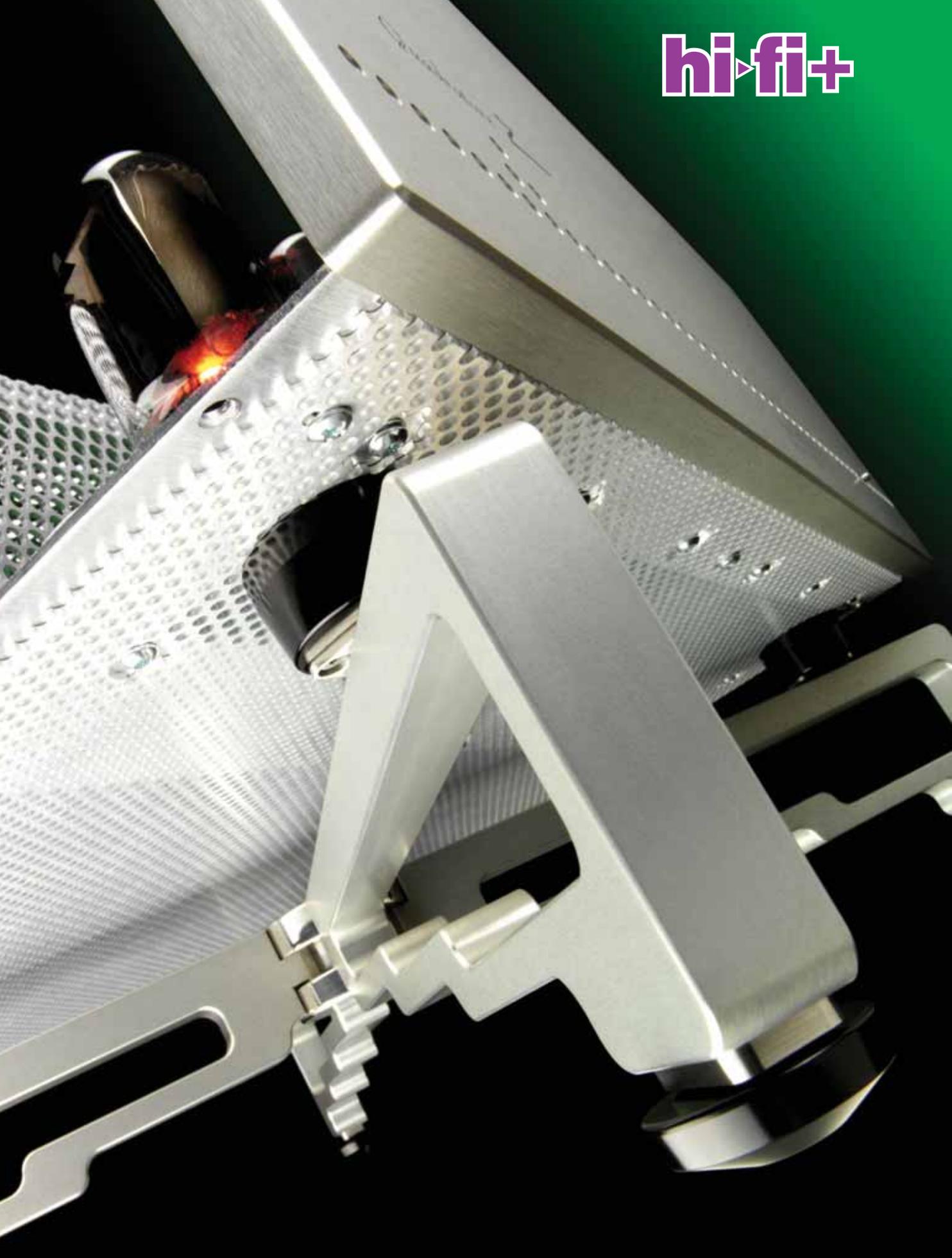


hi-fi+



# Grace And Favour...

## The David Berning Quadrature Z Mono-Blocs

by Roy Gregory

The Berning amps, as they not surprisingly tend to be known, given their clumsy and convoluted nomenclature, arrived with quite a fanfare – and an equally impressive reputation to live up to. Most recently, CT has declared them the most impressive amps he's ever used, and whilst they are also the most expensive by some margin, there's no escaping the depth of the impression they made on him. Then of course, there's that price tag – a burden that can weigh just as heavily as a record transfer fee on the shoulders of a footballer. (Well, before the days of the Premiership, when players gave a fig about more than their next pay-cheque!) But there's more besides; the cult reputation and almost underground status of previous Berning products, tales of whose performance have been whispered in the darkened back corridors of the audiophile community for many a year. And finally, there's the man himself – undeniably and genuinely brilliant as well as creatively eccentric (who else would wear a valve wrist-watch?). Audio is just a hobby for him, relaxation after a heavy day certifying power device performance and safety for the US government. It is, quite literally, a high-powered responsibility. How does he accomplish the task? By designing and building ultra fast and accurate valve circuits to do the job. Yes, that's right; he uses tube circuits to test and measure the fastest solid-state devices...

My first exposure to Berning electronics was in a system at the Montreal Show a good few years ago. It was the same system that

introduced us to Stillpoints – and was producing not just one of the best sounds at the show, but impressive sound by any measure. It was an encounter that had a profound effect on our thinking, but whilst the Stillpoints devices have become a prominent part of our ongoing history, engaging with the Berning amps has taken quite a bit longer.

In part that's because David Berning isn't really interested in his hobby becoming a business, being happy to tinker and build a few

amps for friends.

But those friends, having trodden a long and often winding road to audio Nirvana, are less relaxed about the products and their potential. More people, they reason, should have the opportunity to hear what a truly ground breaking amp can do (and make no mistake – the circuitry in these amps is totally unlike anything you'll have seen or heard before). Eventually they brokered a deal in which the man would provide the design and engineering expertise, but they would handle all other aspects of the business. The Quadrature Zs are the first product of this arrangement and, if these are

anything to go by, the future looks rosy indeed.

The Berning mono-blocs pitch up right alongside the likes of the Hovland Stratos, the big c-j and Karan mono-blocs, established favourites offering a powerful and balanced performance that makes them the pick of the amplification options we've heard



The Quadrature Zs are perfectly comfortable in such exalted company, but like each of those models, they also bring their own particular slant to proceedings, that one realm in which they excel – except that in this instance it's not so much a presence as an absence that really impresses.

Even the briefest of listens to the Berning amps will make you realize that there's something remarkable going on. Both the speed of the amps and the pace of the music, its ability to progress seamlessly from measured phrases to lightening quick runs of notes, is remarkable in the realm of hi-fi reproduction. It invests the playing with an expressive range, a mastery of time and space that's captivating. Playing the Heifetz *Kreutzer Sonata* on Cisco's superb re-pressing allows the amps to really show their flair, ►

▶ matching the maestro for poise and his flair for the dramatic contrast. The sudden switches of line and musical accelerations, the blindingly quick sprays of notes that scatter from his bow, are beautifully controlled and juxtaposed with the slower passages and the sonorous support of the piano part. The balance between the instruments is perfectly maintained – and if Heifetz is a little larger than life, well, that’s life!

It’s listening to the unfettered majesty of performances such as these that reveals just how much the Berning amps are contributing to the experience. What you become aware of is the complete lack of restraint in the process – not the music, where the players exhibit exemplary control – but the process of reproducing it. No matter how fast the signal or how wide and sudden the dynamic jumps it makes, it is never slowed or impeded. Simply because things can happen as quickly as they need to, suddenly the sense of the system tracking the demands of the signal disappears altogether, allowing the music to ebb and flow, race or dawdle as the players desire.

Add to that the OTL’s traditional transparency and the Bernings’ lack of grain, a facet of their sophisticated power supply, and you have an instrument for unimpeded access to the inner workings of any recording. Key to that capability is the lack of baggage, the absence of extra weight or colour, either right across or at discrete bands within the bandwidth. Rhythmic patterns are never slurred or slowed, and only stumble when they’re meant to – or they were played that way. These amps aren’t lean in the traditional sense that we use that word – but they are spare, without an ounce

of extra fat on their musical bones, neither adding to the music’s colours nor taking away. Indeed, one of the few artifacts I can attribute to the Quadrature Zs is a subtle shallowing of instrumental textures, but you’ll need a good system and fantastically good speakers to hear it! You might also detect a hint of coldness, but that’s more to do with another absence – the lack of expected, added warmth.

The Bernings were run with a number of speakers but I was



fortunate to have them in-house alongside the MartinLogan CLX electrostatics. Cue that old joke about OTLs and electrostatic loudspeakers – the one that points out that the transformer has been moved from the output of the amp to the input of the speaker. Be that as it may, the combination was spectacularly successful, possessing phenomenal presence, intimacy and immediacy. But in a way, what was more impressive was the way in which these amps handled the sort of moving-coil systems that would normally make an OTL go weak at the knees. This underlines the effectiveness of Berning’s patented Zero Hysteresis current-impedance conversion technique, a topology that allows the Quadrature Z to drive low impedance loads without its

output collapsing the way it does in conventional OTLs.

If this all sounds too good to have your cake and eat it, good to true, then in one sense it is. The Bernings ability to drive awkward loads is unproven, and they’ll probably need more careful speaker matching than the other amps in their class. They lack the sumptuous warmth and colours of the c-j LP-M 275s, the textural intimacy and phrasing of the STRATOS, the rock-like stability, separation and staging of the big Karans. But if you want to hear a player’s technique and immerse yourself in the structure and inner relationships

of a performance then I can think of no finer tool for the job than the Quadrature Z. Quick, capable and almost intuitively direct in its

communication, this is an amplifier that can beguile, astonish and thrill. I gave these amps to CT for review because they would fit both his system and my purpose – I wanted to stretch his appreciation of the possible. Well, now I’m duly humbled, for they’ve stretched my appreciation too. I’ve yet to discern their full mettle, but a number of projects on the horizon promise the opportunity to do just that – and believe me when I say that it will be a pleasure. ▶+

Price: £22,500 pr.

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