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We return this month to the vexing problem of the competition from internet only sales outlets. A head of steam seems to be building up amongst retailers against those manufacturers who are trying to play on both sides of the field and now Paul Lee-Kemp of Sevenoaks has thrown a few shovel-loads of best Welsh coal onto the boiler fire with his firm stance. Time will tell if retailers are prepared to press their point to some kind of conclusion.

Now I happen to be a great believer in e-bay and it is always my first port of call when I need

writing up the excellent Marantz SR-12S1 Surround Sound Receiver for "Your Guide" and decided to check the typical selling prices on Google. All the UK prices I found were reassuringly close to the £3000 "going rate" when I saw mention of one listed on e-bay. Now I know that some retailers have these wonderful customers who change their equipment as regularly as their socks but I did think that this product was rather too new to be on auction alongside the Armstrong amplifiers and Dansette record players. But no; this was a brand new product that I could "Buy Now" for £1859 with £126 for DHL air freight from Hong Kong. The 692 cases of positive feedback were re-assuring and a follow-up phone call revealed that this company really does exist and that, if so requested, they would pack a receipt showing the receiver to be a "personal effect repaired after return" so the buyer would need to budget only a few pounds for our dear friends at Customs and Excise.

Having imported quite a lot of stuff over the years I know that there is some truth in the claims of this Hong Kong supplier so I was left to ruminate on whether many members of the buying public would avail themselves of the opportunity to save around £900 or 30% on a £3000 purchase. But it gets worse: the same dealer offers a very good projector, yours for £7000 from the UK's cheapest supplier, for only £4000. Tempting it certainly seems.

It is said that the internet draws you in and pretty soon you have lost all your friends. Well this was a case in point and I was soon deeply immersed into e-bay and except for a troubling diversion to look at the option of buying an American fire truck, (fully equipped 1981 Ford Peirce truck with 36,000 miles for £1500 – stunning!), I discovered numerous examples of Hong Kong companies offering similar bargains. Now my first

reaction is that the quantities involved are small so no harm was done until it dawned upon me that the number of these receivers sold in the UK by Marantz each month can be counted on the fingers of one hand and each one represents a big lump of income for one of our increasingly under-siege dealers. This enterprising HK dealer could soon be creaming off more than half of the UK business. Yes the arguments of after-sales support and warranty are there but does the public really care? Consider that in the case of the projector you could throw it away after 18 months and buy another and financially be no worse off.

With internet selling there is already a well established pattern of international sales which is why the likes of FedEx now have the biggest fleets of airliners. I used to buy DVDs and CDs from Hong Kong but now they come from the USA and Jersey or some such island and I also buy lots of electrical components from the USA but these are all low cost, small items. What is new to me, and I suspect to many readers, is the prospect of high value products being imported. Many retailers realise that the high street sales of mid-priced consumer electronics are being savaged by the internet sales channel and some dealers are now inclined to walk away from that business, but they have always felt safe with high-end products. Maybe I should say no more than "Beware the ides of March" because the warning signs are there.

Shortly after writing this piece I met a man who wanted to buy two big Yamaha engines for his boat. A dealer in the USA quoted him a price or around £13500 landed; duty & VAT paid when the best UK price was around £22,000 for the pair. The motors are covered by an international warranty but if the worst came to the worst he could pack one in the crate and ship it back to the dealer for £300. Be honest now; what would you do in his situation?

The world is now the consumer's oyster

something a little unusual. Normally we are talking about Victorian Objet d'Art and stuffed

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foxes but this week I found myself looking at the offers of expensive hi-fi equipment. I'd just finished