

LAST WORD

OFF THE LEASH!

KEN KESSLER TELLS IT LIKE IT IS...

Ken Kessler is in a place where the thirst for hi-fi rivals its peak in the '80s. So where can this be?



Being proven wrong can sometimes be a blessing. I will admit to an unjustified negativity preceding my first trip to Poland. This was despite having learned decades ago never to pre-judge. I always thought Australia would feel like the ends of the earth, yet Melbourne was a sheer delight and the Australians proved to be as joyously life-affirming as the Foster-guzzling stereotype suggests – but far more sober. But Poland? Surely it would be post-Communist greyness and misery.

SIMPLY ASTOUNDING

Or not. Again, I should have learned that my paranoia wouldn't be justified, having fallen in love with the only other former Communist city I knew, Budapest, after presuming the same. Poles, the tourist guide said, are not demonstrative of their feelings in the manner, of say, Italians, but visitors should remember not to confuse their reticence with glumness.

Nothing could have prepared me for what must be the largest show in Europe after Munich, and approaching the scale of those in China. The Warsaw event in November last year was simply astounding, a throwback to the late-1980s, when interest in hi-fi was at its peak. But I hungered for an explanation.

Two lessons were learned, one about the exhibitors and one about the visitors

themselves. Regarding the former, I was overwhelmed by the number of local manufacturers, most of which were unknown to me. That's not to suggest I'm omniscient; even so, I would have at least heard of some of them. It took a British manufacturer to explain to me why these wonderful products – with absurdly low prices! – were not readily available outside of Poland.

Without a shred of 'attitude' or intimations of superiority, he said, simply, that a half-century of Communist rule and limited contact with the rest of the world had created both hungry audiophiles and clever designers. It's no mystery that Poles are better educated than the British and they

excel in sciences. (If you don't believe me, look at the barely literate, inarticulate morons filling any UK high street or shopping plaza.) It's China all over again.

Their hunger for equipment better than

the third-rate offerings approved by Russia created home-grown brands, brimming with lateral thinking and clever solutions to parts scarcity and other obstacles. But post-Russia, their unavailability outside of the homeland was due to something else. Said my colleague, 'They can certainly make fine equipment but have no grasp of marketing, exporting or retailing.'

Sound familiar? Like China circa 1995? Amp after wonderful valve amp, with wild

'There was amp after amp, with wild features and great prices'

features and great prices, but with one huge difference. Unlike some early Chinese valve amps, these are all good enough to pass CE testing and won't feel like they'll draw blood should you run your finger across the edge of the fascia. It took the Chinese a mere decade to refine their wares, and I would gladly own a Ming Da, Shanling or other Chinese-made amp. The Poles skipped a period of shabby construction.

PLAYING CATCH-UP

As for the visitors, it's so obvious that I'm almost embarrassed to explain it, and I certainly do not want to sound patronising – especially as I am probably one-quarter Polish. This is a country that had an empire of its own, and produced incredible musicians, writers, artists and thinkers. But, like every country Stalin occupied, its culture was put on hold for a half-century. And so was its economy.

What resulted, post-perestroika and the fall of Communism, was a society hungry for the benefits of freedom and, certainly, capitalism, whether it be affordable trainers and jeans, cars more desirable than Trabants or Ladas, the latest fashions, computers and, yes, audio equipment. In other words, Poland is not saturated with hardware, the citizens are not spoiled and jaded, and they are playing catch-up with vigour.

A general consensus is that the Warsaw show has the potential to be the biggest of them all. It is organised as well as any I have attended. The venues are superb, including the novel use of the VIP courtesy suites in the city's stadium. Above all, for exhibitors and foreign visitors, are the prices. Brand-name hotels for £35 a night? Sublime food under a fiver? It begs a T-shirt for the UK emblazoned with 'Say No To £5 Coffee!'.

As the organiser, Adam Mokrzycki, told me, when negotiating with an exhibitor, the cost of showing in Warsaw caused much confusion. The client asked how much he charged. Adam told him, and the chap said, 'Per day?' No: all-in, for the entire event.

Munich – said to be the most expensive show of them all – needs to watch out. Germany has a history of wanting to conquer Poland. Looks like certain Poles may have the last laugh. ☺

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