

Warsaw Show 2018

ANDREW HARRISON HAS CLOSE TIES TO POLAND, PARTLY BECAUSE HIS WIFE IS POLISH. HIS SHOW REPORT THEREFORE INCORPORATES SOME UNUSUAL PERSPECTIVES

ANDREW HARRISON

November is an important time in Poland, not just for Remembrance Day on the 11th but Independence too. For Poles, 11 November 1918 was also the day the country was first liberated from occupying neighbour countries. The Warsaw audio show has been held at around this time since it first began, back in 1997. Although it was always a bustling and vibrant event, it has steadily grown in size, visited by thousands of ordinary people eager to discover quality music reproduction, as well as hardcore hi-fi enthusiasts.

The latest show, held on 16-18 November 2018 also marked my own 20 year anniversary since first attending. Returning now, after a ten year break, highlighted how the Polish scene has moved over the last two decades. Vinyl was effectively absent then, artisan brands have risen then faded away, and too many otherwise decent products are now marred by the enervating touch of much Class D electronics. However, room sound quality has benefited greatly by the proliferation of acoustics specialists: many rooms received treatment from the likes of Apama, Artnovion, RW Acoustics, Vicoustic and Zig Zag.

As in 1998, the main focus is the Hotel Sobieski, taking all seven floors of small rooms for the cosy dens in packed rooms familiar to every show attendee (and some larger lounges). Perhaps a victim of its own success, the show has long overspilled into nearby hotels, but in 2015 added the shiny new football stadium on the far side of the Wisła river. This gives it a flavour of Munich's MOC (albeit with terrible signage and Escher-like escalators traversing its labyrinthine layout).

Day one saw a press conference held at the stadium, with the added attraction of Poland's premier jazz chanteuse Anna-Maria Jopek discussing her new album. Unfortunately for foreign visitors, all useful talk at the conference was in Polish (as was the official show brochure). Prices tend to be given in Polish Złoty or Euros. One Pound Sterling was worth around 4.9zł or €1.1 in late 2018.

Exhibition – Wystawa

Nowadays this is very much an international event with the usual familiar, globally-active brands. However, Slavic ingenuity abounds, from designers based in and around Poland and other East European countries. Record dealers opened stalls



*Michał Jurewicz
with new Mytek
Bridge DAC and
network player*

in all the venues, and vinyl and its hardware were everywhere. High-end creations from two quite different designers led the pack, namely J Sikora and Tentogra.

From Lublin in the country's east, Janusz Sikora was showing the Reference Line turntable (€24,000), featuring four Papst DC motors, its steel/cemented carbide and zirconium bearing supporting an 18 kg platter. New this year was a 12in Kevlar tonearm (price circa-€4,000).

Tentogra, from near the industrial city of Łódź, now has two models, the Oscar and Gramy. No pun on film awards intended, the sideboard-like Oscar (~€27,000) is named after Oscar Niemeyer, architect of Brazil's Congress centre which inspired the deck's unique look. The Oscar was spotted in Sky Audio's room too, where it was used to great effect with Tannoy GRF speakers and Sky's own OTL valve amplifier. [The smaller Gramy (~€18,000) translates as 'we play on'.]

There's a certain theme running here. The name 'Tentogra' follows Polish wit first applied by Stefan Kudelski when naming his tape recorder firm. While 'Nagra' translates as 'will record', 'Tentogra' means that 'this one plays'. A rather more affordable solution came from Muarah with its new MT-2 turntable (10,900zł with tonearm and cartridge), made in black acrylic and at a price below the first



*Jarek Waszłyżyszyn of Ancient Audio
with DSP loudspeakers from new offshoot
Fram*



J. Sikora Reference Line turntable with Kenlar 12 arm

MT-1 turntable. It's able to take either 9in or 12in Jelco tonearms.

Audio Anatomy of Kraków was showing the *Scheu Das Laufwerk No 2* deck from Germany, a 38kg heavyweight in steel/bronze with an 8cm thick acrylic platter, demonstrated with Audio Flight electronics and Manger *p2* speakers.

Beyond the Sobieski and Stadion venues, the Golden Tulip Hotel hosted RCM Audio with the TechDAS *Air Force III* turntable from Japan, here sporting two tonearms: SAT *LM-09* and My Sonic Lab *Signature Platinum*, fitted with Schröder *Model CB 9* and Miyajima *Infinity Mono* cartridges. RCM also re-launched the Fink flagship loudspeaker *Borg*, along with a presentation from designer Karl-Heinz, driven by Thrax electronics from Bulgaria.

Vibration isolation is taken to one extreme by Mag-Lev from Slovenia. Its *ML1* turntable has a platter that clearly levitates several centimetres clear of the plinth, both supported and driven by a clever array of hidden magnets.

Fully supporting LPs, I found Czech manufacturer Remton Audio from Prague (sharing a room with Fonolab which specialises in silver wiring the SAEC *WE-308SXL* tonearm). Alexander Remmer makes phono amplifiers, and was premiering a *Mk2* valve stage (€3960) using passive LCR equalisation. I wasn't aware of a *Mk1* but was intrigued, knowing well that LCR magic found in the MFA Reference Phono, avoiding resistors in the EQ signal path and supporting constant impedance at all frequencies. This single-box design with moving-coil transformer step-up uses pairs of JJ *E88C* and *ECC81* and deserves closer investigation.

Polish brands working with valves are the norm, comfortably outnumbering solid-state designs.

There's too many to detail all of them here, but among the highlights were Manron from Toruń with its crazy *Delta SE150m* monoblock. This vintage sci-fi construct takes one Russian *GM100*, a 1kW transmitter triode, which is good for 150W output: can you support its 140kg weight, alongside a bill for 990,000zł?

Also shunning the usual valve inventory, Sound Transmission from Zalesie Górne showed its *SE-PP30* integrated amp, based on a 30W push-pull Williamson circuit. Here be Soviet military valves, four *IY-50 (GU-50)* RF power pentodes; these are also optionally switchable from pentode to triode mode.

JAG Electronics from Łódź displayed its top *JAG 300 SE* integrated and entry-level *JAG 100 SE II*, the latter's 10 W from two *ECL86* proved ample to drive the brand's 99 dB-sensitivity *Nirvana* speaker, based on the *Audio Nirvana Super 10* full-range driver.

Taking a break from his beautifully baroque valve electronics, Kraków sonic knight Jarek Waszczyszyn, of Ancient Audio, was demonstrating a new line in DSP loudspeakers. As far removed from the warm glow of glass as I can imagine, the new *Fram* series of compact speakers relies on hush-hush silicon from a specialist in Oxford, finished off by Class D Hypex. While not quite mass-market yet, at 8000zł for the *Fram Maxi*, the hope is that economy will come with scale.

However, the old-school approach thrives through compatriot Łukasz Fikus and his Lampizator digital converters. The philosophy is non-oversampling filters and vacuum-state output, from the entry-level *Amber 2* DAC (at around €2000) to the €20k+ *Pacific* model. These were being demonstrated with Sveda Audio active loudspeakers in the Golden Tulip hotel – and were also spotted elsewhere, enabling the sculpted-baffle *PIU* speakers made by 8MM Audiolab of Lithuania.

From Hungary came the somewhat familiar Qualiton brand is now under new owner Audio Hungary. The company, formerly Budapest Electroacoustic Factory (EAG/BEAG), was once the largest electroacoustic manufacturer in the eastern block. The *APX 200* stereo power amp conceals four *EL519* valves inside gold/black casework, complemented by a panel meter and user-adjustable bias. Also new are the standalone phono stage for moving magnet cartridges, and the moving-coil step-up, both incorporating in-house transformers.

From Ljubljana (across the border in Slovenia), Audio Alto revealed its *AA 17 OB MKII* 'sound projector', a 1.97m-tall curved dipole with 15 small full-range drivers plus two woofers per channel.



Alexander Remmer of Remton with LCR Mk 2 tube phono stage

The demonstration used active 400W Class D amplification, fine-tuned with DSP filters and room equalisation. Starting price without electronics is €21,000.

Distributor Artisan Audio Devices – from Toruń, birthplace of Mikołaj Kopernik (better known by the latin name of Copernicus) – showed Tsakiridis from Greece. The *Artemis Plus* amplifier may not be brand new, but it offers more than retro lab-tech looks at just 6000zł – one version takes *EL34s* or *6550s* in the *Plus*, with either triode or pentode operation and switchable feedback.

Polskie Firmy

The studio-turned-speaker-maker was represented by two new brands – Rat Studios, and Zeta Zero (from TR Studios). The former had a rock'n'roll set with electric guitars and three speakers: *RAW*, *Callisto* and *Voyager*; the floorstanding *Callisto* was 'finished' in bare chipboard, which seemed strangely attractive.

Entirely not box-like was the Zeta Zero brand and its omnidirectional *Orbital 360*. Using columns that resemble lacquered woodstoves, as with all good omnidirectional designs, these sounded rather good within the confines of a room where access to the sweet-spot is limited.

Long-established Polish audio brands staked their ground, including Gigawatt power conditioners alongside Marton and its US-inspired muscle amp, the *Opusculum Reference*. Heavyweight speaker brand ESA from Warsaw had founder Andrzej Zawada showing a new diversion from the usual figured hardwood with the *Stone* floorstander (140,000zł) (unsurprisingly, hewn from solid rock!).

Cable legend Albedo was founded in 1996, and specialises in monocrystal silver. Through Diapason speakers I heard beautiful Spanish guitar music from Javier Garcia Verdugo, son of founder of Ars Sonum, whose *Filarmonia SE* powered the dem – a 30W integrated amplifier with *EL34L* output valves and little feedback. Cables comprised Albedo *Metamorphosis* speaker, *Monolith* interconnect and *Gravity 1/2* power cables.

Still filling the popular end of the speaker spectrum, Poland's former communist state brand Tonsil packed the ground floor with monster speakers. This company, from Września near Poznań, has turned out millions of OEM drivers for automotive-oriented brands like Pioneer, while keeping its largest anechoic chamber in Europe secret. The domestic range includes the mighty *Omega* floorstander at 7000zł (tuned by the UK's Russell Kauffman), and its more affordable (3500zł) room-filler, the *Altus 380S*, weighing in at 50kg per 100-litre cabinet.

Mytek digital audio is already well-known outside Poland, with owner Michał Jurewicz working in New York studios since the 1990s before founding the DAC brand. His popular *Brooklyn* DAC has become my personal reference for some time now, and has recently been upgraded to the *Bridge*, now incorporating network play capability.

Audiophile meet Anglophile

Mention should be made of various Anglophile distributors such as Audio Center Poland that promote British kit. Pełne Brzmienie Studio Hi-End for example embraces Scottish engineering, playing a *Systemdek 3D* with 12in Audio Origami arm in a system comprising the Art *DRAM 15 Silver* three-way monitors, powered by Art Audio (no relation) valve amps from Nottingham.

Audiopunkt of Warsaw made good sounds with BBC-inspired Graham Audio loudspeakers, the models bearing familiar names like Chartwell and Swisstone. Elsewhere, Jerry and Graham from Falcon Acoustics played their peerless new BBC *LS3/5A* assembled with fresh in-house *B110/T27* drivers. My ears do like a good '3/5A and they loved this sound, along with that from more rooms than I can remember from earlier visits, to a massive event which this year drew more than 14,000 visitors.

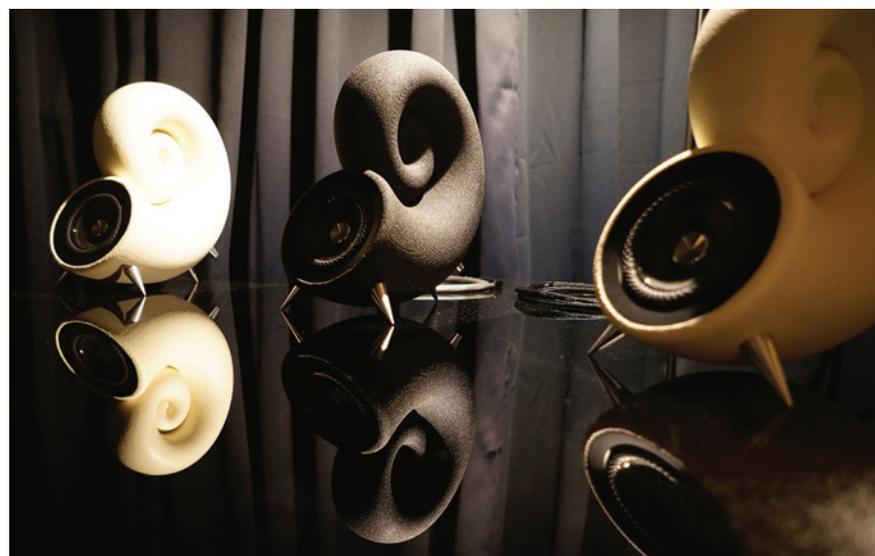
However, the last word must go to the coolest launch at the show: the *Spirula* desktop speaker (€799) from Deeptime (from Buštěhrad in the Czech Republic). Turning sand into sound, they're 3D printed from silica to resemble small nautilus shells, exploiting the shape's structural advantages. The little 3in bamboo-cone drivers may be bolstered by an optional *Thunderstone* powered sub; the combination is priced at €3141.59.



Tentogra Gramy with adjustable arm height while playing



No lens distortion but Audio Alto's curvy AA LA17 OB MKII sound projector



Deeptime Spirula, turning sand into sound