk— even though I don't play that loud most days.

As I was unable to fit my reference arm (SME Series V) it is difficult to say how much the V would be improved by something more ambitious than an RB300. It's a great arm for the price but I suspect that something like an RB1000 or even a Hadcock 242 would deliver greater resolution in terms of image solidity and bass power.

But given the sub £1,000 price of this combination without cartridge it has to represent about the best value for money on the current turntable market. It might not look as flash as some-thing from Michell or Clearaudio but it is nothing if not funky and if it's results you are after the Funk V is a tough deck to beat, perhaps the toughest.



It doesn't have the bass weight of heavier plattered designs but makes up for this with articulation and timbre at low frequencies that lets you hear precisely how an instrument is being played and what its character is. The pregnant note that Jaco Pastorius lets rip on the Overture to 'Cotton Avenue' (Joni Mitchell – *Don Jaun's Reckless Daughter*) is as fulsome, ripe and sonorous as you could ask for. It does low, heavy bass when a synth or similar produces the stuff but it doesn't make a big deal about it – you are encouraged to listen to the playing rather than the sound. This could be interpreted as saying that it's musical but not revealing but somehow it manages to be both thanks to a lightness of touch that is the result of the lightness of platter and the smoothness of drive.

the way that they seem to ring on unhindered and decay clearly and naturally is highly convincing. The music of John Fahey for instance manages to create a story that is rich in both joy and melancholy without words or images in the Funk's capable hands.

Another surprising contrast is the change in level across the tracks on Tom Waits' *Swordfish Trombones*, an album on which the lyrics became that bit more intelligible with the V. The chorus from the song '16 Shells From A 30.6' still doesn't sound the way it reads but if you read the lyric sheet it turns out that they read 'ought' rather than point (.), and that's the way it sounds (so no surprises there then - Ed.).

Taj Mahal's *Recylin the Blues...* (Pure Pleasure's remarkable pressing) delivers extremely well spaced out and separated sound that is unusually clear

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Speeds:	33/45 electronically switched
Drive System:	DC motor with additional Vector Drive pulleys
Suspension:	Sorbothane
Power supply:	Wall wart
Platter:	Dished polyvinyl with clamp
Cover:	Optional
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 115 x 335mm
Finishes:	Burgundy laquer
Prices:	
Funk V	£760
RB300	£190
VTA adjuster	£30

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# The Vienna Acoustics Beethoven Concert Grand Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

Vienna Acoustics has contributed just three models to the thousand or so speaker reviews that have accumulated in my computer's memory over the past decade and a half. I therefore had very little previous with this Austrian speaker brand, but that's partly because the company only started up at the end of the 1980s, and didn't arrive in Britain until ten years later.

Furthermore, the three which I have tried gave somewhat mixed results. The Bach and Mozart models, belonging to the same series as this Beethoven Concert Grand, were noteworthy for combining delicious cabinetwork alongside a decidedly laid back presentation. From a very different series of Vienna models, based around highly distinctive, imaginatively shaped and rather effective alloy enclosures, the Schonberg model gave a decent account of itself, but is clearly aimed more at those putting together silver-finished AV packages.

Recently, US distributor Sumiko (responsible for REL and Vienna in the States) acquired the UK sub maker. So, it seemed logical to reverse engineer a few of their distribution deals, meaning that REL are now the UK distributors for Vienna, which with Sumiko's muscle behind them should raise their profile a bit.

Although there are two still larger models in the catalogue, this Beethoven Concert Grand sits well up towards the top of the Vienna ladder. The standard version, available in three finishes (cherry, as reviewed, maple or piano lacquer black), costs a substantial \$2,995/pair; rosewood is available for an extra £300. The highest standards of craftsmanship are evident in both the beautifully figured veneer itself, and the

layers of lacquer laid on top to give the final lustrous finish. Furthermore, the techniques used to achieve subtly radiused front and rear edges, which will have acoustic as well as aesthetic benefits, is further evidence of the quality of workmanship. The phrase 'top quality real wood veneer' appears so often in speaker reviews it has become something of a cliché, but few deserve it more than Vienna Acoustics.

Veneer is applied to all six faces; all five drivers are flush mounted into the front panel; and the grille is held by some very discrete sockets.

Although the speaker arguably looks best with its grille removed, the latter's aluminium alloy frame incorporates a central spine which is bound to – and indeed intended to – modify the acoustic performance somewhat, especially the tweeter dispersion. The enclosure construction sandwiches a relatively deep side/top/base wrap between two slim but very hefty front and back panels, each nearly two inches thick, and with several extra internal braces, turning the scales to a substantial 33kg, the whole thing feels exceptionally solidly built. Physical stability is one potential problem with all slim, tall floorstanders, and the preferred solution is usually some form of plinth to extend the spike footprint. Vienna Acoustics has its own variation on the theme, using two solid yet compact castings per speaker, one across the front and the

other across the rear. Each provides a solid mounting for two massive and easily adjustable spikes, though regrettably there's no attempt to include lock-nuts here.

This is a full three-way design, achieving a generous bass cone area while keeping the front view fashionably slim through the sensible expedient of using three matching bass units. Although these drivers are identical, the loading arrangements are arranged to avoid generating major internal standing waves by subdividing the bass enclosure so the lower enclosure, half the size of the upper one, loads just the lowest driver; each sub-enclosure has its own reflex port. A slightly smaller driver with different plastics cone formulation and construction is situated above the bass array and below the fabric dome tweeter that appropriately sits bang on seated ear height.

Vienna's designer Peter Gansterer believes that the cone is the most important part of a drive unit, and his proprietary cone technologies use clear plastics throughout, claiming that the current mixtures offer: "marvellous midrange clarity without any hardness". The bass driver cones, developed using finite element analysis, are mostly TPX compound stiffened by a series of radial ribs, and known as 'spider-cones' because of their web-like appearance. The midrange cone, dubbed X3P, combines some TPX with three kinds of polypropylene. The cones themselves are fabricated in Austria, but shipped to Norwegian OEM driver specialist SEAS, which then builds them into drivers. SEAS also supply the tweeters, which are a



▷ specified variation on the D29 theme.

Top quality components are used in a crossover network that is deliberately kept as simple as feasible, favouring first-order (6dB/octave) slopes where possible, up to second-order Bessel if necessary. In fact the Beethoven's bass drivers are rolled off (low-pass) at 12dB/octave; the midrange rolls on (high-pass) at 6dB/oct, and off (low-pass) at 9dB/oct; a 12dB/oct filter feeds the tweeter.

Peter stresses that his main design priorities are naturalness, homogeneity and musicality, and that measured performance – a particularly useful tool at the beginning of driver development – takes a lower priority when creating and finalising a complete speaker system. A key manufacturing priority is to ensure that production samples are as close to the original development reference as possible, which involves painstaking measuring and pair-matching at a component level. All components are compared to known references based on the original prototype design references, and once the complete speaker has been built, it too is compared directly to a reference standard.

The description of how the tweeters were pair-matched took me right back to my first job in the hi-fi industry, when I joined Spendor some thirty years ago. Spendor's main task was building accurate monitors for a very picky broadcast industry, and one of my early jobs was measuring and pairing the Celestion HF1300 tweeters the company was then using, and grading them precisely for sensitivity. Each pair was then partnered with a pair of crossover networks with the correct matching

autochokes to suit that sensitivity and ensure accurate crossover transition. Vienna Acoustics is clearly adopting a remarkably similar approach in seeking to achieve a similar degree of rigorous production consistency.

I've also heard that the company supplies superb after-sales support for all its customers, which is a further bonus, though no reviewer is equipped to evaluate this part of the operation of course. While I can't comment on the after-sales service, I have to say that the pre-review service was first class, as the speakers were delivered by Sumiko/REL's owner John Hunter, who took great pains to adjust the precise positioning of the speakers for optimum performance in my room.

He certainly did his best, even though he eventually admitted he wasn't entirely happy with the end result, but I have to say the speakers worked very well in the positions he chose, even though these were not too dissimilar to where I normally place speakers – just a couple of feet wider apart, and a few inches closer to the wall. Interestingly, and perhaps significantly, the

speaker positions John Hunter chose were very similar to those selected by Bosendorfer designer Hans Deutsch when setting up his VC-1s a year or so previously.

John might not have been entirely happy with his set-up, but the in-room-averaged measurements that I subsequently made only served to confirm that he'd done a rather good job of finding the locations that gave the most even bass delivery. The Beethoven Grand Concert is by no means the flattest or most neutral speaker I've either measured or auditioned, but it does

have important strengths nonetheless. In basic tonal balance terms the bass end goes very deep (-6dB at 20Hz) and is notably even with it, if not particularly smooth. In fact, barring the odd peak or trough, the balance is impressively flat all the way up to 1.3kHz. Above that point, however, there's a quite abrupt drop of about 4dB when measured under far field conditions. The presence and lower

treble, from 1.5kHz up to 5kHz, is arguably a little too restrained, though above that point there's a slight recovery. Despite this anomalous feature, the top end as a whole is again usefully smooth and even. Although the measured far field balance doesn't tell the whole story by any means, it does explain at least some of the BCG's character, and while some might find the significant presence restraint a little frustrating, others will probably welcome the lack of aggression this feature brings to the overall sound.

If you like the sort of speakers which bring a bit of bite and attack to the party, this is probably not the best choice; if you like your music lush, warm, laid back and beautifully enveloping, this could well be the perfect choice.

For the record, the measurements also reveal a sensitivity of around 90dB, which is a thoroughly respectable figure, but also one that's rather compromised by a load that is low throughout the bass region, and dips briefly below 3 ohms at around 90Hz. Clearly, an amplifier with ample current reserves is preferable here, and one should exercise



▶ suck-it-and-see caution if contemplating using valve power amplification.

The two adjectives that best sum up the sound of the Beethoven Concert Grand are 'delicious' and 'relaxing'. Surprisingly perhaps, given its very restrained presence, this speaker doesn't sound particularly or obviously 'shut in', though I did find it necessary to turn up the volume a little higher than normal when listening to speech. This factor seems altogether more positive with musical sources, helping to mollify the unwelcome effects of over-close-miking that's all too common in commercial recording practices, and delivering choral works with a spacious airiness that was positively magical.

A key factor in this lovely spaciousness is a superb freedom from boxy colorations, indicative of the painstaking care that has gone into the enclosure construction. Furthermore, slim enclosures not only look good, they also help promote wide and spacious imaging with good focus and depth perspectives, and that's very much the case here. Besides their delicately beautiful physical appearance, these speakers do a remarkable job of simply disappearing from the acoustic soundstage, so that one is quite unaware of their exact locations.

Another acid test of a high quality speaker is an ability to play both softly and loudly with neither fear nor favour, and again the Beethoven Concert Grand proved exceptionally able. Laid back speakers tend to sound most convincing when playing at highish levels, as they avoid the aggressive nature of more forward

designs, and often fall short when asked to play whisper-quietly at 3am. The BCG showed no such favouritism. It deftly avoids aggressive tendencies when working hard, yet is equally happy maintaining full detail when competing head on with the dawn chorus. Even applause continued to sound realistic when the volume was at rock bottom.

Immediately prior to installing the BCGs, I'd spent some



days enjoying a pair of B&W's magnificent and much more costly 800Ds. While the comparison did reveal some limitations in the Vienna model, most obviously in some lack of grip and dynamic tension in the nether regions, and in bottom end weight and drive in general, this very stern comparison also confirmed how good the BCG was in nearly every other aspect of performance.

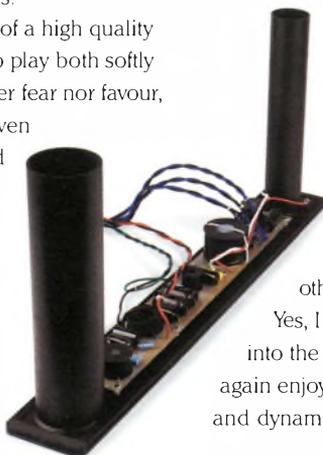
Yes, I will bring the 800Ds back into the listening room soon, and again enjoy their tremendous authority and dynamic range, especially with

rock and dance material. But I'm not rushing to do so, simply because I'm finding the Beethoven Concert Grands such a relaxing and down-right enjoyable experience, especially with classical and acoustic material. When playing Radio 3, for example, their sheer delicacy and sumptuous sweetness is both inviting and immensely involving, and their tonality has an essential rightness that's thoroughly convincing. While some may well find the BCG a little too restrained and polite for their personal taste, many more will discover that its good-mannered acoustic and physical presentation is accompanied by an innate and immensely appealing musical literacy.

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	3-way floorstanding loudspeaker
Drivers:	3x 7-inch bass, XPP 'spidercones' 1x 6-inch midrange, X3P cone 1x1.1-inch hand-coated VA silk dome
Impedance:	4 Ohms
Sensitivity:	90dB measured (2.83V)
Bandwidth:	28Hz - 22kHz
Crossover:	3-way, 6dB and 12dB Bessel 1% tolerance MKP capacitors Air-core 0.7% tolerance mid/tweeter coils Powder-core bass coils 1% tolerance metal film inductance free resistors
Finishes:	Piano Lacquer black, Cherry, Maple or Rosewood (€300 extra) real wood veneers
Dimensions (WxHxD):	190x1130x400mm
Footprint:	240x450mm
Weight:	33 kg
Price:	£2995/pair

**UK Distributor:**  
REL Acoustics  
Tel. (44)(0)1656 768777  
Net. [www.vienna-acoustics.com](http://www.vienna-acoustics.com)



consonance

Reference CD-2.2

B-49.13

# Opera Audio Consonance Reference CD 2.2 Linear CD Player

by Jimmy Hughes

I've already reported favourably on the amazingly affordable Opera Audio Consonance CD Linear 120, finding it alluringly subtle and very easy on the ear, yet deceptively detailed and surprisingly revealing. Since then, I have to confess to a brief but exciting Prescott style fling with the mega-expensive Jadis JD-3 – an impressively dynamic and detailed CD player that really had me sitting on the edge of my seat.

The Jadis won't be to all tastes, but if orgasmic excitement and impact are your bag, this really is some CD player. May I also publicly state that, after this sordid but deeply exciting affair, my wife is standing by me during this difficult personal moment in our relationship. Indeed, at this very moment she's not just standing by me, but standing on my head with a massive pair of Doc Martens adorning her dainty feet....

In essence, the Reference CD 2.2 Linear carries on from where the CD Linear 120 left off. Both have the choice of 44.1kHz or 88.2kHz sampling, and dispense with the digital anti-aliasing filter on the basis that the cure is worse than the disease. Sonically they're alike, in so far as both players produce a smooth well-balanced neutral sort of presentation with good definition and detail. By the way, there are two other CD players in the Opera Audio Consonance range – both helpfully called 2.2. However, these are 24bit 196kHz up-sampling models and are quite different to the Reference CD 2.2 linear reviewed here.

I liked this player for its velvety smoothness. The brilliance and sheer visceral impact of the Jadis is not

offered, yet (curiously) neither is it missed. The CD 2.2 Linear is a CD player for those wanting refinement and unexaggerated naturalness above all other considerations. It's perfect for naturally recorded Classical and Jazz. Which isn't to say its presentation lacks drive or impact – on the right recordings the sound will be strongly projected and powerful, but such qualities won't be grafted on to the music by the CD player.



Going from the Linear 120 to the Reference 2.2 Linear, I was initially struck by their similarities rather than their differences. Both offer clear well-balanced sound that's smooth, natural, and very true to life. There's nothing flash or exaggerated about the presentation. However, the Reference CD 2.2 Linear seems to offer greater texture and separation. I immediately noticed this while playing a recording of a piano trio; the violin and cello had greater substance and a more full-bodied yet sinuous tone quality. The two string instruments sounded cleaner with greater presence and superior projection.

There was a better sense of the individual tonality of the violin and cello – a greater feeling of bows being drawn across strings – creating a more vivid and palpable sonic impression of real instruments playing in a real space. Although the piano had the dominant part, you could hear the two string instruments come and go as dynamic levels fluctuated. Very impressive! But more impressive was the manner in which detail was revealed - without undue emphasis or exaggeration. Here is a player that gives you the music cleanly and honestly, without over-dramatising things.

This, it seems to me, is the hallmark of the Reference CD 2.2 Linear. It's not perhaps a player that immediately knocks you sideways. Rather, it caresses and beguiles the ear in ways that are both informative and seductive. The sound is very natural and unexaggerated, very pure and refined. Clarity seems to be greater than the CD Linear 120. There seems to be more space around voices and instruments, creating a greater sense of depth. It's smoother and cleaner too. But it's an inner clarity, rather than detail being thrust at you.

While the Reference CD 2.2 Linear's musical presentation was not as obviously dramatic and exciting as that of the Jadis, it wasn't lacking in dynamic incident. The C2.2's dynamics may appear to be of a subtler less assertive kind, but the gradation of fine contrasts and delicate tonal hues points to its thoroughbred qualities. The CD 2.2 is a very musical player – very easy to listen to, and extremely

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▶ enjoyable. It's deceptively detailed and informative because everything sounds so natural and relaxed. But don't let this fool you into thinking the presentation is bland or lacking in real detail.

As befits a more expensive player, the CD 2.2 is better built and more lavishly styled than the CD Linear 120. You get the Cherry wood slats on the top, and a slightly thicker front panel.



And then there are the two large chrome knobs on the front panel. What a surprise! These work in Joystick fashion. To be honest, when I first got the player, I actually wondered if these wibbly-wobbly knobs had been damaged in transit. I expected them to turn; instead, they rock up and down and side to side! I can't say I like the arrangement – it feels a bit crude – but it works well enough, and you can always operate the player via its remote handset

The transport sometimes sounded a bit clunky, making a rattling noise as though the disc hadn't quite seated itself properly. You've also got to be carefully when loading the disc, as a light touch on the loading tray causes it to close – and close rather quickly! Once the disc is seated, the transport seems pretty quiet – there's just a barely audible whirr as the disc spins.

Looking inside, internal build quality is very good, and the player is logically laid out with the power supply on one

side, the audio section on the other, and the transport in the centre. Although essentially a solid-state player, there is a single Sovtek C6H30 valve for the analogue output stage. D/A converter chip is a TDA1543. In terms of start time and track access, the player is averagely responsive; the CD 2.2 Linear is a machine built for comfort rather than speed. There's provision to dim or switch off the player's illuminated display.

otherwise features and facilities are pretty basic.

Actually, there were two reasons I took the top off the player; the first (obviously) was to inspect build quality, the second was to investigate a problem that kept occurring after about 45 minutes of use. Basically there was a hissing/rustling sort of sound from the left channel. It would start fairly quietly and slowly build up. Eventually the music would all but disintegrate, sounding like a badly worn LP played with a blunt pin. After a further 10 or 15 minutes the noise would be so bad it was impossible to ignore - you'd have to turn the player off.

It sounded suspiciously like a dry joint. So I had a quick poke around to see if I could locate the component giving trouble. Alas, no luck. But I did notice two things. The first – sod's law! – was that the noise miraculously

disappeared with the top off – indicating that the cause of the problem was heat build up. No matter how I prodded and poked, the hissing noise could not be induced. I've since established that the problem is definitely heat related; possibly the valve is playing up when it reaches a certain temperature and a replacement would cure the noise.

The second thing I noticed was that the player sounded even better with the top off! The music was slightly freer - more open and relaxed sounding - with better definition and detail.

The chassis and top of the Reference CD 2.2 Linear are made from aluminium, and this is known to be less prone to eddy-current effects compared with a chassis made from steel. But it's still a metal chassis, and obviously it still has some effect on things – albeit slight. Because of the noise problem outlined, I ended up using my review sample minus its top.

However I don't suggest you try this at home kids, as doing so exposes the insides (and yourself) to risk of electric shock and possible death. This noise issue aside, the sound produced by the player was very very good. I really liked the creamy smooth refined presentation of the Reference CD 2.2 Linear. Playing Nikolaus Harnoncourt's Teldec recordings of Handel's *Opera Saul*, the lovely openness and neutrality of the player really helped with this rather closed-in and slightly boxy Live recording.

I don't think I'd ever heard it sound so beautiful and natural. The voices still had a slightly backward placement in the soundstage, but it just sounded as though the hall acoustics were ▶

▶ colouring the sound – not the equipment. More to the point, the musical presentation was very convincing overall. With opera, there can be a tendency just to listen to the individual voices. But, with the Reference CD 2.2 Linear, the voices were not simply backed by orchestral instruments; the orchestra was very much an instrumental voice behind the vocal line – harmonising it exquisitely.

Another recording that benefited from the Reference CD 2.2 Linear's openness and neutrality – also on Teldec -

was the set of Mozart piano concertos with Daniel Barenboim and the Berlin Philharmonic. Now these have a fairly full/dark slightly 'thick' sort of sound, without much transparency. The orchestra is warm but recessed, without much bite or brilliance. The Reference CD 2.2 Linear did not change the basic presentation as such, but seemed to open-up what had previously been rather thick/dense textures.

It was almost as though the recording was being illuminated from within – if that makes sense. Strings and winds positively glowed, sounding luminous yet sweet and honeyed. I'd never have believed these recordings could be transformed like this. By comparison, The CD Linear 120 was less noticeably transparent and refined – in particular, the upper partials of the violins sounded a tad thinner and more exposed. The Jadis JD-3 worked differently; metaphorically flooding the

sound with light to brighten-up dull textures. Very impressive! But what I liked about the Reference CD 2.2 was the way it retained the essential qualities of the Barenboim Mozart recordings while minimising what might be seen as their limitations.

In the case of the Barenboim/Mozart set – certainly, with the later more symphonic concertos - it sounds to me as though the orchestra used was fairly big, with a reasonably large body of strings. So the sound in the hall



would have been fairly dense. If you're going to reproduce the original sound accurately you need to suggest this, and not make it sound as though it's just a handful of players using bright-sounding Period instruments. This the Reference CD 2.2 Linear did - with considerable distinction.

When I originally started auditioning the Reference CD 2.2 Linear, I wasn't initially convinced it was that much better than the cheaper CD linear 120. It sounded good, but I wasn't bowled over by it as I was with the Jadis JD3. However, the more I listened, the more obvious it became that the Reference CD 2.2 Linear did produce significantly better results than the CD Linear 120. To prove it, just live with the Reference

CD 2.2 Linear for a few days, get used to it, then go back to the CD Linear 120 – No Contest!

While superficially the two players appear to offer a similar sort of overall presentation (smooth, natural, and well-balanced) the Reference CD 2.2 is even clearer and more transparent, with better fine detail and a greater sense of ambience and space. It's cleaner too, with less high frequency edge and hash. You especially notice this on massed violins, which have a greater homogeneity and tonal allure when heard via this CD player. You get a better sense of the body of sound

– not just the bass and treble extremes.

A really good CD player then – one to marry rather than have a fling with. For me, the Reference CD 2.2 Linear's greatest strength is its sheer easy, unexaggerated naturalness – it does its job effortlessly well. So well, you hardly notice the mechanics of reproduction. In this sense it's very analogue – even more so than the excellent CD Linear 120. ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	CD player with no brick wall filter and tube analogue output stage.
Tube Complement:	1x C6H30
Sampling Rate:	44.1 or 88.2kHz
Outputs:	1pr single-ended RCA 1x co-axial digital RCA
Output Level:	2.35v
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 210 x 33mm
Weight:	16Kg
Finish:	As shown
Price:	£1395

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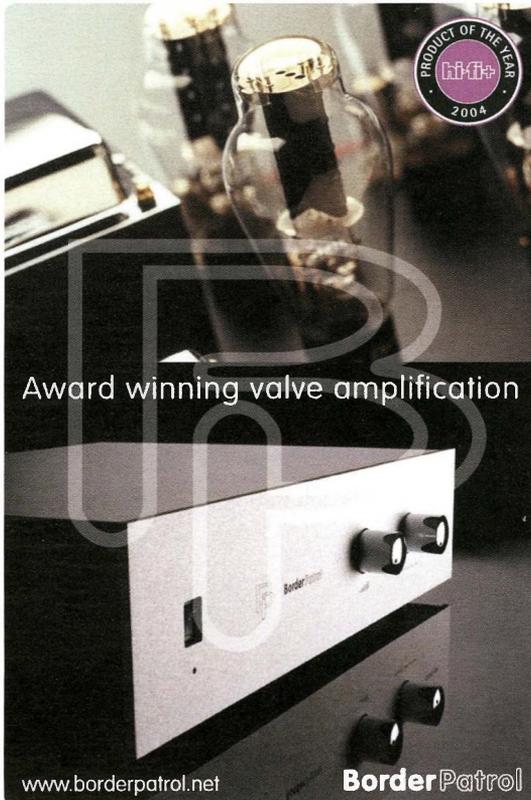


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# Cambridge Audio Azur 640C v2 CD Player

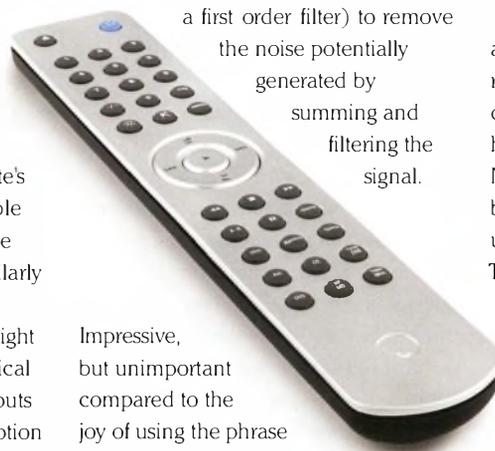
by Alan Sircom

In the online world, there are CD players, and there are CD players. Those that get all the praise are invariably budget models with a bit of clever that loft the player into the region of the Something Special. So it is with the Cambridge Audio Azur 640C v2.

Looking absolutely identical to its predecessor from the outside, this is every inch the budget player. Costing £250, the company has wisely eschewed mug's eye-fu two-foot-thick front panels, 'nuff gold and all that *Pimp My CD* nonsense. The solid aluminium front panel – black in this case, with the obligatory optional silver – is basic, but clearly laid out and functional. The navigator-style remote's easy to use and the freshly-dimmable LCD readout is simple, but none the worse for that. The back panel's similarly utilitarian, with nary a superfluous digital input or balanced output in sight (although there are coaxial and optical digital outputs, as well as control inputs and outputs, making this an ideal option for Cambridge Audio's multi-room minded approach).

Forget the exterior, though; that's unimportant. It's what's inside that gets all the credit. Under the hood are a pair of Wolfson 24-bit, 192kHz digital converters. Read that back again... a pair of Wolfson WM8749 DACs. In a player costing £250, not £1,250. The previous model was impressive enough with just one Wolfson converter for the money. The DACs operate in dual-differential mode, which is like balanced operation for ones and zeros, designed to improve channel separation and widen the signal/noise ratio. This is also the sort of layout usually seen in players costing several times the asking price of the Azur, so the slightly awe inducing effect of the discovery of a pair of DACs is entirely understandable.

In fact, although there are no balanced outputs on the back panel, the layout of the 640C v2 is essentially balanced, using what Cambridge calls a 'four pole dual differential double virtual earth balanced topology'. What this means in real terms is the DAC for each channel delivers a pair of fully balanced outputs, which are summed and put through a third-order filter stage to almost totally eliminate noise and then filtered once more (through a first order filter) to remove the noise potentially generated by summing and filtering the signal.



Impressive, but unimportant compared to the joy of using the phrase 'four pole dual differential double virtual earth balanced topology' as a forfeit in a drinking game.

This is not the only high-end touch at a low-end price. There's a toroidal transformer inside the case, something not often seen in players this side of a grand. There's also an impressively low resonance, acoustically damped chassis; not quite to the level of Arcam's Stealth Mat, but unexpected at the price. It even sports a custom designed servo mechanism, which helps keep the player whisper quiet, except for a brief high-pitched whine when changing tracks.

But the real reason for any internet legend isn't impressive tech or even more impressive technobabble. It's giant-killing sound. Or, at least, perceived giant-killing sound, because there are times when products are not as good

as their reputation. No worries here, though. This lives up to the rap sheet. And then some.

This is one of those CD playing bargains that sticks a broad grin on your face. You can't separate the price from the product, because every time you listen to it, the words "what a bargain!" form in your head or on your notepad. "Punches above its weight" also appears as if by magic. And both are entirely true.

This is a very fluid, articulate and analytical player, one that needs a good run in, good isolation and cabling and deserves being switched on for a good hour or more before playing seriously. Normally, this would go without saying, but cheaper products are often undermined by shoddy hi-fi practices. Treat this like a high-end player and it will return near high-end results.

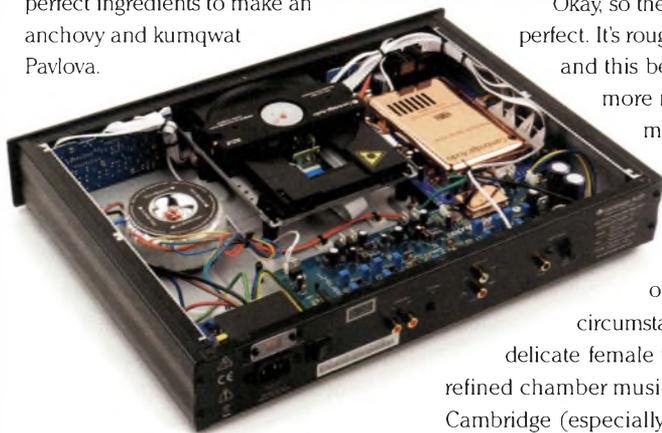
There's a sense of rightness to the sound that marks this player out as a good 'un. The top-notch sound-staging makes sure of that. It marks out a clearly defined, big and deep sound-stage that's precise and pinpoint accurate.

It's upbeat, too. Rock music has a sense of drive to it, while tight techno rhythms are portrayed with a frenetic pace that could turn octogenarians into pill-poppin' hoodies. Yet, it's not all speed at the expense of bottom-end heft. The bass is weighty and full, even if the bottom octave is on the inconsistent side (some notes too full, some notes too light, a bit like a very obvious port boost on a small speaker with big ideas).

Best of all, though, it has those real-world dynamics so often missing from budget CD players. This is where many players get marked 'digital', not necessarily because they are bright and aggressive sounding (those days are almost over, fortunately), but

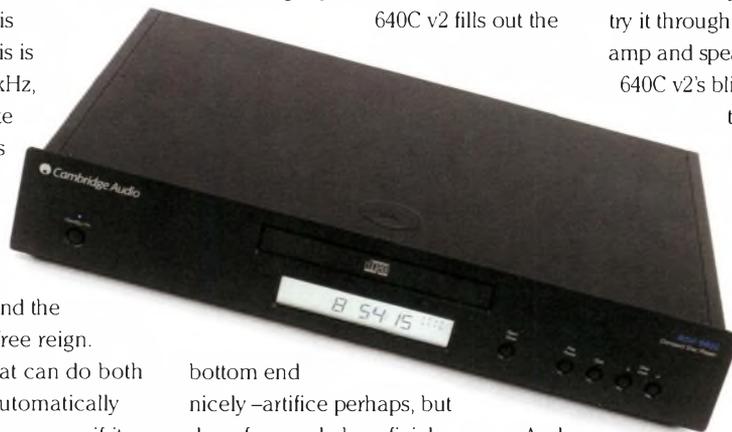


▶ because the dynamic range seems limited and uninspiring. This becomes especially problematic with dealing with string quartets; the dynamic range of a well-recorded, impassioned string quartet can be quite unnerving and often, cheaper CD players leave the sound flat and passionless. Here, the scale of the instruments is preserved beautifully. This is clearly evident in the 96kHz, 24 bit re-master of the late 1960s Quartetto Italiano's reading of Beethoven's late string quartets (Philips 464 684-2). Here, both the natural ambience is preserved and the dynamic scale is given free reign. Any cheap CD player that can do both of these things almost automatically deserves recommendation, even if it sucks elsewhere, because it's getting some of the fundamentals of musical communication, fundamentally right. Other players in the price range (and above) seem to concentrate on the texture of the sound at the expense of its visceral impact, which is a bit like focusing on getting the absolutely perfect ingredients to make an anchovy and kumquat Pavlova.



This zoning in on the important things in music should not be underestimated. Few players do this at the price and there are plenty of considerably more expensive machines that forgo musical communication for beautiful sounds, and it's these players

that get hot under the transport mechanism when faced by the 640C v2. Yes, the Cambridge player is beautifully matched for smaller speakers and will sound a bit waffly when played through true full-range designs, but most owners of £250 CD players will not have full-range speakers to hand. So, the 640C v2 fills out the



bottom end nicely –artifice perhaps, but done for purely beneficial reasons. And perhaps the 640C v2 doesn't keep time on a Dub Syndicate recording as well as a Naim player or similar, but c'mon... you can't buy four such players for the price of the 640C v2. More importantly, you can buy the rest of the system, or perhaps 100 CDs for the price differential between the two players.

Okay, so the 640C v2's not perfect. It's rough edged at times, and this becomes all the more noticeable the more filigree the music gets in the upper mids and highs. But only under special circumstances. Play some delicate female vocals or very refined chamber music through the Cambridge (especially when it's in a good system and the wick is turned up) and the limits begin to show through. There's a bit of the hod carrier too; thick set and a bit brutal at times, but it gets the job done quickly and efficiently. But then sanity prevails and you realise the cables hooked to the player cost twice as much as the player itself.

When you drag the 640C v2 down to the level where you'd expect a £250 player to shine (like, with a £200 amp and a pair of £150 speakers) its performance is simply without fault. That rough edge is subsumed by the limitations elsewhere in the system.

So, then you move up a notch and try it through maybe £1,000 worth of amp and speaker. And it's then that the 640C v2's blinding performance begins to hit home, because the player's rough edges are still hidden by limits in the rest of the chain. It's really only by the time you reach the nursery slopes of the high-end that the 640C v2 starts to show its darker side, but by then it's the cheapest part of the system by far (probably including the tip-toes used to support it).

This machine is where real CD replay starts. It's that simple. This is the first sub-£400 player in a long time that shouldn't be supplied with a health warning. It's that good. Most cheap players are so unrelentingly awful they lurk in the 'here be dragons!' uncharted parts of the hi-fi map. The Cambridge Audio 640C v2 sails right into those waters like Ferdinand Magellan. It's (almost) that important.

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Single disc CD player
D/A Conversion:	24-bit/192kHz x 2
Chipset:	Dual differential Wolfson WM8749
Digital Outputs:	1x Toslink Optical 1x Coaxial RCA phono
Analogue Outputs:	1pr RCA phono
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 70x 310mm
Weight:	4.6 kg
Finishes:	Silver or black
Price:	£250

**Manufacturer:**  
Cambridge Audio  
Tel. (44)(0)870 900 1000  
Net. [www.cambridgeaudio.com](http://www.cambridgeaudio.com)

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### Speakers

Dynaudio Audience 7 speakers with stand  
Elac CL 330 Jet speakers with stand  
Origin Live OL-2 speakers  
BKS Hybrid 107 supreme speakers  
Mordaunt Short MS-815 speakers  
Spica TC-50 speakers  
Orchid LWO speakers ex-demo  
Kef Concord speakers

### Pre-amps

Rotel RC-995 pre-amp  
Musical Fidelity 3A pre-amp  
Conrad Johnson MC 10 FET Pre-amp  
Naim Nac 92 with Nap 90/3 amp  
Proceed PAV pre-amp

### Amplifiers

Mark Levinson 11 & 12 pre/power  
Classe CA 201 power amp  
Quad II amps with 22 pre & tuner  
Ayre AX-7 Int Amp  
Kora triode 100 SB Mono blocks  
Arcam Alpha 8P power amp  
Arcam Alpha 8R integrated amp  
Mark Levinson 383 int' amp  
Cyrus 2 integrated amp  
Mark Levinson ML431 power amp (ex demo)  
Denon POA-T3 three chan' amp  
Audio Research D130 power amp  
Audionote Neiro mono-blocks  
Parasound HCA 1000A amp

### Audionote Keron mono's (new)

£1695	Advantage integrated amp	£1495
£1995	Perreux 200ip int. amp.	£1095
£595	<b>CD players, Transports and DAC's</b>	
£1495	Arcam Diva CD 82 CD Player	£395
£3500	Sony CDP M41 CD player	£60
£195	Pioneer PD-S502 CD player	£95
£195	Sonic Frontiers Transport 3	£1995
£3750	Counterpoint DA-10E DAC	£395
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# More Splendid, Even More Isolation... The latest generation equipment racks

by Roy Gregory

Back in Issue 41 I looked at the way that isolation strategies for hi-fi have developed in recent years, reviewing a selection of the latest support platforms on offer as examples of a new awareness that trouble all too often starts at home. By that I'm referring to the fact that whilst the sonic impact of spurious vibration and mechanical energy on audio circuits is generally accepted, few people seem aware that at least as damaging as external sources of vibration are those that exist within the equipment itself. The most obvious example comes in the shape of the huge transformers that feed power amplifiers, large lumps that literally kick into life as an amp is switched on. But just because smaller transformers are less obvious about their dirty little habits doesn't mean they don't shake, rattle and roll along with the rest. In fact, just about any component that passes electrical voltage or current is going to suffer some mechanical reaction while doing it. Dealing with this very problem is the basis on which tiny, solidly constructed products like the 47 Labs operate. If you've heard how pure, naturally coloured and grain-free these small, perfectly formed but exorbitantly priced products can sound it should have given you pause for thought – and not just because of the cost. Minimize the problem first by using the fewest possible number of components and relying on ICs, then deal with it by grounding to a solid, non-resonant chassis, or so goes the logic. Unfortunately, removing components from existing products isn't really an option, but mechanical grounding – that's where those platforms and couplers come in.

Of course, the next logical step in the process is to extrapolate the support concept into a rack, most audiophiles' chosen mode of system storage. It's a solution I've been employing ever since the finite-elemente Pagode Master Reference racks took up residence in my listening room. Elegant designs, they incorporate a



sophisticated measure of self-resonance control through parasitic resonators mounted in their hardwood shelf frames. These dissipate energy arriving at the frame both through the structure and the shelf, delivering a notably neutral and unobtrusive performance from your system in the process. Rhythmic expression is exceptionally good, with no slurring or undue emphasis to obscure subtleties, while instrumental colours are natural and vibrant rather than distorted and garish. It's a tour de force performance from a mere support, one that's sufficiently commanding for it to have become the de facto benchmark for rack performance, both chez moi

and throughout the industry. Just take a look at some of the people who've bought these pricey racks for use at shows if you don't believe me. But there's the rub; that price word again. Not everybody is able or willing to spend the kind of money that the finite-elemente racks demand, despite their obvious sonic benefits. With that in mind, and using the Master Reference as a, err... master reference, I've looked at a range of alternative approaches that vary in cost and complexity but which all set out to deal with spurious energy generated within the components they support. But first a quick refresher course...

## The finite-elemente Pagode Master Reference HD-03

\$2850 as tested

You can read the full review back in Issue 27, but in the meantime here are the salient points. The HD series racks consist of solid maple frames supporting wooden shelves via precision set, stainless steel cup and cone feet. These frames are in turn, set into a frame consisting of aluminium uprights, fixed by more, incredibly sharp stainless steel cones that screw out horizontally to engage dimples in the metal work. The whole structure is spiked to the floor for leveling and close coupling, although finite-elemente's superb CeraBase feet offer an aesthetically pleasing and sonically significant upgrade. As mentioned above, parasitic resonators are sunk (four per level) into wells drilled into the frames. These start life as steel rods around 18mm in diameter and maybe 60mm long. The first 20mm is left as is, except for a shallow groove machined to accept a rubber grip ▶

▶ ring for tightening. The rest is turned down into a thread for location and an even thinner rod that forms the resonator. These are tuned by dint of length and diameter to work at a range of frequencies, calculated according to the shelf's position within the rack and the load it's likely to carry. The structural resonances of each rack configuration were exhaustively tested and analyzed at the University of applied Sciences in Dortmund where it was found that within a



surprisingly wide range of different loadings

it's the frame mode that dominates, allowing mechanical compensation to be applied at extremely precise frequencies. So, whilst in the last instance, it's possible to specify the weights and layout of your equipment and finite-element will match the shelves accordingly, this is actually unnecessary unless your equipment weights are wildly top-heavy or unusual. In 99% of cases the standard values work fine.

The HD racks provide a level of even, unexaggerated detail and tonal neutrality that's hard to match. That being so I elected to use the HD-03 as the control throughout this series of listening tests. Where comparisons are made, it is to the Master Reference unless otherwise stated.

And now to the contenders...

### The Cambré CORE Rack

£780 as tested

£170 - £220/Level

The Canadian Cambré is a deceptively simple structure and the most straightforward in the test. It utilizes its own version of the now familiar rod and



shelf construction, first popularized in the UK by Quadraspire. However, the Cambré is not without its own wrinkles, perhaps being closest in thinking to the Aavik racks. Here, the substantial uprights are over an inch in diameter and consist of solid aluminium, threaded together with steel stud. These clamp the shelves between them, finished with flush mounted caps at the top and large, conical feet at the bottom. These are beautifully turned to overlap the stub uprights below the bottom shelf, making adjustment of level incredibly easy, even with the rack fully loaded.

The CORE system is modular; you buy a top shelf (which includes the top-caps and feet) and as many individual, intervening shelves as you need, each complete with the appropriate uprights. The uprights provide vertical separation of 18, 23 or 28cm, while the shelves are made from a specially selected MDF and come in a choice of four real wood veneers and black ash. There's also an expensive but surprisingly popular option to go all titanium on the metalwork. Given experience with the Aavik titanium rack I can certainly understand why. The top shelf can of course be used as an amp stand if desired and there's also a glass shelf option, which might look pretty but has no place in a hi-fi system, for reasons that are about to become clear.

So, structurally the Cambré rack has an appealing simplicity while the quality of its metalwork, the carefully beveled shelves and the superb veneers used add up to a discretely elegant and attractive package. The footprint is broad, stable and large enough to accept almost any equipment save the very long and thin. The VPI TNT6 is accommodated with ease, which is saying something! But turn the shelves over and you discover the CORE system's stealth input. The underside of each shelf is scored by a series of deep, diagonal grooves. Varying in length they divide the shelf's structure into a series of discrete resonant zones, again carefully calculated but this time with the aid of a grant from the Canadian government and access to its Institute of Technology. These help spread the resonant modes within the structure.



damping peaks and minimizing their impact. Clearly, this broadband dissipation should also be equally effective in dealing with energy from within the equipment itself. So, although the Cambré looks like a lot of other racks it works rather differently.



The final element in the mix is a pair of extra grooves machine at the rear, in the top and underside of the intervening shelves (and underside only of the top shelf). These accept rectangles of black painted hardboard with a pair of large diameter holes through them. These constitute a

▶ simple but effective form of cable management, and incorporate a small amount of lateral movement to allow for cable exits on one side of equipment or the other. Viewed in isolation they are neat rather than attractive, but once the system is installed they all but disappear, taking the traditional tangle of cables with them. My only reservation is that I'd avoid sharing one hole between mains and any form of signal or speaker cable. If necessary, route the mains lead separately.

Each shelf module costs between £170 and £220, depending on height and irrespective of finish. Cambré also offer the more affordable Entré and Timbre ranges if the CORE system is a little rich for your blood.

### The Audiophile Base StarBase rack system

£275 per level, \$119 per BASE 01 shelf, £159 per BASE 02 and £399 per StrataBASE 2

Audiophile Base adopt a similar pole and shelf construction to Cambré, and a similar modular approach to specifying your rack; however the mechanical details and complexity of the system differ significantly. The AB approach is best understood by viewing it as a set of equipment isolation platforms and a space frame designed to support them.

The heart of the system are the two platform designs, so let's start with the BASE 02.



This consists of a profiled MDF shelf supported on a pair of suspension beams. They come 475mm wide and either 360 (BASE 01) or 425mm deep. The MDF is carefully selected for

consistency, shaped around the edges for appearance and to create the two, front to back ridges that brace the underside. These also each



accommodate a deep channel into which is built a suspension element consisting of a 10mm thick strip of Sorbothane, bonded to the bottom of the channel and in turn supporting a 3mm thick aluminium plate. The plate supports a pair of widely spaced feet, terminating in hard rubber discs. Flip the shelf the right way up and it sits on the feet, isolated from the supporting surface by the Sorbothane/aluminium beams. These are laterally isolated by thin rubber strips to ensure that side loading can't short-circuit the suspension, while experiments using Sorbothane alone quickly demonstrate the huge benefits to be had from the (patented) composite beam approach.

However, not content with that, AB have



developed a superior platform, the StrataBASE 2. The same size as a BASE 02, this employs two slabs of MDF arranged as a constrained layer, with additional lateral as well as longitudinal bracing on the underside. It's heavier (visually and physically), more expensive but it's also far more effective.

Either the BASE 01/02 or the StrataBASE 2 can be used alone, to support equipment positioned on other racks. However, they really come into their own when used in conjunction with the StarBase system. This consists of a series of large, 45mm diameter

uprights, fashioned from thick wall aluminium tubing, combined with the necessary top-caps and conical spiked feet to top and tail the legs. These are clamped around horizontal "shelves" to create a multi-layered tripod arrangement, although in this case the shelves are elaborately cutout into skeletal frames. Into these are machined hollow wells, each floored with a rubber/steel sandwich disc designed to support the feet of the isolation platforms.

The StarBase has a broad footprint and is inherently highly stable. But the



design means that although the platforms are available in two different depths, their width is smaller than you might imagine. The steep, conical taper on the legs makes leveling easy, important as it's vital to achieving full performance from the rack (not to mention the equipment on it). Once again you start with a top-shelf kit (or amp



stand) and add the intervening shelves according to spacing requirements. Finally you decide which platforms you want. These can of course be mixed and ▶

► matched for more and less critical applications. The StarBase elements and platforms are available in graphite or silver elements, and again these can be mixed and matched as desired. I listened to the StarBase with both BASE 01/02 and StrataBASE 2 platforms.

### The Symposium Isis Rack

£2295 as tested

Rollerblocks from £180 per set of three

The Symposium Isis rack also bears a strong relationship to their support platforms (as reviewed in Issue 41), but in this instance the structure of the shelves themselves is extended in order to support the necessary uprights to create a rack.



Another tripod design, it also incorporates Symposium's Rollerblock coupling technology.

The rack is built onto a large base element. This consists of a stainless-steel and structural foam sandwich, creating a rigid but extremely well damped constrained layer. Extension "wings" from the sides and rear of the lower stainless-steel layer support massive conical aluminium feet tipped with lockable spikes. Again the conical

profile and large lock-nuts make leveling a cinch. The spikes themselves have a horizontal drilling of decent diameter, capable of accepting a screwdriver shaft, making adjustments to even a



heavily laden rack extremely easy. But it's the top face of the legs that's interesting. These are machined from aluminium and formed into a rim and cup arrangement into which you drop a large ball bearing.

The central section of the stand consists of two more constrained layer shelves as well as solid, 48mm diameter legs separating them and extending above and below. The undersides of the legs have machined aluminium cups inserted into them, which engage the balls you've just dropped into the base. Together these create a Rollerblock arrangement, allowing the upper section of the rack to move freely in a horizontal plane.

The top layer is fitted with stub legs and again, is isolated from the middle section using exactly the same ball and cup arrangement. The thinking here is that the horizontal freedom offers low frequency isolation, the constrained layers in the shelves protect the mid and high frequencies, while the direct metal to metal contact down the length of each leg constitutes a ground path to evacuate unwanted energy.

Apart from the disconcerting wobble that first greets you (you soon

get used to it) the most unusual thing about the Symposium is that the shelves actually differ in size. The bottom level actually extends forward some 100mm in front of the front face of the middle shelves, while the top plate of the top shelf extends back by some 30mm. This (optional)

arrangement creates extra space top and bottom where it's most useful, especially when it comes to the kind of large power amps that have an almost square footprint. Another nice touch is the small magnets inserted into the base of each Rollerblock element. These help to keep those balls located during assembly, but also apply a small but worthwhile degree of damping to the horizontal motion. If that sounds like marketing-speak, just watch how quickly the rack settles if you nudge it sideways.

Symposium offer myriad options when it comes to vertical spacing, as well as two different shelf sizes, 19" x 16" (as tested) or a humungous 21" x 19". As well as the Isis shelves fitted here there's also a Basic shelf, which is much cheaper and far less sophisticated, although beyond that I have no constructional details. The legs can be specified at purchase and then reconfigured later as a system grows or changes. They come in 8", 11" and 14" heights as standard, with custom sizes available to order. You also have a choice of clear or black anodizing on the legs, or the high bling, extra cost route of hand polishing. Stainless steel surfaces



are notoriously difficult to keep clean, but Symposium do supply a 3M pad with each rack that does a superb (if time consuming) job.

The system is entirely modular, so any combination of leg heights and shelf types, extended or standard, ►



► can be combined, just so long as the basic shelf size remains the same. The accommodation offered by the smaller footprint is capacious; just who might need the extra real estate of the 21" by 19" version escapes me. Naturally, Symposium assume you'll be using Rollerblocks to couple your equipment to the shelves and this is definitely the way it works best.

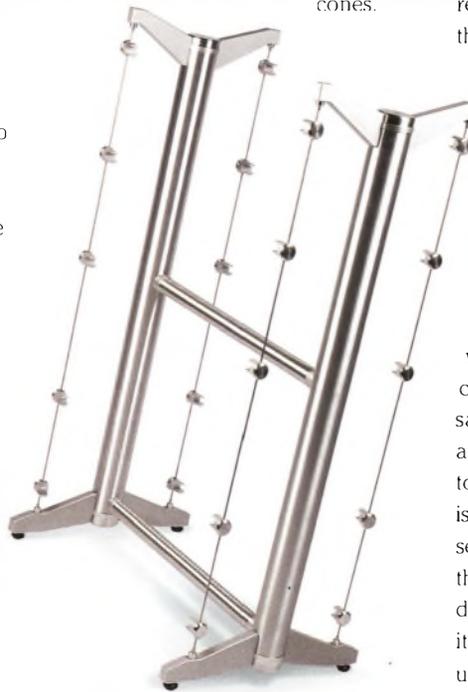
### The Stillpoints Equipment Support Stand

Stillpoints Cones £300 per set of four  
 Risers £100 per set of four  
 £2375 3 shelves (660mm tall)  
 £2600 4 shelves (815mm tall)  
 £2825 5 shelves (1015mm tall)  
 £235 Extra shelf

In many respects, the Stillpoints ESS rack is the most complex and radical design here. It consists of a space frame constructed from two massive stainless-steel pipes fully 63mm in diameter, terminated top and bottom by horizontal aluminium arms (and legs) milled from 19mm plate. These slot into aluminium bosses that are clamped into the legs by thick, stainless-steel end caps. The two legs

are then linked by a further pair of stainless-steel pipes, terminated in aluminium mating collars that meet horizontal bosses protruding from the legs. Thus, right throughout the structure, dissimilar materials are clamped together, creating constrained layer damping at each interface.

Tensioned wires stretch from the top to the bottom of the milled aluminium extensions, while the undersides of the legs are milled out and contain tiny Stillpoints damping arrangements (a ring of ceramic balls in a flexible cradle, spread by the upward conical extension of the threaded foot). Right at the bottom you find a quartet of the concave Mini Inverse Risers, designed to act as feet or interface with upward facing Stillpoints cones.



The shelves in the Stillpoints rack are constructed from Perspex, braced along the underside by a pair of square section, 12mm aluminium rods. These rods are each spaced from the Perspex by five hard plastic dimples and clamped in place with allen screws,

bracing and damping the shelf structure at the same time. Each shelf is connected to the vertical wires by a quartet of clever clamps, two sets of jaws at right angles to each other. One grips the shelf, the other the wire, with everything locked in place by allen grub screws.



Polished stainless-steel caps finish off the open ends.

The shelf and wire arrangement creates a well-damped and diffuse resonant environment, isolated by the Stillpoints dampers in the legs, which dissipate energy from both within and outside the system. Greater degrees of absorption can be achieved using additional Stillpoints, either in the shape of cones or Component Stands, and this proved extremely beneficial. To that extent, although the Stillpoints rack is definitely viable as a standalone system, it is conceptually best understood in the same light as the Audiophile Base, a space-frame intended (ultimately) to support additional layers of isolation. That makes for an expensive set-up, and it's important to stress that the Stillpoints Equipment stand does just fine on its own. However, it does also offer considerable upgrade potential. The finished structure is extremely adjustable (as long as you watch out for the horizontal pipe at half height). It's also simplicity itself to assemble and surprisingly elegant and low density in appearance. Altering shelf height is extremely easy and spacing is of course, almost infinitely variable. The test unit had five shelves, ►

▶ each 560 x 405mm, and a height of 1015mm. There's also a double-wide version of the lowest rack available, whose three shelves will accommodate six components.



One additional benefit of the Stillpoints construction is that the stack height of each shelf is very low, so they don't eat much of your vertical space.

### General Observations

All these racks share certain distinctive features. The most obvious is the attempt

to minimize ferrous content, this generally being confined to threads or non-magnetic stainless-steel parts. They also pay more than mere lip service to the concept of adjustability and flexibility, going to considerable lengths to offer both a range of options to the customer as well as the facility to alter spacings and heights at a later date.

Less obvious is the application of coupling technology. Both Symposium and Stillpoints suggest that additional attention paid to the mechanical coupling of the equipment supported to the shelves themselves (as discussed back in Issue 41) will offer significant and cost effective further benefits. They're right. As a result all these racks were tried with and without both Symposium Rollerblocks and Stillpoints cones coupling the system

components to the shelves.

Two systems were used for the review: the first consisted of the EERA DL1 CD player feeding the Cyrus 7 integrated amp and PSX power supply, driving the Eben X baby speakers. The second comprised the Audio Research CD7, Prima Luna Prologue Two and the Living Voice OBX-R2s. In both cases cabling was from Nordost, Tyr for signal and Valhalla for mains. Somewhat surprisingly the solid-state system proved just as critical of support as the valve option, the results being surprisingly consistent. So much so that I've felt no need to differentiate between them. One can only suppose that the added complexity and component count in the solid-state amp and the energy-sink transport design of the EERA more than make up for any microphony in the tubes.

# The Listening

Each rack was auditioned in isolation but also in a series of direct and closely controlled comparisons. It was immediately apparent that each of the various options had a significant effect on system sound, not just tonally or in terms of detail, but much more importantly on the structure, flow and communicative capabilities of the system. Whilst some fared better than others it should be pointed out that these are all Premiership performers, a world away from the second division makeweights constructed from welded steel and glass.

The conclusions reached combine both types of listening and we'll take the racks in the same order that I've described their structures. It's not a qualitative ranking, more nearly a price one, although the addition of extra coupling components complicates that further.

### The Cambré CORE rack

The Cambré is in many respects the simplest of the racks offered here. It's also a neat analogy for its sound. Big, bold and colourful is the way I'd describe the CORE rack. Its huge and solid images are



impressive, its music purposeful, but it's at its best with simpler material. Janis Ian's 'Some People's Lives' was wonderfully solid, present and direct, even if close comparisons with the finite-elemente revealed a lack of transparency, focus, ambient information and the subtleties of expression, both in her voice and playing. The more complex the material, the more obvious the failings, under-pinned by the weight of the bass and a slight lack of definition. It's not that music stops, it's just that the playing can sound a little clumsy, the shifts in direction robbed of agility.

Compared to a standard metal rack with glass or MDF shelves, the CORE represents a huge step up in both even distribution of energy and vibrant tonal colour. It's engaging, enjoyable and enthusiastic, and

► it's also more at home with pop and rock than the intricacies of classical or complex jazz. Even then its failings are readily tempered with the application of coupling elements. In this instance the Rollerblocks aided definition, fluidity and focus but still left it dragging its heels slightly in the lowest registers. Stillpoints were a much better option, adding the focus detail and transparency whilst also evening up and picking up the bass. Ultimately the most effect solution might well be a DIY combination of sink and supports which could be had for very little money indeed. Used alone the CORE rack is good but its flaws require careful system matching to get the best overall results. With a little tuning of the rack to equipment interface it really takes off, demonstrating that if you get the basics right then you've got a firm foundation on which to build.

### The Audiophile Base Starbase, BASE 02 and StrataBASE platforms

The AB system was a fascinating contrast to the Cambré rack. Much more even, top to bottom, and with better detail and lateral separation, it lacked the latter's dynamics and sheer energy, sounding slightly flat in comparison, an effect exaggerated by a lack of depth. Commendably even-handed it was also in danger of sounding rather worthy and even a little chromatically dull. The problems lie in a collapsed tonal range and a lack of soundstage depth. The opening bars of Basie's 'Beaver Junction' were nicely paced, the hesitance in the rhythm well presented, but the contrast in weight and tonality between the sonorous counterpoint of the piano's left hand and the stabbed intrusions of the right was almost completely missing. Again, seen in the context of run of the mill racks the AB has real strengths, especially in the even

character it brings to the entire musical spectrum. Compared to the best in this test it's found wanting.

Swapping to the StrataBASE 2 platforms improved things considerably. The up-rated shelves deliver both more colour and more life. The increase in detail, dynamic range and separation are all worthwhile, moving the Starbase into another league entirely. However, those improvements pale in comparison to the impact of the Rollerblocks when used with the standard BASE 01/02 shelves.



This difference is, frankly hard to credit.

Clearly, AB's suspension system is extremely capable when it comes to absorbing the spurious energy generated by the equipment itself – just so long as you get it out of the boxes and into the shelves. Placing the Rollerblocks between the various products and the BASE 02 shelves produced a huge increase in dynamic range, transparency, depth, scale and focus. Along the way the pace picked up and all those little, expressive details in the playing emerged from the fog in which they'd been hiding. The acoustic space on the Janis Ian track was huge and clear, her phrasing and the use of her voice

beautifully natural. Basie's playing came to life, the weight and complexity of his left hand just so. Meanwhile the pace and drive of Jackie Leven's 'Single Father' drove the track purpose-fully, ramming home its points and its poignancy. This is a much bigger step up than the one offered by the StrataBASE 2 over the BASE 01/02, although there's nothing stopping you adding Rollerblocks to those either, where they work very nearly as well!

### The Symposium Isis rack

The Isis rack immediately impresses with its detail, dynamic range and discrimination, combined with a bolder, bigger and slightly more forward presentation than the finite-element. The latter is clearly superior in the realms of ambient retrieval, soundstage depth and coherence and its range of tonal colours (a field in which it remained unchallenged throughout these tests).

The substance and powerful sound of the Symposium suited the Jackie Leven, the weight and low-end body drove the track, emphasizing his phrasing, and brought real purpose to the Basie, but at the expense of the relaxed, easy swing that makes 'Beaver Junction' such an impressive ensemble piece. The lack of rhythmic subtlety was underlined by the Janis Ian track, which was robbed of some of its fragile delicacy.

Okay, time to add Rollerblocks under the equipment; and suddenly it's a whole new ballgame. First, a dramatic increase in bass depth and weight demands adjustment of speaker positioning, otherwise the sound gets heavy and ploddy. But once the necessary shift in placement has been made, all that energy and substance is harnessed to a far more fluid and expressive rhythmic structure. Separation, ►



▶ depth and transparency all increased significantly, pulling the balance of virtues, power versus detail and definition, back into a far more convincing (and entertaining) balance. The range of tonal colour improved, but this was almost a case of better definition of each instrument's energy spectrum rather than harmonic distinctions per se. Either way, the individual character and identity of each instrument was clearer and more identifiable. The increase in fluidity and resolution coupled to the power and energy of the Symposium set-up made for compelling and purposeful performances. The sound was highly engaging, and if it lacked the last ounce of acoustic subtlety I can imagine plenty of customers, feet tapping happily away, responding "So what?"

### The Stillpoints ESS stand

Ah, a tale of two stands – for which you'll need to read the cautionary tale recounted in the sidebar. But, once you actually exercise a bit of care and set the ESS up the way it's meant to be, the results are exceptionally good. This is, the

finite-elemente stand aside, the most balanced performer in the group, straight out of the box and without additional couplers or isolation. It's rhythmically deft, extremely fluid and expressive, with no sense of fattening or slurring to the pace and structure of music. Bass is precise and tactile while separation is superb, as is dynamic definition and range. Indeed, if the ESS has a failing it's a subtle hollowness to the broad mid-band that robs it of a little substance and colour, a factor of course that contributes to that pleasing sense of separation and transparency.

Putting four Stillpoints cones and Risers under the legs of the ESS produces a huge lift in performance. Again, the increase in weight and power at the bottom end necessitates adjusting your speaker positioning, but once you've sorted that out the benefits are very real indeed. The extra body fleshes out the performers bringing greater harmonic complexity and definition, but a more focused and clearer sound too.



Dynamics are much better defined, especially at the top-end, removing any sense of glare or strain on crescendos whilst

increasing their range and impact. Add a component stand or two and you simply move further and further along the same continuum, underlining the cumulative, systematic approach of Stillpoints and similar technologies from Symposium or Vertex AQ; properly applied, the more you use the better it gets.

### Conclusions

This time consuming and somewhat daunting task has produced extremely worthwhile results. Overall, they underline the absolutely critical role that support plays in system performance. Both the Cambré and Audiophile Base racks offer affordable solutions that, with a little bit of additional work on interfacing the equipment, deliver astonishing benefits. The CORE rack is elegant and an excellent basic performer. You need to bear in mind that the criticisms leveled at it are in the context of far more expensive alternatives. It easily outperforms more traditional structures while giving nothing away in terms of

appearance. It offers an excellent foundation on which to build.

The Starbase, BASE 01/02 and Rollerblock combination offers a real sight of the high-end and is both financially accessible and achievable by stages. Its sonic value for money is hard to fault and the combination of an Audiophile Base rack and shelves with an effective form of coupling between it and the equipment it supports (which could be as simple as removing the electronics' feet) definitely delivers the most cost effective solution.

However, in absolute terms, the Symposium, Stillpoints and finite-elemente racks are in another league, both in terms of cost and performance. Far more sophisticated and offering a layered approach to the problem of draining energy from components whilst still isolating

## The case of the Mini Inverse Risers...

Stillpoints refer to the small, concave discs that act as feet on the ESS and Component Stand as Mini Inverse Risers. It kind of makes sense in the great scheme of (Stillpoints) things, but boy is it a mouthful. That and their small size means that you tend to dismiss their contribution – which would be a big mistake; huge!

When I first set up the ESS I checked it for level (which was spot on) and left it at that, forgetting that the MIRs were snugged down tight on their threads. First listening revealed a highly detailed but hollow sound, reminiscent of lightweight, Perspex turntables. Impressive levels of detail and separation were totally undermined by a lack of body, colour and dimensionality. That's when I remembered the MIRs...

Loosening off the small feet, a turn and a half each, transformed the sonic character of the rack, adding body, substance and weight to the picture, fleshing out those wonderfully separate images, adding power and purpose to their music without slowing or slugging their efforts. But more was to come. Paul Wakeen of Stillpoints recently supplied an alternative MIR, made of HardCote aluminium rather

than the Delrin of the originals. These are less user friendly, requiring a little more care on polished surfaces and with equipment interfacing, but swapping them for the standard items on the bottom of the ESS and Component Stands wrought a pretty dramatic increase in depth, transparency and dynamic definition, especially micro-dynamics. Everything simply became crisper and clearer, cleaner and easier on the ear. It's an astonishing change; all the more so if you revert back to the close coupled Delrin alternative. It underlines just how critical tiny details in component choice and set-up can be when you reach this level of performance, an observation no one would quibble with if it was made about an amplifier or even the valves it uses, but a rack? Come on!

Currently, the HardCote MIRs are an after-market option for existing users. Given that they make set-up and precise placement of the Stillpoints' interfaces with equipment even more critical if you are to achieve the best results, I think that's actually the best way to be. But be warned; when it comes to setting up this or any other rack, take nothing, absolutely nothing, for granted.

▶ them, they each offer a particular perspective on the musical performance, close enough in quality to make final choice a matter of personal preference. The Symposium majors on rhythmic drive, body and the sense of energy and musical enthusiasm in a performance. The Stillpoints ESS is a more balanced overall performer, with a super high definition sound whose control and transparency makes musical access and enjoyment significantly easier.



Which brings us to our benchmark, finite-element's HD-03. Used in its standard guise, with spiked feet and no coupling, it remained the best performer in terms of natural tonality, acoustic retrieval and soundstaging and the natural, expressive ebb and flow in music. Of course, finite-element offer their own couplers in the shape of the CeraPucs and CeraBase feet, which lift dynamic range, transparency and levels of detail. For me, given my listening preference for acoustic music, the HD-03 remains the best sounding rack here, even in standard guise. It's nice to know it has something in reserve. ▶

## CONTACTS

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Net. [www.audiophilebase.com](http://www.audiophilebase.com)

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Net. [www.activdistribution.com](http://www.activdistribution.com)

finite-element  
Audiofreaks  
Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153  
Net. [www.audiofreaks.co.uk](http://www.audiofreaks.co.uk)

Stillpoints  
Lyngdorf Audio (UK) Ltd  
Tel. (44)(0) 8709 100100  
Net. [www.lyngdorfaudio.co.uk](http://www.lyngdorfaudio.co.uk)

Symposium  
Musicology  
Tel. (44)(0) 1273 700759  
Net. [www.musicology.co.uk](http://www.musicology.co.uk)

# RG beats me to the wash ....but mine are cleaner than his

by Richard S. Foster

It was way back in Issue 18 that RG met the Audio Desk Systeme Disc Cleaner. He'd spotted this at the Frankfurt show in 2002 and was instantly captivated by its prowess. Unfortunately, his schedule, which is a little on the light side of insanity, didn't allow him the time to follow up with this innovative product from Reiner Gläss, owner of Audio Desk Systeme in Germany, home of the CD-Improver I raved about in the last issue. Well his loss is my gain. From the same school as the disc lathe I reported on in the last issue, this is similarly off-beat and just as sonically impressive.

I've been living with the Disc Cleaner for a several months and all I can say is that my CDs, SACDs and DVDs are better for it. I must tell you that it's not going to win the prize for the sexiest audio toy you've ever purchased, and the WAF (Wife Acceptance Factor) won't win you marks if you decide to try and hide this in your kitchen. As fellow writer Dennis Davis said on a recent visit, "The machine itself looks like something roughly between a science lab test device and the back-up drain from my sewage system."

Quite frankly, this is a modified drainage pipe – but whatever it may be, it works like a charm. This clearly has to be considered the Rolls-Royce of CD washing systems. It is also the only device I am aware of where nothing touches the disc's playing surface but liquid.

The container for the fluid and where the electronics are (separately) located is in the bottom portion of this 'split' pipe. This section is about 15 inches long. About half-way, there is a portion of the pipe section that stands up at a 45 degree angle. Located at the

front of the top piece is a door that opens downwards when you pull the handle. This is where you put your water and concentrated enhancing/cleaning liquid. I've been using Brita filtered water and this has worked very effectively. If any of you are have water that is artificially softened (with salts) it is very important that you do not use this in the machine. Use drinking water only, drawn

from the kitchen cold tap, which bypasses softening systems. If you use artificially softened water in the machine, you will have a real mess on your hands with too much foam being generated by the machine's various cleaning cycles.

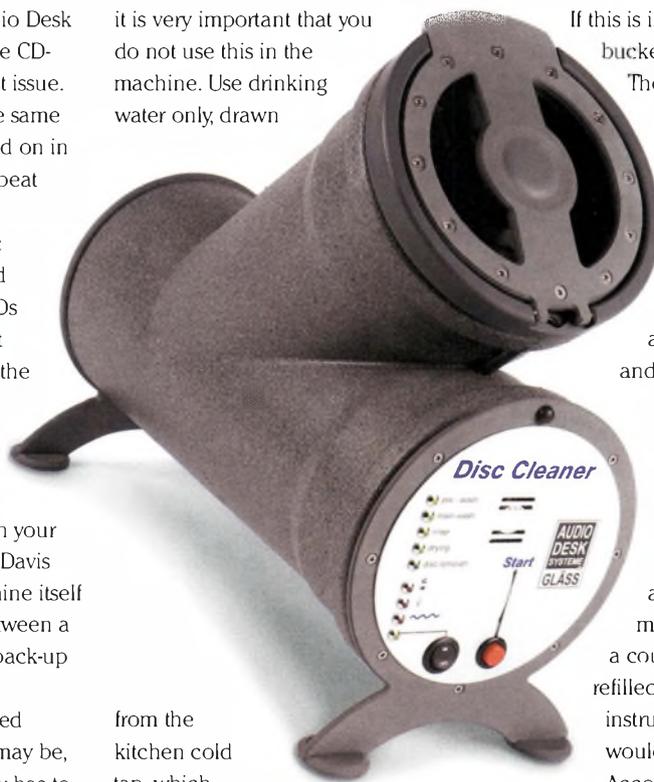
Once you add the requisite amount of water you then add the small bottle of concentrated optical enhancement fluid. This liquid has two purposes, one as a cleaner and the other seems to polish and enhance the surface of the media

inserted. When it comes time to drain the machine, there is a thumbscrew at the rear of the main unit (as well as a window to see how much fluid is in there). It really is best to have the cleaning machine somewhere near a sink or drain. You do not want to move the machine when it is filled with liquid.

If this is inconvenient, then bring a bucket ...

The unit comes with two bottles of 'cleaner'. The cleaner can be stored for months prior to it being activated in the machine with water. Once you've mixed the solution with water, you've got approximately a two month and/or an approximate 200 disc life span before you have to replace all the liquids, both water and cleaning fluid. I've had to replace my fluid twice and being the anal retentive I am, I also decided to rinse the machine's insides with water a couple of times before I refilled it for use. This is not in the instructions but I thought it wouldn't hurt anything.

According to Jody Hickson, President of Globe Audio Marketing and Canadian distributor for Audio Desk Systeme products, "When customers send in their warranty cards to the distributor, they are entitled to 4 additional bottles of concentrate at no charge." To me, this is a pretty nice perk and a saving of \$60 Canadian just for turning in your card. I don't know if it applies in the UK but if not it's something that the distributor should definitely consider. (He has and it does. Ed.)



► The Cleaner has a two year complete parts and labour warranty and as you've already figured out, concentrate is \$15 per bottle. So if you think about what you get after you send in your warranty card, you've enough concentrate to clean approximately 1200 discs. That will certainly keep you busy for a few days.

Okay, okay, enough of this...how does it work and what does it do?

When you've filled the unit with water and you've added the optical enhancement fluid you're ready to begin. The machine has an on/off switch, a start button and a vertical row of LEDs on the front. Turning the machine on, especially if the liquid is cold, it will take about 5 minutes for it to heat to a cleaning temperature of 65 degrees Celsius.

You insert the disc, label facing toward you. Close the door and push the start button and the cycles begin, each phase noted by one of the LEDs. Everything is now completely automatic and all you have to do is sit back and watch – or better yet, trim another disc with the CD-Improver.

There are four cycles to completion. Each cycle has a different speed, movement or sets of movements and period of activation. First is a pre-wash, then a main-wash followed by a rinse and then a spin drying cycle. The entire process takes about two minutes. There are two jets that fire liquid at the disc surface at a pumping volume of 22 litres per minute with a pressure of approximately 1.4 bar (22psi). When the cycles are completed, there is an intermittent buzz from the machine and the 'disc removal' LED starts to blink. Let me clarify the 'rinse' cycle. There is no new or clean fluid coming into the machine. It's not attached to any type of input or drain, so while we consider a rinse cycle in, a washing machine as clean water coming in, no such occurrence happens with the Disc Cleaner. It's just another set of patterns Gläss has determined the machine must perform to maximize the cleaning ability.

Everything is completely controlled by the micro-processor built into the circuit design and it's definitely a plug 'n play operation. When finished, you open the door, remove the disc and – that's all there is to it. The disc is a little warm and it is absolutely gleaming. There is a warning for those who clean their own CD-Rs that have paper labels attached. After a couple of times in the cleaning machine, the paper could start to come off. I don't own any of these so I didn't give it a second thought.

I have to say how skeptical I was about the cleaning of CDs and SACDs. I visually check my discs, primarily for fingerprints and didn't give a second thought to cleaning them. When you think about it, you feel they should come 'fresh' from the factory. But alas, just like their larger black disk counterparts, there are residues from production that are on the discs even before they are packaged and shipped.

In a recent conversation with the renowned Disc Doctor, Duane Goldman (<http://www.discdoc.com>), he stated, "My comments are a summary of information obtained during discussions with several manufacturers. The CD process is designed for the fast and economic mass production of millions of discs. The polycarbonate substrate is injection molded, the metal layer then added and the resulting sandwich sealed, labeled and packaged in a minimal amount of time. The process is done in a clean environment good enough to prevent gross contamination. No effort is made to remove surface contamination which may result from the injection, sealing and labeling processes, affording a surface that is contaminated with a fine haze generated by off-gassing of volatile components of the plastic matrix & the lacquer seal.

"Such contamination may cause read problems and probably will provide a surface that attracts dust and other environmental contamination which can then be dispersed throughout the player. I suggest always applying a carbon fiber

brush before playback when possible.

'As mentioned, if you carefully hold a CD under white light you can tilt it to generate either a spectral band of blue or green colors. Comparing the vibrancy and clarity of these steps can be used to qualitatively demonstrate the presence of the haze.

"I've looked at discs before and after cleaning. When you clean the disc, you will see a colour shift, sharper if you will, because of the cleaning process. Something is definitely going on, from a visual perspective. I definitely know things are changing as far as the audible quality."

Dr. Goldman makes his own CD cleaning solution (which is being sent to me for evaluation) and I will certainly report on what I hear with it in use.

However, what I'm hearing now, before and after cleaning is yet another step closer to what must truly be on the optical disc. Bert van der Wolf of Northstar Consult in the Netherlands has indicated to me that audible "problems are always about getting the right information off the discs."

Clean an optical disc and there is this fleshing out, a cleanliness and greater clarity after cleaning. I've noticed on voices as well as instruments, less blur, greater definition and a much closer to vinyl experience with well recorded CDs/SACDs...rock or classical.

Instruments have greater individuality, tonally and in space, after cleaning. On Donald Fagen's new release on Reprise 49975-2, *Morph the Cat*, cleaning produced a sense of each instrument crystal clear in space, portraying an ensemble of clearly defined artists playing together as opposed to a jumble of instruments mashed together to make noise. Listening to the fabulous Florilegium Haydn, *London Symphonies* on Channel Classics CCS SA 19603, you can distinctly sense the holographic image of all eight players in a semi-circle, much better defined after using the cleaning machine.



▶ One of the discs I took to CES was a treated disc. I recorded a fabulous Fauré *Elegie* from LP to CD-R twice. Both discs had been trimmed with the second disc having the benefit of being cleaned. I then put these together on one cleaned disc, allowing me to compare cleaned and uncleaned versions of the same track.

The universal consensus from those who heard this disc was that the "cleaned" track offered much better separation and an increased sense of space around the instruments. You could hear further into the music, both the composition and the notes themselves. Because of this, the total musical experience was heightened, much more pleasurable and involving.

Having spent several months with this cleaner, and having the opportunity to change the fluids, I've drained the washer into a large pan. I was really quite shocked to see what was in the run off. It wasn't pretty. The telltale is that if you stop noticing a huge improvement after cleaning, it's

probably time to change the fluid. This was a mistake I made early on when I simply cleaned too many discs

While I am sure there may be individual products on the market that may do a decent job of cleaning your optical media, I'd be very surprised if anything comes close to this system in performance terms but just as importantly, ease of use. If a cleaning system is fiddly or time consuming you just know that after the first few times you aren't going to bother. Nothing could be easier or simpler than the Audio Desk system. Even the periodic fluid changes are a minimal chore.

The investment is not inexpensive but you have to weigh the price against the size of your CD/SACD collection. On the bright side is the fact that the cost of replacement fluid is relatively modest. When you think about what some of the better record cleaning machines sell for in today's market, perhaps the Audio Desk Disc Cleaner is not out of line. I clean all my discs, new and old. I not only trim my CD-Rs

before recording, I clean them with the Disc Cleaner as well. It's a wonderful product that's improved every aspect of my digital listening experience no end. Funky and fun, it's hard to imagine life without it.



Audio Desk Systeme Gläss  
Disc Cleaner

Net: [www.audiodesksysteme.de/](http://www.audiodesksysteme.de/)

UK Distributor:  
Lyngdorf Audio UK  
Tel. (44)(0)8709 100 100  
Net. [www.lyngdorfaudio.co.uk](http://www.lyngdorfaudio.co.uk)  
Price: £795

Canadian Distributor:  
Globe Audio Marketing  
Email: [info@globeaudiomkt.com](mailto:info@globeaudiomkt.com)  
North American telephone:  
+ 1 800 330 3804  
Canadian Retail Price: \$1800Cdn

# Clearly Superior...

## Quadraspire's QX 600 LA Acrylic Speaker Stands

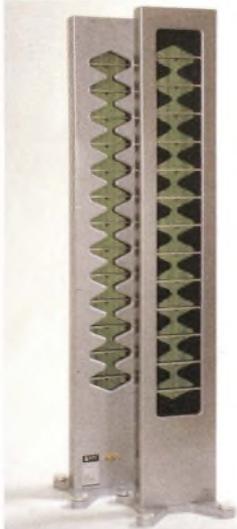
by Chris Thomas

Simplicity in a hi-fi system is seldom a bad thing and it doesn't get much simpler than the Quadraspire acrylic speaker stands which have become a permanent fixture in my home system since I first installed them a couple of months ago. Once thought of as just a method of lifting smaller speakers off the floor, stands have come under much greater scrutiny over the past few years in much the same way as equipment supports. Science would seem to be the answer to designing the "perfect" support and I know there have been all sorts of studies and analysis of the

vibrations involved, and that different designers have incorporated ideas based on these into their designs. The end result seems to be less of a consensus than ever. Even companies with vast experience, all seem to offer a different solution to the problem. Check out the manufacturers' own stands that come supplied with speakers and you are forced to conclude that aesthetic considerations play as big a part in their offerings as the musical results. Can an inadequate speaker stand limit the performance of a high quality audio system? Absolutely.

As the speaker is seen by the stand as a vibrating box, there are all sorts of issues, not least the materials to be used and in what order (a problem that Quadraspire has neatly avoided by building a stand entirely from acrylic). Then those two critical areas of activity, the interface between the floor and stand and the meeting of stand and speaker cabinet. What is certain though is that the speaker should not move in the direction that the bass driver excursions encourage it to. The easiest and most common way of designing a high quality speaker stand seems ▶

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► to be based around the premise of high mass. Give the speaker a relatively heavy structure to sit on and it won't move. This is certainly the route that JMLabs took when designing a stand to support their Micro Utopia Be, the speakers that I currently use at home. They are quite fussy when it comes to partnering equipment and do not synergise well with certain amplifiers, but the sound of the Micros to me has become the sound of both speaker and stand. However, I always had the idea that the speaker had more to give and it seems that I wasn't the only one thinking this way. Musicworks, who designed the stand for Quadraspire, had also understood that here was a very fine speaker whose potential they thought was being limited by its support, so they proposed a rather radical solution in the form of a pair of ultra lightweight and rather wobbly all-acrylic structures.

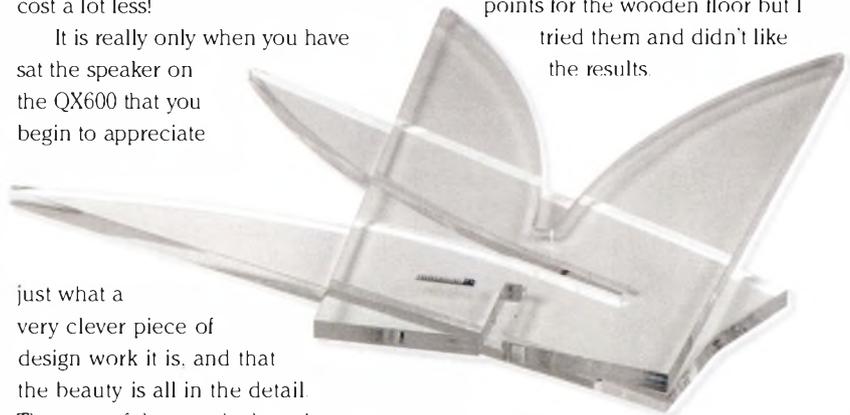
When they arrived I realised that these were possibly the only speaker stands that I had ever tried where I could pick both of them up with two fingers of one hand. They come as a flat pack and have no moving parts. This means there are no screws, spikes or other adjustables to complicate the purity of the design. They take about 10 seconds to assemble as this consists of simply slotting the two 15mm thick pieces of each stand together into the shape of a cross. The fit is quite loose and in the hand they feel so relatively flimsy that you wonder how on earth they are going to be able to work with a speaker of the Micro's weight. Incidentally, there are two versions of the stand: the QX600 A which has a 210mm square footprint and 130mm square top dimension, and the QX600 LA reviewed here, with a 300x390mm footprint and 180x260 virtual top-plate. Both are 600mm tall. Quadraspire have also used the same construction to create a range of small, cruciform acrylic

equipment supports based on either 25mm or 50mm cubic dimensions. RG will be reporting on these in the next issue, but he likes them nearly as much as I like the stands – and they cost a lot less!

It is really only when you have sat the speaker on the QX600 that you begin to appreciate

just what a very clever piece of design work it is, and that the beauty is all in the detail. The tops of the stand where it meets the speaker are slightly bowed so the only contact points are four very small silicone patches while at the bottom there are no spikes or other complex interfaces.

The acrylic is merely left with a soft nose that will not harm wooden floors in any way and will also give a good foundation on carpeted surfaces. Quadraspire supplied some silicone points for the wooden floor but I tried them and didn't like the results.



If you are wondering about the solidity of sitting with no spikes and especially with four and not three feet then take a look at the way each leg is shaped. When you sit a speaker on the top the weight causes the legs to splay slightly (remember the loose fitting parts) and this locks the stand, giving it a very firm grounding. With a speaker in situ the whole set-up is quite twisty but highly resistant to front to back movement. Their low mass makes experimenting with speaker positioning so much easier as you can pick the whole thing up as one and for those with wooden flooring I have to say that you will never find an easier stand to move. I would however recommend that, once you have found the ideal positioning, you remove the speakers, pick the stand up from the floor and gently replace them to make sure that you have all the pre-tension out of them before remounting the speakers.

Sound-wise the difference is quite remarkable. At first it seems as though the whole tonal balance has lightened and that there is less low end but as you listen further you realise that the bass is less bloated and leaner but, if anything, there is more pure extension and certainly more life ►

► and movement. The dynamics are noticeably better and bass instruments become more pitch accurate and the music gains a better sense of rhythmic flow. It feels as if the speaker has had a load removed from its back and has acquired an agility that it didn't have before. But this has much greater musical impact than just cleaning up the bass as its effect is felt right across the speaker's impressive bandwidth. Right through the mid-band there is better separation and articulation. The sound is leaner, with better definition and that tweeter now seems to stretch ever upwards and even more dynamically. I also felt that the sense of rhythmic tension and precision improved to a surprising degree and that the whole system was starting and stopping, across the bandwidth, better than it had ever done before. The musical

flow seems liberated and less rooted to the ground and this is visually reinforced, as they now appear to float in the air, as the acrylic is virtually see-through.

The obvious conclusion is that I am now hearing more of the speaker and less of the stand and I can find no musical evidence to contradict this. The stand that JM provide with the Micro is not bad but I think that this is better and I only wish I had had a pair when I reviewed their 1007Be a couple of issues ago as Quadraspire tell me they are just as impressive sitting under those. I can also see no reason why they shouldn't be just as successful with many other quality stand-mount speakers and I have to say that if you own a pair you really should try to borrow these Quadraspires from your dealer and see if they work,

because if they do then you will be looking at a hell of an upgrade for reasonable money (and I wish I could write that a little more often). I can make no blind predictions obviously but, considering how little effort they take to install, I'd give them a go if I were you. And that's a firm recommendation. ►+

Prices:

QX600 A	£200
QX600 LA	£400

Manufacturer:

Quadraspire.  
Tel: (44)(0) 1225 333360  
Fax: (44)(0) 1225 338083  
Net: [www.quadraspire.com](http://www.quadraspire.com)

# Quiet time...

## The Sennheiser PXC300 NoiseGard noise-cancelling headphones

by Roy Gregory

One of the downsides that goes with this job is the amount of international travel involved. Don't get me wrong; I enjoy getting out and about and love the opportunity to visit foreign lands. No, it's just the getting there that does me in. Not just the jet-lag you understand (that normally gets me on the way home) but the effect on my ears. The constant barrage of sound combined with the pressure changes kills my hearing for days – at least as far as the subtler nuances go. With a 11-hour flight to the Denver show looming, it was enough to finally stir

me into action. The result of my self-preservation programme? One pair of Sennheiser PXC300 noise-cancelling headphones.

What constituted breakthrough, cutting-edge technology a few years ago becomes commonplace incredibly quickly these days, so the Sennheisers represent just one of a variety of options on the market, perhaps the best known coming from Bose. But I chose the PXC300s for a number of reasons: price, sonic (as well as anti-sonic) performance and size. The phones themselves use small,

circular ear pads, attached to a neat, folding headband. The cable passes through a plastic tube about the size of a packet of Rolos, before exiting to the standard mini-jack. This housing contains two AA batteries and the clever electronics that kill the external sound, and provides an on/off switch and a clip to attach the unit to your breast pocket or some other convenient place. The whole lot comes in a really handy little case that doesn't take up too much room in your carry-on, unlike the much bulkier, totally ►

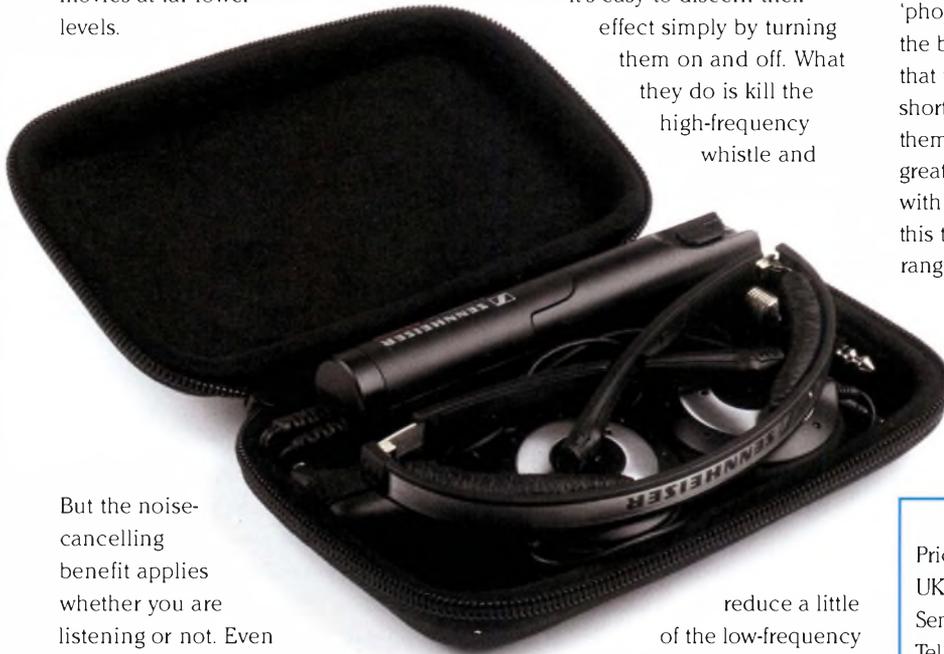
▶ enclosed Bose design.

Now, I can't claim great expertise in this area, having experienced only the Bose for comparison. However, the PXC300s are small and light enough to wear for an entire flight without irritating, or overheating your ears, and this is an important consideration. Being an audio magazine you might think that the sonic performance would be the primary consideration, but that's not so. In fact, the little Sennheisers are excellent in this respect, good enough to use as 'phones at home if you so wish, but given their pedigree that's hardly surprising. They totally demolish the freeby 'phones handed out on flights (as they should) as well as allowing you to listen to music or watch movies at far lower levels.



Don't get the wrong idea – the Sennheisers won't plunge you into an inky silence. Indeed, once in flight it's easy to discern their effect simply by turning them on and off. What they do is kill the high-frequency whistle and

less fatigued, with lowered jet-lag and your ears in far better shape. In fact, I was so surprised by the difference that at first I put it down to other factors. But half a dozen flights later, including the 13-hour haul to Vegas for CES, the results are utterly consistent – so the 'phones it is. What's more, the fact that the benefits apply regardless means that the 'phones are just as useful on short-haul flights too. I've yet to try them on a train, but I reckon they'd be great there too. Anybody who travels with regularity should certainly look at this technology. Sennheiser offer a range of models and prices, as do other manufacturers, but I recommend the PXC300s unreservedly. For me they offer the perfect balance of price, performance and convenience. ➤



But the noise-cancelling benefit applies whether you are listening or not. Even sleeping (which the small size of the PXC300s allows). The only problem I've experienced is with the quality of the sockets fitted to aircraft, which can make getting a consistent connection a bit of a trial.

reduce a little of the low-frequency rumble. It might not sound like much but believe me, combined with the lower volume used for entertainment and the ease with which you can now hear dialogue, you arrive at the other end of the flight far

Price: £130  
UK Distributor:  
Sennheiser (UK) Ltd  
Tel. (44)(0)1494 551531

Manufacturer:  
Sennheiser Electronic GmbH  
Net. [www.sennheiser.com](http://www.sennheiser.com)

# Little boxes, little boxes... Vertex AQ's Pico mechanical dampers

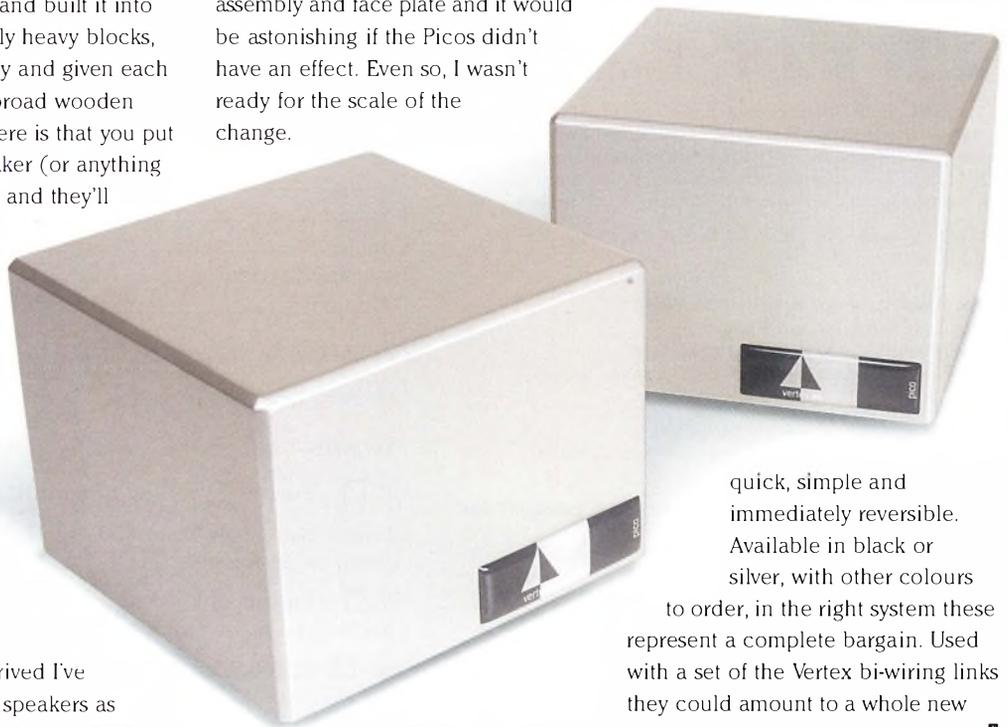
by Roy Gregory

Damping spurious mechanical energy in hi-fi equipment is hardly news; if you think it is, take a look at the ten pages I've just written about racks! But here's something a little different, if not exactly new. Vertex AQ have taken the matrix composition of their Kinabalu platforms and built it into small but surprisingly heavy blocks, painted them prettily and given each one three thin but broad wooden feet. The thinking here is that you put them on a loudspeaker (or anything else for that matter) and they'll help dissipate unwanted energy flying around the structure. Speakers are the obvious candidate, simply because they have drive units generating large amounts of mechanical energy, as well as tuned air masses which also resonate.

Since they've arrived I've used the Picos with speakers as different as the Living Voice OBX-R2s, the Nola Pegasus and the Avalon NP2. In all cases they had a far from subtle impact on the sound, the biggest being the effect when placed on the cabinet directly above the Nola's upward firing mid-bass driver. However, even this paled into insignificance to the benefits when used with Eben's X-Baby. The Eben combines a small

cabinet with a powerful bass-mid driver, loaded by an improbably large port, making it pretty much a worst case scenario for intermodulation distortion. Add the large area radiator used for the high frequencies, along with its equally massive magnet assembly and face plate and it would be astonishing if the Picos didn't have an effect. Even so, I wasn't ready for the scale of the change.

one speaker to another, reflecting in part how effectively the designer has handled the problem to start with. But when the Picos are good they're very, very good and whilst you can't really describe them as cheap a trial is



Placing the Vertex cubes in the middle of the X-Baby top-plates banishes a cuppy colouration, intrusive glare and hardness on crescendos. The focus, separation and general clarity improve pretty dramatically too. The sound opens out, the music starts to breathe and in turn it really starts to sing.

The effects vary of course, from

quick, simple and immediately reversible. Available in black or silver, with other colours to order, in the right system these represent a complete bargain. Used with a set of the Vertex bi-wiring links they could amount to a whole new set of speakers. ➤

Vertex AQ Pico: £295/pr

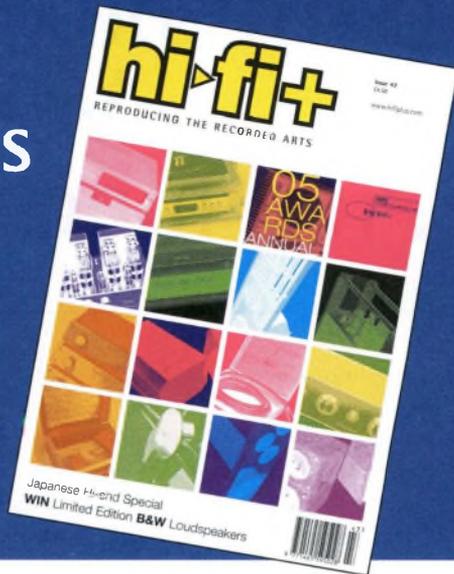
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# Record Reviews

## How To Read Them

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

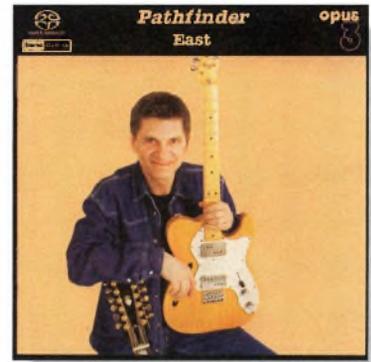
The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information the scale rates a standard,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

The reviewers are identified by their initials.

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

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East

Pathfinder

Opus 3 CD 22061 

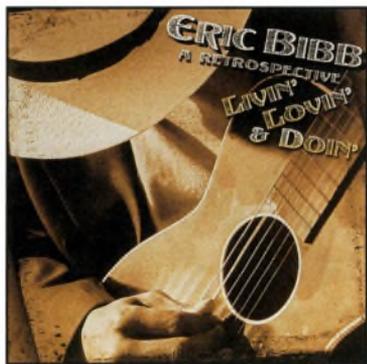
A guitar is a guitar is a guitar? Wrong-o! Each instrument has its own sound and its own soul. Seventeen(!) different types of guitars in a studio, up to five guitars a track, 45 days of recording, mixing and mastering – and every single note is worth the time and effort! *Pathfinder*, the latest release from the Swedish label Opus 3, is a kind of movie for the ears.

Take a little bit of Latin, mix it with a little bit of rock, add a dash of pop and some Django Reinhardt style, and... No, it's not that simple! Listen two, three times, and you will realise that Bert "East" Östlund is a superb musician who really works miracles. Using a special overdubbing technique, this album has been created layer by layer – like one of those masterpieces from Da Vinci and Co. And that's what it is: A masterpiece! However, it's no antique, but in a modern, or more precisely, a 50's/60's style. Östlund's music isn't a mere mixture of stylistic elements, he's no simple chameleon but has found in a career spanning over 40 years, his own musical language. The result is as pleasing as it is emotive: Catchy, but never superficial melodies in combination with excellent technical skills make a delighting easy-listening sound that should long survive the summer!

AKB

RECORDING  
MUSIC





Eric Bibb

Livin', Lovin' & Doin'

Hatman 2020 (CD)

This collection is a retrospective covering Eric Bibb's releases for Hatman records. Bibb is more than familiar to audiophiles from his early releases for Opus 3, prime demo fodder and very enjoyable to boot. His later releases for Manaton/Hatman have also been worthwhile and this set forms a reasonably comprehensive overview of the man's later work. Standouts from this collection include a powerful duet with Ruthie Foster in 'For You', a lovely, rolling version of 'Tell Riley', an impassioned version of the Rev Gary Davis' 'I Heard The Angels Singing' and a great live version of 'Don't You Ever Let Nobody Drag Your Spirit Down'. The latter is powered by the Cultural Heritage Choir delivering great slabs of gospel choruses with Bibb joined by no less a luminary than Wilson Pickett to share lead vocals. The CD also includes a new live version of 'Saucer'n'Cup', and a studio version of a new Bibb song 'Trust the Dawn'. For relaxed, undemanding enjoyment Eric Bibb is always a safe bet and this set doesn't disappoint. I recommend starting with the Opus 3 releases; they combine strong songs with outstanding recordings that still have the edge over the later releases. If however you know the man this set forms an excellent introduction to his more recent stuff with the added bonus of two new tracks.

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DD



Jewel

Goodbye Alice In Wonderland

Atlantic Records 7567837992 (CD)

11 years ago Jewel Kilcher appeared to come from nowhere with the release of *Pieces Of You*, an acoustic folk album reminiscent of Joni Mitchell which has gone on to sell over 11 million copies. Subsequent releases never quite reached those numbers but she remains a popular artist, even allowing for the odd misadventure. The last album *0304* was a big selling release but didn't do her artistic credibility any good; no doubt some bright spark at the record company thought it would be a good idea to turn her into the new Madonna. Fortunately *Goodbye Alice...* harks back to the kind of introspective and biographical style she does best. Jewel has an incredibly flexible and at times exhilarating voice, and that coupled to her beautiful lyrics makes for a pretty intoxicating brew. These 13 songs tell the story of her life, from humble beginnings in Alaska to Stephenville Texas, where she now resides. Bob Dylan's a fan, and on 'Stephenville Tx' quite obviously an influence. She can't be accused of being a straightforward composer, not with her lyrical prowess and the fascinating grasp she has on melody and structure. Right now I can't think of many singer/songwriters out there with as much talent as Jewel, and this is her best since *Pieces Of You*.

AH



...And You Will Know Us By The Trail Of Dead

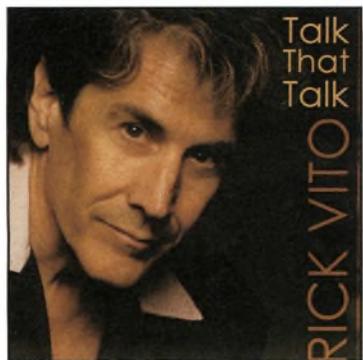
Worlds Apart

Interscope Records 2103697 (CD)

Every release from ...Trail Of Dead has seen then become more and more mainstream, leaving behind some of the most out-of-control elements in their music, even embracing song structures and melodies. Their last album *Source Tags And Codes* went as far as to achieve moderate commercial success. Since then they have dropped out of the limelight and so *Worlds Apart* was released with little fanfare. This record may have received criticism from their original fans, but personally I consider it to be their greatest achievement to date. Listening to it, it's hard to see how they could ever write a finer record. The album succeeds so well because it perfectly matches their old anarchic sound with something more punchy and accessible. Any more structured and they would have sold out, any less so would be a regression. The balance they have managed to strike allows each element of their music to be heard and appreciated. With elements of Pink Floyd and Mercury Rev, they blend classic American rock with progressive influences and then simply let it all grow and evolve. ...Trail Of Dead are a dying breed these days, settling for nothing less than the monumental. Every song is massive, an epic soundscape with boundless ambition. *Worlds Apart* drips with bile and bitterness for all the injustice they see, spat out just for you.

MC





## Rick Vito

### Talk That Talk

Hypertension HYP6248 

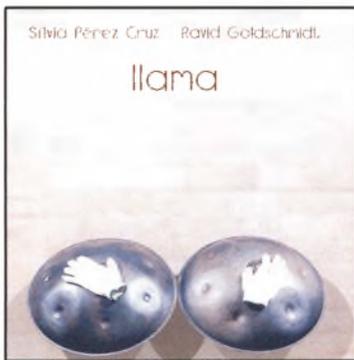
If your record collection takes in a lot of the classic American bands and singer/songwriters then you will have heard Vito's sparkling guitar playing leaping out of your speakers. He's been a member of Fleetwood Mac Mark 2, toured with Bob Seger and featured on his records (it was his fantastic slide solo on 'Like A Rock'), played on Jackson Browne's 'Lawyers In Love' - the list goes on and on.

He's also a highly respected songwriter; he penned 'Midnight, 2am' for Shemekia Copeland which won a W.C.Handy award, so his credentials are second to none. Vito's also released a string of fine solo albums and just to make us all sick, he's a good singer too!

*Talk That Talk*, his latest album for German label Hypertension, is another first class release rippling with brilliance. The style is bluesy but mixed liberally with rock 'n' roll, swing and r'n'b sensibilities, and right from the off he has the groove in his pocket. Rockers like 'Talk That Talk' sit comfortably alongside lazy, slide-driven back porch numbers ('Easy Does It') and Albatross-esque instrumentals ('Change Is Gonna Come'), and it's one of those albums where once you've got to the end you just press play and listen to it all over again. Oh, and he produced it as well. It's just so unfair...

AH

RECORDING   
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## Silvia Pérez Cruz & Ravid Goldschmidt

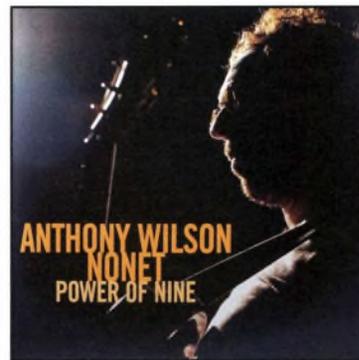
### llama

M-A Recordings M070A 

Sometimes, there are really mystic moments: You listen to a record and the music touches you deep inside. I mean the moment when time suddenly seems to be irrelevant - as happened with *llama*! It's really incredible, the sound Ravid Goldschmidt raises from the Hang, a strange Swiss percussion instrument. What at first glance seems to be two woks, emerges as a fascinating percussion instrument. Be reassured, from the very first note, the sound will attract and fascinate you! It's music from history, from lost cultures with ruminant repetitiveness, underscored by the character of the Hangs: archaic, Pentatonic and Aeolic. Against all expectations, the Hang (Swiss-German for hand) is an instrument with a wide range of dynamics and variety of colours - and Ravid's performance is clear evidence of his virtuosity! Recorded in a small chapel in Barcelona, the CD captures the atmosphere and spaciousness completely. *llama* (which means "flame" or "fire") takes you on a journey to lost cultures, but also into yourself. The voice of Silvia Pérez Cruz with her dark timbre, earthy, with a melancholic undertone in each note, seems almost like a second instrument. The Spanish or African influenced songs, alternating with instrumental tracks, draw from jazz, traditional folk and classical music. This apparently random mating develops into a powerful dream team to create a new listening experience. My discovery of the year!

AKB

RECORDING   
MUSIC 



## Anthony Wilson Nonet

### Power of Nine

Groove Note GRV 1035-1  

I first heard part of this album less than an hour after hearing the Wilson Nonet perform live at the Stereophile Show in Los Angeles. Wilson sat in front of me and producers Ying Tan and Joe Harley sat to my right, so it sounded in some ways like the group was right there in the room with me. Or maybe it was the Titan cartridge and Lyra Connoisseur phono and line stages. Wilson came to wide public attention playing guitar for Diana Krall, and she repays him by singing one cut on this album. He is also the son of bandleader Gerald Wilson, and his father's genes show through here - this is an arranger's album, filled with parts of three suites composed and arranged by Wilson. No mere accompanist (despite backing Madeleine Peyroux as well as Krall), he plays superbly on two vintage Gibsons and a John Monteleone custom Radio Flyer guitar. His playing and that of his group is top notch. The five horn frontline gives this an orchestral feeling, and Wilson's guitar is mixed in well with the group rather than demanding front and center stage. The package comes with one full album cut at 33 1/3 rpm, with a second LP cut at 45 rpm. Only one cut, 'Looking Back' with Diana Krall, is duplicated at both speeds. Another successful original recording from Groove Note.

DDD

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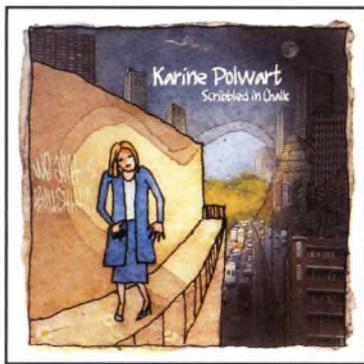
Graham Coxon

### Love Travels At Illegal Speeds

Parlophone 354 1342 

Graham's last album *Happiness in Magazines* marked a turning point in his career post-Blur. The album was crammed full of songs that could easily have been on any of Blur's previous albums, but rendered with a rawness that the band never really achieved. This was the sound of Graham Coxon leaving behind wilfully obscure punk concepts and embracing popular music. With this new release Graham seems to go even further down this road, with mixed results. Whereas *Happiness...* sounded like an artist excited to be free of his (admittedly self-imposed) restraints *Love Travels...* sounds like someone trying to work out what to do with his new freedom. Perhaps I'm being a bit too harsh, because in truth I love this record anyway, despite its shortcomings, but there's just something slightly disappointing in it all. It's true that about half the tracks are instant classics, bursting with energy or emotion, recorded without compromise and ready to be unleashed on the charts. But then between these tracks, whereas before there might have been something savage and unexpected, there now seems to be something indifferent and insipid. Don't let that put you off buying *Love Travels At Illegal Speeds* as this is still a great album, with material that can compete with the best of the best. It's just that this record seems to be treading water when it could be pushing forward.

MC  
RECORDING   
MUSIC 



Karine Polwart

### Scribbled In Chalk

Spitfire Records SPIT028 

It's very difficult to put a label on Karine Polwart's music; she's a little bit folk, slightly alt-country, occasionally indie and sometimes dips a toe in pop. As a songwriter she doesn't follow any particular style of writing, and as a lyricist and observer of what goes on around her she's second to none. The contents of her songs can be deceptively harrowing too. 'Maybe There's A Road' deals with sex trafficking and contains lines like "I'd rather not say why I couldn't stay home, now I get paid never to be alone". In Karine's world light and dark collide with one another, as documented by 'Daisy' which, if I'm reading it correctly, is about sexual abuse: "hey Daisy darling, don't spread your arms so wide... there are people in this world who don't think like you do". The band is essentially made up of acoustic and electric guitars, bass, drums and piano, but it's fleshed out with moogs, melodicas, glockenspiels and loop stations, and by a String Quartet known as Mr. Mcfall's Chamber. Traces of Kate Rusby, Joni Mitchell, Mary Chapin Carpenter and Joan Baez abound, although to call Polwart a copyist is to do her a serious disservice. She says she's really humbled by the stories people tell her about their lives. Equally, we should be grateful to her for the beautiful songs she gives us back.

AH  
RECORDING   
MUSIC 



John Fahey

### The Yellow Princess

Comet Italy/Vanguard 

I should declare my hand before giving an opinion on this album; I believe John Fahey to have been the greatest acoustic guitar player ever recorded. But I'll try to be as fair as I can with this review of what is considered by many to be his finest work. Recorded in 1967 this was the first Fahey album to reveal his technical mastery of the instrument and the breadth of his compositional brilliance. He combined the blues style of figures like Skip James and Bukka White with both western and Indian classical influences to produce a sound that has never been equalled in its power or diversity. It seems appropriate to compare him with the likes of John Coltrane and Keith Jarrett because of his inventiveness and ability to take you to places previously undiscovered. This is at its most apparent on tracks like 'Irish Setter' where his weighting of notes and the dynamic contrasts produced have a tremendous poignancy that elicits both sadness and joy. Unfortunately this pressing sounds as if its source is an original but occasionally rough vinyl LP! This affects some tracks more than others and for the most part the sound is vibrant and resolute. But hey, think of it this way – there is no other way of getting this on vinyl at a sensible price, and get it you should.

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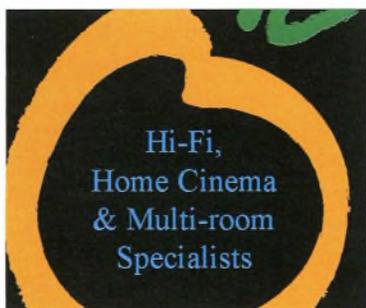
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**Hundred Reasons**

**kill your own**

V2 Music WR1036412

Hundred Reasons just keep on getting better. *Kill your own* sticks to their tried and trusted formula but adds just enough to keep the sound fresh and exciting. This album, their third, manages to be their most coherent and most powerful yet. The sound is driven by the rhythm section which provides a massive slab of sound on which they base their music. The bass and rhythm guitars provide the dynamic and depth that lend Hundred Reasons their power. But what elevates the band above their peers are their melodies or, more accurately, that they have melodies. *Kill your own* is built on a foundation of strong, and at times surprisingly soulful, songs. In order to keep these tunes intact in the midst of a storm of guitars the band have to keep the production tight and the vocals flexible, something they achieve with apparent ease. Those vocals flick between harsh screams and fragile whispers in the blink of an eye, sometimes frail and alone, sometimes backed by close harmonies. Where other bands condemn their songs with clumsy execution, Hundred Reasons lift off just enough to keep it all a cut above the average rock band.

*Kill your own* steps toward capturing the band in a more relaxed way and gets closer to their live sound. The product of a more organic writing process, this record sounds more natural than their previous two and is all the better for it.

MC  
RECORDING   
MUSIC



**Marianne Faithfull**

**Before The Poison**

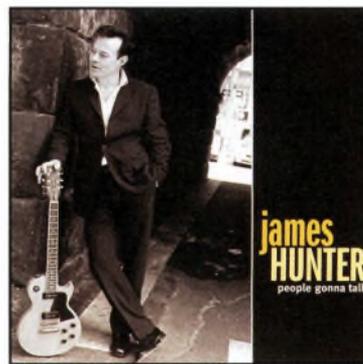
Naïve 8001 61

The majority of the compositions on this ten song album are split between P.J. Harvey and Nick Cave, although Damon Albarn chips in on one number, 'Last Song'. Faithfull contributes lyrics to seven of the numbers. Both P.J. Harvey and Nick Cave also featured in the recording. No wonder then that this is an outstanding album. A million miles of course from Faithfull's breathy 1960's debut, shunted firmly aside by 1979's *Broken English*, the first album to feature her mature, somewhat raddled but emotion packed voice. Here she demonstrates that she's developed further still, and has delivered an album that easily stands up alongside that classic. Nor could she have chosen better collaborators. Harvey's deceptively simple guitar and Rob Ellis' powerful percussion are the perfect foil for Faithfull's voice in the opening 'The Mystery of Love'. 'My Friends Have' comes on like a contemporary Velvet Underground, 'Crazy Love' with Nick Cave, eases back a little with Faithfull declaiming the lyrics against a richer backdrop including some great violin from Catherine Browning. Other standouts include the powerful title track, the chilling 'There Is a Ghost', and the over the top Cave/Faithfull 'Desperanto'.

With a nice pressing and good clean production this is an album that'll repay repeated listening. Oh, and play it loud.

Supplier: [www.vivante.co.uk](http://www.vivante.co.uk)  
DD

RECORDING   
MUSIC



**James Hunter**

**People Gonna Talk**

Rounder Records 116612187-2

Let's get one thing straight from the start. James Hunter is an amazing singer. Not a good singer, but a flat-out amazing one. What's even more amazing is with the voice he has you expect him to be black and American. He's actually white and comes from Colchester, which makes what comes out of his mouth when he sings very hard to believe. You see, this man is a dead ringer for Sam Cooke and he writes songs that sound like they came from the late 50's and 60's. So authentic are they that if one were to play a Sam Cooke song on the radio and immediately follow it with one of Hunter's, it would be very difficult to spot the difference. *People Gonna Talk* contains 14 songs, all of them Hunter originals. The recording process was conducted without headphones and very much 'live' in the studio using analog equipment, thus further emulating the feel of those early recordings. The groove Hunter and his band cook up is incredibly infectious and capable of filling a dance floor in seconds. The sound is punctuated by razor sharp horns which add just the right amount of bump and pump in all the right places and oh boy, do they swing as a unit!

America has taken Hunter to their hearts, and it's not difficult to understand why.

AH

RECORDING   
MUSIC

# Dream Date...

## Meeting the legendary Joe Bonnamassa

by Andrew Hobbs

It's 4.25pm on the 14th of February and I'm pacing nervously outside Mr. Kyps in Poole, not, you understand, because I'm waiting for a date (it is Valentine's Day) but because I'm booked to conduct an interview with one of the blues world's hottest properties ... Mr. Joe Bonnamassa. As I approach the door I can hear six string fireworks going off and my stomach begins to churn - this is, after all, one of my heroes I'm just about to meet. I ring the bell and I'm met by the owner who takes me through to the hall where I stand back and marvel as Bonnamassa sound checks with his band. Kyp walks up to the front of the stage to tell him I'm here. Bonnamassa looks surprised and booms: "Who? Christ, no one told me!" Oh dear, a less than auspicious start, methinks. Joe looks up, sticks his thumb in the air and shouts: "Drew, bear with us while we finish the sound check. I'll be with you as soon as I can!"

So for the next 30 minutes or so I decide to bear with him while I get treated to my own little impromptu performance. Me, a diet coke and my cigarette were being royally entertained by one of the best guitarists currently walking the planet and suddenly I wasn't in a rush to do the interview. Excluding a date with Sharon Stone I couldn't think of a better way to spend Valentine's Day.

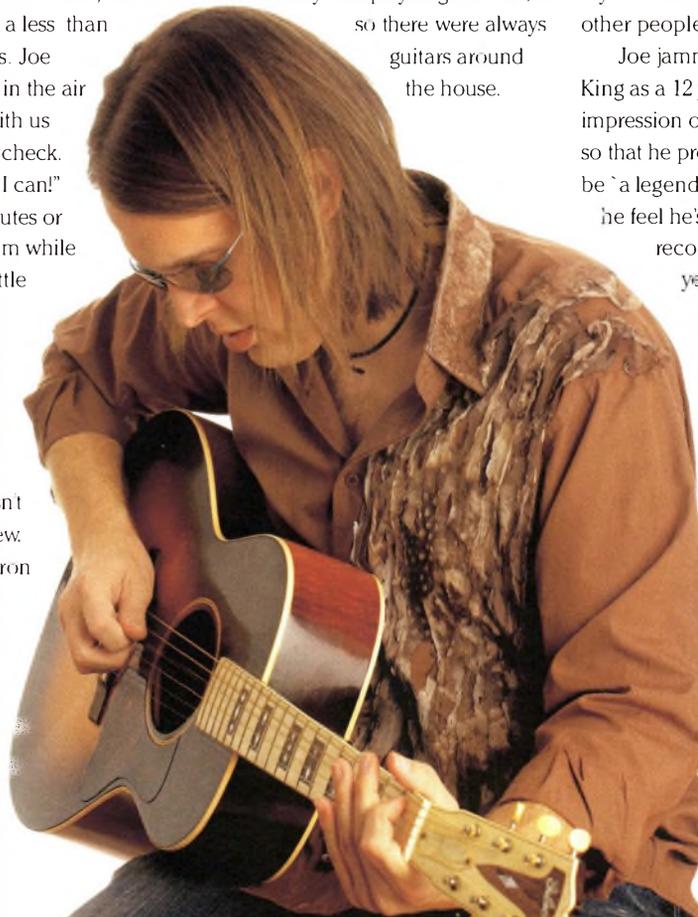
Joe dismisses the band and greets me with an outstretched hand and a big friendly smile.

"Sorry 'bout that, no one bothered to tell me you were coming. Who did you say you were from?" I mutter the immortal words *Hi-Fi Plus* but they don't register. "Come on backstage and you can ask me what you want to ask me" he says. Bonnamassa is not your archetypal head-up-his-ass rock star; he's charming, articulate and actually a little on the shy side, and more than happy to answer my hastily arranged questions.

As he has been playing guitar since he was 4 years old, I was dying to ask him if, when he picked it up for the first time, it felt like he was revisiting an old friend? "It did" he muses, "and I took to it real fast. I started playing classical and my dad played guitar too, so there were always guitars around the house."

I'm fourth generation; my great grandfather played trumpet, my grandfather played trumpet, my dad the guitar and now me. The musical interest comes from the Bonamassa side and I've always been encouraged to play". I decided to follow up the question by asking him who the greatest influences on his career were and I was somewhat surprised by his reply. "My dad, definitely - and Tom Dowd." Tom Dowd? Is that Tom Dowd the record producer? "Yep, he produced my first album and really shaped me as an artist. He got me focused on my own style and showed me what I was good at. I've worked with some great producers but he helped me develop my own sound as opposed to copying other people".

Joe jammed on stage with BB King as a 12 year old and left a lasting impression on the great man, so much so that he proclaimed the youngster to be 'a legend in the making'. So does he feel he's realised the potential BB recognised in him all those years ago? "All artists, even BB now - he's keen to learn new stuff. He's 80 this year, I've just got off tour with him and he's still keen to hear new stuff. You gotta see this guy, he's 80 years old and he's got his iPod and his computer set up and he's totally hip. That's the way it is; the minute you think you've learned everything there is to learn is the time to go out and do the farewell tour and retire". No plans to ▶



▶ do that just yet, Joe? "Nah, not this year - maybe next!"

At the time of this interview Bonamassa's new album 'You And Me' had not been made available for review. The only information I had to go on was a press release which mentioned it had been produced by legendary man-in-the-chair Kevin Shirley. He has an amazing track record for his work within the rock fraternity by way of bands as distinguished as Aerosmith, Led Zeppelin, The Black Crowes and Joe Satriani. So how did a producer from a different field come to link up with Bonamassa, and what did he bring to the sessions? "My manager knew somebody who knew him and we needed a producer, so we sent some stuff off for him to listen to. He came to see us play and said if you want to make the same old blues record then I'm not your guy, but if you want to try and do something different with the blues. ... I'm like, you got the job!" So you bonded well? "One of the best guys I ever worked with. It's him and Dowd - just awesome." And is he pleased with the results? "Oh awesome, I'm very excited about it, I think it's totally bluestastic!" Will he work with Shirley again? "Oh absolutely, that's what I told him. I said you got roped into this deal, the only downfall's you gotta do the next one!"

Rightly Bonamassa is lauded for his stunning virtuosity on the guitar, but what's seldom mentioned is how good a singer he is. I was intrigued to know what he thought about his voice and if he felt under-appreciated as a vocalist. "I under-appreciate myself as a singer! I hate my voice. I'm a guitar player who sings, not a singer who plays guitar, but I'm lucky enough to have a voice that doesn't have to be auto-tuned and I can sing relatively in tune live, but for me to pretend I'm Paul Rodgers is. ... insane. Do I work on the voice? Everyday. Does it take a lot more maintenance to work on the voice than it does the guitar? Absolutely! There are days when I can say a lot with my voice and move the

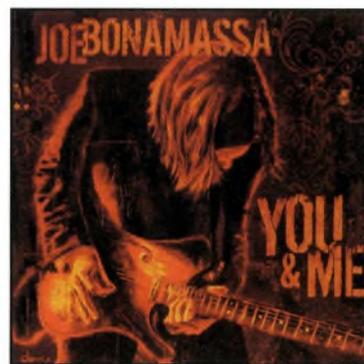
audience as much as I can with my guitar. .. those are the best days".

We'd covered guitar playing and singing so I thought it was time to get Joe's views on the art of song writing. Does he find it as easy as playing? "No. The best songs are the ones that sound like they've already been written by somebody else." And does he have a little black book full of half finished songs? "Nah, computer. I don't go around with a lot of half finished ideas though, I think the best ideas are the ones that stick in your head. The ones you labour over to the point of going crazy really don't come out as good. They sound very sterile - especially with blues. Blues is very spontaneous. So you got something cool? (clicks fingers). .. so, let's cut it!"

It's tempting to think that someone as talented as Bonamassa only had to look at a guitar to become a God. I asked him if he practiced a lot to get as good as he is now, and did he lock himself away in his bedroom for hours as a kid? "Yeah I did, I used to have a full studio in there; a Trident Console, 24 track reel to reel - tons of gear. I learned a lot just playing along to records ... you know, just melting into the guitar player and working out where he was coming from. I'd listen to Clapton, Kossoff; Jeff Beck, Rory Gallagher - *Irish Tour '74* was a big favourite for me."

As this interview is going into a hi-fi mag I concluded by asking him the six million dollar question: Vinyl or CD? His face lights up. "Definitely vinyl. Listen to 'Tres Hombres' by ZZ Top. On vinyl the opening guitar riff is right here ( puts hand close to face) and you go..wow! On CD it's just much further back, so it's definitely vinyl for me."

It's strange when you get to meet one of your heroes, you have them placed on a pedestal and expect them to be some God-like apparition but they're not, they're just human beings like you and me. Well, almost. ▶+



## Joe Bonamassa

### You And Me

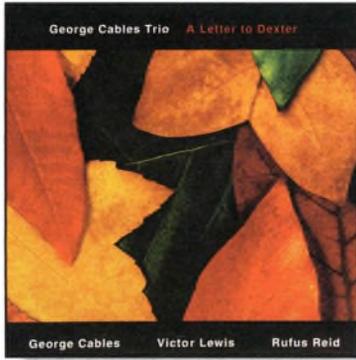
Provogue PRD7158.2 (CD)

There are 21 different guitars used by Joe Bonamassa on his sixth studio album. It might sound like overkill but mark my words, this boy does each and every one of them full justice. Of the current crop of young hotshot blues guitarists currently on the scene, Bonamassa is by far the most innovative and inventive - and certainly the most talented. This is the first time he's worked with producer Kevin Shirley and between them they have crafted a truly remarkable album, one that stretches the boundaries but still remains faithful to the blues. Surrounding himself with a bunch of top notch musicians (including Jason Bonham on drums) Bonamassa burns it up with a fine mix of originals and well chosen covers, and the results are never less than spectacular. The cap is firmly tilted towards the guitar gods of yesteryear; Jeff Beck, Clapton (in his Cream Days), Rory Gallagher, Led Zeppelin and Free are all reference points. In fact, one of the covers is a little known Led Zep track called 'Tea For One'. The album is a perfect blend of bluesy shuffles, sensitive acoustic numbers, sensual slowies and wild 70's rock psychedelia, brought right up to date. It's a career best and the finest heavy blues album I've heard since Led Zep 2. And yes, you read that last bit right.

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RECORDING  
MUSIC





## George Cables Trio

### A Letter to Dexter

Kind of Blue 10006 

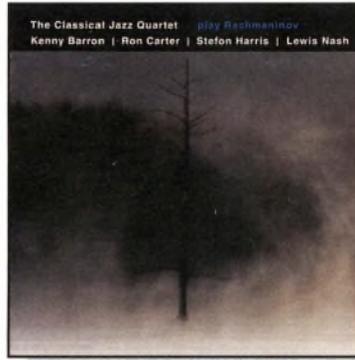
The sleeve notes open with this quote from George Cables: "To me Dexter Gordon didn't just play jazz, he was Jazz... the years I spent playing with Dexter are some of the most rewarding moments in my life. This CD is a thank-you note to Dexter for sharing his stories, his talents, his music and his Dexterness with us." The CD sees two other members of Dexter's bands joining forces with Cables (piano): Rufus Reid (bass) and Victor Lewis (drums). It comprises a strong selection of Dexter Gordon originals along with tunes he regularly played including 'Catalonian Nights', an arrangement of 'Body and Soul' and 'I Told You So' written by Cables and named by Gordon. Cables' love for this music comes across in every note of this very enjoyable set. Standouts include a languid 'Polka Dots and Moonbeams', a lively reading of 'Fried Bananas' and the closing number, the classic Monk tune 'Round About Midnight' a reminder perhaps of Dexter Gordon's Oscar nominated role in the film of the same title, in an interpretation that cleverly echoes elements of Monk's unique style within Cables' masterful interpretation.

Very well recorded – the piano centre stage and foreground with Reid's bass to the left and Lewis' drums to the right, is unusually well captured – and a very fitting tribute to the great man.

Supplier: [www.kindofbluerecords.com](http://www.kindofbluerecords.com)

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MUSIC 



## The Classical Jazz Quartet

### Play Rachmaninov

Kind of Blue KOB10004 

Despite the quality of the musicians involved here (few would argue with the standing of Kenny Barron, Ron Carter, Stefon Harris and Lewis Nash) I confess to a sinking feeling when I saw the title of this album. The marriage of classical music and jazz is rarely a comfortable fit and shades of Jacques Loussier and panatela cigars came to mind. I needn't have worried though as this is a classy affair indeed. Arranged by Bob Belden this CD in nine movements based upon Rachmaninov's *Piano Concerto #2 in C Minor*, allows proper space for these top players, each of whom incidentally has some background in classical music, to take wing. The opening movement sees the quartet kick off with the familiar theme hammered out by Harris' marimba. For a moment it feels like this is going to be all too slavish a reproduction but immediately Barron and the rest are away, using the theme as a springboard for some superb flights of improvisation. Throughout you get reminders of the core work but this is merely the match to the band's fuse, resulting in some startlingly effective musical fireworks. This CD is the first of three that will be released by the quartet this year. The next releases will cover works by Tchaikovsky and Bach. On the evidence of this very strong set I'm looking forward to their arrival.

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## Madeleine Peyroux

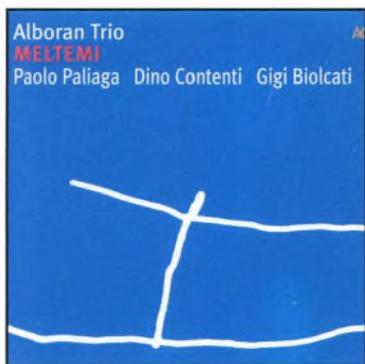
### Careless Love

Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-284 

Vocalist Peyroux is sometimes compared to Billie Holiday as a jazz singer who sings more blues than jazz. This album seems more a nightclub infused pop album, and is perhaps not Peyroux's best. The mix of tunes is eclectic, included Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan, William C. Handy and Hank Williams. She is backed by a jazz ensemble, which is well recorded, and in far better sound than the original compact disc. Is she "Everywoman" in this mix of cowboy, blues, rock and chanteuse tunes? I'll leave that to you, as she does bring her own sense of feeling to this wide range of styles. Still, she is more successful with some songs than others. 'Dance Me to The End Of Love' makes me yearn for an entire album of Peyroux singing Leonard Cohen tunes, whereas her rendition of William C. Handy's 'Careless Love' makes me wonder how good the song would sound with Louis Armstrong. On first hearing, her rendition of Dylan's 'You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go' seems sacrilegious, but on the second or third listen it fits better with the flow of the album. Peyroux shares writing credit on one song, 'Don't Wait Too Long', and it's one of the best performances on the album. The disc is half-speed mastered by Stan Ricker and Shawn Britton, and it's a first class job all the way, easily bettering the CD.

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**Alboran Trio**

**Meltemi**

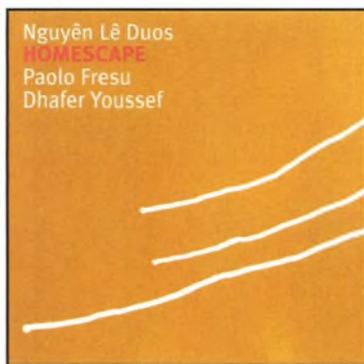
ACT 9448-2 (CD)

Alboran is a term for the entrance to the Mediterranean – the Straits of Gibraltar – the waterway that joins the European and African continents. The Alboran Trio was founded in 2003 by Paola Paliaga (piano), Dino Contenti (bass), and Gigi Biolcati (drums). Despite very varied and different backgrounds and distinctly individual approaches to their art, the trio shared a love of acoustic music and a desire to work together, seeking a new take on jazz which would blend each player's strengths, their European and African influences, to create a greater whole.

On the evidence of this set I'd say that they have succeeded admirably. The album is built around a batch of original compositions by Paliaga (with the exception of the closing 'Pinochio'), and arranged by the trio. All are superbly played with good space for solos from each and no single musician unduly dominant. Whilst it is a very consistent set, favourite tracks include the lovely 'Cinque Lunghissimi Minuti' with a particularly fluid bass solo from Contenti, and the outstanding 'Duende' with a powerful foundation of rolling percussion providing a platform for the soaring tones of the bowed bass. This is a really engaging set: tuneful, fresh, expertly played and well recorded.

Supplier: [www.actmusic.com](http://www.actmusic.com)

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**Nguyen Le, Paolo Fresu,  
Dhafer Youssef**

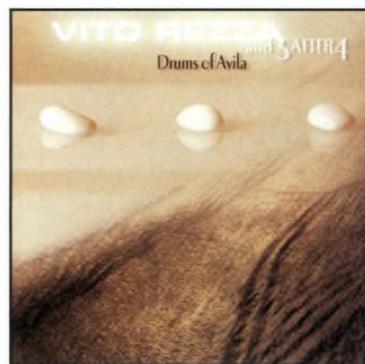
**Homescape**

ACT 9444-2 CD (CD)

Self taught guitarist Nguyen Le has collaborated with the likes of John McLaughlin, Michel Petruccianni and Ornette Coleman. Most of this set was recorded with either Sardinian Paolo Fresu (trumpet, flugel-horn and electronics) or Dhafer Youssef (loud, vocals and electronics). When collaborating with Fresu each piece is entirely improvised with no composed material – a blank canvas – with the occasional exception such as their superb interpretation of Billy Strayhorn's 'Chelsea Bridge'. With Dhafer Youssef, things were a little more structured, with the pair collaborating in the development of each piece. Either way, one thing is clear from the get-go; Nguyen Le is a very inventive and skilled player, a master of his instrument with a keen ear for different textures and effects. The opening 'Stranieri' comes on initially like a Nils Petter Molvaer track: phased muted trumpet, pounding percussion, electronic effects, before Nguyen kicks in with a fractured guitar solo. The second track 'Bianca' changes direction again opening with acoustic guitar overlying a rich bed of percussion leading into wordless multi-tracked vocal choruses as the backing becomes increasingly rich. And so it goes throughout this very strong album: There are enough layers here to keep you engaged and hearing different nuances for months to come with every track delivering a fresh and unusual perspective.

Supplier: [www.actmusic.com](http://www.actmusic.com)

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**Vito Rezza and 5 after 4**

**Drums of Avila**

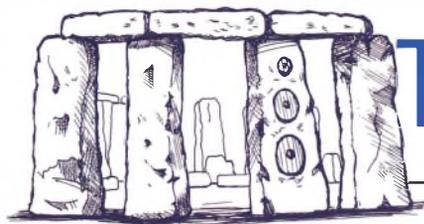
Alma Records ACD14302 (CD)

Drummer Vito Rezza has recorded with the likes of Joni Mitchell, John Lee Hooker and Big Mama Thornton. He has assembled a stellar cast to contribute to this release, including Michael Brecker, Toots Thielemans and Joey DeFrancesco. The lyrical title track sees Rezza joined by fellow percussionist Vinnie Colaiuta with solid bass support from Peter Cardinali providing the foundation for some soaring sax, flute and bass clarinet from John Johnson to provide a really engaging opener. The frenetically paced 'Manhattan Bounce' provides a rapid change of gear with the two drummers driving things ahead to provide an explosive backdrop for Brecker's tenor pyrotechnics. The pace slows again with 'Vichnu's Dream' featuring the wonderful Toots Thielemans and a very nice Hammond B3 solo from Joey DeFrancesco. The 12/8 rhythm of 'Torontella' is given texture and atmosphere by the Bob Becker's Kalimba and percussion and so it goes through this very strong set. 'In Dreams' sees vocals from Benani Choudhury offset by the Bratislava Radio Symphony Orchestra (really), along with Toots' harmonica and the Fender Rhodes and piano of Jonathan Goldsmith. The CD closes with the Keith Jarrett inspired 'Number Nine' with very fine piano from Matt Horner. A solid, weighty and spacious recording does full justice to the outstanding musicianship in this excellent set.

Supplier: [www.AlmaRecords.com](http://www.AlmaRecords.com)

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# The History Man

by Richard S. Foster

## What is Mr. Armstrong going to do for an encore? *L'Archet d'Or* – Volumes IX through XII

It's been approximately 3 years, or Issue 24 to be exact, since I began to wax rhapsodically about this new series from the Martzy man of Coup D'Archet, Glenn Armstrong. He remains totally committed to uncovering the dazzling gems locked away in the archives of Europe's great radio stations. I've talked at length about the difficulties he has encountered in his sojourns with tapes too far deteriorated to be of use and lacquers with music no longer retrievable in any way. (When visiting Glenn last year, I heard first hand, a CDR from one of the great French pianists which alas, was almost unlistenable due to distortion). Add to all of this the licensing difficulties, the politics and egos involved, and you're left with one of the most frustrating tasks in all of modern musicdom. How does he do it?

He has exposed us to some of the World's finest musicians. There are the pianists: Nadine Désouches, Cécile Ousset, Agnelle Bundervoët, Marcelle Meyer, Yvonne Lefébure, Jacqueline Eymar, Geneviève Joy and now Germaine Thyssens-Valentin. Then there are the violins of Jeanne Gautier and Camilla Wicks. Add to this cavalcade of stars, the violoncellos of the legendary Maurice Maréchal and the great André Levy and your musical journey is almost complete. Let's not forget that fine harpsichordist, Aimee Van De Wiele, and now we'll add the magical Loewenguth Quartet and the flautist Michel Debost to the mix.

If you check the sidebar, you will see that once again, Armstrong has offered up a wonderful... no superlative, mixture of repertoire to complete Volume 3 in the *L'Archet D'Or* series.

Peruse these offerings with care because you're going to be hard pressed to match the music making in this one small box. Like the previous eight records in the series, everything is fresh and new, and previously unreleased. These are not re-issues and for those who love classical music, the variety offered continues to impress and astound.

While I was aware of what was coming in this latest offering, I wasn't prepared for the level, quality and calibre of playing by these artists. I remember

being green with envy when I found out Bundervoët was going to be represented with an all Ravel record. Well, I don't have to be green anymore.

I can enjoy this any day I like – like I do. Ravel is one of those composers whose works I can listen to every day. I have these pieces performed by Marcelle Meyer on Discophiles Français, Yvonne Lefebure on

Coup 008 and French FY/Solstice and as much as I love them, Bundervoët is too special for words.

Let me give you a quick lesson in how rare the Bach by André Levy truly is. Levy of course, like Maréchal, uses the long-bow technique. This of course creates a different tone from the sound box of the violoncello. Levy recorded the complete suites for unaccompanied 'cello for the French label Lumen in the 1950's. This is an ultra rare set of records and whenever it appears on the collectors market, you can be sure the price will approach £10,000! Think about it. I don't know where Armstrong uncovered this gem, but this alone is more than worth the price of ALL twelve records in the complete series. These performances are very special and they



▶ certainly give you the illusion that the maestro is in your listening room and playing just for you. To have two of the six suites is quite simply, a fabulous treat. The performance, sound and presentation is intimate, in every sense of the word.

The recordings of the group, Le Trio de France (Jeanne Gautier, Geneviève Joy, André Levy) are so rare as to be non-existent. To have this document on our shelves, the Trio playing the Ravel *Trio pour piano, violon and violoncello* as well as the spectacular *Turiña Trio No. 1 in D, Op. 35* is, quite frankly, more than I ever expected from this series. The playing and the music on this record is quite simply, sublime. Joaquin Turriña's trio dates from 1926 and is a composition which oozes the feel and flavour of Spain's yesteryear. It's a work I've never heard on vinyl before-although there are several compact discs available-and by a wide margin, hearing it performed with this Trio, has been another high mark for me from this set. The Ravel trio is one of my favourite French chamber works and these superlative artists have taught me much about the master, Maurice Ravel.

OR X is an excellent record offering performances of two wonderful compositions from Gabriel Fauré. Thyssens-Valentin recorded the *2nd quintet, op. 115* with the Quartet from the ORTF for André Charlin on Charlin's label as CL 11. Wait until you hear the performance with the Loewenguth Quartet (Alfred Loewenguth, Jacques Gotkovski, Roger Roche, Roger Loewenguth). The playing is warm and insightful from artists with great passion for this work. You, the listener, are offered a real treat. A major

surprise for me was the *Fantasy for Flute and Piano*. I'm familiar with Michel Debost and a fine flautist he is. I racked my brain because I knew I had heard this *Fantasy* by Gabriel Fauré before. It's a lovely piece written in 1898. I checked my collection to see if I my memory had not failed and indeed I did have another performance. Sure enough, it had been years since I listened to the French EMI box set, C165- 16332/6 containing the near complete Chamber works of Fauré. There it was, and much to my surprise, while the pianist was Jean-Phillipe Collard (son of the great French piano accompanist, André Collard) the flautist was none other than Michel Debost! Well this was fun; a chance to compare. While the performances were more than a decade and a half apart, and the EMI was stereo while the L'Archet D'Or a mono, it wasn't, for me, even close. The sound on the Armstrong release easily betters the sound on the French EMI while, quite frankly, the performances are leagues apart. Debost is grand in both, but the nod definitely goes to the

### L'Archet d'Or Series 3:

OR IX - Agnelle Bundervoët -  
Ravel:

- a) Le Tombeau de Couperin
- b) Valses Nobles et Sentimentales

- a) Recorded 23-4-64
- b) Recorded 8-4-68

OR X - Germaine Thyssens-Valentin  
Et Loewenguth Qtt. -

- Fauré:
- Quintet No. 2 op 115 in C Minor for Piano and Strings
- Fantasy for Flute and Piano with Michel Debost, flute
- Recorded 22-9-61

OR XI - André Levy -

- Bach:
- Violoncello Suites Nos. 2, 3
- Recorded 11-4-62
- Recorded 5-1-61

OR XII - Le Trio de France (Jeanne Gautier, Geneviève Joy, André Levy)

- Turiña:
- a) Trio No 1, op 35 in D
- Ravel:
- b) Trio pour piano, violon et violoncello

- a) Recorded 11-1-58
- b) Recorded 7-5-60

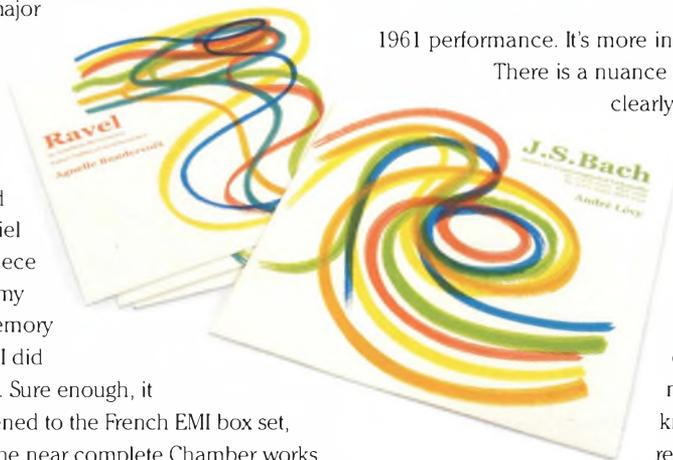
Special issues - ORSP 45RPM

ORSP 01 - Maurice Maréchal(vc),  
Odette Pigault (p)  
Yves Levallois/Herriette Roget:  
In Memorium

Fauré:  
Elegy  
Recorded 17-6-58

ORSP 02 - Germaine Thyssens -  
Valentin, Pierre Mollet (bar)  
Fauré:  
Le Bonne Chanson  
Recorded 22-9-61

A note about the special releases:  
Originally, Armstrong was offering ORSP 01 as a gift, free of charge, for those who owned Series 1 and 2. ORSP 02 was offered for those who pre-paid for Series 3. Now that series 3 is available, this release will be offered for a fee. For those purchasing Series 1 and 2, they will be given ORSP 01 as a gift. Please check the website for details.  
<http://www.coupdarchet.com>



1961 performance. It's more intimate, alive and delicate.

There is a nuance and heartfelt passion which clearly comes through on the mono recording.

If I've gone over the top about this, the third in the fantastic *L'Archet D'Or* series, it's quite simply because I've heard these recordings, these performances, these documents, while you have not. As much as I thought I knew about classical music and recordings, the *L'Archet D'Or* project has taught me how little

that really is. Hear it for yourself and you'll realise just what's out there waiting to be discovered – and what we've been putting up with. This is a deeply rewarding series and while some may balk at the price of £300 per set, quite frankly as a strictly limited edition of 250 copies per box, it's a bargain. These performances will never see compact disc and when they're gone... they're gone. My hat is off to Glenn Armstrong for truly excelling himself. Thank you so much. I'm not even going to dream about what he has in store for us next!



# A Massive Measure of Mozart

by Richard S. Foster

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart lived slightly less than 46 years. (He was born January 27, 1756 in Salzburg and died December 5, 1791 in Vienna.) During his brief lifetime he wrote over 600 compositions including 27 works for Piano and Orchestra. His first *Piano Concerto in F*, Köchel numbering system, K37 is believed to have been written in 1767 when Mozart was approximately 11 years old! The last *Piano Concerto* Mozart wrote, *No. 27 in B flat*, K595, was composed somewhere between 1788 and his death in 1791. It is interesting to note that he composed these works throughout his lifetime of composition, as opposed to one or two periods where he was especially focused on the piano and orchestra alone. There is no doubt of his genius, reflected in the fact that so many of his compositions have stood the test of time... well over 250 years since his death!

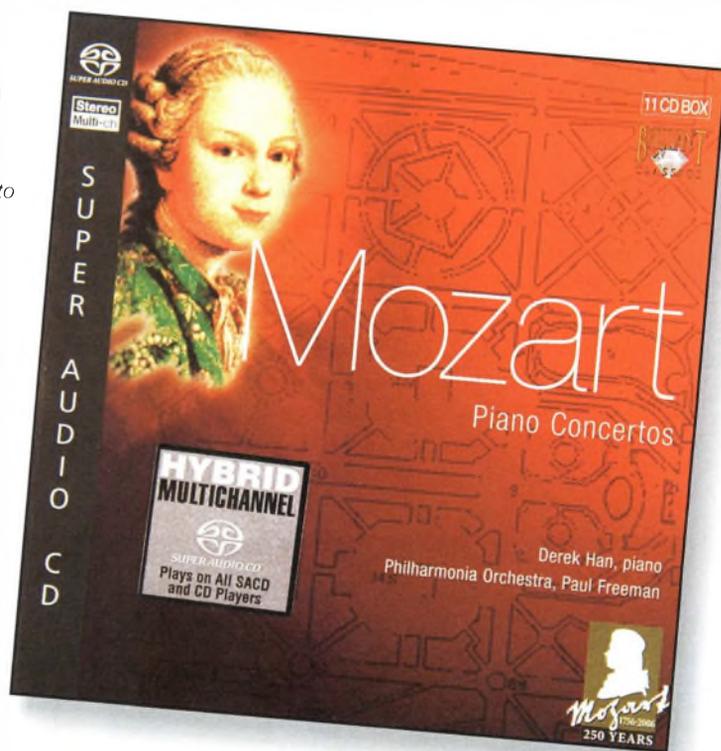
Brilliant Classics has now released a complete Mozart *Piano Concertos* box: Brilliant Classics 92541; 11 SACD Multi-Channel Hybrid Discs. The North American price for the set is a remarkable \$134.95! That's approximately \$12.25 per multi-channel hybrid SACD. This is quite a bargain.

According to Brilliant Classics, "...On 11 discs we present every single known work by Mozart for piano and orchestra. In addition to the more and less regularly performed 25 concertos with a single soloist we include some *Rondos* and both concertos for two and three pianos and orchestra.

"...the three early concertos K107, written by the child prodigy Wolfgang Amadeus and based on piano sonatas by Johann Christian Bach are included (as are these sonatas themselves). On this recording these concertos are played on the instrument they were composed for, the harpsichord. Pieter-Jan Belder is the soloist.

"...performances (are) by Derek Han and the famous Philharmonia Orchestra under Paul Freeman. They recorded all concertos for piano and orchestra for this series.

The concertos for two and three pianos are played by prominent pianists Zoltán Kocsis, Deszö Ranki and Andrés Schiff and the Hungarian State Orchestra under János Ferencsik..."



The two *Rondos*, K.382 and K.386 are played by Annerose Schmidt under the baton of Kurt Masur and the Dresden Philharmonic (these would have previously been released by Eterna on LP).

This was a massive undertaking. I've spent well over two weeks listening and re-listening to the entire 11 SACDs. While I admit some of the performances are 'just okay', most were quite excellent and I confirm this to be a tremendous bargain for those collectors looking for one stop shopping. It's exceptionally difficult to find a complete set of Mozart piano concertos by one artist. The majority of playing in this case is by Han with Paul Freeman conducting the Philharmonia. I certainly enjoyed his playing and I'm sure you will as well. He dominates the majority of the works – playing nine of the 11 discs. And just in case you think you might be getting second best, Han is a very accomplished pianist and was a prolific recording artist even before this project.

I particularly enjoyed the one disc where the

► harpsichord is used for the early concertos, and felt that utilizing the ensemble Musica Amphion with their baroque instruments really heightened my enjoyment of this music. I'd be curious how some of these performances would have sounded in multi-channel sound – which I was unable to play. Ever since I went to Sound Mirror in Boston as well as some other studios in Europe, my interest in surround sound SACD is really on the rise. The Manchester show was a bit of icing on the cake. Fortunately or unfortunately, I am not going to make any system changes that will affect this for the near future.

I find the arrangement of the discs a little confusing but this is purely, I'm convinced, in order to maximize the timing for each disc. It would have been nice to have them all released in consecutive order but this is not the case. Included with the set is a very informative 23-page booklet that details the historical context with respect to events of the day and what orchestration was called for in each particular concerto. My suggestion would be to read the booklet completely and then, when you choose a particular disc, refresh your memory as to what you are about to hear.

The recording quality is quite excellent on the Hybrid SACD layer. I find the sound variable with the CD layer with perhaps a few of the concertos tending toward the brighter

side of the sonic spectrum.

I believe the reasons to purchase this set are clear. The playing as I've mentioned is, for the most part, quite excellent – getting over the major objection to such huge projects. It also delivers a degree of interpretational consistency that makes the developmental path of these compositions so much clearer than chopping and changing between various performers. The likes of Uchida make a strong claim, but lack the completeness you find here (and are only available on stereo CD). On the major works we've all come to love – like *Piano Concerto No. 21 (K467)*, 'Elvira Madigan' – Han is just superb. He has a real feel for Mozart and his commitment to not adding any 'Han' to what Mozart wrote is quite distinct. I definitely get my tail feathers in a twist when artists try to invoke their own impressions of what the composer 'should' have written. When you also add in the cost factor of buying perhaps three or four individual discs by various artists, you're beginning to reach the point-of-no-return. Do the sums and pretty soon there's no contest. I believe you'll like what Brilliant Classics has released; I know I do.

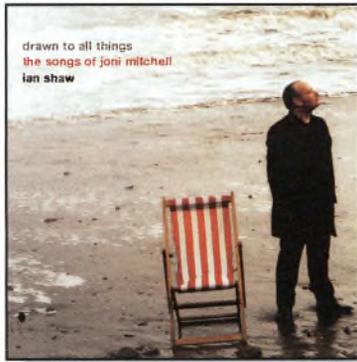


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## Ian Shaw

### Drawn To All Things, the Songs of Joni Mitchell

Linn AKD 276 

Aside from a few of the more obvious choices there aren't that many interpretations of Joni Mitchell songs out there. Maybe she's too distinct a stylist and certainly no-one can deliver a Mitchell song like Mitchell. That said, from left field, here's a really strong contender. Ian Shaw is previously unknown to me so this album is doubly a revelation. With a fine, slightly husky voice and clearly a great love and understanding for Mitchell's work and evident jazz chops, Shaw definitely delivers the goods here. He has carefully selected a great set of Mitchell songs, avoiding her more diary based numbers such as 'Hejira', and has re-arranged and scored them in what is essentially a jazz format. Supported by a sympathetically minded set of gifted musicians including the likes of Guy Barker and Jim Mullen, and aided by excellent production and engineering from Richard Cottle and John Gallen respectively, the recipe is complete. Standouts include the opening 'Jericho', a really effective reading of 'Moon at the Window', a slinky 'Harlem in Havana' with guest vocals from Lea de Laria, 'Barangrill' supported by some superbly recorded percussion, and 'Night Ride Home' featuring Claire Martin in fine form, dueting with Shaw. This release has disproved my instinctive doubts; Mitchell can indeed be successfully re-interpreted and on this evidence outstandingly well.

DD



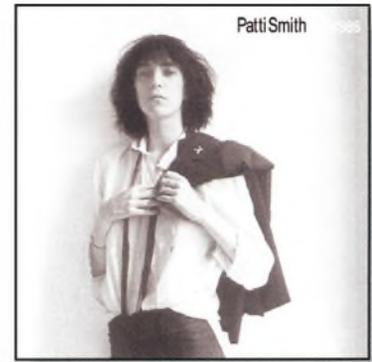
## The Violins of Cremona: Homage to Fritz Kreisler

### Salvatore Accardo, violin; Laura Mancini, piano

fonè 003 LP  

Cremona, the cradle of violin making: Amati, Guarneri, Stradivari, what fabulous names! The sons of the city represent nearly two centuries of a successful teacher-pupil-tradition! The Italian violinist Salvatore Accardo here gathers the wonderful instruments of five of these masters, each a marvel, a solitaire itself. But his "Homage" also applies to another exceptional talent: violinist-composer Fritz Kreisler. Touring the USA at the age of only ten, he excelled furthermore in composing diverting "pièces", billed as bravura pieces to prove technical skills, as well as a series of consummate arrangements. However, he gained notoriety when a reviewer in the New York Times sallied out to find the "originals" to compare with the arrangements: Kreisler had to admit that the "classical manuscripts", the 18th and 19th century originals, were indeed self-penned.. But, who cares whilst listening to this recording? The box is terrific, the sound of such high resolution that you can almost smell the rosin! And the sonic comparisons are fascinating. I must confess that I favour the more subtle timbre of the Guarneri over the bright, vibrant sound of the Stradivari. Is it indeed the magic, orange-coloured varnish? A secret preserved in this fabulous recording.

AKB



## Patti Smith

### Horses

Arista/Speakers Corner 

Patti Smith's debut *Horses* was the album that brought together poetry and garage rock for the first time. By combining uncompromised lyrics with a new musical angle on rock this album proved a major influence on music in the latter half of the seventies. Without artists like Smith it is doubtful whether the likes of Blondie or The Pretenders would ever have turned out the way they did. Patti Smith pioneered the junky look, which was plain shocking at the time, and had a voice that went totally against the accepted norms for female vocals. Smith was the Angela Dworkin of rock, substituting raw intelligence for traditional sex appeal and defying all the rules of commercial success. At the time she was compared with Rimbaud and Dylan and her band stood alongside the likes of Television and the Velvet with a proto punk sound that is played well but is clearly moving into the unexplored territory that became the so called 'new wave'. Alongside Richard Sohl (piano), Lenny Kaye (guitar), Ivan Kral (guitar, bass) and Jay Dee Daugherty (drums) there are tracks that feature Television's Tom Verlaine and Blue Oyster Cult's Allen Lanier. The sound that John Cale gets on *Horses* is open and a little stark but quite sophisticated. Speaker's Corner has done a sterling job, eliminating the hiss found on the Simply Vinyl pressing and delivering a strong yet subtle sound.

JK





Neil Young

Prairie Wind

Reprise/Classic Records 

Classic Records has done a gorgeous job with Young's 2005 album; the gatefold packaging weighs nearly as much as the 200 gram Quix vinyl slabs thanks to fully printed inner sleeves and an 18 page, 12inch square colour booklet. "Lavish" applies both to the artwork and the sound of this LP; it has one of the most lush and rounded sounds I've heard in a good while, with gorgeous weighty bass and natural, sweet highs. In terms of content *Prairie Wind* fits into the acoustic country style half of Young's prolific output. It's dubbed a Nashville Renaissance production and that's the way it sounds. There is a tremendous yearning and nostalgia for a simpler way of life that is reflected in a largely acoustic instrumentation and relaxed, calm tunes. It occasionally lapses into sentimentality ('Falling off the Face of the Earth') but at other times resembles good ole honky-tonk ('Far From Home') with a tune that could have been on the Rolling Stones' *Exile on Main Street!* There are some very strong tracks on here; 'No Wonder' reminds you of his *Harvest* era despite references to 9/11, while the title track with its horn chorus sounds like a classic in the making.

JK



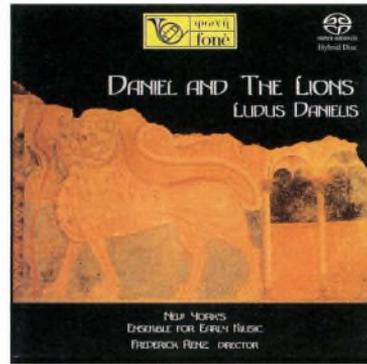
Stan Getz

The Best of Two Worlds

Pure Pleasure PPLAN PC 33703 

By the time the 1970s had rolled around, the bossa nova craze had already peaked. For that reason, this outstanding follow-up to Getz/Gilberto did not attract much attention. The album's success was further hampered by substandard mastering and pressing, now remedied by Pure Pleasure who give it the sound quality it deserves. By the 1970s, Getz had switched labels, from Verve to Columbia, and again teamed with Joao Gilberto and Antonio Carlos Jobim, the chemistry between them had, if anything, grown. By 1976, Astrud Gilberto's star was shooting in its own right, and divorce from Joao and her antipathy for Getz means vocals here are contributed by Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda. She's good, but lacks the once in a lifetime magic of Astrud's 'The Girl from Ipanema'. This album also sports a superior rhythm section, with Steve Swallow on bass and Billy Hart and Grady Tate on drums. The addition of a percussion section expands the sound from that of the earlier smaller group recording. The record was remastered by Ray Staff at Alchemy in Soho and pressed on 180-gram vinyl by Pallas. Both the vinyl and the mastering are far superior to that found on the 1976 originals, resulting in a terrific sounding LP. My highest recommendation for anyone who likes sexy Latin singing, world-class guitar and Stan Getz – an album overdue for recognition.

DD



Anonymous  
Ludus Danielis

New York's Ensemble for Early Music; Frederick Renz

fonè 016 SACD  

Since the 1950s, when the interest first emerged, people have been playing fast and loose with Early Music. Innumerable "special ensembles" have been formed since then, but, as always, the brighter the light, the deeper the shadow! Fortunately, there are exceptions, like *Ludus Danielis* (Daniel And The Lions), performed by the New York's Ensemble for Early Music under Frederick Renz.

This is a liturgical drama based on the tale of the prophet Daniel, thrown into the lions' den, created around 1140 at the monastery of Beauvais, France. You can find the whole spectrum of monophonic music from Mediaeval times, from Gregorianic chants to instrumental dance music, skilfully transcribed and arranged by Renz. And, ever since *Carmina Burana* – the echoes are unquestionable – we know that a proper portion of irony is inherent even in liturgical music!

The musicians, with original instruments from psalter to bagpipe, know how to draw a vivid facsimile of the musical practices of that time with even the "female" parts sung by male voices. Space and movement are vital to the performance and recording, a factor appreciated even with a standard CD player. The dynamics of this recording are phenomenal! Gain a new listening habit with a disc that's not only for the connoisseur! Highest recommendation, and beware of the Lion!

AKB



# Great (Cheap!) Records

by Peter Downard

Today's vinyl enthusiast will have no difficulty finding expensive pressings of great records. The website at [www.popsike.com](http://www.popsike.com) provides a handy guide to results of recent eBay auctions; how about a mint, original UK pressing of Jimi Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland*, the very first issue with blue printing and large photos of Noel Redding and Mitch Mitchell on the inner gatefold? \$531. Or an original 'top-loader' UK mono issue of *The Beatles* (the 'White Album') in similar condition? \$1,625 US. Let's try something in the pantheon of collectors' items that is a bit less elusive – say a near-mint first UK Island pressing of Traffic's *Mr. Fantasy*. \$291!

You get the picture. It can be enough to take the fun out of what is after all supposed to be FUN first and foremost.

So, in that spirit I'll attempt to draw your attention to half a dozen albums that are a bit closer to the musical margins than most big money collectors' items, but which are highly rewarding and available on the collectors' market at reasonable prices. The sonic qualities of these albums are often exemplary.

For convenience (mainly mine, I suppose) I have chosen albums released from the pre-punk Seventies, from 1971 to 1976. I have added a few recommendations for further listening. Also, this is not only for analog folks. Every album discussed is available on CD.

## Richard and Linda Thompson *I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight*

Island ILPS 9266 (UK) (1974)

As our colleague Dennis Davis recently pointed out in these pages, Richard and Linda Thompson's final album together before their divorce, *Shoot Out the Lights* (Hannibal HNBL

1303 (US) 1982), is an essential recording. For my money this earlier effort, presumably from happier domestic times, meets that standard as well.

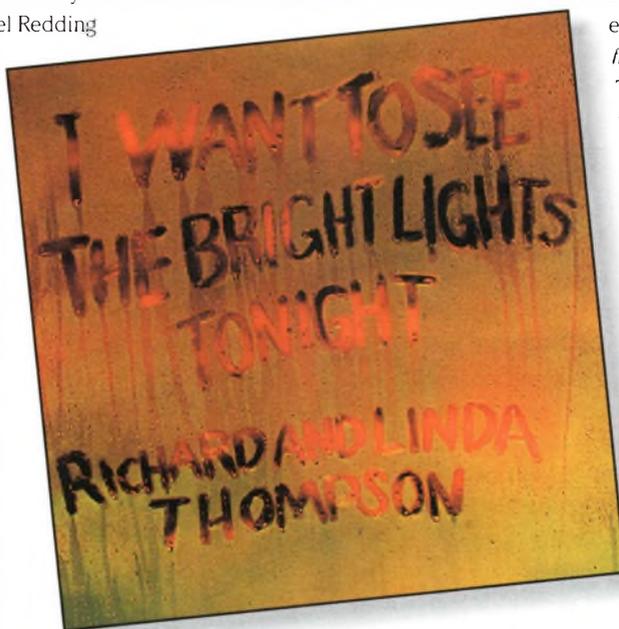
*I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight* is the closest thing I have found to a British equivalent of The Band's *Music from Big Pink*. Here Richard Thompson, a superb songwriter, presents one of his finest collections of work, solidly in the vein of traditional English folk mined by his former compatriots, Fairport Convention. Tradition predominates in the rich and varied acoustic instrumentation, including selectively deployed accordion, mandolin and dulcimer. The presence of Linda Thompson's cool and pure vocals as an alternating lead voice

effectively balances Richard's voice, and prevents his limited vocal range from becoming a liability.

The songs here are also lyrically rich. The words, at first blush, appear to deal with traditional concerns such as death (*When I Get to the Border*), abandoned love (*Withered and Died*) and the debauchery of drink (*Down Where the Drunkards Roll*). But listen more closely – Thompson's lyrics delve deeply and artfully into introspective realms.

The sound on my original UK Island pressing is also outstanding. Acoustic instruments sound natural, the recording of Thompson's electric leads captures every nuance of pickups through a close-miked amplifier, and bass is full and warm without bloat.

If this album is of interest, also consider the couple's very fine *Four Down Like Silver* (Island ILPS 9348 (UK) (1975)).



RECORDING



MUSIC



► **John Cale**  
**Fear**

Island ILPS 9301 (UK)  
(1974)

Notwithstanding his days as Lou Reed's lieutenant in the Velvet Underground in the mid-Sixties, John Cale did not really make his own mark until he released a trio of excellent solo albums in the early Seventies. *Fear*, from 1974, is perhaps the best of the lot.

Although Cale's most significant Sixties accomplishments were as an avant-garde innovator, his early Seventies albums are built on a foundation of simple, strong melodicism. On 1973's *Paris 1919* (Reprise K44239 (UK)), Cale presented a set of memorable songs in a lush and relatively conservative production. For *Fear*, he decided to take his work closer to the edge again and travelled to England to obtain the assistance of two of the more adventurous British recording artists of the day, experimentalist Brian Eno and Roxy Music guitarist Phil Manzanera.

Sometimes the results are relatively conventional – 'You Know More Than I Know' is as pretty a pop ballad as you are likely to hear. More often Cale takes simple and effective compositions, such as 'Fear Is a Man's Best Friend' and 'Gun', and performs them in a manner headed directly for the edges of psychic conflict and human drama. Eno and Manzanera successfully bring their own brands of adventure to the mix. Eno can be heard gleefully breaking the sonic rules with his trademark noises on 'Barracuda', while Manzanera delivers a remarkably manic electric guitar solo on 'Gun'.



The sonics are clean and well balanced – not surprising given that the recording was engineered by John Wood, who also recorded *I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight*.

For those of more reserved taste, the above-mentioned *Paris 1919* is recommended. For those who enjoy *Fear*, check out 1975's *Slow Dazzle* (ILPS 9317 (UK)), recorded with similar personnel, and in an only slightly more conventional style.

RECORDING



MUSIC



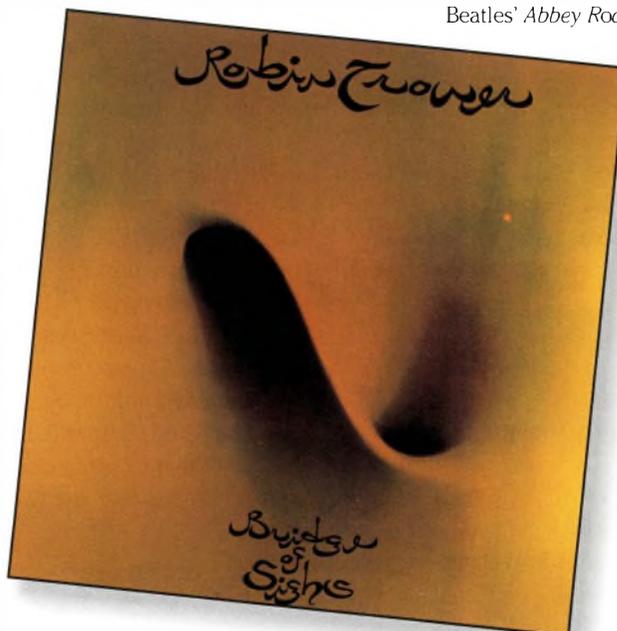
**Robin Trower**  
**Bridge of Sighs**

Chrysalis CHR 1057 (US) (1974)

What would a selection of Seventies music be without a guitar hero? When Robin Trower emerged from Procol Harum in 1973 with his first solo album, *Twice Removed from Yesterday* (Chrysalis CHR 1039 (UK) (1973)), he took many listeners by surprise with a set of strong and concise guitar-based compositions. He sustained that quality on *Bridge of Sighs*. He also had the good fortune to have the services of that great engineer Geoff Emerick – he of The

Beatles' *Abbey Road*, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and *Revolver*, to name a few.

This is electric guitar music – Trower's instrumental prowess towers, relatively speaking, over bassist James Dewar's vocals and the lyrics. But what guitar! As is usually the case with Trower, the shade of Hendrix is often present, for some possibly too much so. The compositions here are also a bit more ponderous than the sharp and snappy rock songs of Trower's first solo outing. But for fans of



▶ traditional British electric guitar rock, there is little here to be faulted. Thanks to Emerick, the sonics are exceptional for this type of disc. The guitar literally soars above the speakers in a rich, full and wide soundstage.

For another great lost Seventies guitar hero captured in good sound, check out Bill Nelson's finest work as leader of Be-Bop Deluxe, *Sunburst Finish* (Harvest SHSP 4053 (UK) (1976)).

RECORDING  MUSIC 

## The Kinks Muswell Hillbillies

RCA LSP-4644 (US) (1971)

"I was born in a welfare state/Ruled by bureaucracy/  
Controlled by civil servants/And people dressed in  
grey/Got no privacy, got no liberty/Because the 20th  
Century people/Took it all away from me..."

No one makes alienation swing like The Kinks' songwriter Ray Davies. For my money the opener here, '20th Century Man', is one of his masterworks. Although The Kinks are hardly known for the sonic achievements of their records, the recording of this song is excellent – Ray Davies' vocal and the acoustic guitar and dobro at the heart of the track are wonderfully natural. Drummer Mick Avory's inimitable loose-limbed propulsion, slightly mixed down to match the mood of the song, spurs everything along with great spirit.

Not all of *Muswell Hillbillies* is as sonically effective, but this track is a splendid one.

Although The Kinks are certainly well known, I have included *Muswell Hillbillies* here because it occupies a relatively obscure place in the group's catalogue. Stylistically, it stands apart from much of their Sixties work, and certainly their later Seventies period as an arena rock touring act.

Davies' songs here, while focused on themes of English realism familiar in his work, are presented in the idiom of beer hall country music and vaudeville. These are songs about the things that matter in small lives - of the woman who loses a lot of weight and loses herself in doing so (Skin and Bone), the sweet relief of Hollywood movies

for a working class existence (Oklahoma USA), and medical science's attempt to diagnose it all (Acute Schizophrenia Paranoia Blues).

For those new to The Kinks who find something they like here, try *The Kinks Kronikles* (2 LPs, Reprise 2XS 6454 (US) (1972)), an eclectic anthology of the group's mature work from 1966 to 1970. For two particular highlights from that period, seek out *Arthur or the Decline and Fall of the British Empire* (Pye NPL 18317 (UK) (1969)) and the widely praised *The Kinks Are the Village Green Preservation Society* (Pye NSPL 18233 (UK) (1968)).

RECORDING  MUSIC 

## Flamin' Groovies Shake Some Action

Sire 9147-7521 (Canadian) (1976)

It was utterly audacious for the Flamin' Groovies to record *Shake Some Action* in 1976. That was a year of over-extended progressive rock, California singer-songwriters and Steely Dan. For goodness' sake, who then was going to release a straight cover of 'Misery' from *Please Please Me*?

On *Shake Some Action* the band accomplished the significant feat of fashioning an original album squarely in the idiom of mid-Sixties British rock without ever falling into mere tribute. They proved the truth of the old saying that the amateur imitates and the professional steals. The band showed an absolute mastery of the Sixties rock idiom and its forebears – one moment a fragment from The Who circa *Sell Out*, the next from the Rolling Stones' early pop phase, the next from Liverpool – as well as a thorough appreciation of those groups' American Fifties

roots. The covers chosen are clever ones, and the original songs are so strong that they retain their individual character. I can't imagine any fan of the period not being especially impressed by 'You Tore Me Down', 'Yes It's True', or the title track.

I have to admit I have waived the sonics requirements to include this album here, although I bet a good British pressing would be a big improvement on my well-worn ▶



▶ Canadian disc. What the sonics lack in such things as definition and soundstage, producer Dave Edmunds makes up for with artistry. Time and again Edmunds precisely captures classic sounds from great Sixties pop records, fitting them into the Groovies' songs in a way that makes for a perfect match of form and content.

If this record appeals to you, check out the sequel, *Flamin' Groovies Now* (Sire SRK 6059 (US) (1978)), on which the group expanded its plundering to California – and The Byrds!

RECORDING 

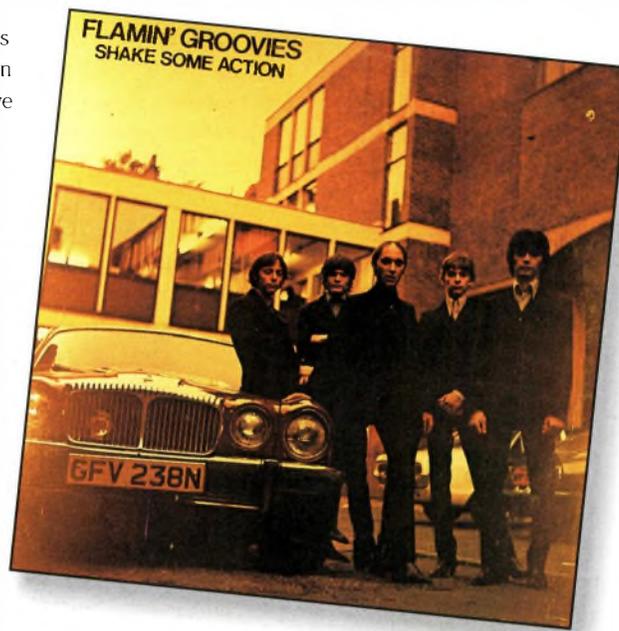
MUSIC 

## 6. Mott the Hoople *Brain Capers*

Atlantic SD 8304 (US) (1971)

Finally, an early exercise in pre-punk rock. It is well known that Mott the Hoople, frustrated by repeatedly hitting a commercial brick wall, had decided to call it a day when they recorded *Brain Capers*. They clearly decided to go down swinging.

The original rock and roll numbers here are steamrollers – the opening 'Death May Be Your Santa Claus' revels in eccentricity (appropriately enough), 'Sweet Angeline' swings hard with an infectious melody, and 'The Moon Upstairs' is a ferocious farewell ("For those of you who always laugh/Let this be our epitaph...") Although the group may have been a bit short on original numbers for this session, they also nailed some unusual covers - The Youngbloods' 'Darkness, Darkness' and Dion diMucci's 'Your Own Backyard'.



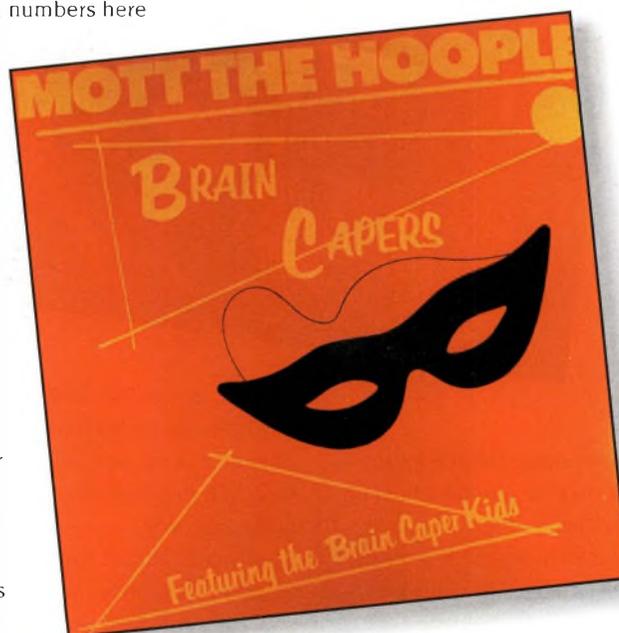
Engineer Andy Johns was one of the finest rock engineers of the Seventies, and the sound here is wonderfully raucous and alive. Johns once said his ideal was to make a record sound like the band was 12 feet away from you on stage, and that's what you get here. The mix is a bit unusual on the rockers – vocals are moved back a bit, emphasizing the cacophony of it all – but that fits this music fine.

Over the next few years Mott temporarily rescued themselves from oblivion by joining the early Seventies

glam rock program. They remained a great group and there are those who would probably insist their best work of that phase, the excellent *Mott* (Columbia KC 32425 (US) 1973), is in fact their greatest album. For me, Mott the Hoople was a band that was always first and foremost about heart and soul, and *Brain Capers* captures that best.

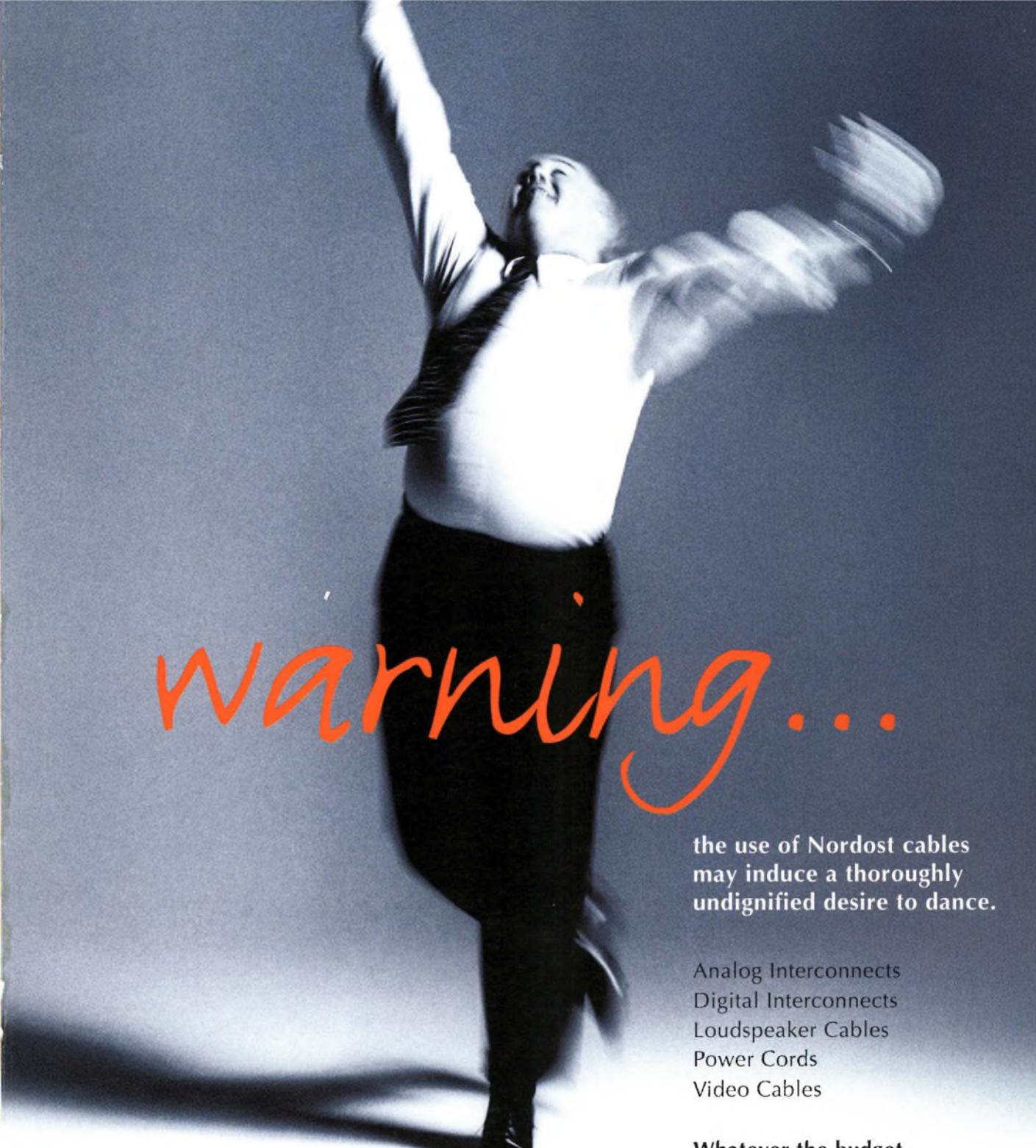
RECORDING 

MUSIC 



So there you have it – half a dozen cheap and cheerful remedies for the financially sane rock music lover. The next time you are shaking your head at the outrageous prices that some great recordings command, remember that there is a vast wealth of excellent material out there that is not over-hyped, over-priced, or impossibly scarce. Nor thanks to eBay is it over there! Go get it.





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