

British Airways Article
"Making It"
by John McLaren



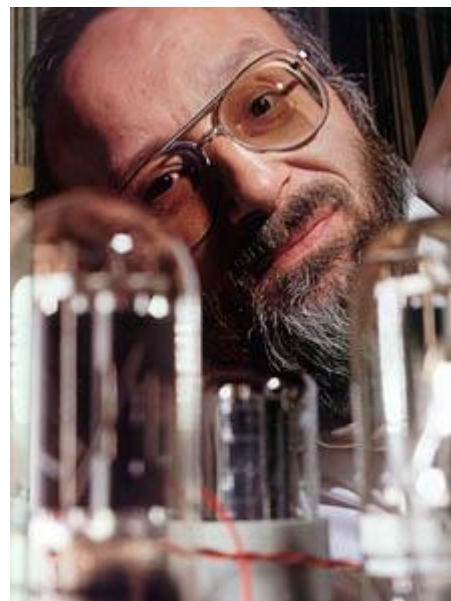
British Airways
Business Life
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The problem with CDs was not the discs themselves but the hunk of metal you were playing them on. Which is why the name Peter Qvortrup should be music to your ears. John McLaren has the full story.

A funny thing happened to the CD on the way to the loudspeaker: some of the sound went missing. "Perfect sound forever", its inventors called it, and that slogan helped sell players by the tanker-load. But many listeners remained unconvinced, finding the sound chromium-plated, artificial and tiring, and resolutely stuck with their vinyl. Over time the inventors, Philips and Sony, came close to recognizing the shortcomings of their system, though they only became enthusiastic about this admission when they'd developed a replacement - the recently introduced Super Audio CD (SACD) - and were raring to persuade us to replace our hardware and software yet again. But Audio Note, a mighty mouse of a company, may turn out to have rained on the giants' parade. The boffins in Audio Note's modest Hove HQ scratched their capacious craniums about what was wrong with CD, and concluded that conventional CD players were losing up to four-fifths of the data. Now they're building machines that unearth those lost chords. The discovery is startling - it may mean we can all upgrade our music collection dramatically, without having to buy a single new disc.

It's not the first time that Audio Note's visionary Danish boss, Peter Qvortrup, has stood conventional wisdom on its head. Among Europeans, he was the main man who insisted that old-fashioned valves actually sounded much better than the transistors which replaced them. He endured great tidal waves of scoffing from 'experts' who gleefully demonstrated that transistors' laboratory performance was superior, never thinking that the tests themselves might be suspect. Since then, humble pie has been consumed on an industrial scale, and the majority of expensive equipment now uses valves.

Qvortrup started his career as a marine broker before getting into hi-fi retailing with a clutch of shops in Copenhagen. His first foray into making the gear came with Audio Innovations, which he set up in 1984 and later sold. Audio Note was formed in 1991, and for the first few years combined manufacture with distributing a line of high-end equipment from Japan. The importing has gone now, and the company can concentrate on its own enormously wide range. It is probably the only small



company in the world that makes a full line-up of audio products from cartridges to speakers.

Audio Note gear is probably the best that money can buy, and given the price of its flagship models, it bloody well ought to be. Want to know how much? Is your seatbelt fastened? Audio Note's range-topping system will set you back a cool 400,000... pounds.

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That's almost as much as it costs to build a Formula One car (minus engine). As it happens, they're very similar. After all, they're both at the absolute cutting edge, use mind-blowing expensive materials, and need highly trained staff to design and assemble them. Since so few are made, the expense has to be amortized over a tiny number of units. The performance of this hi-fi is as far removed from a normal system as the race car is from a Hyundai.

And finally, both provide a trickle down of technology to more humble machines. Audio Note's range starts with a jewel-like mini system at a mere £2,300, that's like buying a McLaren road car for Rover money, and may be the biggest sound reproduction bargain of all time. In all, there are five separate levels of systems, and many different choices within each level.

Qvortrup believes that the Audio Note philosophy makes it distinct from the herd. "Most hi-fi makers are concerned primarily with packaging and market share. Even most so-called high-end machines use much the same technologies and processes as mass-market products. We prefer to stretch the envelope, to improve and refine constantly. However, doing that isn't easy. It makes a great deal of time, and requires superb materials. It's rather like cooking: whether you're making some thing simple or complicated, you'll always get caught out if you skimp on ingredients. Audio Note systems may sometimes cost more, but they offer a far higher enjoyment factor, and give our customers a real pride of ownership, like they might get from a Swiss watch or a racing yacht."

The breakthrough in CD reproduction shows the value of their painstaking research. It took them two years to get to the heart of the matter.

"All normal CD players have error correction circuits which 'sample' sound backwards and forwards as the disc is played, and help paper over any cracks in the data. They slice and dice the input as they go, and then reconstitute the whole. The trouble is that this is like mincing a piece of beef: once you've done that, you can't make a fillet steak out of it again. Basically sound is the same, it's a continuum, and we discovered that these circuits cause the loss of weak signals - subtle things like echoes, harmonics, spatial information, which are vital to natural reproduction. So we came up with our own approach, leaving the data raw, and unadulterated. We found that other conventional components were contributing to data loss, too, and we replaced them with aerospace-grade materials applied in a new patented way"

The result has to be heard. Try your favourite CD - one you think you know in every tiny detail - and be prepared to be astonished. Suddenly a plucked bass appears from nowhere. Hey, who brought that snare drum in here? The sax has somehow acquired a far richer timbre, and the backing singers are no longer a flat wall of sound, but three distinct, mouth-sized humans. The whole thing sounds so alive, so tactile, so real.

The only people who will be crestfallen are the vinyl die-hards. Up till now, they've probably been right, that if you can put up with the pops and clicks, and the dreadful Heath Robinson-ness of it all, LP does sounds better. Not any longer. Fish out the same recording on CD and vinyl, and compare them using an Audio Note digital to analogue converter. Within 30 seconds it's clear that the poor old black record is deep in cocked-hat territory.

I haven't heard SACD, or any of the other competing new formats, but Peter Qvortrup has and is very, very confident that his machinery will see them all off using normal CDs. (in case his customers want to satisfy their curiosity, his converters can handle all of those formats as well.) As for Peter and his

wife Lesley, who helps him run the company, they're far from ready to stop listening to LPs. Mind you, they do own 35,000, and they will keep making brilliant record players for people like themselves.