

hi-fi+

HI-FI+ GUIDE TO AUDIO SOURCE COMPONENTS 2018

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Herman van den Dungen of Kiseki



Hi-Fi+: Given that many see this as a ‘golden era’ for digital audio design, what draws you instead to create analogue audio source components?

Herman van den Dungen: I am sorry to say that whatever has happened and has been

improved in digital audio design, it doesn’t really move me. Already the step from LP to CD was a tough one, but OK at least you still had something in your hands. What a difference (it makes), to be able to put an LP on turntable or a disc in a CD player drawer. CD top loaders still “feel” better.

Analogue audio source components usually comprise four or five key classes of equipment: turntables, tone arms, phono cartridges, phono stages, and—in some instances—reel-to-reel tape decks. Which of these are areas of particular expertise for you and your firm?

A long time ago we experimented with the Hadcock tone arms we were importing. Let’s say these needed some “medical care” after arriving from (the manufacturer’s) premises. We did that together with Eddie Driessen of Pluto-fame. He went on with The Pluto tone arms and turntables. We ended up being involved in the Kiseki cartridges.

Within your areas of product expertise, what are specific design principles you seek to follow, and why?

We always have focused on building Moving Coil cartridges. While the principle is simple, there is a nice choice of materials available and it is always a surprise which material choice or combination gives what results. Think of different materials for coil bodies, cantilevers, coil wires, magnets, poles, not to



forget the bodies. A good thing is also that precision nowadays is an easier thing to get than in the past.

From your point of view, is there anything ‘new under the sun’ in the world of analogue design or have we reached a stage where we are continually refining existing concepts?

I feel we have reached a stage of refining existing concepts. But the variations are so numerous that we still have enough possibilities in front of us.

If you do see breakthroughs in analogue audio design (and are at liberty to say), what are some that you presently are working on?

“Breakthroughs”: what a dangerous expression that is! I hope to be able to develop a range of small precision assembly tools, which will make assembly and production of phono cartridges easier, faster, more consistent, and in the end, less expensive. I want to accomplish the same for analogue electronics. We did that for tubes already and will for solid state too. I feel that the high-end industry is shooting itself in



the foot by making beautiful stuff at prices they cannot justify anymore or most people cannot afford anymore. Such a pity.

What qualities should buyers look for when choosing new turntables & tone arms?

What about phono cartridges and phono stages? How about reel-to-reel tape decks?

Look if you like what you see. Listen if you like what you hear. Decide if the price fits you. Check the community to see if your conclusion isn't too far away from what experienced users are stating; read what professional reviewers are writing about your choice. Find a reference reviewer who feels and thinks like you.

What do you consider your top one or two analogue audio product achievements thus far? What makes those products special from your point of view?

For phono cartridges, my answer would be the Kiseki Lapis Lazuli cartridge, for the

art and pleasure of listening to it. I wish I still had one—with a (working) cantilever, I mean ...

What components do you use in your own reference analogue system?

I have several systems. I am using Krell, Duntech, PrimaLuna, (original) Sonus faber, Kiseki, and a Njoe Tjoeb 4000 cd player.

If you could only use four or five analogue discs to do a quick assessment of the performance of an analogue audio rig, which discs would you choose? Or, if you specialise in reel-to-reel tape decks, what four or five tapes would you use for a preliminary assessment of the sound quality of a deck?

First a good quality test LP and then the discs nearest to me at that moment (which definitely is fitting my personal taste, or otherwise it wouldn't be there) and fitting the mood I am in at that moment.



What set-up or installation tips would you give the newcomer... and what guidance would you give to the expert?

None. I would advise the newcomer to follow the instructions coming with the turntable. If no good instructions come with it, it's not a good turntable. Both newcomer and the expert I would advise to read articles in the qualified press as so much experience is there, it can only help everybody learning from it. Also, on YouTube you can find nice instructions from

qualified experts. Or get yourself a qualified dealer and ask if you can watch him doing (turntable and tone arm set-up) while explaining what he is doing.

The 'Analogue v. Digital' debate has raged for over 30 years. In your opinion, what special sonic attributes make analogue audio uniquely appealing and worthwhile?

It's original sonics. It has "feelings" you can touch, looks you can see. It's the emotion of the original. +