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# THE VINYL FRONTIER

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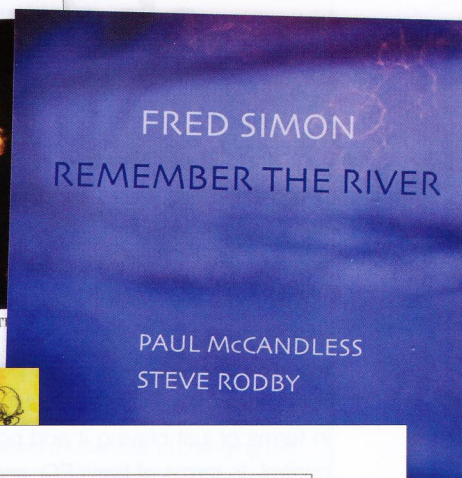
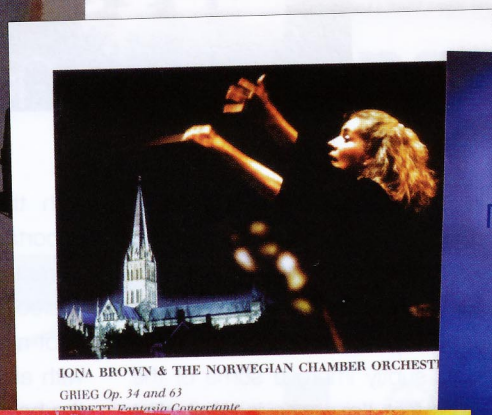
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## Naim 24-192 True Stereo

by Jason Kennedy

**B**ack in the 1970s, Naim founder Julian Vereker met American audio engineer Ken Christianson and formed what was to be a lasting friendship, resulting some ten years later in the first of Ken's recordings to appear on the Naim Label. Ken is more than an engineer; he's a producer, an educator and the proprietor of Pro Musica, Chicago. He has had a long fascination with recording techniques and a commitment to a purist approach that he sees as the only way to, "capture lightning in a bottle", as Fred Simon, one of the artists he's worked with, describes it. In essence, he is looking to deliver the sound in the studio to the end user with as little compromise as possible.

Recently, Ken took on the task of remastering twelve of the albums he has made for Naim to 24/192, for the label's True Stereo series released last year. All the original recordings were made on Ken's Nagra IV-S analogue recorder, and these are what he went back to do the transfers to a Nagra VI 24/192 digital recorder, using a Naim NAC552 preamplifier as a buffer between the two devices. I asked why not just connect the two recorders directly and Ken's response was, "it sounds much, much better than a direct connection between recorders. I did a number of tests where I ran the Nagra both analogue and digitally into whatever I was transferring to, and it never sounded as good. I always just want to get the best results. You might as well try to make an effort to get it right." ▶





▶ Ken got the Nagra VI in 2008, which was when the first hi-res remasters were performed at 24/96. Since that time, he has been using Wavelab software to edit and master his work and this has given him the ability to improve the final results. "When I did the 24/96, I started looking at the files and there were things that I could do to subtly improve some of the recordings. No recordings are perfect. I'm not saying that what I'm doing makes it perfect but it makes it a little bit more linear in terms of just playing it and not having to touch the volume control. In terms of bass EQ, some of the stuff was a little hot in the bass. I generally don't add much top end but I found that on some recordings if I took a little bit away below 100Hz, less than 2dB, I could get a bit more dynamics out overall."

The twelve True Stereo releases are therefore not only higher resolution versions of the originals but different mixes as well; only subtly different, but they do sound better in ways beyond those normally encountered with higher sampling rates. On Fred Simon's *Remember The River*, the music has a greater presence in the room and it seems more homogenous, more concrete and real, which suggests that Ken's mastering techniques have grown more sophisticated

with the experience he's had with Wavelab. The most important thing is that as he says the piece is more engaging, vibrant and involving for the listener. Another of his True Stereo remasters is *State of the Union* by Union. This has a lot more power and dynamics than you usually encounter with audiophile recordings. The piano sounds very real and the bass and drums have a gravitas that means you can feel as well as hear the notes. The top end is filled out with a shimmering ride cymbal to deliver a vitality that makes the music accessible and enjoyable, despite its unfamiliarity.

*Heartplay* is one of several Charlie Haden titles in the True Stereo series, this time with Naim Label favourite Antonio Forcione. Here the change from 96k to 192k versions is apparent in the definition of Haden's double bass and a small increase in transparency; these aspects combine to produce a stronger sense of the interplay between the two musicians. The extra bass definition helps timing and the extra vibrancy in the sound makes both musicians sound like they are that little bit more real.

Ken is refreshingly music centred and he's a big fan of Naim, especially their streamers. When I asked him about ▶



► the benefits of 24/192 he initially took the opportunity to say “It depends on the system and how you’re deriving the information. In some systems, I prefer listening to the CD to what some people are using with computers. I’ve never found computer systems adequate to get back the real hi-res information in a proper way. Frankly, I’d rather hear a good Naim CD player than most of the computer things I’ve heard. But the Naim streaming system is exceptional. I have an NDS with the 555 power supply and that is extraordinary, I use a UnitiServe with an analogue power supply that we’ve developed here at Pro Musica and it’s incredibly good. It sounds better than a Nagra VI which is a pretty good source.”

He did eventually get around to the question with the simple answer: “The benefits [of 24/192] are that it’s what the music is intended to be, which is more realisation of what the artist was saying, more of the harmonic information and the dynamic contrasts and all of the little things that make really good hi-fis sound good.”

Ken started out recording with just a single stereo pair of mics; “I’ve been using the same basic pair of mics since 1978, started using Nagra in ‘82 (before that I used Studer machines), and if I found something better that I thought was adequate then I would go to that. But I wasn’t out there looking for perfection, I found something very good and I learned how to use it. I’ve used a matched pair of AKG 414EBs since ‘78, I’ve got several other mics and I use them in different situations but I always use the 414EBs as my primary pair. I know what I can do with them, I don’t need monitoring set-ups, I know their capabilities.”

I also spoke to the pianist Fred Simon, also from Chicago, whose work has had the remastering treatment. He described Ken as “a *cinema vérité* documentarian who uses the simplest set-up possible”. As a musician, he prefers the control you have with multi-track recordings, but appreciates the quality of result that Ken can get, this is his description of hearing them; “Kens thing is so... I’ll never forget hearing his recording played back on his home system in his basement lair, if I closed my eyes it was literally that cliché of you feel that you could reach out and touch the wooden shell of an acoustic bass. Ken’s a magician.”

Fred also gave a great account of the differences between playing and recording live; “Live music is different, the notes go out into the air and into peoples ears and that’s it, it’s gone. But making a live recording whether it’s in front of an audience or not there’s this pressure that isn’t balanced by the more carefree playful spirit of a gig. You’re not so worried about every little fault being preserved in amber for eternity.” When asked if the results with the True Stereo remasters produced a marked improvement for him he admitted: “I have not heard the 192 remasters. I’ve heard the 96k masters and it’s astonishing how good they sound; it’s like three dimensional sound that you could actually step into.”

It’s inspiring to find people like Ken Christianson who have not only mastered the art of recording live bands using purist techniques, but have also found great artists to record. There are too few recordings of this quality available on hi-res audio, a sub genre which tends to attract a lot of upsampling and remastering, but rarely has the scope to deliver a better result than the original. Ken’s work on the twelve albums he has remastered for the Naim Label is a lesson in what can be done with modern digital technology. If the guys who remastered for the major labels had the capability and, of course, the freedom to deliver results of this quality hi res audio would surely find a bigger audience than our little niche. It’s also interesting to hear his enthusiasm for streamed audio. I doubt there are many in the professional field who realise that there’s more to it than Sonos, let alone who appreciate its full potential. By making the exact same music files available to us that he considers sound better than the analogue originals on a Nagra, he – with the Naim Label’s help – is putting the potential for genuine high fidelity in the home on a plate. +

See [www.naimlabel.com](http://www.naimlabel.com) for details of the titles that have received the 192kHz True Stereo remaster treatment.