

Hi-Fi Critic(al)?



There's a new bi-monthly magazine out of London that claims to be the hi-fi version of the Seven Samurai—out to protect us, for a fee, from poorly designed equipment and bad information.

Hi-Fi Critic (www.HiFiCritic.com) is the creation of long-time freelance audio journalists Martin Colloms (publisher) and Paul Messenger (editor). This magazine, which claims to provide “about 40,000 words of original editorial content per issue,” takes no advertising, and costs US subscribers \$147/six-issues/year (discounts for multi-year sign-up) airmailed to their homes. The print edition is complemented by website addenda.

Contributors on equipment include Chris Binns, Chris Breunig, Martin Colloms, Alvin Gold, Paul Messenger, and Malcolm Steward. There also are music reviews of classical, pop, and jazz recordings.

From the website: “Although British audio journalists have built a fine reputa-

tion for high quality critical assessment of hi-fi equipment, current reviews seem to have become increasingly ‘soft’ and lacking in serious critical insight. . . Relentlessly positive ‘rubber stamp’ reviews simply devalue the long term credibility of the whole reviewing process. . . We’ve therefore decided to take a stand, and use our experience and critical faculties to restore credibility to the reviewing process, while also addressing the serious issues facing hi-fi today.”

Their focus is “classic stereo systems: preamplifiers, power amplifiers, tuners, LP vinyl and CD players, turntables, tone arms, and cartridges, plus phono equalizers. Integrated amplifiers and designs with still more functionality will be tested. Loudspeakers will figure strongly in the reporting, not forgetting audio cables, line conditioners, equipment supports and the like. . . [Lab test results will emphasize] power distortion, load matching and input matching, plus investigative work to try and improve the correlation between lab data and sound quality.”

Colloms will use his subjective sound quality rating scheme. “Some 25 years ago I used an IEC-based scale from 0 to 10, when zero represented nil fidelity, 10 was assigned to essentially perfect reproduction, and given a sufficiently large and representative group of product, a score of 5 represented the group average for sound quality. Such results were self limiting and self sufficient. Maintain-

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ing a historic standard based on such results proved difficult as equipment continued to improve and the resulting scores edged upwards inexorably towards 8 and 9."

He opened up the top end, with the concept that a doubling of the score relative to a reference piece of equipment should represent a perception of twice the sound quality. The top score reached to date is 120, by "the Krell Evolution ONE and TWO pre-power amplifiers, separately and in combination." More detail about the ratings scheme is at www.HiFiCritic.com/colloms/ratings.aspx. His amplifier ratings archive does not include a McIntosh tube amp.

THE WEBSITE

- The Archive section provides access to 27 articles in *.pdf format, almost all written by Colloms, either solo or with a co-author, during the 1970s-1990s.
- The Music Room: "Renowned recording engineer Tony Faulkner will supervise the release of non-compressed music excerpts for download. These will illustrate aspects of recording and production techniques and the effect on sound quality, or relate to topics to be published in forthcoming issues of *Hi-Fi Critic*. The download should then be formatted to a standard CD-R for replay on your audio system."
- The Audio Scene provides reports on audio shows covered by their writers.

ISSUE 1

Malcolm Steward explains how to get CD-quality downloads, Chris Bryant looks at the perceived degradation of CD sound quality over its quarter-century life, Tony Faulkner wonders whether recording practices are getting better or worse, Martin Colloms provides a limitedly scientific analysis of cable performance characteristics, plus reviews of speakers, CD players, amps, and recordings.

Steward presents a fair appraisal of downloading. For higher-quality downloading, he recommends FLAC (Free Lossless Audio Codec: <http://FLAC.SourceForge.net>), which "doesn't trouble itself with . . . any DRM" and is being used on an increasing number of music sites as an

alternative to MP3, although it generates substantially larger files. For FLAC-encoded music, he points to www.AllofMP3.com, a commercial Russian site with "a vast range of recordings." A FLAC codec is available for Windows Media Player (the latest stable version is 0.71.0946 from www.illiminable.com/ogg/downloads.html). Open-source players such as Cog are available at <http://CogOSX.SourceForge.net>. Steward also suggests that FLAC is a good choice to back up your CDs, because it "provides an exact duplicate of the original," and points to websites offering software to convert FLAC files to regular CD format.

Chris Bryant declares that "now that the very best of [today's CD players] can produce sounds as good as vinyl, we can finally enjoy our silver disc collection. It's therefore exasperating, if not totally unexpected, to discover that many of the CDs themselves are mediocre. The surprise comes when you discover that the older discs in your collection are often the ones you enjoy the most. . . The best of the 1980s CDs sound far more like vinyl than those made later. . . The most disliked CDs tended to be digital re-masters of earlier recordings." He is not categorically against digital audio technology.

Bryant admits that technically, today's equipment performs better than earlier designs, and finds that new CD players sound "better and cleaner." Bryant believes that extensive editing, which has become much easier and more powerful than when you had to cut-and-splice tape, "is the biggest reason why many—if not most—modern classical CDs sound anemic and un-involving. They have been hacked to shreds in a workstation in pursuit of some mummy-knows-best horizontal and vertical perfection. . . Many productions now are made using Pro Tools multi-track as a matter of course, and I believe this is a further reason why modern CDs sound less convincing than earlier ones. The more processing. . . the greater the scope for the intervening technology to dull the musical effect and energy." Bryant blames technology for the degradation of newer versus older CD sound quality.

Martin Colloms looks into the physics and sonic effects of cables. "My personal experience with hundreds of different cable types has shown that the judicious

selection of cables is crucial in achieving a finely tuned and well-balanced system.” He acknowledges equipment’s susceptibility to EMI (electromagnetic interference), claiming the effects in current equipment are generally subtle. He views every cable as an antenna that can carry spurious signals into equipment, with the magnitude of the effect dependent “more on the details of a cable’s construction than its absolute cost.”

Colloms acknowledges the interaction of amp-cables-speakers with his mention of the Grodinsky/Cornwell three-decade-old patent for an integrated system, but only addresses the EMS (electromagnetic compatibility) factor, and in his exploration of the potential problem makes judgments aurally. Among cable construction characteristics, he discusses insulation, physical strength, vibration damping, metals, supercooling during manufacture, and others. He claims that he “(and others) have little trouble in differentiating between grades of solder used for interconnect cable connections.” Colloms warns readers of possible fraudulent manufacturers and overcharging,

and clearly believes cable selection is an important factor in system sound quality.

In Colloms’ review of the Krell EVO-202 two-box preamp, which includes extensive detail on the circuit design, he notes that the short interconnect cable between the power supply and the processor keeps them close, raising the concern of induced hum, ameliorated by the “shielding plate [to keep] induced hum out of the preamp above.” He does not raise the same concern over the separately packaged phono preamp stages that are connected via “single-ended unbalanced” RCA plugs. His descriptions use terms that require study: “overall sound has a remarkably vibrant energy”; “explosive bass has a lean muscularity”; “transient edges were sharpened”; “sound is moderately upbeat, with quite good rhythm and good timing, showing decent synchronicity over the whole frequency range.” He credits an immediate improvement in “midrange clarity, marginally improved timing and greater soundstage depth” when he inadvertently left a magazine on top of the preamp.

Messenger’s selection of his favorite

speakers in several price categories is the most rational review in the magazine. What’s missing is a description of speaker placement and listening room acoustics, plus the speakers’ dispersion characteristics. At least he is not averse to different design philosophies, including both direct radiator and horn-loaded designs.

Alvin Gold’s analysis of three CD players that he calls mid-priced (about \$1700 srp) yields the only source of substantial negativity: “The three players here are not necessarily better than older, less-celebrated designs. There was really nothing that these players did on test that couldn’t have been replicated a long time ago, perhaps at much lower prices and from less-revered names than these.”

Ken Kessler’s tribute to Alastair Robertson-Aikman (ARA), known for SME (originally the Scale Model Equipment Company Ltd.) products, was respectfully laudatory, providing ARA’s and SME’s histories, how important music was to ARA, and his efforts to provide products and knowledge, especially the need for a “no-compromise room” that could bring

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"superior sound" to his "fellow music lovers." ARA's passing "is the loss of one of very few remaining audio pioneers from the Golden Age still active in the business a half-century after gramophones turned into record decks, and needles became styli." Kessler's respect for, and friendship with, ARA is quite clear in this touching homage.

Christopher Breunig's reviews of recent and re-issued-historic classical recordings are thoughtful, anecdotal, informative, and not all positive. He compares these with other recordings, explaining why he prefers other performances, and reports sound quality and recording anomalies, for example noting that "the tympanist is as suddenly to the fore in the development section of (i) as the tenor's solo in (iv) dips into submersion:" and "sound quality is notably variable, with some over-separation in the balancing. Less excusable is the precipitate editing of ambience at movement endings."

Nigel Finn's reviews of rock, pop, and other nice music are equally useful.

ISSUE 2 (FROM THE TABLE OF CONTENTS ON THE WEBSITE)

"Martin Colloms continues his magnum opus on cables, examining directionality, bi-wiring, and reviewing 16 different speaker cables."

Paul Messenger tries out exotic speaker cables.

A variety of classical and other music recordings reviewed.

ASSESSMENT

So far there is a high proportion of tube equipment reviewed.

A telling comment is from Colloms' "Subjective Sounds" (issue 1): "As the rest of [my hi-fi] system downstream from the sources is incrementally improved, so the advantages of analogue seem to become that much more obvious." He praises his upgrade to the Magnum Dynalab 106T FM tuner as providing "a firmer, more solid soundstage and a quite obviously much sweeter, more delicate and transparent top end than [his previous tuner]."

The equipment reviews provide history to each model's place in its manufacturer's line, and delve deep into design and construction characteristics and engineering

choices, even to identifying the OEM of subsystems such as CD transports and the Chinese IAG factory that, according to Colloms, now makes Quad speakers.

Colloms' speaker reviews go into each manufacturer's design theory without expressing his preference, discussing materials, dispersion (in some reviews), the designer's goals, and so on. His extensive description of the Quad 2805/2905 designs is a tutorial on electrostatic speaker science, although I wonder what must be going on in the speaker to justify his claim that turning off the speakers' lighted logos "removed a certain colouration."

I agree that we have yet to quantify our hearing to the point of being able to completely correlate measured performance with subjective perceptions, but am challenged, beyond my ability, to accept many of the claims made regarding cause and effect. For example, it is well known that as more time is spent listening to a system, or attending concerts in a specific concert hall, our hearing acclimates to its sonic/acoustic idiosyncrasies, accepting some characteristics and revealing others. It often leads to the sound becoming normal/preferred, generating a new psychoacoustic reference.

I would give *Hi-Fi Critic* more credibility if they hadn't praised most of the reviewed equipment so highly, including only ever-so-slightly negative comments to apparently rationalize a differentiation among price classes. Substantial negativity was found only in the four reviews of the Arcam Solo, and most of it was aimed at Britain's DAB (digital audio broadcasting, also known as Eureka 147) system.

Messenger, Colloms, et al. aren't Luddites. They report, without deprecation, the use of computer analysis and high-tech materials in speaker designs. They accept the evolution to digital technology, although they seem to long for the sound of analog. My biggest problem is with their claim that it's better, instead of expressing it as their sonic preference.

Hi-Fi Critic is a UK magazine that seems aimed at the British audiophile sitting by the fire in his study sipping an expensive red wine, deciding what to buy based on high-enough price and mellifluous audiophile verbosity. *Hi-Fi Critic* is informative, but will find it difficult to succeed with no advertising and such a high subscription price. *ax*