

The National Audio Show

at Whittlebury Hall, Northampton
(Silverstone) September 26,27th. 2009
(organised by Chester Group, Roy Bird)



Whittlebury Hall show venue

While presaged by gloomy forebodings from the audio industry doomsayers, show organiser Roy Bird's choice of venue, the Whittlebury Hall complex on the Silverstone site boundary turned out to be more than satisfactory. While those south of the Thames complained somewhat, quite a proportion of the London crowd turned up, with journey times of typically 90 minutes and free parking. The venue was also sufficiently northerly to bring in enthusiasts from as far Yorkshire and beyond. Billed as an 'Audio Show' it even included massive international brands such as Bose who built a large custom stand and had a new iPod playing endlessly at full volume at their entrance. Buffs felt that this did them no favours as the poor thing had entered that part of its dynamic range where the inbuilt bass limiters were working overtime and not much music was left to hear.

There was very little video screen product in evidence and in truth the more prominent UK audio brands also choose to rein in their spending and stay away, leaving a number of dealers to carry the flag. Those absent were too numerous to list, yet those that remained benefited from the extra attention. Off the top of my head I noted the official absence of Linn, Kef, B&W, Creek, Monitor Audio, AE, Neat Acoustics, Meridian, Roksan, Funk, PMC etc

But we had ART, Systemdek, Trichord, Focal, Kudos, Audiosmile, AstinTrew, Harbeth, Micromega, Zu, Metronome,

Krell, Revolver, Wilson Audio, Avalon, Magico, Conrad Johnson, Isotek, Audio Research, Arcam, EAR, Emille, DCS, Gamut, Van den Hul, Icon Audio, Origin Live, Lovington, Supra, the Henley and UKD product ranges including Opera triangle and Unison, and a number of dealers and their products such as Tom Tom with their Guru loudspeakers. A large presence was seen from Naim including the Naim powered Bentley coupe parked in an inner courtyard. Vertex and Nordost were here together hosting new research on correlating repeatable measurement with the subtle variations introduced into audio replay waveforms when cables, filters and supports are varied. **Roy Gregory** of **Nordost** gave demonstrations of the effects, which technical interactions until now have not surfaced on many audio technologists measurement horizons.

Ben Duncan has shown by inference that RFI can degrade the noise floor of an amplifier and thus potentially affect sound quality, while also showing that the special weave in Kimber mains cable has a moderate but very wide band RFI filtering ability. Joining these two strands indicates that this mains cable at least does have the potential to affect sound quality.

Regarding the demonstrations above, the effects of Quantum devices and mains filtering and special cables from Nordost research wise are now more closely associated with the vibration controlling technology of Vertex, to try and reach for better and more consistent sound quality based on good science.

By kind invitation from **HI-FI World**, who negotiated a large room from the organisers, Noel Keywood, Peter Comeau (IAG), and myself for **HIFICRITIC**, were giving timed presentations to pre-booked and sizeable audiences of 80 plus. The subjects were 'comparisons of LP and CD sound quality' by Noel Keywood, 'electrostatic v moving coil speakers' from Peter, while I chose to use a high power PMC IB2i based system (reviewed in vol 3 no 3) on studio height stands to show 'aspects of music and music production'

while explaining how and why a powerful free field speaker such as this was nicely suited to drive this audience space. Thanks to PMC for supply of a demo system at short notice, even to the point of specially building these speakers for us that week, though the penalty was the quick running-in that was required. This initially resulted in some controversy over their suitability for the shared demonstrations.



Noel Keywood (Hi-Fi World) Contrasting LP and CD reproduction.



Peter Comeau (IAG) with Moving Coil-v-Electrostatic speakers.



Martin Colloms (HIFICRITIC) demonstrating aspects of record production with the PMC IB2i on studio 30 inch spiked stands (pictures from Noel K, these frames from his movie camera)

Absolute Sounds

Some of the big importers were here in style and honours must go to Absolute Sounds who put up a recession defying panoply of products in four suites, fielding a large team including key members of the manufactures concerned. Thus we had **Yair Tammam** of **Magico** who had skilfully voiced the optimal location of his **V2** floorstanding loudspeakers using a soundcard and software he had brought with him.

V2 is a sealed box 2.5 way tower speaker perhaps 10 times the price of the mass market equivalent for this intrinsic specification and driver size. But the resemblance ends there since the precisely formed stereo images of solo vocalists were impressively fleshed out; eyes shut, good enough almost to reach out and touch, with no trace of bass looseness, excellent transient edge control and so obviously no detectable box/enclosure hangover or coloration. This was relatively compact but perfectly formed, one proof at least for the existence of the High End. Amplification was by **Dartzeel** Pre NH-8s power NH-108B, and with Ricardo's own set of **Transparent Opus** cables and fed music by the **Metronome Kalista** integrated CD player.

We also had on site Peter McGrath of Wilson Audio who set up and

demonstrated the new **Sasha** three-way floorstander so successfully that at times it sounded more like the highly regarded £60,000 MAXX III. (HIFICRITIC Vol. 3 no 2)

With mid and treble drivers taken from the **MAXX III**, the pair of extant high power Dynaudio 8 inch bass drivers now have more linear suspensions and more powerful motors for higher damping. While the Sasha form is recognisably the two -box WATT-PUPPY, the WP designation has been dropped since the 'WATT' head is no longer an independent free standing speaker in its own right, but rather a dedicated mid-treble section in the idiom of the MAXX and **Alexandria**. Here this units' crossover is now better placed in the low frequency enclosure, allowing the back of the mid unit more space to breathe.

Whether specifically due to this aspect or not, this speaker could throw enormously deep and strikingly layered stereo images combined with precision focusing right across the image, in the face of both high sound levels and thickly textured musical scoring. I felt that I could not properly assess the low frequency performance in this room though Peter M explained that the intrinsic bass voicing for the bass section was now aligned more closely to the more recent, more upbeat standards heard from the **Sophia 2** and the MAXX III, where the ratio of lower to upper bass has been improved, together with improved time responses. We shall find out when we soon review this important design, which brings the remarkably successful Watt-Puppy designation to an end (15,000 pairs over its production life)



Alan Sircom (Hi Fi Plus) discusses Sasha's finer points with Wilson Audio's Peter McGrath

The new **Sonus Faber Liuto** range was on show with the top model floorstander, the Liuto Tower was on demonstration ably driven by a Prima Luna pre power set.

These sounded crisp, nicely focused and dynamic, despite the presence of many other speakers from this range in the room, not necessarily a good idea for best sound.

The **Tower** is a 3 way floorstanding vented box loudspeaker. Some details include a lute shape cabinet profile, a high power 8.5inch alloy cone woofer, custom thermo moulded synthetic fibre mid-range in a specially shaper enclosure and custom 1 inch tweeter, fabric dome with polymer surround. Sensitivity is 89 dB and a rated '8 ohm' impedance.

Krell also showed some new compact power amplifiers, the narrow S150 M monoblock at £2650, the S275 stereo at £5,900, or join up the channels of the stereo bloc for a for a massive 550W mono. These versatile combinations cover a few important bases in the sector below the massive Evo series and with lower standing consumption are more eco fashionable.

Revolver showcased the largest of their three Screen Series and showed a tall panel incorporating a 10inch bass, double 6.5 inch mids and the usual 1 inch tweeter, but the whole just 4.5inches deep. I went

in the room and missed them, thinking that they were screens, not recognising them as loudspeakers. 'Sorry Revolver'.



*Revolver Screen dem room, no wonder I could not find the speakers.
(they are the printed 'signboards'!)*

In the Chapel suite **Audiofreaks** showcased the new **cj GAT** single box SE line preamp from conrad johnson, in its way a successor to both the Art and ACT series, and offered as an edition of 250 in its present form. While there did not seem to be sufficient 6922 triodes at the front as has been usual, just one 'double' per channel, a low 100 ohm output impedance is claimed for which you would normally need six or seven valves. It is in fact achieved using a power FET buffer-follower for the output stage, the triodes serving for linear, near-zero feedback amplification.

The show layout logically placed the LP 275 m cj monoblock power amplifiers (genetically the successor to the Premier 8) behind the speakers, with a very long haul of Cardas interconnect from the preamp, perhaps 10 metres, so the low 100ohm source requirement was not misplaced. The 275 W/ channel available would be enough for the show presentation. Very possibly the Audiofreaks primary product introduction was the long awaited new £47,000 floorstander from **Avalon Acoustics**, called '**Time**', but unfortunately one or two visitors actually missed it as it did not seem to be very clearly signed, and with the grilles in place looked from a distance so much like an Eidolon that some walked out again without listening. While the new enclosure is barely inches larger than the Eidolon, designer Neil Patel has somehow

shoehorned two of those custom Eton 11 inch woofers into it, to double the bass power capacity, and lift overall sensitivity by 2dB for this essentially 4ohm system. To match the higher sensitivity, the 19mm tweeter of the Diamond Eidolon has been replaced by the alternative, louder 25mm example. Range wise it fits between the highly regarded Isis and the Eidolon Diamond, but size wise, it is rather more domesticated than the towering Isis, as the latter is founded on a pair of 13inch bass drivers with a much greater enclosure volume for the low frequency units.

'This was the best show dem room that they had used yet' remarked Audiofreaks Branko Botic, and a very civilised, defined sound was the result. Both vinyl (Kuzma sources) and cd playback (Zanden, the one box player) were in action.



*The Avalon 'Time', grille off (not for listening), bass by Eton, mid and treble by Accuton)
flanked by cj LP275M all valve power amps*

BADA The British Audio Dealers Association



*Simon Byles, current chief of **BADA** on the front line, illustrating **Demcraft** to NAS visitors. Demcraft trains dealer's staff how to get the best from audio systems, how to demonstrate them to customers, and how to fairly show the differences between both audio components and systems, and has proved a great success.*

AudioNote UK seem to defy conventional wisdom with speaker placement right in the room corners, and a large direct radiation loudspeaker driven by a relatively low power valve amplifier. Yet as usual, a lively stomping and musically entertaining sound resulted.

[TT Two turntable with ARM Two and an IoI MC cartridge, CDT Zero/II CD transport DAC2.1x Signature, M5RIAA, phono stage JINRO integrated amplifier, and essentially a copper version of the ONGAKU AN-E/SPe HE speakers]



AN Jinro SE integrated valve amplifier

Cabasse

One show stopper, set up in something of a small ballroom, was the extraordinary Cabasse 'La Sphere', truly a tour de force in loudspeaker design and with a £108,000 price tag to match. A sealed box with a 22inch bass driver, 8.5 inch lower mid, 4inch upper mid, and 28mm semi horn loaded dome tweeter. This is a 4 way spherical concentric design, near point source. It made quite an impression on the majority of visitors to the room both visually, and sonically, especially with a total of 5KW of matched Class D audio ICEpower on hand. The speaker comes with the digital electronic crossover and you can choose your own amplifiers if you wish. It is 1.4 m high, 0.7m in diameter and comes with electronic crossovers, with full phase, time and amplitude compensation plus programmable correction for room and room placement. Diffraction controlling wave shaping contouring has also been used, echoing the DXT technology similarly used for tweeter faceplates. With active drive and a 22inch sealed box bass it went deep and clean and fast as expected while the stereo focus desirably approached that of a small source. What a leg up from the similarly aspirational and somewhat broadly equivalent but established lifestyle design, the **Beoloab 5** active loudspeaker at £10,000.



Cabasse La Sphere 5kW power: 4 way concentric source, infinite baffle, with 22 inch bass driver. Here it looks rather smaller than it actually is.

Three magazines held the publishing front for this show, **HI-FI Plus**, **HIFICRITIC** and **HI-FI World**, while we were missing HFN and HFC and WHAT.

Alan Sircom, Editor of 'Plus, had some presentations of his own to make. Called 'Tricks Traps and Tests', he demonstrated reviewing technique but also how the listener may be fooled in to making the wrong judgements together with the tricky issues involved with A/B and A/B/X testing of audio components.

KeyStrobe

Established company **KeyStrobe** exhibited their latest low cost, hand held synthesised white led strobe with two options of strobe disc, the most appealing the etched, gold finish version there making fine accessories for LP enthusiasts allowing for easy monitoring of speed, drift and wear in the drive system. We plan to use it to check players before review audition.

www.keystrobe.com



Keystrobe strobe disc and handheld strobe

KUDOS

Playing its heart out in one of the smaller rooms was the new slim floorstander from **Kudos**. This was the X2 designed by Derek Gilligan and has custom drivers from SEAS, a 5 inch pulp cone on a die-cast chassis and a 1 inch soft dome, selling for £1250.

Enclosures are of HDF while the bass port output is floor boundary loaded.



Kudos X2

Paul Bengel of **ABC Audio** is usually good for an interesting demo and here showcased the established but most capable Pioneer/TAD S1ex floorstander with the concentric mid treble driver, which he plans to supply retail (less than £8,000 a pair). The fine mid dynamics and low frequency grunt obtained was impressive, with these super heavy inert cased designs ably driven by a 'New Tech' solid state amplifier from Hamamatsu, Japan, Yamaha's stomping ground. The amp is by 'Digital Do Main' and uses SIT, 'static induction transistors', these specially designed by them and accorded proper numeric identifications, eg 2SK77B for the output devices.

(rumoured to be a custom V FET). The technology includes great attention to low mechanical resonance and to excellent thermal behaviour seeking to stabilise the dynamic performance with very high conductivity, gold plated copper heat sinks, and where the 'transistors' are themselves built with specially efficient

heat conduction paths . A single B-1a amplifier is 80W/ch 8ohm , 150W into 4 ohms and may be bridged , and beautifully locked together in pairs to make a 300W /ch 8/4 ohm design. The input impedance is a bit low at 10kOhm, and is both balanced and unbalanced.(£6,500)



Digital-Do-Main B1-a Stereo PA top cover showing excellent finish

ABC Audio also demonstrated **Harbeth**, the Super HL5, ably driven by an HIFICRITIC favourite , the **MSB Platinum** monoblock power amplifiers, one of our highest scorers. With the Harbeths on these higher stands a well balanced and highly articulate sound resulted from this show system.



Harbeth Super HL-5 and MSB Platinum amplification

Tom Tom Audio were demonstrating the new woofer base (the Extension Module at £2,250 a pair) to add to the Guru 10, rather like the 'B' unit which used to be added to

the LS3/5a. This was firing up from the new £5,000 flagship CD player from Rega. Called ISIS this design has the Rega team pulling out all the technology stops, even two mains transformers, external digital inputs and galvanic isolation between analogue and digital, and between the USB input and the DACs. The latter benefit from discrete current-to-voltage convertors based on their successful phono preamp circuits. He got a suitably grunty, punchy sound in a usually packed and hot room.



The new Rega flagship CDP: ISIS (photo with thanks to Jason Kennedy)



Tom Tom Audio at NAS , the matte black Guru 10 on their 'extenders')

ART and Systemdek

A year ago I suggested that Derek Dunlop revive his Father's justly famous and best selling Systemdek IIx turntable, which in its prime sold for a few hundred pounds. He proudly showed off his response which is the **Systemdeck 3D**, certainly once again a spring suspended player, but priced at £10,000? and here partnered with

a 12 inch locally built tone arm, the Audio Origami (Glaswegian), with some parts faintly reminiscent of the Syrinx. The precision motor is mounted outboard while the lamination for the plinth is still subject to discussion.



Systemdek 3D prototype with Audio Origami 12 inch Arm

Zu showed the **Essence**, working despite some transit damage, a mid 90s dB sensitive floorstander mixing a 10 inch high efficiency cone driver with a whizzer cone working to 10kHz, augmented by a sensitive, transformer coupled ribbon tweeter, and this gave lively dynamic sounds, at one later point too loud for me to safely enter the room! Rated at a high 8ohm load impedance over most of its range and suited to SE triodes and the like, the latest Stereophile report found a dip to 4ohms over the top octave, but since music energy is rather less up here I do not see this as a problem. Many visitors were here converted to the high efficiency sound, which in this case had bass too.

It will cost about £3-4,000 in the UK on a direct delivery basis, the new factory policy, though you can hear and order them at some dealers.

UKD were running the new eye candy **Unison S9** integrated valve amplifier. With 45W/ch of single ended power from paralleled 572 super triode outputs per channel. They were driving those big new **Opera Malibran** (perhaps a bargain at £20,000 pr) loudspeakers with their array of balanced side firing woofers



Unison S9 integrated valve amplifier

Conclusion

All in it turned out to be a successful show, hard to put in a particular box, but well attended and liked by the participants, with some early trading showing signs of a fading of the present retail recession.

Martin Colloms 2009