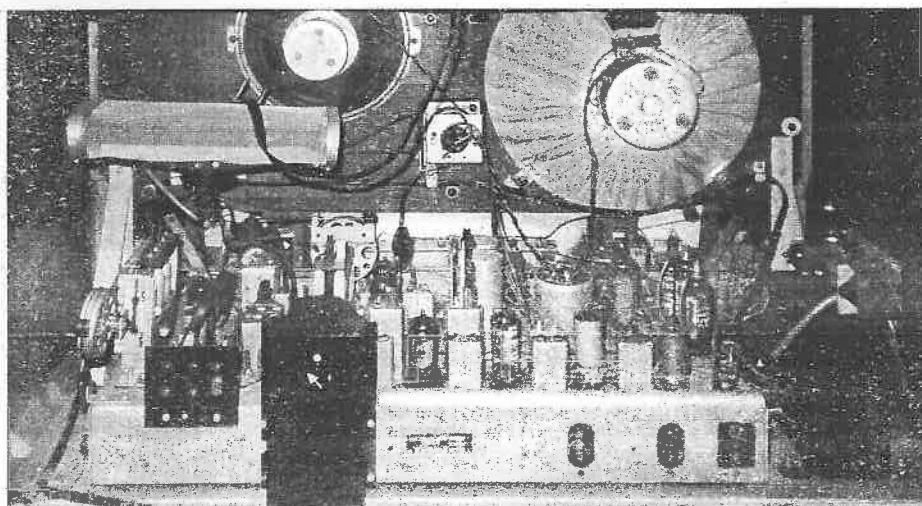
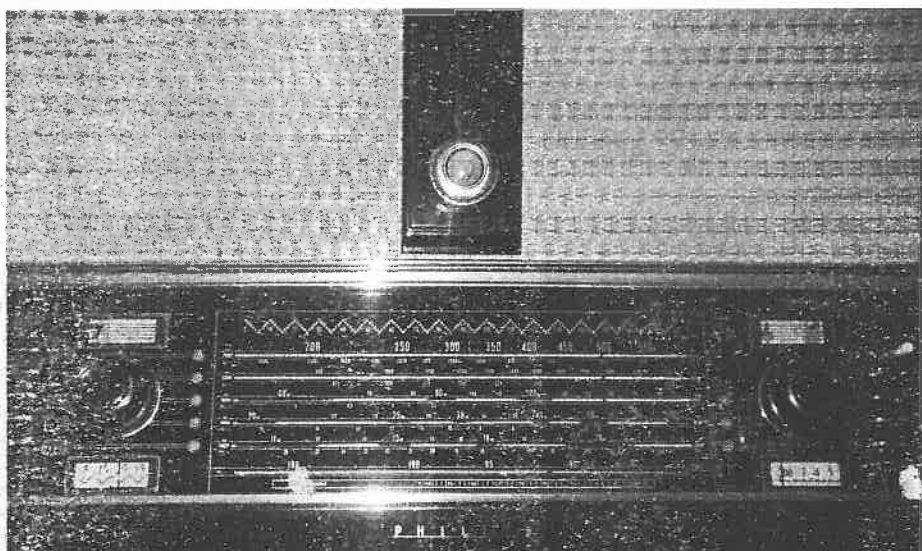
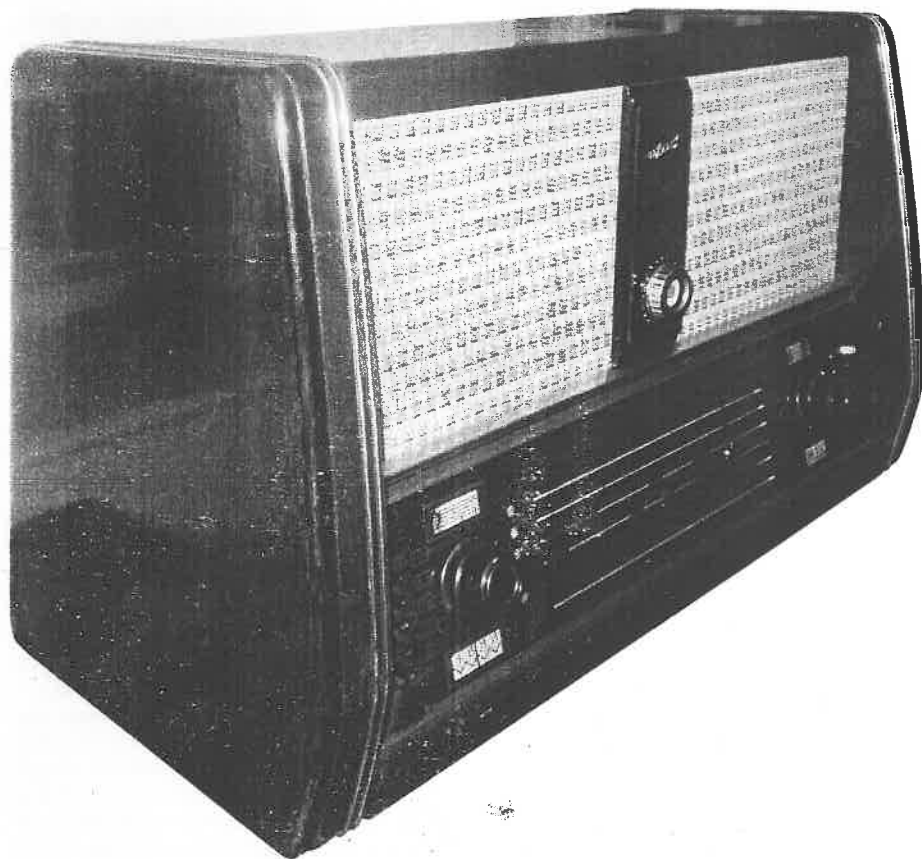


The BX998A/54: Philips' most ambitious table model from the 1950's.

by Jonathan Dollimore



I first saw this imposing set in a friend's barn a year or so back. I'd never seen one before or even heard of its existence. Even a quick glance showed it was special. To begin with there were six wave-bands (LW, MW, three SW, and VHF), and looking inside I counted no fewer than 16 valves. Other obvious features included two speakers, an integral AM aerial rotatable from the front of the set, a built in FM aerial, and a tuning indicator (EM34). There were also an alarming number of drive cords, almost as many dial bulbs and, most intriguingly of all, some kind of electric motor. Control wise it was apparent that FM has two settings – one for "extreme sensitivity/sensible" and the other for "Haute Qualité/Excellente reproduction". There were also separate smaller dials for local station and short wave tuning. The tuning dial itself was entirely devoid of station names. Station selection was by push buttons which were obviously a function of that electric motor. There was also a badge on the front proclaiming the set's "Bi-Ampli" credentials.

A most intriguing set then, and one I needed to find out more about it. My friend had found the set in an antique shop in Lewes, Sussex, some years ago but knew no more about it than what we gleaned from inspection. A quick call around some of the Wise Men of the BVWS came up with nothing. Not for the first time the miracle of the internet provided the answer, on this occasion in the form of Gerard Tel's very helpful site Radio Corner (<http://www.cs.uu.nl/~gerard/RadioCorner>). There I discovered that this set dates from 1955 and was one of Philips' most ambitious domestic receivers of the post war era. In Holland it cost 820 guilders in 1956 when, I believe, there were about 10 guilders to the pound.

"Bi-ampli" refers of course to the separate amplification of bass and treble notes. The latter comes from the EL84, the former from two PL81s. Treble and bass can be altered separately and the treble control also narrows the bandwidth of the IF strip for the AM bands. The bass also benefits from a series balanced output (readers who would like more technical information on this side of things will find it on Gerard's site together with an account of his own restoration of one of these sets). That electric motor was, as we surmised, for wave changing. I'd assumed this was a fad of the late 1930's which didn't survive the war. But here it was, and operated by push

buttons, just as in the old days. Incidentally one other feature it has in common with quality pre-war sets is that it's both heavy, weighing around 60 pounds, and big – 28ins long by 18ins high and 13ins deep.

The "qualité" setting on FM mentioned earlier also features silent tuning. On short wave you get everything between 517 and 26500 kiloHertz. VHF and AM have separate dials with their own pointers, but each is operated independently by a single knob. Again the connection between the latter with its appropriate dial/pointer is electrical. There's also a fine tuning facility for short wave with a separate knob and its own small dial which is lit only when the relevant bands are chosen. Also with its own dial is a local medium wave facility allowing for the pre-setting of one station and, again, only lit when chosen.

I decided this was a set that had to be got working again and my friend agreed to sell it on to me. I felt that the restoration of a radio like this was beyond me; I should add that I am a relatively recent convert to the world of old wireless, and in no way an expert, and so willingly open to correction on anything I've written here. But I am learning: being of the bah-humbag mentality when Christmas was concerned, and I managed to escape the festivities I devoted my time to working on an Ekco console, with motorised tuning. The thrill of getting it going tolerably well was great indeed. As for the Philips was concerned I persuaded another friend, John Pearson of Brighton, to undertake the chassis work for me. As always he did a superb job. Generally, the condition of the set was pretty good. There turned out to be around 18 drive cords in the set and fortunately only one of these was actually broken. That was for the VHF tuning and, as you'd expect with a Philips, proved a bit tricky to restring. Four valves needed replacing (EF80, EBF80, EF85, EL84), also a valve socket where tracking-of-high-voltage had caused the carbonization of the paxolin material. The grid coupling capacitors to both output stages were duff, and several resistors were sufficiently out to need replacing. The bass tone control was seized and needed freeing, and the cone of the bass speaker needed to be recentred. Quite a few switch contacts needed cleaning. Lastly, five of the pilot/station bulbs were replaced.

What can one say of the styling? Only the Devil and its mother could regard it as handsome. To be fair it is, I suppose, simply a more opulent version of a typical mid 1950's radio and my misgivings are mainly about its appearance. Why for example was it necessary to give a perfectly nice piece of wood that high gloss toffee coloured finish which obliterates all trace of the grain? And why give metal and plastic trim that gold finish which seems to have been the precursor of those dreadful gold coloured electrical fittings of more recent

times? Well, as someone once said, you have to forgive fashion almost everything because it dies so young. Fortunately the cabinet on this set is in reasonable condition – I wouldn't have the resolve to spend painstaking hours restoring it to an original finish that I don't actually like.

As to the way this set performs, I can't fault it. The motorised wave changing operates smoothly, and mostly silently, although the various dial lights flash a little disconcertingly as it moves in sequence through the chosen bands.

This is particularly so when switching from the high sensitivity to the high quality settings for VHF: the buttons are adjacent to each other but for some reason the selection goes round the houses via all the other wave bands. Performance on the other wave lengths is also excellent. I may be a bit biased here since I'm keen on Philips sets more generally, especially of two pre war sets in my collection – a 691A/U radiogram from 1938/9 and the other a 701X console from the previous year. Both are of the notorious monoknob variety and on both the sound is excellent. The 701 is best, having a better treble response than the 691.

Gerry Wells, also a fan of Philips, tells me that they devoted great attention to the speakers. As for the monoknob control I can only conclude that, far from making tuning easier for the amateur listener easily intimidated by several separate knobs, it was specifically designed to frighten off such people. And if the head of the household was a control freak (so to speak) that might well have been just what he wanted. (Well it would be a "he" wouldn't it?)

I learn from Gerard that there was also a console model of the BX998A, and another with a built in tape recorder selling for about 2700 guilders. Also that there is an internal logic to the Philips model numbering. In this case, the first letter indicates type (B=table model), the second letter country of origin (X=Netherlands), first number indicates price class (1 is cheapest, 9 the highest) and so on. But the suffix numbers could apparently mean just about anything and in the case of my set I haven't yet been able to find out what 54 stands for.

A question remains – was this set ever officially available in this country? None of those in the BVWS I've consulted so far had heard of it. Remember that it cost, in Holland, the equivalent of around £85 in 1955. The basic imported cost over here would surely have been even higher than that, and additionally there would have been purchase tax to pay as well. Gerry Wells recently remarked to me that most people in this country in 1955 could hardly afford our own conventional 5 valve sets, let alone ones like this. And I can't help feeling that

sets of this kind, no matter how impressive their engineering, remained toys for the rich. But then, was it not ever thus? Comparison with Rolls Royce cars, and Purdy guns, among many other products, come to mind: how many of their first owners really appreciated the fine engineering of those cars, the supreme craftsmanship of those guns? And in case you think I'm reserving that discrimination for myself, someone who definitely could not afford them, let me hastily put another related question: was their excellence really worth the huge extra cost over and above similar high quality mass produced items? If the answer is "no", then the finer discrimination may lie in declining the higher cost item. There have always been those in a position to answer the old quip "if you need to ask the price you can't afford it" with "actually I can afford it but want to know the price because I suspect it ain't worth it". It used to be said of the Oldsmobile that it was the wise man's Cadillac. I rather agree – but then as someone who once bought an Olds in preference to a Caddy I would say that wouldn't it?

But we can only be grateful that expensive items like the 998 were made at all, that someone originally bought them and that they survive for us to enjoy at much more

affordable prices. Gerard believes that, despite the cost quite a few of these sets were made, and the survival rate is quite good, at least on the continent. And to be fair to this set, coinciding as it did (at least in this country) with the early days of VHF, its sound quality

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must have been a revelation. There are other good VHF sets from the mid 1950's – Ekco C273 console and the Bush VHF 64 to name but two. Sound-wise this Philips set is the best I've ever heard. These things are notoriously subjective but I find the sound of high quality mono VHF sets of this era especially pleasing. Somewhat perversely perhaps, I'm as happy listening to music in this form as in stereo. Shortly before writing this I was listening to a Radio 3 broadcast of Shakespeare's King Lear and was hugely impressed too with the way this set reproduced speech. Gerard regrets the simplicity of the tonality control, pointing out that whereas in this set there are just two controls for treble and bass, other VHF sets of the era had four or five band equalizers and presets for speech, jazz, orchestra, etc. His explanation is that "in 1955 there was just one acceptable style of music, namely classical music, while pop music didn't exist and jazz was hardly played by the class of people buying this radio." In practice, I'm always happy to play with the controls, so the more there are the better. It's also true that I don't actually miss not having them in this case. The sound quality of this set always has its own integrity, something that can't always be said of expensive sound equipment.

BX998 A

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