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Absolute Sounds

Ricardo Franassovici, the driving force behind Absolute Sounds, reveals how he turned a hobby into founding the UK's most renowned high-end distribution company. Interview: Malcolm Steward

On a cold winter's evening, *Hi-Fi Choice* donned a thick coat and went to meet Ricardo Franassovici, the founder of Absolute Sounds. In the warm and comfortable surroundings of London's Baglioni Hotel, we sipped espresso while chatting to the enthusiastic businessman who effectively brought high-end hi-fi to Britain by introducing such legendary brands as Krell, Sonus Faber, Audio Research, MartinLogan, Koetsu and Wilson Audio.

HFC When did you first arrive in the UK?

RF I came to live in the UK in the late 1970s. I'd had about 15 years in the music business and I came here to work for a major record label, which didn't turn out as planned. During my time in the music industry I'd developed what you might call a manic obsession, an audiophile disease – all the people working with me thought I was completely crazy. However, as a result of my obsession, I had already begun importing some highly esoteric hi-fi – moving-coil cartridges from Japan and valve preamplifiers from California – purely to satisfy my craving for better sound. That hobby eventually turned into a business and Absolute Sounds was born.

I was a real two-channel man, a genuine enthusiast whose passion had created a small business, almost by accident. But it certainly wasn't plain sailing. Things were very tough for me in those days – for starters, I had just arrived in this country with my family, and there was this tremendously insular resistance to anything that was above the two best-known UK brands of the day, Linn and Naim, who were effectively trying to corner the market and convince people that there was no life beyond their sound. To be fair to them, they had a wonderful story, even though it was controversial, but in those early days of the high-end market many retailers thought it an attractive proposition to put to their customers, and it became almost religious,



Ricardo Franassovici:
high-end evangelist

“At the time there was no high end. In the UK, the perception of many companies was that nobody needed high-end components.”

a cult thing. That made life difficult for me, because I was the new kid on the block with my unusual esoterica, but I feel in retrospect that opposition actually helped me, because it forced me to do a better job – to develop a better story and to ensure the integrity of my products. I wanted to deliver sound systems that were at that time not available on 97 per cent of the planet. Having spent much of my life working with musicians, I had a good idea of the sound I was looking to create. I believed that I could create a better sound than that of the original performance, which I soon realised was impossible, but at least it gave me the necessary drive and conviction to continue in my endeavours.

At that time there was no high end, no esoteric equipment. In the UK, the perception of many companies was that nobody needed high-end components. I'm pleased that over time that situation has changed and we now

have an industry that accepts that these types of systems genuinely deserve a place in the market, for those consumers who want hi-fi that offers the sort of exceptional performance that mass-market and Far Eastern producers, in all fairness, cannot provide. Those manufacturers concern themselves mainly with keeping up with the latest technology and hitting price points, which aren't major concerns for high-end producers and for the companies Absolute Sounds represents. Our goal is to produce systems that will wow and amaze people, and make them say: "I have never heard music sound that good before!"

In the early days, I experimented a lot and learned a great deal. I imported all sorts of products – ribbon-technology panel loudspeakers, planar loudspeakers and the legendary Beveridge electrostatics, which were a fabulous design and the only other electrostatics that Quad's Peter Walker said he

respected. In fact, some 27 years after hearing them I'm buying a pair to restore, because they had the type of performance one could never forget. We were also the first people to introduce a turntable that competed with the Linn LP12 – the Oracle – and I believe we helped to establish the market for high-priced moving-coil cartridges. I would like to believe that Absolute Sounds helped to create in the UK what is now called the high-end, two-channel industry.

HFC Would it be fair to say that before Absolute Sounds there were no high-end components such as Krell amplifiers in the UK?

RF There was nothing – or at least only a very tiny amount. Ira Gale had personally brought in two pieces of Audio Research equipment, one of which is now in my museum. So we had others, but in truth, as an industry it wasn't even at cottage level – more kitchen table!

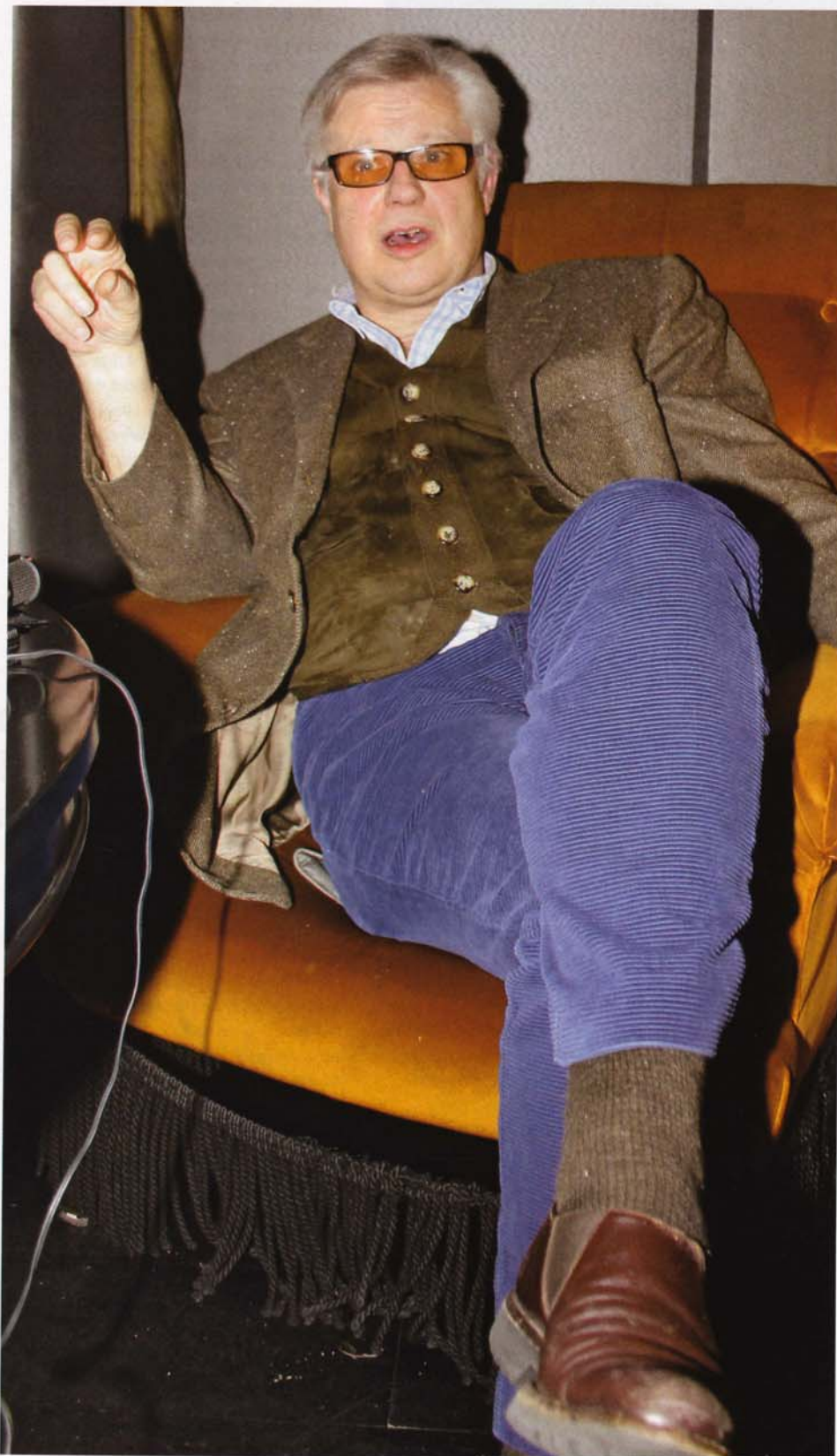
At that time the nearest equivalent to a high-end system was Linn Isobariks with a Naim NAP 250 along with a Linn LP12/Grace/Supex turntable. I listened to it and, although it was very enjoyable and powerful, it lacked the definition I wanted. I felt that it seemed – perhaps intentionally – bandwidth-limited. It gave a good midband and upper bass, but that wasn't enough for me, so I began to introduce my 'toys'.

HFC What were the first products you brought to the UK?

RF The Beveridge loudspeakers, followed closely by the Oracle turntable. At that time life was really fun – I used to hire a van and go to shows in Stockport, Edinburgh, Manchester, Hull and Liverpool, and set the system up on my own. Things weren't perfect, because we hadn't yet developed a true system – we just had individual elements – but they were nonetheless really enjoyable.

HFC In recent years the hi-fi industry has had its share of ups and downs, but you seem to have remained impervious to events that have had a dramatic impact on the budget- and mid-market sectors. Does being at the more expensive end of the market effectively insulate Absolute Sounds from recessions and suchlike?

RF The company grew significantly and rapidly in its first ten years as our systems came together – we initially had excellent individual components, but it took time – and a fair bit of trial and error – to develop coherent systems. We then started importing Krell and Apogee, which afforded us an extraordinary breakthrough – apart from being outstanding individual products, they finally provided us





Ricardo embraces new formats, but is a two-channel man at heart

with a fantastic system that was totally esoteric in its concept – ribbon-planar loudspeakers with pure Class A amplifiers along with the valve preamps we were using at that time. We were very creative in the way we assembled systems, and from that point on we became very credible in the market and started to attract a lot of attention.

HFC Have you also remained unaffected by other changes such as AV and iPods?

RF About five years ago we started feeling changes in the market, when even very credible publications that were traditionally two-channel started looking at new formats that were being offered to consumers. It wasn't that we weren't economy-proof, just that the attention of the consumer was being drawn somewhere else, to the point that we started bringing in home installation and home cinema products – from brands that we were already associated with, not by looking at new suppliers. But over the last two years, rather encouragingly, the situation has altered again, and we are seeing a tremendous resurgence of interest in two-channel music.

From that perspective, I think the iPod is a good friend, because of the massive promotion going on around the product, which is all about listening to music in stereo without any multichannel or serious vision element attached to it. Effectively, it's creating a lot of music enthusiasts. Whether it will be easy to move these people from their iPods to a

higher level of hi-fi, I don't know. But it's certainly encouraging to have more and more people telling us that they simply want to have a good stereo, especially when the term 'stereo' five years ago was virtually politically incorrect! It's good to know that there's a pride of ownership coming back to that simple, very honest format.

HFC Many people seem to think that multichannel music is dead in the water.

RF I think that's correct. I think customers are fed up. We've seen situations – through our association with one of our suppliers, Theta Digital, which has always been at the pinnacle of digital technology – where by the time you had delivered a product to the customer, there was already another that had made it obsolete. Customers are sick and tired of that. But I have a slightly more poetic view about the resurgence of two-channel – I think we are in a world where customers are definitely rewarding themselves, and their senses, and they have different ways of doing that. As much as I don't understand him, I respect the man who enjoys a good cigar over an ordinary cigar; I respect the man who buys himself a nice analogue watch, even though it's not as accurate as a digital Seiko. I believe our ears have rediscovered that infinitesimal ability to discern better-quality sound.

“I think we live in a world where customers are definitely rewarding themselves, and their senses, in different ways.”

Because I'm still driven by the same passion – as are my suppliers, I'm pleased to say. We would be pleased to see people accepting the pride of ownership of very good stereos. I would like to think that over the years we have made it possible for people to reward their senses with good sound and have made it accepted in the luxury market, without wishing to make high-end hi-fi seem elitist. People will buy supercars, art and great bottles of wine to reward themselves, and I would like to see that grow to include high-end hi-fi.

In the last three or four years this has been happening. Our customer profile has changed. We still retain the hard-core hi-fi enthusiasts, but we're also selling to that group of people who want the best. One of my retailers recently told me of a client who said to him that he had the choice between upgrading his Porsche or buying a Krell system, and that he'd opted for the latter.

HFC It's gratifying to know that there isn't such a diminishing market as some might have thought for 'quality' audio and that it may, in fact, be attracting new customers.

RF One thing that is necessary for that growth to continue is that retailers – or some of them, at least – need to become less lazy, waiting for the good review to be published and then waiting for their phone to start ringing. Specialists need to be more proactive and invest more into their stores and staff so that consumers feel happy about dealing with them. In many of my best retailers, the staff gain so much confidence from their customers that the customers, after a couple of demonstrations, are completely happy to let the sales consultants decide on the best systems for them.

That is how it should be, because manufacturers and importers can only do so much – we can supply the ingredients and suggest a recipe, but ultimately it's the dealers' responsibility to 'prepare the meal'.

Yet another thing is that with age comes cynicism – especially in this country, it seems. I would ask our colleagues in the press to remember that when they write about components, they should convey more about the musical aspects of the components rather than be too disparaging.

HFC Surely that's a reflection of some magazines' beliefs that readers only want quick-hit reviews and small snatches of sound bite-style information?

RF We need a lot more proactivity throughout the industry. We need to tell people that good music exists and that its reproduction is not an antique pastime. Music is available in a variety of formats, so let us create high-quality systems that can make the most of all of them.

We are not antiques – certainly not when you compare our industry to, say, the car industry, which has been around far longer. We need to create an environment in which listening to high-quality music reproduction becomes an aspirational pursuit, and before we can do that, we need to ensure that the people who are designing the hi-fi are just as passionate about recreating the original performance.

Venturing out into the cold night air, it struck us as being refreshing to have discovered that Ricardo, despite his overt passion for vinyl and his plans to release some of his favourite recordings on that medium, isn't caught in any time warp and is still eager, after nearly three decades, to preach the high-end gospel to anyone with the inclination to listen. **HFC**