



Gryphon Scorpio CD Player

Review Stereo Prestige & Image no. 46, 2010, France

The Danish Gryphon brand was created in 1985 by Flemming E. Rasmussen, who already operated one of Scandinavia's largest high end audio import businesses (representing Krell, among others). Rasmussen had a deep background in graphic arts (painting, textile printing, design) while maintaining a close relationship with the musical world during the 1970's. As a result, he possesses one of the finest collections of original master tapes from this exciting period.

In parallel with his import activities, he researched the phonostage and built a dual mono unit under the Gryphon name (a mythological animal with the body of a lion and the head and wings of an eagle, holding domain over earth and air, according to legend). The phonostage, compatible with the vast majority of moving coil and moving magnet cartridges, became the jumping off point for the development of a full range of electronics and loudspeakers of extreme high quality.

Then, at the end of 1993, the import business was phased out as its founder dedicated himself 100% to Gryphon with substantial international success that has never been challenged.

We have fond recollections of reviewing and listening sessions that we carried out a decade ago with the integrated Tabu Callisto whose rapid transient response combined with a remarkable fluid quality especially impressed us. Now, roughly a dozen years on, with Scorpio, their very latest CD player/converter, listening reveals once again this sonic "signature" of great suppleness in the transition between notes, a lovely fluidity in the succession of chords, a remarkable sensation of planes of sound detached one from the other in the depth dimension, for a tangibly real image.

Such faithfulness to a sonic aesthetic at once close to the reality of master tape, but with none of the aggressiveness or parasitic grain that accompanies the vast majority of transistor components can only be achieved through the obstinacy of the Gryphon engineers, who frequently attend concerts and recording sessions, the only real points of reference in a hi-fi world all too often dominated by the virtual reference of other hi-fi systems.

Listening

With the music box passage in the first track from Pulse, Scorpio magnificently lays out the dimensions of the machinery, centred with great accuracy between the speakers and firmly grounded in the acoustic environment of the recording space.

Unlike so many systems, there is none of the total dissociation between the direct sound from the metal strips as they are struck by the revolving cylinder pins and the woody resonance of the box. Everything hangs together perfectly, whether it is the transitions between notes or the distinctive noise of the drive spring as it is released or the air noise caused by the

revolving cylinder. Similarly, at the conclusion, the clunk of the stop mechanism is not a simple mechanical noise that clatters through the Scorpio, rather it is prolonged a fraction of a second afterwards by the resonances of the box and the acoustic response of the room. At this level of resolution and separation of micro-information, even at low volume, Scorpio delivers incredibly high resolution combined with proper phase.

The listener is aware of the attack of the huge bronze Buddhist temple bell on the mountainside which Scorpio separates perfectly, without a hint of confusion. The leading edge of the first wave of the resonance possesses a speed and vitality joined with flawless timbral accuracy. Scorpio distinguishes planes in the depth dimension with such exceptional accuracy that the listener forgets the positions of the loudspeakers. They become abstractions to the benefit of a virtual sonic landscape that allows the listener to localise in space the source of varieties of birdsong, the commotion of crates of bottles, the starting of a small automobile with air conditioning (characteristic noise of a motor with cooling turbine), distant conversations, and various wind noises.

On the album *La Nuit de Mai* by Leoncavallo, tenor Placido Domingo sings *la Chanson des Yeux* based on a poem by André Chénier. Scorpio reproduces the recording space with consistent distance, the piano played by Lang Lang and the voice of the celebrated tenor, without any rapid overlapping effect during peak levels.

The fullness of the piano stands out with a flow in the succession of notes with total clarity from Scorpio which strives to permanently oil the wheels of melodic passages in the manner of finer analogue sources. The voice of the legendary tenor stands out with well-controlled expressive power without emphasis or harshness. In the upper midrange, one notes an absence of traditional constriction or harshness phenomena. The converter principle, the gentle proprietary filter, output stages operating in pure Class A (all you have to do is rest your hand on the left rear of the Scorpio top panel to appreciate how much heat is being generated by the power supply), all come together for exceptional naturalness in the handling of timbral harmonic structure, voice and piano in this instance, as well as crucial amplitude variations. Moreover, the two performers are not isolated in separate sound booths; they perform in the acoustic of the Marzoni Auditorium in Bologna with the mix of direct sound and indirect reflections carefully measured in time and level.

One can also recognise Scorpio's extraordinary respect for the acoustics of recorded space in the excerpt from *La Scène de la Folie* from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* in which soprano Natalie Dessay, tenor Roberto Alagna and baritone Franck Ferrari are transported without intellectual effort, recreating the immense studio in Cologne named after the street in which it is located, "Stoliberger." Few, very few, are the CD players/converters capable of preserving all the atmospheric detail of this recording, with perfect placement of all performers without spreading voices across two meters, but instead retaining human proportions. Thus, thanks to its lightning-fast dynamic transitions with no inertia, Scorpio is able to render the voice of soprano Natalie Dessay with all its dramatic, exorbitant character intact during the journey from reason to folly, without becoming irritating because of unbearable "pinched head" vocal effects during fortissimo passages. Everything unfolds with total control, musical flow and instantaneous dynamic shifts with no inertia without afflicting peaks with intolerable distortion.

On *Jasmine*, the latest album by Keith Jarrett and Charlie Haden, Scorpio meticulously avoids inflating the string bass unduly; with a rise around 80 Hz that brings out added "liquidity" in the succession of notes in the standard *Body and Soul*. With an accuracy unhindered by the slightest hint of strain, the two instruments are perfectly situated in space without ever appearing to be superimposed in the same plane. Scorpio delicately lays out all the subtle nuances of Keith Jarrett's immense palette of piano techniques. Notes and chords emerge in a spontaneous manner. On this subject, Keith Jarrett writes at the end of the CD booklet, "I hope many of you can hear this on a good system. There are nuances abounding and details

make the music what it is." These wishes are granted in full, at the source, with such a reference in terms of the handling of nuances with so much fluidity and precision.

Summary of a Sonic Aesthetic

With the high end Scorpio CD player/converter, Gryphon has truly remained faithful to its signature sound of great musical distinction. It achieves a veritable musical alchemy, fast transient response, tonal accuracy which does not vary as a function of volume, fluid handling of melody, with absolutely remarkable positioning in the stereo image. Such perfect harmony among often contradictory parameters is extremely rare to find, even in the "high end" to which Gryphon has belonged for many years. One can only congratulate the designers for the success of their achievement with Scorpio, a digital source that is truly musical in every sense of the word.