

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 ▶

► considered as partner to more than ten big one's worth of speakers. But that's the plan set out by Wilson Audio for the Duette. In fact, by putting the speaker on the recommended stand, we are already over-egging the Duette pudding; in most

disc for almost a decade; there's nothing but test disc left for me here, its musical content has been worn flat through too many listening sessions. Only here, that cynicism simply washed away. I was back listening to the recording anew, stunned by the talent

jazz, big band jazz, classical piano, small scale orchestral works, small scale choral works and finally to vast orchestral mania. Usually, a dozen discs can pin down the nature of any system, finding the places where it works well and those where it falls flat on its speaker drivers. Only not here; yes, the system couldn't quite keep up with a concert hall full of singers, musicians and organ pipes wiggin' out, but it tried and did a surprisingly good job. Let's put it this way; unless your music consists almost entirely of organ works, or you look at something like Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances* as a dynamic light-weight, this system will pass muster with almost every recording you play. More than pass muster, in fact. It will sound remarkable.

promotional literature – and when first seen in a private suite at the 2006 CES show in Las Vegas – the Duette speaker is seen on a regular bookcase, up high and in totally the wrong place for a pair of good speakers to shine. We aren't cheating – the stands are designed by Wilson and improve the performance – but this is one design where an almost fanatical devotion to the instruction book is not mandatory (nor are fear, surprise, ruthless efficiency and nice red uniforms).

Anyway, it can't work, and I am going to have to nod and smile nicely to Our Beloved Leader, for it is his chosen system. I start gently, expecting something possibly harsh, possibly bland, possibly nasty. In goes *Rare on Air*, the CD of live sessions from KCRW in Santa Monica. On went track four – Evan Dando and Juliana Hatfield singing 'My Drug Buddy'. And the next time I could reach for the remote, six other tracks had passed and I was captivated. Remember this is a CD that I have been using as a test

and wishing I'd bought more *Peel Sessions* with me. Damn it! The Beloved Leader got it right again, and the smile isn't painted on.

Acoustic rock moved to electronica, then back to more head's down rock, dance, rap,

It's a curious thing; this system managed to combine the sort of analysis that makes you listen out for loose phono plugs with the sort of musical enjoyment that makes you into a karaoke mime. I found myself air drumming to John Bonham, rapping into my pen with Eminem, playing an air double-bass to the Jazz Messengers (that's 'Art Blakey and the...', not PM in a beret), even air conducting with Sir Georg Solti. That's some entertaining magic in this kit.

Part of that magic comes from its completely transparent nature. This isn't totally unvarnished CD truth at play, but what's on offer is detailed, coherent and expansive. Imagery never draws attention here, but it's just there; wide of the boxes, deeper than the room, and taller than most. This is backed up by good solidity, although the extra bass notes that adding £50k to the system ►



► would bring do begin to show up here. There is a touch of the Wilson forwardness and big sound, but this sounds more like excitement than aggression and those who have previously dismissed Wilson speakers for being PA-like will find the Duetto, especially in this system, to be a genteel partner for our smaller British rooms and our slightly softer-hued sensibilities. I'd like to say vocal intelligibility is a strong point, but that's understating the case. It's not a strong point... it's a magnificent point. One of the regular torture discs I use is *The Eminem Show*, purely because that machinegun vocal is like submitting a system to a shorthand test. A good system will return about 70 words out of 100 clearly, leaving the rest swamped by the sheer speed of his delivery. A very good system will occasionally get past 85 out of 100. I'm not sure this is entirely possible, but I didn't lose a single word here. It retained all the intensity, the venom and the pace of his vocalization, but made every single nuance immediately understandable. So there must be a limitation? Of course... the limitation is that it isn't a well thought out £50,000 system,

or a well-matched £100,000 system.

That means it lacks the power behind the throne to deliver the sort of scale needed to parse Mahler's *Symphony*

of a Thousand. It lacks the dynamic freedom of the very best (and biggest) systems. And it lacks the frequency extension of the tiny handful of loudspeaker systems that can take this speaker on, and win. Yes, the chances

are if you replaced every other component in the chain to bring it up to the same price level as the Wilsons, the sound quality would in most cases improve. But whether it would improve to a commensurate extent is hard to say. Fact is, this is by far, one of the best systems I've ever heard this side of £20,000.

Now, here comes my personal problem (no, the other personal problem... the one that needs more than a dab of talcum powder and some breath mints). I have an antipathy toward cables in general and exotic mains fiddling in particular. Something deep inside

me goes all Trotsky when faced with several thousand-quid's worth of cable, even in the context of a system worth half a squillion pounds. When it comes to mains treatments, my default position is 'get a separate spur' not 'buy a box of tricks'.

So, the idea of adding the Vertex AQ equipment to this system falls into my 'tweaky nonsense' box and my hackles start to rise.

So, the supports went under CD player and valve amp, the mains leads went between electronics and wall

and the parallel mains filter was plugged in. Up went my hackles... and up went the hairs on the back of my neck with them. Suddenly there's an odd sense of correctness that kicks in.

It wasn't missing beforehand but sure as hell is missing when you go back; all the system's ducks are in a row, everything is neatly ordered like the Trooping of the Colour. Suddenly, the already well-ordered music makes just that bit more sense and becomes more coherent. Just as Scotty couldn't describe anything about the Enterprise's engines ►



▶ without recourse to analogy, so I have to fall back on the same blunt tool. But at least the analogy has the benefit of not being used before (I hope); the system is like a hand-made, custom Turnbull & Asser shirt – a perfect fit, elegant and able to be both brightly coloured and understated at the same time. It's an instant arbiter of the wearer's taste and bank balance. The difference between the system with and without Vertex AQ is like the difference between that T&A shirt ironed five minutes before rushing out to work, and it starched and pressed by a professional. In other words, it's the small space between classy and classic. Or something. In truth, I'm struggling here, because the change is not like any

normal improvement in hi-fi upgrades; it's more subtle and it's more profound at the same time.

This is no small change, but I cannot for the life of me work out why the change is so musically significant. As with the system entire, it shouldn't be this good, but it is. The little part of me that still clings to my physics A-level cries out in pain at the thought of something so patently bonkers making a difference, and it won't come out until I double-blind ABX test this under proper lab conditions. But that's okay, because the other part that clings to my theatre studies

A-level wants to make a song and dance about Vertex AQ. Preferably in iambic pentameter.

Generalissimo Roy thinks the Vertex AQ additions are as fundamental to the sound of the system as the system itself. I don't agree... sort of. I think the groundwork was done by the good system itself – the Vertex AQ equipment takes that very good sound and places it in even more natural order.



That said, once the Vertex AQ kit is in place, there's no going back, which means in some respects it is as fundamental to the sound of the system as the system itself. Oh my!

But let's draw back from this and look at the bigger picture. This is a system that literally inverts the source-first thinking firmly (albeit sometimes unconsciously) ingrained in every English hi-fi reviewer's head. There are still many of us who simply could

not accept this system, simply because of the way the components are priced. Not to undermine any of the other parts of the system, but in the Duette, Dave Wilson set out to make a speaker that will deliver good results with comparatively low-end equipment; whatever else this genuinely important system shows, it certainly shows that he totally succeeded. With honours. ➤

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