



A BEAUTIFUL OBSESSION

GARY PEARCE FEELS THE NOISE ON THE MOST EXPENSIVE STEREO SYSTEM IN OUR BLESSED LAND

There are a few times in one's life where you just have to stand back, take a deep breath and soak up the experience that is unfolding in front of you.

These are moments where you know exactly where you were at the time (just like Band Aid or the beginning of the new millennium); it's these moments that seem to ingrain themselves permanently into the psyche.

In January/February there was the amazing sight of Comet McNaught illuminating the skies above the Waitakere Ranges in Auckland, on its journey around the sun. For those who missed it, it will be back in about 85,000 years. Thankfully there are other memorable sights you won't have to wait that long for.

I witnessed such a sight in December last year, but this particular experience, although out of this world, was more of a terrestrial dream come true.

I was invited to a home just north of Auckland to audition perhaps the most expensive audio system in the country. Now I've travelled overseas to quite a few hi-fi shows and seen some amazingly costly gear, but this was far more than an expensive travelling sideshow of the hi-fi state-of-the-art. Neville and Anne have scoured the planet searching for the ultimate hi-fi system, and the cost has been completely secondary to their quest: the musical truth.

Neville is a self-confessed music nut, and it's perhaps this aspect

that warmed me to his dream system the most. The equipment is really a means to an end - it allows the artists to express all the emotion and drama of their music with amazing realism, subtlety and sound pressure levels that typify live performances.

Walking into Neville and Anne's home brought about a sense of anticipation: within is a purpose-built listening room with some fabulous equipment by world standards, let alone here in NZ.

The 9 x 7 x 3.2m room was designed specifically to house the system by a renowned Australian sound engineer, and I could well imagine spending countless hours in there with its beautiful water views and serenity. As bewitching as the outside view is, what lurks inside the room is simply mind-boggling. Audio royalty exists within these walls, in the imposing form of the Von Schweikert VR11 loudspeaker system, monster VTL Siegfried Reference monoblocks and the sublime DP-100/DC-101 SACD Converter/Transport from high-end Japanese audio artist Accuphase.

The mighty VTL Siegfried tube monoblocks look like giant computer servers, and are rated at a mind-blowing 800w each; full-logic tube re-biasing is utilised between music passages to ensure the tubes are always in optimum condition, while each 80kg amplifier has both single-ended and balanced circuitry. No less than 12 x 6550c, 2 x 6350 and 1 x 12AT7 vacuum tubes are employed to create the massive 800w power output, and I must stress these are tube watts - they

seem extremely potent when compared with solid state watts. The DP-100 SACD transport and DC-101 Processor from Accuphase are not brand new components, but they by no means let the sound quality down in Neville's system. At around 20kg per unit they're built like tanks, and were responsible for some extremely involving sound when driving the VTLs through the flagship VTL TL-7.5 mk2 preamplifier - arguably the best tube preamplifier in the world.

I've saved the best for last. When ushered into the listening room I couldn't help but notice two very large and purposeful cherry wood cabinets flanking the window at the head of the room. These were the Von Schweikert VR11 'Vanquish' loudspeakers, the American company's monstrous reference system and rated among the world's finest speakers, irrespective of price.

I have seen some massive loudspeaker systems in my time, but the VR11s are just gigantic. Weighing in at a floor joist-threatening 290kg and measuring almost 2.3m high, these colossal transducers are an incredible \$290,000 per pair and totally full-range. There are three modules per speaker: two modules containing 15-inch woofers, each driven by 1000w class D amplifiers; four 8.5-inch magnesium mid-basses; and one midrange/tweeter module with two 7-inch carbon Kevlar aerogel



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midrange drivers, two 1.5-inch dual concentric silk ring revelatory tweeters, and two 5-inch aluminium ribbon supertweeters, one of which is mounted on the rear baffle in a bi-pole arrangement.

Unbelievably the VR11's power requirements start at a laughable 20 watts per channel, because of the excellent 96dB sensitivity and stable 8 ohm load, but I guess having 2000 watts of power on board to drive the dustbin lid-sized bass drivers must help things along a bit. I must agree with Neville's ethos concerning amplification, though: although you could get away with a mere 300 or 400 watts per channel, real room-filling sound pressure is the hallmark of large amplifiers and speaker systems. And that's just what I experienced while listening to Neville and Anne's hi-fi.

Awestruck is one word I could use here, but once the music started that term was quickly forgotten as my reference for recorded musical enjoyment was re-written.

It's hard to pin down just why this system was the best I've ever heard. Was it the effortless dynamics and stunning bass performance? Or was it the explicit midrange combined with utter accuracy of the human voice as recorded by the microphone in the studio?

I was having a hard time pinning down just why this system, VR11s and all, drew me into the music like no system before it. And in the end I just gave up. You see, sometimes it's not worth analysing those things that can't be explained; we're better off just enjoying the ride while we can. So I stayed, and stayed, and stayed until I thought my welcome was almost up. I played disc after disc through Neville and Anne's beautiful system, and each performance was delivered in a way I'd thought impossible via an audio system.

There are plenty of ways to spend \$500,000. An average house in the 'burbs. A new yacht that could see 10 sails or fewer per year. Or a once-in-a-lifetime hi-fi system that arouses the senses and brings your beloved musicians to life in your own home. Neville has a stunning home and he isn't that hot on yachting. For a guy who started this beautiful obsession with modest electronics from the likes of Pioneer, he sure has raised the bar for himself. Invite me back any time Neville (please)! ■



Thanks to Romesh and The Listening Post for getting us in the door to hear this incredible system. The Listening Post put this system together for Neville and Anne, and are agents for VTL, Von Schweikert and other great gear: www.listening.co.nz