

# Letter from Shenzhen

AFTER 40 YEARS AT THE HEART OF BRITISH HI-FI, PETER COMEAU HAS MOVED TO CHINA AS DIRECTOR OF ACOUSTICS AT THE IAG GROUP (WHARFEDALE, QUAD, MISSION, CASTLE ETC). IN HIS FIRST 'LETTER FROM SHENZHEN' HE ANSWERS THE QUESTION: "WHY SO MANY SPEAKERS?"

PETER COMEAU

Look at the international websites of many loudspeaker brands these days and the chances are you'll find products that just aren't available in your country. Until recently a clear example was Tannoy, which had very good sales from its *Prestige* range, primarily developed to suit customers in the Far East. Now that Tannoy has started marketing its *Prestige* models more strongly in the UK, they've started to gain a following.

Another current example is Wharfedale. In a similar class as Tannoy's *Prestige* models, Wharfedale's high-end *Airedale* speakers simply aren't distributed in the UK, while at the lower end, I'll bet you've never even heard of the *Amber* series.

So just why are there so many products in a loudspeaker manufacturer's range if half of them don't seem to be popular? The answer is that you may only be thinking about the market you can easily see – that of your own country. Other areas of the world have different ideas about what makes a good loudspeaker. You could say that there's no accounting for taste.

As I am now working in China I thought it would be interesting to contrast the Chinese and UK hi-fi markets, in particular for loudspeakers. I've seen the typical British hi-fi buyer, and while this might not apply to you personally, just try to think of the hi-fi equivalent of the apocryphal Man on the Clapham Omnibus, and his gradual preference for purchasing smaller, thinner loudspeakers over the last four decades.

Let's look at this more closely. When I was growing up, a 'small' bass unit was 10 inches in diameter and 'serious' speakers used 12in or 15in bass units. Early Wharfedale speakers used 8in drivers as midrange units for goodness sake!

Then during the 1970s hi-fi speakers started to shrink, led by products from the likes of KEF and AR, until we ended up with the present day predominance of designs based around 165mm and 130mm bass/midrange drivers. Don't get me wrong, some seriously good hi-fi loudspeakers are based on units of these sizes, but they're not necessarily what comes into the mind of a Chinese hi-fi nut when he starts looking for 'seriously good' speakers.

In China small loudspeakers are just not considered 'real' hi-fi. If you have an audio system in China with small loudspeakers, the chances are they'll be part of a cheap all-in-one system. In fact, walk down the city streets in China and you'll hear music blaring out of shops, not coming from the



sort of small 'satellite' speakers you would find in Europe, but from large PA type speakers with 300mm bass units and a treble horn.

So the predilection of your typical Chinese hi-fi buyer is for the larger tower models, especially ones with a multiple array of drive units on the front.

Now we might like to poke fun at this but, before you do, ask yourself is it really so silly? Naturally the Chinese buyer likes the relatively slimmer floorstanders – who wouldn't when floor space in the home is at a premium? But the hi-fi owner also wants the same levels of bass and acoustic power that he or she hears in night clubs and city malls all over China.

So, if you're a speaker designer and you have to generate deep bass frequencies at a high acoustic level, and you don't have the luxury of being able to utilize a 250 - 300mm bass unit, then the alternative has to be multiple bass drivers. So the seeds of the large tower speaker with multiple bass units were sown.

Then again the British buyer has become well used to the supremacy of the two-way loudspeaker system. This has mainly come about because, not unnaturally, a speaker with a single crossover point is easier to design. However, with the sophisticated computer speaker modeling techniques now available, multi-way speakers are beginning to emerge that have similar coherence across the audio band as a two-way.