

IT'S a fine sight, the Lake Michigan mist coiling around the skyscrapers of down-town Chicago—the most appealing skyline in the world in the opinion of this much-travelled reporter. It reminds the observer that, despite being more than 1,000 miles inland, this bustling town is one of the USA's busiest sea ports, served by the Great Lakes and the St Lawrence seaway. However, "bustling" wasn't quite the appropriate word to describe the 1989 Summer Consumer Electronics Show (SCES). Though widely touted as being the world's largest electronics show—and physically, it appears to the visitor to be so, being spread out in two huge multi-level halls and a number of hotels—the SCES's 13 miles of walkways were comparatively empty this year. The official attendance (all trade visitors) was 57,446, well down on previous years, though a new, more accurate accounting method does suggest that official attendance figures had been somewhat inflated in the past. Be that as it may, one thing that is certain is that high-quality audio is increasingly taking a back seat as far as this show is concerned, with many of the exhibitors who want to demonstrate sound quality being forced to take suites in out-lying hotels and the main show being dominated by cellular telephones, computer games, facsimile machines, still cameras that record a digital image on a micro-floppy computer disc, video cassette recorders (VCRs), and other non-music-related products.

For UK-based readers of this magazine, the biggest news must be that Quad finally showed pre-prototypes of their long-awaited CD player, along with a new control unit, the Quad 66, which is fully, in fact *only*, remote-controlled. I understand that UK prices had still to be set at show time, but in the US, the CD player will cost \$1,100 (£690) and the preamp \$1,400 (£875). An aesthetically attractive infra-red remote control carries all the preamplifier's function buttons as well as a conventional circular volume knob that offers 32 steps of 2dB. A custom-designed liquid-crystal display on the 66's front panel indicates volume and balance, which input has been selected, and the status of the Bass, Tilt and Filter settings. The remote also carries the controls for the CD player, which is itself devoid of any controls apart from Drawer Open and Close. (Another, less complex remote control can be supplied for owners of the CD player who do not want to use the 66.) In Quad's typically understated manner, the CD player is said to be "correctly engineered", and uses a Philips transport and 16-bit, four-times oversampling chip set, with hand-selected TDA1541A S1 D/A converters. One particular aspect of the player that I found appealing was its operational simplicity—this is *not* the machine for those who wish to spend hours programming their favourite tracks or portions of tracks from different CDs in different orders; rather, it is for those who want or need to concentrate on the music. In the words of

CHICAGO

CONSUMER ELECTRONICS SHOW

BY JOHN ATKINSON

Quad's Jeff Piel, who gave me a very effective demonstration of the new components, "If we found that we didn't make use of a function, we left it off!"

Remote-control preamplifiers are a "hot" design area right now, with the UK taking an early lead, the Quad 55 and 66 joining Meridian's 207 and the Linn LK1. The Americans are not far behind, however, and the SCES saw the official launch of a similar product from the revitalized Hafler company. Hafler is now part of the large Rockford-Fosgate corporation, which specializes in manufacturing in-car audio components, although founder David Hafler remains in a consulting position. The first product to be announced since the takeover is the all-JFET preamplifier, the Iris, which can be supplied with a well-designed infra-red remote control, distinguished by the appearance of two conventional circular control knobs. No awkward up/down buttons here either: the Iris remote offers 256 steps for both volume and channel balance, set by rotating the knobs in the usual manner. The Iris remote control can also operate all the functions of a matching FM tuner (also launched at the show) and a CD player based on a Philips chassis (which was shown in prototype form). These components are connected to the preamplifier by a ribbon-cable 'data-link' as well as by the usual signal cables, giving a

compact, fully remote-controllable system.

Meridian, i.e. Boothroyd-Stuart, now part of KEF, launched less complex versions of two of their most intriguing products at the SCES. The 206 is a CD player identically styled to Meridian's attractive 207 but lacking the preamplifier functions, while the M60 is a conventional active loudspeaker based on their excellent-sounding digital-input D600 (reviewed in July). Boothroyd-Stuart is the British company that has probably gone the farthest in promoting the idea of a multi-room system installed so as to be almost invisible to the eye, though KEF are making a lot of headway here in the States with their unobtrusive wall-mounted speakers, now joined by a version featuring their Uni-Q coaxial drive-unit. KEF also launched a modestly priced woofer for their C-series budget loudspeakers.

This custom-installation area is perhaps the only audio-related field showing a healthy growth at present in the US; even CD player sales are slowing down, as I predicted in my report from last year's show (August 1988). Sales of separate CD players in the US are expected to be just over 3 million units in 1989, compared with around 2.9 million in 1988, and many would-be owners are still put off by the high price of the discs. A typical release costs between \$15 and \$17 (£9.40 and £10.60). Cassette is the

dominant prerecorded medium here, with a specialist record store typically selling a mix of 60% cassettes, 25% CDs, and 15% LPs. The last figure is dropping fast.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, to learn that even the most reactionary of high-end audiophile manufacturers are fast adopting the Compact Disc. Commercial reality leaves them no choice, even though personally some might still feel that a well-recorded LP, played on a high-quality turntable/pickup arm/cartridge combination, has a certain something all too often lacking from CD replay. There is no doubt in my mind, however, that the influx of fresh American engineering talent into CD is resulting in some very good-sounding players. To quote record producer Robina Young of Harmonia Mundi USA, who staged an intriguing live versus digital-recorded versus analogue-recorded demonstration at the CES, "As the digital art advances, when you put back what is missing, you will get back to analogue".

Take the small Californian firm of Kinergetics, for example, whose products are distributed in the UK by Absolute Sounds. With their latest KCD-40 player, based on a Philips mechanism and eight-times oversampling digital filters with 18-bit D/A converters, they have succeeded at successive shows in producing an extremely enjoyable yet accurate sound, using modest loudspeakers (the Spica TC50s—reviewed in April 1989) with their own stereo subwoofers. I don't think I have heard a more musical presentation of orchestral music at a show. (The particular recording was Vaughan Williams's *Job*—EMI CD-EMX 9506, 10/87—engineered by the redoubtable Mr Bear, alias Mike Clements.) Also sounding excellent was a new CD player from the Madrigal company, who manufacture the expensive Mark Levinson amplifiers. Named Proceed, the player is a neat, taller-than-wide unit with a marble base. Combining Philips's top CDM1 Mk II diecast-aluminium transport with the eight-times oversampling filter used in the \$13,000 Accuphase CD player and 18-bit Burr-Brown D/A converters, the Proceed player is the first in a series of components to appear under this brand name and will cost a competitive \$1,650 (£1,000). California Audio Labs are probably the best-selling 'audiophile' player manufacturer, with their *valve* modifications of Philips chassis setting benchmarks for sound quality over the last three years. This show saw CAL proudly announce their first all-American manufactured players, the solid-state Icon and Tercet Mk III, priced to meet the top-quality Japanese players head-on, at \$695 and \$1,295, respectively. But perhaps the most tempting player at the show was the new Rotel RCD855, which, while being an absolutely conventional Philips-based machine, sounded excellent and is to be priced at just \$350 (£220).

The main American thrust, however, is in the field of add-on digital processors. The Black Box from A&R Cambridge (Arcam), which



The new Quad CD player (top), 66 control unit and remote control seen with the existing 306 power amplifier