

John Dunkerley had produced a superbly atmospheric recording of *El sombrero de tres picos*. "Open, clear, well balanced, specific stereo, and even better on CD", read our notes. For comparison we listened to Previn's Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra version on Philips 6514 281 (4/83) but its rather close, dry balance stood no chance against this Decca. Safely one of this quarter's top six. There was merit too in Brian Culverhouse's work for HMV in some Prokofiev with Bätz and the LPO at Watford Town Hall. We sampled all three pieces and voted this a nice open sound with firm stereo location, good dynamics and body, our only slight misgivings being directed to some excessive bite to the brass which bordered on harshness at times.

'A well-chosen seat'

On then to yet another Decca recording with the Concertgebouw, this time giving us the Rachmaninov Symphony No. 3 under the baton of Ashkenazy. Andrew Cornall produced with John Dunkerley and Kenneth Wilkinson looking after the engineering. Between them they achieved a luxurious clean sound as heard from a well-chosen seat in the hall, woodwind perhaps a little strong and a trace of edginess on the strings, but EG admired the fullness and remarked that they had produced more than a passing resemblance to their beloved Kingsway Hall sound. In Symphony Hall, Boston Hyperion had recorded Ozawa conducting the Sessions *Concerto for Orchestra* and Panufnik's *Sinfonia votiva*. Doyen Harold Lawrence was the producer and rising star Tony Faulkner the engineer. Yet another breath-stopping result. Wide, clear, open, lots of detail, plenty of air round it, good stereo and depth too. Edward Greenfield was enchanted by the perfect detail of an oboe and the rest of us happy to go on listening and pointing up little surprises here and there. Top-six material here too.

Shostakovich's Symphony No. 12 brought Haitink, the Concertgebouw and Colin Moorfoot and Andrew Cornall of Decca into action again, and again a very lifelike result but this time judged to be lacking more than a shade in body and warmth, perhaps the strings being rather overfavoured, although realistic and clear against surprisingly backward horns. Next we went back to Boston's Symphony Hall where the same forces as before gave us Richard Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben*, but Ko Wittween and Mike Bremner had produced a disappointingly different sound for Philips. Here it was set back yet constricted, almost boxy at times, somehow badly defined and only slightly relieved by the advantages of CD, so we were more than willing to pass on to the Vaughan Williams Fifth Symphony as recorded by Suvi Raj Grubb and Mark Vigers in EMI's No. 1 Studio, Abbey Road. The RPO under Sir Alexander Gibson certainly produced the best brass quality heard so far this session in this cool studio presentation, but JB thought there was some clouding on tutti; EG put the violins in an alien acoustic and GH felt that this was a reading which failed to hold his attention.

We then came to another sample of Bernstein and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, still 'living it up' in San Francisco, in a selection of American orchestral works and found our good fortune slipping away. Here was another close and rather narrow presentation—JB likened it to tunnel vision—obviously partitioned and, in spite of the "recorded live" label, devoid of those audience sounds which might have just lent it some much-needed humanity.

Turning to lighter things we immediately struck oil with a charming record of Consort Music by Jenkins, recorded by John Pellowe and Morton Winding for L'Oiseau-Lyre in St George the Martyr Church in Queen Square, London. At first we had the level too high, giving a booming closeness, but a couple of notches back and we all rated this highly-civilized sound just the thing for a hot summer evening. It was, incidentally, our first analogue recording of this session. Continuing in a chamber-music mood we came again to

Anne-Sophie Mutter, this time accompanied by Alexis Weissenberg on HMV in the Brahms and Franck violin sonatas. In our opinion Serge Remy and Michel Glotz had completely misjudged the balance in the Salle Wagram, Paris. The relative acoustic allotted to the two instruments was unnatural and in the case of the Brahms First Violin Sonata it became almost a violin solo with a distant tinkling on the piano now and again. No one came out of this well. Stephen Bishop-Kovacevich gave better service to Brahms as he went to work on a good-sounding piano at London's Henry Wood Hall. The formidable Philips team of Hans Lauterslager and Erik Smith have captured this most successfully for his latest recital record, but you must have the volume well up for it is recorded moderately closely and a Steinway at this range is a powerful beast. Notice how the harmonic structure of each note brightens with increasing force used to strike it and hear how perfectly the dampers control the way it dies.

Vocal

Hyperion scored again with a recording of Handel's *The Triumph of Time and Truth*, recorded at St Jude on the Hill Church, Hampstead by Martin Compton and Antony Powell. An amazingly clear presentation of quite substantial forces with soloists apparently placed right in the orchestra arena. Reverberant but defined although perhaps a mite sibilant at times, this was our second analogue recording, quite undetectable as such in a work of this character. On Hyperion again, a different vocal experience awaited us in "Tour de France" by The Light

Blues, a selection of French songs captured by Andrew Keener and Tony Faulkner. Recorded rather distantly in a warm and quite appropriate acoustic this needs playing at a lowish volume setting in order not to destroy its essential clarity.

Turning to opera we tried Rossini's *Il turco in Italia*, recorded at Abbey Road for CBS by David Mottley and Michael Gray. We found the voices rather forward but well spread and the whole brought together quite well, although there was no definite acoustic and the orchestra sounded rather subdued. Abbey Road's No. 1 Studio went unrecognized. David Mottley and Michael Gray again produced and engineered our next selection, this time in the CPC Studio, Milan. This was a recording of Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, with a number of distinguished soloists and the Chorus and Orchestra of La Scala. The sound they achieved here, once more for CBS, was rougher than their efforts in Abbey Road and this gave the impression of a very confined and boxy studio in which—perhaps in an unconscious reaction—they had found it necessary to exaggerate perspective and spacing.

Our brilliant finale was a second 'barber' who really trimmed the locks of the first. The Smith and Lauterslager/Philips team, not for the first time, have demonstrated the art of recording opera to perfection. None of us could seriously fault this set and we await a CD version with eager anticipation. It was made in Watford Town Hall, hardly the operatic venue of all time, but you would never know it. Marriner leads the ASMF in a brilliant opera debut, with wonderful support from his soloists, particularly an 'in his element' Thomas Allen as Figaro and an Ambrosian Chorus eager to justify their name: this is a winner from start to finish.

THE GRAMOPHONE INTERVIEW

THE FOUNDERS OF BOOTHROYD STUART TALK TO GEOFFREY HORN

Allen Boothroyd and Robert Stuart are two of our industry's clever young designers, responsible for the well-known Meridian range of audio equipment. As this interview taken at their Huntingdon factory on a hot July afternoon unexpectedly reveals, they have had a considerable involvement with quite a gamut of other products as well. Allen in particular comes across as a versatile talent who has already made his contribution, albeit anonymously, to some familiar marques, while Bob Stuart emerges as a clear progressive thinker who knows exactly where he wants to lead the company. However, as is often the case, the whole exceeds the sum of the parts, not least because both men obviously relate most happily, being blessed with the right leavening of mutual respect even when gently sparring.

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G.H. First of all, let's hear about you, Allen. What is your background?

A.B. I was originally trained as a mechanical engineer and then, on noticing that there were several spare mechanical engineers around, I decided to take a course in industrial design at the Royal College of Art. I took my degree and then I worked for an architectural design group in London, Ian Chadwick and Partners. After a time I met a chap called David Southward. He ran a group called Cambridge Consultants who were actually manufacturing at that time under licence an amplifier called the Cambridge P40. David decided to leave Cambridge Consultants and form an audio company based on the success of this product. While he was at Cambridge Consultants, he had set a competition in which the winner happened to be one Bob Stuart. So, when he came to set up his own company, he brought together Bob

for the electronic design work, myself for appearance and John Greenbank who was at that time Technical Editor of *Wireless World*. He asked Bob and John to become directors of Lecson Audio, the company he had founded, and I worked as a consultant on appearance and mechanical design.

G.H. Bob, where had you been prior to this momentous joining?

R.S. Well, I had acquired a science degree and done my electronics training in a very good school at the Marconi Company. But I had always had feelings for music, and its satisfactory reproduction fascinated me, so I was more than ready for this new venture.

A.B. As a result of Bob's early prototype for Lecson, which I remember as a piece of bent aluminium with all sorts of spiders hanging over it in the traditional way, I was inspired to leave the architectural group and I was appointed to run the industrial design effort at Cambridge Consultants. I stayed there for two and a half years until August 1975, when Bob and I decided to form a consultancy designing audio products. Because Lecson had had some success, certain vesting parties saw it in their interest to take on this team to produce a new product about which they had firm ideas on marketing, and how many bells and whistles it should contain. Responding as consultants sometimes do to their client's every whim, we produced an extremely complicated product called the Orpheus amplifier, shown at the 1976 Hi-Fi Show, and this brought forth our first active loudspeaker which later became the Meridian M1.

R.S. So our design partnership started in 1975 and a year later we decided that, because on a couple of occasions our efforts had lost way when the people who had originally set it up seemed to run

out of steam, we would go it alone and produced the Meridian design. In many ways this was a reaction against the Orpheus, with the minimum we thought essential, and it has always been our hope at Meridian that we err on the side of simplicity rather than complexity.

A.B. Boothroyd Stuart Ltd. was formed in November 1977 after we had produced some 40 Meridian systems and had bought the rights of Orpheus. We then developed the 101 preamplifier and the 103 and 105 amplifiers. Later we went on to do what we thought was a more domestically acceptable active loudspeaker product called the M2 which you, Geoffrey, were good enough to describe as "a happy accident" in your August 1981 review (page 399). In 1979, we had moved to this factory from St Ives and concentrated increasingly on further active loudspeakers.

G.H. *This was because you felt this to be the way the market was moving?*

A.B. I don't think it was market-driven; I'm convinced it was driven by Bob's feeling that this was the right way to make something. Whenever we've consulted marketing experts, they all say we're mad and we should make a proper amplifier and passive loudspeaker like any other sensible person.

R.S. All marketing people say "Give 'em what they want"—and what they want is what somebody else developed six months ago and can't be selling.

A.B. We thought our first duty was to develop the ideas we thought were good, and we had this rare opportunity to put them into the market-place—an opportunity denied to people with overseers.

G.H. *Allen, you do quite a bit of work for other companies in the industry.*

A.B. Yes, as an independent consultant. This company can't employ my particular talent full-time. So I decided, as Meridian was running efficiently and well under Bob's administration, to step backwards and develop my own design business. This happily coincided with the rise of the micro-computer and I've since done every product for Acorn including the Atom and the BBC micro-computer project. This involvement has introduced me to the fascination of designing for large-scale production. I've also done work for



The Meridian 103/105 modular amplifier system with a matching tuner

other audio companies. Bob and I were asked some years ago to design a receiver for Celestion which has never been produced, although it is occasionally resurrected. This led to me being asked to help them regenerate their public image, logos, type styles and 1981 and 1982 products, including a model called the SL6 which I saw as an instrument rather than just a piece of furniture. Perhaps because of this, it bears some resemblance to Meridian's smallest active loudspeaker to date, the M3.

G.H. *And you've done work for other loudspeaker manufacturers too?*

A.B. Well only very recently. Having terminated my contract with Celestion earlier this year, I was asked by the new board at KEF if I would look at the visual aspects of their work. More recently I've been doing some products in the medical area, microtomes for the laboratory industry. This work parallels much of our existing field of experience, where we've had some success in winning a couple of Design Awards and two or three pots at Italian shows.

Allen Boothroyd (left) and Robert Stuart being congratulated on their 1982 Design Centre Award by H. R. H. the Duke of Edinburgh



G.H. *Looking more at home entertainment, how do you see the future? Is it going to continue as an obviously technical product, perhaps a little knob-happy, or will it become more an item of domestic furniture?*

A.B. We've seen the polarization and it will speed up. There will be the Hasselblads and Nikons of hi-fi still around in five years' time; but unless a company has a strong product identity and they're doing it well—and profitably of course—they'll die. So far as what people will want—your question—I sat at the Milan show this year with what I regard as being the first completely remote-controlled hi-fi system and I was pretty disappointed. I felt that it didn't supply what is traditional, the hands on, the record turning, the stylus in the groove, whatever you call it: there is part of that which people want to retain. Faced with this all-remote system—in fact it was Bang & Olufsen's new 5000—with a kind of digital dashboard in front of me and what appeared to be a silver and black sandwich dormant in the corner, I felt a sense of loss and I think that this will be many people's view. I therefore see a retained role for specialist product providing it has character.

G.H. *That is a most interesting observation which I'm sure will be noted in Jutland.*

R.S. The Compact Disc player gives me a weird feeling. It may meet some consumer resistance because its what McLuan would call a cold medium; all you can do is put in the disc and press the button.

A.B. Why should Compact Disc be colder than radio?

R.S. Well radio is or was a live source, but its not like the gramophone. There's not the same involvement. You can't completely alienate the human spirit from the things he's doing.

G.H. *Coming back to Meridian, you surely are in both schools because you've just developed an amplifier which is flexible and versatile and aimed at the hands-on chap who can almost write his own specification, choosing modules to suit his requirements and expanding in the future if needed. Yet you are also in the school that provides a pair of M2s and a very simple control unit.*

R.S. The new system can also provide a very simple control unit. We've always prided ourselves that we can fall between two stools as well as the next man, but our reason for this new design is fundamentally to make available a simple, but precisely tailored, system for the home. We fully recognize, and will exploit the fact, that the hi-fi enthusiast (who wants lots of bells and whistles and an impressive thing to play with) will buy it. He couldn't get it from our 101; that's not what it was for. But now we can give these people exactly what they want, and every piece of it should be as good as we can make it. I view it as a crafted product, and I think that is where the future for companies like ourselves must lie. We have to develop something akin to a cult following if we are to succeed within the industry. Others have developed cult by brilliant

marketing (in spite of average products, perhaps) but, unless there is this characteristic I'm speaking of, I think they won't develop the essential quality and consistent theme. We've never changed our view about what we set out to do. Two designers like us don't go into making equipment just to make a profit from our amplifiers. That isn't our primary motivation. We feel as designers that our responsibility is not to produce what is currently being sold but to analyse the problem—which is to bring music to people's homes—and produce equipment which is friendly, easy to use, straightforward enough for all members of the family to use without getting it into a silly condition. It must be ergonomically satisfactory, visually satisfactory and certainly musically satisfactory. My belief right from the beginning was that the reason we founded the company was to build active loudspeakers; on the way, we recognized certain pragmatic things; we needed to have a reputation for amplifiers in order to sell them, and that belief led to the 103 and 105.

G.H. *Your loudspeaker must be known to contain a good amplifier.*

R.S. Yes, that's what we set out to do and that's what we do. The peripheral activity you see at the moment, producing an integrated amplifier is a little bit of pragmatism, saying "There is a market there that we'd like to have a piece of," and there's a bit of saying "We wish to continue to restate that we make the best amplifiers". We feel it important to recognize that we are specialists; never a Ford, but perhaps a Lotus or a Ferrari, and both will get you to work in the morning. In any field of endeavour, there is always room for a specialist who is trying to provide something a little bit different, a little bit better and therefore oriented towards a particular kind of person. We have to recognize that, if that is what we want to do, we have to stay in those areas and stay clear of other types of product in which the big boys can compete. There is no British company, particularly of our size, that can ever compete with the East in manufacturing electronics. So we have to produce something a bit different and specialized, and the fact that we do it for what we perceive as real advantages to the customer, makes us happy.

G.H. *Thank you both for spending this time with me and sharing the joint philosophy which you've built up over the past eight years. I wish you good fortune with all your varied enterprises.*

**PART FIVE OF
"60 YEARS OF
GRAMOPHONE"**

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