

Audio Works and Me, Myself, I (with apologies to Joan Armatrading)

I first came across Larry Ogden's Audio Works in 2012 following a friend's suggestion that I consult him regarding a distribution block, which he informed me had transformed his system. I was no stranger to Cheadle as my previous hi-fi supplier, Audio Council, had been based there. I duly made an appointment for a demonstration of the distribution block and a CD player he recommended - the AstinTrew At 3500. The rest they say is history.

I brought my CD player, then retailing for £3,750 with me for comparison. I was convinced that there was no way the cheaper £1,500 Astin Trew could improve on it. Larry just proceeded to set up the two players, sit me down comfortably on his listening room sofa, supply copious cups of coffee and just let me listen to my personal choice - a poor early Caruso recording. I soon realised that a noise on my player was transformed into a brass instrument on the Astin-Trew. I was astonished at the sound improvement, which was more musical by being more accurate and transparent. With the distribution block I was again sceptical but was completely blown over by the improved sound quality and even more impressed to discover that Larry had developed and manufactured it as a Music Works Product. Since then, I have invested thousands of pounds in superb hi-fi equipment following Audio Works' advice. Each investment has been guided by Larry, but ultimately it is the listening sessions that decide the issue. At no time did Larry press equipment on me or complicate matters with explanations of what is meant by timing etc. He just plops you down on his listening room sofa and lets you listen to music for as long you like.

Since these first two major purchases I have invested in speaker cables, mains plugs, an interconnect and PEEK isolation supports. However, my friend, who first introduced me to Audio Works, was still dissatisfied with my system, which he compared unfavourably with his own. He blamed my Naim amplifier for 'making a mess'. In 2020 I hoped to solve the problem with continued investment in AcouPlex isolation platforms, but though the sound improved, it was still muffled and diffuse compared with his crystal clear set up with floor standing Tannoy speakers. I too became convinced the fault lay with my Naim 82 pre-amp/250 power amp. Now Larry again came to the rescue and suggested I divert money from ancillaries, hear new speakers and reconsider my opinion that my gigantic Linn Isobarik speakers were "the best in the world", and so he quickly demonstrated the petite French manufactured Focal Aria 906 speakers hastily set up on top of floor standing speakers. I was astounded with the lively, musical and detailed sound and immediately agreed to a home demo. How was it possible that such a weighty and lively sound was emanating from such small speakers? His friend, "Hi-Fi" Steve, soon supplied the answer when he set them up in my living room. He explained, with an illustration, the importance of time and phase coherence and that the problem lay not with the Naim amp, which was fine, but with my speakers. I soon caught his arm-waving and knee-slapping enthusiasm. Never had drums sounded so present, real and captivating. The Linn Isobariks were now history - 32 years in fact. Again, Audio Works showed that it was demonstrable sound improvements and not just the amount of money you invest in hi-fi that really makes the difference.

I now find myself listening for much longer and with greater pleasure than I did with the Linn Isobariks. I used to watch lots of TV, but now Netflix is very much on the back burner. I also find that my musical tastes have become much broader. I hardly ever listened to pop music

before I bought the Aria 906's. When Steve set up the speakers, he brought a few demonstration CDs with him and so I was not only impressed with the 906's revealing, lively and natural dynamic sound, but also with the musicians he played, notably, Sting, Don Henley, The Eagles, Alan Parsons, Jackson Browne, Gretchen Peters and Mary Chapin-Carpenter. (They were all unknown to me with the exception of Sting.) Jackson Browne's solo acoustic vol 2 was especially noteworthy. He seemed to be playing in my small living room. The sound was crystal clear and seemed not to be coming from the speakers, but beyond, between and besides them. In comparison, my Isobariks sounded woolly and boxy with nothing in the inter-speaker space or around them. The 906's sound was far more transparent and dynamic. Browne's acoustic guitar seemed to be right in front of us. I immediately recognised a superb musician. My unfortunate indifference to good popular music crumbled and so I decided to buy all of the artists he had played to me. Three months later I called Steve for more album recommendations and so acquired CDs by Fleetwood Mac, Paul Simon and several by Joan Armatrading. I also listened again to some my wife's small CD collection and suddenly found myself appreciating U2, Simply Red, Barbara Streisand, Annie Lennox, Nina Simone and Tracey Chapman. Over many years I had occasionally listened to them with her but with the exception of Lennox and Chapman, they just did not click with me. I was now on a voyage of musical discovery and rediscovery thanks to my new natural sounding system and speakers that were punching far above their weight both literally and metaphorically. I now cursed myself for not replacing the Linn Isobariks earlier and when I sold them for a pittance, I almost felt guilty of inflicting them on the purchaser!

The lock down also provided much free time to explore again my extensive collection of classical, romantic and modern orchestral, chamber and opera music. It was like listening to a completely new collection. I liken it to old master paintings being painstakingly restored and cleaned by the National Gallery. As a consequence, I notice that BBC Music Magazine CDs recorded in different venues now sound quite variable; something I hardly noticed with the Isobariks. For example, the Satie/Anne Queffelec CD contains superb recordings made in St David's Hall, Cardiff, of piano music by Francis Poulenc and Reynaldo Hahn, but, oh dear, the recordings of Satie's and Honegger's piano music on the same disc sound poor and highly reverberant in comparison, having been recorded at the French Institute in London. I now listened again to many CDs in my classical collection. It was like listening to a new collection.

The 906's have also spawned a growing interest in Jazz, of which I know little. During the lock down interregnum, I purchased over a dozen CDs titled 'Jazz Greats'; one was called 'The Shout: Art Tatum'. I was astounded by Tatum's piano playing. He was an extraordinarily gifted early jazz pianist, and that was the problem because the late 30's and early 40's recordings, were abysmal through the Isobariks with a distorted piano sound. I therefore reluctantly decided to take the CD to the Oxfam shop. Fortunately, lock down 3 prevented this and after purchasing the Arias I listened again and although the sound was far from perfect, I suddenly realised that I was enjoying his phenomenal playing. (Oscar Peterson, considered him the greatest jazz pianist.) Now this album has been restored to my rapidly growing collection of jazz CDs. The Isobariks had deadened and dulled the sound, whereas the Arias made Tatum come alive and emphasised the music.

In conclusion, I can confidently state that these speakers have been my best value hi-fi purchase and the most satisfying. They have unleashed the system's musical and hi fi potential that was being squandered by my previous loudspeakers so that I can now appreciate fully the upgrades I made earlier. I now listen to music at a much loader level without feeling any listening fatigue. I have come to appreciate music that I once would avoided, such as Astor Piazzolla's Latin Tangos. It is almost as if the Arias were designed to reproduce his accordion-like Bandoneon. The result is the beginning of much more universal and varied CD collection.