MAGICAL MAGICO
Martin Colloms’ enjoys a close encounter with Magico’s S5 floorstander.

AXJET BY AXHORN
Paul Messenger discovers a unique horn speaker system in the heart of Wales.

ANALOG DIGITAL?
Chris Bryant checks out MSB’s claims for its new Analog DAC.

THE SPECIAL ONE
PMC has upgraded one of PM’s favourite speakers, so how good is the iB2 SE?

LONG LIVE SUPERNAIT 2
The new Naim SUPERNAIT 2 has fewer features than its predecessor – and with good reason.

HEADPHONE EXPLOSION
Comparing newcomers from AKG, Yamaha, Jays, B&W, Sennheiser and Focal, against established references.

REVIEWS THIS ISSUE: MAGICO S5, AXHORN AXJET, AURENDER W20, PMC IB2 SE, RAIDHO D-1, NAIM SUPERNAIT 2, MSB ANALOG DAC, FENSON ISO, AKG K550, AKG Q701, YAMAHA HPH-MT220, YAMAHA HPH PRO 400, YAMAHA HPH PRO 500, o-JAYS FIVE, BOWERS & WILKINS P7, SENNHEISER MOMENTUM BLACK, SENNHEISER MOMENTUM BLUE, FOCAL SPIRIT CLASSIC, TRACK AUDIO STANDS, EPOS S15 STANDS, IFITUBE, DIVINE ACOUSTICS GRAVITY, VAN DEN HUL THE HILL, VAN DEN HUL THE MOUNTAIN
The Ambient Odyssey (Part 2)

NEW POSSIBILITIES: AMBIENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY. MARK PRENDERGAST CONCLUDES HIS SAGA

The great euphoric rush which accompanied the end of the 20th Century was soon replaced by the earth-shattering events of September 11th 2001 in New York City, now commonly referred to as 9-11. The Age Of Uncertainty was back and music as we’d known it was changed forever. The highs of House and Techno seemed a long time ago now, and the naivety of the chill-out room and the rave scene seemed a long forgotten memory. Ambient turned in on itself, becoming spare, isolationist, environmental, arty and philosophical. But out of the trauma of 9-11 and the new uncertainties of the international landscape came music that defined a new cerebral aesthetic.

High-profile pop figures like John Foxx, David Sylvian and Brian Eno had flirted with the idea of installation music for years. Eno’s Place Not Not 11-16 were defining sound installations of the late 20th Century. His Lighness of the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg Russia in 1997 was widely considered his peak accomplishment in this format, rendering the palace interiors close to the hush of a Catholic basilica. But it wouldn’t be until the 21st Century that sound art, a discipline which explores the spaces between hearing, listening, perception and environment would take off. With its roots in Dada & Surrealism, Situationism and Fluxus, it was not considered a separate movement at all for a long time, but was regarded as part of the general art scene. In the 1980s it was properly defined by New York’s ‘Sound Art Foundation’. Pauline Oliveros, Terry Fox, Alvin Lucier, Bill Fontana, Paul Horn and Toru Takemitsu would all have a huge influence.

Soon sound sculpture and sonification became significant buzz words. In 2008 a major exhibition of Sound Art took place at the Zazgori Gallery in Berlin. The city’s own Boris Hegenhein infused his works with ideas of painting and sculpture, his Feldern utilizing voices and electrostatic speakers to create ‘sound clouds’. New Yorker Douglas Henderson (a veteran of the Milton Babbit school of electronics) was adept at electro-acoustic composition and even won a Mercury Prize in 2005 for his work with Lou Reed. His Footfalls comprised a floor made acoustically live to convey the sound of human traffic.

Washington born Michael J. Schumacher is closely associated with La Monte Young and is an integral technical and engineering cog in the presentation of Young’s eternal Ambient masterpiece. A graduate of Juilliard (like Glass and Reich) he is adept in any form, especially the prepared guitar. His concentration nowadays is on the creation of computer-generated sound environments that evolve continuously over long durations, and he is one of the innovators of ambisonics where sound cubes surround the listener in perfect symmetry.

‘Enemies’ comprised a room with 71 different sound emanations. He is the sound artist who feels closest to Eno in spirit: “My work fits into the sound practice originating with Satie’s concept of furniture music”.

Agostino Di Scipio is a Professor of Electronic Music at the University of Naples. He began experimenting in his garage with synths and tape while listening to Eno, Bowie, Cluster and Pere Ubu records. He worked at the Xenakis centre in Paris and was inspired by both Satie and Cage to explore sound. He loves the idea of background noise, and his Private Rooms was mesmerising: “A self-organizing, self-regulating eco-system whose acoustic energy is background noise.” What made it delightful was that stored chunks of audio material would be activated at irregular intervals “to reveal the sounds of sex, of the toilet flushing, of praying, of confessing to ourselves, of secrets whispered”.

In 2010 it arrived big time in the UK, when Susan Philips won the Turner Prize for Lowlands - a series of intertwined Scottish laments played in variable versions through a loudspeaker system.

Back in the studio, musicians and visionaries kept mining the Ambient seam, but in isolation, no longer part of a global movement. One couldn’t get much more remote than 217 miles inside the Arctic circle; Tromso in Norway to be precise, the home of Geir Jensen. Better known today as Biosphere. A dedicated outdoor skier and mountaineer, Jensen brought the landscape of Scandinavia to his music which is full of translucent Arctic sounds. In 1997 he was signed to All Saints Records (an offshoot of Eno’s Land and Opal projects), and Substrata was released to worldwide critical acclaim. Beginning with the sound of a lone aircraft, along the way we hear samples from David Lynch’s Twin Peaks, Russian broadcasts, the customary bird noises, wind, rain and cracking fires. It reminds one of the films of Andrei Tarkovsky but there is a uniqueness to the sound. In 2001 Substrata was voted the greatest Ambient
MUSIC FEATURE

album in the history of the genre and was re-issued alongside Man With A Movie Camera with extra tracks. All latterday Biosphere music is worthwhile, especially 2002’s Shenzhou, a brilliant re-working of Debussy using samples from old scratched records.

Mining the isolationist furrow were other innovators – Thomas Koenen, Paul Schütze, Mark Van Hoen, Scanner and The Black Dog (especially on the 2010 Music For New Airports). All made worthwhile Ambient music, and all had their audience. In Britain in the 21st Century, two artistic collectives called Boards Of Canada and Marconí Union would push Ambient into the mainstream.

Describing their music as oniric (relating to dreams), Boards Of Canada’s Marcus Eoin and Mike Sandison based themselves in rural Scotland, avoiding cities, the press, and the hype of the London music scene. Accepting terms like ‘chillwave’, they disliked the word ambient being applied to their work. Inspired namers of recordings their first proper album Music Has The Right To Have Children (1998) was followed by the intriguing EPs In A Beautiful Place In The Country (2000) and Trans Canada Highway (2006). Their music blossomed on The Campfire Headphase (2005) and Tomorrow’s Harvest (2013). The New York Times greeted the latter album with the description ‘discretionary Ambience’. It’s odd stuff – with beat structures similar to Aplex Tvin often the music is pure tonal atmosphere derived from old malfunctioning equipment. They admit to loving psychedelia, especially The Beatles, the Incredible String Band, the Cocteau Twins and “the sounds between notes”. They could be termed sound collageists and much of their work echoes the best of Cabaret Voltaire or Throbbing Gristle. The sound has a cerebral intensity, a kind of lost world. They prefer absence to presence – their last gig was a secretive playback of Tomorrow’s Harvest in the Southern Californian desert on May 27th 2013.

Producing wonderfully consonant records of uplifting beauty, Manchester’s Marconí Union’s approach is the exact opposite of Boards Of Canada. A trio of Richard Talbot, Jamie Crossley and Duncan Meadows play live ambient, using keyboards, guitar, drums and effects. Highly melodic the band were discovered by All Saints’ Dominic Norman-Taylor and kicked off with the superb Distance in 2005, citing Eno, Miles Davis and Martin Hannett’s spidery production of Joy Division. Albums like A Lost Connection (2008) and Different Colours (2012) are vintage Union but Richard Talbot considers Beautifully Falling Apart (2011) to be: “the most genuinely Ambient album as it was subtitled Ambient Transmissions”.

In 2010 Marconí Union played a 150-minute set of improvised Ambient behind a glass atrium at Manchester’s City Art Gallery. In 2011 came their biggest coup, Weightless, an 8-minute composition done in collaboration with the British Academy of Sound Therapy. According to scientists it produced a 65% reduction on anxiety. Full of piano, field recordings and sound manipulation, but the hypnotic beat most clearly characterises the work. Its worldwide impact was so great that Time magazine considered the Union to be one of the great inventors of the new century.

Until May 2013, the American Ambient scene was all but unknown in Europe. Having lectured at AMBicon in Martin County (the first Ambient festival ever held in the US), I have to say the scene over there is in many ways healthier and much more experimental than what is happening on this side of the Atlantic.

AMBicon was the brainchild of Stephen Hill, America’s very own Ambient guru. As the Inventor of Hearts Of Space (a syndicated Ambient radio programme which began in Berkeley California in the mid 1970s). This went around several hundred US radio stations weekly; expanded to Hearts Of Space Records in 1984, producing 150 releases over 17 years, and has been the very best port of call for Ambient in America since 2001 through its independent subscription streaming service and the definitive weekly Ambient show presented by Hill himself. His histrionant deep voice is so appropriate he could be called Mr Ambient U.S.A.

“Artistically it’s a very healthy genre in the U.S. There’s an abundance of recordings and artists.” A former New York architect, Hill’s concentration on the detail sets the AMBicon event and the Hearts Of Space (HOS) radio/streaming service apart. “Many artists don’t understand the implications of the Fletcher-Munson ear sensitivity curves especially when streaming. The noise floor of good digital recordings differs radically from those which are compressed or levelled to max. Sequencing different sources means a lot of work to produce high-quality audio.” HOS has some of the best audio quality on the web.

Four artists stand out from the crowd as making the very best contemporary American Ambient music. Steve Roach, who has over 100 recordings to his name has established his Timestore studios in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona as ‘headquarters central’ for Ambient music production in the US. A brilliant co-mingler of vintage analogue hardware and digital systems, Roach is the soundscape extraordinaire who can literally put you into an environment.
Recordings like *Dreamtime Return* (1988) (based on a lengthy trip to the Australian outback) and *Destination Beyond* (2009) a single 73-minute track of slo-mo atmospheric music epitomize his approach. What makes Roach the best is his awesome commitment and execution. "I grew up in the desert areas of Southern California and I visualized these places in my head with sound. I worked in a record store in my teens and was inspired by Eno, Tangerine Dream, Can, Kraftwerk, Jon Hassell and especially Klaus Schulze, because of the endless immersive atmosphere of his music. After seeing both Tangerine Dream and Kraftwerk, I wanted to investigate longer harmonic drifts, slow motion beat-scapes, analogue sequencing and more."

Robert Rich, who was also born in Southern California (in 1963) is particularly interested in ethnic sounding Ambient music. Influenced by Cage, Riley, Schulze and Cluster, his early work involved deep concerts at Stanford, where he would eventually take up a post at the Center For Computer Research in Music & Acoustics. A designer of synth presets, engineer and MIDI developer, Rich is extremely bright. His music explores micro-tonality and favours Balinese, Javanese and Arabic tonalities. Two albums in particular, *Rainforest* (1989) and *Seven Veils* (1998), are tour-de-force of sound construction. "Terry Riley is my biggest influence as is the deep listening of Pauline Oliveros. My favourite album is *Sonnatia* a 7-hour recording which best expresses the very slow concentrated side of my musical process."

Probably the highlight of AMBIcon was the collaboration between Idaho-based musician Tim Story and Indiana guitarist Jeff Pearce. Since 1993 Pearce has created nearly a dozen albums featuring his heavenly guitar-scapes. *Both To The Shores Of Heaven* (2000) and *The Light Beyond* (2001) are masterpieces of beautiful sonic visions. Pearce says: "I wanted to see how low I could go on the electric guitar. William Ackerman, Harold Budd and Satie were all big influences. *Light Beyond* is actually a one-hour live recording at Philadelphia's Star's End radio show using one electric guitar, a loop box and two effects processors."

Tim Story hails from Philadelphia and is by far the most in-depth follower of Satie in his work. A maker of exquisite miniatures, Story imbues his collations of woodwinds, strings, piano and guitar with a rare emotional intensity that uplifts the music into another realm. His own recordings like *Shadowplay* (2001) and *Caravan ST* (2005) are recommended but his work with German musician Hans-Joachim Roedelsius, *Lanz* (2002) and *Lazy Art* (2013), are also essential, marrying aspects of 'kompische musik' with subtle changes of key and tempo. "In fact I was experimenting with Ambient long before Eno coined the term. I loved krautrock but also the Velvet Underground and Television. My aim is to create a wholly convincing immersive environment, yet my interests are always the construction of right, concise miniatures, rather than long drifting soundscapes. To reverse Eno's dictum, I've always leaned to the listenable rather than the ignorable."

Another important Ambient practitioner, this time on America's East Coast, is Andrew Shapiro. Like Story he's a follower of Satie, but the 1970s born New Yorker also acknowledges the influence of Jean-Michel Jarre, Sting, Brandford Marsalis, Morton Feldman, Philip Glass and the Cocteau Twins. He has produced half-a-dozen recordings on Airbox of which *Numbers, Colors & People* (2008) (produced by Michael Rieman at Philip Glass' NY studio and mastered by Jarre's sound designer Michel Geiss in Paris), and 2012's *Intimate Casual* (2012) (recorded at home on a soft-pedalled upright piano) perfectly sum up his piano art. In 2009 the track *Mini Green* achieved 3.5 million plays on Pandora Internet radio. Following in Satie's footsteps Shapiro spends every Sunday near Wall Street, playing a baby grand piano upstairs in a branch of McDonald's. "I've no limitations in terms of listening. Philip Glass paved the way here in the US for someone to get out of that school mentality. Eno also showed us it was kind of possible to have your cake and eat it too, to be relaxed but also achieve your serious art, have that simultaneity."

It seems Ambient music can never die. Will the form go on forever and ever? I'll let Stephen Hill have the last word. "I think Ambient music is really old. It goes back to the pre-history of music...to caves, canyons, natural and man-made reverberant spaces and so-called primitive instruments. It's probably one of the oldest alternative forms of music. It's found in all music, in all genrees, and has been essential in the context of religious, sacred and contemplative music for millennia. It is not limited to electronics, though they have greatly expanded its creative possibilities. We will always have the magic of slow, spatially expanded music and the profound psychological states it can create. If it were ever lost, it would have to be re-invented. We need it!"

www.ambientmusicguide.com/pages/features/Ambicon2013.php
Hearts Of Space: www.hos.com
AMBIcon: www.youtube.com/user/AMBicon2013