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# Hi-Fi News

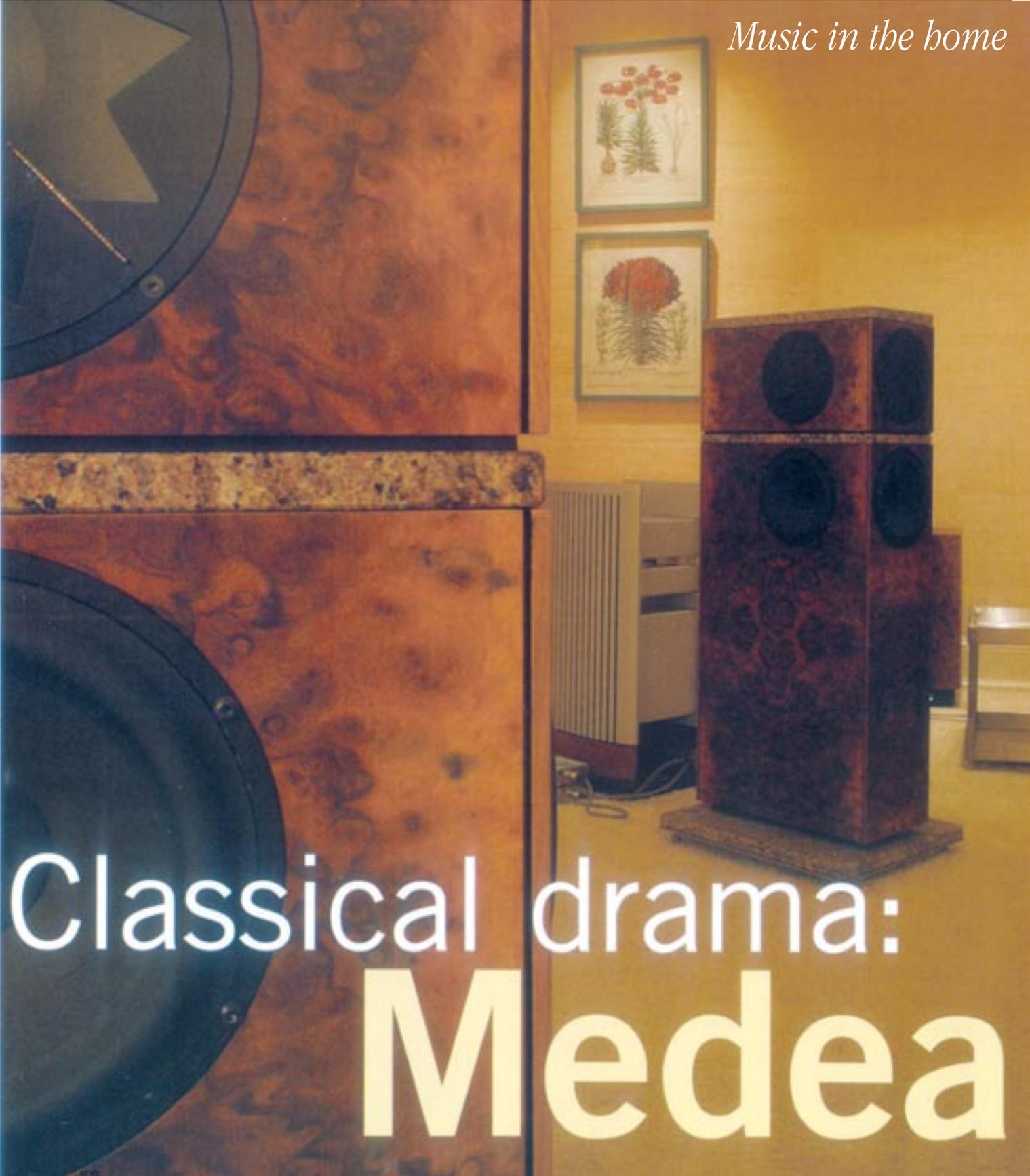
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PURE AUDIO EXCELLENCE

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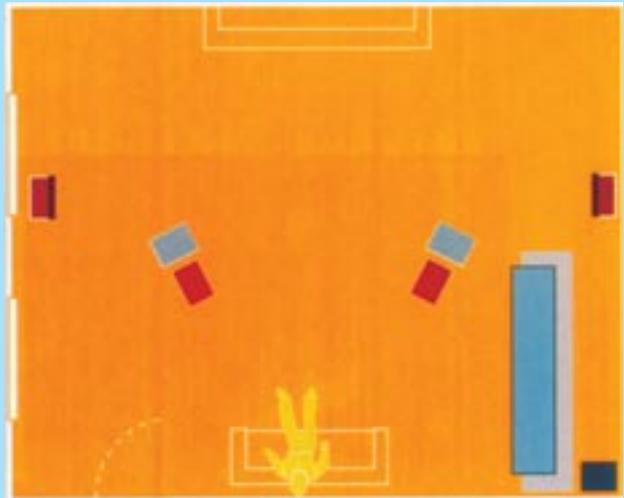
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*Music in the home*



Classical drama:  
**Medea**

‘...Michael had refused to fall prey to doubts and insecurities that send enthusiasts reeling from one dealer to another, from one system concept to another, and often to despair.’



**I**t was always on the cards that we would revisit Michael, whose highly exotic ‘bedroom system’ was first described back in December 2000. At that time (you may or may not remember) he was planning to build a purpose-designed listening room of awesome specification, with megawatts of Gamut amplification and subterranean subwoofers in a full surround rig. There were various reasons why this did not happen, but loss of enthusiasm wasn’t one of them. However, that remarkable system-by-the-bed had progressed a lot since 2000 - not least by having the room to itself - so we felt it was time to have a listen. And a very enjoyable day it was too.

For the benefit of those who don’t have a December 2000 issue open in front of them, I asked Michael to begin at the beginning:

‘For years I had a very ordinary system. I can’t quite remember what actually triggered me to look into what really could be done. It may have just been that my kit was really just getting on a bit - it was 15 years old. I started going down the traditional route, looking in shops, got steadily more confused, got all the magazines and got even more confused - although that’s no criticism of the magazines.

‘I think it’s an impossible subject for someone who has no starting-place. You can’t do it yourself, not at this level. You’ll finish up with some nice sounds but you won’t get the best unless you’ve got some help.

‘And that I think is where I had a stroke of luck because in one of the magazines I read an article which referred to Jeremy Baldwin of the Right Note near Bath, and what grabbed me particularly was that the reviewer had the very good sense to say that Jeremy lived next door to the pub and what a charming environment it was, and that when you went to see Jeremy you usually finished up with a glass in your hand. So I rang him up and one thing led to another. And then the journey began.

‘When it began, I had no idea how far it would go; it sort of evolved. I dare say that if Jeremy had told me at the beginning - not that he withheld anything,

An already-imposing system based on Audio Physic Medea speakers moves up to another level thanks to dCS and Halcro. Interview by Steve Harris pictures by Roger Phillips



'I think classical music tends to need that dynamic range, more than rock'

Electronics are mounted on Vertex supports (in essence, these are specially - treated granite slabs and special cones) which in turn sit on the Vibraplane pneumatic table

but the story is quite bizarre in places, like those funny things in the corners - I would have been a little cautious.

'There is a lot of bullshit, and it is quite difficult to sort out the wood from the trees. So I started off behaving as I would in business, looking for cues that would tell me whether the person I was talking to knew what he was talking about. And then you have the inevitable cautious stage where really you are fencing with your supplier, really trying to find out about their integrity, how expert they are, where they sit in the scheme of things. I was impressed with his intellect; I wasn't in a position to judge his expertise, not directly, because I didn't know the subject.

'Anyway, I rapidly felt quite comfortable, Jeremy started to show me things, we took it steadily. He took

**'I started by going down the traditional route, looking in shops, just got steadily more confused ...'**

me to one customer who had the Medea speakers and then we went to Germany to listen to the Medea speakers at Audio Physic. We also went to Denmark to listen to Ole Christensen's stuff.'

In case you are wondering, Ole's original business was and is designing recording studios, for which he needed a good amp, hence the Gamut.

'I then had a diversion, when I thought I was going to build a music room. What unfortunately stopped that project, apart from concerns about what it was going to do to the house, was that we'd bought ourselves another house abroad and I realised that maybe we weren't going

to stay here indefinitely. Sadly, very sadly, I abandoned that project.'

At the time of our visit in 2000, Michael was using a dCS Elgar with Wadia 270 transport, although before that he'd briefly used an Accuphase player. All the electronics had been placed on a set of Vibraplane isolation tables, which are kept inflated to the correct pressure by an occasional burst of activity from a large pump in the corner. With such a big and complicated system, cables running across the floor and sometimes a small-hours whirr from the pump, the conflict between the functions of bedroom and music room had to be resolved. The music won, and another room in the house became the master bedroom!

'Then it sat around for quite a while and we only did this latest revamp about six months ago. We had it finally all together when we came home at the end of the summer in September.'

The system now includes Halcro amplification and a full dCS three-box front end, with the upsampling-to-DSD version of Purcell that is reviewed in this issue by Andrew Harrison (page 40). Also new were granite slabs between the Medea cabinet sections, with cables, local mains conditioning and supports by Vertex.

As we talked, it became obvious that Michael had refused to fall prey to the doubts and insecurities that send enthusiasts reeling from one dealer to another, from one system concept to another, and often to despair. It seemed, I suggested, that he'd actually taken a more rational approach than most of us do.

'You've touched on something that has certainly been most helpful to me in business, and that is that it's most important that you acknowledge your *lack* of knowledge. Then you don't look a fool when you say something absurd. And you have to be prepared to say things that are absurd in the process of finding out - if you're going to challenge, for instance, an established way of thinking. In my professional life I was always responsible for things from quite an early age. As a young man, inevitably I had no experience, but often found that people working for me were my father's age. It wasn't wholly contrived, I think it just sort of happened, but I quickly realised that the best way not to be threatening to the older men was to be their son.

### Listening included...

- 1) Kate Rusby, 'My Young Man' (from *Little Lights*, Pure Records PRCD07)
- 2) Van Morrison, 'Piper at the Gates of Dawn' (*The Healing Game*, Exile 537 101)
- 3) Queen, 'Another One Bites the Dust' (*Greatest Hits 0777 7 895*)
- 4) Verdi, 'Requiem: 'Rex Tremendae'' (von Karajan, DG 415 091)
- 5) Schubert, 'Im Frühling' (Alan Bostridge, EMI Classics 7243 5 56347)
- 6) Verdi, *Otello*, closing scenes: 'Ave Maria', the murder, death of Desdemona, Otello regrets (Pavarotti, Te Kanawa, Chicago SO/Solti 1991 live recording)

And then they would protect you. If you went to them and said "You've been doing this for a long time, how do you do it?" this avoided conflict and you weren't a threat.

'Now, obviously that is not quite what I am trying to say here about hi-fi, because apart from anything else I'm nearly 70 now! But the point is that you mustn't be afraid of showing your ignorance. If you want help from people that know their job it's extremely foolish to walk in and say, "I know about this". For the ordinary person going in off the street, it's a communication that's only about 20 seconds old. The chap says "Can I help you?" and you say "I'm interested in...". Where do you start? It's very difficult. And you don't know how much expertise the chap in the shop has actually got. What can one expect? They'll be enthusiastic, that's probably why they are there. But they too have problems to try and sort the wood from the trees.

'So early on, I decided that it would be very foolhardy for me to take the responsibility for making the decisions. My job was first of all to find somebody I trusted to make the decision for me! Then of course I prodded and poked the poor fellow all the way along the line, saying "Why this? Why not this?" all the time, but at the end of the day nearly every decision finished up with me saying "Well what do you think Jeremy, what should we get?" Because at the end of the day if you've got someone who you're sure has established what your needs are, and has the expertise to find the products that match your needs, you must then let their view come forward. Otherwise, you're really saying you don't trust them.'

For our visit, Michael prepared a little programme of music which showed off the various aspects of the system (see box). This culminated in the last 20 minutes or so of Verdi's *Otello*, after which I was left in no doubt the system does do what Michael wants it to do. His main focus is the human voice and the system puts up a strong performance here. I think the seamless mid and smooth treble of the Medea's Manager drive units help. With their additional side-firing drivers, the Medeas fill the room in quasi-omnidirectional fashion and they do indeed produce a vast soundstage - especially now that they are positioned according to Audio Physic's principles, equidistant from all walls and angled with their axes crossing about 0.5m behind the listening position, which is close to the wall.

Michael's Purcell is set up to upsample CD to DSD, which was a new experience for me. I would have liked

'Those bizarre things in the corners' are Shakti Hallograph resonance tuning devices (right). The Halcro DM8 pre-amp (below), along with the digital front-end components, is powered from the Accuphase 1200 mains conditioner.



to hear the comparison against straight or PCM-upsampled CD: sadly we didn't have the connectors to do this, but I think the DSD-upsampled results I heard chime in with AH's findings. There's certainly an analogue-like rounded quality to the sound.

When it comes to opera, Michael has clearly created a system that will get the drama across, with its vocal clarity, huge sound stage and impressive dynamics.

'I think that a lot of classical music really does benefit from a system that reveals the detail and that is extremely successful playing very quiet music - where it's not lacking in that sense of emotion, and it's still got life even though it's extremely quiet - and I think that's one of the things that demands a good system. And I think classical music tends to need that dynamic range more than a lot of rock or jazz. If you take 'Rex Tremendae' from Verdi's *Requiem* as an example, you don't very often get that kind of dynamic range from pop music, but it does crop up regularly in classical music.'

After Verdi, we listened to some more singers, and were completely melted by Kathleen Ferrier, utterly magnificent on this system. We were left speechless. Which is, perhaps, how it ought to be. ■



## The system

dCS Verdi disc transport  
dCS Purcell D/D converter/upsampler  
dCS Elgar D/A convertor

Halcro DM8 pre-amplifier  
Halcro DM 68 monoblock power amplifiers

Audio Physic Medea Loudspeakers  
(modified with three granite slabs each)  
Audio Physic Luna subwoofers

Accuphase PS1200 power cleaner  
Vertex AQ equipment supports, mains  
filters and cabling  
Vibrplane equipment supports

Shakti Hallograph room-tuning devices

