



LYRA
Connoisseur
POWER SUPPLY

The Lyra Connoisseur 4-2L SE Line-stage

by Chris Thomas

Can it really be more than three years ago that the Connoisseur Definitions 4.0 L passed through my life? Roy had sent it over with no fanfare and asked me to take a listen. What followed was two weeks of the most memorable listening sessions since I first bought a Linn/Naim system from Jimmy Hughes at Grahams Hi-Fi back in the seventies. But it left an indelible mark and an unquenched flame smouldering in the back of my mind. It came, everyone, especially me, loved it and then it went, leaving behind one frustrated reviewer for whom it had expanded the possibilities of music in the home so far that nothing would ever really be the same again. Having heard much, though not all, that home audio has to offer at this exalted level it was obvious that the Connoisseur 4.0L had achieved rather more than just slightly raising the bar.

Whatever our notion of “the best” is, it will be dictated by our experiences and the emotional impact each system has made on our souls, with the best marking the outer territory of what we feel is actually possible from a domestic hi-fi system. There are some very fine pieces of audio electronics out there but I have found little agreement as to where the boundaries lie. But everybody who heard that pre-amplifier including those from radically different audio creeds agreed, with a single voice, that the Connoisseur 4.0L was simply awesome. In fact of all the hi-fi that has passed through my hands over the years this was the only piece to achieve such total consensus. It was one of those

products that come along, perhaps once every decade or so, that push the boundaries back... a very long way. One of those that, however long you live with it, seems to have no discernable weaknesses, leaving you wondering just how it could be any better. Within the strange, tiny universe that is the Hi-Fi community, that very same pre-amplifier re-entered my orbit in Spring 2005, by which time my home system had evolved for the better with the passing of time. Once re-installed the Connoisseur Definitions 4.0L was straight back in the groove, working its magic and hauling the music onto such a level that I was spending hours and hours making a dent in the sofa, exploring my musical collection with fresh ears. But, once again, the flirtation was to be brief.

In the interim Connoisseur Definitions had changed their name to include their parent company and became Lyra Connoisseur, appointed a UK agent and released the final and ultimate version of both the 4 series line- and phono-stages. There had been a previous upgrade from 4 to 4-2 but this latest version would incorporate these and further important changes to be known as the 4-2L SE (Special Edition). The initial change from 4.0L to 4-2L was major enough and included a serious reworking of the boards with many new components being incorporated, as well as a completely

new system of earthing. This involves a pcb, which did not exist in the 4.0, being built into the base of the chassis and accessible through a small hatch set in the bottom. This is the central, master grounding board that is normally set to floating but, by using jumpers, can be set either via a cap and resistor network to



chassis ground or directly to chassis ground. There was also a new floor panel, a redesigned rear panel with improved airflow and a new acrylic top. Although the 4.0 came equipped with an aluminium top there was a transparent acrylic top available that came with the review example. This was much better sounding than the metal top and looked tremendous because it allowed you to see how beautifully made the innards were (and watch those Shallco stepped-attenuators ►

▶ at work). The latest acrylic top has a mirrored metallic finish that looks superb but I personally have a soft spot for the old clear version, purely from an aesthetic point of view at the moment, as I haven't compared their sonic attributes. So, if the jump from 4.0 to 4-2L was big, Lyra Connoisseur were not finished there. There is also a 5.0L which is sold almost exclusively in Japan. This is a more expensive no-compromise type line-stage that is both extremely limited in production and very rare. But, the man behind Lyra Connoisseur electronic design is Jonathan Carr and he decided to incorporate much of the thinking gained from research into the 5.0L into the latest version of the 4 series line-stages, the 4-2L SE. This upgrade it is said is at least as big as the first. Mouth-watering stuff.

Outwardly it looks the same. The control unit is smaller than it appears in the pictures but is beautiful and minimal with the wood lending it a warm organic glow. Like RG I hate the way wood is normally tacked onto audio electronics, but this is different. Take a closer look at the detail finishing, the way the wood is scalloped and the quality of the joinery at the edges. The cabinets are hand-made by Mr Jim Sweeney in Berkeley, California from South American Pau Ferro (Iron Wood) obtained from a renewable and sustainable source. The single satin shaft dual concentric volume/selector switch and the surrounding high-polished level and input indicator plate give it a look of real, understated, simple elegance. There is no balance control, illumination or relay switching, nor is there a remote control. Everything is centred on that lovely notched knob with the outer section providing the input switching and the inner part controlling the level. The rear plate is a lesson in logical layout though there are various permutations of connection available. The review version had four

sets of phono sockets and two XLRs coming in and both a set of phono sockets and a pair of XLRs for output. But these are not balanced connections, just a way of utilising cables with XLR plugs. Each pre-amplifier can be configured for individual preference. It's also worth noting that the phono sockets are custom made for Lyra Connoisseur and are hard-rhodium plated.

Power is drawn from the separate supply that mirrors the size and scalloped-sided design of the control unit.



This is a very solidly built, all-aluminium cased unit that carries the only illumination, in the shape of a small blue light. Internally it is as superbly built as you might imagine. There are two 190VA R-core power transformers (one per channel), each with dual secondary windings that each have their own rectification bridge. All rectifiers are 30-amp Schottky types, while there is 20,000uF of capacitance per channel. This connects to the control unit by a single umbilical cable, terminated with a Fischer connector

Lyra Connoisseur describe the 4.2L SE as an air-dielectric design. It trips off

the tongue easily enough, but what does this actually mean within the context of the design? I asked Jonathan Carr and I'll let him explain:

"I use air-dielectrics for nearly all the circuit nodes directly involved in signal amplification so it is not used for the power supplies or voltage regulators. Although there is a signal wiring loom and it is insulated with Teflon tubing this is oversized, relative to the conductor diameter so that the bulk of the insulation is air rather than

Teflon but I don't regard this as being part of

the air-dielectric structure. When I say that an air-dielectric is used I mean that it is used to build internal nodes within the amplification circuit and because the circuits themselves are quite compact there is so little space that separate wiring would never fit. The air dielectric is actually constructed with the leads of the components, transistors, resistors and so on and these are laid out so these leads are very short. In many cases the components are physically touching one another and the connecting air dielectric leads are perhaps a millimetre or so long. For the 4 and 5 I developed a new type of structure which I've come to call "boundary-layer air dielectric". Now envision ▶

▶ how a modern sewing machine stitches. One thread enters the cloth from the top and another from the bottom and the two threads meet at the boundary layer, i.e. the cloth. The thinking with the 4.0 was very similar. All of its air dielectric components are mounted right side up on the circuit board with one layer on the top and one on the bottom. The components on the top can connect to each other in air dielectric fashion directly, without using wires or making contact with the circuit board, as can those at the bottom. This gives us two clear layers of air dielectric, but by significantly enlarging the holes in the circuit board relative to the size of the circuit lead that will be passing through it so the circuit does not come into contact but only touches air I can overlap air dielectric components by utilizing the layers available on both sides and stitching the nodes together, again using air dielectric. In reality, each side of the circuit board has multiple air dielectric layers but, even if I limit myself to only one side I can still stack multiple layers. The outcome of all this is that much higher component densities and much more compact circuits become practical”.

Take a look inside the 4.2L SE and you can see for yourself how different that arrangement is. But beneath each of the boards, in a sandwich arrangement, are the pcbs carrying the voltage regulators. This board has been designed to hook up to the trailing legs of components on the amplifier board rather like a CPU does to the mother-board. This is designed for proximity regulation i.e. a big socket that the amplifier board plugs into, with the individual voltage regulators (12 per circuit board) located so that each regulator will be as close as possible

(directly below) the part of the amplifier that it needs to supply. When the two boards are placed and soldered together you get a circuit stack or sandwich. This increased density is obviously far more compact than if the respective types of circuit were laid out on a single circuit board and is the reason why the electronic innards look



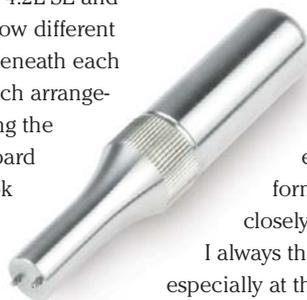
so simple to the naked eye and is indeed why the whole package can fit in such a modest sized case. But perhaps the most obviously beautiful aspect of construction is the open cage arrangement that houses the Shallco volume and input selector switches. On the 4-2L SE this is a shorter and squatter design than that on the 4.0 but it sends a clear message as to what the pre-amplifier is all about. This construction probably doesn't have to be this visually attractive, look at the sheer ugliness of other high-end electronics, but where form follows function so closely I am glad that it is.

I always think about equipment, especially at this level, in terms of its musical potential so let me cut to the chase and say that, in a digital replay system, the 4-2L SE requires and deserves to be used with only the finest CD players. It is pointless using this line-stage with anything less. Never has the ancient phrase “Garbage in, garbage

out” had such resonance. A player of the quality of the excellent Naim CDS 3 has to be considered the minimum required to provide the source. I used this and the Teac Esoteric X-01 SACD player. Anything less and although the system will still sound

very good, you will start attributing shortcomings here to the pre-amplifier and that would be a mistake. The hard fact is that this line-stage has way too much resolution for the vast majority of CD players. It also places considerable emphasis on the rest of the system. The partnering power amplifier, cabling and speakers must be able to deal with the sheer motorway of musical detail that the 4-2L SE can provide. But that doesn't necessarily mean monumental costs. I used the Lyra Connoisseur with the Hovland RADIA, Tom Evans Linear A hybrid, the mighty Moon W8, and though each had its own particular flavour they were all well able to show what this pre-amplifier is all about.

There are a number of things that the 4-2L SE brings to a system that are ever-present, whenever you listen to it. It sounds so much less electronic and processed than any solid-state pre-amp I have ever heard. In comparison it is as though several veils of noise and general mush has been stripped away. The Lyra Connoisseur does not strangle the flow by creating a bottleneck but rather just lets the music happen. There is no sense of the musical picture being pre-formed and reconstructed electronically to ▶



▶ any predetermined shape or scale. Where many high-end systems, especially those from the US, impose a soundstage that is both enormously deep and stable, they tend to supply the same shaped picture of the music, whatever the recording, with only the instruments being interchangeable. The 4-2 SE has so much space yet it produces a sound-stage view into the musical picture that is determined by the recording rather than the system. It allows each instrument and voice so much individual freedom dynamically and tonally that it is easy to totally isolate any one instrument or vocal and follow its progress through a piece. At note level the control is absolute and by far the best I have heard. With no emphasis anywhere to falsely enhance its dynamic capabilities, the colour, duration and ultimate length of decay brings new meaning to the term resolution. Think of this in the broadest possible sense.

From actual pure musical detail across the bandwidth, to the resolution of even the most complex rhythmic elements, through its remarkable control and pure, natural speed.

The 4-2L SE has a full octave more low frequency extension than the 4.0L and I never heard anybody complain about any lack of bass with that

pre-amplifier. This is pure extension we are talking about here but again with superb control right down to those last few hertz, where it has enormously impressive grip, frequency precision and where it is still operating in focus and

with a full range of tonal colour. With such a pristine and unprocessed view of the music this pre-amplifier lets you go straight to the heart of the piece by allowing the musicians room, space and liberating dynamic freedom. There is a depth and instrumental weight to instruments and a body

to vocals that is profound, yet this is backed by an almost impossible delicacy and subtlety of tonal shading. *Nefertiti*

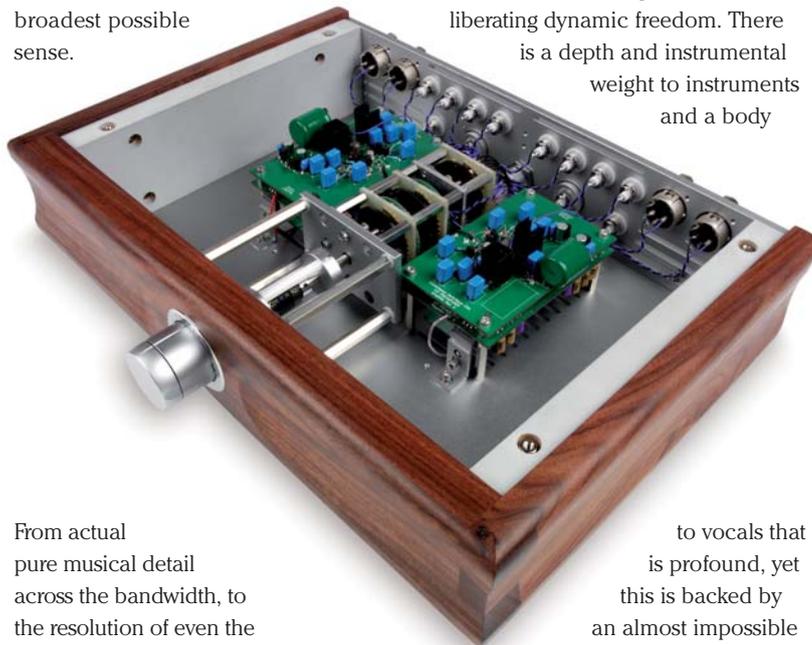
(Sony 9116) is one of my favourite Miles Davis' albums. Always overlooked in favour of *Kind Of Blue* it has an instrumental line-up that has Tony Williams on drums and no

one had quite the same fun or takes the same liberties with rhythm and time as him. The title track shows the whole band at their most languid.

Williams makes the tempo feel almost arbitrary and seems to invite Miles and Wayne Shorter to drop off the beat.

Even Ron Carter's upright bass threatens to wander off, almost to a stop as Williams plays with several timings before slipping in the groove and pulling the others back into shape. The 4-2L SE opened this tune up so much for me that it gave me a completely fresh view of the music. I soon realised that I had never really understood the bass line before, or the relationship between Williams cymbal work and Herbie Hancock's piano chord inversions. And the blend of trumpet and tenor saxophone, that I have heard sound so awkwardly astringent on many systems, is quite beautiful. When you can hear the character and the range of tones that both these incomparable musicians pull so effortlessly from their instruments you can appreciate the blend so much more.

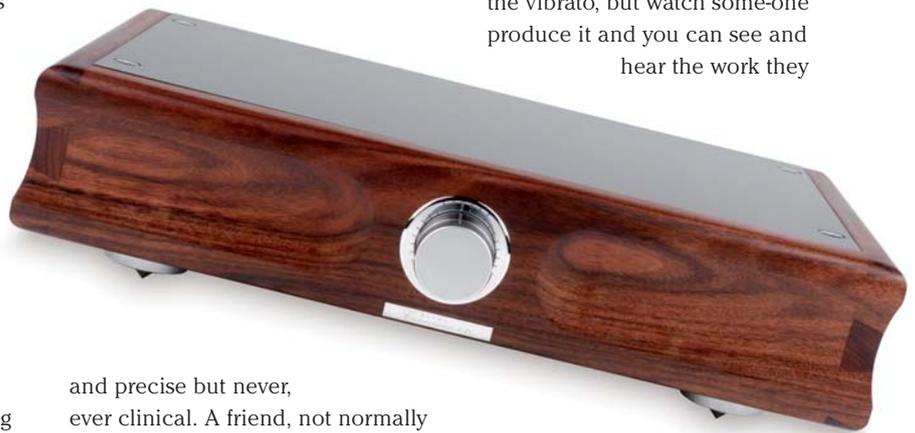
Wes Bound (GRP 97052)), Lee Ritenour's tribute to the legendary guitarist Wes Montgomery is an album that I have enjoyed many times over the years, but hearing it through the Lyra Connoisseur once again left me with a completely new understanding and take on the music. The track titled '4 on 6' tells you what to



▶ expect from it timing wise, and the tempo is delicious. Based initially on a four note strolling bass line I was taken aback to realise just how sinuous that rhythm is; there was a whole new dynamic urgency and pace about it. The choppy guitar chords and octave playing, a Wes speciality, was so much cleaner without that gloopy attack that I normally associate with both this track and big-bodied jazz guitar recordings in general. But what really got me were the subtle variations the band uses when making those pushes that phrase the song so beautifully and keeps it rolling. Stabbing chords and lingering decays seem to hold the rhythmic structure in time with a delicate restraint. This band swings, with masterful musicianship and the 4-2L SE is so free, loose and very liquid in the way it allows this expression to flow.

Installing this pre-amplifier in a suitable system really does encourage you to begin a voyage of discovery through your music. It is completely at ease with anything from thrash metal to the most delicate pastel-shaded mood music. Its incredible responsiveness is limited only by the ultimate quality of the source and the abilities of the rest of the system. There are so many musical examples I could give to illustrate just how good this thing is but, in a sense, they would all be saying the same thing. This is the sort of task that has led me to run out of superlatives as it is simply the best I have heard and by a huge margin. I could tell you about the first time I heard some early sixties recordings of The Beach Boys through it and how every other high-end system I had heard this disc on made it sound every one of its 40 plus years and yet on the 4-2L SE it sounded so unprocessed, real and fresh. Every vocal totally individual, yet the sound of those harmonies like a recorded time capsule with even the dodgy drumming, up

and down in tempo like a yo-yo, completely in keeping with the simple charm of the atmosphere. Then there's the sheer, exhausting intensity of Shakti at full bore, with Johnny McLaughlin playing long, blistering yet structured passages like only he can, over some stupendously transient percussive backdrops. What sounds like a barrage of technique and brazen exhibitionism on other systems has form, structure and becomes a whole lot more approachable and understandable. The Lyra Connoisseur is stunningly articulate



and precise but never, ever clinical. A friend, not normally a listener of such complex music, sat with me through the whole ten minute piece and described it afterwards as the most intensely draining experience he had ever had listening to music at home. In doing so I think he hit on the greatest thing about the Lyra Connoisseur; its ability to get you emotionally involved with the music. How can you describe this aspect of its personality? Yet it is an affect that always comes up when the 4-2 SE is being discussed. For me it has made listening sessions an event. I can sit as an admirer and watch the music go by or I can step in and lose myself in it, opening my mind to its influences in the confidence that, as deep as I want to look, the Lyra Connoisseur can provide both the resolution and the answers.

As somebody who often sits opposite musicians of all abilities,

listening to them play guitar I must also say that, put simply, this pre-amplifier sounds more “real” than any I have heard before. In the flesh there is an energy signature surrounding each and every instrument, from guitar to trombone, that you are aware of as soon as the musician addresses it and starts to play. Where most high-end systems give you a decent enough representation of the note or the chord they often fall down when showing you the sheer physical connection between human and musical instrument. You may hear the vibrato, but watch some-one produce it and you can see and hear the work they

are putting into the instrument and onto the note. You can feel the extra, controlled physical pressures they are using and hear all the associated sounds and noises that this produces. For me it all comes under the general heading of technique. Give it a good enough source and the 4-2L SE will bring that sense of real people playing solid multi-dimensional instruments into your living room.

For the past three months I have been searching within the performance of this pre-amplifier with a microscope to try and find some limitations, but I can't. The truth of the matter is that it outperforms every other design I have heard in every area so comprehensively (or so it seems to me) that what we have here is something that is very special, something that should ▶

► find itself at the heart of some of the worlds best music systems – and I don't necessarily mean the most expensive. This is a totally hand-built performance-driven product that is solely devoted to making music and this it achieves with spectacular success. Lyra Connoisseur, and Jonathan Carr in particular, should be congratulated for producing such a stunningly beautiful sounding and looking piece of audio art. When I take an overall look and listen to the market at this price-level I have to say that, even at \$12K, this represents a serious bargain. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS			
Type:	Solid-state line-stage	Price:	
Inputs:	6x single-ended RCA/phono (XLRs optional)	4-2LSE:	£12000
Input Impedance:	10kOhms	UK Distributor:	Symmetry
Outputs:	2x single-ended RCA/ phono (XLRs optional)	Tel. (44)(0) 1727 865488	
Output impedance:	50 ohms	E-mail. info@symmetry-systems.co.uk	
Gain:	33.6dB	Manufacturer:	Lyra Co Ltd
Dimensions (WxHxD) –			Tokyo, Japan
Line-stage:	400x 94x314mm	Net: www.lyraconnoisseur.com	
Power Supply:	400x 94x270mm		
Weight –			
Line-stage:	6.5kg		
Power supply:	11Kg		

Icing The Cake...

by Roy Gregory

The lovely thing about doing a second opinion (most of the time) is that someone else has done all the hard work – and you get to look all erudite by expanding on a few of the points they've made. Sort of like the benefit of critical hindsight if you like. Well, this is just such a case; CT has nailed the Connoisseur dead centre. I read his review and that's the product I'm listening to. However, that doesn't stop me adding my own two-ha'pth.

One reason that we double-teamed the 4-2L SE (apart from the obvious desire to lay my hands on it again) is that I wrote the original review. The other is that I use vinyl as a source and CT doesn't which, in light of his comments regarding the quality of source required, makes that a good decision. When it comes to sheer information there are few if any CD sources that can rival a top-flight record player, and as CT points out, the Connoisseur thrives on real, useable information: The key words in this instance being real and even more so, useable. The point about the musical

detail delivered by a decent record player is its intelligibility; it's recognisable and generally, reasonably well organised. It's exactly these qualities that the 4-2L SE maintains and amplifies.

Now, Lyra Connoisseur also make their own phono-stage to match the line-amp. It's also going through revision and wasn't ready in time for this review, but past experience with the previous models operating in tandem was what first got me thinking about synergy in its true sense. That whole is very much greater than the sum of its parts. I used the Groove Plus instead (not exactly slumming it you'll agree) but even with this "handicap" the musical experience delivered by the 4-2L SE exceeded that of the 4.0 line and phono together. The reason is all to do with that extra octave that CT refers to, so let's examine why...

Of course, the extra octave is a figurative description. Even the most basic integrated amplifier is essentially flat across the audible bandwidth. This is where that difference between "information" and "useable information"

comes in. Few if any hi-fi systems provide realistic energy levels much below 30Hz. It's one thing showing the bare bones of what's going on down their (many systems just about manage a fuzzy shadow of the bones) it's quite another to put real flesh and muscle on those bones. Yet that's exactly what the 4-2L SE does. The 4.0s knocked me sideways with their astonishing resolution of the energy envelope that creates each note: its shape and texture, duration and magnitude, harmonic structure and shading. It was a quality that extended from the mid-bass all the way on up, giving music a palpable physicality and presence that I'd never previously experienced from any hi-fi system. Now, the 4-2L SE extends that range further down, and whilst an extra octave might not sound like much, its musical impact is literally profound.

What the latest Lyra Connoisseur adds to the mix is absolute authority. By underpinning the music with a solid, defined foundation, not only is each voice or instrument locked in place ►

► relative to those around it, but the acoustic space is itself defined. Dynamics launch from a solid footing, making them seem more sudden and far wider in range (just think of a high jumper taking off from the solid running track as opposed to the sand-pit he'd normally land in). The resultant gains in crisp, natural clarity are impressive enough, but the real benefit is in even greater substance and presence to players, more believe scale and dimensionality, greater immediacy and – what this is all leading up to – more direct communication. I thought the 4.0s sounded more live than anything else I'd heard. They did – until now...



The impressive thing about the Lyra Connoisseur is its ability to make so much more sense of the same signal. I can feed the Kuzma turntable and Groove, or latterly (and tantalizingly) the Kondo phono chain, into other great pre-amps but none does what the 4-2L SE achieves. Indeed, comparison with the likes of the Zanden is fascinating. Harry Pearson, in his recently published (and seminal) review of the ATR integrated amplifier described its qualities perfectly: it's not, he said, that it makes the music more real, rather that it makes it less unreal. It's a subtle but vitally important distinction that encapsulates the Zanden line-stage perfectly. The Connoisseur is a different case;

it too fails to make things more real, but it does definitely make them more live. Each in its own way is a stunning achievement, but it's your musical proclivities that will dictate which is more appropriate to you. Reaching for a crude analogy I'd have to say that the Zanden leans more towards the strengths of the traditional, US-led high-end, the Lyra towards the UK Linn-Naim ethos, but don't read too much into this. Of much more interest are the similarities between the two.

The thing that separates the Lyra Connoisseur, and the Zanden and the Kondo, from

the vast expanse of opposition, is their ability to maintain the separate identities and musical integrity of individual instruments within the whole, whilst also achieving or maintaining other, stellar performance attributes; separation without constraint if you like. In the case of the 4-2L SE, it's the combination of holding instruments and voices separate from each other yet injecting their natural life and energy into the whole, recreating their creative tension and interrelationship. In many respects it cuts to the very heart and nature of what makes music so compelling, and in turn that makes the Connoisseur's performance itself compelling. Never has a system demanded attention in the way it does with the 4-2L SE in control. Never has it engaged so directly. You need to take care with what you

feed it – and what it feeds, but this quality of commanding authority and intensity will surface in any company. The Connoisseur is never wantonly destructive and always makes the most of what you give it – it just gets better with care.

How far can the 4-2L SE carry a system? Well, there's always the 5.0 to consider, even if it's rarely seen beyond the confines of its native shores. The notion that a £12000 line-stage constitutes a compromise is faintly mind-boggling, but as outlined in the original review if the 4.0 back in Issue 16, that's exactly what it is. Using modular gain blocks, one pair in the line-stage, two in the phono-stage, allows some degree of efficiency in manufacturing. What it doesn't do is give you an ideal gain structure, so that the phono-stage comes in a little low while the line-stage actually offers too much. Used together they compensate, but mixing them with other units needs some care. Personally I think it's irrelevant as having heard the units together the benefits are so obvious that mixing and matching makes no sense. The combination of the 4-2L SE line-stage along with the upcoming, upgraded, phono-stage is a mouth-watering prospect indeed. I haven't played with the earthing arrangements, or compared the RCA/phono and XLR connections. I haven't sat the 4-2L SE next to the previous model. And obviously it awaits the arrival of its partner in (financial if not sonic) crime. But there are two things of which I am certain: there's an upgrade available to 4.0 owners that carries their unit right up to current spec and I'd get my name on that list straight away. And the other? That this one is going to run and run, if only so that I can keep the review sample in my grubby little mitts. There again, there's always the CT solution; he bit the bullet and bought one. I suspect I'll be opening negotiations shortly...

