

Audio

Qvortrup; Meeting with an Audio Note-ability.

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He's the guy that goes against the grain. He's maintaining that yesterday's technology is by far superior to today's and is longing back to the days of monaural recordings. That's the way that helps you to get disliked by your competitors and become a TV-hero in Russia. Meet Peter Qvortrup, Audio Notes absolute ruler.

Brighton pops up out of nowhere, suddenly it's just there after a few miles of open, British landscape. We are on our way to a meeting with one of the most fearless and creative designers in today's world of hi-fi, Peter Qvortrup. He's wearing a happy grin at the reception, his disheveled hair has started to thin out, the beard grizzled. He's addressing himself to my traveling companion, the Norwegian importer of Audio Note; - Hey you Norwegian Devil! and to me; Welcome, nice journey, beer? Things are really happening around Qvortrup, either he's making the roads unsafe in one of his Merc's, or he's rushing around in the listening room in an endless search for music to illustrate one of his sudden whims. He's a fanatical record collector, and an out-and-out music lover, his listening room is filled floor to ceiling with more or less rare vintage vinyl records in a system where even the owner can only keep a vague overview.

After nearly 20 years in England, he claims English to be his primary language, but his Danish mother tongue has not lost much of its colourful expression: - The problem with the other designers, he says, is that they are just not very interested in music! That makes it impossible for them to make a valid and relevant product, and that's easily demonstrated by the quality of most of the product available, it is so absurdly poor that you almost believe it's a lie! Yes, several of the big, well known brands have a sound so awful that it is ridiculous! I have on several occasions spoken to designers that don't even bother listening to their own products, claiming the result can be found in the calculations and measurements made, this is so nonsensical that it must be obvious even to themselves that they're lying. Because even if intelligence is a nice quality to have, it can never compensate for wisdom, and without the wisdom the intelligence is largely wasted! Oh, here's one you've just got to hear.... He throws the cover from a 1949 vintage album into the pile on the floor, adding; -I got a hold of this one for £150 this in London last year, I have another one here somewhere. He pulls his finger over the pick-up needle to remove the dust: -No problem for a properly designed and assembled cartridge. What most of the others manufacturers make looks more like agricultural instruments! He doesn't own a dust brush, wanting the record to be as it is, natural. A Voyd reference is placed on a tripod, it's equipped with Audio Notes own arm and pick-up. It plays heavenly through an Audio Note system costing such a sum that my calculator suffered from severe overload during the calculating process.

The best thing the hi-fi designer can do, Qvortrup preaches, is to remove the sound of the system itself, allowing the real character of the recording to come to the fore, by letting the artist through the medium, so to speak. This way good hi-fi equipment also plays the poorer recordings better, in contrast to most high-end set-ups which make these recordings sound noisy, harsh and unpleasant. Far too many components do in fact add their own distortions and colourations in such a way that the listener might perceive it as more detailed, not realizing it is a function of the equipment and not on the recording itself. Lots of equipment seems to be made to impress hi-fi journalists with their huge amounts of information, it is actually producing details, which was never on the original recording. We're working hard here at Audio Note to detect what the equipment adds of ringing and "extra details" and find ways to remove this. Differentiation is our main intention when we design new equipment, the equipment must reproduce the differences between different recordings as much as possible, because all recordings are different, as small frozen time fragments in the history. And those time fragments are the ones we try to preserve and recreate as faithfully as possible.

We are then blessed with the only recording made by the Dutch pianist Dirk Schaefer in 1928; he was an unusually virtuous pianist, despite the high level of noise the artists' unbelievable elegance and emotional way of playing comes through to the listener. - Pay attention to the fantastic intensity that can be transmitted with this instrument, Qvortrup says, grand pianos are not made that way anymore, now they're made to play loud, and the subtlety and dynamic contrast suffers as a result, much like in hifi. Then he puts on a CD with an incredible noisy recording of Andreas Segovia, also from 1928, and here too it's possible to note what fantastic artist we are listening to. Then we get the same excerpt again, only this time it is filtered to suppress the noise from the 78. It's the same artist, the same recording, but it's dead, totally dead. -This way we're degenerating one of the greatest artists of the century to just a good guitar player, Qvortrup says, and this is actually the same we're doing with transistors, feedback and several other "advancements", I just can't understand in any way why people would want to insult their beautiful music signal with a transistor! Again it's horrifying to watch the designers' basic lack of understanding and passion for the reproduction of real music. Money and commercial interests is all that counts right now, and if this continues unabated it will in the end kill most real musicianship and if we can't transmit our biggest aspirations and ideals to our children, the future of the human race is in real danger! The process of homogenizing going on in the big companies both within hi-fi and music have led us deep into a dead end, where there's no real checks and balances. You've got to taste this! He's producing a bottle from somewhere; -Korean gin! His proud smile underlines the following; -It's very good!

-Yes, well, he continues, we are now in the darkest age ever, we are in the middle of a cultural & historical break with the coming generations, and all the time we're told that it's going so much better. While the new media are sapping the message out of our musical heritage, we are too busy doing what we are doing, making new things, that we just don't have the time to ask ourselves if what we are doing actually is necessary or desirable. In thirty years time people will look back and ask: How could they not have realised what they were doing? The quality of Louis Armstrong's great humanity and emotional message is drowning in just more commercialism! The whole thing is built on coincidence, random decisions made in the big commercial record companies that are destroying or damaging whole tracts of the musical catalogue, and they're doing this on purpose, with the sole intent of squeezing as much money out of the catalogue as possible, a bit like cutting down the rain forest, really! He picks up a CD, puts it into a new top loaded drive, the cables leads into the insanely expensive DAC 5 Signature. The characteristic voice of Louis Armstrong fills the room; the sound is unusually organic, free and wonderful. After a while he switches to the record player, this signal source costing about half the price of the CD replay system all included. The result removes any doubt that Peter Qvortrup has a strong point. If I believed Armstrong's voice was close to the original on the CD player, I was now forced to revise my opinion. There was so much more life and artistic beauty in the analogue rendition that anyone hearing it would have great difficulties in leaving without having certain thoughts about the later technological developments.

Qvortrup casts a glance on his wristwatch, and reveals another of his rather eccentric sides: -This watch, he says, is worth a tremendous sum of money, more than £100 000. It's part of an exchange. And then he just as well comes up with two more of the same kind, unused, plus a book dealing with the history about these watches and other types from the same Swiss brand. It's just unbelievable what people write books about, and what ends up at Peter Qvortrup's. - All this collecting might be some kind of madness, Qvortrup admits, but it's a madness I'm very comfortable with! And now it's time for High Tea!

Qvortrup is a splendid but aggressive driver, in addition to that he will with great arrogance maintain his right to park where ever he wants. If there's space for a Mercedes Cabriolet in the immediate vicinity of the destination that is where he puts it, remorseless and efficient; pavements or crossroads only add to the available space.

We're drinking an exciting, smoky tasting tea in a hotel on the Bristol seaside. Qvortrup orders a double portion of the special butter (clotted cream, Ed.) that goes with the scones, and helps him self to an inconceivable amount. - There was an article written about me in British Airways magazine a while ago, he is telling us, I would have loved to see the reactions when the entire British hi-fi trade on a trip to Prague, when they opened the BA-magazine, guess who was staring at them! He's underlining his question with a hearty laughter. - I mean, they hate me, they are quite backwards, refusing to meet in any debate, instead they're creeping into their trenches, sniping at me in magazines, on the Internet and other places. Yes, it's hard to believe some of it, the insults and lies are nearly without limits, and most of it is envy, they would not need to do this if they did their job properly and had belief in their own ideas. What the industry is doing is actually like trying to escape from reality, just like in a marriage, really, and the divorce statistics prove this. You get so focused on looking for faults, that you forget why you are there in the first place and what it's all about, really and then you divorce the mother of your children, or in hi-fi you stop listening to music, instead start you're listening to the equipment, searching for meaningless parameters that provide nothing, but a further focus on the negative aspects. Good systems must be able to make even the so-called poor recordings into a positive experience, it's shocking and depressing to see how the hi-fi designers and manufacturers neither understand nor care about music!

This last point is really essential. As a hifi journalist and reviewer I have spent lots of time and written God knows how many essays, complaining about how the majority of high end set-ups dissect the music to a point of un-listenability and also makes many records almost unplayable. It is almost true that the equipment with the highest claimed resolution, treats poor recordings the worst, how can this be? In all fairness; Peter Qvortrup is the only one I've met in this industry that really plays any recording with any artist on his equipment without fear. And what's more, - he can safely do so, without exceptions the artist comes through the media, just as he wants, either we're playing immaculate classical recordings, mediocre recordings of heavy rock bands from the seventies, or dance music aimed to be combined with ecstasy and big halls.

Just after the fall of the Berlin wall, Peter Qvortrup was invited to participate in a debate on a Russian TV-station, and that his striking and colourful arguments caught on even there, is beyond doubt. - Russia and the former Soviet countries have such a delightful virginity about them, he says, -it's lovely just experience this as long as it lasts. He's now participating on an annual basis on TV-programmes, arranging debates, and meetings with the press, being in big favour with the music and hi-fi interested people over there. The meetings are attended by thousands, and quite often culminating with Peter signing autographs. No wonder Qvortrup is in love with that country...

We're back in the listening room. - Peter Snell, Qvortrup says, I owe him unbelievably much. If he were still alive he would definitely be making even better speakers than what we are able to. Without fear he balances on top of a pile of vintage records on his search for a certain record to demonstrate his point. An organ recording finds its way down to the Voyd-platter; notes with a power and a depth one barely knew the existence of, literally shakes the room. The AN-E has is equipped such that one single 8 inch mid/woofer per cabinet must do this work, a seemingly impossible task for such a small element, but it seems like we've just got to bow for the master. - It's all got to do with correct acoustic coupling between the drivers and the box, Qvortrup says, far too little attention is paid to this aspect in modern loudspeaker design. The point today seems to be as much dampening as possible, and fill the box with all kinds of... I was on a hi-fi show in USA a few years ago, when one of the more prestigious speaker designers came over to our stand to listen. After a while he asked: - Where is the sub-woofer? - If you find a subwoofer here I'll treat you to a free dinner! I then told him that there is no subwoofer, whereupon he claims that there's just no way an 8-inch could do the job he'd just heard, and when he realized that what he heard had been reproduced by a 20 Watts Audio Note amplifier and an 8 inch SEAS woofer, he asked: How do you do it? The obvious and simple answer to that was of course: "That's for me to know, and for you to find out!"

Again he's changing the subject, this unpredictability is what you can expect in a conversation with this creative power; - One tend to think that mans journey to the moon, or today's technological development are results of great inventions, but they're just not, compared to this! He puts a new record on the platter. - Grieg, he says, it's himself playing, and he died in... 1907, wasn't it? An absolutely acceptable recording with a technically skilled, but not exceptional piano player fills the room. Transferred from paper roll or whatever it was they used for recordings right after the previous change in centuries, we're avoiding noise and sounds from worn lacquers. - This is like a time machine, Qvortrup says, we are actually attending a recording with a person who died long before today's medias were invented. We'll never get closer to time travels than this, and it's very important that we bring the greatness of these documents to our children in their original form. I mean, no-one would wash one of Gauguins paintings with soap and water, photograph it with a modern camera and then exhibit that saying: Look! Now it's much better!

Then we visit another of his many projects, the shop. He's been carrying the idea for more years than he cares to remember, but thus far he's sold nothing from it. Records. Valves. In incomprehensible quantities. Treasures of a nature and quality I barely knew the existence of, room after room filled with oddities and more conventional stuff collected from around the world. This too is like being set back to a different time where it was completely normal with storage rooms filled with LP's and radio valves of all kinds. When is he going to open? In three years, perhaps? Or is it so that Peter Qvortrup is more focused on owning than sharing...? Japanese are not allowed in the shop, that is for certain, and that fact reveals the seeds of an anxiety that somebody could be buying a little bit too much, because racism is as far from Qvortrup's ideals as you can get...

Of course there's hi-fi gear ready in the shop too, this time in the entry-level end of Audio Notes range, in shape of a complete Zero system. The writer has had such a system in my listening room for a couple of months and I was quite familiar with the warm, full-bodied and powerful sound it produces. The splendid CD-combination shone wonderfully with Mick Jagers "Wandering Spirit" before Qvortrup swaps the DAC Zero for the newer, filter-less DAC One 1x, 18 bits without over sampling. Also a giant retrograde step backwards from today's stacks of over sampling and digital filtering techniques. But the result was so striking that approximately 2,4 seconds was all I needed to let a less beautiful four letter word pass my lips (in Norwegian, then, to avoid hurting delicate English ears). What is it that this man knows, which the rest of the world barely realizes the implications of? This D/A converter is just impossibly good for less than £1000! But then, why does he even bother the fuss about making equipment priced way into the world of insanity? - I am unbelievably selfish, he admits, I make it all for myself, I've just got to have the best that money can buy. So if other people want to buy it, that's nice, and then it is also the same with hi-fi equipment as with Formula 1 cars, without the knowledge of the extremes, the cheaper products won't get better either. The cheaper products benefits from the research put into the extremely expensive products, apart from the fact that it is challenging to see how far we can go on one hand and how much of our goals we can achieve with a limited amount of money on the other.

I want to talk about dynamics on CD compared to LP, and again he has controversial and interesting views on the matter. - Again we see that the people who designed the digital recording medium just don't have a clue! The LP's are far superior to the CD's especially here, and the best way to illustrate this point is to go into a noisy pub on a Saturday evening, pick a girl two or three tables away and listen to what she says. You can actually hear her voice even though she is in possession of only one voice in the crowd. Of course she isn't talking louder than the rest or anything, but the human brain is equipped with the most advanced focusing and filtering system you can think of, and this is of course far superior to any known technology, so we can hear through noise, focus on what we wish. Naturally a music lover will focus on the music, not the tape hiss or anything like that, and this way the LP gets another 40 - 60 dB of dynamic range to play with, and so the CD can just go and forget it, regardless of which system is used.

It is by no means unusual with arrogance and strong belief in ones own superiority when you deal with designers of hi-fi equipment, every experience I have with this breed is strongly supportive of that view, suggesting as it does that they are in possession of a somewhat exaggerated self confidence. Qvortrup is, as this conversation has shown, not exactly a minion in this aspect either. But it must be said in his defence that he has his foundation firmly grounded in a holistic philosophy, where the music and the artists' expression is the focus from when a new product is conceived till it leaves the

prototyping bench, and this most definitely separates him from the vast majority of other designers, regardless of what they might think of this themselves; just listen to what they're talking about! During the weekend in Brighton, I didn't hear a single sentence about component choices or the effects of small changes in the circuitry, on the other hand there was no lack of colourful descriptions of musicians and compositions, sprinkled with great knowledge of artists and their art and combined with an intense love of the music being demonstrated.

Out of these roots grows true art. In Qvortrup's world the art does not consist of the interpreting or composing of music, but of proliferation and understanding of others artistry. And where would the artist be without anyone to spread his message?