

# Making a Splash...

## The Splash Audio 'Show' system

by Roy Gregory

Take a quick look at this system and you'll see some familiar pieces; familiar from the pages of *Hi-Fi Plus*, familiar from any number of hi-fi shows. Indeed, you could easily have seen and heard this exact set-up at the recent Bristol or Heathrow High-End shows – which is one of the reasons that you are reading about it here.

In essence, a system – any system – should be greater than the sum of its parts. It's a rule that applies to hi-fi with a vengeance, it being all too easy to assemble a set of products that, while individually excellent, simply don't gel when it comes to the exacting practice of making music. Which brings us back to the set of 'parts' assembled here. The amps, speakers and rack have all received reviews, in these pages and each in their own right. But what sets them apart, aside from the fact that they're huddled for protection from the current economic storm beneath the sheltering umbrella of distributor Splash Audio, is the fact that, time and again they've been responsible for some of the most impressive, most musical and most downright

enjoyable sounds to be heard at any number of hi-fi shows. To achieve such consistent excellence in an environment that more often than not constitutes a musical desert, one in which the sonic cacophony is (often mercifully) drowned out only by the

starting, naturally enough, at the back end with what is a distinctly different speaker. Most speaker designers would be happy to come up with one truly novel idea, but Paul Burton (him behind the Rountree Acoustics OmniMon OM1 loudspeaker) can list the original Sumo Aria, the ground breaking, shallow cabinet Podium Sound 0.5 and a heavy involvement with NXT on his resume. And that's

before we even get to the OmniMon. Perhaps even more remarkably, none of these speaker concepts share any sort of common technological root. From which you can assume with confidence that the OmniMon is the product of one of the industry's more fertile intellects.

Standing a shade over a meter tall, the OmniMon OM1 is characterised by its separate crossover, complex top-mounted tweeter assembly and lack of other visible, forward facing drivers. In fact, the housing for the ribbon tweeter effectively hides a downward firing 170mm Scanspeak mid/bass driver. This radiates omnidirectionally through the mid-band, while the (extremely) lightweight cabinet acts as a low frequency transmission line, open around the speaker's base. The whole assembly (drivers and cabinet) are perched on a cast



flood of excuses that accompany it, suggests that there's something going on here, something beyond the norm.

So, for those of you who have missed the shows or skipped the reviews, here is a précis,

▶ iron pole that provides a solid mechanical ground, and constitute a coincident, hybrid sound source, the omni mid and bass coupled to the monopolar output of the ribbon tweeter. It's an unusual configuration both physically and in terms of output, but then it's unusually musical too...

Amplifiers are the Renaissance Amplification RAP-03 preamp and RA-02 monoblocks recently last issue by Steve Dickinson. A model of simplicity, they employ quality components where it matters (so there's a nice stepped attenuator for level control) and dispense with anything that doesn't directly improve sound quality (so there's no remote control to screw things up). They're joined here by the RT-01 CD transport and RD-01 DAC – and there's also an RP-01 phono stage, all of which follow the same, no-nonsense philosophy. That

fed by a sophisticated independent power supply. There's just the one S/PDIF output (BNC) and this time round you do actually get a remote – which is just as well as the chassis boasts a total of five single function control buttons. Despite the slim dimensions, the RT-01 is surprisingly heavy, suggesting considerable attention has been paid to the mechanical termination of the transport. The DAC is similarly simple with just one BNC or RCA input and a pair of fixed level RCA/phono outputs. Inside there's an (unspecified) chipset feeding a wide bandwidth current/voltage stage and a beautifully executed analogue output stage. And that, as they say, is all she wrote...

The Audiophile Base rack is an established favourite with UK dealers and customers alike, providing an unusually

complete approach to equipment isolation, both from the outside world and betwixt system components.

Speaker and interconnecting cables are Philosophy throughout, whilst the AC supply is handled by an Audioss distribution hub, no mean feat with five boxes to deal with. This latter product is particularly interesting, a simple and surprisingly compact box fitted with a 1.5m connection to the wall and four or more 13A IEC tails. But there's more here than meets the eye, the IECs' internals employing a sophisticated flexible mounting to decouple the cables, in a similar fashion to the Naim power cord. For people with multiple box set-ups the Audioss approach offers an extremely versatile unit which can be specced to order as far as cable lengths go but remains astonishingly cost effective given the price of the competition. As we shall see, it also sounds very good indeed...

One of the things that fascinates me about this system is that it both abides by and breaks my cardinal rules. Yes, it pays considerable attention to supporting the equipment and delivering a decent cable package. But it also fails to offer any exit route for energy generated within the equipment itself, the interconnects cling to old style WBT connectors, rather than the better sounding NextGens (the alloy used in the Philosophy cables requires a crimped connection which isn't available on the newer plug design) and the mains leads come from a separate source all together. I guess the



means that on the CD transport you get a high-quality Philips CD Pro 2 top-loading mech combined with a manual drawer and magnetic puck (a combination that delivers superb results in the ARC Ref 8 CD player) with each section

complete approach to equipment isolation, both from the outside world and betwixt system components.

Available in a range of finishes, the Starbase rack can be combined with standard Base platforms or the higher performance Stratabase option. This system uses a mixture of the two, with Stratabases under the CD transport and pre-amp, standard bases under the rest of

▶ secret here is that all these issues (support, signal and mains cables) have been addressed, and with considerable care, allowing the electronics and speakers to work at their best. And work they definitely do.

Setting the system up was perfectly straightforward until it came to positioning the speakers. Then, all of a sudden my listening room, which delivers totally predictable results with the highly directional speakers manufactured by so many hi-fi companies, decided to go all soft and sludgy on us. Clearly, the reflective rear wall that reinforces the sense of space around and behind the majority of speakers, were getting a bit carried away with the amount of mid-band energy thrown their way by the OmniMons. But fear not, a fix was at hand. Simply arranging the speakers asymmetrically slightly across one corner (we're talking one speaker forward by six inches, the other back by the same amount) and the sound regained its sense of life and urgency. More importantly, it also started to exhibit that lovely sense of musical flow that attracted me to the OmniMons in the first place.

Indeed, it's easy to fixate on the speakers, their uncanny combination of unforced delicacy and scale contributes so much to the sound of the system. But to do so overlooks the all-important contribution made by the rest of the set up – or rather, its lack of contribution. The really impressive thing going on here is the natural sense of musical coherence and uninhibited involvement – on the part of the players and also you, the audience – that escapes all

but the best hi-fi systems. Yet it's a result that is achieved through careful assessment of the problem rather than resorting to exotica and tweekery. It triumphs by identifying the really important things and then doing them right. Which explains why there's no remote control for the amplifiers and casework that's competent



and nicely executed but definitely falls well short of flashy. It's why there's no ostentatious displays or banks of controls and programmable options. Likewise, there's no claims made for the uniqueness of the technology or engineering, other than that it's done right. Four line inputs on the pre and a single digital input on the DAC are definitely barebones, but adequate for most situations whilst meaning that the budget goes on performance rather than extraneous facilities that you'll rarely (if ever) use.

The end result is a set of electronics that are capable of standing aside from the signal and achieving that most difficult of hi-fi goals, being musically unobtrusive. The care that goes into their support and cabling

merely makes that job easier, in turn, allowing the speakers to deliver their considerable best. Limited power and the drive units used mean this system won't go ear-bleedingly loud and it lacks the pinpoint positional sense and hyper reality of the more transparent miniatures – but it more than makes up for that with an expansive acoustic and much more natural perspective.

Mozart has always been one of my guiltier

pleasures (not serious enough, don't you know?). The recently arrived Esoteric re-mastering of the Decca/Clifford Curzon K.466/K.595 was just too inviting to miss. With the Renaissance/Rountree combination, even the CD layer served up a feast of orchestral contrast and the dramatic flamboyance that typifies Mozart's later work, delicacy played against fiery bombast, light against dark. The sense of space and air around the orchestra was just right, the balance between it and the typically over-voiced piano, just so – not pushing the solo instrument forward of the acoustic, the way more direct speakers can. At the

▶ same time, Curzon's deft melodic lines and mastery of shape unravel and reveal the perfectly poised development of theme and phrase that make Mozart's melodies so beguilingly beautiful.

But captivating as Curzon's performance is, the full scope of his artistic expression only really becomes apparent when you contrast his playing with the acute, angular brilliance and symmetry of Perahia's masterful Bach – which is about the same time you'll realize just how lucid and musically expressive this system is.

And don't go making the mistake of thinking that it only does 'nicey-nice' classical music. Just listen to the languid grace of Miles Davis' rendition of 'My Funny Valentine' followed by the unimpeded up-shift to the jaunty yet plaintive lines with which he leads 'Blues By Five'. And by way of contrast, how about Coltrane's

smoky tone and the darker shades of his solo vision, along with the tactile life and pace of Paul Chambers' short string, bass solo. Where so many systems fail with upright bass, here there's a shape to notes and a momentum and sense to Chambers' sure footed phrasing that just pulls you in and keeps you there. The natural tone of bass notes, the lack of clutter or slurring is one of the key aspects of the OmniMon's performance, allowing music to breathe with unforced clarity and an easy, natural pace.

The wilder excesses of *Led Zep II* were handled with aplomb and rock and pop hold few fears for this set-up. The only way to really get this system into trouble was to go way beyond its comfort level in terms of volume and sheer musical density. Crank up the *Gladiator* OST and it'll start to crack, but you'll be going some when it does. More to the point, you shouldn't really need to, as the scale delivered, even at much lower volumes, compensates remarkably well for any perceived lack of grunt. Indeed, it was the clean, deep bass that first attracted me to the speaker.

By now you might have noticed that this review has been all about the music, rather than the system making it. Which is just the way it should be. And not only does this system do a remarkable job of allowing that music and the musicians playing it to speak for themselves, it will do it equally well in almost any environment, as it's show appearances attest. It's also fuss and tweak free, no-nonsense and simplicity itself to use. The reviewer inside me occasionally bubbles up and makes my fingers itch; I know couplers under the kit would improve the sound still further, as

would a single brand cable loom. But then the musical enjoyment to be had just as it is banishes any such thoughts. If a system should be greater than the sum of its parts then this is certainly a system. More importantly, it's also music! ▶+

#### PRICES AND AVAILABILITY

##### Renaissance Amplification

RT-01 CD Transport ..... £2,495  
 RD-01 DAC..... £1,395  
 RAP-03 Preamplifier..... £1,295  
 RA-03 Monoblock Power Amplifier.  
 ..... £2,495/pair

##### Rountree Acoustics

OmniMon OM1 loudspeakers.....  
 ..... £7,800/pair

##### Audiophile Base

##### Rack & Platforms

'Starbase' 120 module (x4) .....  
 ..... £375/ea.  
 'Starbase' basepack (x1) ..... £400  
 "02' VRC platform (x3). .... £250/ea.  
 'Stratabase 02' VRC platform (x2) ..  
 ..... £450/ea.

##### Philosophy Cables

'Nebrion' 0.5m BNC S/PDIF digital..  
 ..... £299  
 'Hypothesis' 1.2M RCA analogue pr.  
 ..... £499  
 'Nebrion' 0.6M RCA analogue pr....  
 ..... £1,099  
 'Organon' 2M single wire  
 loudspeaker pr. .... £849

##### Audioss Mains

'Paua' IEC distribution hub as 5-way  
 ..... £850

(System total cost..... £22,626)

##### Splash Audio

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