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It may seem unreal – even irrelevant – to carry on writing about an expensive hobby in these still-troubled times, but we maintain our commitment to subscribers: to inform, question entertain and to analyse developments in high quality sound reproduction.

Manufacturers and suppliers have again stepped up with review samples, and audio dealers are finding ways to answer requests from customers, including sale or return home demonstration deals. Product is left on the doorstep avoiding contact, and similarly collected by appointment. In the case of a recent delivery of loudspeakers, once in the hallway they were left for a day or two before unpacking. Another family member helped get them up to the listening studio.

I'm still not quite sure how it happened, but a compact, standmount two-way loudspeaker has sucked in many pages to describe it fully and report in detail on its performance. This poses the question what an audiophile loudspeaker should be about: is it all about stature, technology, power, loudness, frequency range? And at what cost? Or is it really just about playing music really well?

This issue has turned into something of a loudspeaker special, with five reviews including the Derek Hughes-designed Graham Audio LS5/9f, the suffix indicating the floor standing version of the famous BBC LS5/9. It's analysed by Chris Kelly, while my marathon assessment of Karl-Heinz Fink's FinkTeam KIM loudspeaker joins company with the Fyne Audio F703, reviewed by Kevin Fiske. Meanwhile Ed Selley explores Neat's new Orkestra, while guest contributor Jose Victor Henriques was able to sample a true high end flagship loudspeaker from Denver-based Avalon: the monumental and rare Saga which has been sprinkled generously with 'ultra' technology derived from its manufacturer's statement product, the Tesseract, which itself boasts a shipping weight close to a metric tonne a pair!

In his regular Safari, Stan Curtis pays tribute to Tim de Paravicini, while our interview by Chris Frankland is with Linn's head honcho Gilad Tiefenbrun.

An extended feature from Keith Howard examines the effects of vibration on audio systems, complemented by my comparative review of eight vibration controlling devices for loudspeakers and audio electronics. These 'footers' and absorbers include products from IsoAcoustics, Bassocontinuo, Synergistics, Alto Extremo, Soundcare, Grand Prix /Definitive Audio and PEEK by Soundworks, and I've also been trying the Chord Company 'Burndy' loom for the Naim NAP500DR power amplifier.

Analogue audio sources are represented by two phono preamplifiers – the PS Audio Stellar reviewed by Kevin Fiske and the iFi Zen Phono assessed by Chris Kelly – while further fallout from my extensive CH system review has led to a review of the Argento Flow series cables from Denmark, made from pure silver and tailored to CH requirements.

I also offer a postscript to my CH assessment in the last issue. Digital audio sources include the noted Meitner DAC from the USA, reviewed by Chris Frankland, and then the new NEO iDSD from IFi Audio, assessed by Andrew Everard.

Altogether I count 22 product reviews in this new issue, as well as also classical music by Andrew Mellor, DSD jazz from Andrew Everard, and classic rock and pop releases sought out by Steve Harris, who also contributes his view of the latest version of Roon.

Finally, we must mark the passing of renowned studio audio engineering pioneer Rupert Neve, who was active in design and development engineering until this February, stopped in his tracks at 94. He and his wife founded Neve Electronics in 1961. By '64 he had designed his first transistor-based equaliser, then a transistor-based mixing console for Philips Records, leading to the famous Neve 8028 desk.

After fruitful years designing much admired analogue mixing desks, especially the substructures and circuit blocks, he became a pioneer in digital audio, holding that multibit operation was more natural in timing and dynamics than the low bit high oversampled 'Bitstream' alternative. He also preferred passive line in/out transformers to active op amp style interfaces. His audio engineering career spanned eight decades, his contribution to recording technology winning him a GRAMMY for Lifetime Technical Achievement.

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