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High-end integration

Can hi-fi truly play a part in custom installations?

"It was only a few years ago that the phrase 'hi-fi' began to be seen by many in the consumer electronics industry as a tad moribund."

At a recent launch at London's The Ivy restaurant, Marantz invited the UK's hi-fi journalist cognoscenti to come together in congratulating Ken Ishiwata – one of the most influential personalities in high-end audio – on 30 years of service.

As well as raising a glass to Ken, the event was intended as a launch-pad for Marantz's new, super high-end, super-exclusive (only 500 worldwide!) SACD player and integrated amp, the KI Pearl. If the KI Pearl is not quite representative of the high-end (not many products are that exclusive), it is an indicator of how this sector of the hi-fi industry is flourishing.

It was only a few years ago that the phrase 'hi-fi' began to be seen by many in the consumer electronics (CE) industry as a tad moribund. Traditional hi-fi manufacturers embraced home cinema and introduced wave upon wave of cinema amps and surround sound speaker packages.

But the reality is that home cinema is only part of the story. A quick glance at the website of CI organisation CEDIA – www.cedia.co.uk – is very revealing: "CEDIA is an organisation of experienced companies involved in... the process by which your home electronics are integrated."

There's no mention of home cinema here. CI, of course, takes in hi-fi (two-channel or otherwise) and all other relevant electronics, such as lighting control, security, air conditioning etc. The CI market has helped to champion the kind of high-end equipment that complements, while transcending kit that has become synonymous with the iPod generation.

The most obvious is Imerge's SoundServer range. A world-first when launched in the '90s as the M1000, it was ahead of its time. The problem was that, back then, installations weren't geared to hi-fi. This meant that relying heavily on audio distribution systems being put in place, the M1000 often sounded decidedly low-end: ceiling speakers for 'background music' didn't really do

the product – or the hi-fi aspect of the installation – justice.

Thankfully, the market soon realised that the SoundServer sounds much better when connected to high-end hi-fi. Charlie Mertz of Imerge explains: "Bespoke audiophile circuitry was then designed and produced for the SoundServer. The fact that it could record and play uncompressed files was a bonus."

Interestingly, Marantz was one of a handful of hi-fi companies that became an OEM for Imerge's XiVA server, Cyrus and Linn included. The iPod may have changed the way many of us listen to music, but people have started to demand better quality sound to accompany the iPod music 'method'.

"Look at all the CI brands these days that produce distributed AV systems: most of them are using high-end circuitry," says Charlie.

"In-ceiling speakers have improved dramatically, in wall-speakers now defy belief in their capabilities; the hi-fi experience is back thanks to companies such as Imerge embracing the latest and greatest technologies."

Indeed, many of the high-end products being developed for CI are hi-fi first and foremost, including a host of multi-zone systems – NuVo's Grand Concerto, DF Solutions Base, SpeakerCraft's MODE and Opus' 500 Series, to name but four.

Hi-fi's high-end is now comfortably integrated within the burgeoning CI industry, with products such as the Imerge SoundServer and Marantz's KI Pearl more easily accommodated than in previous years.

I'd love to know how many of the 500 Pearls end up within custom installations. And it would be equally fascinating to discover how many of The Ivy's regulars approach CEDIA members this year for their own bespoke home cinema – with high-end hi-fi integrated, of course...! **HFC**



Above: Marantz's new KI Pearl SACD/CD player and integrated amplifier