

## MEET YOUR DEALER

# Audio Exotics, Hong Kong: a new approach

by Alan Sircom



I was going to make this feature a fairly normal 'Meet Your Maker' with a few pithy interview questions fired out at CEO/Founder Chris Leung (above left) and Managing Director JLam (above right) of Audio Exotics. OK, so it would have the Hong Kong angle, but it would be going over the same pathways. But then I went to both studios just after the Hong Kong show and quickly realised this wasn't going to be anything like 'normal'. In fact, it's the start of a series of features about the nature of audio retail in today's world.

The company has three separate and very different audio experiences, all on Hong Kong Island. The first is the CK Music record store in the Central district. Unlike most record stores world-wide, this is run along audiophile lines. The LPs are curated to find the best sounding albums, including many records from the late Harry Pearson's Super LP list. These are also able to be played on

one of two extremely good Audio Exotics systems. These had been stripped down for the show at the time of visiting the store, but this was clearly Not Your Average Record Shop.

From here, it's a short jump and a 30HK\$ cab ride to Audio Exotics in Sheung Wan. This is where the 'unlike most stores' aspect begins. Most Hong Kong audio stores (and there are still a lot of them) are like bazaars; packed to the ceiling with every product you could wish for (and more than a few you wouldn't wish for, ever). The idea isn't 'the customer is always right', but 'the customer's money is always right in our pocket!'. Audio Exotics is not like that; if anything, it's more like a listening room of a Hong Kong high-ender. There are not a plethora of components, just a system... a very good system, but just the one system. You are not met by a corridor of

boxes or a wall of loudspeakers. Granted that system changes over time and things are assessed and inserted, but there are also core constants, such as Cessaro Firebird horns, Da Vinci and Vertere turntables, Wadax digital audio, and so on. Products that feature regularly (such as a Robert Koda K15EX preamp and the excellent Engstrom ARNE 300B amp) get pride of place in this system, too. The core component in this system, however, is the Tripoint passive EM/RF passive filtration system. This revolutionised Audio Exotics and the direction it took several years ago; "No Tripoint..." says Chris Leung, "...no Audio Exotics. It's as simple as that!". Because of his close relationship with the American company, he had the latest version of the Troy NG from Tripoint, and Chris and JLam are only too keen to demonstrate it, in and out of a system. The enthusiasm alone for the product would almost be enough, but the upgrade it brings to the sound, and how fast that upgrade dissipates when the Troy is removed, is absolutely palpable.

The systems generated here are perfectly attuned to the demands and musical choices of their marketplace. Hong Kong audiophiles take their music very seriously, and there is scant rock and jazz played. This is a world of classical music, both Western and Chinese, and the systems play to those strengths, by sounding dynamic, expressive, and focused, especially at medium levels. These are not systems designed for earth-moving bass played at 130beats per minute, because they will never be played that way. Instead, they are fine tuned to the tonality of the orchestra and the piano.



Where things really start to take off is when you take the 30 minute journey across the Island and get to the Divin Labs store. This is a far larger space, designed without constraint. Again more like a home than a shop, Divin Labs is set up as the best system money can buy. And we do mean 'set-up'. In order to make the system sound good, Chris Leung calls on the skills of international audio installation expert Stirling Trayle of Audio Systems Optimised. Normally, Stirling only attends systems in customer's homes, and spends days with them in order to get their system sounding perfect. Such an installation would never work in most dealers. Chris, instead, plays the long game, knowing that his customers aren't 'pick 'n' mixers'. This system comprises a top Hartvig analogue front end, Wadax Atlantis Reference digital audio replay, Zanden Jinpu phono stage, Chukoh preamp, and Kaun mono amplifiers, and Divin Majestic loudspeakers by Göbel. That is a monumental system unmatched anywhere. ▶



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▶ However, the big clue to Audio Exotics’ significance is in the name of the Göbel loudspeakers, built to Chris Leung’s exacting specifications. If that were the only bespoke product in the line-up, that too would be enough to make this something special, but the Zanden amplifiers are custom designs too; they are built to order and sold exclusively through Audio Exotics. You don’t get to them unless you go through Chris Leung. Not that he’s overly-protective of his brands, but that he has entered into agreement with like-minded audiophiles with passion to make their best-of-the-best only available in the best-of-the-best.

This is more than just bragging rights; it’s the way forward for many good dealers the world over. As the world becomes more standardised and boringly consistent, there will be those who kick against that as a form of mediocrity. If an audio dealer sells the same products as 20 other audio dealers within a 10 mile radius, you aren’t providing a service; you are acting as a reseller of products. While not everyone can walk this line, by going for bespoke products that only Audio Exotics provides, they automatically have a captive audience of those who want the best.

The audio world often seems to be retreating from thinking for itself; instead of trying to walk their own path, many dealers simply see the product portfolio of a nearby successful dealer and try to replicate it, forgetting that there isn’t enough room for two almost identical dealers in the same catchment area. Chris Leung is one of the few to think beyond these narrow guidelines, and that is aided to no small amount by working with good people, like that seemingly inexhaustible supply of energy that is the company’s Managing Director, J.Lam. Good people bring in good people!



Chris is certainly convinced of his way of building audio stores, as he’s thinking of opening a similar scheme in several parts of the world. Naturally, those parts of the world require a clientele with both interest in the best of high-end audio and the wherewithal to reach those highest of high-end branches, but such places do exist around the world. Granted this is dealing with the most exclusive of exclusive clientele, and that might be a big ask if you are not in one of those chic venues. But I feel the concept can be ported down to more real-world levels.

The typical dealer moves products around their studio frequently. They have passing relationships with brands and products, rather than spending weeks getting the best out of a device. That’s understandable if you have a fast moving market and a lot of foot-traffic, but that isn’t the modern day audio dealer’s lot. They could take time, and build better systems for better clients! +

**Audio Exotics:** [audioexotics.com](http://audioexotics.com)