



Connoisseur Definitions
4.0 LINE AMPLIFIER

Connoisseur Definitions 4.0 Phono and Line Stages

by Roy Gregory

Retired audio reviewers should be able to turn a healthy living as landscape gardeners, judging from the frequency with which we are accused of creating mountains out of molehills. Well, sharpen your quills all you audio cynics out there, 'cos here comes Everest, and it's only got one control knob!

Despite its rarity (rarely seen and never reviewed outside of its native Japan), modest stature and stratospheric pricing, the various incarnations and developments of Petr Mares' original circuit have held a near legendary fascination for show watchers and the audio cognoscenti. The 4.0 is the latest (and by a fair way the cheapest) version of the Connoisseur, yet it never failed to drop the jaw of even the most hardened listener and music lover. People who have seen and heard it all were routinely stopped in their tracks, such is the mind-boggling superiority and horizon expanding potential of this product. And everybody wanted it – badly.

If you are lucky enough to get to hear the 4.0 and you want a simple introduction to its capabilities, just play something you know really well.

Take the Stan Getz and Charlie Byrd *Jazz Samba* (Verve V6-84320) with its almost cliched opening on the first track 'Desafinado'. There's that familiar bass



line, but suddenly it's taken on a sinuous, convoluting quality that ripples beneath the locked beat of the insistent percussion, lifting and pushing against the constraints of the time frame, toying with, pushing but never breaking the self imposed rigidity of the rhythm. Getz' breathy sax is fluid, Byrd's guitar is soft and understated, underpinning and echoing the guitar line. Each entry is distinct, the instrument's place in space and the musical scheme of things absolutely secure. Each simply steps into what amounts to

a predetermined pattern, building up to that hesitation after the statement of the first sax theme. Ah, that hesitation.

With the 4.0 the pause hangs in the air, almost daring the musicians to break the silence. It's almost as if the music is saying

"Right, the boys are all here" before the band hit their stride in a perfect, single moment. I don't know how many times I've heard that opening, but it was getting well towards the cringe level.

The Connoisseur has brought this familiar, verging

on the over exposed, music back to life, providing a depth of insight and understanding, drawing an emotive response, that I'd considered well beyond it. In response to the musical cliché I'll resort to a hi-fi one; it was like hearing it again for the first time. Why? Because the 4.0 was capable of presenting the track, the whole album, in a way that no hi-fi I've ever heard is capable of matching. Indeed, it has more of the zeitgeist of real, live music than any other component I've ever heard (and yes, I will come back to this).

So how does it do it? Listen to the Connoisseur and one of the first things that will strike you is the easy, unforced and relaxed quality of its ▶

► music. This might lead you to think it tends to the slow or rounded. You couldn't be more wrong. The 4.0's greatest single strength is its incredible speed: speed that means that it always has time to deliver what it must, without ever sounding hurried. That speed of response allows it to shape a note, tracking its energy profile precisely, from opening transient to harmonic decay. More than that it allows it to place that note with equal precision relative both to the next note in the line and other notes around it. Musical strands are easier to separate and follow but so too are the interrelationships between them. It's that underlying chemistry that once revealed brings music dulled by familiarity back to life, that the Connoisseur shares with live performance. Instruments take on their own readily recognised identities, dynamic jumps are scaled without apparent effort or strain, and with real body and impact, based on sheer instrumental energy rather than a pumped up mid-bass. The music has an innate sense of naturalness and balance, coherence and life: it breathes, and in the case of Jazz Samba, boy does it swing.

Given its apparently modest exterior and paucity of facilities, why does the Connoisseur cost so much? I mean, I know it sounds good, better than anything else I've used, but \$26000 is an awful lot of money for four boxes with only a dual-concentric volume control and source select between them. To understand what we are dealing with here, it's necessary to appreciate exactly where it has come from. As noted before, the Connoisseur products started life as the

work of Petr Mares, a Czech émigré who found work in the US as an engineer at Spectral. In 1987 he left to pursue his own design path, an approach that stressed the physical structure and construction of the amplifier.

In particular he developed the concept of the "air dielectric", in



which he employed a sandwich construction. The lower boards carried the DC and all its regulation, the upper the active components. This enabled him to place regulators immediately below the components they served, creating the shortest possible distance and lowest possible impedance, an advantage he extended by running the components own legs

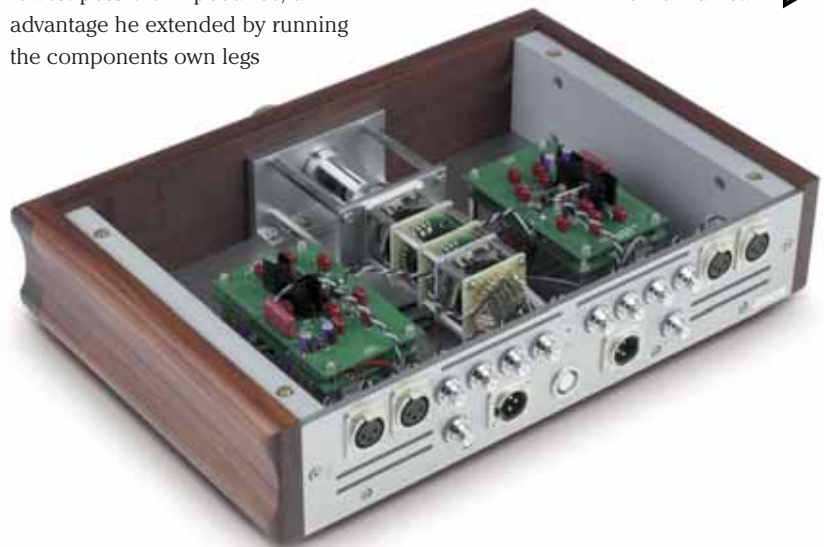
down to the lower board. It was an approach that yielded exceptional results but was incredibly complicated and difficult to produce.

Being so materials conscious it is hardly surprising that Mares settled on a wooden casework for his pre-amp, a sonically sensible choice that was nevertheless to prove his nemesis. The sheer degree of regulation and the number of regulators required by the circuit generated sufficient heat

to have an adverse effect on the wooden casework. Deforming the structure in turn had an adverse effect on the delicate sandwich circuits and the long control rods used to operate the stepped attenuators. Soon the dual-concentric and dual mono knobs were rubbing. At this point,

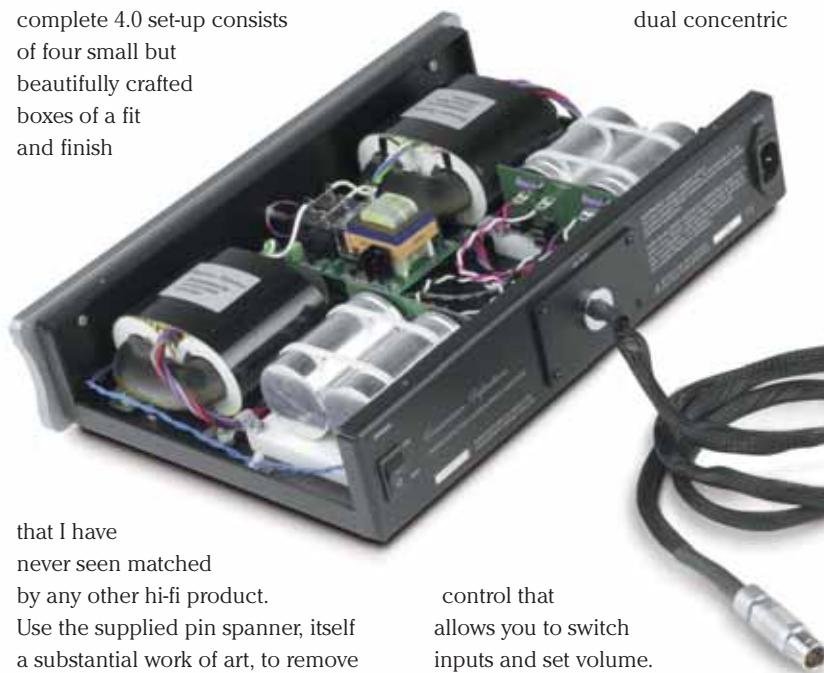
Lyra, the unit's Japanese distributor stepped in, ultimately setting up the Connoisseur Definition brand to re-engineer and manufacture the Mares design. That was in 1993, and lead to the Connoisseur Definitions 2.5 pre-amplifier and ultimately, in 1999, to the 3.0. These were large, complex and costly designs that were essentially confined to their

home market. ►



► However, Lyra's US distributor, Alan Perkins of Immedia, was keen for them to produce a simplified, less expensive and more serviceable version of the pre-amp, preferably with a separate phono stage, more suitable for export. Thus were born the 4.0 phono and line stages.

Less expensive? The 4.0 combination may retail for £26000, but in its home market, the three box 3.0 costs two and a half times the price of its baby brother! These products redefine our notion of exotic and expensive. The complete 4.0 set-up consists of four small but beautifully crafted boxes of a fit and finish



that I have never seen matched by any other hi-fi product. Use the supplied pin spanner, itself a substantial work of art, to remove the lids on the phono and line stages, and inside you'll discover individual examples of the Mares sandwich circuitry. Each sandwich consists of a pair of four layer boards, the upper carrying a selection of surface mount and more traditional components, the lower no fewer than 12 individual regulators. Despite the compact dimensions of the circuits, they are actually densely packed and complex. The circuitry itself is claimed to be novel, but frankly, I'm in no position to confirm or deny that fact.

The phono stage employs four identical sandwich sections, two per

channel, each one offering 36dB of gain, allowing 72dB overall. Input loading is set at 47K, although lower values can be accommodated if ordered. Inside the line stage are two more sandwiches, each identical to the ones used in the phono stage. 36dB of gain is an awful lot for a line stage, but the commonality of construction was essential if the cost and serviceability goals were to be met (the PSUs and most of the casework are common too). Running down the centre of the line stage is the beautifully constructed dual concentric

control that allows you to switch inputs and set volume. Based on Shallco switches, it provides six inputs (two balanced), as well as the hand built discrete stepped attenuators used to control level. Until you see it, it's hard to explain just what a beautiful construction this is. The line stage also provides a choice of single-ended or balanced outputs, but that's as far as the facilities go: Absolutely the bare bones and only the bones.

Externally, as I've already hinted, the standards of construction are peerless. The sculpted wooden casework is the best I've ever seen,

and as someone who normally abhors the tasteless slapping of solid timber onto bits of hi-fi, I'll admit to being completely seduced by the understated curves and superb artistry of the Connoisseurs' cases. Top panels offer a choice of milled aluminium, which looks superb, or perspex for superior sound. Thankfully, the company have solved this potential dilemma by discovering a perspex product that actually matches the appearance of the metal tops, although this wasn't available in time for the review. At the other extreme, organophobes can have the entire casework milled from aluminium – at an extra cost. The power supplies are simpler, aluminium affairs whose thick front panels echo the curves of the active stages. It's makes for a visually impressive contrast.

Does the beautiful casework justify the cost of these units? No, but it certainly helps. You only have to touch the silky smoothness of the wood, or marvel at the faultless execution and feel of the control knob to appreciate that this is no ordinary product. You only have to recognise the intricacy of the engraving on the volume/source select dial or the curved and inlaid name plate, or marvel at the clarity and quality of the rear panel layout and hard ware to realise the care and attention that has gone into these products. They may not impress your friends from a distance, but as an owner you'll be suffused with a warm glow of satisfaction every time you touch them.

Of course, analysing how the Connoisseur weaves its captivating spell was made a lot easier by comparisons and help from other equipment. In particular, the Lamm ML2s opened an invaluable window on the 4.0s' inner workings. ►

▶ Without the Lamm's unexaggerated transparency and dynamic discrimination it would have been much harder to appreciate just how far the Connoisseur really stretches the envelope. However, such is the choke hold exerted by most pre-amps over the signal they pass, that even amps as modest as the Rogue Audio 88 (at slightly less than one twentieth of the price) left you in no doubt as to the 4.0s superiority. It's just that you couldn't tell so clearly and obviously how that superiority was manifested.



Fortunately, I also had a veritable house full of exceptional pre-amps to provide multiple points of comparison. Units from Klyne, Lamm and Hovland all served as mirrors to the Connoisseurs' performance, but in each instance it wasn't a case of whether the 4.0s were better, but by how much. The breadth of that gap was, in all cases, astonishingly wide, yet these are all fine units in their own right. However, with each and every great product there always seems to be a seminal moment, a crystallising instant in which it all starts to make sense. In this case it was running a comparison with the Tom Evans designed The Groove phono stage which I have been using at home for a couple of years now. The Groove is an exceptional unit, and I've heard it now in a whole variety of systems and circumstances. Never once has its superiority or musical insight been seriously challenged. Listening to the

Connoisseur, with its wonderfully unforced and relaxed presentation I thought to myself, "Hmmm, it doesn't have the transparency, speed or dynamic range of The Groove". Confidently, I connected the plastic wonder to the 4.0 line stage and settled back for a listen. That's when I realised just how fast the Connoisseurs really are.

In comparison, The Groove sounded obvious, hurried and clumsy, tripping over itself to get notes out on time. In fact, exactly the way the Groove normally makes other phono-stages sound. The Connoisseur phono stage didn't just match The Groove's exceptional dynamic range, it did it with greater weight and substance, more precisely scaled and with correspondingly more impact and drama.

So why hadn't I twigged that immediately? Sonic perception is a strange thing and easily tricked. Despite its dynamic superiority, the Connoisseur's ability to present those dynamic shifts and jumps as part of a coherent, correctly proportioned whole actually rendered them less obviously impressive. A classic case

of listening for a single, and in this case wrong, aspect of musical performance. Rather than simply looking at apparent dynamic range I should have been looking at how those dynamic graduations worked in the context of the music and performance as a whole. Like I said, it's all in the chemistry.

The Connoisseurs bring a majesty and easy

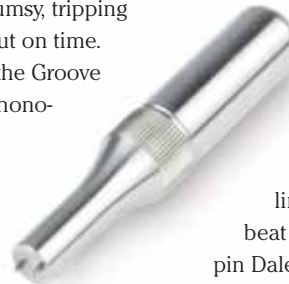
grace to great performers, wrapped around their inherent sense of balance and rightness. Plodding bass lines plod without ever sounding heavy or leaden. Tracks immediately seem to hit their stride.

Farmers Market Barbeque (Count Basie on Analogue Productions APJ023) provides the perfect example.

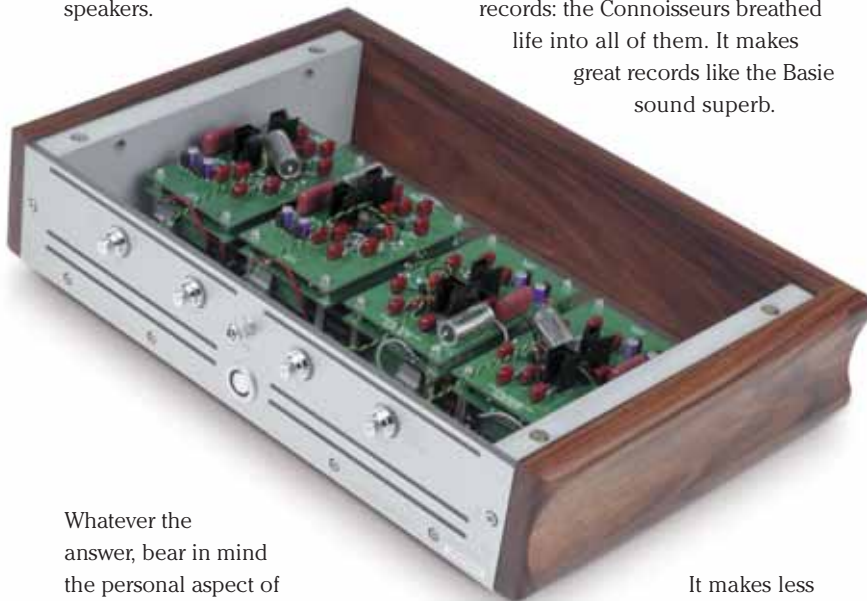
The languid tempo of 'St Louis Blues' (strangely appropriate on this Super Bowl weekend) never drags or slows the rhythm.

Basie's meandering piano line never strays from the beat and together they underpin Dale Carley's inspired trumpet solo, the hushed ensemble, almost Miller-esque brass, before the Count provides the perfectly poised coda. Then, without so much as a pause it's straight into the staccato part rhythm that opens the up-tempo swing of 'Beaver Junction'. This is one pre-amp whose superiority is stamped by a far wider margin than a single, late field goal.

Having said that, it doesn't match The Groove's absolute focus, immediacy and transparency, running with either the Lyra Helikon or the ▶



► Clearaudio Insider Reference. It never pulls off The Groove's party trick of putting you in the same acoustic as the performance. However, much of that is down to the insistence on loading the cartridge at 47K, a compromise which certainly produces voluminous soundstages, but definitely robs the cartridge of the damping and control that generate the exceptional focus and transparency that Groove is capable of. Mind you, there are those who swear by loading coils at 47K, amongst them such august personages as Harry Pearson himself. I think it's got a lot to do with the nature of your listening room, bandwidth, and in particular the radiation pattern of your speakers.




Whatever the answer, bear in mind the personal aspect of this. You can of course load the Connoisseur down if you choose, although I don't believe the circuit can accommodate the 100 Ohm load I prefer with The Groove. Horses for courses: I was so busy enjoying the 4.0s' musical coherence and captivating presence that it never occurred to me to miss that last ounce of transparency (and don't even think of suggesting that comparison to CD might solve the conundrum).

How to sum up such an

astonishingly musical performer? Whilst it is clearly the most engaging and informative, the most musically correct pre-amp I've ever used, that's not what really makes the Connoisseur combination so special. Whilst its exceptional coherence and control manage to extend in both directions, along the dynamic as well as the temporal continuum, and I guess we'd better not forget the spatial as well, that's not what makes it so special either. No, what really impressed the hell out of me was the way the Connoisseurs were able to apply all those hi-fi attributes without ever once allowing them to impede the music's life and flow. Bad records, old records, damaged records: the Connoisseurs breathed life into all of them. It makes great records like the Basie sound superb.

It makes less stellar recordings equally engaging, and musically just as valid – and that's really special.

Will I miss it when it's gone? Will I fight to hang onto it for as long as possible? You can put a big hell yes in both those boxes. But that's not really the point. I feel genuinely privileged to have spent time with these products. They've extended my understanding of what's actually possible via a hi-fi system, and at the same time they've provided

the strongest possible confirmation that we're not on some road to no where. The truth is out there, and at the moment it'll cost you \$26000. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

4.0 Line Stage

Inputs:	4x Single-ended RCA, 2x Balanced XLR
Outputs:	1x Single-ended RCA, 1x Balanced XLR (optional)
Input Impedance:	10kOhms
Output Impedance:	50Ohms
Gain:	36dB
Dimensions (WxHxD)	
Line Stage:	400 x 94 x 314mm
PSU:	400 x 94 x 270mm
Weight	
Line Stage:	6.5kg
PSU:	11kg
Price:	£13000

4.0 Phono Stage

Inputs:	1x Single-ended RCA
Outputs:	1x Single-ended RCA
Input Impedance:	47 kOhms (see text)
Output Impedance:	50 Ohms
Gain:	72dB
Dimensions:	As above.
Weight	
Phono Stage:	5kg
PSU:	As above
Price:	£13000

Manufacturer:

Scan-Tech Europa (Germany)
Tel. (49)(0)561-4759-0266
Fax. (49)(0)561-4759-0267
E-mail. scantech@gol.com
Net. www.lyraaudio.com