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I've just travelled all the way up to the North West Audio Show, in a small village with a large hotel called Cranage. Despite the observation that it's a very long way from my home in North Kent, it's the second time I've been there, and is certainly a whole lot bigger than it was two years ago.

Sure, it doesn't match the size of Bristol or Munich yet, but I reckon it's on the way, a key observation being simply that I couldn't get round it in one day. It didn't take two yet, like the abovementioned, but I'll be heading North West next year, while many others are going South West towards Glastonbury.

The hi-fi industry is certainly changing, but in a way it's merely reflecting what's happening in society as a whole, as we're all becoming slaves to the convenience of the internet. The traditional dealer should survive, but he/she needs to raise his/her act in order to persuade potential customers to get off their smartphones and pay a visit to the store.

The good reason for an actual, physical visit is that components (especially loudspeakers) can be properly demonstrated, but one of the worrying signs at Cranage was simply that several new loudspeaker brands were not bothering with dealers at all, but going straight to the web.

Kralk Audio, PureAudioProject, Node, 3 Square Audio, Bluesound, and Buchardt are all brands that are new to me, and all are pursuing a 'direct sale' course of action. Only Ophidian seems to be the exception that tends to prove the rule.

Direct sale notwithstanding, there was plenty to interest the hi-fi enthusiast and journalist. I even spent an hour in a sit-down lecture by Mike Valentine (of Chasing the Dragon fame), on recording techniques and formats, and found it thoroughly interesting and enlightening. Despite the large room, there wasn't a spare seat available, so I had to stand at the back!

One reason for liking Cranage, however, was the chance to meet and chat with industry people that are normally too busy or hidden behind a PR screen. I spent some time talking with drive unit engineer Mark Fenton, and hadn't realised that he'd been involved with late Ted Jordan. I also encountered Tony Monaghan of True Signal Audio Cables, who'd had an interesting relationship with Nigel Finn when he was at The Chord Company. I'm hoping to try some of Monaghan's cables in the next issue.

Arguably the most interesting new product was the Node Hylia, which might look like an Eclipse 'egg' but is actually a 3-way speaker, with transmission-line bass and a BMR midrange. That said, I was also impressed by a new 'baby' speaker called Vox3 at SoundKaos, and by way of contrast a large dipole from a company that calls itself Pure Audio Project.

It wasn't by any means all loudspeakers, of course. There were at least two Italian electronics brands that I'd not encountered previously, while Guy Sergeant was using vintage reel-to-reel analogue tapes to highlight his Puresound valve amplifiers.

Paul Messenger
Editor

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