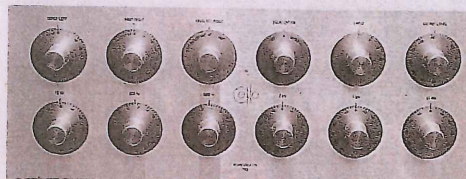
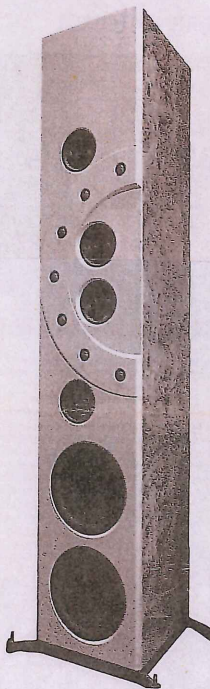


A perfect sound at any price



Golden-eared hi-fi enthusiasts with gilded pockets to match will stop at nothing to achieve the best audio quality, as *Peta Tomlinson* discovers



Top and above, Cello amplifier and speaker, rated the best of the best by Danny Au of Jadis Electronics. Photos: Oliver Tsang

HOW MUCH WOULD you be prepared to pay to listen to your favourite CDs?

If you would swap a week's wages for a reasonable car sound system, or maybe a month's pay for a good home stereo, no doubt you are a discerning judge of music.

But if your idea of perfection is just the Rolls-Royce of hi-fi equipment, then some will say you are not aiming high enough. Only those with "golden ears", not to mention considerable wealth, may join the revered ranks of the true audiophile. The word may not even be in the dictionary, but that hasn't stopped a proliferation of magazines and Internet sites dedicated to audiophiles around the world, united as one in their search for perfect sound, true reproduction.

Hong Kong magazine *Audiotechnique* has 12,000 to 20,000 readers whose buying trends are influenced by new brand releases, technological improvements and even changes in the season, says general manager Rebecca Chin.

These purists are apparently so sensitive to sound that they can tell the difference if so much as a cable has been changed in their hi-fi system. They'll shell out fortunes for a pieced-together system that doesn't even have to look good.

Some pool-pool the CD, maintaining that the analogue vinyl record of yesteryear delivers a purer sound than modern-day digital recordings. And if they're really serious, they lock themselves away in a special room to enjoy their music in solitude. So where are they, these musical elitists with golden ears and gilded pockets to match?

Lawyer Jonathan Midgley, describing himself as "simply a music lover", listens to his favourite tunes on a hi-fi system worth a cool \$1.5 million. That's not excessive, argues Midgley. "I'm a non-neurotic, small spender. I know people who'll spend \$10 million," he says.

True audiophiles often care more about the equipment than the music it produces, Midgley says. "It becomes like an addiction... they change equipment every six to 12 months, lose an enormous amount of money, and try to squeeze extra mileage out of every piece of equipment. A lot of them don't seem to enjoy



Jonathan Midgley with his hi-fi system worth \$1.5 million. He says: "I'm a non-neurotic, small spender. I know people who'll spend \$10 million." Photo: Antony Dickson

music much at all. They're more worried about the reproduction of the note than the context of the music."

Midgley is not a fan of piecing together different brands of equipment. He uses only Audio Note Japan, a system costing from \$250,000 to \$2 million, assembled by hand in Tokyo by Hiroyasu Kondo and his five assistants and regarded by some as the world's finest music systems.

The metallic innards of these systems are all made of silver, because Kondo was once a metallurgist and decided that silver was the best medium through which pure sound could be transferred from a recording into the air.

Midgley was so impressed he became the Hong Kong distributor for Audio Note Japan, doing deals from his living room "over a glass of wine and a chat".

Some are so passionate about their music, Midgley says, that they actually buy a second apartment for the sole purpose of housing their hi-fi.

They don't live in them, but go there to avoid the "interference" their wives and children might cause to their listening pleasure. Kind of like running away to the other woman? "Some people I know refer to these houses in womanly terms," he agrees.

"Mixing up hi-fi equipment to me is wrong. It's like buying a car with Ford wheels, a Honda engine and a Lexus interior," says Midgley, who owns more

than 3,000 LP records and 500 CDs. "You need to stick to one manufacturer's vision, otherwise it will be unbalanced." While Audio Note Japan has been described as the Ferrari of the hi-fi world (except some Ferraris are cheaper), Midgley prefers the analogy of a fine oil painting. "It can be kept, enjoyed, looked at and passed on. It can last more than a generation," he says.

Bang and Olufsen customers such as attorney Richard Lucchese own "the Mercedes of the hi-fi world", according to the company's Central store manager, Dick K.C. Man. "Choosing a sound system is like choosing a work of art," Man says. "Bang and Olufsen is not Rolls-Royce, but it is at least a Mercedes. For many Hong Kong people, this matches their image."

Lucchese, a third-generation Bang and Olufsen man, is happy with his \$80,000 investment in a slimline hi-fi with remote-control features. "I take my music very seriously, but design is also important to me," he says.

Danny Au at Jadis Electronics sells high-end audio equipment with names that if you've never heard of them, you're not an audiophile. His customers mix and match their systems using the best components from various manufacturers, paying between \$500,000 and \$1 million for a set.

Au's opinion on the best of the best would be Cello or Boulder amplifiers, a Wadia sound processor (CD player) and

speakers from Cello or Westlake. They might be contained in old-fashioned looking outer casings, but their beauty comes from within.

Computer engineer Andrew Cheung says he is a "learner" audiophile. He speaks reverently of "the people with golden ears", who can pick up differences between interconnection cables. "To laymen like us there is no difference, but they can hear it," he says.

Cheung's system - comprising Sonic amplifiers, Proac speakers and Lexicon sound processor - was put together with the advice of Raymond Chang and Samuel So of Allegro Audio in Central.

Under their guidance, Cheung is being trained to hear the subtle differences that could one day lead him towards attaining the "golden ear".

Chang and So are audio enthusiasts who turned their hobby into a business. They spent \$200,000 in fitting out their shop with a special acoustic room, which, as they point out, is the only way to fully appreciate high-end audio systems. Without the right environment, Chang says, a \$1 million masterpiece can end up sounding "worse than a \$10,000 system".

"Hi-fi [appreciation] is the art of listening and carefully putting compatible pieces together, then having the right environment," Chang says. "It can take 10 to 15 years to become a good listener. And for serious high-fidelity sound you need

one good acoustic room, somewhere your system has space to breathe."

Allegro's studio must be one of the few places in Hong Kong where an old-fashioned record player is still not only in existence, but gets pride of place. It's there for the purists who still believe the analogue LP is the best way of enjoying music. "A lot of high-end audiophiles think the sound characteristic of the CD is too harsh," Chang explains.

Ellis Fung of Precision Audio says he has sold "countless" systems costing \$500,000 to Hong Kong enthusiasts. Some have had to build special acoustic rooms in their homes to satisfy wives who object to the sometimes-ugly, always-bulky look of a top-end hi-fi system.

One of his customers, electrical engineer Alan Chui, says having an acoustic room would be his dream come true. Having started with a cassette recorder bought as a teenager with money earned in a part-time job, Chui has progressed to a \$300,000 system that is spread out "everywhere" all over the living and dining rooms.

Another customer, Au Yeung, agrees. A service manager and collector of LPs (he owns "about 1,000"), Yeung says his \$500,000 hi-fi will do for now. But as all true audiophiles know, there's always the potential for something more.

"If something better comes along, I will change it," Yeung says. Even if it costs more? "Of course."