

Music in the concert hall is important to this month's *HFN* reader and his pianist wife. Their system has evolved over many changes – vinyl reproduction coming and going, and finally favoured over digital – with Vertex AQ providing the icing on the cake. Story: **Steve Harris**

Music could hardly be more important than it is for Roger, and for his wife Elizabeth, who is a pianist and piano teacher. They are keen concert-goers and their comfortable sitting-room houses a system that approaches the old ideal of 'concert-hall realism'. Roger enjoys both CD and SACD, but has repeatedly returned to vinyl too, despite some expensive accidents. I asked him for the whole story.

'I've always been interested in music, had piano lessons as a child, and with my younger brother used to play piano duets. We persuaded my parents to invest in an HMV box, a mono thing with an autochange turntable. They joined a record club, and got records sent through the post every month.

'That's when I first heard things like Brahms's Fourth Symphony and *Hungarian Dances*, piano concertos, that sort of thing.

'Then I went off to university, and I had to do something, rather than wait until I got home to my parents in the holidays. So I went to Imhofs in New Oxford Street, with whatever my budget was, which would seem pathetic now. They said, "You want one of these!" It was a thing that looked smart, with a wooden case,

a Perspex lid that you could lift up, and it had two little speakers. I took it back to my digs and I was thrilled with it. Now I was buying stereo records, because I had two speakers.

'What with work and other commitments, it was quite a while before I invested in something a bit more exotic. I bought a pair of KEF Cadenza speakers, a Leak receiver and a Thorens turntable.'

CD: THE BEES' KNEES

Next, the Cadenzas were replaced by some TDL-inspired transmission line speakers, built for Roger by Tony Seaford – a friend who would become well-known as a hi-fi retailer and consultant.

'I still had the Thorens, but then CD came out and I got a Philips player, one of the first tray-loading ones. I had a huge collection of vinyl, but over the next few years I got rid of quite a lot, as it was replaced by the equivalent recordings on CD.

'At that time, I thought that CD was the bees' knees and was inherently better. That was the received wisdom. And then, I didn't have a good enough turntable and cartridge to take advantage of what was inherently available from vinyl.

'Today, with the right kit, playing the same LPs that I've had for



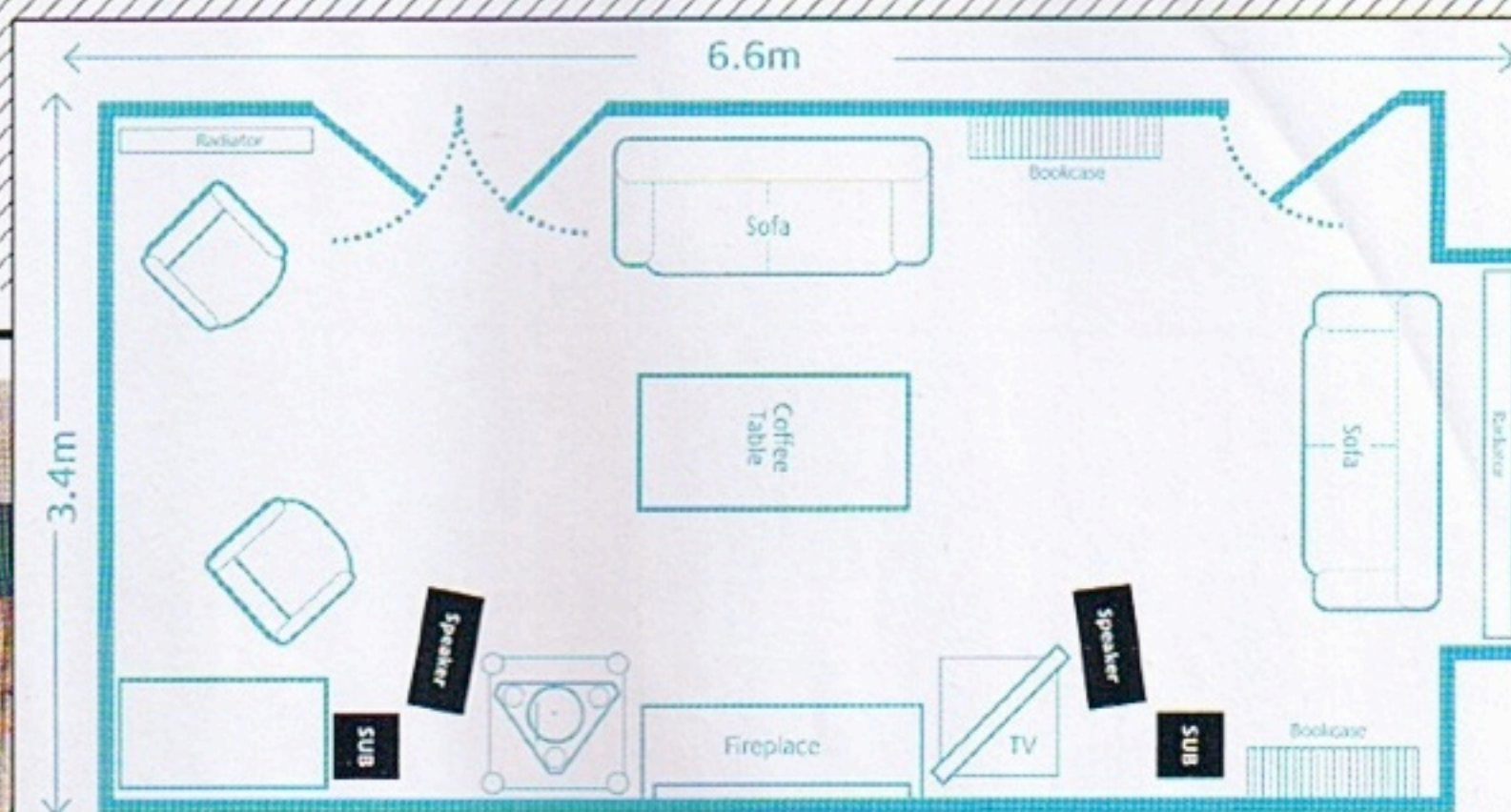
donkey's years, I'm hearing them as if they were something new, something completely fresh.'

Yet it was CD, with those transmission lines, which first made Roger realise that you could actually listen to hi-fi in a living-room at something like realistic levels.

'Maybe it was the kind of equipment Tony was using as a source for his speakers. I got into Marantz, and bought the CD17 player, and the PM17 amplifier – which I still have in my study and is still going strong. Looking back, that Marantz amp and CD player were able to provide the speakers with what they were capable of delivering. You could listen to music at those levels, without it being silly, painful or antisocial, because the quality of the sound was commensurate with the volume.

RIGHT:
A serious turntable indeed, the Scheu Laufwerk 2 from Germany, with Clearaudio Unify 12in satinwood tonearm and Lyra Skala cartridge





MUSIC ROOM

Earlier editions of Roger's system used the length of the room, rather than firing across with such a short listening distance. But although the change was mainly for aesthetic and practical reasons, the new layout has been successful sonically. With only a subtle contribution from the subwoofers, the stand-mount speakers produce a beautifully convincing soundstage which really conveys the scale of larger recording venues.



'The way the sitting room was organised, the speakers were closer together than I would have liked, so I didn't get as much definition...'

'Then things moved a bit further, because I thought that my Marantz CD could be improved upon, and I got an Accuphase DP75 player. In fairly short order, a GamuT pre- and power amplifier followed.

'At that stage I still had a pair of Tony Seaford's transmission lines. But then we got to the point – and I'm sure you can see what's coming here – when the speakers weren't quite good enough for the rest of the system. So I invested in a pair of Audio Physic Virgo IIIs, which were really nice.'

At that time, the system was still arranged with the speakers firing

down the length of the room, from the right-hand end, looking at the fireplace.

TAKING A NEW POSITION

'The way the sitting room was organised, the speakers were closer together than I would have liked, so I didn't get as much definition across the soundstage as was ideally possible with that equipment.

'Then my wife and I decided we were going to revamp the sitting room, change things around to better use the light. It made sense for the principal listening position to be on the sofa facing the fireplace,

with speakers on either side. And that worked extremely well. Now, I thought, I can get a bit more out of the system as I've got a wider spacing of the speakers. So I replaced the Audio Physic Virgos with Avantis.

'About that time, dCS, which I'd heard demonstrated by Jeremy Baldwin at The Right Note in Bath, came out with a one-box SACD player. I'd heard SACD, although not surround sound, which had never appealed to me as something I wanted to do in a domestic environment. I invested in the P8i. The P8i integrated was going to be ➔

ABOVE: Widely-spaced GamuT L3 speakers flank the fireplace as well as Roger's hi-fi rack to the right, and the TV and DVD setup on the left

replaced by a two-box transport and DAC combination. That never materialised, but what did eventually appear was the Paganini transport and DAC. I must have been one of dCS's more valued customers, because I received one of the first pairs in the country.

'So now I had a transport and DAC that I was extremely pleased with. And at the same time, I downgraded, if you like, from the GamuT pre- and power amp to the GamuT integrated. Which I think is fabulous. It looks good and it does all the right things without any fuss. I think it actually cost more than the two original boxes, but I'm really, really pleased with it.'

VINYL IN AND OUT

'Along the way, though, I wanted to get back into vinyl. My Thorens had long since bitten the dust, and I'd had a Rega Planar 2 for a long time, and I had a succession of cartridges, including a Dynavector 10x. I've had a problem with cartridges, which I might as well mention now, and that was *damaging* them!

'I gave the Rega away in the end. So then I was without a turntable, but I had an awful lot of records still. Eventually, I got a Michell Gyrodec from Jeremy, with a Sumiko Blue Point Special.

RIGHT: Two of dCS's most elegant products, the Paganini CD/SACD transport and DAC, sit on Vertex AQ Kinabalu platforms

BELOW: As well as the dCS pair, this Stands Unique rack houses an Aesthetix Rhea tube phono stage and GamuT DI 150 integrated amplifier

BELOW RIGHT: One of the two Velodyne SP-800R subs



'I'd only had that cartridge for a short while when I caught my sleeve on it! Fortunately there was a good trade-in deal, so I got a new one at something like half the price, which wasn't quite so damaging.

'Then, we were changing the furniture around and I thought, I'll sell the turntable because I'm not really playing records much. It looked very nice, and people used to enjoy watching the weights go round, but it went.

'But by then I'd got the dCS kit and the GamuT integrated, so I could put it all on three shelves. And I thought, "I could put a turntable on there again, on the top shelf...". These decisions are not made rationally! So I got a Clearaudio Champion 2, with a Unify arm and Symphony cartridge. And the Symphony cartridge was a beast, in terms of its vulnerability. Which I duly demonstrated, because I broke that one as well!

'That put me off somewhat. Again, it was replaced, and again at a very advantageous rate, which was fine. But although it had a stylus guard, it was so fiddly that you felt like a nervous wreck by the time you got the guard on.

'Then we'd got into a situation where the speakers were just... well, as I say to people, you actually see hi-fi more than you listen to it. It's always there.

'So I thought, well, something that's not so in-your-face as two huge speakers over a metre high will probably do the trick. Before that, I'd had the feeling that the more drivers the better. But then I thought, well, the Mk1 eardrum is a single diaphragm that is excited and covers all the frequencies. Why not? You can cover the whole range with

just two units, if you've got the right crossover between them.

'So then I got talking to Jeremy again and I ended up with the Gamut L3s, which I think are fabulous. And in the piano black I think they look stunning as well. And on their Partington Dreadnought stands you can't move them, let alone shift them around, they're so heavy. They are really solid.

'With piano sound, where you've got variation in tonal quality from the lowest note on the keyboard right up to the top, and somehow you've got to integrate all that lot... where you've got the extra units, as with the Audio Physic Avanti, to my ears at least, there was a slight disconnect with the

upper frequencies. Maybe it was the design of the tweeter or something. But I just felt happier with these L3s.

'And they are much more friendly domestically. So they came in, and at the same time, two little Velodyne subwoofers, just to catch those lower frequencies. You're not aware they're there, but if they're *not* there, then you will think something's missing. I think also that they do help integrate the whole sound picture. ➔

'You felt like a nervous wreck by the time you got the guard on'



'As does the Vertex AQ equipment. Although I would have difficulty articulating it as clearly as Jeremy does, as to which particular aspects of the overall picture are attributable to cleaning up the mains, or stopping spurious vibrations going through the cables and upsetting the signal through unwanted noise.

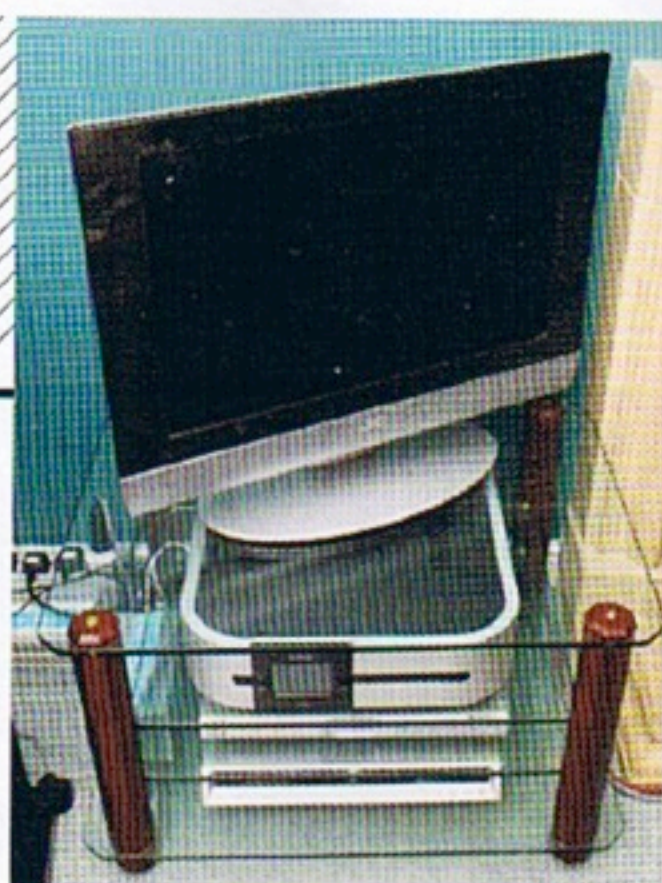
'All I'm aware of is that the sound is amazingly clean, and you can really appreciate that when listening to a string quartet, particularly one played on period instruments. The purity of the sound is amazing. You shut your eyes and the instruments are in the room with you.

'If you've got the space to put the stuff in, it's worth it. And I can understand the proponents of the Vertex AQ approach, when they say it's like a significant upgrade to your CD player. You don't need to do that upgrade if you make sure that what goes in is as clean as possible and what goes out is as pure as possible. So what goes to the speakers is as clean as you can get it.'

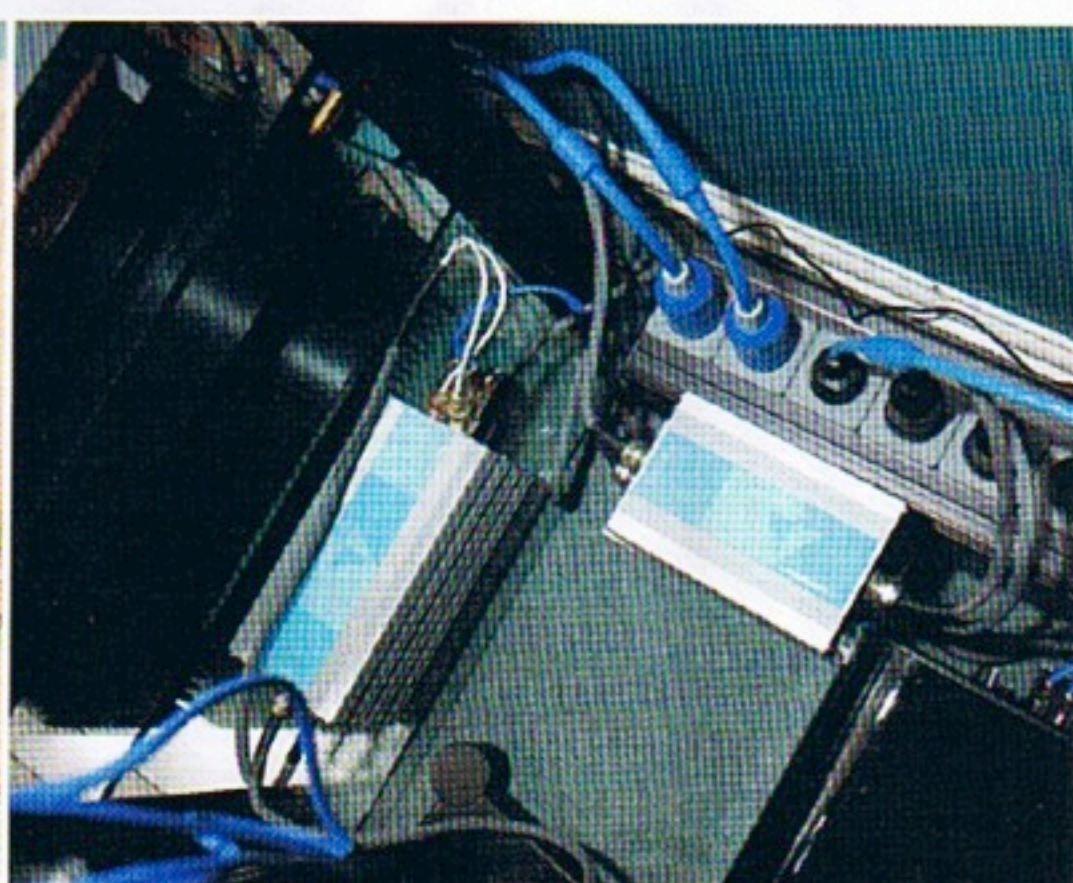
SEEING THE SOUND

'We started with a mains distribution box and filter. When we put the new speakers in, we got the speaker cables. The one thing that has to be said is that these units are bulky and they're not attractive, so I've done my best to hide them.

'Anyway, that's how that side of it came about. And it was done in order to make sure I had a coherent sound picture, where the instruments in the orchestra can be properly identified and pinpointed across the stage. Something like a piano, for example, the richness of the sound and its focus, you are "looking" at it! But again, as I understand it, it will depend on how the piano was



ABOVE: Under the JVC 26 inch LCD flat-screen TV is a Classé CDT-300 DVD player and a Sony RCD-100 CD recorder



ABOVE RIGHT: Vertex AQ power supply components

BELOW: A Gamut L3 speaker on its Partington Dreadnought stand; speaker cable [shown below left] is Vertex AQ Moncayo

recorded. Sometimes, you will hear a preponderance of treble on one side and bass on the other, or you just get a general sense of "it's all there".

Roger finds that the effect is still good when seated far away from the ideal central listening position.

'When you go to a concert, you'd like to sit in about Row H in the stalls, in the centre behind the conductor. Well, how often is that possible? If it's a well-attended concert you might be right over to one side. Then you are aware of being closer to one side of the orchestra than the other, but you can still hear everything. And that's what I get by sitting in the corner in our sitting-room.'

Going back a few steps, I asked Roger how he'd felt about his CD player

upgrades, first from Marantz to Accuphase, then on to dCS.

'I don't think I heard the Accuphase at its best, because I was in transition with the speakers and with the amplifier. I enjoyed it a lot. But that had been such a jump up from the Marantz CD17 that I'd begun to realise that some CDs were better recorded than others. Some sounded brash, strident, harsh, with an edge to them.

BLIND TEST

'And I didn't realise it, but what I was hankering after was the warmth of the LPs. Interestingly, I had, and I still have, the LP of the Royal Marines Band playing Sousa marches, which subsequently appeared on a cheap EMI CD. And we had some friends staying, for whom vinyl would have been old hat – they wouldn't have even considered it, and they weren't particularly musical although they appreciated music. So I gave a blind test, and I told to

my friend that he was going to hear the same music, played by the same people on the same occasion, it's just that one would be the LP and the other would be the CD. I played him *Liberty Bell*.

'I played the CD first, and he was honour-bound not to look at what I was doing. Then I played the LP. I asked him which he preferred, and he said he preferred the second one. I asked him why, and he said "It had more information". And he'd hit it right on the nail. Because the CD smoothed out everything, it was hard and glossy, take it or leave it. With the LP, it was quite different.

'I realised that, OK, CDs were not last word. LPs, if you play them properly on the right kind of stuff, you're going to get more satisfaction.

'And that's where I am at the moment. The Clearaudio went because it was a bit too intrusive domestically. And I was forever worrying about knocking the stylus. But then I paid a visit to Cool Gales, one thing led to another and I ended up with the Scheu turntable I have now. Which I think visually is stunning, and it's a joy to use.

'Ivan Kursar at Cool Gales has done for my vinyl what Jeremy of the Right Note has done for my CD listening. I am delighted with the way the Aesthetix Rhea phono stage handles the information in the LP groove and makes you "feel" the music. A valve phono stage seems somehow more capable of persuading you to think, "Let's hear just one more LP!". It's like the difference between a superbly-executed line-etching, with everything correct and in its place, and a vibrant oil painting that fills out the meaning behind the lines.

'And the Lyra Skala cartridge has got a guard which is easy to use. So far, it's survived!'

'Some CDs sounded brash, strident, with an edge to them'

