



THE LISTENING POST, HAMILTON

# LISTEN UP

For the first of our new series of retail profiles, Gary Pearce drives to Hamilton to chat with the head honcho of a business fuelled on passion for music and then puts a delicious 7.1 system through its paces

**S**ituated on the main street of downtown Hamilton is perhaps New Zealand's most diverse hi-fi and home theatre retailer, The Listening Post.

Probably best known as a high-end audio store, The Listening Post has become a keen advocate of home theatre and custom installations, while home automation has also become a growing part of their business.

It's a large store and the sales team are certainly enthusiastic and helpful, without the hard sell you'd expect. On hand to show me around was Managing Director Romesh Anandaraja, who among other

Wadia CD Players, Halcro amps and processors, Von Schweikert loudspeakers; the list just goes on and on. On the more affordable front Yamaha have a presence here with their award-winning range of home theatre receivers, and it's also here you'll find the Waikato's only Bose specialist store with The Listening Post carrying a large range of the company's popular lifestyle systems.

While I was there I decided to ask Romesh for his views on things home theatre and hi-fi related - and later I couldn't resist a peek at the stunning Halcro Logic SSP80 Surround Sound Processor/Preamplifier. Let's get cooking.

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talents, boasts a degree in physics and is a classically trained pianist to boot - possibly explaining his lifelong interest in quality music and theatre sound reproduction.

He's a very engaging and obliging chap, with a refreshing lack of hi-fi snobbery. Nope, you can talk all types of budget with Romesh and although the high end is where his personal interests lie, he's extremely focused on his customers' needs regardless of their budgetary constraints.

So let's talk about the store: the premises are large although there definitely is no wasted space due to the sheer amount of products on hand, and the range of equipment on display in store is quite staggering. Quite literally there is something for every taste and budget - whether you're after a simple Bose lifestyle system for the bedroom, or have just won Lotto and can now afford that VTL/Wilson Audio and Wadia system, Romesh and his knowledgeable staff will have all the bases covered.

There are three demonstration rooms, two for music and one large home theatre room - all with excellent acoustics for customers to audition products before making a decision to purchase. As interesting as the store itself is their website - the guys have made an excellent job of making the site as informative and helpful as possible, and even invite customers to receive a newsletter abounding with industry news and special deals.

The Listening Post is a sort of hi-fi and home theatre Aladdin's Cave, a treasure trove where you'll find high end brands you definitely wouldn't expect in Auckland, let alone Hamilton. For instance: VTL amplifiers,

### What's so special about the Listening Post?

Well, first and foremost, we started off as music lovers and from there our home theatre and multi-room audio developed, along with the custom installation expertise. Probably the biggest difference between us and our competitors I think is our passion for music - this is reflected in our wide range of good quality two-channel hi-fi equipment, especially at the high end of the market.

### How about two-channel hi-fi these days, is it making a comeback after a few years of home theatre dominance?

Well, in the US and Europe two-channel is definitely making a strong comeback, while for us here it's been as strong in terms of sales as it's ever been. Probably, if you asked most people, it's the music performance that is most important to them, with home theatre abilities coming in at second place. What I think is happening these days is most people are



being sold home theatre systems, when in fact they're music lovers - the question just isn't being asked. People aren't so critical of the sound on movies, there's the storyline and the action happening on-screen and there's a sort of sensory overload. But with music, that's really all there is to concentrate on.

### **How about home theatre - is it a still popular entertainment medium?**

Yes, it's still very strong. It's more of a family thing that people enjoy every day - just flicking on the news through a home theatre and it sounds much better than through the TV. It'll always be strong, of course, but there definitely is a big comeback with music-only systems and components. Watching a movie through a good home theatre system gets you so much more involved, but it's probably not done as regularly as people listening to music. When I do get a DVD out, I love it, but the main thing for me is music.

### **What's your opinion of the new high resolution video formats, Blu-Ray and HD-DVD?**

It's fantastic we're getting them - they're so much better than the DVD standard, but it amazes me that after SACD and DVD Audio / Beta and VHS and all the other format wars that the industry is doing it again. So now manufacturers are talking about producing universal players that will play both formats. It's quite amazing really! One thing, however, if you walk through a shop and see HD playing next to normal DVD, you'll instantly see the difference in quality.

### **Let's hear about your custom installation service.**

### **Is this a growth area for The Listening Post?**

Yeah, it has been growing steadily for the last 10 years and every year it has become more exciting and a larger part of our business, so it has become important for us. So we're pretty focused on it, for sure, and the main delight for us isn't the size of the installation or how many rooms, but

making things work and making it special for our clients.

A lot of people these days have two living areas and one of these can incorporate a hidden projector and sound system. The days of the rumpus room with the pool table are long gone and people are turning these areas into home theatre or music listening rooms.

### **Where does good old vinyl fit into today's digital world?**

Last month we sold more turntables than CD players. Vinyl has been more popular than all the high definition music formats, LCD and plasma screens. If you'd told me five years ago that vinyl would undergo a renaissance, I wouldn't have believed you! There are a lot of people rediscovering their old collections and just about everyone, without doubt, comes back in and says that it sounds better than their CDs. Also, younger people into the DJ scene are buying turntables and these customers are into collecting music on vinyl. It's quite incredible!

### **Let's hope they don't try scratching using a \$25,000 VPI TNT HRX!**

Ha ha! Well, we've had a few interesting insurance claims as a result of similar carry-ons!

### **What does the future hold for The Listening Post?**

Certainly more of the same. We love high-end music and still want to pursue that area of the market, but what we will see is a lot more automation come into the market with more affordable equipment. Just a few years ago automation was expensive and looked on by some as a bit of a toy, but now you'll start to see home theatre and music systems integrating with automation such as intelligent lighting, electronic screens and curtains. It all adds to the experience and I think we'll see this area grow, especially given the price issue. It'll become a whole lot more affordable.



**“Last month we sold more turntables than CD players”** Managing Director Romesh Anandaraja





## HALCRO SSP80 SURROUND SOUND PROCESSOR/PREAMPLIFIER

**A MANUFACTURER OF** some of the world's most esoteric and expensive solid-state amplifiers, Halcro's entrance into the home theatre world has been made with the same ultra-low distortion design philosophy of their much acclaimed hi-fi amplifiers.

With a parent company heavily involved in technology (especially the mining industry in Australia), substantial research and development has been invested in the Logic series to place it right at the cutting edge of home theatre performance.

Although the SSP80 is the entry level processor in Halcro's line-up, it is right up to date in terms of features and technology. The SSP80 is fully THX Ultra2 compliant, while three HDMI inputs that up-convert composite or S-Video to the HDMI output mean an end to the cable mess behind your audio furniture. Both USB and RS232 connections are available on either front or rear panels, making software upgrades and the connection of computer devices (iPod, etc) a snip. Also, the SSP80 can output up to 10 channels of information, so it is possible to configure stereo subwoofers if required.

Both 7.1 input and output connections are available as balanced AES/EBU or RCA, while an analogue bypass is kindly incorporated to switch off all video and digital circuitry while playing your upmarket CDs. There is an adjustable lip-synch feature and extensive bass-management circuitry. I could go on, but suffice to say there isn't much missing off this marvel of modern HT technology!

As you would expect, the casework is also of a very high standard, with a solid milled front fascia and a heavy steel ventilated top cover. Aesthetics are very smart as well, with a distinctive family look that signifies the product as Halcro.

No Halcro power amplifiers were available for the test, so Romesh had a brace of VTL valve amps connected to the SSP80 with a set of top-flight Jamo THX rated home theatre speakers and subwoofer. It was an interesting

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mixture to say the least, with an exceedingly low noise processor connected to comparatively distortion-laden (under test conditions, anyway) amps that are poles apart in terms of design and philosophy.

But, once they were powered up and the play button on the Marantz DV9500 was pressed, all thoughts of a mismatch of products floated away.

Music DVDs just sounded natural and effortless through this system, and I was amazed at how sweet and musical the sound was. *Hell Freezes Over* by The Eagles is a common demo DVD and I've heard it a billion times – but not really like this. The sound was warm yet explicitly detailed and there just seemed to be so much poise and realness to the performance that I almost felt I was watching it for the first time.

It was simply stunning and the talents of the SSP80 weren't just devoted to sound quality either. Swapping discs for *Behind Enemy Lines* with Owen Wilson and Gene Hackman brought a bit of mongrel out of the Halcro system, with fine impact and explicit surround sound steering. I was also impressed with the video-scaling ability of the SSP80, with the component output up-scaled to match the native resolution of the resident Infocus IN74 projector. It was a very good, if not a sublime, performance from the Halcro and the supporting cast.

It's certainly not an inexpensive option, but the sounds and pictures on display were of the highest order. I can't recommend Halcro highly enough – for those with the budget, of course! ■ GARY PEARCE



**Halcro SSP80  
Processor \$17,995**  
Listening Post  
website:  
[listening.co.nz](http://listening.co.nz)