



ORACLE/High-End Audio/Ken Kessler

Parallels between high-end wrist watches and high-end hi-fi equipment might surprise those who only know music playback via ear-buds and mobile phones. There's a weird disconnect in the realm of luxury goods, which embraces £100,000 handbags but balks at sound systems costing more than £299. If you love music as much as you desire an F.P. Journe Chronomètre Souverain, it's time you discovered a world of sound beyond those plastic lumps shoved in your ears.

First some history: what we now know as hi-fi separates – as opposed to the all-in-one radio/record player console your great grandpa had – appeared in the 1950s with the arrival of the vinyl LP. Yes, the same 12in plastic disc that's enjoying a major revival even in this age of streaming. And just as quartz nearly destroyed mechanical watches, so did digital (initially in the form of compact disc) threaten to kill off hi-fi forever.

What happened was a backlash among those who preferred sound quality over convenience, in perfect sync with watch lovers who rejected quartz. Hi-fi enthusiasts carried on with legacy technology, with the same resolve as those of us who are not yet ready to forsake petrol cars for electric vehicles.

Regular readers of *Oracle* know that interest in bespoke, limited edition, artisan or other exclusive wristwatches continues to grow. This is no reflection on The Usual Suspects, such as Rolex, Patek Philippe, Audemars Piguet, Cartier, or other major

houses. They are justifiably default purchases because some people are more comfortable owning watches from traditional, established makers.

Others, however, prefer something a bit more esoteric, exemplified by car fanatics who buy Koenigseggs instead of Porsches. This applies in exactly the same measure to hi-fi. High-performance audio equipment is available from a plethora of long-serving, mildly conservative brands, but home audio has always encouraged small-scale artisan manufacturers. They are the ones bold enough to create outré hardware unlikely ever to be found in high-street electronics emporia. Ownership requires a more adventurous type of audiophile, one prepared to put up with the peccadillos of small-scale production in the quest for more realistic sound in the home.

This phenomenon affects every single part of the hi-fi chain. From the cartridges, tonearms and turntables that extract the music from your vinyl LPs to the preamplifiers that control the signals and direct them to the power amplifiers which drive the loudspeakers, to all of the cables in between, every element has been addressed by ultra-exclusive manufacturers.

What defines them will be an approach familiar to those of you who covet watches from today's micro brands at the affordable end to the works of maestri like Philippe Dufour, Roger Smith and other auteurs. Even the prices are not dissimilar to *haute horlogerie*. This is the world with turntables which cost a half-million pounds and loudspeakers over the million quid mark. Even cartridges, rarely larger than a sugar cube, now include examples costing in excess of £20,000. Compare that to the £50 cartridges fitted to mass-market record decks.

There has to be some justification for these prices beyond the exclusivity. In part, manufacturing costs are defined by production numbers and they do not plummet when you're only making 20 or 30 pieces a year. The cost benefits of large-scale

production are thus denied to artisan hi-fi makers.

As an example, a major manufacturer who produces valve amplifiers (and valves are the go-to technology at this level) might buy valves by the tens of thousands. An artisan maker may only use 500 valves in a year, and is thus ineligible for the benefits of quantity purchasing. The hardware in this sector is produced in the tens or maybe hundreds per year. They are pieces as rare and hard-to-come by as anything made by Konstantin Chaykin or Thomas Prescher.

That's where the watch/hi-fi similarities end because it's where high-end audio departs from high-end wristwatches. As much as the watch houses would love to deny this, performance is not an issue *because any wristwatch on the market, whatever the price and whether quartz or mechanical, has to do one job and one job only.* And that is to tell the correct time, reliably and repeatedly. There is nothing subjective whatsoever about this, no margin for variance. A watch either keeps time, plus or minus a few seconds a day, or it is unsalable.

Hi-fi equipment is the opposite because every single aspect that establishes its worth is its subjective performance, once you get past the undeniable matters of its looks and the cost of the equipment. The appearance should never be dismissed because we tend to buy with our eyes, while budgets are always a main determinant of whatever anyone purchases. Once past those, it's all down to one's ears.

There is nothing in common visually, for example, between a d'Agostino Relentless amplifier and an Audio Research Reference 750SEL valve amplifier. Both are massive and requiring way more space than an iPad, they're hugely expensive, and heavy enough to need a team of movers. They employ different technologies – transistor vs tube – and they sound different enough to cause factional divides. Both are tasked with feeding the music signal to the loudspeakers but listen to them side by side and

there are subtle differences which will trigger the emotions of the well-trained listener.

What reaches your ears is undeniably susceptible to personal taste, bias, perception or other criteria. To most people, the differences may be inaudible, but the sort of client for equipment at this level will not be a novice. He or she will have many years of listening to high performance systems and their ears will, by osmosis, have been trained to detect the most minute of subtleties. An analogy doesn't work with how watches tell the time, whether analogue hands or numerical displays, because there is no variance. It's either 12.05 shown in digits, or with two hands doing the pointing.

Perhaps the closest one can come to this level of discernment is by comparing different vintages of the same wine. The language of hi-fi may seem deliberately arcane, wilfully obscure as if it is a secret patois known only to the high-end audio community but as with wine terminology, the terms mean something once you've heard what they describe, such as "plummy bass" or a "dark midband". It's no more imaginary that saying a wine has "structure" or "hints of chocolate".

These subtleties are the issues which encourage audiophiles to suffer the law of diminishing returns. Just as none can deny that a £49 Swatch tells the time with accuracy to rival a £1m pound tourbillon, so is it impossible to deny that for the vast majority of people, *any* sound system from reputable manufacturers and costing around £1000 will prove ultimately as satisfactory as need be.

Indeed, the worst nightmare for any hi-fi salesperson is the couple which arrives to purchase a system and one of the two says those dreaded words, "I can't hear any difference" between two loudspeakers with wildly varying performance and prices. To a seasoned listener, however, the differences are as great as the driving experience between a Dacia Duster and a Bugatti Chiron.

How the artisan hi-fi designers achieve superior sound can be summed up in two words: no compromises. They will fit the most expensive components – resistors, capacitors, internal wiring and more – even though the exact same specifications exist in less costly alternatives. They will hand-select these components and undertake intense comparative listening. A perfect example is a popular valve which can be acquired for as little as £150 per pair. For the fastidious artisan designer, only the selected £1500 option will suffice.

Complexity is no deterrent, so the turntables at this level demand a ritual for playing an LP. A TechDAS Air Force Zero is the size of a coffee table and weighs 330kg. The wiring to hook up all of the elements resembles fire hoses. The loudspeakers may stand 2m tall and weigh 400kg. All of these extreme measures serve only one purpose, and that is to render the recording indistinguishable from real life.

This, of course, begs the question, "Why, if sound from £1000 system is so satisfying, would one want to add three noughts to the price tag?" Again, one must turn to fine wine. Yes, there are phenomenal reds and whites for under £10 of bottle if you know what to look for, while moving up to just £20 might deliver a massive improvement. But if presented with a glass of Sassicaia 2004, even the most committed socialist would be hard-pressed to then praise table wine available for €4 in Calais. Apply this to hi-fi and you have to ask yourself but one question: How much do I love music?

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