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**Published by**  
HIFICRITIC Ltd.

Registered in England No.6054617  
Registered Office: Winnington House,  
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Printed in the UK by  
Premier Print, London

## HIFICRITIC

is a printed publication available  
by subscription only.

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As the HIFICRITIC team was planning to get under way with the preparation of this late spring issue, the Covid-19 storm broke. Momentarily, our usual upbeat enthusiasm for our favourite subject was dampened: none of us could escape the direct or the indirect effects of this crisis, or ignore the extended ramifications. The months of social distancing have greatly reduced our sharing of listening experiences – and you may have seen in the national press that HIFICRITIC contributor Rafael Todes (of the Allegri String Quartet) was asked by the police to stop performing small family fundraising concerts in his front garden for his neighbours, as it might attract a crowd.

Fortunately, the HIFICRITIC ‘family’ has rallied round: checking our own resources and activities – editorial, production, print and distribution – we are fortunate that our production remains intact, and product review samples continue to come in, thanks to distributors and marketing agencies. We didn’t need to worry about social distancing or commuting: our design and production are distant but solidly connected. While many are coming to terms with working from home – it’s what we’ve been doing for years!

Copy is flowing in from our dedicated freelancers; our contract printing, subscription and fulfilment services continue to operate; and crucially, in a strange twist of fate, our publication model is not dependant on advertising revenue as are almost all others.

Our thoughts turned to the many aspects of our audio industry: research and design, manufacturing, marketing, importation and dealerships. How would companies survive? They have needed to adapt, control costs, and find a way to reach their customers in a new era – the length of which, at the moment, seems unknown. Manufacturing involves long lead times and sometimes a complex supply chain, so there will be delays, and some items may never appear, while some will be hampered by unexpected challenges: we’ve heard of at least one company manufacturing here in the UK halt operations simply due to the unavailability of the cardboard boxes in which the products are shipped.

However, mail order suppliers exist and the crisis has certainly proven the efficacy of the modern delivery chain. Some manufacturers have also adopted direct selling to customers. Even for dealers with showrooms, there are alternatives: casual walk-in browsers are out, but subject to official movement restrictions and suitable social distancing, it may prove possible to introduce timed appointments.

Home trial is becoming increasingly popular, dependent on the value, size and mass of the equipment concerned. Manufacturers and sellers of audio cables and similar smaller accessories should have a field day here. Potential purchasers are also becoming aware of the economic ramifications of the inevitable recession and many will be severely curtailing hobby budgets, including those for audio products. Others, however, will be taking advantage of their isolation, and investing in products to make more comfortable their current predicament – and what better balm to soothe these times than good music played on fine hi-fi equipment?

In this issue I report on a long-planned investigation of home audio network sound quality issues including the comparative auditioning of Ethernet cables. Listening to wires is stressful at the best of times and can lack reward, especially when differences sometimes become elusive. Sharing the sound quality presentations with another critic is usually helpful, so working with others, especially streaming enthusiast Steve Harris (Audioplus), several of these sessions have been conducted as a duality. We had both previously shared some comparisons in my listening room but also had taken the precaution for each of us to have samples of many of the cable products and net switches to allow further solitary assessments.

Please accept the best wishes of the entire HIFICRITIC team as we all face the evolving pandemic and economic crisis, reminding ourselves that music reproduction remains helpfully cheering and therapeutic.

*Martin Colloms*  
**Editor-in-Chief**