

Subjective Sounds

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I've reviewed three loudspeaker models in this edition of *HIFICRITIC*, from Dali, Russell K and B&W, and the results are best described as paradoxical, for several reasons. That's partly because evaluating loudspeakers is by no means straightforward. I could rate the three purely on sound quality grounds, which I guess is what one is supposed to do, but to be truly honest, sound quality is only one of several elements that persuade a customer to make a purchase.

One paradox was that the least costly speaker – the Russell K *RED 100* – also turned out to be the best sounding. But I'm equally convinced that the B&W will be the bigger seller, simply because it looks so much more fashionable. Styling and fashion play major roles in loudspeaker sales, and that observation explains all sorts of other paradoxes that I could identify.

For example, although a new pair of *RED 100s* are a rather tempting prospect, I reckon the best deal in loudspeakers today is – and has been for a great many years – a pair of secondhand Spendor *BCIs*. True you won't achieve massive loudness, given the limits imposed by modest sensitivity, and power handling based on the glues that were available for voice-coils 40 years ago. But the sheer sound quality remains hard to beat even today (especially through the midband, with that lovely alnico magnet motor), particularly if they're used on decent rigid stands.

The trouble is, of course, that secondhand *BCIs* are not particularly trendy right now, and a pair of used *LS3/5as* would probably cost twice as much, even though they're nowhere near as good, simply because they're currently far more fashionable.

There's definitely an attitude out there, fostered no doubt by many vested interests, that new is necessarily and automatically superior to old, whereas my experience is that, if not exactly the contrary, it's certainly by no means necessarily true.

Over the years, those vested interests have actually been exceptionally successful in foisting all manner of technological changes upon most of us. Only determined rearguard actions by those who really care has prevented the disappearance of, say, valves and vinyl, in the face of the purported 'improvements' that solid state and CD have brought to the hi-fi party.

It's all too easy to dismiss the sometimes glorious past as mere nostalgia. I'm not saying that everything old is necessarily good – far from it; many of the creations from the past are best forgotten, no question. But the same is true for so many of the new components appearing today. How many will actually stand the test of time?

One relatively new brand that I fondly expect to survive and prosper is Vertere, led by ex-Roksan design engineer Touraj Moghaddam. I've mentioned his cables more than once in this column, and have used them regularly for the last two or three years. But at the beginning of this year he shocked the hi-fi world by introducing a *Reference* tonearm that doesn't use bearings as such and costs an eye-watering £27,000 (of which the cable accounts for £6,500).

That's fantasyland as far as I'm concerned, but he also has a much less costly (£1,800) *SG1* tonearm, with bearings based on a unipivot variation, and came down to fit one onto my much-modified hybrid Linn in place of its regular Rega *RB1000* tonearm.

As usual I just let him get on with the installation, and was quite startled by improvements that I could hear easily enough after he'd done all he could. Despite this very promising start, certain details have still to be finalised, which is why this is just a sneak preview rather than a more extended discussion.