

The changeling

Tim Jarman tells an unlikely tale of substituting an excellent integrated amplifier for a very different, less expensive one...

When you sell your car and buy another one, it is called 'changing'. When you sell your house and buy another one it's called 'moving'. And when you change any part of your hi-fi system, for better or worse, it's called an 'upgrade'. This use of the language suggests that any new equipment that is introduced is automatically considered to be an improvement, even if what you are replacing has no obvious shortcomings...

The implied logic of the hi-fi upgrade also assumes that the new equipment should be in a higher price band than the old, so things can get expensive after the first few cycles. Does an upgrade always make your system better? Even if you choose your new equipment carefully there is normally something that you will have to give up; going from a starter turntable to a more advanced one used to mean that you also had to cue by hand and be there at the end of the record to lift the stylus up, otherwise it would sit there all day slowly grinding itself away against the run-out groove.

Buying bigger loudspeakers with more drive units often involves a trade-off of greater tonal extension against less distinct stereo imaging, which smaller models are often very good at. Replacing an all-in-one system with a newer model that lacks a tape deck means that you can't record radio programmes any more. A complex new amplifier may make the rest of the system too difficult for the rest of the family to use, the list goes on and on and yet "the next upgrade" is still an essential topic of conversation whenever audiophiles meet.

Sometimes the need for a change is the key driver behind an upgrade, whether one admits this to oneself or not. When troubled by 'upgraditis', I find it useful to think about how many records and CDs I could buy with the same money instead. If the new gear still looks like a sound idea then the chances are it's a sensible use of resources – many of my past plans have fallen at this particular fence. That being said, I've recently had the chance to experience the most enjoyable first part of the three stages of life of every consumer product (the thrill of purchase, the eventual disappointment of ownership, the problem of disposal) when I 'upgraded' my reference amplifier from an Arcam FMJ A38 to a Cyrus 6A.

Sound-wise these two designs are *different* rather than one being definitively better than the other, both are strong performers and I expect that many listeners would get along very well with either. The amplifier which improves on absolutely every aspect of the A38 probably



doesn't exist and in some ways the 6A could even be regarded as inferior, it offers only about 60 watts instead of 140, the sequential source selection menu is a pain, the remote control is horrid and the display isn't particularly legible for starters, yet I am absolutely overjoyed with it. How can this be?

When you change your equipment what you are really doing is swapping one set of compromises for another. In my case, replacing the Arcam with the Cyrus seems like a backwards step since there is less power, no built-in phono stage and you have to grub around at the back if you want to plug a pair of headphones in. It is also a cheaper unit and given that the price deflation which has come to be expected in the rest of the home electronics sector has been largely absent in the field of amplifiers for some years now the change seems on the surface to be positively retrograde.

However, the life of a review system is a tough one that involves more humping about, plugging and unplugging and trying things every-which-way round in a week than most gear sees in a lifetime. On this basis the change is a good one, for an amplifier which you can pick up in one hand and whose cabinet is strong and has no sharp corners is a Godsend. Especially, when you are swapping sources one day, loudspeakers the next and looking for something to benchmark an integrated system against the day after.

For a 'normal' person these are unlikely to be compelling priorities, but they demonstrate that sometimes you do have to go backwards to move forwards. Progress, as C.S. Lewis rightly identified, does not have a single direction; it is simply the process of getting closer to where you want to be.

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