



Bedroom suite

This is a bedroom system? Well, it's no ordinary bedroom and it's certainly no ordinary system

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Listening to this system is like being back on hi-fi's magic carpet. I say 'back' because I've heard great stuff before, and I mention 'magic' because the hi-fi in this system has that all-important quality of being able to act as a transport, carrying us to the music.

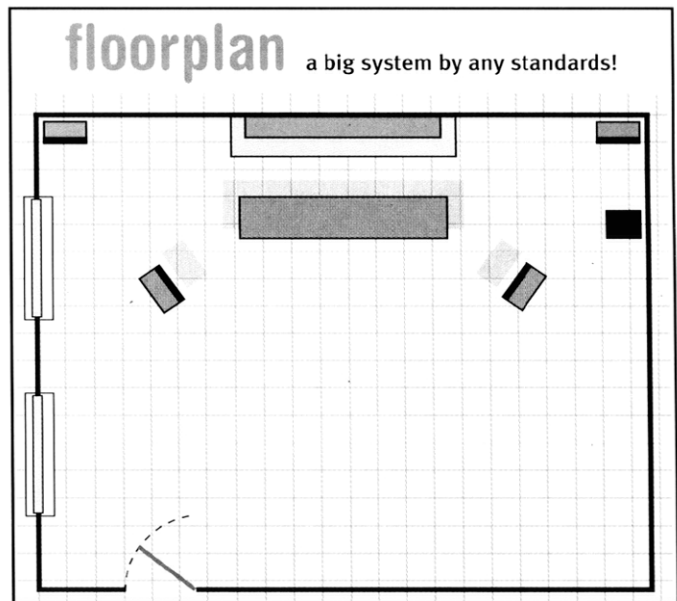
If all you have is a transistor radio, and you're still grooving, that might sound pretentious. But it's not so much about getting into the music, as Van Morrison might say, but about the crazy, money-and-space-no-object, pursuit of chasing stereo detail and harmonic integrity; the *re-Creation* by Haydn. It's about closing your eyes and feeling the room drop away, its walls replaced by the space of an auditorium. It's music as you hear it when you've got dressed up in your glad rags, driven to the best hall in your locale, shuffled to the liveliest seats you can afford and recognised the conductor from the telly — he's that good. Hold up, get this carpet back to earth, it's just a hi-fi, and it's in this man's bedroom.

The bedroom? We've been invited to listen to a newish

hi-fi belonging to a recently retired businessman who lives in a Georgian farmhouse in one of the leafier, lovelier, areas of the southern Midlands. Michael has only recently acquired the zealous pursuit of the ultimate sound, yet he seems to have negotiated the inevitable rotten and slippery rungs with ease. Why is it so difficult? It's surely because, money notwithstanding — and let's face it, there's lots of it here — it's pretty hard to get to where you want with just a few jumps.

Michael's old hi-fi was a stalwart companion of midrange separates bought 20 years ago and housed in the library. 'I'm not a serious hi-fi guy,' he explains, 'I didn't have an idea about what to get, but I was interested in a decent sound. And I know, as a businessman, that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. I think the chance of success in choosing a good system is extremely low if you go and try to do it by yourself.'

Aware of the pitfalls, Michael sought the advice of a professional. He found Jeremy Baldwin of The Right Note.



with grandchildren in mind he intends to incorporate cinema facilities, making a family media room in the style now popular in the States. But all that is some time, and planning permission documentation, away. For now he listens to his £69,000 CD-playing system in his bedroom.

'It's really the only place where the acoustics are right,' he says. 'And the Audio Physics are configured to play across a rectangular room,' Jeremy adds. Like the rest of the house, the airy Georgian dimensions of the bedroom are ideal for music. Antique furniture, soft wallpaper, paintings and heavy curtains, not to mention the bed, make it an acoustically-friendly place. The two multi-paned sash windows, overlooking lush water-meadow, actually sound less live than the opposite wall, but there are no obvious suckout or live surfaces to worry about.

To say the system is visually dominant would be an understatement, though the burr walnut veneer of the Audio Physics speakers, with their attendant subwoofers in each corner, matches the furniture beautifully. The electronics boxes sit on 6mm glass platforms set on sand, filling a stainless steel two-tier tray. The tray is suspended by two Vibraplanes, supported on steel stands. This was designed by



Vibraplane support system
provides isolation ☺

'What I liked was the way we discussed my needs and aspirations. I'm not a student of music — though I was in a Bach Choir and sang at school — but since retiring I've grown to love it more, especially classical. There was no hard sell from Jeremy, which was important.'

Michael then set off on a journey that was, literally, to take him across the world, from fine hi-fi emporia in Germany and Denmark to the high-end pavilions in Las Vegas. Jeremy is still on hand today to explain any technicalities. Michael found himself not only buying a high-end system but has decided upon a purpose-built room to adjoin his rambling farmhouse. The room, its acoustics and components will be designed by Ole Christensen of AMPspeaker, in Copenhagen. Michael has an architect's model of the room, with sloping ceiling to cancel standing waves and secondary internal walls which will house speakers out of sight. His main quest is for stereo sound, but

Michael himself. Some novice!

The system is just a CD player and amp, but comprises Wadia transport and dCS Elgar DAC, the Gamut 200W amp, and an Accuphase mains cleaner from the highest reaches of audio exotica. Possibly the most interesting box here is the dCS Purcell upsampler [reviewed by AH, Dec '99], between drive and DAC. It re-samples the CD data from the normal rate of 44,100 times a second to 192kHz, a clever way of taking CD's supersonic filtering from the normal 22.05kHz up to 50 or 60kHz. It's an eye-watering task to try to comprehend the maths, and I'll not let it reduce me to tears here. But Jeremy says it is a major reason this system sounds so open and dynamic. And it is a dynamic sound. We sit to listen on Michael's three chairs, drawn up about eight feet in front of the speakers. The set-up seems a little abnormal — the speakers are as close to us as they are to the side and rear walls



Audio Physic Medea speakers with unusual Manger drive units

— but with their main Manger star-diaphragm drivers firing either side and to the front, it ensures that direct sound hits before reflections from the room.

Michael plays a selection of favourite music which shows off some of the system's capabilities. He prefers acoustic classical music. From the first bars you hear how good it is. This is a quiet system; it isn't doing much to the sound itself, but it's very dynamic and fast, and the sense of contrast it brings to the colour of music is real. Showroom-Bentley magic carpet stuff.

A Philips recording of Mitsuko Uchida playing Mozart's Piano Sonata K281, for instance, conveys the notes with unerring accuracy. The attack is so fast you can almost hear the hammer hit the string and the string start to think about vibrating; and the piano is on a solid floor. I exaggerate, perhaps. But the system certainly has the ability of letting you look into the individual elements of music in a way that for most of us just results in fuzz. Confucius would have put it better, something like: 'He who can outstrip time has the pleasure to watch it catching up'.


The electronics are so quiet that when they do punch it is palpable. A 1989 recording with John Eliot Gardener conducting the *St Matthew Passion* [Archiv] brings crescendos out of nowhere; we hear Pilate dithering over Barrabas or Jesus, then the crowd's roar for crucifixion deluges the room, and it's an assault on the senses. I begin to see what Michael meant when he said this was an emotive system. The clarity and dynamics converge so you have no sense of anything musical missing; it's relaxing, and that allows the music to exercise those killer strokes.

Individual voices sound authentically real. When Michael produced his Hyperion CD of Fauré's *Requiem* with Matthew Best and the ECO I noticed to my dismay that the soprano was female. 'Pie Jesu' couldn't be any good with a quavering lady delivering it! But Mary Seers holds on to those notes like a tiger — diaphragm like iron, with a voice that has upper flare almost like a brass instrument. I've since heard it on a lesser system and it lost something of that force. So, by being extremely dynamic, the system is forgiving here — usually you would describe a revealing system as unforgiving.

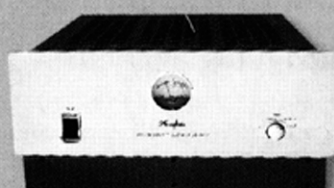
This hi-fi is balanced slightly more to classical music than

rock. Even good recordings like Fleetwood Mac's 'The Chain' sound a tad nasal when compared to the Philips and Hyperions. All the speed's there, and instruments like drums and guitars sound excellent in that fat, chew-on-it, realistic way. But the sheer attack of a violin note or the wide-open separation of an orchestra at full tilt are more awe-inspiring.

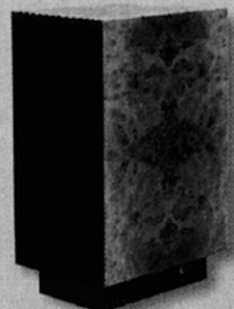
It actually matters less what I think about the system than what Michael feels, and I'm left with an image of him churning his arms like waves on a beach; 'What I like most is that it's alive. The clarity and elements of attack are great, but I'm not listening for those most of the time. This system has an uncomplicated sound which I love. And it sounds human: it has a human voice.'

What's going to get him out of bed now? 

THE SETUP



Accuphase mains cleaner



Audio Physic Luna sub



Audio Physic Medea



Gamut amplifier



The hi-fi's future home!

THE SYSTEM

Wadia 270 CD transport	£8500
dCS Elgar DAC	£8500
dCS Purcell Upsampler	£3500
Gamut (formerly Sirius) D200 amp	£3000
Audio Physic Medea speakers	£25,000
Audio Physic Luna subwoofers x 2	£3800
Cables: dCS digital i/cs	£1500
Yamamura Churchill M6000 (speaker)	£1700
Vibraplane automatic air platforms x 2	£6000
Air compressor (self draining)	£1000
Siltech mains cable	£1000
Accuphase PS1200 Mains supply	£5500