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One of the reasons for starting *HIFICRITIC* was simply that Martin Colloms and I were fed up with reading unremittingly sycophantic equipment reviews in much of the hi-fi press. Had all hi-fi equipment suddenly become universally excellent, or had the standards of criticism dropped? Or was there another explanation?

Seven years down the road I think I might be getting closer to the answer, but it's by no means a simple one. In fact all three factors seem to be involved, and probably more besides.

Does all today's hi-fi equipment achieve impeccable standards? It's certainly true that many of the components we review end up with 'Recommended' flags, but maybe one shouldn't attempt to sum up a product in a single word. I'd far rather subscribers read the review as a whole before deciding whether they're interested in the component in question.

Furthermore, I don't think the best hi-fi has actually improved by very much over the years. I reckon I could put together a system using 40 year old components that can comfortably rival a system available today of an equivalent (inflation adjusted) price.

Again in my opinion, I feel that hi-fi itself has been undermined by the indifferent quality of today's music and recording quality, and the widespread adoption of MP3 downloading. Those factors alone might well have helped undermine serious criticism.

However, I do believe that the overall average performance of hi-fi components has slowly but surely got quite a bit better, and that there aren't all that many 'lemons' around today.

People tell me that a main reason for using solid state amplifiers is simply that they're perceived as more reliable and consistent. While I have some sympathy with that view, I reckon hi-fi and music ought to be about emotion, not practicality, and there's no denying that a good valve amp can sound wonderfully superior.

Have the reviewers become less critical? Possibly. But other factors have also come into the frame. As the UK hi-fi industry has shrunk, so has the number of distributors, and those remaining have become rather more cautious about who reviews their products.

One problem faced by *HIFICRITIC* is that we do try to review products fairly but critically. However, if a distributor doesn't agree with something one of our reviewers has said, it's very likely that the reviewer in question (or even the magazine as a whole) simply won't receive any more review products.

One thing is certain: hi-fi equipment has become much more reliable over the years, which has got to be good news for everybody. Indeed, the reliability of technology as a whole has steadily improved. Back when a mobile phone was the size of a brick, I'd automatically take one along with me on a journey just in case the car broke down, which in those days it did, quite often. Tempting fate, I haven't suffered a breakdown in twenty years, and if I were looking to replace my car today, I probably wouldn't care much which company made it.

Paul Messenger
Editor