

hi-fi+

REPRODUCING THE RECORDED ARTS

Issue 48
£4.50

www.hifiplus.com

Awards Issue

- ▷ **Best Speaker?**
Avalon's mighty Isis
- ▷ **Best Systems?**
Reviewers' picks
- ▷ **Top Tweaks**
33 outstanding accessories

Interview:
Pierre
Boulez





One For The Money...

by Roy Gregory

When it comes to judging quality, drinking by the label is one of the first security blankets most of us reach for. After all, if it's got a good name and a high price then it's got to taste all right – hasn't it? Anybody who has traveled the outer reaches of the wine lists in the more vaunted eateries that dot this planet will know just how flawed and expensive this approach can be. Yet how many of us apply it to hi-fi equipment? How many of us make assumptions about products based on the company that made them and the price being charged? Big ticket – that must mean costly ancillaries; and all of a sudden we've ruled a product out of our notional system on budget grounds alone. Yet, in reality it needn't be that way...

Almost as soon as I first got my grubby mitts on the Wilson Duettes with their enticing yet forgiving musical qualities, I started to wonder just how tolerant they'd be of partnering equipment. After all, you can't listen to just a speaker – you need the kit to drive it. Which can make the cost of speakers somewhat misleading; it's the cost of the system you need to worry about, as owners of the cheaper Apogee ribbons discovered – often to their considerable cost. Apply that thinking to the Duette and it could change things pretty dramatically. On the surface you have a £10K stand-mounted two-way, which makes it one of the pricier examples in its category. Go with traditional FEF* thinking and you are looking at a £40K system as a sensible starting point – without cables and all the other gubbins you'll be needing. That puts the Duette well and truly out of reach for most mere mortals.

* Front-End First / a term dating from the era when all sane people thought the World was flat – and just about as relevant as that concept today.



However, what if the entry level Wilson can be persuaded to "walk out" with genuinely entry-level electronics? How expensive does the associated kit need to be to get a worthwhile and representative performance out of the Duette? How pricey does the system get before the speaker stops being embarrassed? Right about now you're probably thinking that I got off the trolley bus at Marble Arch and left my marbles on board – and if I didn't then the Duettes' distributor or manufacturer probably did, on the basis

that they're prepared to be involved in such a hair brained scheme. But hold on. Wilson themselves have always espoused spending the lion's share of your budget on the speakers (well, they would, wouldn't they).

Their logic is that the speaker has the hardest job in the system and at least if it's up to that task, then you'll hear the benefit of any subsequent upgrades. Of course, I'm not sure they were thinking along quite such extreme lines as me...

So, the cheapest system that will get the Duettes running properly? Well, the speaker is a given, along with the stands. I'm kind of tempted to try the Quadrasire stands at some point, but for the purposes of this exercise let's keep the considerable mechanical and aesthetic coherence of the speakers intact. That means we're looking for source, amp, cables and supports.

Much as I'd love to run with a record player, these days it's an expensive option, which means that CD it is. Once I'd bitten that bullet the choice was easy; at £695 the Consonance CD-120 Linear is a shoe-in. Reviewed back in Issue 44 by JMH (and given a Product of the Year Award in this one) the simple exterior of this Chinese built machine conceals a confident and lucid performance that punches way above its price. Like many other recent players it dispenses with the brick-wall filter in its DAC and keeps ▶

► everything else simple too. The result is sound quality and musical integrity from silver disc that would have cost a fortune even five years ago.

The amplifier was more problematic, especially given the speakers' moderate sensitivity and 4 Ohm load (3 Ohm minimum). First thought was solid-state, with the likes of the Krell 400Xi and Lavardin IS Reference tried with some success. But at well over £2K a throw, these are hardly bargain basement products. How about setting the bar at a grand? Now there's a challenge.

At this price the cost-quality curve gets pretty steep with solid-state, which got me wondering about a valve amp. After all, the Duettes' impedance curve is actually pretty benign and output transformers will ease the path still further. With all those nice little ultra-linear integrated designs flooding out of China, surely I could find one to do the job? Sure enough, and the one I settled on will probably be new to you. Dubbed the Bewitch A30, it's a Class A design offering 32 Watts a side from a pair of 6550s. Choke smoothed and heavily valve rectified, it's not just the butch power supply that sets it apart. Although built in China, the Bewitch brand is specced by Guy Sargeant, once of Audio Innovations and a man who knows a thing or two about valve amplifiers. What's even better, it comes in at five pence under the thousand pounds; job done.

That still leaves cables and supports for which I chose my budget benchmarks, Chord's Chorus interconnect (£163) and new Epic speaker cable (£39/m). The fact that the speakers are single-wired saved a bit more money too. Stand was a couple of layers of the excellent Cambre CORE rack at around \$200 per level. Add all that lot up and you arrive at a grand total of

\$2492.95, including 2.5m speaker cables and termination.

That makes for an all up system price of £13.2K, near as spittin'. Not bad given that the speakers constitute \$10.7K of that! Does it work? I'll leave AS to decide...

PS. Having expended so much time and ink on the subject of proper mains cables and supports – and with a suitable Guinea Pig to hand – it seemed silly not to trial that hypothesis too. So saying, here's the upgrade package:

2x Vertex AQ Super Kinibalu platforms - \$1155
 2x Vertex AQ Roraima mains leads - \$634
 1x Vertex AQ Jaya mains filter - \$453.40

That's an extra \$2242.40 that doesn't even touch the signal path. Of course Vertex AQ offer interconnect and speaker cables too (much loved by PM) but they would have muddied the waters and raised the price. Let's see what AS makes of purely environmental factors! ➤

The System

Opera Audio Consonance CD-120 Linear	£695
Bewitch A30 Integrated Amplifier	£995
Wilson Audio Duette Loudspeakers	£8900
Duette Speaker Stands	£1800
Chord Co. Chorus Interconnect	£163/1m pr.
Chord Co. Epic Twin Speaker Cable	£274/3m pr.
Cambre CORE rack	£600

Two For The Show...

by Alan Sircom

This is the system that shouldn't work. It has no right to work. By all that hi-fi people of good standing hold dear and true, this system should be taken out and shot, put to the sword, burned at the stake for heresy and then sent to work down a salt mine until really sorry. I mean, c'mon... the CD player and amplifier cost a fraction of the price of the speakers – armed Flat-Earthers will be storming the barricades by nightfall.

Only problem is, this system works: Really, really well. Like, well

enough to recast all your hi-fi prejudices, make you wonder if we've got it wrong all these years and start looking round the room to see what you might free up to let you buy into the experience. That well.

Of course, the basics help. The Opera Audio Consonance CD120 Linear CD player may not cost a fortune, but the removal of the brick wall filter makes for a very good foundation stone to build a sound upon. Then there's the Bewitch A30 line integrated amplifier. This valve

amp sports some disturbingly high-spec components to augment the good solid Class A operation, ultra linear push-pull output, and twin rectifier and choke power supplies. Short of joining the SET set, the A30 represents the best good valve engineering can get at a reasonable price. Even the Chord Company wires and Cambre stand represent the unprepossessing entry point to high-end cables and supports.

Of course, a system totaling less than three grand should not be ►