

This spread | 1999: Full Metal Jacket 'FMJ' unit

# CHASING THE FUTURE

**Adrian Stokes**, principal of asa designers, reflects on a twenty-year creative relationship with the Cambridge audio manufacturers Arcam

My company, asa designers, has worked with scores of companies since 1985. Unsurprisingly the long-term ones have not only been our lifeblood, but the most engaging, challenging and fun. I suspect most of our contemporaries would share that view if they've been lucky enough to have the same experience; one friend, for example, still designs for Samsonite after 40 years!

respectful, keen for our input, but no patsies. They could articulate their thoughts and reactions without being bombastic or arrogant and we became intensely loyal to them all.

High quality hi-fi is something the UK is pretty good at. As a student, I lusted after a Quad 22 system and ESL speaker. The range appeared in 1959 and back then was a thoroughgoing statement of modern design in a thoroughly

Thoeren's TD124 turntable with an SME pick-up arm, hi-fi's holy grail. Ironically, they were kept behind closed doors, in a huge ornate cabinet. On the rare occasions we visited I would gawp in hope, but it was never played. Sadly, Bambi and Walter died within a month of each other in 1987 and the system came to me with an original Kenwood Chef.

Back at my house, later that year, my faulty



In our case the associations dovetailed: Gordon Russell Furniture; then Carlton Luggage; and since 1999, Arcam, manufacturers of audiophile hi-fi. What they all had in common were CEOs or owners who were innovators in markets that were hungry for new ideas. All knew their business, had an instinctive eye for good design and a lively interest in it. Furthermore, all were

modern, high technology business. I only became aware of Quad in the early 70s, about the time I also became aware my mother had a prodigal sister Bambi, who coincidentally was a successful lighting designer. She and 'Uncle Walter' lived in a swish mansion in Wimbledon and Walter was a music and hi-fi lover, owning a Quad 22 system, Quad ESL speaker, and a

wiring-up left me so disappointed at the sound I packed it away and it was months before I looked again and read the instructions. To promote their product Quad would put a string quartet and the Quad 22 system on a stage behind a curtain and ask an audience to say which was live. For present day music lovers brought up on Bose, Sonos and now Alexa who have never listened to 'proper'



hi-fi, take a favourite record, CD, or download into a specialist shop and ask them to play it, you're in for an epiphany and might well cry. Hi-fi nerds talk about sound, like wine buffs talk about wine and whilst I never had much time for either, the sound from those valves and that single ESL speaker was so precise, crisp, textured and faithful, it was thrilling.

Ten years later we were approached by one of hi-fi's premier league, Naim Audio, to work

on some new speakers. Naim was run by a true entrepreneurial eccentric Julian Vereker and his office at their factory in Salisbury looked like someone had tossed in a grenade and shut the door. Outside his den it was something else. Naim make instruments for playing music, witness people in white coats placing small squares of rubber on electronic components; nothing was overlooked in the drive to eke out perfection, or Julian's view of it. At this end of the market hi-fi

buyers are not so much customers as disciples. Brands like Naim, Linn and Meridian attained cult status in the 1970s and demanded total loyalty from those with pockets deep enough to indulge themselves.

Enter Arcam. Amplification & Recording Cambridge was founded in 1976 by John Dawson and Chris Evans alongside their respective wives Jackie and Sue, all students at Cambridge University. John and Chris made amplifiers in





their spare time and together they launched the A60 amplifier. I knew of Arcam but not much about them until 1998 when my company was contacted by Phil Taylor at the Design Council. Phil had been asked by Arcam to put forward the names of industrial designers so they could cherry pick one to work with them on a new product range. We were one of the initial bunch.

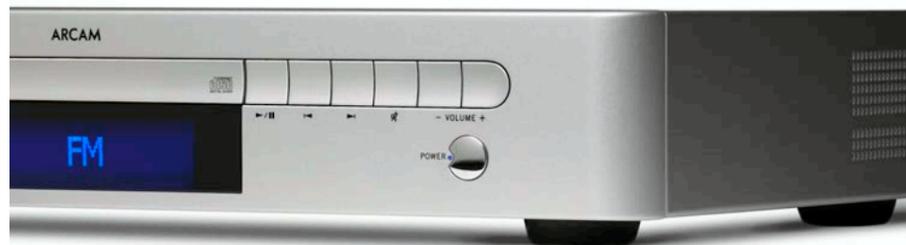
The company were known as producers of good quality, good value hi-fi separates and whilst they didn't have the mystique of Naim et alia, on asking around some specialist shops we discovered that in terms of sound quality, they were considered to be up with the very best. The gallery of awards in the stairwell at the Cambridge

factory testified to this. Our competition for the work were a select group and by the time we came to present to John and his team, we'd realized that Arcam was rather an exciting prospect and so as usual I set about presenting our work as if I was having an anxiety attack. No matter, somehow we made the cut to the final four and the senior team at Arcam came to see us at our studio in Kingston. I don't remember this meeting quite as clearly as the Cambridge one, but at least I was calmer, my team were there and it seemed to go well. The outcome was unexpected, a split decision! The company's owner John Dawson headed one faction and marketing director Charlie Brennan the other.

Charlie is a character, with an interesting family background, a deep love of music and an independent streak. Whilst studying at University College in Dublin he decided music was his first love and left. Having mooched around the industry learning about products and how to sell them, his big break was to join Linn in the mid 1980s, working with owner Ivor Tiefenbrun. This period brought him into contact with some leading creative lights such as Richard Rodgers who designed the new Linn Factory, Helmut Esslinger at Frog design and Andreas Haug who together with Tom Schönherr formed the outstanding Phoenix Design. I knew none of this, but I did hear he was fighting our corner and 19 years later he still was when Arcam became part of the Samsung corporation. In 1999 ASA was appointed to work with them on a project called FMJ or Full Metal Jacket (referring to the product's case work rather than the Kubrick movie).

Since the 1950s the specialist hi-fi industry had predominantly made separates and speakers. Separates are a collection of individual units that

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Opposite page | 2005: Solo and accompanying remote control  
Left and below | 2006: Muso front and back view



might include an amplifier, tuner, CD player, a power amp and later, following the arrival of DVD, products for the emerging audio visual market. In the late 90s Arcam had bucked the trend and decided styled plastic was a better bet than machined aluminium for their separates. This was rather like turning up at Ascot in a flat cap and despite the products' audio performance certain important markets voted with their feet. In Germany, Japan, Switzerland and Sweden customers couldn't take their eyes off the flat cap and Arcam needed to address the problem. The aim with FMJ was that it should be a simple, refined, beautifully made statement of quality and good taste. We were proud of the work, which was universally well received, especially in markets lost during the plastic period. Indeed, FMJ is still in production 19 years on. A second, lower cost

range of separates, DIVA, followed later that year but the market was changing with new technology driving innovation. Keeping up in a specialist area was a challenge for everyone.

In the late 80s the Japanese adopted a term to describe US business: 'fast gun slow bullet'. Probably the gun and the bullet are equally slow in the era of global business and corporations look for new ideas from small, smart businesses. From big pharma to big tech, small is beautiful and a window on what's coming next.

What most impressed me over the years we worked with Arcam was the ability of this small team to adapt and continually create truly world beating, world firsts. The first DAB radio in 1999 which found its way into the FMJ range was one of those and it's no coincidence that it coincided with the arrival of Charlie Brennan and his rise

to CEO soon after. Charlie and the Arcam team had the whiff of the underdog about them. A slightly chippy, but paradoxically cocky and unconventional group of individuals. Charlie was a latter-day Brian Clough, managing a bunch of unlikely lads to produce something exceptional. I was a Clough fan and loved this about them, though it wasn't always an easy environment for an industrial designer.

The new millennium brought Apple's iPod and a period of accelerating change. The pressure to anticipate the future and create products that customers wanted would become a surefire guard against complacency. Arcam aimed to make products that were not only more affordable, but packaged and presented in ways that stood out and were attractive to potential users in smaller homes, without alienating their audiophile



audience. Their mantra became 'better sound for more people', the task was to be first and best, wherever they set out their stall and Solo Music was a bold break with their high-end traditions. A one box system which integrated an amplifier, CD player, DAB and FM tuners into one unit, it was a breakthrough product for Charlie and the Arcam team. Reviewers noted that it could light up the listening lives of serious musos and was in a form that attracted a new, design-conscious audience. Many of these new customers would receive their first experience of true, high fidelity sound.

Jonathon Margolis at the FT wrote: "A huge, million decibel roar of applause, then for this utterly gorgeous magnificent new one-box hi-fi from Arcam, one of those normally blokey high end audio manufacturers in the UK's hi-fi gulch around Cambridge. Arcam has joined the elite of British companies (Linn being another) capable of producing a serious hi-fi that - how can I put this? - no girl could object to, indeed I think there's a bit of clever branding going on in Arcam's naming of this sleek beautiful machine Solo..."

What I remember most about the project was

not only the way in which we were pushed to find the right face for the Solo idea, but once that was agreed, the entire team ensured the manufactured quality of the unit measured up. Accolades, awards and sales followed and were an indication that, as the FT had suggested, Arcam was eyeing a seat at the top table. Finding it was one thing, hanging onto it would be another. What was also clear was that a design conscious younger audience were buying with their eyes as well, as their ears. Furthermore, the tech world had become a shape shifting monster that could re-appear and sideswipe even the most savvy sound man.

As Solo was being launched in Alexis Park at CES 2005, I was in the main hall where a start-up named Sonos was showing the prototype for a multi-room system which allowed speakers to be connected around the house wirelessly. Whilst attendants on the huge corporate stands were

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Left | 2015: rCube  
Below | 2016: Mini Blink DAC



thumb twiddling, the modest Sonos stand and surrounding aisles were heaving. We were looking at the future, though I confess I saw only some great looking products and felt the energy that was largely absent from the rest of the CES bun fight. Under the surface of the Sonos prototypes was a revolutionary undercurrent.

Sonos was a story in gestation, meanwhile Arcam were shaking up the ultra-conservative high end hi-fi market. Solo had created a new niche which was consolidated a year later by the introduction of Solo Mini and a companion loudspeaker Muso, a duet so good no one who called at my studio escaped a demo. CEO Charlie Brennan meanwhile led a management buyout from John and wife Jackie, (John continued to do excellent technical work with the company) and there was a continual push to explore new ways for people access great quality sound. Somewhere at Arcam there's a cupboard with prototypes that were forerunners of later shifts in the market, but, for whatever reason, they stayed on the bench and never achieved final selection.

The drive to innovate and the desire of the



small team at Arcam to take on all comers never waned. Whilst maintaining their position in the separates market and improving the Solo range the technical team was always looking ahead and our task was to dress these ideas so they were ready to face their public. In truth, many never dropped their veils. Arcam continued to push the boundaries developing technical partnerships and moving into more consumer markets. rCube, introduced in 2010 and the What HiFi product of the year, was a truly portable music player giving a voice to iPods and allowing users to connect wirelessly to a range of devices. The sound quality, flexibility and portability it offered created a huge potential market. Responding to dramatic shifts in consumer behaviour and then promoting them to help realize their commercial potential is the monkey on the back of so many SME's and a regular source of frustration.

What no small tech company can do is dictate the behavior of component suppliers, guarantee the success of a new technology, or even predict a financial crash. In any business, how you deal with those moments is telling. How you deal with all three, survive and then prosper, depends on the physical and mental constitution of those occupying the hot seats and their ability to maintain R&D momentum without sacrificing the quality of the products they make. Arcam met fairy godparents in

the form a Canadian investor and it seemed to us they barely missed a beat. Having relocated to new premises the company embarked on a continuous programme of improvements and innovations that put them top of the fast-developing market for AV products. They also carried their fight into the mainstream, from sound-bars, to desktop speakers and a range of digital to analogue converters. DAC's are pieces of technical alchemy that can conjure audio gold even from 58year old classic amplifiers. They facilitate music sharing, awakening memories of teen years spent wandering around with arms full of vinyl and in many ways Arcam's Mini Blink is the consumer markets high-end, hi-fi product of its time.



Left | 2015: Arcam soundbar  
Below | 2016: Solo Music 2

There's no doubt the relationship between those responsible for the technical genius that affords the rest of us the opportunity to experience beautiful music beautifully and the industrial designer who gives it a public face, can be testy at times. However, the last 19 years allowed us to get close to some of the real heroes of our tech driven world, whose work we take for granted every single day. In Arcam's case, if the objective was to deliver 'better sound to more people' then by any benchmark they have done that.

This surface scratching, short story of our experience ends with a new chapter, as Arcam begins life under the Samsung wing, who I hope will appreciate the worth of this super-talented pioneering bunch of 'diamond geezers' and let them fly. |

*Adrian Stokes is a practitioner, thinker and occasional design writer.*

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