

NEWSLETTER vol. 29

September 2003

With over 20 years of experience at the cutting edge of high end audio and home entertainment, Absolute Sounds knows a fine product when we see and hear one. As the world moves further into convergence - who better to guide you through the audio & video jungle?

As Absolute Sounds completes its first quarter-century, we've taken the time to sit back and reflect on how the high-end segment of the home entertainment industry has changed. And our reflections are timely: in the weeks leading up to the hi-fi show,



Wilson X-2 Alexandria

we've seen two high-end brands 're-structure' themselves. What does this tell us? That we were right all along to use a conservative approach, supporting only the brands that we knew - with some certainty - were here for the long run. Above all, we have promised our customers that the products they buy would serve long lives and would act as investments, not as disposable commodities with built-in obsolescence. We'd like to think that we've made the right choices.

Not that this will allow us to be complacent. Rather, these recent events have inspired us to raise the bar even further, consolidating our brands, improving our service and increasing our activity in promoting only the best products on offer.

Why? Because it's not all bad news. SACD and DVD-Audio have upped the ante for digital two-channel sound - not just multi-channel - in ways we couldn't have imagined. Those who despaired of CD quality after a lifetime of superior vinyl replay have admitted that the new formats are nothing less than superb, and we're seeing the first true high-end manifestation in Krell's SACD player. Broad-band is slowly spreading through the UK, bringing with it the viability of music and movies on-demand. The DVD software situation has improved so much that Empire magazine was driven to write that Region 2 can now boast some superior releases to Region 1. Our favourite brands have staggered us with their productivity, with Transparent upgrading its cables across the board, Wilson unleashing what one reviewer has already called the greatest speaker ever made, Audio Research producing a run of amazing 'common sense' designs culminating in a honey of an integrated amp, McIntosh unveiling a stupendous A/V integrated amplifier, MartinLogan delivering a raft of new room-friendly electrostatics and more.

AUDIO RESEARCH

True to its two-channel roots, Audio Research continues to maintain its position as THE purveyor of the finest in all-analogue hardware through the continuing dominance of the Reference 2 Mk II pre-amp and the Reference Phono. They simply have no peers, and they positively sing when driving the Reference 300 or 600 Mk II power amplifiers. These are the sort of amplifiers around which legends grow, and we implore you to hear them if you're in the process of creating a state-of-the-art two-channel system.

To bring some of this brilliance to a wider market, the company launched a shockingly good range of cost-effective purist amplifiers reminiscent of the models that first established the brand: the SP 16 pre-amplifier and VS55 and 110 power amplifiers. This year they've been joined by a product that will reach even more music lovers, the VSi 55 integrated amplifier, at £2895. This promises to introduce more people to the delights of all-valve amplification than any model in recent memory! Sweet-sounding, with natural bass and near-holographic imaging - who could believe that this much of Audio Research's signature sound could be accessed for so little outlay?

And Audio Research is not shying away from multi-channel and digital. The CD3 now in its MKII version, which upgrade kit is retrofittable and includes a 45 part change, continues to serve as a reference-grade CD-only player (our friend Dave Wilson uses one!), demonstrating levels of refinement that seem to elude other players. And it's here that we owe you a bit of an apology: the long-awaited 150M multi-channel amplifier has been delayed slightly while awaiting CE approval. But it will be worth the wait: the 150M can be configured to house up to seven Class T digital amplifier modules, each rated at 150W. Not enough power? Then why not bridge pairs of modules for a massive 600W into 8 ohms? If you thought audiophile-grade surround sound was a contradiction in terms, think again. And if you really don't like multi-channel, you can enjoy just two channels of Audio Research's Class T amplification with the brand-spanking-new 150.2, the stereo-only version of the 150M. To match it? How about the stunning MP-1? This is a true pre-amplifier, but with 6-channel discrete technology and gain and phase adjustment. If you have an SACD or DVD-A player, or a universal, this has to be the way to hear it!

COPLAND

Our favourite Scandinavians really caught us unawares with the kind of bargain we just didn't expect. On the other hand, Copland has never been greedy, and its prices are always sane and sensible. Selling for only £1898 is the frighteningly proficient CSA29 integrated amplifier. Naturally, as it's made by Copland, the amp is beautifully-styled, ergonomically close to perfect and featuring valve/transistor hybrid technology. What it also does is deliver a serious 85W/ch, it features a cutting-edge phono section with active RIAA equalization, and its remote control will also operate the CDA822 CD player. If you want a sublime entry-level two-channel system, or a package for a second 'zone', this is the place to start. Best of all: the stuff looks so fantastic that you'll never think of it as affordable, only as 'gorgeous'!

DWIN

Our favourite display manufacturer's 3rd generation TransVision™3 High Definition DLP™ Projection System is deliciously clever: it employs two complementary components - the 720p DLP™ Projector with the latest Mustang/HD2 DMD technology from Texas Instruments, and DWIN's acclaimed Digital Video Processor. The latter provides great installation flexibility, eliminates double processing of video signals and enables complete digital connectivity from digital video sources to the display, ensuring the best picture quality possible. Better

still, the TransVision™3 is the only contender amongst the competing 720p DLP™ projectors to employ Prism Free Optical light path architecture to guarantee maximum picture contrast. The result is true high definition, stunning film-like images with superior detail, deep blacks, high contrast and vibrant colors unsurpassed by any other competing system. With its Carl-Zeiss™ zoom lens, this baby produces the widest single lens throw distances, ranging from 1.41 to 2.1 times the screen width, and it employs a 200 watt lamp to cover a wide range of screen sizes. Flexibility is assured because the TransVision™3's Digital Video Processor accepts a total of 10 video inputs: 2 DVI/HDCP, 2 RGB, 2 S-video 2 component, and 2 composite.

Plasma hasn't been forgotten, either. Dwin's Plasmalimage™ combines a 50" High Definition Plasma Display and a Video Processor Controller. The HD-50TS utilizes DWIN's exceptional video processing electronics and digital home theater features, offering Asymmetric Cell Design, Native HD Resolution, Adaptive Film Mode Processing, (3:2 Pull Down), Gamma Correction, True Black Drive, Increased Grayscale Range, and 160 degree viewing angle. The result? Probably the best plasma screen images we've ever seen! And tell the wife: the HD-50TS measures only 47.6" wide, 28.5" high and a very slim 3.9" deep.



Audio Research - VSi 55

JADIS

Enjoying a much-deserved revival, France's premier valve amp manufacturer has introduced two outstanding new products for the 2003-4 season. The JPS 8 all-balanced line stage pre-amplifier with out-board power supply is so musical, so glorious that even noted Francophile Ken Kessler had to rave about it! And, like its Absolute Sounds stablemates Audio Research and Copland, Jadis, too, has produced a fabulous entry-level integrated amplifier, the DA 50 Signature, with 30W/ch and drive capability of 1-16 ohms. (Do we detect a new trend for high-quality integrateds?) Like its bigger sisters, the baby Jadis has the kind of warmth and holographic imaging that has made this brand the choice of the cognoscenti. We know of no other amplifiers that caress the listener as do the Jadis models. Then again, they are French....

KOETSU

Manufacturer of the world's finest moving-coil cartridges - bar none - Koetsu has, with the re-introduction of the legendary Black, re-affirmed its supremacy even at the entry-level. With the proliferation of variants within the model range, we've taken it upon ourselves to rationalise the line, and are now offering for the UK music lover, the following models: Black with aluminium body, Red T with rosewood body, the various Urushis configured differently in terms of 'engine tuning', the Platinum series comprising of the legendary The Signature, the Gold with onyx body, the Itoigawa and the Jade. It continues to amaze us that Koetsu cartridges demonstrate longevity not evinced by any other moving coils, making them long-term investments rather than short-term risks. Quite simply, there's no better way to retrieve sound from vinyl.



KRELL

With the recent shake-ups at the top of the high-end solid-state sector – both two- and multi-channel – Krell has shown that our confidence was not misplaced: it is emerging as a victor amongst also-rans. At the entry-level, it has triumphed with the magnificent Showcase range, while its cost-no-object models, including the HTS processor and TAS amplification, have no peers: the DVD Standard and the SACD Standard now rank amongst the finest source components available. This will be the first opportunity for UK consumers to see and hear Krell's first foray into SACD, the SACD Standard proving unequivocally that SACD takes optical disc playback to new heights. You will simply not believe what it does with the new Rolling Stones SACDs! New this year is the KAV-400xi, a revolutionary integrated amplifier with a budget price tag but performance way above its fighting weight. Krell has a long tradition of releasing exceptional integrated amplifiers, but this one surprised even us: balanced operation, remote control, all-metal construction, a massive 800VA toroidal power supply, Krell's



Krell - Showcase amplifier & processor

Class-A coupled design, 200W/ch output (400W into 4 ohms!) and full integration with all Krell components. Of course, if this isn't enough power, there's always FPB. Showcase hasn't been forgotten, either: we were pleased to see the new Showcase DVD player launched at the CEDIA show, with progressive scan and a price you won't believe!

McINTOSH

Talk about a monster! McIntosh's MHT200 A/V Receiver is the kind of product that makes you shake your head in wonder. In one fell swoop, this revered brand has released a product so intelligent, so brilliantly conceived that it will cause sighs of relief throughout the land, especially amongst those who fear a proliferation of hard-to-connect/hard-to-configure home cinema products. This wondrous beastie contains an up-to-the-minute, perennially upgradeable A/V processor AND eight channel's worth of amplification (140W each!) in one single chassis. But there's more: it will power a second, two-channel zone, or act as an 8.1 system. It will integrate with any after-market remote control/multi-room system. It will accept an internal module that provides FM radio. And it features all that has made McIntosh one of the most respected brands in the world: classic styling, flawless construction and reliability that is the envy of the industry. This device is NOT to be confused with mass-market A/V receivers!!! For those who like their separates completely separated, McIntosh has also introduced the MC501, a mind-bender of a power amp conservatively rated at 500W. Clear a lot of space for systems using this monoblock: it has a footprint of 17.5x15.5in!

MARTIN LOGAN

It's not enough that Martin Logan has a range of hybrid electrostatics covering a vast price range, from the economical to the stratospheric. This year the company decided to fill some gaps, and there are four new models to ensure that the company can provide something for everyone. The Clarity, at £2498 per pair, could turn out to be the hottest of the Martin Logan 'affordables', a 53in tall floor-standing model with all of the ML virtues, including the new generation aluminium cone woofer. With a floorspace requirement smaller than an LP sleeve, this is THE compact Martin Logan for the space-shy. Just announced in time for the hi-fi show are three new models aimed at those who want to create compact home cinemas. The Grotto is an all-new sub-woofer based on the technology of the much-praised Descent and Depth, only housed in an enclosure measuring only 15x15x12.9in – and still it contains a 10in aluminium woofer and a 250W amp, for only £999! We couldn't believe it! Under a grand!!! To complement the Grotto (or should it be the other way around?), there's the new Mosaic, a

40in tall hybrid retailing for £1799 per pair, and – for those who really have space problems – the Fresco, a true wall-hanging Martin Logan using a new ATF planar technology, at £899 per unit. Depth is only 5.69in!!! Freshly launched at CEDIA in early September was the Montage, coming in just below the Mosaic and using an ATF tweeter. We'd like to congratulate Martin Logan, too, for winning a slew of awards this year.

SONUS FABER

We're so pleased with the reception you've shown for the magnificent Cremona series – it's been one of Sonus Faber's greatest successes, another hit in a long line of winners. It rewrote the style-book for wooden-enclosed speakers, and Sonus Faber really paid heed to the calls for a home theatre system that wouldn't compromise one iota when it came to purist two-channel performance. Of course, the Cremona is the company's mid-range series, coming in below the Homage models, so it shouldn't be forgotten that there's also a 'junior' range, the gorgeous but cost-effective Concerto Home series. For audiophiles on a budget, searching for monitor-grade performance, the Concerto Home and Grand Piano Home will suit them perfectly. Then, when it's time to add more channels there's the matching Gravis subwoofer, the Wall rear channels and the Solo centre channel. Still unrivalled for sound AND looks!

THETA DIGITAL

Basking in the glow of absolutely rave reviews for its amplifiers, Theta has added a fourth model to the series that includes Dreadnaught, Intrepid and Citadel. The new Enterprise is a 300W monoblock based on the Citadel, selling for £4444 – less than half the price of the parent amplifier! Zero feedback circuitry, balanced operation, Cardas wiring, 'control tower' styling – another gem from a source better known for processors. Which brings us to the main announcement for 2003: Generation VIII. The model that put Theta up with the greats is now into an incarnation that ensures future-proof ownership, even including suitability for direct feed from SACD and DVD-A players...when they're available. The Gen VIII is a full differential balanced DCA pre-amplifier with custom-designed software, upsampling, jitter filtering, five digital inputs, compatibility with Casablanca and CasaNova and much, much more. The most advanced DAC on the market? We believe so. STOP PRESS: Theta showed the Compli universal SACD/DVD-A player at CEDIA, and it looks like it's going to transform the market for the new formats: Theta's high-end performance for under £3000, and it will play any flavour of silver disc that you care to feed it!

TRANSPARENT CABLE

After much research, Transparent has upgraded the entire line to use MM technology, effectively adding a touch of Opus to every model in the catalogue. MM boasts such details as a refinement of the Transparent filter network, individually insulated strands of heavy grade oxygen-free copper, improved damping materials and much more, making it the most sophisticated wiring we've experienced. For the home installer and home cinema user, each and every Transparent cable can be terminated in any type of connector. And for those of you with a cost-no-object approach to fine-tuning your system, we believe that the Opus line remains the finest selection of cables that money can buy. Bar none.

WILSON AUDIO

By now, you've all heard of Wilson's new flagship model, the Alexandria. Coming in well above the X1 Grand SLAMM, which stays in production, the Alexandria is so huge a leap in performance and price that it has even laid to rest the mighty WAMM. Reports from those fortunate enough to have heard it suggest that there's nothing on the planet that even comes close to the sheer grandeur of the Alexandria's performance: breathtaking naturalness, sublime bass control, utterly convincing stereo imagery – it's got the lot. In the event that we haven't received a pair in time for the show (the first 50 pairs have been sold, and Wilson can only make four pairs per month!), they will definitely be available for auditioning in the UK by the end of the year. But this masterpiece mustn't overshadow what we consider to be just as monumental an achievement by

David A. Wilson: the timeless and truly legendary WATT Puppy System 7. The latest version of his modern classic, System 7 didn't just move the goal posts: it changed the scale of the whole damned playing field. No matter what happens, System 7 will be on active demonstration at the hi-fi show. It's becoming something of a tradition for us, to take the opportunity presented by our newsletter to congratulate our suppliers for their achievements.



Copland CSA 29

Our brands are recognised around the world as the premier manufacturers within their respective disciplines, and it continues to warm our hearts, every time their efforts are acknowledged. It is with much delight that we raise our glasses in acknowledgment of the following honours during 2003:

Krell Showcase/Showcase 5 - Home Cinema Choice
'Award of Excellence'

Krell LAT 2 Robb Report

'Best of the Best'

Krell HTS7.1 S.G.H.T

'Editors Choice Platinum Award'

Koetsu Red K Signature Hi Fi +

'Product of the Year'

Martin Logan Odyssey - Audio Art Japan

'Best Performance of the Year'

Martin Logan Clarity - 2003 International CES, Innovations 2003,

'Design and Engineering Showcase Award'

Wilson Audio Watt/Puppy 7 Robb Report

'Best of the Best'

Wilson Audio Watt/Puppy 7 SoundStage.com

'Hall of Fame'

Sophia The Absolute Sound

'Golden Ear Award'

As noted above, next year marks the end of our first quarter century, and the beginning of the next. Looking back on the way high-end audio has evolved during those years, we'd like to think that we played no small part in wresting British music lovers from the grip of the small-minded, zero-aspiration brands that controlled the UK with an iron fist. No appreciation of soundstage nor tonal accuracy, no concept of scale nor understanding of what constitutes authentic bass, little concern for the actual aesthetics of the product – these negative qualities marked the breed, a coterie of brands that somehow managed to hoodwink the press and the retailers.

But we persevered. They laughed at size, power rating, price. But when the doubters finally listened to our first Koetsus, compared the then-unknown Krell with the weedy, gutless amplifiers so cherished by the audio press, revelled in the valve warmth of Audio Research – they had no choice but to admit that they had been sold a low-end bill of goods, masquerading as real hi-fi.

After 25 years, our track record speaks for itself, in that we are unique amongst distributors: most of our relationships with our brands are measured in decades, and very few are the brands that have fallen by the wayside – and even then not because of quality. Gone but not forgotten are Beveridge, Apogee, Randall Research, Counterpoint, each of which played a part – large or small – in making Absolute Sounds the force it is today.

As we close this first chapter, we wish to say thank you to every customer, every manufacturer, every retailer who has supported us and understood that Absolute Sounds has one primary function: to provide the greatest number of listeners with the best sound and picture imaginable.

Martin Logan - Mosaic

