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Recent and
Upcoming Events

WILSON[®] AUDIOFILES

CES

January 8 - 11
Wilson Audio will be in
a Penthouse Suite in
The Mirage

Dec. 5 - 7, 2006

Goodwin's High End
Waltham, MA
Dealer Training
with Peter McGrath

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The new luxe

by Nick Compton

THE EXCLUSIVE IS EVER MORE ELUSIVE—
BUT WE KNOW THE WAYS, IF YOU HAVE THE MEANS...

Global luxury goods sales were up 14 per cent in the first six months of this year and are expected to have topped \$230bn by year-end, a bounce back to pre-9/11 figures. The Gucci group, for one, saw sales up 20 per cent between January and June. And all the luxury goods giants seem to be opening stores beyond the traditional fashion capitals, as new territories are exploited. It's all making for very rich gravy.

Yet there is unease. It's not just that a massive terrorist assault or crash in property prices or any other economic or geo-political malevolence could upset the teak, fur-lined apple cart. Or that the business of fine things is always subject to spikes and sharp dips. But more that the most sophisticated consumer is developing a different concept of luxury; their objects of desire have become intangible. The very idea of luxury is being contested, while business for luxury goods makers is increasingly coming from the big, fat base of the taste pyramid. Of course, there is money to be made there, with the Russians and the lurching ladies who simply must get their compacts and Vertus into the latest handbag. Never mind the heaving masses who have acquired a taste for cashmere, decent wine and 'designer' furniture and are trading up into luxe as if their lives depended on it.

Amex Centurion has been trying to get at the nub of this problem, interviewing a 'Futures 100' panel of creative and business brains for their take on what luxury really does mean right now. The panel includes Giorgio Armani, Heston Blumenthal, Alexander McQueen, Ian Schrager, Patrizia Moroso, Tomas Maier, Marc Newson and Marcel Wanders. And all this insight has been boiled down and beefed up by the London-based prediction agency, The Future Laboratory.

Giorgio Armani, for one, offers a sharp take on the existential crisis in the world of luxury goods: "The most defining change in the last couple of years has been the move towards personalisation and customisation, which is a direct consequence of the massification of luxury. The notion that everyone around the world would be carrying a so-called 'luxury bag of the season', to the extent that several women could arrive at the same party with the same bag, has devalued the sense of luxury. The reaction has been an increasing desire for true luxury." But what is true luxury? There is more to this than the rush for the bespoke and the limited edition, although this is indeed luxury's big story of the moment.

The report suggests that what we might call the Moscow model of luxury consumption is but gauche baby steps. This stage it calls Acquisitive Luxury: conspicuous consumption at its most conspicuous, designed only to impress on others just how much cash you have at your disposal.

The next stage is Inquisitive Luxury. This is where savvy and discretion enter the picture, where a certain connoisseurship and taste for the bespoke join the party. An understanding, as the report suggests, of why an 18-year-old single

(Cont. on pg. 2 as "Luxury")

Luxury (Cont. from pg. 1)

malt is better than a 12-year-old. Or the inner workings of a bespoke suit and how a shoulder can sit just so. It is at this stage that we start to look for quality and exclusivity in all things, from socks to salt, audio equipment to olive oil.

A third stage the report calls Authoritative Luxury. By now, the consumer has left whim, fancy, fad and fashion behind. They are utterly confident in their own taste and expertise. They have become collectors and archivists, true taste-makers perhaps. They invest in ancient valve amps and architectural drawings. These are the people currently developing the market for 'design as art.'

You can see an attempt to cater to such an element in many of the new fashion flagships. 'Increasingly, stores will be run like ateliers,' says the report, 'with art and fashion sitting side by side and fashion designers regarded as dealers or sourcers.' It cites Paul Smith's London Curiosity Shop as an example of this trend. We are, as Dutch designer Hella Jongerius has it, in the market for narratives. "The stories behind products are the luxuries."

However, the report suggests, the most sophisticated consumers have progressed even beyond this stage into the rarefied realm of Meditative Luxury: "This is where luxury moves away from the product and into the realm of experience. Consumers at this level realise that what matters is fulfillment, and seek it increasingly through learning new skills and engaging with culture or politics on a personal level." Says Patrizia Moroso of Moroso: "the concept of luxury is not tangible or material; you can understand it if you have the consciousness but you cannot simply buy it."

Established ideas of what luxury is are toppling in many areas. Le Fooding, a movement among French chefs, is a rejection of the Michelin star system and all it presumes about what fine dining is. Followers are throwing away their stars, dropping prices and rethinking the dining experience. It is an effort to strip away years of accrued crud and pretension to get back to the essentials.

Experience is the new luxury buzz word. "It has gone beyond service to doing something that gives you the highest

Luxury's new buzz words are experience and engagement

and best experience," says hotelier Ian Schrager. This requires highly trained and motivated staff at all levels, who have been given the power to act on their own initiative. We are yet to be convinced that this is really happening. But we live in hope.

Engagement is another key factor in the new luxury; rather than passive consumption, people are after a pro-active stake in a creative process. Hence the emergence of so-called 'co-creation' schemes. So runs the blurb: "Co-creation enables a group of like-minded people to create a product, service or even a community that is free from the normal rules of commerce, because it is driven by their passion and shaped by their choices." One such group of the like-minded, The Ladybank Company of Distillers, is investing in a run-down Scottish mill and converting it into a top-end, small batch whiskey distillery. The scheme asks members not for a simple financial drop, but that they invest time and money in developing ideas for how the distillery should be run. They can get involved in the whiskey-making process, and the distillery will also function as a members' retreat. It is business as plaything and pastime, nice business, interesting business, luxury business. It's the chance to develop your own luxury product.

It is also clear that conscience is going to play an increasingly important role in luxury purchases. Says Lady Bamford, owner of British company Daylesford Organic, "People are asking more questions and the choices they make are intelligent. They want to know where products come from, whether they come from cheap labour." The modish demand for a clear(ish) conscience is affecting the luxury travel market, too, with the rise of what is being called Cause Related Tourism. "Eco-luxe is

a naff phrase," acknowledges Glen Donovan of exclusive travel agency Earth, "but it sums up the combination of good design with natural materials in a really quiet environment. In other words, it's about neither guilt nor gilt."

The report is so far, so good, if a little fuzzy round the edges. But it doesn't leave matters there. It goes on to suggest that we—or at least the elite band of super-consumers, the sharp point on the taste triangle—are entering an even more advanced consumer age, Enlightened Luxury. In this phase, states the report, "the lessons learnt at each previous stage—the value of money, discernment, a desire to learn and collect and appreciation of the intangible—distil into a singular state. Here, the emphasis is on only ever buying one of something—even if it means waiting for the best, the most luxurious, the most perfect." It's a stretch. And an attempt to tidy up what is not a tidy picture.

But what it might get at is how much the idea of luxury is now up for grabs, how worn out and threadbare existing notions of exclusivity, quality and style are. No one is an innocent consumer any more and the weight of meaning attached to luxury might be forcing it to crash under its own weight. "Luxury is now more hidden," says Dutch designer Marcel Wanders, "disguised under a blanket of innovation, intention and meaning. Before, it was just about spending money; now, it's about content, meaning and excitement. What defines luxury is the ability to know and decide." But decisions, decisions, decisions, there's a problem. Luxe has become a universal promise, a contradiction in terms.

The last words go to Zowie Broach and Brian Kirby of British fashion label Boudicca. "Luxury is an experience that may cost, but it is about history, recommendation and association. This is where the value lies. Luxury items are the spoils of a journey of exploration—the finest souvenirs of our civilisation." That works for us.

The following information is excerpted with permission from the November 2006 issue (48) of Great Britain's *Hi-Fi+* magazine (www.hifiplus.com).

Wilson Audio Duette Wins Legacy Award

"*Hi-Fi+* Awards are very different to those handed out by other bodies or magazines....This is a simple straw poll, an arbitrary listing of those products that have got us and kept us excited."

At *Hi-Fi+*, the awards structure is subdivided into three categories. "...It's important that you appreciate the nature of each award. None (save the Legacy award) is inherently superior to the others, but they are distinct from one another and that distinction is important."

Product of the Year: In this category are the "solid products that have that little bit extra, that certain something that elevates their performance above (in some cases way above) the norm."

Product of the Year - Discovery:

"This designation rewards exceptional performance products from emergent companies."

Product of the Year - Legacy: The Legacy award recognises not just the excellence of an individual product, but also the consistent performance and longevity of the company behind it. In many ways this two-tier commendation is the nearest thing we can give to a blanket endorsement....but these products come with the imprimatur of an excellent company reputation and proven record of support behind them....These are the products you can consider with confidence."

Wilson Audio Specialties' DuetteLoudspeaker earned the *Hi-Fi+* 2006 Product of the Year Legacy award.

"Equally at home on its matching stands or a shelf, against the wall or mounted in free space, the Duette seems to break every hair-shirt hi-fi rule in the book. After all, how can anything so 'compromised' sound any good? But that's exactly what makes the Wilson so wonderful; the one thing that they haven't compromised on is the sonic performance. ...The Duette's presentation is so beautifully integrated and natural that it sounds almost understated - until you realise just how much of the music you're hearing and how little of the system playing it...In many ways this is David Wilson's most impressive achievement to date - as well as his most approachable.

"One for the Money...Two for the Show..."

The following is excerpted with permission from the two-part article by Roy Gregory and Alan Sircom. The article was published in Hi-Fi+ magazine's November 2006 Issue #48. In the first article, Roy Gregory sets up a system to run the Duettes. In the second part of the article, Alan Sircom reviews the Duettes using Mr. Gregory's selected system.

"Almost as soon as I first got my grubby mitts on the Wilson Duettes with their enticing yet forgiving musical qualities, I started to wonder just how tolerant they'd be of partnering equipment." -Roy Gregory

The System: Opera Audio Consonance CD-120 Linear, Bewitch A30 Integrated Amplifier, Wilson Duettes on Duette Stands, Chord Co. Chorus Interconnect, Chord Co. Epic Twin Speaker Cable, Cambridge CORE rack.

Alan Sircom writes: "This is the system that shouldn't work. It has no right to work. By all that hi-fi people of good standing hold dear and true, this system should be taken out and shot, put to the

sword, burned at the stake for heresy and then sent to work down in a salt mine until really sorry....

"Only problem is, this system works: Really, really well. Like well enough to recast all your hi-fi prejudices, make you wonder if we've got it wrong all these years and start looking round the room to see what you might free up to let you buy into the experience. That well.

"...In goes *Rare on Air*, the CD of live sessions from KCRW in Santa Monica. On went track four - Evan Dando and Juliana Hatfield singing, 'My Drug Buddy.' And the next time I could reach for the remote, six other tracks had passed and I was captivated. Remember this is a CD that I have been using as a test disc for almost a decade: there's nothing but test disc left for me here, its musical content has been worn flat through too many listening sessions. Only here, that cynicism simply washed away. I was back listening to the recording anew, stunned by the talent and wishing I'd brought more *Pell Sessions* with me.

"...Usually, a dozen discs can pin down

the nature of any system, finding the places where it works well and those where it falls flat on its speaker drivers. Only not here; yes, the system couldn't quite keep up with a concert hall full of singers, musicians and organ pipes wiggin' out, but it tried and did a surprisingly good job....this system will pass muster with almost every recording you play. More than pass muster, in fact. It will sound remarkable.

"...Imagery never draws attention here, but it's just there; wide of the boxes, deeper than the room, and taller than most.

"...(You) will find the Duette...to be a genteel partner for our smaller British rooms and our slightly softer-hued sensibilities. I'd like to say vocal intelligibility is a strong point, but that's understating the case. It's not a strong point...it's a magnificent point.

"...in the Duette, Dave Wilson set out to make a speaker that will deliver good results with comparatively low-end equipment; whatever else this genuinely important system shows, it certainly shows that he totally succeeded. With honours."



During Wilson's building expansion, the new raw materials storage area has been used to store both raw materials and construction materials. The room, which measures 40' x 20', is nearing completion with finish details such as a handrail on the stairway, a garage door separating the storage area from the shipping area, and sealant for the concrete being all that's left before final move in and organization can take place. Prior to the building expansion, many raw materials were stored in a rented building next door to Wilson Audio.



The new prep room for the fabrication shop has been used as a holding area during construction. This room, now measuring approximately 15' x 20', was originally divided in half, with one half being used for raw materials storage and the other half being used for sealing speaker enclosures prior to painting. The room was gutted and the wall moved to make the room three feet wider. Following completion, the room will be used for prepping machined parts coming off of the KOMO CNC router. Previously open rafters have been enclosed. The sealed ceiling will allow for better lighting and better dust control.



The glue area of the fabrication shop is pictured in the foreground. After machined parts are prepped (the prep room is just behind the lower three windows), they are sent back into the fabrication shop to be glued into enclosures. Once the enclosures have cured for a prescribed period of time, they are sent to the sanding room, which is located behind the upper three windows. The sanding room, where speaker cabinets are routed and sanded in preparation for the paint shop, is the last stop in the fabrication department.

Wilson Audio wishes you and yours a joy-filled and prosperous New Year!



Finish work on the new offices has begun. Oak door frames have been stained and doors will soon be hung. Offices are ready for the final electrical, including the alarm system, before ceiling and carpet are installed.