



## My Road to Hi-fi Nirvana

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Like every big river, all things start as small trickles. My road in Hi-fi is no exception.

It started when I was in Form 5, when I spent a princely sum of \$150 on a small cassette tape recorder and player. The cassette player was nothing of high fidelity, but a definite improvement over the minute transistor radio that had accompanied me over countless nights. It wasn't even in stereo, but the enjoyment was still overwhelming. I can still remember the times when I recorded music over the radio and television, and of course the five-dollar-per-cassette pirated compilations. Unfortunately my player became so popular within the family that it had effectively turned into everybody's entertainment centre, and I lost custody of my first love.

Then everything was quiet for the next two years when I had to study hard for my A-level examination. I could still use the cassette player after 11 pm, when everyone had gone to sleep, when I was burning my midnight oil. I also experimented with building my speaker boxes, which could give me deeper bass or better ambience. But of course I would be filled with joy if the speaker could utter any sound at all.

My real encounter with Hi-fi in the usual sense occurred when I was in Year 1, when I moved out of the family and lived alone in Kowloon. I got myself a set of junkies, including a record player (yes, those black vinyl discs), an amplifier and two loudspeakers. Some of them were second-hands from Apliu Street, while the others were cheap and cheerful Japanese boxes. They were all connected together with "red and black" wires, again from Apliu Street. The price I paid was really peanuts, when compared to the present day exotic gears, but of course it was still a sizable sum, not to mention the cost of software.

So every month I tried to buy a few vinyl records, costing around 20 dollars each. My first record was by Mary Hopkins (remember Those Were the Days?), which cost 18 dollars. I was a poor student so I had to spend less on food. You can see easily the reason why I was one of the thinnest amongst my fellow classmates.

I was hooked onto Hi-fi and music since then. Even though most of my software nowadays are CDs I still hold onto my precious vinyl collection. The sweet and mellow sound, and especially the nostalgia from vinyl is still incomparable. Give it a try if you haven't heard that before.

In the past decades many more hardware came and

went, initially mostly Japanese transistor gears bought from high street shops. I was happy with them, and bought hundreds of CDs and LPs, enjoying every piece. An hour or so of listening, down with a glass of whisky, was at one time my usual routine, and source of delight. I grew a particular affection to Baroque music. Its intricate and symmetrical arrangement had given me hours and hours of relaxation and joy.

But things gradually changed. What was considered adequate in the past had slowly degenerated into something that I loathed. In the beginning I was particularly fond of a loud and thumping bass, and of course a splashy high pitch on the other frequency extreme. I have changed as well, my hair is getting thinner, my tummy beginning to swell, and I was loosing my high frequency hearing. My sonic preference slowly tilted towards a sweet and mellow sound, and not just highs and lows.

The transition came almost suddenly. A few years ago I was browsing around in a Hi-fi shop. No purchase was expected. The shop was demonstrating a newly introduced, made-in-China amplifier, a tube amplifier. The sound was cosy and relaxing, with lots of nuance. Suddenly I was immersed totally into this auditory hallucination. After full recovery I was very interested in the amplifier, which cost just a few thousand dollars. I bought one on the spot, and replaced most of my solid state hardware within a short time.

I was bitten by the vacuum tube bug, with no regret. The cheap original tubes were replaced by very expensive vintage ones, giving me even more pleasure. For the past two years or so, vintage gears which are often forty or fifty years old are my favourite, with a reason. The sound is simply superb, when compared to many modern designs. The other point worth mentioning is that this vintage machine collecting could be a very good investment. A Marantz 7 preamplifier that was bought less than a year ago has already doubled its market price!

According to the Pocket Oxford Dictionary, Nirvana is "(in Buddhism) a state of perfect happiness in which there is no suffering or desire, and no sense of self", you can see that the road I have pursued so far is more a track of gadget collection, with desire and lust thrown in. Nirvana seems to be a non-reachable land. But just forget that. I am enjoying the journey myself, and when immersed in the music I will forget about self and all other troubles. Isn't there a touch of Zen?