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## Paul Miller Editor

Technician and writer on all things audio for over 25 years, Paul Miller took over the editor's chair in 2006. He invented the QC Suite, used across the audio industry

# Sleight of hand and ear

What helps mould our impression of a product's sound quality – its engineering, its aesthetics or association with a particular musical lifestyle? None of us is beyond suggestion says **Paul Miller**

**H**aving conducting blind and sighted listening tests over some 25 years, I've come to a few conclusions about the 'audiophile condition'. In a nutshell, while I believe that blind listening tests performed in a level-matched but relaxed environment yield a clear picture of a product's absolute sound quality, these impressions may not always be mirrored in 'real life'.

Why? Because nobody will ever ask a hi-fi retailer to select a fine CD player and install it into his (or her) listening room while simultaneously keeping the choice and price of the player a closely guarded secret. Indefinitely. It just isn't practical. And anyway, how are you going to load a disc into the player with your eyes shut?

The plain truth is this: knowledge of the player's brand, its aesthetics, price and – yes – its critical reputation are all part of the purchasing and *listening* experience. Like it or not, a large proportion of our perception of sound quality is governed by our knowledge and preconceptions of the hardware to which we are listening.

### SETTING THE SCENE

I drafted a crude illustration of this phenomenon for our demo room at the Bristol Hi-Fi Show this February. On the hour every hour, our listening sessions ostensibly demonstrated the fine sound achievable by partnering a costly pair of speakers (Sonus faber Minima), a mighty amplifier (the Krell S-300i) with a modest digital front-end (a budget Cambridge CD player/DacMagic combination). And, over three days, our 200 guests generally agreed the sound was rather fine, with personal tastes only intervening over our choice of vocal, rock and classical music selections.

It was only when we ejected the CD tray and the music continued to run that our subterfuge was revealed. Our friends had been listening to an iPod all along. But this was not compressed MP3 played

through its analogue output but linear PCM files – identical to those burned onto our CD-R disc – recovered through a Wadia 170i dock (*HFN*, Dec '08) and transmitted as S/PDIF data to the aforementioned Cambridge DacMagic (*HFN*, Feb '09). We were simply using the iPod as a digital storage device, an alternative to CD-R.

### DIGITAL IN TWO FLAVOURS

Once our ruse was exposed we then listened to back-to-back comparisons of the CD player and iPod dock digital

*'Our impression of a brand, its aesthetics and price are all part of the purchasing and listening experience'*

outputs, both running into the same DacMagic converter. In practice there was not a huge difference. After all, this was the same 16-bit/44.1kHz LPCM recording, albeit delivered from two alternative digital sources.

However, would our room have been so packed with enthusiasts if I had invited them at the outset to 'come in and listen to my iPod'? Most agreed the prospect would have seemed less than thrilling, because we typically associate the ubiquitous 'Pod with low-fi compressed audio. Our demo showed the need to constantly question our prejudices, for if the iPod is used to store uncompressed digital audio at 16-bit/44.1kHz then it's really no different from any other basic CD-based storage/server solution. Provided you can extract a digital output using the likes of the Wadia 170i, that is.

### WIDENING THE DEBATE

This also feeds into the wider debate about audio measurements apparently failing to correlate with the listening experience,



ABOVE: What is playing through the DacMagic – the digital output of a Cambridge CD player or Wadia iPod dock?

because this presupposes that one listener's impression of a product's sound quality is somehow inviolate or absolute. In practice of course it's not.

Taste is neither right nor wrong, but it is always personal. The fact that some enthusiasts prefer the sound of valves over transistors, of panels over boxes or vinyl over CD is the variety that makes hi-fi so enjoyable. It's why some of our readers will immediately turn to read an effervescent and entertaining review by Ken while others prefer the strict admonishment offered by Keith, the most feared scribe in the industry.

We all have our favoured critics. But I'll leave you to chew over this thought: regardless of the impressions put to paper by one or more of our experienced reviewers, the results from the lab would always remain the same. ☺



ABOVE: Visitors to the *HFN* demonstration at this year's Bristol Show discover they've been listening to an iPod all along...