

## **Flemming E. Rasmussen - Gryphon Audio Designs**

During his studies at the Aarhus Art academy in Denmark, at the department of art and graphics, Flemming E. Rasmussen started to develop a close relationship with the local music scene, designing LP covers and posters for various concerts. After his studies, he devoted almost ten years to photography and painting, before he became the chief fabric designer for one of the largest Scandinavian sportswear manufacturers. Although he could have advanced to the position of president of the design department of the company, he resigned and established the company 2R Marketing, which soon became the leading importer of High End audio products into Denmark (Kiseki, Eminent Technology, Krell). In 1985 he established a sister company Gryphon Audio Designs. We talked twice about the reasons for founding it, about the products, and about the philosophy of Gryphon Audio Designs. The first time was at the beginning of the summer of 2001 during his visit to Zagreb, and the second time during this year's High End fair in Frankfurt.

### **First part -- Zagreb**

We talked in the hotel Intercontinental (now called Opera), after F. E. Rasmussen had spent several days in the neighboring Slovenia. As I heard that he had been fishing, I was interested to find out whether he was a passionate fisherman and whether he had had any luck.

### **F. E. Rasmussen**

Whenever I have the chance, I go with my friends to the lakes, in Denmark there are quite a few, and fish. It is not so much for the catch, but because I find it relaxing. Best of all is that I still manage to catch something.

### **Do you eat the fish you catch?**

No, usually we return what we catch. There is one place where a particular fish has been caught and released perhaps forty times. A very strange fish.

### **So there are more stupid creatures than the blonds from jokes?**

It seems that way, ha, ha, ...

**Let's go back to your reasons for and your start in the audio field. How and why did you get started?**

As you know, I started as a distributor of High End products in Denmark and after a while, unhappy with what was on the market, I gathered some coworkers and we made our own MC preamplifier. We needed a preamp which could raise the ultra low voltage of an MC cartridge to the level of the phono input of the control preamp. We set ourselves high goals: a wide frequency range, with no feedback, all first class, dual mono configuration and the best components. I was very happy with the sound we achieved, so in 1986 I went to CES in Chicago. One of my acquaintances asked me to lend him the preamp for a demo of his own products. During the fair a Japanese gentleman wanted to buy just my product. That was a problem, since it was the only one I had. His insistence to buy it motivated me, on my return to Denmark, to produce several more, which I sent to Japan. I would have soon forgotten the episode, were it not that in 1987 the Head Amp won the "Best Buy" award in Japan; awarded by "Stereo Sound." Because of the award, as well as an increasing amount of interest from friends and acquaintances who wanted to buy the Head Amp, we decided to go into more serious production. So the Head Amp became our first product.

**What was next?**

After that we made a phono preamp which had a Head Amp integrated into it, then a preamp, our first output amp, and so on.

**In your biography I notice that from 1993 you have completely devoted yourself to Gryphon, because of the increased amount of business. It's clear that based on your art background you offer products imbued with style, luxurious appearance and ergonomics, but I wonder if you had had any experience with electronics?**

No, not personally. When I get an idea for a particular product, I get in touch with people, engineers to whom I explain what I want and let them make it for me.

**How do you find them? From personal experience I know that most engineers don't understand sound.**

You are right. At first I tried to find them through acquaintances, some I even knew personally, but it was always important to me that in addition to technical expertise they also understand sound. Today I employ engineers, but it's still the case that they design, and I listen to the prototypes. I have some basic ideas about what a thing should look like, but I leave to them the development of the design of the product. Many times I requested that further design work be done because I wasn't satisfied with something. I've spent a lot of time listening to various manufacturers' electronic components and now I understand how they sound. If I don't like something about the sound, I first take a look at which components were used. Sometimes just changing the components improves the sound greatly.

**While developing new products do you compare them with similar components from other manufacturers?**

No, we never compare them.

**In talking to a few other manufacturers I came to the conclusion that many of them apply this principle: compare with the competition to get a better idea of the placement of the new product.**

We don't work that way. Very rarely do we set the retail price of a product at the beginning of development. We try to make every product as best we can. Of course, there were situations when we were surprised that a finished product was considerably more expensive than we had expected, but that's how we work. I know that large companies do market research and that they will get data about a target audience for some product, what level of quality is required, etc. We don't make products for people, but products that I like. Perhaps that sounds arrogant, and I understand that not everyone will agree, but that's our approach.

Sometimes people come to us with products from established manufacturers wanting to listen to our product because they have a reference (the equipment they're bringing with them) with which they're familiar, which is, to me, the completely wrong approach. I think that the reference should be much more perfect than electronic equipment. Here I'm talking about live music. Our approach is to go to a concert, then listen to the equipment, then go to a concert again. We own some master recordings from those concerts so we listen to them. I think that's a much better reference for evaluating products.

**You use master recordings?**

Yes, they're very old. Some are from the 50s and 70s. We have an excellent tape player from that time -- a studio-quality STUDER A80. That system is so good that until this very day we haven't found a product, be it CD or LP, that could replace it with respect to the quality and naturalness of musical reproduction.

**When developing your own products you must use a speaker of some sort. Which model do you listen the most?**

Being not perfect a speaker is often being changed in our system. We tried many of them, and lately we use a very expensive American Rockport. We have also, for the last six years, developed a model of our own. We use it as an inside reference, but it is not ready yet for the public.

**It is strange that you keep a product for so long in your house. Is the reason the fact that you are not satisfied, or you have other reasons?**

No. It is completely OK. The reasons are more of the business kind. It is rather hard for a company that built its reputation on amplifiers to start out with speaker boxes. At least when I speak about the past. This attitude has been changing slowly because there are numerous companies that can offer a complete solution -- a complete audio system. In the past the producers used a certain type of amplifiers and they would recommend these to their costumers. Nowadays, this is rare, because there are companies that offer their own speakers. When you start producing a complete program, you are alone on the market, without any support from anyone. Unfortunately, the market is going that way, and nobody does anything for someone else.

**Does it mean that you have decided to get out with your own speaker on the market?**

Yes. Our intention is to present it at the beginning of 2002.

(You can read more about the speaker at the end of this conversation. Editor's note.)

**For a long time you have been offering interconnection and speaker cables. I heard several times that you use cables made by the Dutch company Siltech. People think that it might be because of the use of silver. Where is the truth here?**

That statement isn't true. I admit that it's possible that we get materials from the same supplier, but our cables are our own product. I remind you that Gryphon has been in the audio business since 1985 and that from the beginning we paid special attention to audio cables. I contend that the material of the conductor isn't as important as the geometry of the cable. If the geometry is bad, the most expensive conductor isn't going to help it sound well.

**I'm often shocked at the poor quality of cables I see inside very expensive speakers. What do you think about the need to have high quality cables inside speakers and how much do you think they affect the overall quality of the system?**

Of course they affect the overall quality. I think there are two reasons why manufacturers use inexpensive wire. The first is to save some money in manufacture (on one pair it's not a great savings, but in a large production run it's noticeable), and the other is that many of them still believe that the cable doesn't affect the sound. Besides, some think it is stupid to spend money on something that most customers will never see. They prefer to spend money on looks because that will make their product easier to sell. That after the initial excitement the customer will be disappointed with the sound nobody cares about. It's similar with women. If she has only looks, we probably won't keep her after we have to listen to her for several months.

**Visiting your distributors and fairs, you had a chance to meet the people who buy your products. Do they have a profile they share, some commonality?**

People buy products for various reasons. What I noticed through all these years is that customers who buy my products put a higher emphasis on music than they do on technology. Some of them are a bit older, but they like to talk about music.

**Did you on those occasions also see interest for AV processors and multichannel amplifiers? What is your opinion of home theater?**

There was talk of that and I understand that home theater is increasingly popular, but we are not interested in that field. We want to stay a traditional High End stereo company. I have been told that a client in Taiwan, since he was satisfied with our amplifiers and wanted a home theater, bought five mono blocks of our most expensive model, the Antileon. After that I often say, jokingly, of course, that anyone who wants a Gryphon home theater can do the same. You know, people expect that for the same amount of money that they spend on a good stereo system they can buy a surround system. It's completely unrealistic to expect that because for the same money you get many more lower-quality components, which degrades the sound. There were suggestions that in some of my products I reduce the quality of less-important components to achieve a more approachable price. Personally I have no intention of putting my name on something with which I'm not satisfied. I'm convinced that when they want me to make an amplifier cheaper than the Antileon, they actually want an Antileon for less money.

**To make your products more affordable, have you thought about moving the manufacture to China, which is a common practice in Europe?**

If you want to save money in manufacturing large series, of course you need to go to China. If you need 50-100 pieces of a product, there's no company in China that would take the job, because to them that would be like producing samples. It's good that we are still in Denmark. Imagine if Ferraris were made in Sri Lanka. High End is not so connected to the trends prevalent in average HiFi.

It is hard to maintain the level of quality. If you move manufacturing and start having quality problems, you'll soon have problems with pricing. We have a well worked out system: we have in-house development and quality control, and manufacture of components is done outside, by our partners. This method works so far and there is no need to move something new, unknown. If it goes downhill, it is hard to go back to the previous position. We are a small company with only about 15 employees, and we cannot afford something like that.

**Second part -- Frankfurt 2002**

At this year's High End fair in Frankfurt, Gryphon presented a complete stereo system, in which was prominent their own speaker, which we talked about last year. Mr. Rasmussen fairly generally described his future product during his trip to Zagreb. This time he was much more detailed.

**I see that you finally decided to present speakers.**

After so much research and experimentation it was about time, wasn't it?

**I wouldn't have had so much patience. Could you describe them in more detail?**

First of all, the speaker is called the Cantata and comes with a special external unit called The Q Control. In this unit are the active electronics with which we configure the Cantata for the acoustics of the room, which lets us use the generated bass energy of the room, instead of fighting against it. This technology is so effective that it will redefine bass reproduction by small 2-way, closed boxes. The drivers are in a D'Appolito configuration and have been specially made for this project. The bass units use a Kevlar membrane with a special coating, special suspension, the enclosure is very open from the back so that we get minimal compression, and the magnets are three times bigger than they would need to be for this size speakers. The high-range has a soft cone, and comes from Scan Spek, and it's mounted on a special aluminum housing. In the crossover we use specially selected components, for example, Jensen capacitors. The drivers are mounted at an angle so the listener would be in focus, they are all in phase over the whole frequency range, impedance isn't below 4,7 Ohms, and sensitivity is 90 dB, so they won't need monster amplifiers, but they need and deserve only the best amplifiers. The Q Control is connected between the preamp and the main amp, and if they are integrated, then on the tape loop. It, in effect, electronically decreases the Q factor of the speakers. Every room amplifies the lower frequencies to some extent, and instead of fighting against that, we use it to achieve with this small a speaker a frequency that's as low as 20 Hz.

**Can the Cantata work without The Q Control?**

It can, but we won't sell it separately, because then that wouldn't be the sound that we spent years developing.

**When you were deciding to bring your speakers to market, did you ask your distributors whether they even needed a product of this sort?**

Please don't again think I'm arrogant, but I did not consult them. Several years ago when I intended to offer a CD player, everyone was telling me that it wasn't a good idea, although it turned out to be one of the most popular Gryphon products. I was convinced of the correctness of my idea, and I wasn't mistaken. We have a different situation here, because I don't expect that the speakers will bring a return on the money invested, but it was important to make them as a statement, to make a statement. It's not the case that I don't give weight to anyone's opinions or wishes, as you can see at this fair where we presented, after much convincing from almost all our customers, an entry level preamp and main amp.

**Lastly, tell me why you chose the name Gryphon.**

The inspiration for the name and the logo I got from Greek mythology, in which there is a creature with the head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion. It's a perfect combination of the strength of a lion and the elegance of an eagle, which is an adequate symbol of what I'm trying to achieve with my own products.

Andrija Curkovic