

IN the introduction to last year's Bristol Show report (April 1989, page 1662) I mentioned that despite all the talk of an on-going merger between audio and video, there was little real sign of it in the exhibition itself. That seemed fair enough, especially given the show's title of Hi-Fi 89. This year the video presence, was, however, rather stronger, notably enhanced by an awareness of what television's NICAM stereo sound already has to offer those who are within reach of an appropriate transmitter (Crystal Palace, London and Emley Moor, Yorkshire), and its potential for those who will be catered for later this year and during 1991.

The bigger UK manufacturers tend to aim their new product launches for the summer or winter CES in the USA, and in the case of the latter the Bristol event has for the past three years been their first opportunity to show in the UK. This year, however, saw the re-emergence of a winter hi-fi show in London, the first since the demise of the Swiss Cottage event five years ago. Audio 90, as it was called, took place at the Gloucester Hotel in South Kensington two weeks ahead of the fourth Holiday Inn show in Bristol, Hi-Fi 90.

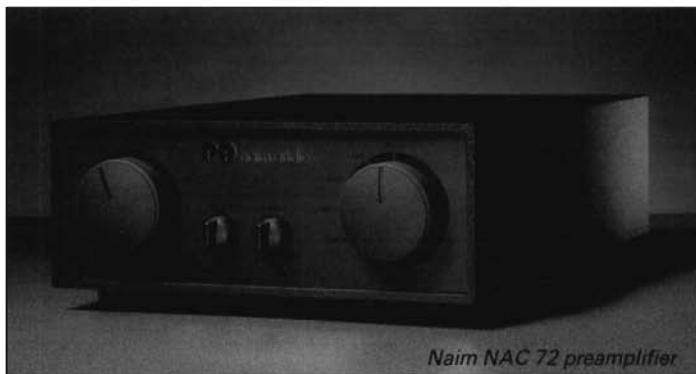
Sponsored by the North London dealer chain AT Labs, Audio 90 was a modestly scaled event based on just two floors of this conveniently situated hotel. (It would have been more convenient had Gloucester Road underground station, a mere half-minute's walk away, not been flooded over the weekend.) Nevertheless, the public attendance was by all accounts very good—I was there only on the trade day—and the fairly modest number of exhibitors who had decided to support it declared the effort worthwhile. There were 40 or so exhibitors at London and around 70 at Bristol with of course a high degree of overlap (well over 20 of those at London also exhibited at Bristol).

To be frank, neither event was overwhelmed with products fresh off the drawing board but there was nevertheless a fair amount of innovation around if one was prepared to do a little digging. What follows is a brief round-up of the things which caught my attention—a personal list of highlights, as it were, from the two shows. It makes no attempt to be comprehensive; my reasons are the constraints of editorial space and the fact that most important releases are covered anyway in our "New Products" pages month by month.

Why not start with my own contenders for the best sound? This is unfair really, because the results obtained are always determined at least as much by the surroundings as the equipment and how it is set up. At Bristol, for example, Naim had the ninth floor to themselves and a very large room there too. This was a watering hole for the faithful, split between those who wanted to sit and listen and those who had come for the word, especially about the new preamplifiers, the NAC 72 and 52. The latter is Naim's most ambitious product to date and at £3,800 it

AUDIO 90 & HI-FI 90

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Naim NAC 72 preamplifier

certainly ought to be. It comes in two boxes, one for the power supply, the other for the circuit proper. Offering six inputs which, because they are modular can be customized to the individual's requirements, it has full remote control of each function, with motorized potentiometers and opto-coupled signal relays for the switching. Dual mono construction is employed with, apparently, separate power supplies for each channel of each input. With all the goings-on it was hard to listen intently, but I did think the results were persuasive—a very coherent, comfortable, alive sound. Naim products are beautifully made and the new styling has given the range a renewed viability.

Tannoy, on the other hand were less than blessed with their accommodation three floors down. At London they had had a pretty decent room but here it was just another poky box-type bedroom, so instead of trying to put on a comprehensive demonstration of the range they very wisely restricted themselves to using just the diminutive E11 model (129-90), powering it by a Marantz CD-94/II CD player and PM-94 amplifier. I thought it worked well.

Despite Naim, though, my Bristol accolade goes to ATC for the very musical sounds issuing from their new £1,320 SCM20. This new model was having its first UK showing. A two-unit sealed enclosure design it

uses a new 9kg (!) bass/midrange drive unit derived from previous ATC thinking—massive magnet glued and bolted to a diecast aluminium chassis, and a viscose-damped polyester diaphragm of mirror image cone/dome profile. This is combined with the Vifa tweeter they employ also in their existing SCM50. A fairly low sensitivity of around 83dB/Watt/metre means the SCM20 needs a pretty capable power amplifier for lifelike levels, but the Sumo pre/power combination ATC were using was certainly wrestling some effort-less dynamics and a remarkably precise and rounded stereo image out of them.

For me the best sound of the London show was that achieved by Meridian in the KEF/Meridian room, using their latest CD player, the 208, which has a specially configured version of the new Philips Bitstream PDM (pulse density modulation) circuit, and the D600 active loudspeakers (reviewed by JB last July), these fed from the analogue output of the 208. Coherent, detailed and unforced in a very un-ideal room that had been created by partitioning-off part of the ground floor area, it was the typically well considered, indeed understated demonstration that David Inman (Marketing Director of KEF Electronics, here wearing his Meridian hat) always seems able to put on, and the results could easily have led me to outstay my welcome.

Talking of Bitstream, Philips were at both shows with their new CD-840 player (to be reviewed soon) as well as several other separates components, including a large three-way loudspeaker the FB825 (two paralleled 200mm bass drivers, a 135mm midrange unit and an isophase ribbon tweeter), which clearly has much in common with the Marantz four-way design shown in prototype form at Bristol a year ago. Some cross-fertilization of ideas here no doubt, although Marantz certainly manages to retain its autonomy under the giant's wing.

Hayden Laboratories were showing their new portable Denon CD player the DCD-100 (see "New Products" last month) and demonstrating it by taking its line output to an outboard (but hidden) amplifier and loudspeakers. I was struck by its robust construction and well thought-out features (including its twin battery compartments for up to four hours continuous play away from its power supply). Hayden also now handle Acoustic Research in the UK, since the Jensen take-over of the company in the USA, and were showing a new two-way design called the AR152, scheduled for April release and to retail for £349. This is intended for use against the wall, as is the newest addition to KEF's "C" range, the C45. Like the C15 and C25 reviewed by JB last month, this uses a metal dome tweeter and combines it with a polypropylene coned bass/midrange driver (built on a quality cast chassis) in a 20-litre enclosure.

New from Musical Fidelity are the T1 tuner (£249), FM only and tastefully styled to match the smart, 32 Watts per channel, B1 integrated



Meridian 208 CD player