

London High Fidelity Show Heathrow Park Inn, 28-29 March 2009

by Martin Colloms

Amid this dangerously pervasive aura of pessimism we find that quality stereo music and equipment is actually not doing too badly. While some overextended chains may be trading really cautiously many independents are finding that their specialist customer base has not lost its enthusiasm for improvement. Thus this Spring 2009 specialist stereo audio show, while a bit smaller than last year, managed to sell out the rooms booked and even showed a small increase in footfall on the Saturday while still remaining encouragingly busy for the second day. HIFICRITIC can testify to that as Sunday saw an even brisker traffic in subscribers and back copy sales. It is fair to say that it was primarily a dealer exhibit show with most exhibits supported by the respective manufacturers. The big UK brands were notable by their absence, presumably seeking to control costs in these difficult trading conditions.

I had a quick look round and report on stuff which caught my ear and eye with apologies to those I missed. I must note the new **MAD** brand (My Audio Design), office in Whitehall, London which name attracted mixed opinions, but which certainly caught the attention of many, not least for the extraordinary shaped and hued speaker in their demo line up which I overheard one comment 'It looks like a giant, shell-on peanut! This was the **Royal Salute**, while there was also a set of audio cables with very promising technical specifications despite the odd naming, e.g. 'My **Sweetie**' for a pure silver Teflon interconnect complete with **Cardas** connectors and solder practice. There are more examples in this vein.



MAD Royal Salute Loudspeaker and supporter



A MAD audio interconnect



A tidy Almarro monoblock



The M12 II radial horn

Having somehow missed the brand in previous visits I got better acquainted with the Beijing manufacturer **Opera Audio** (**Alium Audio** distribution) with their extraordinary yet excellently built, if sometimes quirky range of components, for example the **Consonance** series. I auditioned the quaintly named curvaceous **Droplet** CD player, which I could barely lift, a top loader with something like a kilo of sound deadening alloy sealing lid over the lightweight inner CD puck.

I heard this with a Consonance valve amplifier driving a pair of excellently made two way floor standing speakers at some £4,500. A high efficiency 12 inch powered bass enclosure was topped by a carved, dense plywood radial, mid-treble horn. This has 8 ohm basic impedance and attractive, potentially dynamically expressive, 97dB sensitivity. This could well be a good 12 W SE triode match. This Opera speaker is designated an '**OPERA M12 II**' and follows a well regarded earlier version. There is also a still higher performance model with a 15 inch bass, and both lf units have classic paper-pulp cones and treated cloth surrounds and full size compression horn drivers. You just do not know do you; was it going to sound like bag of nail in the treble with a mid bass boom underneath?

No, not at all, it sounded even and smooth, more than civilised, with crisp tuneful bass and a well integrated, expressive, and promisingly dynamic mid- treble, in my view a serious loudspeaker worthy of our attention.



The Opera M12 II on a Stella frame

Artisan Audio presented the latest iteration of the 'coil, magnet and iron' less pickup cartridge, the 'solid state' **Sound Smith Strain Gauge**, with necessary matching electronics/pre/control unit, now finished in a fetching black gloss, and making the veneer