

Value for money

In a previous article (System hierarchy – a little common sense) I touched on the subject of value for money. The question arises, is a particular piece of equipment good value for money? All too often people in the hi-fi industry forget about this. Even customers, who have to save up to indulge their hobby, get misled.

Nowadays good hi-fi equipment is made in many places in the World. The differing local costs and the effect of exchange rates frequently mean that some items of equipment are good value in one location but less so in others. Unfortunately a lot of people still equate cost with quality. Another mistake people make is in thinking that because something is cheaper elsewhere in the World it must be bad value in their local market. Most people are simply not familiar with the costs involved in manufacturing, distributing and retailing hi-fi equipment. When I started out in hi-fi I can remember thinking that buying US sourced equipment in the UK was bad value, as typically a dollar became a pound. However, when you allow for shipping, insurance, duty and VAT, the fact that the UK distributor provides a guarantee and the need for a margin for exchange rate fluctuations, the figures do not look so unreasonable. Some people seem to think not only should dealers always give discounts but that demonstrations, advice and installation should come free, which is more than a bit unreasonable. In my experience, unless you are prepared to buy hi-fi without a demonstration and without a UK guarantee, usually it is not worth trying to save a few pounds by buying new equipment from outside the UK.

The following examples, taken from my own portfolio of equipment, should serve to illustrate various types of good value for money.

Example 1 – Plinius

Plinius amplifiers may be thought of as natural rivals to the big solid state amplifiers that are made in the US. Despite being manufactured in New Zealand, hence involving extra shipping and distributor costs, Plinius items do indeed compete in the US with the homegrown items at the same prices. I daresay that readers will say “he would say that, wouldn’t he”, but this is something that readers may check for themselves, by looking at the reviews from the US audiophile press and customer’s comments on websites such as Audio Review and Audio Asylum. Although one must be careful with trusting any individual review or comment, based upon the totality one may say the following – maybe a particular person might prefer a rival equivalently priced product from a US manufacturer, that is a matter of personal taste rather than right or wrong, however the Plinius items do indeed compete in the US at their price level. Turning to the UK, a typical US amplifier that costs \$10,000 plus sales tax is likely to sell in the UK for £10,000 including VAT. A particular Plinius \$10,000 amplifier was £6,350 in the UK. Similar considerations apply to other Plinius items. So, in a fairly “objective” sense, one might say that Plinius equipment was fairly priced in the US but is a bargain in the UK. And this is before considering the specific sound of Plinius equipment, which I happen to think is notably better than some US products that I find can sound rather dry and hi-fi-ish when compared to Plinius.

Example 2 - Aurum Cantus

Aurum Cantus is a large Chinese loudspeaker manufacturer, noted for making ribbon tweeters. They also make loudspeakers for other manufacturers. With regards to Aurum Cantus’s own loudspeakers, the saving in manufacturing costs is passed on to the customer, making their products extremely competitive in the UK, with a very high level of finish and quality of the drive units and design compared to certain home grown designs. Quite simply, you get a hell of a lot for your money.

Example 3 – Reference 3A

Reference 3A is based in Canada and in this case I pretty much make a US dollar become a pound when setting UK prices – it is just how the numbers work out. However, what matters is that in the UK I have rarely heard homegrown loudspeakers that can touch the Reference 3A ones at the same price. Decades of experience have led to real artistry. So, in the UK, they are more than fairly priced. Certainly I can think of no UK loudspeaker that can touch the Dulcet and Veena loudspeakers at what they do.

Example 4 – Nordic Concept

In this case, Nordic Concept decided that in order to make their products more attractive, the decks and tonearms should be sold direct by the distributor rather than through dealers, making their products extremely good value for money.

Ultimately it is for an individual customer to decide what is good value for money, but certainly I can think of a few products available in the UK which seem distinctly overpriced, no matter how well received they might appear to be.