

## NAS 2011 Audio Show Blog

by Paul Messenger

To call September's Whittlebury Hall event a National Audio Show seems a shade disingenuous, given that the roster of exhibitors left out most of the major brand names that dominate UK hi-fi. The list of stayaways was so comprehensive, nobody could claim that the show was representative of today's hi-fi marketplace, but this journalist still found more than enough exhibitors to keep busy tramping around for two full days. Although far from crowded, visitor numbers seemed healthy enough to keep most exhibitors busy most of the time.

The larger brands were missed of course, but most have PR offices that keep journalists well informed, and their absence made it that much easier to explore the smaller operations that had come to the show. A number of retailers had also taken rooms, bringing welcome variety to the equipment combinations, and reflecting the increasingly blurred distinction between retailer and distributor.

Copies of *HIFICRITIC* sold well from the stand, so much so that we ran out of one of this year's editions. Arguably more interesting was the room upstairs, where Martin Colloms was explaining and demonstrating *HIFICRITIC*'s radical BMR-based *TRK* DIY speaker project. These interesting close-to-wall designs were driven by a Naim server system, to a succession of packed rooms and many favourable comments especially about the imaging and bass delivery. (UnitiServe, NDAC, Supernait/Hi-Cap, DNM Precision Cables)



A great venue in many ways, even third time around Whittlebury Hall remains a serious navigational challenge, so some rooms are easily missed. Although there were plenty of interesting items, organising them into a coherent show report is almost impossible.

Arguably the most intriguing room contained the new version of the *Voigt Domestic Corner Horn* that John Howes and his associates are introducing. The room didn't suit them particularly well, it must be said, but the field-coil driven Voxativ AC-Xp drive units delivered a very different impressive and decidedly subtle sonic delight.



HOWES QUARTERWAVE The Howes Quarterwave speaker is based on a 1970s DIY design

The drive units from Berlin based *Voxativ* could be heard in several rooms.



## VOXATIV

Voxativ's field-coil drivers are beautifully engineered, but costly

Designer *Ines Adler* had her own room, where the horn-loaded *Ampeggio* speakers were demonstrated via Cayin 9084D amps and a Lector CD player. Steve Harris interviewed Ines, which is planned to appear in the next edition of HIFICRITIC Vol 5 No 4.

Another brand using Voxativ full range drivers is *JoSound*, which is noteworthy for creating unusual transmission line enclosures from bamboo. Last time around it just had models based on a small *Jordan* driver, but this year has added a bigger Jo33/1 model with the larger Voxativ AC-2.5 permanent magnet driver.



JOSOUND JoSound's new heavyweight bamboo transmission line (left) uses a Voxativ AC-2.5 driver

The same driver was also found in the compact *Howes Quarterwave* speakers that *Music First Audio* was using with their transformer-based passive pre-amps. (see Vol. 5 Issue 3, for review)

Where single driver speakers go, valve amps are sure to follow, and a number of newcomers here were joining established lines like the extensive Icon Audio range. The Greek brand *Tsakiridis Devices*, imported by the entirely unrelated *Ikon Audio*, is one name that was new to this journalist. Another was *JoLida*, a US brand now manufacturing in China and introduced by *Aired Audio* to be reviewed in Vol. 5 No 4.

As usual, *Audio Note UK* was tucked away at the end of one corridor, playing an inexpensive valve-based system to a packed and very appreciative audience, one of whom described it as “an oasis of musical sanity”.

Vinyl too was well represented by several costly new turntables. These included a very purposeful looking thread-drive newcomer called *Palmer*, built on a birch-ply chassis and fitted with a *Scottish Audio Origami PU7* tonearm, in a room operated by the expanding *Kronos Audio Visual* operation. *Loricraft* has always favoured idler-wheel drive for its Garrard-type revivals, and is applying that to a new Triton model.



LORICRAFT  
Loricraft's new idler-drive Titan turntable

I also encountered a Linn LP12 mod called the *Spoke*, on the *Stamford Audio* stand. This inexpensive mod consisting of three wire spokes that connect the top plate to the subchassis is designed to prevent the platter and subchassis from rotating about the spindle axis. I can't say how well it works, and it clearly requires some fitting, but it certainly looks like an interesting idea.



Vertex AQ -Kaiser LeadingEdge support tables showing the Oval damping inserts

I've long been a fan of *Vertex AQ*'s approach to setting up a system by paying particular attention to a coherent pattern of cables, support furniture and accessories, largely by applying an unusual degree of mechanical damping and acoustic absorption. To these ears, the demonstration using the *Aletheia dac-1* DAC, *VTL* amplification and *Kaiser Kawero Vivace* speakers, was certainly one of the highlights the show.

*Nordost* adopts an approach which has some similarities, in intention rather than technique, maximising system performance through carefully applying a hierarchy of accessory components. Lars Christiansen ably demonstrated how a structured sequence

of changes could bring a succession of incremental sonic improvements to quite modest electronic components.

One consequence of the iPod revolution has been to make headphones fashionable again, and the sector is currently very buoyant and showing healthy growth. With that in mind, Symmetry focused all of its attention on high quality headphone products. Examples included a new *Stax SR009*, and a classy £1,995 model 903 dedicated headphone amplifier from *Trilogy*. *Symmetry* shared its room with *Electromod*, which showed more headphone amps – class A made-in-the-US solid state and valve designs from *Schiit* (pronounced Sheet) – and some interesting orthodynamic headphones (shades of the 1970s Wharfedale Isodynamics) under the *HiFiMAN* brand.

Streamers are also hot right now, at least among the bigger brands, and the most interesting thing in the *Henley Designs* room was a neat new *Stream Box DS* from *Pro-Ject*.



PRO-JECT Pro-Ject has added a streamer to its Box range



### HRT DACS

Audiofreaks introduced a collection of HRT DACs to drive C-J electronics and Avalon Idea speakers

DACs are another lively product category, and the choice of increasingly classy models at around £300. These included the *TEAC/Esoteric K-01* and *K-03* from *Symmetry*, *High Resolution Technology* (HRT) from *Audiofreaks*, while the full high res monte (at a rather higher price) is available via the *M2TECH Young DAC* from *Russ Andrews Accessories*



#### ANALOGUE ALCHEMY

Analogue Alchemy has now added its own range of electronics to its turntables and active speakers

One of the more interesting rooms featured a bunch of Russians living in North London and calling themselves *Analogue Alchemy*. Besides an impressive collection of acrylic vinyl turntables, the company has an interesting four-way active speaker system with dipole bass, and has now added its own electronics. When I dropped in, a heavily modified *Tascam* cassette deck running at 3.75ips was providing the source, and doing a fine job of imitating a much faster reel-to-reel machine. I've a suspicion that Audio Alchemy might be a brand to watch out for in the future.

Ex-Sonus Faber designer *Franco Serblin*'s surprisingly compact and unusually styled floor standing *Ktemas*, distributed by *Momentum Audio* and reviewed in our current issue Vol 5 no 3, were making some very sweet sounds in one of the smaller rooms.



## ETUDE1

Chris Liauw has introduced several improvements to the Etude 1

Close by in the *Ikon Audio* room, Chris Liauw has made a number of modifications to his radical BMR-based *Etude 1* stand-mounts, including decoupled drive units, a constrained-layer Corian sandwich front baffle and steel bracing.

Distributor *Kronos AV* is expanding rapidly into England from its roots in Northern Ireland. A relative newcomer amongst its growing portfolio of products is US speaker brand *Mark & Daniel*, which makes some very hefty stand-mount speakers with high density marble compound enclosures. Another high class and costly range of stand-mounts comes from Dutch company *DSS*, which *Astin Trew* is introducing.

**Origin Live** is taking its own radical route to compact loudspeakers, mounting co-axial drive units in drum-shaped enclosures that are then cord suspended from a hooped overhead cradle: decoupling par excellence.

At the opposite end of the size scale, the **Kudos Titan** was another of last year's prototypes that reappeared in a room organised by Leicester retailer **Cymbiosis**. This very substantial loudspeaker with its double reflex/isobaric bass loading is now finalised, is on the market, and some customers are already enjoying them at home.

Some of the better sounds were emanating from a large pair of **Magneplanar MG3.7s**, driven from a **Rega Isis/Osiris** combo and convincingly filling Decent Audio's very big room. I also enjoyed the vanishingly slim but intimidatingly tall **Gallo 5LS** speakers, driven from Cary Audio SET amplifiers in the LW Audio room

Other dramatic looking loudspeakers included a **Hart Audio** design that's much prettier and more compact than its predecessors, augmenting a front-mounted 300mm Tannoy Dual Concentric full range unit with no fewer than 18 little 115mm 'woofers', entirely filling the rear panels of two of the shapely enclosures.

Fred Davis' extraordinary looking **AXJET** design first appeared back in 1992, but was too bulky to get beyond the foyer of the Heathrow Penta hotel. Loading a single full range driver with front and rear horns, Davis brought a revised version of this very refined and developed design to Whittlebury.



AXJET

Fred Davis has reworked his outrageous looking AXJET double-horn speaker

He was driving them with a new *Deltec DPA-SA2* amplifier, reviving their 'Kelvin-sensing' design that incorporates the speaker cables within its feedback loop.



The New Deltec amplifiers

### **Colloms Show Notes :**

I was mainly manning in the *HIFICRITIC* room demonstrating to truly, all-day packed houses in our Syndicate15 room and could not visit many others. I snatched a look at the following.

The *AMR* room S14, with *Select Audio*, were showcasing their DP 777 Digital Processor with separate hi res and CD level conversion sections, operated with Pass amplification, XP30 pre and XA100 power the system providing an impressive and

expressive sound. Located adjacent to HIFICRITIC they were kind enough to control peak sound levels during our lecture demonstrations.



### PROTEUS

The heavily chromed Proteus valve amp now uses KT120 output valves

**ABC Audio** reintroduced the **Proteus** integrated valve amplifier, reviewed in a couple of musically intriguing guises in HIFICRITIC, but revised and now with KT120 output valves

Vertex AQ were partnered by **The Right Note** and again the new **Vertex AQ** NOS DAC was making delightful sounds with the **Kaiser Vivace** loudspeakers. I noted the new audio support frames from Kaiser-Vertex support frames, the **LeadingEdge** series, co-engineered designs where claimed superior performance and clean modern lines successfully conceal combinations of Vertex and Kaiser vibration control systems. Kaiser is now a part of the Vertex Group.

**Triangle**'s flagship **Magellan** was sounding particularly good with supporting equipment supplied by the ubiquitous Paul Benge of **ABC Audio**, who also advised on the successful sounding installation. I felt like reviewing a pair right away.



Origin Live: (suspension cords not shown )

I popped in the *Origin Live* room and saw their new suspended speakers, these a set of prototype interpretations for now, and they also admitted to some acoustic problems for which solutions were already being found. They looked striking while the arched support took considerable space, seeking an open location in a listening room.



Voxativ full range driver back horn loaded loudspeaker

With our forthcoming interview for and coverage of the new **Voxativ** full range driver, I caught some of this action in the **Schimmel** room with their striking, piano black, of course, full range horns.

I was sorry to have missed the UK first showing of the **Stella Utopia EM** from **Focal** but we hope to review them in the near future.

**Deltec** showed with the revived **AXjet** full range horns while introducing a cool looking new pre-power set in their house styling, but now finished in a fetching matt silver. I think that this suited their rounded 'house' styling better than the older gun-metal grey

finish. As Paul noted the Kelvin output approach is here revisited by Deltec, where the speaker terminals are brought to the power amplifier via sensor cables to make the drive to the speaker more accurate. These are prototypes as yet.

I popped in at *AudioSmile* and again marvelled at their three way modular active bass system showing a commendable punchy grunt in the bass, enquired about a review and was told that my editor was already under way on this for HIFICRITIC!



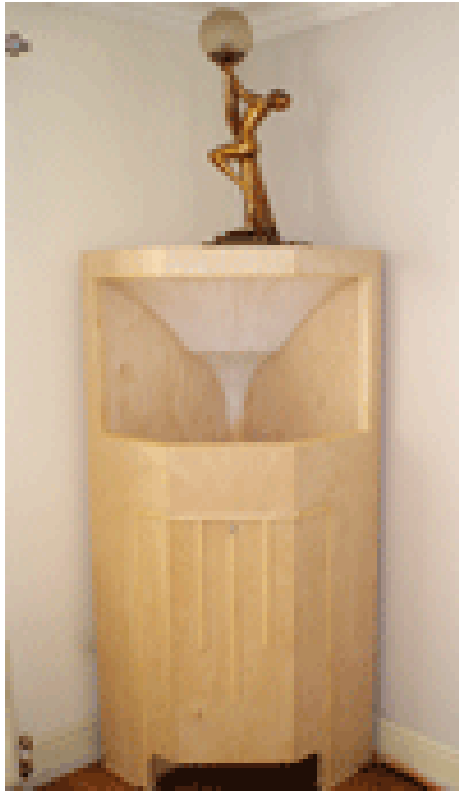
Jolida integrated valve amp the JD 502 BRC

Audiomobility showed a middle range *JoLida* integrated valve amp the JD 502 BRC, 80 + 80 W with remote for about £1,500 from Aired Audio which caught my aural attention and got booked right away for review in the next issue.



AcousticImagery Power Amplifier MonoBlock

*AcousticImagery* showed with Eminent LFT speakers some nicely crafted new electronics, pre and power, the former a linear design and the latter a new generation Class D, all in handsome milled from billet, alloy cases. The power amp monoblock does 400W into 4 ohms and has a bi-quadrant power convertor for lower noise and higher peak current, and is developed by the original Tri Path designer Bruno Putzeys. The results were promising, and we clearly we must revisit Class D technology with some more modern designs.



The Voigt Memory

The Voigt Memory recreated from 1934 by Howes Audio, was an extraordinary sight with its white plaster? inner wave guide internally illuminated from inside. The sound was massive, clear and characterful, with for me a hint of a classic Gaumont 'cast', maybe those Gaumonts of my aural cinema memory used these or similar speakers? A Voxativ full range driver was installed powered by Howes single-ended valve amplification.



Franco Serblin Ktêma

*Audio Momentum* showed the *Franco Serblin Ktêma* with high end electronics in a relatively small syndicate room. I need not have worried, the speaker showed that delicacy and intimate musical insight which I had experienced from it in review (Vol 5 No3 )