



Practically perfect?

Looks to die for, performance to enthral and not a single bad habit – **Ed Selley** might have found an ideal trio that doesn't cost the earth

As the sort of cultured and intelligent type to read *Beautiful Systems*, I know that you know that behind the fulsome praise of many systems lie one or two drawbacks. Some previous subjects have been very large and heavy, others have a price tag you might usually see in a car showroom while others perform the way they do thanks to engineering decisions that make them tricky to live with. The name of the piece is *Beautiful Systems*, not *Practical Systems*, so this is hardly surprising.

What you see here, though, is a system that balances beauty with impressive practicality and barnstorming performance with manageable dimensions. I won't insult your intelligence by calling it cheap, but if you bear with me I think we could definitely stretch to bargain. This is a combination of Danish design flair and Italian artistry that walks an almost perfect line between appealing to heart and head.

The Danish contribution comes from Copland in the form of the CDA825 CD player and CTA405 amplifier. The

CDA825 is sufficiently lovely to have featured in a *Beautiful System* before and any time spent with it makes it easy to understand why. Internally, the CDA825 is bang up to date; twin 192kHz-capable DAC's, custom digital filters and a tremendously sophisticated power supply arrangement are all present and correct on the spec sheet and internal shots show just how much of that substantial footprint is given over to electronics rather than air.

What makes the CDA825 special, though, is the way it looks and feels



COMPONENTS

1 SONUS FABER VENERE 2.5 £1,998

The newest member of the Sonus Faber range is also its 'affordable' offering, but you'd be hard pressed to tell looking at the gorgeous styling and high-quality driver compliment. Usefully high sensitivity allows them to compliment the Copland nicely.

2 COPLAND CDA825 £4,298

The only piece of source equipment in the Copland range, the CDA825 combines state-of-the-art decoding with gorgeous casework and an extraordinary top-loading mechanism that manages to add a real sense of ceremony to putting a CD on.

3 COPLAND CTA405 £2,998

Copland's take on an integrated amplifier is a design based around a quartet of 6550 valves for a useful 50W output, all wrapped in lovely minimalist styling. Not enough? How about an all-valve phono stage and full remote control to boot?



while being state of the art. I am sure that there is a sound engineering reason why the lid to the top loading mechanism is a rotating platter the size of a side plate, but back in the real world what it does beyond reasonable doubt is create a bit of ceremony to the business of changing CDs – usually a process so anodyne as to slip the mind in seconds. The illuminated legends positioned above the buttons and crisp red on black display give the CDA825 an aesthetic appeal that puts it ahead of more conventional competition.

One step beyond

The partnering CTA405 integrated amp arguably goes a step further. The only integrated in the Copland range, the CTA405 is a valve amp but one apparently designed by people without the slightest interest in compromising modern life to use them. The chassis encloses every hot and high voltage component, every aspect of its functionality can be performed from the (lovely all metal and system-driving) remote control and the quartet of 6550 valves give an output of 50W – perhaps not enough for a festival, but certainly enough to give you a wide choice of partnering speakers. Around the back, three line inputs and a tape loop should allow for most systems to be accommodated. The final flourish is the presence of an all-valve internal



phono stage that is capable of showing standalone designs a thing or two if you are a vinyl user.

It is also gorgeous. The CTA405 is not exactly small, but the simplicity of the styling hides this amazingly well. The symmetrical arrangement of the controls, the half circle of input lights and the control knobs that move with the assurance of a high-class bank safe all combine to make the CTA405 feel very, very special. £2,998 is no small amount of money, but I can't think of much that does more than the Copland for less.

To find a suitable match for these dynamic Danes, we turn to fellow Absolute Sounds portfolio member Sonus faber. In this instance, the speaker selected is the newest member of the range, the Venere 2.5. In some regards, the Venere has the hardest job of any Sonus faber, because while customers are confident that a Sonus faber will have excellent performance, they also expect that it will be beautiful. With the more expensive products, this is



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEMS COPLAND/SONUS FABER



achieved by Sonus faber doing what it does best and using exquisite materials in striking designs. At the relatively terrestrial price of the Venere, this is a much tougher proposition. Aesthetics are a subjective area, but I think it has succeeded admirably with the Venere. The styling is clean, understated and modern, but at the same time undoubtedly a Sonus faber. Like the Copland's they partner, the fit and finish is absolutely top notch.

It's oh so quiet

The resulting system is visually elegant, built like a piece of research equipment and impressively specified, but more importantly than any of that, one that sounds absolutely fantastic. Pick a CD – literally anything – take the time to enjoy the digital equivalent of cueing it up in the CDA825 and pausing only to notice that the CTA405 is astonishingly quiet for a valve amp, and I almost guarantee that this system will impress.

The main reason for this all round ability is that the electronics and speakers are completely free of emphasis in any particular area of the frequency spectrum. This means that they go about music reproduction in a way that is incredibly unforced, but at the same time means that nothing is lost from the performance. I jump from the Cinematic Orchestra's sparse

but beautiful *In Motion* #1 to the barely contained fury of Underworld's *Everything Everything* in one sitting and at no stage do I feel that the system is ever out of its depth. The assurance, agility and integration it has is at home with a tiny circle of performers playing softly as it is with an electronics act on the rampage.

At first it is slightly hard to work out if the valves in the CTA405 bring

Partnered with the Veneres, the headroom on offer is effectively unlimited for most domestic environments

anything to the performance, but the more time you listen the more you realise that some of this apparent effortlessness comes from the wonderful air and space around vocals and the very faithful tonality accuracy that the system possesses. What makes this rewarding is that partnered with the Veneres, the headroom on offer is effectively unlimited for most domestic environments and the system will go impressively loud without any signs of hardening or strain.

Listening to components in isolation, you begin to realise just how well they complement each other in practice. The CDA825 extracts incredible detail from discs

ABOVE LEFT:
The top-loading mechanism makes loading a CD more of a ceremony

ABOVE CENTRE:
Typically of Sonus Faber, the Venere is a stunning speaker

and has a soundstage to die for. This is preserved intact by the CTA405 that adds that wonderful tonal sweetness and some unusually assured timing for a valve design before the Sonus fabers carry the sonic ball over the line by keeping everything intact and adding a scale and airiness to the final performance that is larger than even their relatively substantial dimensions suggest is possible. Nothing cancels out the positive attributes of the other components, instead they collectively augment one another. This sounds simple, but I've rarely seen it happen as effectively as it does here.

The price is right

The end result is a system that is greater than the sum of great parts. It has an audio performance that stands comparison with any system at the same price – beautiful or otherwise – and combines this with fabulous styling, sensible dimensions and the sort of build that is not commonly encountered anywhere near the price. What's more, going right back to the beginning, there are no obvious downsides. The amplifier has plenty of extra inputs if you need them and control and operation of the entire system is marginally more taxing than using a knife and fork. This piece might not be called practical systems, but as a collection of electronics to live with and enjoy every single day, this system will take some beating ●



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