

FORMAT FRENZY

Dominic Dawes is on the case with some high-end solutions

Stephen Crane

As a long-standing expert listener and writer, this month's patient has every source software under the sun – that's a reel-to-reel recorder in the picture below. So how can he upgrade while ensuring compatibility?

Sources? I've got them. What next?

Upgrading can be a tricky business. It's not too hard to perform a wholesale switch on a reasonable budget, but dealing with an already complex hi-fi can be more of a conundrum. It's a question of how to add new – and better – components without compromising the strengths of what you've already got.

When Stephen Crane wrote to us asking for audio advice, it was immediately clear what we were dealing with. A brief look at the list of his existing gear below tells its own story: a plethora of playback and recording formats – two cassette decks, turntable, DAT (Digital Audio Tape) and even a beautiful Technics 1500 reel-to-reel tape machine.

Stephen is clearly no ordinary listener. When we arrive at his Lincolnshire home on a bright August afternoon, he explains his passion and professional interest in recorded music. He's just finished a book on Britten recordings, and is working on a history of recordings of classical music.

Despite a long list of components, Stephen knows his hi-fi could be performing much better. Like many of us, his listening is mostly CD these days, and he's aware that his Sony player/recorder isn't offering the audiophile sound that he aspires to. Add to that some ageing KEF speakers, and we've got a lot to improve on.

A brief listen to the system confirms this. It has been formed over more than 20 years, and its performance has both pros and cons.

We start with a disc of Saint-Saëns's Requiem. Stephen's system displays a good grasp of dynamics, with a sweeping musicality and timing that makes the music roll along with gusto.

However, there's a grainy quality about the sound, a lack of

absolute detail and midrange insight which leaves the performance sounding a little thin.

Stephen has a flexible budget, so we have the option of upgrading several parts of the system. He wants to upgrade his amplifiers, but here's where we hit a snag. Stephen has a wide range of playback and recording components, and his Quad 44 preamp is the perfect control unit for the whole system. In fact, when we call Quad to check, they confirm there's no contemporary product with the range of inputs and outputs that could accommodate all of Stephen's components.

Which leads us to the first decision: the 44 preamp stays. In any case, despite the age of his amps, Stephen is very fond of the Quad sound. So we decide to offer a part upgrade: keeping the 44 preamp, we'll replace the 606 power amp with the more up to date and more powerful 909 (£900).

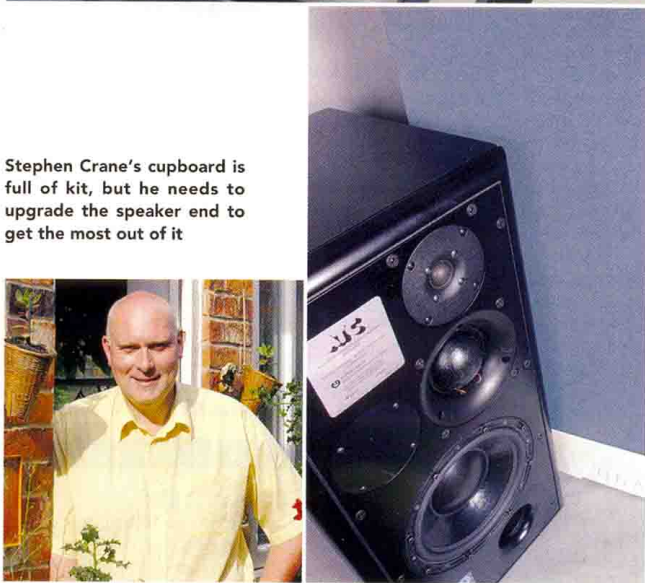
We try the system with the 909, expecting only a minor improvement. However, the difference is surprising: the sound is clearer, more dynamic and less hazy in the midrange. Stephen agrees: 'It's much less opaque than before,' he says. 'The sound is also more expansive throughout the frequency range.' With a disc of Khachaturian's *Masquerade* Suite conducted by Kirill Kondrashin, Stephen is even more struck by the 909. 'There's a more pronounced effect there,' he says. 'It's cleaner, less grainy, and there's more bass. I'd even say there's slightly better channel separation.'

So, we've managed to perform a partial amp upgrade – keeping the vital connectivity of the Quad 44 preamp but improving things by upgrading the power amp. Stephen is impressed: 'I'd say it's made about 10 per cent improvement to the sound, which is worthwhile in my opinion.'

It's now time to start really changing things. In terms of speakers, we think Stephen will



Stephen Crane's cupboard is full of kit, but he needs to upgrade the speaker end to get the most out of it



like a pair of ATC SCM50s (£5500). However, getting hold of a pair at short notice proves difficult, no matter: ATC has a pair of Pro50s we can use. The Pro50s are exactly the same speakers, but without the veneer finish. So if Stephen finds the Pro50s look a bit imposing in the black you see here, a pair of SCM50s will give him the choice of five wood finishes with a more elegant air.

As we listen again to the Saint-Saëns, Stephen is impressed. 'The horns have got a greater bite to them,' he says. 'There's a ringing quality that I'd only expect to hear at a live performance.'

We switch to Peter Hurford playing the Finale from Vierne's Symphony No 1 and the ATCs are again impressive: strong, articulate bass is married to a detailed, powerful performance. The Pro50s have three drivers, including an unusual soft-dome midrange driver that registers the middle frequencies with incredible insight. 'They've got such an even spread throughout the frequencies,' muses Stephen. 'I've been known to criticise this performance for being pedestrian, but with these speakers there's somehow much more life to it.'

Still, we're working with Stephen's old Sony RCD W3 CD recorder as a source – not ideal. Change the player, and the new components will really shine.

So, out comes a new CD player – the Naim CDX2 (£2700). As soon as the strains of Khachaturian flow from the speakers, it's clear that the CDX2 is the final piece of the jigsaw. Almost immediately, Stephen says, 'Oh, we're really getting better now.'

The added level of detail that the Naim digs up from the disc has transformed the performance. 'You can hear all the parts, whereas they were all mangled in together before,' agrees Stephen.

There's no doubt: Stephen's system is now sounding pretty special. But he's expressed an interest in electrostatic speakers, and while he's clearly over the moon with the ATC Pro50s, he wants to hear the comparison. So out we trudge out to the audio ambulance to unveil a pair of Quad ESL-988s. (£3500).

The upgrade is nearly complete. But will Stephen ditch the ATCs in favour of the Quad

electrostatic speakers, with their single-driver, flat panel design?

Conclusion

We listen through to the same pieces, and the Quads deliver an open, insightful sound. They don't pack the punch of the ATCs, but they offer a very refined and enjoyable performance. Will Stephen swap the ATCs for these?

'I do think the voices have more air around them,' he begins. 'But the bass isn't nearly as good.' This is an inherent fact of electrostatic speaker design: they don't go as deep as their box-speaker brethren. But Stephen continues: 'I also detect more congestion in the sound. I don't feel they're offering the same clarity of line that the ATCs give. My preconception was that I would prefer the Quads, but actually the ATC Pro5s are much better for me.'

We have our system then. As we hook the Pro50s back up, Stephen sits back contented. 'I love the sound now. I'm so impressed with the ATCs: I'd love to isolate one thing they do particularly well, but they simply do everything.' 🎧

CURRENT SET-UP

Sony RCD W3

CD player/recorder

Quad 44 preamplifier

Quad 606 power amplifier

KEF 105.4 loudspeakers

Technics 1500

reel-to-reel tape machine

Yamaha KX 580 cassette deck

Nakamichi 600 cassette deck

Sony SLF25UB DAT recorder

Sony PCM 501ES DAC processor

Lenco GL85 turntable

Technics ST GT350 radio tuner

WE TOOK ALONG

Naim CDX2 CD player

Quad 909 power amplifier

ATC SCM 50 loudspeakers