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Headmaster

Luxury MSR7 cans by Audio-Technica



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42 stylish
in-ear
headphones
to be won

Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. **398**

June 2015

Back to black

Six turntables to kick start your groove

WIRE-FREE
Bluetooth tunes to your hi-fi

32

PRODUCTS ON TEST:

Arcam, Cyrus, NuForce, Pro-Ject, Q Acoustics & Rega

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HI-FI WORLD



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Hi-Fi World - April 2015



DXD
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Welcome

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16
Q Acoustics
3050 loudspeaker



113
Black Rhodium
Sonata VS-1

Music reviews



99 **Blur**
The Magic Whip



Flicking through the pages of this month's issue shows that the humble LP usurped by CD in the mid-eighties is still very much alive and well. *Hi-Fi Choice* has always championed the much-loved format alongside new audio alternatives as they arrive, but it's clear that the vinyl resurgence is reaching new audiences as well as reminding many that had forgotten why they once loved it so.

As record sales continue to grow, April saw the format make its biggest comeback so far with the UK's eighth Record Store Day making 2015's event the biggest yet with hardcore fans queuing up early outside local stores to get their hands on the numerous special and limited edition pressings made exclusively for release on the day. But, of course, the headline news is the introduction of a new weekly vinyl albums chart launched by the Official Charts Company following the upturn in sales – see page 79.

Turntable brands have wasted no time in tapping into the market, and I reckon there are more decks available now than at any time since the seventies. In our *Group Test* starting on page 24 we select six bargain-priced models to see how well they spin our treasured records. Whether you're returning to vinyl after a lengthy hiatus, looking to digitise your albums or discovering the joys of the black stuff and the yearning to get started on the hi-fi track for the very first time, we're sure to have a model that's just right for you.

Lee Dunkley Editor

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BADGES EXPLAINED

OUR AWARDS



EDITOR'S CHOICE:
Awarded to those products that are judged to deliver outstanding performance



RECOMMENDED:
Products that we feel meet a high standard of performance



GROUP TEST WINNER:
Comparative tests can only have one winner, and this badge says it all!



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Hi-FiChoice Contents

hifichoice.co.uk Issue No. **398** June 2015



NEWS & OPINION

6 **Audiofile**

The latest news on the hottest products from the world of hi-fi coming your way

14 **Webwatch**

Essential websites to direct your browser towards for all your hi-fi requirements

69 **Letters**

Put your points of view and queries on audio matters to our team of experts

79 **Opinion**

The *Hi-Fi Choice* team say it as they see it as they discuss the issues of the day

99 **Music Reviews**

The month's essential new CD, vinyl and hi-res releases given a work out

READER SERVICES

120 **Competition**

We've got 14 bundles of three sets of in-ear headphones to give away

122 **Reader Classifieds**

Sell your unwanted hi-fi for FREE here

130 **Next Issue**

The sonic treats to look out for next month

FEATURES

64 **Insider: Roksan**

Meet Tufan Hashemi, the man that made a small hi-fi company into a world beater



90 **Dealer Visit**

It's time to head off to London to check out affordable setups from Bartlett's Hi-Fi

94 **Labelled With Love**

Your primer to Hindustani classical music begins with the Music From India series

114 **Guide To...**

Why using a dedicated specialist is the best way to go when buying your system

118 **Destination Dorset**

Meet the owner of the pet food store that doubles as a record shop with a difference

GROUP TEST

24 **Six turntables are put through their paces to see which is the king of spin**



6 **Audiofile:** Lotoo PAW Gold audio player



100 **Music Reviews:** Lead Belly



56
Cyrus Stereo 200 stereo power amplifier

“Getting advice on how to set up a product can be far more valuable than shaving money off of the price”

TESTED THIS MONTH

Guide to... Buying from a dedicated hi-fi dealer p114



46
Onkyo A-9010 (UK) integrated amplifier



42
Ming Da Piccolo integrated valve amplifier



52
Scansonic MB-1 loudspeaker

REVIEWS

- Kit testing
- 16 Q Acoustics**
3050 floorstanding loudspeaker
- 42 Ming Da**
Piccolo integrated valve amplifier (Exotica)
- 46 Onkyo**
A-9010 (UK) integrated amplifier
- 50 FiiO**
X1 digital audio player
- 52 Scansonic**
MB-1 standmount loudspeaker
- 56 Cyrus**
Stereo 200 power amplifier
- 59 Raumfeld**
Connector 2 digital music hub
- 60 NuForce**
DDA120 integrated amplifier
- 63 Audio-Technica**
ATH-MSR7 headphones
- 88 Garrard**
SP25 turntable (Retro)

MINI TEST

- Bluetooth adaptors
£35-£90
- 102 Harman/Kardon**
BTA 10
- 103 Lindy**
BTX-50 Audio Receiver Pro
- 103 Philips**
AEA2700/12
- 104 Arcam**
miniBlink

CHOICE EXTRAS

- 107 Clint Digital**
Odin wireless speaker
- 109 Chord Company**
Sarsen speaker cable
- 109 ISOkinetik**
Graphite Headshell
- 110 WychWood Audionics**
F3 filter system
- 113 Black Rhodium**
Sonata VS-1 analogue interconnect

GROUP TEST

- Turntables £120-£399
- 27 Audio-Technica**
AT-LP120USBHC
- 29 Connected Essentials**
CET-500
- 31 Numark** TTUSB
- 33 Pro-Ject** RPM 1 Carbon
- 35 Rega** RP1 Performance Pack
- 37 Stanton** T.62



60
NuForce DDA120 integrated amplifier



103
Philips
AEA2700/12

Never miss an issue – turn to p20 for our latest subs offer



Gold standard

Lotoo introduces its PAW Gold hi-res music player for music on the move

PRICE: £1,500 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01903 768910 **WEB:** HIFIHEADPHONES.CO.UK

SINCE SONY'S WALKMAN first hit the streets back in July 1979, we've been obsessed with music on the move. The first blue and silver cassette models changed our relationship with music forever and instantly turned a train or bus ride to the office or school into an energising experience that could put a smile on faces even on a dismal Monday morning commute. Wind forward to 2015 and the landscape may have changed somewhat, but take a look around and you'll realise our desire for

portable listening devices is getting ever stronger with a raft of Digital Audio Players (DAP) and headphones for a life of music and movement.

Like all things in the world of hi-fi the (DAP) market is pretty widely spread with models at a variety of price points offering different performance levels and flexibilities, and the PAW Gold from Lotoo (pronounced low-to) is firmly aimed at the high-end market. As a new brand to UK hi-fi users, Lotoo says it comes from a 10-year background in

pro-audio and is best known as a supplier of audio workstations and broadcast automation systems.

Taking its first steps into the domestic hi-res audio arena, the PAW Gold looks set to make a striking debut. The slightly blingy full-metal casing is machined from a solid brick of what the maker calls aircraft-grade duralumin and is accentuated with 24k gold elements. It claims a scratch-resistant 1.8in OLED screen on the front, vital statistics are 60 x 104 x 25mm (WxHxD) and it



weighs in at 280g. Storage is offered via an SD card slot with support for SDHC and SDXC cards as well as futureproof support for 2TB-capacity cards as and when they become

The slightly blingy full-metal casing is accentuated with 24k gold elements

available. A USB 3.0 micro-B port claims fast file transfers from a computer and a Burr-Brown PCM1792 DAC chip handles PCM sample rates up to 384kHz as well as

DSD at 2.8 and 5.6MHz. Audio format support is extensive and covers DSD, FLAC, ALAC, WAV, AAC, MP3, WMA, OGG, M4A, CUE, APE and WavePack music files.

The 6000mAh built-in rechargeable battery claims to give up to 11 hours playback time at maximum output, and the PAW Gold's Ti LME49600 headphone driver can support a wide range of cans plugged into the 3.5mm mini-jack headphone/line level output, it says.

The Lotoo is available now in grey with gold-finished controls and also comes with a velvet storage pouch. We look forward to getting our hands on one in the next few months.

COMMENT

RECORD STORE DAY MISSES THE POINT



Now that April is well and truly over, we can reflect on Record Store Day 2015. Now in its 8th year in the UK, the event has become a fixture of the vinyl lover's calendar, and it's easy to see why. Anything that celebrates the black stuff should be heaped with praise. But there's a growing feeling that it's having a detrimental effect and is getting away from its original goal.

Before we start laying into RSD, let's first look at the good stuff. This year saw a 3.3% percent rise of sales over last year and a 628% increase in vinyl sales on the previous week (April 11). So far, so impressive, but delve a little deeper and it's no all quite so good news.

Record Stores are offered the 'exclusives' that prove so popular by distributors on a 'firm sale' basis meaning that they're not sale or return like normal. Prices are also vastly inflated compared with the rest of the year. The day's biggest seller was The White Stripes's reissue of *Get Behind Me Satan*, which cost £25. The result is that many stores end up spending out an awful lot of money on records that they'll be stuck with if they don't manage to sell them. As one store owner told *The Guardian*: "You can spend many thousands more than you'd like. Then your profit is tied up in the records that haven't sold. A small shop could feasibly sell everything on the day and pay its rent for a year, but it could also drive a shop out of business". Meanwhile, the regular clientèle feels alienated by the hordes of hawkers and hipsters hoping to get their hands on a disc they never intend to play - instead hoping to sell it on ebay for a profit.

What was originally billed as an opportunity for independent labels and stores to get some exposure has turned into a marketing exercise for the major labels and mainstream bands. The top 10 selling discs included The White Stripes, Metallica, David Bowie and The Black Keys - hardly up and coming indies. We don't pretend to have the answers, but the day rapidly needs a retune to try and get back to its independent roots. ▶

Dali Menuet loudspeaker

Danish manufacturer's Mentor Menuet is upgraded

PRICE: £799 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
WEB: DALI-UK.CO.UK

THE NEW DALI Menuet is a diminutive loudspeaker that promises an astonishing level of detailed sound reproduction, thanks to a design upgrade (taking it from the Mentor Menuet to the Menuet) in line with Dali's highly acclaimed Rubicon series.

This compact bass reflex loudspeaker features a 4.5in woofer and a 1.1in soft-dome tweeter. The woofer is airflow optimised in order to achieve the best possible coupling between the wood fibre cone and the real-wood veneer cabinet, claims Dali. The oversized dome is 30 percent lighter than comparable standard domes and is designed to start and stop with speed and precision due to the very low mass of the dome assembly.

Whether bookshelf or wall mounted (using the optional bracket), the Menuet offers what the company calls a clean, undistorted bass, an open and dynamic midrange and detailed highs. It's available in a choice of high gloss black, high gloss white, walnut and rosso finishes.



IN BRIEF

ARCAM'S NEW STREAMING APP



Created inhouse by Arcam's new app software team, MusicLife is designed to be easier to use, faster and more stable than other rivals offering the same features. Simple to integrate with Bluetooth, the app supports the playing of media from network/UPnP servers to any Bluetooth device, enabling streaming on almost anything if paired with an Arcam miniBlink or rBlink Bluetooth DAC. It's compatible with Arcam's hi-fi and home cinema components with streaming built-in – including the CDS27 SACD/CD player, UDP411 Blu-ray player, Solo Neo one-box music system, airDAC integrated DAC and up to nine separate receivers – and can be downloaded for free from Apple's iTunes Store.
ARCAM.CO.UK

Mitchell and Johnson debut CD and amplifier

PRICE: £249-£299 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 0845 6435064 **WEB:** MITCHELLANDJOHNSON.COM

Following the rebranding of Sansui UK as Mitchell and Johnson at CES in Las Vegas earlier this year, the new British-based hi-fi manufacturer is launching the SAP-201V (pictured) – an updated and improved version of the slim-line integrated amplifier previously sold under the Sansui brand name, and a matching CD player (CDD-201).

Internal modifications at the £299 amp's component level have, claims M&J, improved its audio performance significantly without increasing the price.

The amplifier boasts 40W per channel into 8ohm and features seven inputs, including four line-level analogue inputs, a 3.5mm front panel socket and a dedicated phono input. The high-resolution 24-bit/192kHz Wolfson DAC enables digital audio sources, such as computers, portable players or the soon-to-be-launched matching network music player to be connected via coaxial or optical sockets for the best possible signal transfer. High-quality toroidal transformers and audiophile-

grade components are also used throughout to ensure accurate sound tuning. The SAP-201V includes a headphone socket on the front, while loudspeaker connections (4 to 16ohm) are made using the binding posts.

Supplied in brushed silver or black finishes, with restyled metal volume controls and flush mounted control buttons, the SAP-201V aesthetically matches the CDD-201 CD player (£249), which is compatible with all common CD formats including; CD/CD-/R/RW and MP3. ▶





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All there is. **DYNAUDIO**

Sony goes wireless

New speakers and micro system unveiled

PRICE: £259-£599 **AVAILABLE:** JUNE/JULY
CONTACT: 0207 3652413 **WEB:** SONY.CO.UK

SONY IS SET to release a batch of speakers designed especially for multi-room use. The seven-speaker X99 system (£599) delivers 154W through a 2.1-channel setup that includes four super tweeters. The £349 SRS-X88 boasts 90W in a more compact casing with a subwoofer, mids and two super tweeters and the portable SRS-X77 (£259) has a built-in rechargeable battery, allowing you to enjoy audio for up to 10 hours between charges.

Designed to expand your multi-room options, Sony has also announced its CMT-SX7B Wireless Micro hi-fi system. Slip in either a CD or USB drive, access online services via Google Cast and Spotify Connect, listen to your favourite DAB radio station or alternatively hook up your iPad/iPhone/iPod or Walkman for a full range of (24-bit/192kHz) hi-res audio.

The wireless speakers are available in June and the micro hi-fi in July. Both use Sony's proprietary distortion-reducing S-Master HX and upscaling DSEE HX technologies.



IN BRIEF

TMA-2 MODULAR HEADPHONES

● Copenhagen-based audio design company AIAIAI has announced a new headphone concept called TMA-2 Modular. Providing a vast range of interchangeable options across sound, function, comfort and design, TMA-2 Modular lets you create a personalised headset. With prices starting from £100 you'll be able to create your own unique bespoke headphones from a framework of AIAIAI elements, including the speaker unit, headband, earpads and cables.

KILODESIGN.DK



Musical Fidelity unveils DSD-compatible DAC

PRICE: £699 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 0208 9002866 **WEB:** MUSICALFIDELITY.COM

As one of the very first hi-fi manufacturers to introduce a digital-to-analogue converter, Musical Fidelity knows a thing or two about DACs, and has been at the forefront of the technology for some time now. So when it says that its latest addition to the range of converters flooding the market is "almost perfect" it's worth paying attention to, particularly as – for the first time – it will include compatibility with the hi-res DSD format.

Constructed from custom-made extrusions using Mil-spec aluminium, the new MX-DAC boasts ultra-low distortion combined with a wide bandwidth and low noise. Musical Fidelity claims that its technical performance is "On a par with any other DAC at any price" and that conversion of any digital input will be "completely neutral and accurate". This is thanks in part to the Sigma Delta PCM1795 32-bit/192kHz chip at its heart.

Jitter is quoted at "about 12pps" and frequency response is described as "ruler flat".

The selection of digital inputs include two optical and two coaxial (up to 24-bit/192kHz), along with an asynchronous USB-B 2.0. Output connections, meanwhile, consist of a line-level RCA and balanced XLR sockets. Dimensions are quoted at 220 x 53 x 215mm (wxhxd) and it weighs 1.9kg. Look out for our review coming next issue. ▶





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Midlands – Oxford Audio Consultants 01865 790879 / Midland Hifi Studio 01902 380083 / Art Audio Salon – 07878 566814.

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BLUE AURA

www.blueaura.co.uk





Pioneer USB/DAC

PRICE: £699 **AVAILABLE:** SEPTEMBER **CONTACT:** 0330 1231240 **WEB:** PIONEER.CO.UK

THE NEW U-05 USB/DAC headphone amplifier will play regular PCM signals with a resolution up to 32-bit/384kHz and is also compatible with 2.8MHz and 5.6MHz DSD files. According to Pioneer, jitter and noise have been eradicated thanks to a high-precision master clock circuit and dual Sabre 8-channel chipset.

But the U-05 is not just a USB DAC. It also includes two optical and two coaxial digital inputs and an XLR (AES/EBU) input, allowing connection to several digital sources such as CD players or network audio players. The amplifier section is, says Pioneer, fully balanced and uses a shielded power transformer with

anti-vibration structure. The XLR-terminals on the front – a set of three-pin terminals and a single four-pin option – are said to be compatible with every type of headphone on the market today, regardless of its architecture and wiring. A full-size jack output is also available.

With a distinctive casing that's been constructed from solid aluminium, the U-05 can be deployed as a traditional, high-end preamplifier with volume control, using the balanced XLR-outputs or the unbalanced RCA outputs. An easy-to-use infrared remote control is also bundled. Look out for our full review coming to these pages soon.

NuForce power amplifier

PRICE: £650 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01923 691800 **WEB:** OPTOMA.CO.UK

Hot on the heels of its DDA120 integrated amplifier (see page 60), NuForce has unveiled details of its latest stereo power amplifier, the STA120. Engineered for high-quality audio, the 120 has a claimed power output of 85W into 8ohm (or 125W into 4ohm), and connections include a brace of analogue RCA inputs and speaker binding posts.

Beneath the lid, the power amp's 400kHz PWM switching frequency constantly adjusts to the input signal, output current demands and loudspeaker impedance variations, says the company.

Enclosed in an anodised aluminium casing that's in keeping with the look of the NuForce range, the STA120 can be partnered with

the DAC80 digital preamp and WDC200 wireless DAC. It's available in either a black or silver finish.

Justin Halls, head of product marketing at NuForce's parent company Optoma, told *HFC*: "The highly efficient design also means the STA120 is better for the environment and will ultimately cost less to the consumer".



IN BRIEF



STATUS AMP

● New British hi-fi brand, Modern British Audio Company, has launched its Status integrated amplifier. It comprises two separate 170W into 8ohm monobloc amplifiers, which are coupled to a high-quality analogue control preamp stage.

The integrated Bluetooth 4.0 receiver and DAC allows streaming of music from iOS, Android and Windows devices. Substantial power supplies, separate for each individual mono channel, provide high-current capacity for the power stages, says MBAco, and a separately regulated higher voltage supply to the power amplifier's input and driver stages.

Physical connection is via three sets of phonos, a 3.5mm front-mounted jack and balanced XLR inputs. Left, right and subwoofer preamp outputs are provided. The Status also features a dedicated Class A headphone amplifier and is priced at £6,295.

MBA.CO.UK



CANS FOR HIRE

● Place Over Ears is a new UK website that hires out noise-cancelling headphones by post for holidaymakers for just £17.99 per week. Customers can either hire or purchase – via its website – leading headphone brands including Audio-Technica, Sony and JVC for a minimum of four days and a maximum of 29. When back home, simply return the headphones using a pre-paid return service and you'll be rewarded with a shopping voucher towards the purchase of headphones for your next trip.

PLACEOVEREARS.CO.UK

Webwatch

Andrew Simpson checks out the best hi-fi websites, social media and online content



Power Chord
Where better to test the build of your hi-fi than under a Russian BMP tank? In this video Chord's Hugo DAC gets the same treatment dished out to its QBD76 DAC back in 2011, revealing its build to be as strong as its sound: youtu.be/OjkkslWX1wc



Whiskey cans
Chief Frodo impersonator Elijah Wood presents this short film into the collaboration to craft Grado headphones from Bushmills whiskey barrels. Grado of course isn't the first to plough this furrow, with Linn's Highland Park LP12s breaking the seal in 2013: youtu.be/jW66ldROOsg



Arcam app
Arcam's new free MusicLife app for iOS devices is designed to work with Bluetooth and media servers for fast and reliable streaming on almost anything when used with a miniBlink or rBlink DAC. We've also had great results using it with other network players: apple.co/1lcKlyE



Hilarious headphones
Top marks to Tannoy for this online April fool. The WRX headphones feature BLAST (Background Limiting Ambient Sound Technology) for optimum performance with no distortion, as you'd expect with two 15in drive units strapped to your lug holes.



Elvis is in the building
In June 1953, Elvis made his first ever recording directly to acetate at Sun Studios, Memphis. Fast forward to 2015 and watch how this slice of unique music history is being digitally transferred with its new owner and vinyl activist Jack White: youtu.be/vwtSMMaYUug



Inside Abbey Road
Created for the world's most iconic recording studio, this Google-produced interactive site lets you navigate your way around Abbey Road Studios, learning the history of its recording spaces via pop-up facts, videos and a virtual tour guide: insideabbeyroad.withgoogle.com

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CHOICE TWEETS

JOHNNY MARR (@JOHNNY_MARR)
The 10 best Record Store Day releases ever. t.co/hPoZ438g4L

KEF AUDIO UK (@KEFAUDIO)
KEF Connects talks to independent record store, @SOTUSOHO about their love of #vinyl! youtu.be/CMhZVgtKSQW #KEFConnects #RSD15

CRITERION AUDIO (@CRITERIONAUDIO)
The @HiFiChoiceMag recommended @Focal_UK 926s were favoured today to partner an existing #Rega 3 and @Cyrus_Audio 2.

SEVENOAKS YEOVIL (@SSAV_YEOVIL)
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TIDAL (@TIDALHiFi)
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MELCO AUDIO (@MELCOAUDIO)
Here is a great Q+A on the Naim forum. Put your questions to us on twitter. ow.ly/LwXRR

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO (@CAMBRIDGEAUDIO)
#GlastonburyLineUp is out! But if it's not for you, check out the #CambridgeAudio guide to our top 5 UK festivals cambridgeaudio.com/blog/sound-summer

LARRY OGDEN (@THEAUDIOWORKS)
Another definitive product from Accuphase 40th anniversary series, the new C-37 phono pre-amplifier.

THE AUDIOBARN (@THEAUDIOBARN)
NEW IN!! The #UnisonResearch Preludio Valve Amplifier. Come & experience the different sound valves have to offer

AUDIO LOUNGE (@AUDIOLOUNGE)
V knowledgeable staff & pioneering state of the art music systems. This means we have an opinion or two about #hifi t.co/o5SIFy3Jf0

THE CHORD COMPANY (@CHORDCABLES)
D.I.Y. Terminating speaker cables tips for the weekend. bit.ly/1IT9G4y

THE BESPOKE AUDIO CO (@THEBESPOKEAUDIO)
#HIGHEND invitations printed, stand finished, units almost complete. We're nearly ready for #Munich! @highendsociety

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hi-fi+

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VERDICT
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IN-DEPTH Q ACOUSTICS 3050
FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER £500



Life begins at thirty

The next-generation Q Acoustics budget floorstanding loudspeaker is here – and it's really rather special, says **David Price**

It is not easy to be a new speaker brand. First, anyone trying to enter the loudspeaker market will find it crowded. Second, designing a competitive speaker requires a team of talented people, and that is not easy to come by. Q Acoustics solved this problem by collaborating with talented engineer Karl-Heinz Fink, but getting around the first problem was more luck than judgement.

Q Acoustics' Steve Reichert admits that at the time the new brand was launched, the big fish that swam in the deep British speaker sea had

A clear step up from the 2050i – one of the best budget floorstanders around

momentarily vacated it. He confides that when the first 1000-series models came out, big names like Mission and Wharfedale weren't quite as strong as they had traditionally been – for various reasons. This opened up a space, he says, for Q Acoustics to move in and start selling decent-sounding but highly affordable boxes, traditionally the province of these bigger, more established brands.

He freely admits that the company has been pushing for market share rather than profit. As (still) a newish name, the aim was to get people to know the brand and trust it, and this involves making a more expensive speaker – he suggests – than some rivals sell at the price – in order to entice customers of established names over. One of the things that makes this possible is the fact that Q Acoustics is part of Armour Home Electronics, and can share office space and resources with the group's other brands, giving useful economies of scale. In short, the brand is a little less expensive to run, more nimble and

partnered up to a really good designer who also does many other projects for other people.

The first 1050 was really impressive at the price. Costing £330 in 2007, few – including me – had heard such a capable-sounding cheap floorstander. It rather shook up the market, offering sound more in keeping with £600 models. The 2050 (HFC 335) followed, which was a big step forward, making its predecessor sound opaque and flabby. It too was remarkable for what it was, and now the new 3050 is tasked to be just the same again, in 2015's loudspeaker market which has evolved a fair way since the earlier incarnations arrived. The price has gone up though; it's now £500 for the stock matt graphite or American walnut finishes, or £650 for the gloss white or black, or grained vinyl 'leather effect' finishes.

Boxing clever

The 3050 is not a small loudspeaker, standing one metre tall, and it weighs almost 18kg apiece. Compared with its predecessor – a sample of which I have to hand – it's a significant advance in styling terms. Its softer, cleaner design gives it a more 'designed' look, as if its creators have put some thought into how it looks in a room. The 2050's bottom-mounted binding posts have gone, thank goodness. It certainly looked good, cleaning up the rear of the speaker, but it was a huge pain to wire up; the 3050 has its terminal board at the rear of the cabinet where it should be. As it happens, Steve says this has allowed the whole box to be substantially more rigid too, which doesn't hurt the sound.

This new design is the same as its predecessor inasmuch as it's a two-way floorstander with a single 25mm soft dome tweeter and twin 165mm mid/bass units, although these now feature paper doped in Aramid fibre. Steve says the designers

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Q Acoustics 3050

ORIGIN
UK/Germany/China

TYPE
Floorstanding loudspeaker

WEIGHT
17.8kg

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
298 x 1,000 x 200mm

FEATURES
• 1x 25mm soft dome tweeter
• 2x 165mm mid/bass drivers
• Quoted sensitivity: 92dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
Armour Home Electronics

TELEPHONE
01279 501111

WEBSITE
qacoustics.co.uk

moved to this from a paper/mica mix, and it has made the cone slightly stiffer and better controlled. The crossover point is set at 2.6kHz, which is fairly conventional. The company claims a sensitivity of 92dB/1W/1m, which is a good figure that will suit low-powered amplifiers and/or tube designs. The crossover follows the 'less is more' principle, using a fourth order Linkwitz/Riley design, with new 'U' inductors with a more compact magnetic field, helping to reduce crosstalk between the components.

The big cabinets are decently rigid, although nowhere near as quiet as those on the twice-as-expensive Concept 40 (HFC 385), for example. Indeed, I would suggest that this is where much of the money has been saved on the 3050, which is slightly taller yet a little lighter.

Sound quality

For most of my listening I use the speaker in conjunction with the supplied foam bung in its rear-mounted bass reflex port, which tightens up the timing and dials down the bass. Unlike its immediate predecessor, though, it seems a good deal more relaxed about being used

The drivers use a new hybrid paper and Aramid fibre



close to a rear wall without the bung. As before, a slight toe-in benefits stereo imaging, snapping the soundstage into focus.

This new loudspeaker superseded the 2050i (HFC 365) last month. Its predecessor was the best large, budget floorstander on sale, at a price point where you can barely get a listenable standmount, let alone a big floorstander. It sounded warm, open and musical – making it a hard act to follow. To succeed, the 3050 not only has to outperform its rivals, but also be a significant upgrade on the 2050i – and thankfully for both Q Acoustics and budget loudspeakers as a breed, it is.

Coming up trumps

The new design adds focus, grip and insight to the 2050i's combination of smoothness, size and power. Its predecessor had a big, broad-brush stroke sound which was lots of fun, whereas the new one is tighter, tauter and more regimented. It doesn't quite have the former's 'valve amplifier sensibility', where everything was sumptuous and slightly opaque – instead it brings a more sharply focused and detailed character. Part of this manifests itself as more low-level information, another aspect

you notice is the more precise location of instruments in the stereo soundstage. The most profound upgrade, however, is the improved dynamics, making the 3050 a far more engaging and musically articulate design.

For example, Simply Red's *Holding Back The Years* is a gentle, almost balladic song with little in the way of high intensity musical energy, but the 3050's new-found delicacy and detail makes it much more fun to listen to. By comparison, the 2050i seemed bland, compressed and a little leaden – while its replacement is better able to track the gentle dynamic inflections in the playing and also singer Mick Hucknall's phrasing. The music acquires a sense of rhythmic snap that had previously been lost, as well as better location of the instruments within the mix. There is a finer sense of flow, giving a superior sense of the song having a beginning, a middle and an end.

Moving to some higher powered house music, in the shape of K-Klass' *Rhythm Is A Mystery* – a nineties club anthem with pounding bass and thumping drums, along with some rousing high-energy



Selling for just pennies less than the 3050 is Monitor Audio's Bronze BX5 (HFC 345). It's a two-and-a-half-way system with twin 140mm mid/bass units mated to a 25mm C-CAM metal dome tweeter. The speaker is a little less attractive than the 3050, and a bit smaller too – bass extension is slightly better but sensitivity is down fractionally, but still very good at a claimed 90dB/1W/1m. Sonically the Bronze BX5 doesn't sound as big or as far reaching; it images a little less well, has a slightly narrower soundstage and seems a more constrained. But it's still a fine-sounding design and its treble is particularly good, with extension and insight that the 3050 cannot quite match.

vocals. It's wonderfully incendiary stuff, but can sound a little hard and brittle on lesser loudspeakers, or all-too-easily losing its dynamic impact. The 3050 copes impressively well, diving into the track with aplomb and punching out lots of clean, tuneful synthesised bass and a tight, gripping snare drum sound. At really high levels it seems to compress this a little, but it is way beyond the realistic listening levels encountered in your average terraced house. You can hear the cabinets introducing a slight slurring and overhang in the bass too – in a way that you don't in the gel-reinforced Concept 40. Yet that's not to say the 3050 is bad in this respect; for example the Cambridge Audio Aeromax 6 (HFC 391) sounded no tauter in the bass than the Q Acoustics at half the price.

Some of this new-found grip comes from the new mid/bass drive unit material, I suspect. It definitely gives the 3050 a crisper and more spry sensibility, which is able to get deeper into the recording without becoming bogged down. The mid/bass units cross over smoothly to the tweeter, which is also an obvious improvement over what came before; it seems

The 3050's new-found delicacy and detail makes it much more fun to listen to

crisper and has better air and space; the hi-hat cymbals on Thomas Dolby's *Airwaves* via CD sound sweeter and more delicate, making the 2050i sound like it was playing a low bitrate MP3 by comparison. The track comes over really convincingly, with the various strands in the mix separated out beautifully. This is a splendidly recorded song that gets better every time you upgrade your sound system, and comes over with considerably more depth and insight than the 2050i ever did. Indeed, that sums up this new floorstander – it's a less superficial performer, digging down deeper into the mix and getting more of the music out than its esteemed predecessor. That's no small feat!

Conclusion

Q Acoustics' new 3050 is a clear step up from the 2050i that preceded it, and that – lest we forget – was already one of the very best budget floorstanding speakers around. First, it's better looking than before; the previous version was attractive, but this is positively stylish and lifts any



Happily the new smaller terminal board has moved from the bottom to the back

IN SIGHT



- 1 165mm mid/bass units
- 2 25mm soft dome tweeter
- 3 4mm speaker binding posts
- 4 Rear-facing bass port

MATERIAL WORLD

Since Mission's 752 in the mid-nineties, with its innovative High-Definition Aerogel mid/bass driver, loudspeaker manufacturers have been experimenting with various kinds of clever, high technology cone types. This is not surprising because the material used dramatically affects the sound of the driver; heavy plastic ones sound smooth but slow, light paper ones can be fast but coloured. That's why this is a key point of differentiation, along with the number of drive units and type of cabinet, cone material gives a loudspeaker

its distinctive character. The original Q Acoustics 1050 and later 2050 used a special paper/mica mix that sounded fast but controlled. The new 3050 breaks away quite significantly, running a hybrid paper and Aramid fibre formulation; the latter is similar to Kevlar and confers stiffness without adding too much weight. This has given this latest Q Acoustics floorstander a substantially grippier and tauter sound, with more fine detail – yet the fundamentally smooth and agreeable character of the speaker hasn't changed.

room in which it sits. Second, it is extremely well built at its price; frankly there's nothing around that betters it. Then there's its sheer physical size; no rival comes close, and size bestows any speaker a deeper bass and/or better efficiency – the 3050 is very easy to drive and goes low. Last but not least is the sound, which is excellent at the price – only when you spend £1,000 on designs such as its own big brother do you really get an appreciable performance gain. If you're a cash-strapped audiophile, you simply have to hear this loudspeaker ●

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Easy musicality; detailed, focused sound; styling

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Treble lacks air compared with the best in class

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Class-leading budget floorstander that represents superb value for money

EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★

Q&A

Steve Reichert

Marketing manager, Q Acoustics



DP: What would you say is the aim of the new 3000 series?

SR: To deliver such a high level of style, finish, value and sonic performance that it becomes the obvious first choice for every consumer considering purchasing 'affordable' loudspeakers! We set out to beat the best in class with the 3050, which was of course the 2050i!

What do you think is biggest improvement you've made?

We've improved everything, but twist my arm and make me pick just one, and it would have to be the new '2 in 1' concentric ring/dome tweeter. Designed by Karl-Heinz Fink, it combines the advantages of both dome and ring radiator HF units and is frankly genius. The result is a wonderfully smooth, detailed and extremely low distortion tweeter, with outstanding dispersion.

Why move the terminal board to the back, from the bottom?

This has been done for purely 'sonic' reasons and is the result of the research we undertook while developing the 'Gelcore' cabinets for the Concept models. Put simply, in order to maintain cabinet strength and integrity, it's important to cut as small a hole as possible for the terminal panel. The panel on the rear of the new 3050 is not only much smaller than the 2050i panel, it also boasts an internal bracing spar to reduce resonance and maintain cabinet strength.

Can we look forward to a Concept version of this?

Not in the short term, for two reasons. Firstly, the advances delivered by the Gelcore cabinets of the Concept models means they continue to offer a superior sonic performance over even the new 3000 Series. Secondly, I'm pleased to report Q Acoustics has enjoyed a spectacular sales growth over the last couple of years; and for that to continue, our international customers tell us they need some more higher-end models, so that's our focus for the time being.

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How we test

Hi-Fi Choice employs the most rigorous test and measurement regime in the business. Here's how we do it...

Unique group tests

Our *Group Tests* are supported by rigorous and exhaustive listening tests carried out by experts

TURNTABLE GROUP TEST

ENSURING A TURNTABLE is properly set up takes considerable time, care and effort, and it, therefore, isn't really practical to audition this group with our usual blind listening test panel. Instead, we opt to extend our test period over a week, allowing for each deck to be tested with its supplied cartridge, to gauge the ability and value for money of the overall package. Before testing begins, we check all the cartridges that come pre-installed for correct alignment, downforce using a digital stylus force gauge and bias adjustment.

The decks are tested without lids (where supplied) and in sequence with both their supplied cartridges and our reference Goldring

2400, to ensure consistency across the group while making sure that a supplied cartridge isn't holding back a strongly performing deck. Significant variations between the two cartridges are duly noted, but the differences are not used to overly sway the overall ratings, which are largely based on the performance of each deck heard with its supplied cartridge.

For isolation, each turntable is positioned on a 10mm acrylic platform, supported on four Deflux Audio Polipods. This base sits on a Hi-Fi Racks Podium Slimline unit.

All six decks are put through the same cycle of music from four different test records, each chosen to reveal varying audio traits.



BLIND LISTENING TESTS

This crucial process is very carefully controlled so that we get reliable and consistent results in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. Our listeners must not feel that they're being tested, despite being unaware of the brand or price of the products they are auditioning.

The session begins by setting the volume level to an agreed point, one that all three panellists feel comfortable with, yet that is

high enough to make differences easily discernible. Then the choice of music is agreed – it needs to be familiar, but also well recorded and of sufficient variety to give meaningful listening comparisons. The chosen selection of music is played, and the panellists are encouraged to discuss their impressions of the sound of the product. This is then repeated, and periodically the panel listens to earlier products for reference purposes. The

consensus, or otherwise then forms the basis of our sound quality section.

At the end of the session, there's a final debrief when panellists discuss their findings. It's an exhaustive process, but carried out in this way is free from prejudices based on brand, price or appearance, while the different sensitivities of the listeners help to round out the analysis in order to make it more widely applicable.

REFERENCE SYSTEM

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER
Exposure 3010S2 fitted with internal MM phono stage

LOUDSPEAKERS
Chris Rogers PRO 9TL

EQUIPMENT SUPPORTS
Hi-Fi Racks Podium Slimline

CABLES
ISOkinetik Silver Melody Two interconnects; Chord Epic Twin speaker cable

TEST MUSIC

LAURENT GARNIER
Tales of a Kleptomaniac



MILES DAVIS
Kind Of Blue



SIMON AND GARFUNKEL
Bridge Over Troubled Water



STRAVINSKY AND BORODIN
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Group test



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Back to black

With vinyl on track again as fans look to kick start their habit or rekindle the passion, **Neville Roberts** rounds up six bargain decks

WHEN THE SHINY new Compact Disc came along in the eighties, the death of vinyl was predicted within a few years and record producers wasted no time in cooling down LP production and releasing music on the new digital format. CDs were sold to us as a virtually indestructible format offering superior sound quality, with no clicks or pops to mar our enjoyment.

The tide has turned

Wind forward 30 or so years and CDs themselves are seemingly on the brink of becoming a legacy format, as music fans move to downloads and streaming. Curiously we are also in the midst of a resurgence of music releases on vinyl – so much so in fact that a new official vinyl sales chart was recently announced – see p79.

Many more music fans now realise that the humble LP is capable of

storing music at a higher resolution than CD. Furthermore, with careful handling and manufacture (which wasn't always the case with vinyl in the seventies) together with a good cleaning regime, surface noise that can hinder the format can be kept to an absolute minimum. Throw into the mix the satisfaction of removing an LP from its sleeve, looking over the artwork and the sleeve notes, and you have a far more tangible connection with the artist and their music that other formats simply cannot reach.

Whether you're returning to vinyl after a hiatus or discovering the sound of the black stuff for the very first time, there's a turntable here for you. These six wallet-friendly vinyl spinners span models with the flexibility to digitise your records to a computer as well as pared-back starter options for budding hi-fi fans. Let's see how they perform. ▶

ON TEST



**Audio-Technica
AT-LP120USBHC**
£399 **p27**

A familiar name to vinyl fans, this moving magnet design has a direct-drive motor and USB port for connection to a PC.



**Connected Essentials
CET-500**
£160 **p29**

The name might be new, but the spec looks impressive with a built-in phono stage and USB output among the CET-500's talents.



**Numark
TTUSB**
£120 **p31**

Well respected by DJs everywhere, the Numark looks a sound choice for those that want to digitise their vinyl and cassettes.



**Pro-Ject
RPM 1 Carbon**
£325 **p33**

With the sort of distinctive minimalism that we've come to expect from Pro-Ject, does the RPM 1 have what it takes to impress?



**Rega
RP1 Performance**
£298 **p35**

A legend of British hi-fi, the RP1 Performance Pack (to give it its full name) is an upgraded version of the RP1 with a few extras thrown in.



**Stanton
T.62**
£170 **p37**

The US professional brand is well regarded across the world, but does the T.62 have what it takes to be the king of spin at home?



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Q uintet

Since 1948 Ortofon have introduced nearly 100 different moving coil pick-up cartridges to the hi-fi market. Their latest models in this long and proud heritage are the Quintet Series.

All Quintet cartridges use the same ABS thermoplastic bodies and neodymium magnets, but each model in the range has its own sonic expression that reflects its status. From the well-rounded **Quintet Red**, through the smooth **Quintet Blue** and spacious yet dynamic **Quintet Bronze** up to the pure audio excellence of the **Quintet Black**, this series offers something for every discerning listener at a very attractive price.

The Quintet Series also includes a true-mono cartridge, for accurate reproduction of older mono recordings.



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HEY MISTER DJ

The AT-LP120USBHC is classed as a professional turntable that can stand up to the rigours of DJ use. The high-torque motor has an electronic brake and when used with the supplied slip mat enables records to be held stationary and released for precision cueing.

The internal moving magnet phono stage can be bypassed via a switch on the back. The USB 1.1 output will be of particular interest to those wishing to digitise their record collection. No special drivers are required for the computer, which can be Microsoft Windows XP or later, or Mac OSX. As well as recording onto your PC, the supplied Audacity software also performs tasks such as trimming your recording and editing out clicks and pops. In addition to manual editing, it can also attempt to remove clicks and other noise.

Audio-Technica AT-LP120USBHC £399



This functional deck has a high-torque direct-drive motor and USB output for easy connection to a PC

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audio-Technica
AT-LP120USBHC

ORIGIN
Japan

TYPE
Direct-drive
turntable with USB

WEIGHT
10.7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
450 x 157 x 352mm

FEATURES
● 33, 45 & 78rpm
● USB output 16/44.1
& 48kHz-compatible
● AT95E moving
magnet cartridge

DISTRIBUTOR
Audio-Technica UK

TELEPHONE
0113 2771441

WEBSITE
eu.audio-technica.com

A name that's well-known to vinyl enthusiasts, Audio-Technica has been around for many years. It has certainly moved with the times and produced this bang up-to-date package that includes its AT95E moving magnet cartridge, a built-in phono stage that can be plugged straight into any line-level input or can be bypassed when used with equipment that has a moving magnet phono input stage. There's also a USB output to connect it to a computer for digitising LPs at CD quality of 16-bit/44kHz or 48kHz, and it comes bundled with all the necessary cables and Audacity open-source recording software to digitise your vinyl. The turntable has a nice, solid feel and includes a removable hinged acrylic dust cover.

The LP120's quartz-controlled direct-drive DC turntable motor has 33, 45 and 78rpm speeds selectable

via push buttons, as well as reverse mode for any budding DJs. The turntable has a built-in stroboscopic lamp for illuminating the markings on the edge of the cast aluminium platter for accurate adjustment of playing speeds and pitch is adjustable within +/-10% or +/-20% ranges. The supplied mat is a slip mat, but this can easily be exchanged for a different one if desired, such as a cork and rubber or foam option. Another nice feature is a nifty pop-up Target Light to illuminate the cartridge at the beginning of the LP. This will be really useful to assist in cueing in dim lighting conditions or perhaps if your eyesight needs a bit of help.

The tonearm has a removable headshell with a standard SME connector, making cartridge changes a breeze. A reputable AT95e cartridge is supplied and features a dual magnet design fitted with an elliptical diamond stylus. The instructions point out that this cartridge is not suitable for playing 78rpm records, so swapping to a different cartridge would be recommended. A good plan would be to purchase another headshell and fit a suitable cartridge in that – see our headshells mini test in *HFC* 396.

Sound quality

The deck is very easy to set up and the speed is spot on when viewed with the built-in strobe. Starting off with the Borodin, the full orchestra sounds very agreeable, although a little restrained. Swapping the AT95E cartridge with the Goldring 2400 does

not make a significant difference, so I bypass the internal phono amp and plug the deck into the moving magnet phono stage input of the Exposure amp. Immediately, the orchestra blossoms and this improvement remains when I re-install the AT95E cartridge. This is a great little cartridge that really comes alive with a good phono stage.

The vocals come across as relaxed and warm and this is exemplified by the Simon and Garfunkel recording. *Bridge Over Troubled Water* is lovely and clear with no sense of sibilance. The LP120 gives a very relaxed and warm presentation with Miles Davis, although the hi-hats are a little recessed with the internal phono stage of the LP120.

Finally, the Laurent Garnier pounding bass line proves to be punchy and well extended and the AT-LP120USBHC certainly seems at home with heavy techno music ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★★

LIKE: Build quality; great range of features; excellent tonearm/cartridge combination

DISLIKE: Internal phono stage is a little restrained

WE SAY: Likable sound if a little restrained, but its versatility makes it a great all rounder

OVERALL



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GET CONNECTED

The CET-500 can be powered from 220V or 110V (switch-selectable from underneath the unit) and uses this to generate the DC power needed for the motor and the internal phono stage. Apart from the auto-stop and start facility that starts the motor when the arm is moved onto a record, a master on/off switch is provided on the rear of the turntable.

The platter comes bundled with a removable rubber mat. The supplied cartridge is a Connected Essentials own-brand model that has a recommended tracking force of 2.5g. Replacement styli are readily available, as are drive belts. The headshell is a standard SME mount that can be swapped.

The USB output allows a direct connection to a computer so that users can digitise their record collection at CD quality.

Connected Essentials

CET-500 £160

This versatile belt-drive turntable has a built-in phono stage and a USB output to digitise your records

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Connected Essentials CET-500

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
Belt-drive turntable with USB

WEIGHT
3.3kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
450 x 152 x 352mm

FEATURES
● 33 & 45rpm
● USB output
● Own-brand MM cartridge supplied

DISTRIBUTOR
Connected Essentials

TELEPHONE
01704 823567

WEBSITE
connectedessentials.co.uk

If the brand name doesn't sound that familiar to you then you're not alone.

Connected Essentials has been in the electronics and telecoms business for some time, offering a range of AV furniture and accessories. The CET-500 is the first deck we've seen from the brand and given its versatility it's a welcome addition to the group and won't break the bank.

Although no software is included, Connected Essentials recommends the use of Audacity software, which is available to download free from: audacity.sourceforge.net.

The CET-500 is supplied with a hinged and removable dust cover and the integral tonearm is fitted with a moving magnet cartridge. It has a built-in phono stage so a separate phono amplifier is not required as it can be plugged straight into any line-level input on your amplifier. A large-centre 45rpm adapter is also

provided for playing those juke-box singles in your collection.

The turntable is very light and although the plinth is plastic, it looks smart and won't look out of place in an audio system. The CET-500 supports both 33 and 45rpm, which is selectable via a push-button speed selector switch. On the rear of the unit is an auto-stop switch that, when on, starts the turntable when the tonearm is moved into the proximity of the platter and stops the turntable when the end of a record is reached. If the off position is selected, the platter will turn whenever the unit is switched on. The platter has stroboscopic markings that can be used to check the speed of the turntable when viewed under incandescent or fluorescent mains lighting, although it can't be adjusted.

Sound quality

The CET-500 copes very well with the intricacies of the Borodin and the Stravinsky records, although the top-end detail and low-end bass is a bit light. The bass improves with the Goldring 2400 installed in place of the CET cartridge, but the top end is much the same, suggesting that the issue is with the in-built phono stage. However, there is no facility to switch this out of circuit, so I cannot confirm this by using the phono stage built into the Essentials amplifier.

The unit seems to like the Simon and Garfunkel track and there is certainly no sign of the turntable getting into troubled water when the music ramps up to the crescendo at

the end of the song. There is no hint of any unpleasant sibilance with the vocals and the rendition is very musical and tuneful. Imaging is quite good with a good spread of music across the sound stage.

Relaxing into Miles Davis is a very enjoyable experience with this deck. When you consider that it was recorded in 1959, *Blue In Green* reproduced on the CET-500 really exemplifies how a smooth and easy sound can draw you into the music and hold your attention for the duration of the track, and still leave you wanting to hear more.

Time to let the turntable loose with the Laurent Garnier banger. The deck provides a great balance across the frequency spectrum and the cartridge has no problems with the wealth of techno lines playing concurrently. Once again, the sound is not tiring and at no time do I feel compelled to reach for the cueing level to kill the sound ● ▶



HifiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★
FEATURES
★★★★★

LIKE: Plug and play straight into any amp or computer; smart looks; price
DISLIKE: Lightweight plinth
WE SAY: A decent starter deck for someone wishing to add vinyl to their audio system

OVERALL



Primare 30 Series “ADDICTIVE!”



PRIMARE



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Andrew Simpson
May 2015

For more information please contact
Karma (01423 358 846) or visit primare.net

karma

audio - visual

karma-av.co.uk





GOING DIGITAL

The USB 1.1 digital output means that no special drivers are required for your computer. The supplied EZ Vinyl/Tape Converter software is compatible with all current and future versions of Mac OS X and iOS, as well as with all Windows operating systems from XP onwards. It splits tracks automatically when it detects silence in the music. However, it is extremely basic and it's probably better to use Audacity's free software as the USB is not software-specific. The TTUSB can accept an external line-level input, such as a cassette or reel-to-reel tape deck and feed this to the USB output instead of the signal from the inbuilt phono stage. This will, of course, enable recording from these sources onto your computer – bypassing its built-in sound card, which is often not really all that suitable for hi-fi recording.

Numark TTUSB £120

A multi-purpose deck from the DJ brand aimed at those wanting to digitise both vinyl and cassettes

- DETAILS**
- PRODUCT**
Numark TTUSB
- ORIGIN**
China
- TYPE**
Belt-drive turntable with USB
- WEIGHT**
3.5kg
- DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
515 x 174 x 436mm
- FEATURES**
 - 33 & 45rpm
 - USB output
 - Ion Audio ICT04 cartridge supplied
- DISTRIBUTOR**
InMusic Brands
- TELEPHONE**
01252 896040
- WEBSITE**
numark.com

Known for its range of DJ equipment, Numark has a turntable that is aimed at the domestic market and is designed for digitising music. Having said that, the styling is unashamedly 'DJ' in appearance with its curved plinth, tapered-edge platter.

The TTUSB provides a USB output for connecting to a computer, as well as line-level RCA outputs fed from the built-in phono preamp to enable it to be hooked up to any line-level input of your amplifier. The built-in preamp can be bypassed so the turntable can be used with an external phono stage if desired. The TTUSB provides both 33 and 45rpm speeds and is fitted with a 3.5mm stereo mini jack input connector to enable the transfer of cassette tapes (or similar line-level sources) to computer files. This input is only used to send audio to your computer via the USB connection and does not send audio to the RCA

output. The supplied software will rip your vinyl collection directly to iTunes and save it to your computer as MP3 files, but it does require you to have iTunes installed on before it will run.

The turntable has two on/off switches – one located at the front-left of the plinth and one at the rear-left. There is also a master power switch around the back. The deck includes a slider speed control, which enables the pitch to be adjusted by +/-10%, revealing the deck's DJ heritage. However, the slider can also be used to accurately set the turntable speed with a stroboscopic disc if required. The S-shaped tonearm has a detachable headshell, which enables easy swapping between different cartridges. The arm does not have a cueing lever and so you have to manually lower it using the finger-lift on the headshell. The supplied cartridge is an Ion Audio ICT04 moving magnet cartridge and replacement styli are readily available. All necessary cables to connect the TTUSB to your computer or stereo system are included.

Sound quality

The Ion cartridge does quite a respectable job of handling both the Borodin and the Stravinsky pieces. The thump of the bass drums in *The Firebird* has plenty of clout and the top end is nice and clear. Doing an Ion exchange with the Goldring 2400 cartridge has little effect on the sound quality, so I proceed to bypass the internal phono stage and connect the output to the MM phono input of the

Exposure amp. This results in an improvement in depth and imaging, but that's not to suggest that the Numark's internal phono stage doesn't do a respectable job.

The Simon and Garfunkel track has a good presence and clarity. Although there is not a great deal of depth, there is good left-to-right spread across the soundstage. The Miles Davis piece is similarly very clear and open, with the hi-hats very light and musical. I find myself drawn to the piano solos, which are tuneful and melodic. The piano sounds very believable as an acoustic instrument, rather than sounding like an electronic piano.

Ending with the Laurent Garnier disc shows that both the arm and cartridge cope well with the heavy bass and the triangle is also clear and sharp. The changing moods of *Food For Thought* are well accommodated by the TTUSB ●



HifiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Ability to connect external sources to use the internal USB interface
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Plastic construction of the plinth and platter
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: Low-cost turntable that is ideal for digitising your analogue collection
FEATURES ★★★★★	
OVERALL ★★★★★	

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oppodigital.co.uk



NEEDLE CRAFT

The Ortofon 2M Red cartridge supplied with the RPM 1 Carbon has a good reputation in its own right. The cartridge makes use of Ortofon's split pole pins, which is a design feature to enable moving magnet cartridges to have a flat frequency response similar to that obtained from a moving coil cartridge. This cartridge is fitted to other Pro-Ject turntables that use a carbon fibre arm and this has proven to be a combination that works well in terms of appropriate tonearm/cartridge resonant frequency combined with a good tracking ability.

The phono stage or amplifier phono input will need to be set up for a moving magnet for the 2M Red cartridge. A separate earth connection is also provided to connect to the corresponding earth point on the amplifier or phono stage.

Pro-Ject RPM 1 Carbon £325



The latest edition to the RPM range, this affordable hi-fi deck looks the part but can its sonics impress?

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Pro-Ject RPM 1 Carbon
- ORIGIN**
Austria
- TYPE**
Belt-drive turntable
- WEIGHT**
3.8kg
- DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
380 x 110 x 350mm
- FEATURES**
 - 33 & 45rpm
 - S-shaped tonearm made from carbon
 - Ortofon 2M Red MM cartridge supplied
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Henley Designs
- TELEPHONE**
01235 511116
- WEBSITE**
henleydesigns.co.uk

The distinctive, minimalist design of the Pro-Ject RPM 1 Carbon is available in striking red, white and black high gloss finishes. It will certainly add an air of modern elegance to any hi-fi setup and has a real feel of quality about it.

The motor is mounted outside the platter and the drive is taken from the pulley to the circumference of the platter via the belt. The motor sits inside a hole in the plinth, but doesn't touch it. It stands on your equipment support and so is completely decoupled from the deck itself, apart from the drive belt, which runs around the platter's circumference. This motor is of a similar design to the one used on the more expensive Xpression Carbon and is powered by an AC generator connected to a DC power supply. The 33 and 45rpm speeds are selected by moving the belt between the two pulleys of different diameters on the

motor. The platter is made from MDF and is supplied with a felt mat. The main bearing is an inverted design with a ceramic ball to minimise friction.

The S-shaped tonearm has a fixed headshell and is made from a one-piece carbon fibre and aluminium resin construct that is manufactured using special heat and pressure treatments. It is fitted with a magnetic anti-skating device of a new design. The counterweight utilises TPE damping in the form of an anti-resonant ring around the fixing point. At the business end, the arm is fitted with an Ortofon 2M Red moving magnet cartridge. The RCA phono connectors at the rear are connected directly to the cartridge, so a separate phono stage or dedicated phono input on an amplifier is required.

Sound quality

The sheer power and authority of the orchestra with the Borodin track is totally captivating – so much so that I am compelled to flip the LP over and listen to some of Stravinsky's *The Firebird*. What strikes me most is the realism of the performance, and I almost jump out of my seat when the drum strikes and the trumpets blast. On balance, I feel the supplied Ortofon out-performs the Goldring reference cartridge.

Changing to the Simon and Garfunkel track, I can hear the breath of Art Garfunkel during his solo section in *Bridge Over Troubled Water*. Then when the bass drum and backing orchestra comes in, there is no sense that the cartridge and arm

are being overloaded and they take the crescendos in their stride.

The sax in Miles Davis' *So What* is incredibly clear and lifelike and yet does not swamp the drum accompaniment in any way. I get the feeling that the drums are being reproduced on a completely separate system. However, that's not to say that the music is not totally cohesive and well integrated.

By contrast, the driving techno rhythm in Laurent Garnier's *Desireless* is tight and beautifully controlled, which confirms the great marriage of the tonearm and cartridge. Vocal growls in the recording are perfectly projected in front of the soundstage, demonstrating the genuine three-dimensionality of the performance that is so well rendered by the Pro-Ject and has many of the characteristics of the company's more expensive turntable packages, which is quite an achievement ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Excellent build quality and superb tonearm/cartridge combination
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Nothing at the price
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A modern and elegant design resulting in a superb-sounding turntable
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL



ANTHONY GALLO
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CRESTRON

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DENON

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EXPOSURE

GENELEC

GOLDRING

GRADO

IMAGE audio

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KUDOS

LINN

Lumagen

MARANTZ

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Rega RP1 Performance £298



This is an upgraded version of the standard Rega RP1 that includes a fitted cartridge among other goodies

FEEL THE FORCE

The RB101 tonearm is a no-frills design utilising a simple machined aluminium arm tube with bonded headshell. Tracking force is adjusted by rotating the counterbalance weight clockwise by 180° for every 1g of tracking force required. No-frills it may be, but that means the money is put where it matters, such as into the quality of the bearing and the overall engineering of the arm. Anti-skating bias is magnetically applied via a plastic sliding knob in front of the arm bearing.

The Rega Bias 2 moving magnet cartridge uses a pair of parallel wound coils which are carefully assembled on custom jigs by hand to create a working stereo generator, and this is then subject to a rigorous checking and testing regime. The cartridge has a relatively high output of around 7mV.

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Rega RP1
Performance Pack
- ORIGIN**
UK
- TYPE**
Belt-drive turntable
- WEIGHT**
7kg
- DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
450 x 120 x 360mm
- FEATURES**
 - 33 & 45rpm
 - Rega RB101 tonearm
 - Rega Bias 2 MM cartridge supplied
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Rega Research
- TELEPHONE**
01702 333071
- WEBSITE**
rega.co.uk

With a hi-fi heritage spanning several decades, Rega is the name that undoubtedly comes to mind when considering British turntables and tonearms. Its classic Planar turntable dates back to the seventies and was a budget belt-drive deck employing a solid plinth instead of the suspended chassis that was used in many quality turntables from the early sixties onwards. Keeping with tradition, Rega's latest entry-level turntable RP1 is also a solid plinth and is supplied in the Performance Pack upgraded version as seen here, which includes a Bias 2 moving magnet cartridge, an upgraded drive belt and a 100% natural wool turntable mat.

The plinth is available in three finishes – cool grey, white or titanium. The platter is made from a phenolic resin to give it a flywheel effect to improve instantaneous speed stability,

but still feels a little lightweight. It sits on a standard Rega plastic sub-platter that is driven by an upgraded drive belt to enhance speed stability and accuracy, as part of the Performance Pack upgrade. The speed change between 33 and 45rpm is manual and the platter has to be removed to move the drive belt across the two motor pulleys. Although basic, it feels nicely engineered. For example, a very high quality precision main bearing is used, taken from Rega's more expensive models. It is pre-lubricated and the sub-platter takes about a minute to settle into the bearing when removed and replaced, indicating a tight tolerance between the bearing and the spindle shaft.

The supplied arm is the RB101, which is Rega's new entry level offering and replaces the legendary RB100. The Rega Bias 2 moving magnet cartridge is fitted with an elliptical stylus. As with the Pro-Ject deck, the RP1 will need to be connected to a phono stage or amplifier phono input configured for use with a moving magnet cartridge.

Sound quality

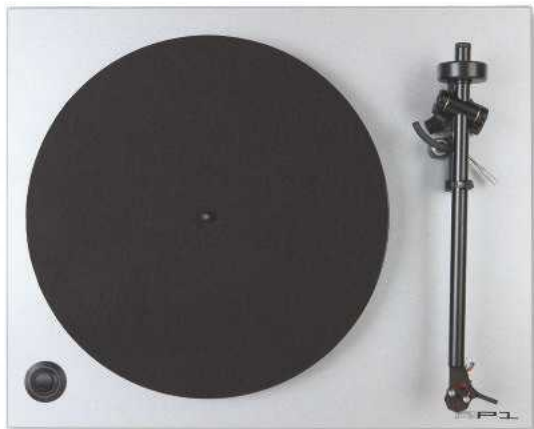
Starting with the Stravinsky track, the drum strikes are very powerful, but a tad less real than with the Goldring cartridge. Moving on to the Borodin, I find the choir is nicely situated behind the orchestra and the performance is smooth and melodic.

Art's vocal solo with piano on *Bridge Over Troubled Water* seems slightly recessed and the high-frequency detail is just a little restrained. Having

said that, I consider the performance, to be very musical indeed and generally effortless.

Likewise, Miles Davis' trumpet is somehow both strident but not shrill or, dare I say, brassy. The Bias 2 seems very much in its element with jazz and I am drawn into the performance and the music flows along effortlessly. I have the stereo version of this recording and the image spread between the speakers is really good and the instrument focus is spot on, showing excellent stereo imaging.

Letting my hair down, the Laurent Garnier effort is full of energy, but I do find the high squeals are more recessed. For example, the subtle tinkling of the triangle in *Back To My Roots* is almost lost in everything else that is going on. Nevertheless, when the heavy bass line kicks in, it manages to make the woofers in my loudspeakers move some air and massage my kneecaps – great stuff ● ▶



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ | LIKE: Good build quality; sound; engineering |
| VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ | DISLIKE: The need to remove the platter to change the speed is a minor irritation |
| BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ | WE SAY: Classic styled budget turntable with excellent sound |
| FEATURES
★★★★★ | |

OVERALL



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FOR THE RECORD

The Stanton employs an eight-pole, three-phase, brushless DC motor that is directly connected to the platter. The motor is fitted with two on/off switches – one located at the front of the deck and one at the rear. These are in addition to the master power switch that contains the strobe light.

The playing speed is selected by using two push buttons with LED indicators. The speed adjuster slider has a centre position with another LED light to show that the turntable speed should be correct at this point. The headshell is removable and connected to the arm by a standard SME connector. The supplied Stanton 500.v3 cartridge is the latest incarnation of the classic Stanton 500AL and has improved slip resistance. It features a spherical stylus and is considered to be both rugged and reliable.

Stanton T.62 £170

A rugged, direct-drive turntable with a high-torque motor and plenty to keep new vinyl fans happy

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Stanton T.62

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
Direct-drive
turntable

WEIGHT
6.3kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
452 x 87 x 370mm

FEATURES
● 33 & 45rpm
● SME detachable
headshell
● Stanton 500.v3
MM cartridge
supplied

DISTRIBUTOR
Focusrite Audio
Engineering Ltd

TELEPHONE
01494 462246

WEBSITE
uk.focusrite.com;
stantondj.com

In 1946 Stanton was one of the first American firms to make and sell magnetic cartridges. Its founder, Walter Stanton, is claimed to be the inventor of the easily replaceable phonograph stylus, which made it possible for users to replace the stylus assembly when it wore out instead of having to send it back to the factory. This invention has become a standard of moving magnet cartridge design.

Nowadays, Stanton is focussing on the professional market with its range of audio products including high-performance cartridges, CD players, DJ mixers and turntables. The T.62 is designed to be an easy to operate direct-drive turntable and includes a factory-fitted Stanton 500.v3 cartridge pre-mounted in the headshell. The cartridge has a wide range for the tracking force of between 2 to 5g and a +2g weight that screws into the headshell is

provided for DJ applications when an increased force is required.

The direct-drive brushless DC motor is high-torque for rapid start up. It has playback speeds of 33 or 45rpm with a manual +/-10% pitch control adjustment. The metal platter has stroboscopic markings around the rim that are illuminated by a lamp, which is built into the motor on/off switch to make calibration incredibly simple. This is fortunate as the pitch control does not have a centre detent and simply lights a red LED when in the middle position and some fractional adjustment is required to get the speed perfect. The platter is fitted with a high-quality slip mat and there is a small plug-in light to assist in manual cueing.

The plastic case, although rugged, is fitted with isolating feet so acoustic feedback should not be a problem. There are RCA phono connectors around the back for connecting to a separate phono stage or to an amplifier phono input configured for use with a moving magnet cartridge. The arm is quite basic in design and does not have a cueing lever, so you will have to manually lower the stylus into the groove.

Sound quality

The Borodin piece produces a very agreeable sound that is easy to listen to, although it does sound a little two dimensional. With the Goldring 2400 installed, I feel that there is a small improvement in the width of the soundstage, but not hugely so. When the choir comes in, the sound is very

musical and easy to enjoy, although perhaps a touch indistinct.

Switching to the Simon and Garfunkel album is a whole different ballgame. The T.62 seems to enjoy playing this piece more than the classical one and vocals are handled well, especially during the solos.

Similarly, the T.62 seems to relax into Miles Davis' jazz and, although the performance is not exceptional, it is nevertheless very enjoyable, laid back and easy. The first track of side two, *All Blues*, wastes no time in picking up the pace and guides you into the music, with no nasty edge to the trumpet. Nice!

Getting into the groove with the Laurent Garnier piece shows that there is plenty of bass clout. The supplied cartridge copes well with both the bass line and simultaneous high-frequency motifs. Indeed, the T.62 seems to be tapping its feet really enjoying itself with this music ●



HIFIChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★☆ **LIKE:** Robust design; cueing light

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★☆ **DISLIKE:** Plastic construction of the plinth; basic tonearm; no cueing lever

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★☆ **WE SAY:** Low-cost and robust turntable, but feels a bit short on features and sound

FEATURES
★★★★☆

OVERALL
★★★★☆

Group test verdict

Having spun through all six turntable packages, **Neville Roberts** sums up his experience with all of the contenders and announces a winner

THERE IS A wide variety of features available on all six entry-level turntables in this test. All of the decks have something good to offer and there is likely to be at least one that will appeal to both new and old vinyl fans alike. As a taster to the world of vinyl it may well be that a solid but low cost deck is your top requirement so you can 'suck it and see'. Perhaps you want to try your hand at DJ-ing and have some fun with a deck that does a few tricks and is robust enough to survive life on the road. Or maybe the ability to digitise your vinyl is going to be the primary requirement.


Whatever the reason, there is little doubt that sound quality is ultimately going to be the deciding factor, and this is the main focus of any *Hi-Fi Choice* group test.

First to fall, the Stanton is good value and the most rugged of the group and great for someone that wants to travel with their vinyl, but performance is nothing special. The Numark is super value although a bit more disco in appearance, but it offers the ability to digitise LPs and even cassette tapes. Connected Essentials makes a smart-looking turntable that will fit in well with

most hi-fi setups and has plenty to get vinyl fans started.

And so to the badge winners, the Audio-Technica is packed with features and will perform well when connected to a hi-fi system or digitising LPs to a computer. It's the only deck in the group that supports 78rpm, but you'll need to change the stylus or cartridge. An external phono stage is advised to get the best results, too.

Narrowly missing out on the top spot, the Rega is a serious starter deck for any new hi-fi fan and build quality is excellent at the price.



The top spot goes to Pro-Ject for the RPM 1 Carbon. It scores on both build and sound quality and is a lovely looking deck to boot. What's more it comes fitted with the stunning Ortofon 2M Red cartridge, which makes this starter hi-fi deck the one to beat.



Make/model	Audio-Technica AT-LP120USBHC	Connected Essentials CET-500	Numark TTUSB	Pro-Ject RPM 1 Carbon	Rega RP1 Performance Pack	Stanton T.62
Price	£399	£160	£120	£325	£298	£170
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	A versatile turntable offering plenty of facilities, but the sound isn't up to the standards of the best	A great starter deck with decent enough sound for anyone wishing to kick start a vinyl habit	Low-cost turntable with USB output that's great for digitising LPs or a tape collection	A modern and elegant turntable with a sound that's close to its more upmarket decks	Classic styling, quality engineering and a solid sound are what makes this turntable a great buy	Robust design is likely to appeal to budding DJs for life on the road, but sound isn't the best

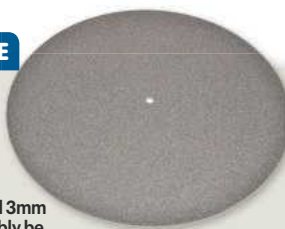
Key features

	Audio-Technica	Connected Essentials	Numark	Pro-Ject	Rega	Stanton
Cartridge	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Speed change	Auto	Auto	Auto	Manual	Manual	Auto
Drive	Direct	Belt	Belt	Belt	Belt	Direct
78rpm	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
USB output	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No

TRY WITH THESE

PLATTER MAT:
Analogue Works
Foam Turntable
Gimp Mat **£12**
HFC 394

This mat is a standard 3mm thick, so it can probably be simply swapped with an existing mat. If no mat has previously been used, the tonearm height will need to be adjusted to accommodate it. The mat has a high-friction surface that allows for good record rotation with negligible slip.



STYLUS CLEANER:
Vinyl Passion Dust Buster
£21 HFC 377

This cleaner uses a specially formulated polymer that is placed under the stylus and into which the stylus is lowered. On raising it, any dust will have been removed. It is claimed that the Vinyl Passion Dust Buster will increase the life of your stylus by up to 1,000 hours.



CARTRIDGE ALIGNMENT:
Analogue Studio Protractor
£13 HFC 384

To set up your cartridge, simply place the gauge over your turntable spindle and move your cartridge so that it is aligned with both sets of graticule markings. If this is not possible, the overhang is adjusted by moving the cartridge forward or backward in the headshell and the process is repeated. Alignment is then complete.



Package Deals

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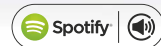
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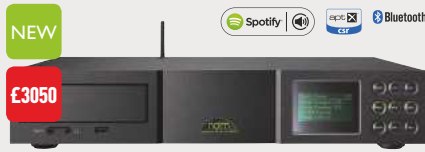
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China in your hands

David Price lounges around to the soothing sound of Ming Da's new Piccolo integrated valve amplifier

Remember the seventies? Early on in that decade we saw a wave of new Japanese products begin to appear in the shops and on our roads. The result was that by the end of the decade, Honda, Datsun, Sony and Panasonic were household names and everyone who bought them couldn't praise them enough.

This same thing is now happening with China. It's a work in progress I grant you, but some companies have

an excellent track record and Mei Xing is one. It's the manufacturer behind the Ming Da brand name, located in an historic village on Qi Ao Island, which is near Hong Kong. Almost a quarter of a century old, its founder and chief designer says that it has always specialised in valve amplifiers. The company has done high-quality OEM work for several big brands, and is now reaching out to the world under its own name.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Ming Da Piccolo
(MC368-B902)

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
Integrated valve
amplifier

WEIGHT
16kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
330 x 310 x 230mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power: 2x
18W (4 or 8ohms)
• 2x KT90; 2x 12AU7,
1x 5U4G/5AR4
valves
• 3x RCA phono
inputs
• VU meter

DISTRIBUTOR
Ming Da UK

TELEPHONE
07831 197019

WEBSITE
mingda.co.uk

Ming Da makes a dizzying range of products, from the titanic two-box £34,950 Ming Da Dynasty Cantabile-Grandé MC998-A, down to products such as this small, cute-looking Piccolo (MC368-B902). Perhaps this is part of the problem because customers end up bewildered; I would argue that it needs to hone this down to a sensible size. The upside is that the budget products such as this share economies of scale, and would not be as good if the company wasn't so prolific. Looking at the Piccolo, you can't help but be surprised by the build quality. There are no sharp edges, no gaudy finishes or awkward graphics, and the chunky controls work well, rather like fifties British kit. The one concession to fashion is the little level meter inset into the fascia – some may not like this as it doesn't have an appropriately retro look, but it is handy because you can get a sense of how near you're running the amplifier to its limit.

Using two KT90 beam pentode power valves running in single-ended mode, two 12AU7 input valves and a 5U4G(274B) rectifier valve, the amplifier produces a claimed 18W



handle a variety of programme material, but with just 18W per channel it is never going to be the new king of rock.

With its limited output power, it is far better suited to rhythm and blues than drum and bass, for example. Cue up Goldie's *Timeless* and you're struck by all the amplifier's fine qualities, and then all of its not so fine ones. The opening few phrases are carried with great delicacy and a wonderfully sumptuous tone – sweeter and more mellifluous than you would hear from any transistor amplifier ever made. The lead female vocal is seamless, smooth and tactile. But when the fierce electronic percussion breaks, on a good £1,000 solid-state amplifier all hell is let loose, but here it is not. The song gathers pace, but you're aware of compression, and then in comes the electronic bass line, and the Piccolo simply cannot do it justice. It's a bittersweet experience because you can hear the amplifier deal with the looped hi-hat and snare drum pattern brilliantly; it might be a little less biting than it should, but the timing is superb.

Move to something more sedate and beguiling, and the problems disappear. It's a revelation, with a breathtaking beauty to Heidi Berry's dark, sultry voice on *Washington Square*. The song is moody, atmospheric and has gentle filigree detailing, such as triangles and steel string guitars, sparkling away at the back of the mix. The Ming Da captures it all without so much as blinking; it's like water off a duck's back. It even has you gasping at the exotic way that it conveys the rich and resonant piano. On this song the bass line is gentle and doesn't tax the amplifier much, or throw it off balance like it does with the Goldie track and its swinging dynamics.

The same goes for more uptempo rock tracks like REM's *Welcome To The Occupation*. More demands are made of those KT90s and the output transformers downstream of them, but still the amplifier serves a very convincing rendition at modest listening levels. With the help of my reference Cambridge Audio Aeromax 6 loudspeakers' 90dB sensitivity, it is able to deliver a decently high volume before it runs out of steam. Even when it does, it does so gracefully, simply not going any louder despite continued clockwise twiddling of the volume knob. Settle the amp a little

It's telling you to forget absolute power and to just get into the groove!

lower at a good level where it's not sitting on transients and squashing dynamics, and there's a wonderfully beguiling rendition of the song. It focuses on the sweet sound of the crashing china boy cymbal of drummer Bill Berry, Michael Stipe's uniquely gritty, earthy voice and Peter Buck's plaintive Rickenbacker guitar. Tonally and texturally lovely, it's almost like it's telling you that you should forget about absolute power and just get into the groove!

Having heard its command, Dave Brubeck's *Take Five* quickly finds itself on the turntable. This is a great track, but it can sound oddly flat played on some systems and it does tend to be tough on the amplifiers that can't keep up. The Ming Da Piccolo has no such problem, playing it like it's a natural. From the rich golden sheen of the ride cymbal to the full-bodied, woody sound of the piano and the

of Class A sound. It also sports a headphone socket, three stereo inputs via RCA connectors, and an infra-red remote volume control. As with all valve amplifiers, the quality of the output transformers is critical, and so Mei Xing hand-winds its own, rather than buying them in from another company. Those fitted to the Piccolo seem quite large for the size of the amplifier. All internal connections are hand wired and soldered, using point-to-point topology for the shortest signal paths. The UK importer specifies a specially updated 5U4G rectifier valve, for better longevity and superior signal-to-noise ratio.

Sound quality

Those that are looking for a good all-rounder with a decent amount of power and the ability to work across many types of music will find themselves disappointed by the Ming Da Piccolo. In the same way that you would not buy a supercar to do the school run, this amp needs to be purchased by someone who knows the job it is intended to do – to make lovely, sweet music into a fairly sensitive pair of loudspeakers. It can

The VU meter might not be to everyone's taste, but it's very useful

CONNECTIONS



- 1 RCA analogue inputs
- 2 On/off switch (on side of Piccolo)
- 3 IEC mains input socket
- 4 Loudspeaker binding posts

Q&A

Mark Manwaring-White
Ming Da UK



DP: Where does the Piccolo sit in Ming Da's range?

MMW: Also known as the MC368-B902, it is an entry-level model along with the MC34-A. The two share the same basic chassis, but the Piccolo is a Class A single-ended design, whereas the MC34-A is a classic Class AB push pull design. The typical customer would be a possible 'new to valves' listener, running with efficient loudspeakers (of at least 90dB). He or she may well prefer a softer sound, more of a classic sweet valve glow.

What brand of valves are used and why did you choose them?

The KT90's output valves are the exclusive Jinvina brand, which is Ming Da's own valve brand. The input valves are very typical 12AU7 from Shuguang or similar, as is the rectifier 5AR4(GZ34) valve. The KT90 is a slightly more powerful version of the original KT88, specially selected for Jinvina and seem to have a long healthy life span. I have KT90s working well with excess of 4,500 hours on them!

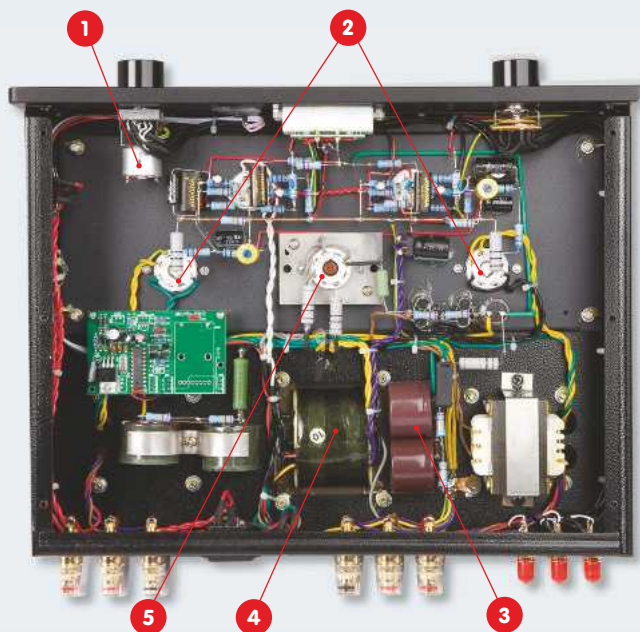
What audiophile features does the Piccolo have?

Well the main one, of course, is the fact that this is a single-ended amplifier running pure Class A! As all valve aficionados will know, this orientation offers one of the sweetest possible sounds from a valve amplifier, and has many fans. Also, the hand-wound output transformers give Ming Da amplifiers that special audiophile sound, even in an entry-level product.

Are there any special tweaks for the UK models?

Yes, I tweak the power supply for extending the longevity of the rectifier valve. However, there are also capacitor upgrades available, using the Audyn Reference series of capacitors, to enhance the sound quality still further. Lastly, of course, Ming Da UK gives the amplifiers a three-year transferable warranty along with one year on the valves.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Alps motorised volume control
- 2 KT90 output valves
- 3 Choke-filtered power supply
- 4 Heavy-duty mains transformer
- 5 Rectifier valve



HOW IT COMPARES

Ironically, the closest rival for the Piccolo is Ming Da's MC34A. This valve amp costs the same and shares many components, but not the MC34's four EL34 power valves, running in push pull mode. The 34 is far more of a headbanger than the Piccolo, with over twice as much power (Ming Da claims 38W RMS per channel). The 34 has an obviously more powerful sound, and you can hear that it runs out of steam less easily than its rival, but still I think the claimed power output is a little optimistic. While it might win in the power stakes, the Piccolo is the nicer-sounding amplifier to listen to on soft, gentle music. It sounds sweeter, more liquid and more musical.

silky, smouldering saxophone, it gives a majestic performance. The recorded acoustic comes over as large, spacious and airy – the speakers seemingly disappearing into space. Inside this is the sound of jazz greats playing great jazz – it is clear that the piano is the most percussive instrument present as it rolls along in a wonderfully fluid way. The syncopation with the drums is magic, and the sax floats and soars above it all. Again this amplifier is totally blameless, completely outclassing almost all of its price rivals on this sort of material. It sounds so sweet and sumptuous that I find myself wondering why anyone buys transistor amplifiers any more.

The answer is soon delivered to me though, when I cue up my prized 1976 pressing of Elgar's *Cello Concerto* (Du Pre/Daniel Barenboim/Philadelphia Orchestra). Initially beautiful, giving a string sound as if from heaven itself, when the massed strings come in and the orchestra swells up the sound begins to compress. It's annoying because – showing many of the outward sonic signatures of a very expensive amp – the Piccolo lulls you into thinking it is a large and powerful performer. Then when musical 'heavy lifting' is required, it just falls short, and the only answer is to turn the volume down a little. Part of the 'problem' is that it just doesn't sound 'cheap', so you begin to treat it like something costing five times the price, then get frustrated when it isn't. The cure for this is to stay away from loud, dense

programme material, and/or listen less loud, and/or get a smaller room. In fairness, my listening room is relatively big and not everyone would need to ask it to go up to such volumes as me.

Conclusion

Brilliant but flawed, is how I would describe the Ming Da Piccolo. To which I would have to add, "what £995 amp isn't?" and also "what valve amplifier isn't?", too. So in all fairness, this is actually a superb little integrated providing that you keep it in its comfort zone; this done you will find you have something able to completely transcend normal expectations at the price. Match carefully with sensitive speakers, don't use it to power your next seventies disco party, and you'll have an extremely capable performer with change to spare ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Lovely, charming, sweet sound; build quality

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Limited power; requires careful speaker matching

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Super little romantic valve amp, but not for everyone

FEATURES



OVERALL



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British steal

David Price explains how Onkyo UK took its A-9010 entry-level amplifier, sprinkled some stardust and added a UK suffix

Ah yes – Cool Britannia, *Absolutely Fabulous*, Blur vs. Oasis – remember it well! As the nineties slowly morphs from contemporary to historical, let us pause and reflect on the hi-fi of that decade. CD players were king, floorstanding loudspeakers were just beginning to catch on and we suddenly saw a procession of Japanese-made budget amplifiers which were “tuned for British ears”. It was all the Pioneer A-400’s fault as I remember, and this started a fashion for Sonys, Kenwoods, Marantz, etc. all fettled especially for us.

Quite what the difference is between British and Japanese ears

was never made clear then, and isn’t now. Perhaps it’s more useful to talk in terms of taste and environment. When I lived in Japan in the nineties, I was struck by how different the houses and apartments were – many use tatami mats extensively and this gives a well-damped sound compared with the average British abode with carpets and painted walls. Another consideration is that Brits tend to buy different loudspeakers to Japanese audiophiles, too. Either way, it’s nurture not nature.

Now some two decades later, Onkyo has started to ‘channel’ the nineties, and has come up with its very own British-tuned products. The company’s

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Onkyo A-9010 (UK)
ORIGIN
Japan/China
TYPE
Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT
6.5kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
435 x 130 x 333mm
FEATURES
• Quoted power output: 2x 44W (8ohm)
• 4x RCA, 1x 3.5mm line inputs; 1x RCA line output
• MM phono stage
DISTRIBUTOR
Onkyo UK
TELEPHONE
08712 001996
WEBSITE
uk.onkyo.com

British operation is blessed with good enthusiastic people who know a decent sound when they hear one, so a UK-tuned amplifier was always going to be an interesting thing. It has started with a standard A-9010, stripped it of its built-in DAC (which appears in some markets, but not the UK), and fettled it into an audiophile product. Given its price, the challenge was to make substantial upgrades to its sound, without spending so much money that it would no longer be an entry-level stereo amplifier.

Onkyo’s British tuning team retained the lion’s share of the 9010’s internal gubbins – including its ‘Wide Range Amplifier Technology’ circuitry, which is said to privilege current drive over output power; to give good ‘real-world’ driving ability even when the speaker impedance drops and increases the load. Interestingly, instead of the usual Class D modules you might expect for such a product, the A-9010 uses discrete low-impedance Darlington output transistors from Sanken running in Class AB. Many audiophiles still believe this to be the best compromise between sonics and practicality, but



it's less common than it used to be. The result is a claimed 44W RMS per channel in an 8ohm load, which is just about enough to drive most speakers in most British rooms.

A series of tweaks were made to, as Onkyo puts it, “deliver a sense of warmth and body” to the musical performance. A large, frame-type power transformer and beefy extruded aluminium heatsinking was fitted, along with four audio-grade

Despite its budget price, it gives little away in features or quality of finish

capacitors. The circuitry all sits on a chassis designed to isolate the components from sound-degrading external vibrations, and there are chunky gold-plated speaker terminals.

The Onkyo may be a little more finely fettle than some, but it's still a Japanese budget amplifier – and to this end it comes with a predictable list of facilities that haven't changed since the seventies, let alone the nineties. So you get a moving magnet phono stage (not discrete transistor, via an IC), a headphone output stage (via a 6.3mm socket), tone and balance controls and a good range of

It's way more convincing than you have a right to expect at the price

inputs; four on the back via RCA and a mini-socket on the front for your portable. It's well turned out for the price, with a nice sleek brushed alloy front panel and the pressed steel casing isn't as flimsy as one might expect. With smooth controls and a generally robust feel, Onkyo has done a good job of hiding its budget origins.

Sound quality

Having reviewed a number of budget Japanese amplifiers over the years, I have a good idea of what to expect.

At this price they tend to have a bright and breezy sound with a slightly metallic upper midband, vivid treble and a decent but rather vague bass. The overall sound is usually pleasant, and at first you think it is really rather impressive at the price. But extended listening tends to reveal quite an insipid and prosaic sound; it's not bad, but it completely fails to involve the listener. This is precisely what the Onkyo has to avoid, and after about 10 minutes of

use it is clear that it doesn't fall into such a trap. Indeed, right from switch on I find it a particularly bouncy thing, with lots of energy and drive. This stands in marked contrast to the sat-upon sound that some rivals at or just slightly above its price serve up.

First inside the CD player is Kate Bush's *Cloudbusting*. It's a beautiful song made with distinctive eighties synthesisers and samplers, and can sound quite shut in, yet shrill on vocals. The Onkyo copes surprisingly well and rises to the challenge better than expected. Kate's voice sounds icy, yet doesn't veer into harshness – unlike some other budget amplifiers I have tried. It's a difficult one to get right, because many smooth amps flatten it and strip it of its sparkle, while brighter ones can grate. The A-9010 (UK) treads a well-judged middle path and places it fairly deep into the mix. Behind it sits those distinct sampled drum patterns, which can sound curtailed on lesser amplifiers because they're highly damped and nowhere near as lively as you would expect drums to be. Again the Onkyo takes a sensible middle path, and seems fast and lithe enough to capture much of their energy and impact, without pushing them unduly to the fore. On a good system the relatively murky mix of this album begins to open up, and there is definitely a sense of this happening here.

Next up, some superbly crafted seventies rock courtesy of Steely Dan. *Aja* is a masterpiece of its age, and still sounds superb to this day. For a rock recording it is very dry, but with a good amplifier it can fill out and command the room. The title track proves impressive; Donald Fagen's voice can be a little nasal and forward, and the close-miked piano sometimes comes over as brittle with cheap solid-state electronics; but the A-9010 (UK) takes things in its stride ▶

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Earthing point for turntable
- 2 4x RCA analogue line inputs
- 3 Gold-plated 4mm speaker terminals
- 4 RCA analogue line output
- 5 Moving Magnet phono stage

Q&A

Kulwinder Singh Rai
Onkyo PR/product
development consultant



DP: Why tune products in the UK?

KSR: In our experience listeners in different markets historically have often had different preferences when it comes to sound quality. Not necessarily better or worse in any way, simply different. The A-9010 (UK) is an acknowledgement of that reality, and the process took about a year to do.

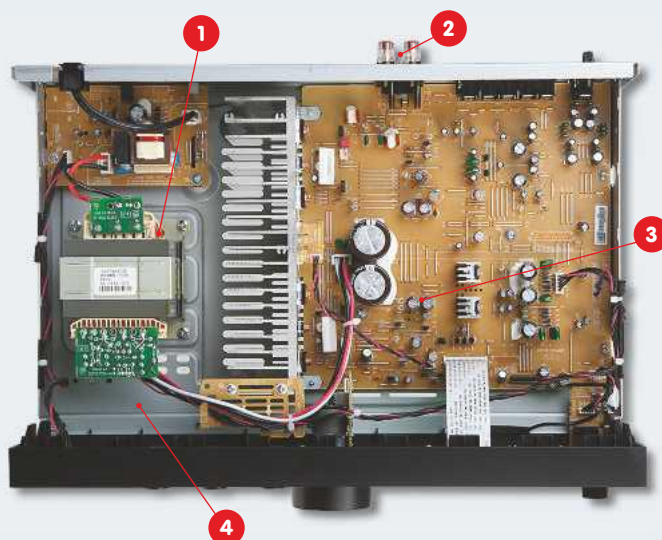
What differences are made to the UK version, and why?

Stage one was to create the base amplifier circuit. Stage two was to fine-tune our specific version for the UK. We listened to the sonic effect of all the key components within the amp's signal chain to assess which would give the desired sound quality balance. Capacitors have a particularly influential role to play so we spent a lot of time testing and evaluating what worked best on that front. And then we benchmarked it against competition costing substantially more. We wanted to set a new standard for pace, rhythm and timing in the truly budget sector, nothing less. Also, as the A-9010 (UK) is a UK-specific-version we also did away with a multi-voltage converter, resulting in an additional sonic gain.

Why doesn't it have a built-in DAC, like everything else now?

Onkyo was actually one of the first audio brands that implemented D/A converters and/or USB DACs in its stereo amplifiers. At the same time, we have continued to improve our analogue amplifier performance with our dedicated sound engineering team – the focus was on sound quality to the exclusion of all else. Nowadays, consumers can get decent-quality network players with good analogue outputs at reasonable prices. So we took the decision to create an amplifier that would appeal to budget-conscious customers whose priority was sound.

IN SIGHT



- 1 High current output, low impedance transformer
- 2 Speaker terminals connected to amp circuit via plates
- 3 Audiophile-grade capacitors
- 4 Rigid chassis designed to minimise interference

and shows its fine natural balance. It's quite a dynamic recording and so quite a workout for a relatively low-powered amplifier such as this, but the crashing drum kit breaks don't throw the Onkyo. In absolute terms, it doesn't quite have the range of a more powerful design at three times the price, but it seems to make the most of the power it has. That powerful bass guitar line that underpins the song is given good weight, and is enjoyably supple and tuneful too. The song's various stops and starts, bridges and middle eight all have a real sense of coherence, showing this amplifier to be well capable of keeping a grip on the proceedings – again this isn't something you can take for granted down here in the cheap seats!

Moving to some classic jazz in the shape of Miles Davis' *So What*, the Onkyo continues to impress. This is less complex than *Aja*, but demands rock-solid control to properly convey the infectious rhythms, and a decently realistic tone to handle that soaring trumpet. The A-9010 (UK) isn't out of its depth here either, zooming in on the drum section and giving a nice, full-bodied piano sound. It's way more convincing than you have a right to expect at the price, and manages to snap the recorded acoustic into sharp focus and locate the instruments with a decent degree of precision. The soundstage is surprisingly wide too, although it's a little two dimensional compared with an amplifier at twice the price. It gives some sense of depth perspective, but if you want proof that it isn't entirely blameless, then this is where you should look. Nevertheless, it serves up

a beguiling and enveloping sound and makes this beautiful jazz standard a pleasure to hear. This is something I cannot say about anything else at or near the A-9010 (UK)'s price.

Conclusion

The first job of any budget amplifier is not to sound horrible, and the Onkyo A-9010 (UK) breezes through this challenge with ease. Then it goes on to make a really rather lovely sound that completely belies its cost. It's not the greatest amplifier in the world of course, but what it does wrong never offends the ear, and it hides its tracks brilliantly. What it does right is something that plenty of amplifiers costing many times as much cannot do – which is to sound unerringly musical and fun. Forget about the UK-tuned amps of the nineties, the Onkyo's combination of bargain basement price and unalloyed sonic charm reminds me of the classic NAD 3020 of the late seventies. It's a recipe that appeals far beyond the beaches of Britain, I dare say ●



HOW IT COMPARES

Cambridge Audio's £270 Azur 351A is the Onkyo's closest rival. It feels fractionally more solid, is a little more compact yet is still quite heavy. A similar range of facilities is offered, and it has a similarly slick feel to the controls, which belie its price. Sonically it's a close-run thing between these two rather excellent amplifiers; the Cambridge Audio is fractionally punchier and grippier in the bass, but doesn't quite have the warmth or lyricism of the Onkyo. The A-9010 (UK) is more musically articulate, bringing more emotion to the event; it's also a little sweeter tonally too. By comparison, the 351A sounds drier, less beguiling and more controlled and focused.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Wonderfully musical sound; solid power output

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Absolutely nothing at the price

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Unexpectedly capable performer; a great starter amp

FEATURES



OVERALL





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The X-phile

Who says portable hi-res audio players have to be expensive? Not FiiO. **Adrian Justins** asks if the X1 is as cheerful as it is cheap

If you've been itching to get into portable hi-res audio but can't justify the outlay of an expensive player, the FiiO X1 is here to try and lure you in. At a whisker under £100 this is by far the most affordable hi-res digital audio player (DAP), with its closest competitors being the Sony NWZ-A15 (*HFC* April 2015) and FiiO's own X3 Mk 2, both of which sell for £159.

Given that serious audiophile hi-res players from the likes of Sony, Acoustic Research and Astell&Kern usually command a four figure price, or several £100s at the very least, you have to wonder whether the X1 has got what it takes to compete. One significant shortcoming is a complete absence of built-in storage. Instead, it has a microSD slot that can accept cards up to 128GB, which should provide enough capacity for around 4,000 24/96 FLAC tracks.

Unless you already own a compatible card you can expect to shell out around £10 for 32GB of storage and £50-£60 for 128GB. It's a bit of a kick in the teeth really because while you expect to provide your own storage card for a digital camera you simply don't when it comes to portable audio players. To be fair to FiiO though, it isn't shy in communicating the trade off of storage for a lower price in its publicity and marketing materials.

The rival Sony NWZ-A15 comes with 16GB of memory built in (and

has an SD expansion slot), while the FiiO X3 Mk 2 is also bereft of built-in storage, its USP over the X1 and Sony being compatibility with native DSD and DXD files and USB DAC operation.

Otherwise in terms of the X1's spec shortcomings nothing stands out on paper, although only a USB cable is provided and no plug or charger (only an issue if you don't wish to use a computer or existing USB chargers). What it does have is a handy line out, plus a TI PCM5142 chipset that is compatible with APE, FLAC, ALAC, WMA and WAV lossless music formats, up to 24-bit/192kHz. Remote control support is provided for the likes of Apple and Samsung inline headphones, allowing you to pause, play, fast forward and rewind tracks, although perhaps annoyingly not control the volume.

The player weighs a pocket-friendly 106g and is more compact than a pack of 20 cigarettes. It's similar to a 6th generation iPod Classic in terms of weight and dimensions as well as design and operation.

Pleasingly, FiiO eschews the trend for exceptionally hard edges found on many other DAPs, and the X1 has nice rounded corners. The build quality is commensurate with the price, and the unit feels somewhat plasticky. Available in gold or silver, it appears impressive in photos but in real life it looks every inch a piece of sprayed plastic. It's a shame, because the buttons and scroll wheel themselves look and feel superior. The saving grace is that the unit is

► DETAILS

PRODUCT

FiiO X1

ORIGIN

China

TYPE

24-bit/192kHz-capable digital audio portable

WEIGHT

106g

DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)
57 x 96 x 14mm

FEATURES

- APE, FLAC, ALAC, WAV, WMA, AAC, OGG, MP3, MP2 playback
- microSD XC slot (128GB max)
- 2in 320x240-pixel screen

DISTRIBUTOR

Advanced MP3 Players

TELEPHONE

08432 896880

WEBSITE

fiiio.net



Those industrial looks are sadly all plastic

supplied with a black rubberised silicon case, which protects and covers the body (but annoyingly hides the LED that lights up to tell you if the unit is being charged), or you can plaster it with stickers, which FiiO has strangely opted to provide.

The scroll wheel grips nicely and has decent resistance when you drag it round to select items from the menu or control the volume, but the central select button feels slightly loose. External buttons provide track transport duties, plus there's a Back button for navigation. It's a shame there isn't a Home button as you don't always want to work your way back through folders to get to the home screen. Oddly, though, depending on how a track is selected and played, pressing the Back button can act as a Home screen button, which can be annoying if you want to browse the folder/album/playlist that contains it. It all depends what screen was showing previous to the playback in progress and is a tad baffling to deal with. Another annoyance is that the screen can only display track information briefly (artist, album, format, resolution and bit-rate) and it superimposes it on top of the album artwork, often leading to hard to read clashes of words and pictures.

This is exacerbated by the clarity of the screen, washed out colour scheme

and font that's so small at times it's like looking through back-to-front binoculars. Having said all that, generally the operating system is well laid out and divided into sections such as settings, browsing, etc. The cursor moves quickly and the system responds promptly to selections. One nice touch about the design is that supplementary volume buttons on the left side are lower in profile than the adjacent power button, making it easier to select them by touch.

Loading music is relatively straightforward. With an SD card placed in the slot and the player connected by the USB cable to a computer, the card appears as an external drive on the desktop. On an

Delivery is smooth, finely detailed and nicely rounded off with a hint of warmth

iMac I am able to drag and drop until I fill the card, and all metadata and sleeve art is carried over. To preserve playlists from iTunes you have to create new folders on your desktop first and the only other faff is that you have to tell the player to update the media library after disconnecting from the computer. You can, however, manually build new playlists using the X1's GUI, and save favourite tracks.

Sound quality

Output can be tweaked using the built-in EQ, which has seven adjustable bands between 62Hz and 16kHz, plus there are seven genre presets. Pairing the X1 with Sony's MDR-10RC, which are decent lightweight hi-res headphones, the first and most important observation about the X1 is that the built-in DAC and amp are adept at extracting all of the sonic juice from the fruit of most hi-res tunes. Be it FLAC, ALAC or AIFF files, delivery is smooth, finely detailed and nicely rounded off with a hint of warmth. The soundstage is perhaps a bit narrow, Mozart's *Violin Concerto No.4 in D Major* (AIFF) for example feeling a little spatially cramped and not as airy as it could be. But it is possible to get a much more satisfying sound out of the X1 than it first offers up.

The flat response is weighted too keenly towards the lower end of the midrange and requires some EQ adjustment to reduce some of the overzealous bass extension. The

Metal preset boosts the upper mids and works out as a pretty good option for use as the default setting.

The bass on Bon Jovi's *Army Of One* (FLAC) goes from sounding rather dull and flabby to a punchier, quicker attack, allowing the mids of the guitar and vocals a bit more flight thanks to improved extension and greater transparency. Also with the Metal preset engaged, a 24/96 FLAC file of Steely Dan's *Time Out Of Mind* is underpinned much more effectively by a drum beat that has immaculate timing and reach. The keyboards and electric guitar are sharply defined, while Donald Fagen's vocals resonate sumptuously with good separation.

With Coldplay's *A Sky Full Of Stars* (24/96 FLAC), Chris Martin's vocals are the highlight in terms of revelation and impact. The attack of the piano rumble is a bit slow out of the gate and the synth is a tad too rounded. The midrange boost isn't optimum for all sources, Wings' *Band On The Run* (24/96 ALAC) for example sounds much better using the Rock pre-set, which boosts the 160Hz band and higher frequencies, tempering the midrange a tad, allowing much better balance between the vocals and instruments.

Another limitation is the volume starts to sound harsh and lose coherency as you crank it up. There is also a slight double click before the first track played from standby, but at least gapless playback is on board.

Conclusion

Overall, the performance isn't quite as open or refined as you get from more expensive players and the FiiO X1 is also a bit of a pain to operate in some respects. That said, considering the price there is plenty about the unit to recommend it. You may have to work a bit to get the best out of it, but the FiiO X1 is still a significant step up from bog-standard MP3 players, iPods and smartphones ●

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Headphone/line output
- 2 Scroll wheel used for navigation
- 3 SD expansion slot
- 4 Select button
- 5 Volume controls

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Price; format compatibility; warm, detailed sound
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Cramped soundstage; challenging OS
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: Not the easiest to use and it needs EQ adjustment, but sound is respectable at price
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL





A touch of Nordic noir

This compact speaker has impressive engineering and plenty of heritage behind it. **Andrew Everard** takes a listen

So, Scansonic – does the name seem vaguely familiar? Its MB series of speakers, starting with the MB-1 we have here and going all the way up to the MB-3.5 floorstanders, may be new (and just one of three complete speaker ranges on its books), but the brand name has an illustrious history, being deeply rooted in Danish speaker design and engineering. Scansonic goes back 45 years, when it was introduced as the name on a then-new line of loudspeakers from famous Danish

A detailed balance that's well beyond expectations of a design so compact

drive-unit manufacturer ScanSpeak. Having survived a factory fire, ScanSpeak was later acquired by current Scansonic owner Dantax after a period of being owned by Ortofon parent company Fonofilm, during which its co-founders pulled out and eventually found Dynaudio. You may be getting the idea by now that the inner workings of the Danish speaker/driver industry are both fascinating and entirely convoluted!

For the design of the MB speaker series, Scansonic looked within its parent company to Michael Børresen, executive R&D manager at Raidho, where he has worked for more than a dozen years. And while there's a clear influence from his work with Raidho designs in some aspects of the design here, the intention was always to make a range true to the Scansonic brand. Oh, and to Mark Børresen's contribution to the design, his initials are on every model – hence the 'MB'.

Available in black or white 'silk' finish, the speakers have a curved-wall enclosure design, ported to the

front, and can be used on a choice of two Scansonic speaker stands: there's a curvaceous single-pillar model, selling for £490 a pair in black or £505 in white, and a twin-column design at £580 a pair.

Standing just over 33cm tall, the MB-1 has pretty conventional 'bookshelf speaker' dimensions, but an all-up fighting weight of 6.1kg reveals the use of heavy bracing inside to further increase the structural integrity of what is already a rigid cabinet, thanks to those curved panels. Ribbon tweeters and carbon-fibre cones are found across the range, and the one in the MB-1 uses a Kapton/aluminium sandwich construction 0.02mm thick, meaning it weighs a fraction of a conventional dome diaphragm, making it easier to drive with less coloration.

The 115mm mid/bass unit uses that carbon-fibre weave to obtain stiffness without weight penalties, and is of a dustcap-less design, driven by an overhung magnet system with a long excursion for powerful bass. Inlays line the slot-shaped port below the woofer to reduce noise, and the handover between the drivers centres around 3.5kHz.

Sound quality

On the end of my Naim network music player/amplifier system, the immediate impression is of the scale and quality of bass: yes, the spec suggests they run out of steam at around 50Hz, but when it comes to small speakers and low-end welly, there's no sense of the sound lacking substance. Playing rock or pop music there's weight and speed down there, ensuring rhythm sections power along smartly, and bass and drums have excellent character and drive.

Scansonic doesn't quote a sensitivity figure, saying only that nominal impedance is greater than 60ohm, and that it recommends high-quality

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Scansonic MB-1

ORIGIN
Denmark

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
6.1kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
178 x 312 x 286mm

FEATURES
● Ribbon tweeter
● 115mm mid/bass
driver
● Impedance:
>6ohm

DISTRIBUTOR
Dantax A/S

TELEPHONE
+45 982476 77

WEBSITE
scansonic.dk

amplifiers of greater than 50W. That said, the speakers seem to be a pretty easy drive: as well as using my Supernait 2, I also try them with Denon's PMA-50 (HFC 397), and there's never any sense the Denon is struggling, although the sound does take on further conviction and presence with the Naim.

That bass weight may be the first surprise in the MB-1's presentation, but what's even more pleasing is the way the whole sound hangs together, with no sense of this being a one-trick speaker, and a generous, detailed overall balance that's well beyond expectations of a design so compact. In particular the tweeter works exceptionally well, with an open, airy sound when playing atmospheric live recordings, excellent sting with cymbals without any sense of overcooking things with excessive splash or sizzle, and fine midband fluidity and detailing.

Play some classic Miles Davis and it's hard not to be drawn into the performance. There's superb rasp and breath to the trumpet, while other instruments are handled in similarly convincing style, the bass has just the right amount of snap of finger on string then vibrational resonance, enabling the contribution of the instrument's body to be heard. At the same time the drums have good punch and drive, while all the

MB-1s combine ultralight ribbon tweeter with carbon-fibre mid/bass



Q&A

Michael Børresen

Executive R&D manager, Raidho



AE: What were the challenges in designing the MB range?

MB: I was very focused on building on all the experiences and strengths obtained from designing the Raidho speakers, but this time, the task also came with a budget and a desire to create the very best possible speakers within financial limits.

Doesn't the use of a ribbon tweeter and carbon fibre bass unit make building to a budget tricky?

It was clear to me from the very beginning that some core techniques from the Raidho speakers would be of importance: the speakers had to be designed around a ribbon tweeter as, thanks to its super lightweight diaphragm sealed around the edges, it allows for a seamless transition to the midrange region. The same thinking on quality and integration informed the use of a mid/bass driver with a rigid, piston-type membrane – which is why we chose carbon fibre.

So many speaker companies have moved their production to lower-cost countries. Why was it so important to not do the same?

At the same time, I also had to be aware of the long heritage and the Nordic design tradition of the Scansonic brand, so developing and building these speakers in Denmark was a tremendous task, and quite a long one. However, I'm very glad that a fantastic team effort made it possible – the result makes me proud.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Kapton/aluminium ribbon tweeter
- 2 4mm cable binding posts
- 3 Front-venting reflex port
- 4 Carbon-fibre weave mid/bass unit

delicacy required to enjoy the times when sticks give way to brushes and the snap and fizz of the cymbals.

While the bass is impressive for speakers of this size, there are times when its lower limits are apparent, for which reason I wouldn't suggest these are the optimum choice for fans of church organ music or those enjoying room-shaking synthesised bass – that's prog fans perhaps disappointed on two fronts, then!

However, in general terms the MB-1 covers its tracks extremely well, and you're more likely to be struck by how low these speakers can appear to go, along with the speed and tunefulness of the bass they deliver, rather than worrying too much about that last bit of low-frequency information that's missing. There's never any sense of a lack of weight, and by the standards of speakers of this size they're extremely impressive.

What is beyond reproach is the superb sense of soundstage depth, width and focus the MB-1s present: listen to a live concert through them and you get a sonic picture extending between and beyond the speakers, and in which performers are placed solidly and reliably. With a shade of toe-in toward the listening position, that remarkable focus is sharpened, and at the same time the feeling of front-to-back depth is enhanced; impressive, too, is the way they maintain that sense of solidity – which after all is what stereo is all about – even when you move off-axis.

These aren't 'sweet spot' speakers, limited to delivering their best at one, very narrow, listening position, and there's no sense of the tweeters 'beaming': instead they've very clearly

been designed for real-world listening, to be enjoyed by several people in the room at once, and they're all the better for that. As well as the tweeter design, that has much to do with the way the two drivers and the crossover marry up to present music as a whole, with no sense of 'handover' between the drivers to catch the attention and divert it from the music.

Conclusion

If you're looking for rather superior speakers for use in a small or medium-sized room, and can afford both the speaker/stands package, at around £1,800 all-in and the kind of amplifier you'll need to hear them at their best, this is a highly competitive design. By combining room friendliness – that front-venting port means that you can use them close to a rear wall – stylish looks and a very persuasive sound seemingly beyond its modest dimensions, Scansonic has come up with loudspeaker well worthy of a serious audition ●

HOW IT COMPARES

There's no shortage of high-quality standmount speakers available in the £1,000-£1,500 price bracket, and the MB-1 finds itself up against the likes of the £1,485 PMC twenty.21 (HFC 379), another design with prodigious bass from a small enclosure plus a fast, detailed midband and treble, and the ultra-precise and illuminating B&W CM6 S2, at around £1,500. Or, as an alternative to the MB-1s with stands, the compact and accomplished Neat Motive SX1 speakers (HFC 379) are a must-listen at £1,885.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Sound, design and build quality; ease of placement
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** No shortage of competition at price; stands, while elegant, aren't cheap
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Powerful sound from a compact design, but some may hanker for more bass
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL





HE400i
SRP £360

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

OVERALL



HE560
SRP £650

HIFIMAN

HEAD STRONG

Panar magnetic drivers for under £400 are about as common as reliable estate agents
Ed Selley - Hi-Fi Choice

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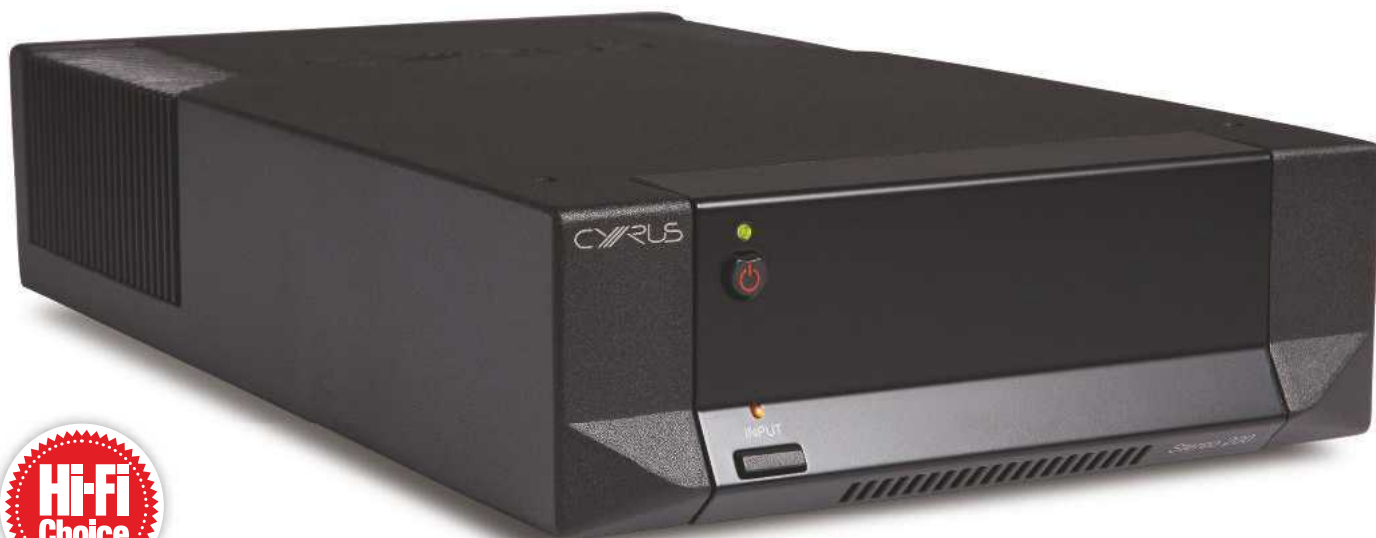
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Class warrior

Punching out serious amounts of power from a small box, the Cyrus Stereo 200 makes a big impression, says **David Price**

Audiophiles can sometimes be a bit snobby about Class D; they tend to be more interested in the As and ABs of this world, and feel D can sound a little opaque and musically unconvincing. Class D is an extremely efficient mode of producing power, though – and is surely the future in tomorrow's energy-saving world. Personally, I have always found the old adage that, “it ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it” applies here – I'm all for a classless society!

The new Cyrus Stereo 200 is said to have started as one of the company's special projects, produced to explore if Class D could ever be developed into a power amplifier good enough for serious hi-fi listeners. For this reason, unlike practically all others on sale, it doesn't use a third-party off-the-shelf chip power module. Instead it's a hybrid of toroidal transformer with a custom Class D topology using an externally clocked PWM generation unit to insure that it performs at its best across the full

power bandwidth. The >475VA toroidal transformer plays a big part in this says Cyrus' R&D team, making for an amplifier with fine sound, high efficiency and low heat generation. It produces a claimed 2x 200W into a typical 6ohm load from the company's compact half-width casing, which is no small feat – a conventional Class AB amp in this box would surely make less power and run hotter.

One of the feistiest sounding Cyrus power amplifiers I have ever heard

The Cyrus even 'harvests' the energy used to stop the loudspeaker cone moving and puts it back into its power supply reservoir, making for very low current consumption.

The Stereo 200 has a heavily filtered mains power supply, and its microcontroller is powered from a separate supply to the other circuitry.

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT
Cyrus Stereo 200

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Stereo power amplifier

WEIGHT
6.9kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
215 x 73 x 360mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power output: 2x 200W (6ohm)
• Speaker impedance detection system
• Balanced XLRs and unbalanced RCA inputs

DISTRIBUTOR
Cyrus Audio Ltd

TELEPHONE
01480 410900

WEBSITE
cyrusaudio.com

Cyrus says it provides large amounts of burst power for musical transients by using a mix of electrolytic, ceramic and polypropylene capacitors, coupled to the custom low-noise toroidal transformer. All low-level audio signal carrying components get their juice from four independently regulated supplies, and the high current supply is separately fused and decoupled between left and right channels. The reconstruction filter in the Class D output section has a ferrite-shielded coil with oxygen-free copper and polypropylene metal foil capacitors for the lowest distortion; the company says that a lot of time was spent tuning this for the best possible sound.

The amp constantly monitors the circuit for errors in supply voltages, DC offset from the speaker outputs and also over current short circuit. The circuit will even detect a short circuited output without any applied audio signal. Speaker impedance detection is carried out on start up, so that every time the amplifier is powered up it automatically adjusts to the speaker load.

In other respects it is pretty conventional; it has a choice of unbalanced RCA inputs or fully balanced XLRs. There are standard 4mm speaker binding and power consumption is said to be a miserly 0.5 watt in standby mode.

Sound quality

As ever the Cyrus sports the company's classic non-ferrous aluminium diecast chassis, which is significantly less resonant than typical pressed steel wrapped boxes. Despite its unusual, bespoke design, the

Like a fly-weight boxer, the Stereo 200 packs a mighty punch for such a small unit

Stereo 200 still sounds spookily like a typical Cyrus product – one which serves up a smooth, tonally even sound with no particular emphasis on any part of the frequency range, and that has a crisp and propulsive feel to the way it plays music. Indeed, if anything the bass actually comes over as a little gutsier than some amplifiers from this stable – there’s a sense of solidity and weight to low frequencies that belies the size of the box. Moving up to the midband, and all is clean and tidy, with no sense of the upper midband being brightly lit or coarse. In the treble, it is crisp and detailed with a nice spry feel, even if it isn’t quite as silky or spacious as a Class A Sugden A21, for example.

With Isaac Hayes’ *Cafe Regio*’s from the classic Stax *Shaft* LP, the Stereo 200 serves up a rich and three-dimensional sound. This is just as it should be considering it’s a spacious and opulent-sounding recording. The amplifier also proves untroubled by the succession of quite hard to drive loudspeakers I try with it, from new ATC SCM40s to classic Yamaha NS1000Ms. The song’s wonderfully thick and fruity bass guitar sounds effortless, even at very high levels that would have many similarly priced products wheezing. It is also pleasingly tuneful and stops and starts in all the right places, giving the sound a rhythmic correctness that underpins everything else in the mix. Further up the scale, the piano is carried well with a natural sound that syncopates nicely with the lead electric guitar. Behind this, those gorgeous strings soar and the brass rasps; flute is breathy and the cymbals sparkle. The amplifier is able to blend everything together well, giving a detailed, multi-layered sound that is a pleasure to listen to, with little sign of muddle as the track grows in complexity. It is also good with

dynamics, seeming unfettered and well able to capture the subtle phrasing of these quite brilliant session musicians.

Jacqueline du Pré’s arresting playing on Elgar’s *Cello Concerto Op.85* (Barenboim/Philadelphia Orchestra) is also a joy. The Stereo 200 conjures up a spacious recorded acoustic, yet one that invites the listener right in. Again that strong bass is in evidence, and at high volume levels gives the amplifier a commanding sound. Du Pré’s cello is beautifully carried, with a lyrical presentation that fits seamlessly with the rest of the orchestra. The overall effect is stirringly musical, and when the massed strings come in you wouldn’t

There’s a sense of solidity and weight to low frequencies that belies its size

know that such power is emanating from such a small box. In absolute terms, the petite Cyrus doesn’t quite have the detail and air of some pricier power amplifiers I have tried, sounding slightly misty at the back of the hall, but it is still a combative performance from a mid-priced power amplifier. It images well up front, but becomes a little diffuse towards the rear of the soundstage.

Moving to less rarefied musical climes, the wonderful slice of new wave that is Nick Lowe’s *So It Goes* is delivered in a gutsy and muscular way. It’s a piece of music that’s right up the Cyrus’ street, giving it a chance to really show off its fine rhythms and strong dynamics.

American muscle car fans will tell you there’s no substitute for cubic inches to make real power, but the Stereo 200 begs to disagree – it sounds bold despite its diminutive

dimensions. Once again, its supple handling of the song’s bass guitar pushes things along with alacrity, while vocals are clean and expressive and guitars upfront and engaging. Unlike some Class D designs I have heard, this amplifier certainly does not have a sat-upon sound. Indeed, I think rock music best suits this amplifier’s nature; it is subtle and sophisticated enough to work well across the board, yet can tackle crashing electric guitar chords and drums with relish.

Conclusion

An interesting one, this. The Cyrus Stereo 200 doesn’t broadcast its mode of operation to the world; rather it transcends it to work as a highly enjoyable all-round solid-state power amplifier. You can’t immediately tell it’s a Class D design, yet you never forget the benefit conferred by this configuration – namely a lot of power in a small space. It’s certainly one of the feistiest sounding Cyrus power amplifiers I have ever heard, making it ideal for owners of this marque wanting to raise their roof or even just drive difficult loudspeakers. Yet it also has real appeal for those needing a fine-sounding powerhouse that doesn’t take over their living space ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Big power in a small package; gutsy, musical sound
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Subtle lack of fine detail and atmosphere
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Excellent value compact powerhouse
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL



CONNECTIONS



- 1 Balanced XLR input (right ch)
- 2 RCA input and chain output
- 3 4mm speaker binding posts
- 4 MC Bus connections

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"WILSON AUDIO ALEXIA IS QUITE SIMPLY AN OUTSTANDING EXAMPLE OF AUDIO EXCELLENCE"

- HI-FI CRITIC / MARTIN COLLOMS / ALEXIA REVIEW

"SAY 'HELLO' TO MY NEW REFERENCE"

- HI-FI NEWS / KEN KESSLER / ALEXIA REVIEW

"HAVE YOU EVER HAD THE FEELING OF TRANSCENDENCY, SOMETHING THAT GOES BEYOND CONSCIOUSNESS?"

- HI-FI CLUBE.NET / JOSE VITOR HENRIQUES / ALEXIA / CONSTELLATION SYSTEM REVIEW



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Net station

Want an affordable way to get networked music into your hi-fi? **Lee Dunkley** thinks this neat little hub holds the answer

Multi-room networked music systems are very much bang on trend right now, but German brand Raumfeld is the new kid on the block when it comes to UK audio fans. Already reasonably well established on its own turf, it looks set to make waves over here with a growing range of well thought-out components available via its online store offering an eight-week trial period.

With a range of active speaker models, networking capabilities and

Detail is impressively integral and the soundstage has a good sense of depth

access to streaming services like Spotify and TuneIn, Raumfeld is positioning itself as a Sonos challenger, and its Connector 2 is one of the main building blocks to the company's networked music systems. The well-constructed unit enables existing hi-fi owners to access home networked music libraries found on computers, NAS drives and mobile devices. It's a simple-looking box with just a power button on top of the unit and the only things gracing the slender front panel are a pair of LEDs that indicate its status. At the back you'll find a set of stereo RCA inputs to hook up a wired source like a CD

player and play it back through other Raumfeld networked devices around the home. Outputs run to stereo RCAs and optical digital and there's an Ethernet port for wired networks and a USB port for connection to an external HDD. Wireless connection to a router is available via the Expander (£50), but there's no Bluetooth or AirPlay compatibility provided here. At the loftier end of its capabilities the Connector 2 says it can handle music files up to 24/192 (more on this later) thanks to the built in Cirrus Logic digital-to-analogue converter as well as a healthy list of formats that includes MP3, WMA, WAV, AAC, ALAC, FLAC and OGG.

Installation is straightforward once you've downloaded the app to your iOS or Android device and run the setup wizard, and there's a system reset button at the back of the unit should you run into difficulties. Music library and streaming service control is also handled by the app, which is surprisingly intuitive to use and comes preloaded with access to Spotify Connect – so long as you have a Premium subscription – Napster, TuneIn and Last.fm streaming services. The app is nicely configured and easy to master with volume and EQ control for each room around the home should you decide to go down the multi-room path. Following a system update, I discover there's also Tidal streaming integration – giving access to its 25 million-track library

at near CD-quality so long as you are a £20-per-month subscriber – see our music streaming services *Group Test* in *HFC* 396.

Sound quality

Wired connections are always the way to go for any hi-fi fan and the same goes for networked music, particularly if you have a catalogue of hi-res audios files that you want to stream. Play a 24/96 ALAC file of *Hotel California* by the Eagles and the track sounds just as intact and polished as with any upmarket network streamer I've heard. Detail across the frequency range is impressively integral, and the soundstage has a good sense of left-to-right and front-to-back depth that can often be sacrificed with lesser networked devices struggling to retain these kind of hi-fi credentials.

It's not such a success story with 24/192 tracks stored on my network, even though it is hard wired throughout, and I am unable to play these without the music stuttering and breaking up. Nevertheless this only affects a tiny amount of my music collection, and anything from 16/44.1 to 24/96 is seamlessly handled by the robust Raumfeld and its solid networking.

For me, though, the real pleasure of the Connector 2 is in its integration with Tidal's streaming service, giving me access to its extensive catalogue of tracks, saved favourites and playlists using my existing subscription. Other services are available pre-installed on the app of course, but at near-CD sound quality, streaming music in this way to my hi-fi is a tough act to beat.

Conclusion

The Connector 2 offers a high level of networking possibilities and access to music streaming services. Its app is one of the most integrated I have seen, and offers tremendous flexibility at the price ●

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Raumfeld Connector 2

ORIGIN
Germany

TYPE
Digital music hub

WEIGHT
0.3kg

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
172 x 28 x 127mm

FEATURES

- RCA line input;
- USB-A port;
- Ethernet port
- Optical digital and RCA line outputs
- Playback support for: MP3, WMA, WAV, AAC, ALAC, FLAC, OGG

DISTRIBUTOR
Lautsprecher Teufel GmbH

TELEPHONE
03308 080489

WEBSITE
raumfeld.com

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Great sound quality; flexible app; ease of use

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Shaky 24/192 playback

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Great way to add networked music libraries to a hi-fi and get seamless integration with top streaming services

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL





Force for change

Now under new ownership, NuForce has developed its direct digital amp line with the DDA120 **James Parker** puts it to the test

We're used to some unusual ownerships in the audio business, from Formula 1 parent companies to guitar makers and furniture manufacturers, but the takeover of amplifier firm NuForce by Optoma, while keeping things within the consumer electronics world, wasn't the most obvious move. After all, Optoma is known for its projectors – produced for everything from home cinema to business applications – while NuForce was always a slightly leftfield hi-fi company, making everything from exceptionally dinky headphone amplifiers to digital amps.

Where the two meet is in NuForce's recent AV products, but what we have

here is traditional hi-fi – well, traditional in that it's two-channel – in the form of the new DDA120 direct digital amplifier, which comes with both analogue and digital inputs.

Designed at what is now known as Optoma NuForce HQ in California and then manufactured in Taiwan, the DDA120 is the latest in a succession of amplifiers from the company, including its immediate ancestor, the DDA100. NuForce describes it as a digital music system, and says that it “Was developed for one simple purpose: to allow you to enjoy music from any source in fantastic quality”.

All very standard stuff, but what's immediately obvious about the amp is

that it's surprisingly compact for a model claiming an output of 75W per channel (admittedly into 4ohm; the 8ohm figure claims 50W) and 250W peak: it's just 241mm wide and stands only 51mm tall. It tips the scales at a featherweight 1.2kg, quite a bit of which is accounted for by the casework – available in silver or black – and the transformer.

However, despite these diminutive dimensions, the DDA120 feels anything but flimsy: the combination of its rounded casework, thick front panel and single control make it feel substantial and well designed, while the single rotary control and apparently featureless fascia adds to the sense that we're dealing with something rather different here.

The DDA120 looks like a single-source amplifier, having just a volume knob to the right of the front panel and nothing else: however, the NuForce designers have cleverly managed to make that single control look after power on/off and input switching as well as volume. A short push cycles one by one through the inputs; a longer push turns the amp on or off; and hidden display elements to the left of the fascia shine through what looks like a solid panel to show volume level and the input selected. There's also a simple remote handset, with more conventional

DETAILS

PRODUCT
NuForce DDA120

ORIGIN
Taiwan

TYPE
Digital integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
1.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
241 x 51 x 216mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power output: 2x 50W (8ohms)
• USB; 3x digital in and analogue inputs
• aptX Bluetooth

DISTRIBUTOR
Optoma Europe Ltd

TELEPHONE
01923 691800

WEBSITE
optoma.co.uk/
soundproducts

volume up/down, mute and input selection buttons, from which it's possible to set the amp into 'dim mode', which turns off the front-panel LED after three seconds, re-lighting it when the controls are operated

Yes, a display of input selected: for all its outward simplicity, the NuForce actually has no fewer than six inputs. There's a coaxial and two optical digitals, a USB-B for computer hook up, a single pair of RCA analogue ins and a USB-A to which you can connect the BTR1 aptX Bluetooth dongle that comes bundled. Speaker outputs are on an entirely conventional pair of combination speaker terminals, suitable for bare wires or bananas, and there's also a miniToslink optical digital out.

The amplification here is all digital, which means that analogue input is sampled (at 24-bit/96kHz) before being fed through the amp, and while the conventional digital inputs handle files up to 176.4kHz, the USB is limited to 96kHz. Within, all incoming digital inputs are re-clocked, and then oversampled at 3GB/s for processing.

This uses the SAB2403N1 from Infineon, which is a complete 'digital in, speakers out' open-loop Class D solution, complete with the A-to-D conversion required for the analogue input here, and as a result the internal layout has plenty of fresh air: just two boards – one for power supply, the other for everything else – make up the workings of the amp, and the layout of both is clear and logical, making it easy to see where and how the signal flows.

Sound quality

NuForce provided me some advice on how to use the amp to get the very best out of it, but unfortunately it arrived with me after I had started using the DDA120, and thus beyond



Available in black or silver, the DDA120 is sleek and compact, but it's far from the only ticket in town when it comes to small amplifiers with a big sound, and the Denon PMA-50 (reviewed last month) has similar features to the NuForce, plus a sound with a little more warmth and body. It also has the ability to save desk space by standing vertically, as does the amp perhaps responsible for starting this mini-amplifier trend – the NAD D 3020 (HFC 386). This also has unconventional styling. If you'd prefer to keep it old-school, the Pro-Ject MaiA (HFC 390) looks much more like a normal amp – just smaller.

the initial break-in stage. No matter, as it turns out it doesn't impact on the final outcome. The optical digital inputs, apparently, provide the best sound, but I have to say that I find that almost all the connections offer a similar performance, with the notable exception of the analogue input, which sounds just a little less sharply focused, no doubt due to the extra conversion stage upstream of the digital amplifier. Bluetooth, too, is a little vague, lacking the crispness of the 'hard' digital connections, but then I've found that generally to be the case across a wide range of BT-toting amplifiers: the convenience of firing audio from a smartphone or whatever portable device you opt for to the audio system comes at the expense of some audio quality.

Offers good levels of clarity, with gutsy bass and plenty of rhythmic snap

Although it may come as no surprise to devotees of tiny T-amps or other diminutive powerhouses, what the DDA120 delivers from so small an enclosure is actually rather remarkable: this is a little amp with more than enough juice in reserve to drive even fairly demanding speakers with decent control and conviction. It definitely passes the 'go loud' test with flying colours, whether used with small monitor speakers in a desktop system or with some rather more ambitious partners in a small-to-medium-sized room setup.

Whether with a direct connection via USB from my laptop or using a CD player fed in digitally, the NuForce offers good levels of clarity and communication, with gutsy bass and plenty of rhythmic snap and

while it could be argued that the soundstaging is a little on the small side with not as strong a sense of depth or space as some competing designs offer, there's excellent focus and definition and persuasive positioning of performers within the entire sonic picture.

Conclusion

The overall sound here is just a shade on the bleached and anonymous side, lacking some warmth and generosity especially with large-scale rock or orchestral recordings. Some care should be taken with the choice of partnering speakers, and I'd certainly try to avoid matching it with any components with a bright, let alone brash, balance. However, even with warmer speakers the NuForce can still pack quite a sting in the treble with close-miked or over-recorded cymbals, for example, and it also has a tendency to overemphasise sibilants, meaning it's not one for Queen fans, perhaps.

That said, the DDA120 is never a dull listen, and has both energy and vitality on its side. If you have a penchant for something a little different from the midrange amplifier norm, it could be just the thing ●

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Style; flexibility; packs a solid punch for such a tiddler
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Could do with a bit more warmth and substance
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WESAY: A smart and innovative amplifier, with a style all of its own, if not quite all-round sonic ability
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL



CONNECTIONS



- 1 4mm speaker binding posts
- 2 USB for extra storage
- 3 RCA analogue inputs
- 4 Coaxial & USB-B digital inputs
- 5 2x optical inputs & 1x miniToslink output



Connectivity without compromise.

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Design
Concept.*

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Want to find out more? Visit rotel.com to find your nearest authorised Rotel retailer.



Headmaster

Audio-Technica says its latest headphone is designed with comfort in mind. **Ed Selley** puts the claim to the test and checks it out

On occasions the marketing material for a product can be a statement of the blindingly obvious. Given their interaction with your head you might assume that all headphones make more than a few concessions to user comfort. So Audio-Technica's claim that its ATH-MSR7 has been designed with comfort in mind seems about as notable as announcing it has drivers inside. In reality, not all headphones are created equal and given that Audio-Technica has a good record for making comfortable designs, the ATH-MSR7 might be the ticket to long-term listening bliss.

It is a hybrid-size designed to be used both at home and on the move. That said, it is fairly large compared with some of the competition. Part of

Can be driven to usefully high levels on the end of a mobile device

this is down to the use of drivers that are a little larger than normal in this segment – 45mm versus the more usual 40mm. This is designed using AT's 'True Motion' technology, which is intended to keep the driver as light and easy to move as possible so it should add low-end performance, but not at the expense of sluggishness.

These are then placed in an enclosure that is closed-back save for a small vent, which doesn't appear to leak noise. Audio-Technica has then gone to great lengths to make the enclosure comfortable. The memory foam padding is deep but not too soft, and ensures a good fit to the ear. The headband then manages to apply enough pressure to ensure that it stays in place, but doesn't squeeze your head too much. The partial exception to this is that my glasses can be forced against the side of my face, which gets uncomfortable after a while.

As a design that will be used in a variety of locations, the MSR7 is

supplied with a short cord complete with microphone and a longer one that allows you to be a fair distance from your system. A soft carry bag is supplied too. Compared with rivals like the Sennheiser Momentum (HFC 372), it feels more orientated to home use and folds flat rather than inwards, but is no trouble to use out and about. The looks are a little on the sober side in the black of the review sample, but they are extremely well finished and feel very solid.

Sound quality

With a long history in pro audio, the Audio-Technica house sound is accurate, but there is generally a forgiving rather than forensic edge to it. The MSR7 has these traits, which means in comparison to something fearsomely detailed like Grado's SR225e (HFC 393), it is more relaxed and less instantly attention grabbing.



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audio-Technica
ATH-MSR7

ORIGIN
Japan/China

TYPE
Over-ear, closed-back
headphone

WEIGHT
290g

FEATURES
• 45mm 'True Motion' dynamic driver
• Detachable cords
• Carry bag

DISTRIBUTOR
Audio-Technica

TELEPHONE
0113 2771441

WEBSITE
eu.audio-technica.com

The fillip to this more relaxed style is that it is refined and controlled when the material you are asking it to play is less than perfectly recorded. Bass is deep and well integrated and there is a smoothness to the top end that is not provoked even at very high levels.

Compared with the Sennheiser Momentum or Focals Spirit One S (HFC 391), it is more relaxed and less rhythmically engaging, but it never sounds slow or lacking in control. There is plenty of scale, though, and there's a commendable sense of space and soundstage for a closed-back headphone. This gives performers space to be presented in a commendably real and believable way and the Audio-Technica then imbues them with a realistic tonality and scale. With Seasick Steve's *Sonic Soul Surfer*, Wold's vocals are rich and vivid and the MSR7 manages the neat trick of ensuring they are distinct from the backing instruments, but never removed from them.

The power and scale of the performance is undoubtedly assisted by the sensitivity. Quite what goes into a 'True Motion' driver is slightly unclear, but the MSR7 can be driven to usefully high levels on the end of a mobile device and never sounds coarse or strained when you do turn the wick up. But that's not to say that the headphones don't benefit from being driven well and the ATH-MSR7 works beautifully on the end of a Naim Supernait 2 integrated, too.

Conclusion

This price point is keenly contested and there is no shortage of excellent competition, but this is an extremely well sorted headphone. Audio-Technica has come down firmly on the side of home use over out and about, and the result is a headphone that works superbly for domestic listening with just enough portability to make use on the move feasible. It's a worthy option at the price ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Accurate, refined sound; comfortable and well built


VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Looks a little dull; can interfere with glasses; no hard case

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Extremely accomplished all rounder that should work well in a variety of situations

EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★

OVERALL



A photograph of Tufan Hashemi, the founder of Roksan Audio, standing in a hi-fi listening room. He is smiling and holding a vinyl record with a colorful abstract cover. The room is filled with audio equipment, including large white and black speakers on stands, a turntable on a metal rack, and bookshelves filled with records. The background features a large, textured acoustic panel.

School of ROK

Roksan Audio's Tufan Hashemi talks through his company's illustrious past, present and future. **David Price** gets an education

Music has always been a passion for me", says the softly spoken but charming Tufan Hashemi, reclining behind his desk in Roksan's London headquarters. "It was always a hobby when I was in university, and Roksan really started just as a fun thing for me when I was working in the City". Formed in 1985 with Touraj Moghaddam, the company was started to sell the Xerxes turntable which he says, "Wasn't initially something I wanted to retail, it was something just to use at home".

As it transpired, somebody else wanted to sell it. "Some friends had opened a shop in London, and they had a room at the London hi-fi show. They had a pair of those little Wharfedale Diamond speakers and a Naim Nait amplifier, but no record player. So I lent them this little 'toy' turntable we were playing with, and they had something like 200 records there, and the sound was just amazing. A lot of people came into the room and got interested."

From small acorns

The next step was a phone call from the Sound Organisation's Roger Macer, who asked to come and have a listen to that very turntable. "I said 'yes sure, come around'. So he came over and had a look and I remember he had his eyes shut for about half an hour. I thought, 'The guy has fallen asleep', and then he looked up and said, 'This is the best thing I've ever heard', and, 'can you make them commercially?' I thought I don't mind making a few each week for some extra pocket money, and he said, 'I can take up to 50!'"

Tufan's economics background (he was previously a student at London University)

meant he knew how to form a company, and so in summer 1985, Roksan was born. "We were having a huge amount of fun those days. We used to get together in the evenings and each person brought an album; each person had a different system and we used to go to each other's homes and so on. I hadn't planned to leave the City to run a hi-fi company, but found myself in this little room in Edgware Road. Roger was true to his word and six months later I realised that we couldn't work there anymore and with several people already involved, we moved to the Barbican. We were off!"

The eighties was a fine time for hi-fi. Britain was booming, and British specialist audio

"I think perhaps one thing that set us apart was that we didn't see any boundaries"

companies with it; there was a sense that a lot was possible. Compact Disc was just beginning to surface, but hadn't really been absorbed into high-end audio, and the turntable was king. "It was a boom time, I can't understand why or how anyone could start a company today like that. It was only viable in the eighties and prior to that, because the public were really interested in music, you had the mentality of sitting down to listen to proper music, and I think we've lost that to an extent."

That's not to say competition wasn't tough. There was one company that Tufan remembers was particularly dominant in the high-end market. "I always looked up to Linn, it was the turntable to be admired, it sounded very good,

but Touraj was always saying that the Linn LP12 was not doing things right! I didn't think they were doing anything seriously wrong, but I was always interested in the other company that people looked up to – Rega. My reaction to this strong competition was that, 'okay, every penny I make out of Roksan is going straight back into advertising for people to know the brand'. This happened for the first two years, and finally we made people aware of the company. We were also lucky, because there were some open-minded reviewers."

Sell, sell, sell

It's all very well having a great product, brand awareness and respect for what you're doing, but as many frustrated hi-fi manufacturer will tell you, that all means nothing if you've got nowhere to sell it. "We had a problem that many shops could not take on another record player; if they wanted another turntable then other manufacturers would stop supplying theirs." But in the late eighties there was a shift in the tectonic plates of British hi-fi dealers, and Tufan says this opened up the space for companies such as his. "We were very lucky. It had been a bit of a monopoly, but this change was good for the industry. I always think the reason that we were able to sell anything, and why we survived, is due to courage of Roger Macer of the Sound Organisation. He had the critical mass to be an opinion maker, he had one of the best shops and sold a lot. The fact that he sold Roksan at the time showed other retailers that they could too, so it opened up other opportunities for us."

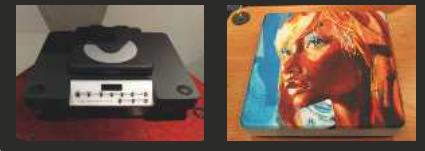
From that point, Tufan's path was clear. He and Touraj set about producing a tonearm and



The Xerxes was Roksan's first product and instantly put the company on the map

30 YEARS OF ROKSAN

- 1985..... Roksan Xerxes turntable
- 1986..... Darius loudspeaker
- 1987..... Artemiz tonearm and Shiraz cartridge
- 1990..... Rok L1 pre, S1 stereo and M1 mono power amplifiers
- 1991..... DP1 CD transport and DA1 DAC (DP3 pictured, below left)
- 1991..... Touraj Moghaddam Signature turntable
- 1995..... Xerxes.X 10th anniversary turntable
- 1998..... Caspian integrated, power amp, CD player, tuner
- 2003..... Radius 5 turntable, Nima tonearm
- 2005..... Xerxes.20 20th anniversary turntable
- 2008..... TMS3 record player
- 2008..... Kandy K2 integrated and CD player
- 2010..... Caspian M2 CD player
- 2013..... Oxygene CD player and integrated amplifier (Special Edition, p66)
- 2015..... K3 integrated and CD player



cartridge for their highly reviewed turntable. “We made a record player that was really fantastic, but I didn’t want to put a Linn tonearm on it. The Roksan sound is tight, it gives you the beat, it gives you the bass, but it’s controlled. I loved the Rega RB300 arm, but it still wasn’t quite there, it was a bit too flappy around the bass and didn’t have kick, so the Artemiz was launched. Then I wanted a cartridge that was affordable, then we had to make a monitor loudspeaker. The principle was that it had to be completely, solidly held into place, and that the high-frequency unit should be completely isolated from the low-frequency one, because they would affect each other. Nobody was doing it at the time. I had to make one box with drive units to listen to what the tonearm and the Shiraz and Xerxes were doing together, to make sure we were getting the right sound, that’s how the Darius came about.

“I think perhaps one thing that might have set us apart was that we didn’t see any boundaries – although we didn’t make

products unless there was a really good reason for it. When CD came along I didn’t want a normal player, I wanted it to look retro, to look ancient, to feel like it had roots. We thought it needed to be completely isolated and contrary to a record player should not be floating, it should be on a fixed chassis. So the brief was to design something that looks like it comes from the forties, with a new way of working.”

Back to the future

This approach defined the original DP1 CD player. “If you are doing something really futuristic, you’ve got to be able to go along some kind of route, so we made the first prototype out of wood. It had to be big and deep, because I wanted its mechanism to have complete isolation from everything else. It took us three years to design it, and it finally came out around 1991. It now looks very ‘mid-century’. I couldn’t make enough, I think that’s when Roksan changed gear, we were selling as many as we could make. I had ambitions for it, and we went in big,

thinking we were going to make hundreds and ended up making thousands. It completely changed Roksan and made us a proper company financially.”

For the music reproduction chain to be complete, Roksan needed an amplifier. “It was probably about five or six years in the making, because I think the first amp we brought out was in the mid-nineties. In a way we took the best components available and improved on them; we didn’t ‘reinvent the wheel’ as we had done with the turntable or CD player, for example. Whereas with Xerxes, Darius, Artemiz, DP1, even Shiraz, it was back-to-basics, but with the Rok series of amplifiers we took current best practice and made it better. We were then able to offer a full system that was true to the sound, something we wanted to hear ourselves – I like the sound to be tight, controlled, clear. I like the drum to be hit and I like it to stop, I like to hear it stop, I like to hear the notes end!”

New era

Roksan’s first decade had been amazing, having grown from nothing to a fully fledged and internationally respected manufacturer. But the next 10 years weren’t quite as linear, and saw the company moving to become a member of Verity Group with all its corporate politics. “This was the public company that held Cyrus, Mission, Wharfedale, Quad, Premier drums, Leak and Roksan. Moving to Verity was amazing because I suddenly had access to about 20 electronic engineers in R&D. What I had always dreamed of was a really fantastic-sounding, compact integrated amplifier with retro styling – and from that the Caspian was conceived. We used some of the best people at Verity to do that. They had one ▶

Roksan’s new K3 CD player and integrated amplifier have proven extremely popular



INSIDER FEATURE ROKSAN AUDIO



Roksan's stunning Oxygene CD player and integrated amp with Darius S1 loudspeakers

big research and development room, with about 30 engineers there, and then it had different manufacturing facilities for different brands and different sales and marketing too. That's probably why Verity was successful in bringing out its transducing technology, everything was centralised and all the different academics were able to have their input."

The downside of working this way was having to fight for R&D resources. "Of course we had to fight the board, but I was lucky because I could push my way a bit more than some others and could concentrate on R&D for Caspian. Roksan was at that time a public company, so we had shareholders to answer to. As directors of the company we felt that this is

"In the eighties you had the mentality of sitting down to listen to music, I think we've lost that"

where the money should be going. It was the only public company that was making hi-fi in the UK and I wanted access to the funds to do the things I wanted to do!"

I put it to Tufan that it must have been rather like joining a rock supergroup of the seventies. "Yeah, everybody wanted to be part of Verity. When I was there, I realised how lucky we were, because so many companies wanted to join us. It became such a fantastic company that the shares jumped up from 5p to £4 in the City in the space of just six to nine months. When Verity R&D managed to make the NXT panels make a sound, shares just started shooting up. Indeed it became so fantastic that Verity Group decided to sell the hi-fi companies and live off the technology licences. They no

longer wanted to get involved in R&D and making things. So we sold off the companies, and Touraj and I bought Roksan back.

"We transferred ourselves from an analogue record player manufacturer to one of the most successful specialist hi-fi electronics companies in the world, thanks to the Verity years. We had been able to use designers who were brilliant in that sector at what they do, we were able to go out to specialist designers, get each person to do the section they know best, and put everything together. We now have a design department to control all these brilliant ideas, to bring them in and create a synergy to give us the product that we want. It's like Andy Warhol's factory in the sixties, in a way! Lots of people come in and do things and create, and I get to oversee it, basically!"

The Roksan way

Tufan points out that you have to be able to finance your company, and have to be sure about the product you want to see at the end. "I can open a cupboard of designs that never came out. The trick is to be 100 percent sure about what you want, then get the best people in the world and ask them to work with you. Half the time it doesn't work so you don't bring the design out, and the other 50 percent of the time you get gems like the Caspian and K3. You don't know whether a product is fantastic or not, until you see it in real life – no matter how much I can imagine it, it doesn't turn out that way always. It's a different way of working to many companies – which have one fixed design department with a couple of people on salary full time, progressing through in a linear way. I think that the future is going to be like this, the Roksan way."

PROTECTING THE LEGACY


This new era of Roksan has been marked by forays into more lifestyle-oriented products with the Oxygene CD player and amplifier, and also the wireless technology being incorporated into several products, but Tufan has not forgotten vinyl. He tells me: "We are making the Xerxes and the Radius; the former now comes in three finishes and the Radius has two. The Xerxes has a brand new power supply, is digitally controlled and 100 percent accurate. We also have a new phono stage coming out, which is completely different to what we had before. The Artemiz is still selling, but we have stopped making the Tabriz for various reasons. There is another tonearm on its way, which sounds brilliant, and the Nima is doing extremely well and can be fitted to almost any turntable."

Indeed, he appears very keen to curate Roksan products, emphasising how the company will go out of its way to service and/or upgrade any old components whenever possible. Roksan owners can send their gear back to the company for servicing, even if there isn't anything apparently wrong. "It isn't a business thing. We need to support our products for a long time, and for me it's a moral issue. Really we are asking our customers to give their loyalty to us by spending a huge amount of money on these products that last a lifetime. So we are making a contract with them today, we are making a commitment to support that product."

Following on from this, Tufan talks about his club for Roksan owners. "They pay a nominal £100 fee every year, and we will regularly update, set up and service the product at no charge, and keep it going. I set this up because I want Roksan products to sound their best wherever they are in the world, and we now have a lot of members. If somebody trusts my taste, they like my music, they like the way my equipment sounds, then I am for sure going to look after them for the rest of the life of their equipment. I don't actually feel ownership of Roksan, I really feel that Roksan would be nothing without all the guys; some of my staff, they've been here forever!"

Great designers, suggests Tufan, come up with one or two great designs in their lives. He thinks by pooling creative and engineering resources, it gives him a much more potent team. "I think we are past the age of one-man bands. There are just too many principles – one designer won't be able to understand everything properly. We're talking about digital technology, wireless technology, electronics, software for audio, software for control, etc. All so different! Now you have to use specialists for everything, so any company now that has five or so designers isn't going to be around in five years – doesn't matter how good they are – unless they start outsourcing."

Touraj Moghaddam left Roksan to pursue a new project several years ago. For a long time he had been a colourful ambassador for the company, so it was strange for some to see him go. Tufan bought his share and says: "He left as he had been 30 years ago, as a friend". Roksan is now a company with 26 or so employees and a long chain of contractors, some of whom work seven days a week, says Tufan. He insists on manufacturing in London, having tried in the past to move factories and always felt the call of the capital city. With a range of interesting new products, topped off by the beautiful Oxygene components, the company is going from strength to strength. Having spoken expansively for two hours, Tufan finally switches from 'transmit' mode to 'receive', and suggests with relish, "come on, let's go for a listen!" ●



“Chord C-Line is up there with the best – and could easily go head-to-head with some rivals costing twice as much.” 5/5

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THIS MONTH



ED SELLEY

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

For the best part of 10 years, Ed was developing and supporting products from some of the biggest names in audio. He enjoys blogging about his favourite tunes, too.



NEVILLE ROBERTS

EXPERTISE: ENGINEER

Retired NHS director, electronics engineer and physicist Neville is very much into valve technology. He's a classical music lover and a serious vinyl junkie.



JASON KENNEDY

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

Former *HFC* editor Jason loves music so much that he has dedicated his life to finding the ultimate system. A long-time vinyl nut, he also enjoys a well-streamed file.



DAVID PRICE

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

DP has spent much longer than he'd care to admit buying and upgrading his own hi-fi system, not to mention reviewing thousands of separates over the years.



CHRIS WARD

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

When Chris isn't advising businesses on strategy, he's trying to squeeze more musical qualities out of exotic combinations of cutting-edge tech and vintage hi-fi classics.

Email us at letters@hifichoice.co.uk **or write to:** *Hi-Fi Choice* Letters, AVTech Media Ltd, Enterprise House, Enterprise Way, Edenbridge, Kent, TN8 6HF **Your letters** may be edited before publication and we cannot enter into personal correspondence



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Germany calling

Hello from Germany! I've had a subscription to *HFC* for two years after being tired of the German hi-fi magazines (*Stereoplay*, *Stereo*, *Audio*, *Image Hifi*). You seem to have a different approach and I very much appreciate your clear criticisms in your tests.

It's not only the brands that differ between *HFC* and German magazines. For example, the gold-plated metal foil links that come with so many speakers with bi-wiring terminals (for example with the PSB Imagine X1T in *HFC* 391) are considered an absolute no-go

in the German media, and I would strongly confirm that.

Perhaps you could give me some advice, since I have been looking for the right speakers for many years. I run all Linn electronics: Akurate Control Mk 1 with a Klimax 500 Twin, LP 12 with an Ekos 2 arm and a Benz Ace MS cartridge, Akurate DS streamer and a Unidisk 1.1 - both upgraded with Dynamik PSU - Linn Silver Interconnects and HMS In Concerto Mk II speaker cables. For the mains I use

Since I have moved home my speakers don't sound so good

all Audioplan PowerCord S/ PowerStar S with a recently purchased HMS Energia RC 3/1 power filter. And not to forget a neat little REL Q200E subwoofer. In my opinion all great equipment, and I consider my needs for upgrades pretty much done for some years.

However, after moving from an old apartment with a 24m² living room with a very high ceiling into our house with a room of almost the same size, but the regular 2.30m high ceiling (brick walls), for seven years I have never been content with the

bass performance, especially in the upper bass. Voices, strings and trebles, and good (warm) recordings in general sound great. But a lot of material sounds lean, and with less good recordings it can get almost painful. Even though according to the Analyzer app on my iPhone with pink noise the frequency levels seem to be fairly even.

I already tried various speakers, and remarkably the ones with potentially the biggest bass performance (Canton RC-L and Canton RC-A) I found not as good as all the small and standmount speakers I tried. Room modes seem to be a problem, which almost erase the bass in the middle of the room. So I also tried moving both speakers and seat position, also an electronic solution with DSpeaker, but all with little improvement. Fairly recently I replaced my Dynaudio Confidence C2 with the smaller C1. And I feel that this is the best result that I have found so far. Still I feel that there could be room for improvement, when I compare it with my old Stax Lambda Signature earspeakers. So, in general, would you agree that the Dynaudio Confidence C1 is a good match for Linn equipment, or would you favor other options? My music taste covers almost all ▶



Jason suggests that ATC's SCM40 holds the answer for Rainer



Linear power supplies – such as this one from MCRU – can make a huge difference

there is from classical, jazz, rock, pop to folk and world. I prefer a monitor-like neutral sound rather than speaker with preferences on certain aspects. Linn speakers did not really overwhelm me, not even as active speakers. I considered buying ME Geithain active monitors, which I found utterly convincing in the showroom, but at a painful price. From what I read in *HFC*, I would also be very curious about

The music has much more detail and voices appear as if by magic

ATC or PMC speakers. But they are not common here.

Rainer Aradei-Odenkirchen

JK: Hi Rainer, it sounds as if you have been working hard to find the right sound. Rooms have a big effect on results as you have discovered and some are harder than others to get right. ATC and PMC make extremely revealing, musically involving and wide-band models and could be a great match with your system and room. You don't mention budget, but I'd try ATC's SCM40 and PMC's twenty.26 which is a bit more expensive.

If they are not happy in your room I'd suggest something a bit warmer sounding, such as a Harbeth Monitor 30.1, which will give a neutral and resolute result but a different balance to the options mentioned above.

➤ **Clean up your act**
I've just seen the letter that was in issue 394 from Roger Hooton. I have a Naim system

comprising a Uniti, which is connected to a UnitiServe via a TP-Link Gigabit switch, using 6m of Audioquest Cinnamon CAT7 cable. My speakers are PMC twenty.21, supported by a BK XLS200 MkII 275W sub bass speaker. I recently bought a linear power supply (from MCRU) to drive the Unitiserve and the improvement in sound has been dramatic. The music has much more detail, instruments, voices and, in some cases, even the background sounds from an orchestra appear as if by magic. Bass is firmer with transients so sharp they can make me jump, even on pieces I know well. Whether it is Pink Floyd or Elgar, across the music spectrum I am listening to a new world of music. Expensive, but worth it. Whether a Netgear NAS would benefit in a similar way by replacing the supplied switch mode supply with a linear one would need to be checked. I'm almost all digital now with a good proportion of my LPs converted to 24-bit/96kHz WAV files using an HRT Linestreamer+. The conversion has been a revelation, with much more detail appearing than when played straight from the record. I'm converting using a Rega P25, fitted with an Ortofon 2M Black cartridge, driving a Graham Slee 'Genera' (kit) preamp powered from batteries. I suspect that a lot of the improvement is a result of the records being recorded in a quiet environment, with no opportunity for feedback from the loudspeakers. I'm

now building a linear power supply for the Gigaswitch – though I can't imagine there will be much improvement, but I'll let you know...

Denis Holliday

NR: Hi Denis, I am a great advocate of linear power supplies and like you have built several and been delighted with the results. The improvement in sound quality when I fitted my linear power supply to a Squeezebox Touch was quite remarkable. Having said that, a well-designed, high-quality switched mode power supply can be very good indeed. The snag is that many of them are simply not up to the mark for audio applications and this was certainly the case with the 'wall-wart' supply provided with the Squeezebox. Given that jitter is one of the greatest enemies of digital audio, anything that reduces power-borne noise, including the use of high-quality mains leads, has got to be a good thing. I would, therefore, be surprised if you don't notice some improvement when you fit a linear PSU to your Gigaswitch.

JK: I too have been using the MCR power supply with a Unitiserve and can only agree with your findings, it's quite shocking what it does. I suspect that putting linear power supplies on all the elements in an audio network would be beneficial and am keen to try one on my switch. This is partly because the devices are getting cleaner power but equally, I suspect, because you are removing a source of noise on the mains when a switching supply is taken out of the loop.

➤ Needle craft

I was interested to see in the November edition that Ed has in some part a parallel set up to mine. When can we expect a review of the superb Avid Pellar? My turntable is the Michell Gyro SE Technoarm, with Ortofon 2M Blue cartridge and Naim 5 speaker cable to Kudos C2 speakers.

Although my vinyl has never sounded better since buying the Pellar, I am tempted to upgrade to a moving coil and am interested in the Ortofon

TWITTER QUERIES



Shane Dorrian

@HiFiChoiceMag In regards to the Devialet where it says

1 analogue input my tonearm has 2 wires so I am assuming it will still plug in okay?



Hi-Fi Choice

@ShaneVinyl yes, it has a pair of RCA sockets which can be set to line level or phono via the configurator



Shane Dorrian

@HiFiChoiceMag Well if its

high quality and saves me having to use another plug that will do me this is still on the 120 right?



Hi-Fi Choice

@ShaneVinyl you can see all the latest spec on the @DEVIALET website for the 120 & other models



Shane Dorrian

@HiFiChoiceMag

@DEVIALET No probs thanks

very much for all your help, I've decided to take the plunge and trade in my Naim for it



Hi-Fi Choice

@ShaneVinyl @DEVIALET

with a #hifi investment on that scale we'd certainly recommend auditioning first if you can



Hi-Fi Choice

@HiFiChoiceMag

Countdown to @RSDUK is over! What's on your shopping list & which stores are you supporting for #RSD15? We're here for turntable advice!



Acton Gate Audio

@ActonGateAudio

Happy Record Store Day from Pro-ject, VinylPlay, Onkyo, Clearaudio & Michell.



Will Griffiths

@WillGriffiths91

My first @RSDUK and it was amazing! Thanks to @JumboRecords for making it great fun. I GOT ONE! @BiffyClyro!



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Chord's Hugo is a good alternative for Ross and is DSD capable

Quintet range either the Blue or Black models, the Bronze as I understand it is rather laid back. My musical interests are mainly jazz, classical rock (eg Dire Straits, Genesis, Fleetwood Mac and Pink Floyd), with some opera and classical.

John Belcher

ES: Hi John, the Avid Pellar was reviewed back in issue 363 and got 5 stars and a Recommended badge. As for the cartridge, I'd endorse the Ortofon as a strong candidate having now spent a bit of time with one, I find it to be almost entirely viceless. The creep in pricing has meant that the Dynavector DV20X2 has risen to £570 and while I prefer this to the Ortofon, the extra money and low output (albeit well within the capabilities of the Pellar) might count against it.

DP: Given that you are a prog rock fan – so obviously appreciate the finer things in life – I suspect you would be happiest with the Audio-Technica AT33PTG/II



Audio-Technica's AT33PTG/II is ideal for prog rock fans

(£450) given your budget. Your turntable and tonearm is an excellent combination, and well able to exploit the brilliance of this cartridge. It's also a country mile better than your existing Ortofon 2M Blue; the Blue is a great MM, but even this is no match for a good MC. The Audio-Technica is more than this in my opinion, it is remarkable at the price. Wonderfully detailed, with a fantastically wide soundstage, it has a delicacy to its treble that is unmatched until you get to the likes of the Lyra Delos at £1,000. The only issue is that it doesn't quite have the thumping, propulsive nature of its AT-OC9 brother (£600), although it is certainly a more beguilingly musical device to listen to.

➤ Sweet streams

I'm writing as I'm an avid reader of your magazine and would like some advice in this constantly developing world of digital streaming. I am considering upgrading my Marantz SA-15S1 SACD player. I use it alongside a Marantz PM-11S2 integrated amplifier, PMC GB1i speakers with Black Rhodium Samba cables. I also use an IsoTek Titan 11 mains conditioner. I am now at a stage where I want to enable my system for streaming from a PC, which I am currently configuring purely for this purpose with a stripped-down Windows 8.1

and J River in order to access hi-res downloads like HD tracks and so on.

My conundrum is as I like the SACD player and Marantz in general, should I simply upgrade my SACD player to the new SA-14S1 and utilise the onboard DAC that also enables DSD? Or should I consider a dedicated DAC like the Primare DAC 30 or just a separate DAC altogether? I have had some experience of Primare and I used to have an A21 amp, which was an impressive piece of kit for the money at the time.

My overall focus is to try to upgrade my overall system performance so that it will enable me to utilise digital download sites via a DAC.

Or am I completely on the wrong track and should I be looking at this from another angle in order to increase my performance and also enable access to hi-res? I would appreciate your advice as I feel that I'm rather lost in a maze of choices.

Ross Lucas, by email

ES: Hi Ross, in your position, I would be checking how many SACD's I had, how often I listened to them and considering a streamer as a more elegant way of handling downloads. The Marantz NA-11 might be the most logical choice – albeit pricier than the SA-14 – as it can stream most things and has the same

HINTS & TIPS

REDUCING INTERFERENCE

There is nothing worse than hearing an intermittent buzzing coming through your audio system, often caused by a nearby mobile phone or a click when your refrigerator cuts in. Sadly, with all the electrical gadgets around, interference is all too prevalent nowadays. Many of these devices are designed to transmit radio waves, such as wireless computer network routers and the aforementioned mobile phones. Sensitive audio equipment, especially phono stages, is very good at picking up this noise.

Obviously, the first way to reduce this is to keep these noisy devices as far away as possible from your audio equipment. Just changing the position or re-routing an interconnect cable can result in a huge improvement. Fitting good-quality interconnects and mains cables will also help keep out external noise.

Mains-borne interference is a common problem and there is a variety of very effective mains filters, suppressors and filtered distribution blocks on the market to suit all pockets. Induced hum can be cured by moving interconnects away from leads and locating phono stages and the like away from power amps that have large mains transformers. Finally, good earthing is vital, not only for safety reasons, but also for ensuring that noise signals are routed away to ground.



SETTING CARTRIDGE TRACKING FORCE

Correct tracking force not only makes sure that your cartridge tracks the record properly, it also ensures that the cantilever suspension is correctly tensioned. Before attempting to accurately set the tracking force, first make sure that your tonearm and cartridge are properly connected and set up, as any changes will affect the tracking force. Also ensure that you have removed any stylus protecting cover as this will affect the weight of the cartridge.

Start by setting both the tracking force adjustment and the bias on the tonearm to zero and then moving the counterbalance weight so that the arm is perfectly horizontal. Now set the tracking force on the tonearm to the correct value according to the manufacturer. The markings on a tonearm are unreliable for accurate setting, so the only way to do this properly is to use a stylus balance. The manufacturer will usually specify a range for the tracking force and you should set the force to a value within that range. Too low will result in poor tracking and will cause harm to your records. Finally, set the bias to match the tracking force.

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Paul Miller, Hi-Fi News, March 2015

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Music in the home

These are a few of our favourite things – favourite because they give so much musical enjoyment

NEW
Vertex HiRez
Balanced Taga
distribution block
– prepare to be shocked!

When equipment sounds wonderful, is well-built and gives great musical pleasure – then it becomes a favourite. We reckon we are lucky to have a high number of ‘favourites’ in our stable.

The **Aurender W20** streamer is a masterpiece of user-friendliness, the streamer for people unsure about streaming! It is easily loaded with most file types from almost any digital source – high resolution downloads (eg 24/96 and 24/192ks/s), CDs, USB stick and external hard drive – controlled from Aurender’s own user interface running on an iPad.



The display shows current track information. Full details of music stored on the hard drives appear on the iPad with album cover art.

Music is stored on two 3TB hard drives but queued and played from a 240GB flash drive to minimise electrical noise. For further mains isolation, free of glare and haze, power for the audio circuits is drawn from re-chargeable batteries.

Operation is smooth and faultless and sound is gloriously natural and full-bodied, floating behind ‘invisible’ speakers, from performers clearly ‘present’ in your room.

Vertex AQ’s new HiRez Balanced Taga distribution block takes their vibration and RFI absorption technology to new levels, comprehensively beating other well-known blocks in straight A/B comparisons. **Everybody** needs to clean their mains to unleash their system potential, whatever the main components, however grand.



This top-level Taga supplies balanced ultra-clean power to four source components and highly filtered mains for two power amplifiers. Unlike many competitors the Vertex blocks do not limit power to amplifiers as their filtration is not in the supply line.

Spiral Groove turntables **SG1.1** and **SG2** and the **Centroid** arm have earned universal praise for their spectacular near-silent operation, retrieving information from an inky-black background, thanks to a fundamental re-think of ‘Balanced Force Design’ and fanatical care in controlling energy.



Solid construction ensures that stylus, arm pivot, platter bearing and motor remain in an absolutely fixed relationship, unlike suspended turntables that are perpetually in motion as they attempt to correct for the dynamic forces acting both internally and externally.

Spiral Groove have won several ‘Product of the Year’ awards and comments such as ‘..this may be the best tonearm I’ve heard’ and of the SG2 ‘..it transcends expectations – it’s something special’ both from the US magazine *Stereophile*.

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Praise has been heaped on the Chiara, in the on-line review site *The Audio Beat* and in the September 2013 issue of *hifi+* where Paul Messenger wrote, ‘*The bottom line is that this is one of the finest loudspeakers I’ve ever had the pleasure of reviewing.*’

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Digital: Aurender, Bel Canto, dCS, Vertex AQ dac. **Vinyl:** ClearAudio, Graham, Spiral Groove, Transfiguration.

Tuners: Magnum Dynalab. **Amplifiers:** Aesthetix, Bel Canto, CAT, GamuT, Sonneteer, Storm Audio, VTL.

Loudspeakers: Avalon, Kaiser Acoustics, NEAT, Totem. **Cables:** Chord Co., DNM, Nordost, Siltech, Tellurium, VertexAQ. **Mains:** Aletheia, Vertex AQ.

Supports: Arcici, Black Ravioli, Hi-Fi Racks, LeadingEdge, Stands Unique, Vertex AQ. **Room acoustics:** LeadingEdge

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DSD DAC handling as the SA-14. If this is a little on the pricey side for you, however, there are some impressive options at slightly lower price points. Equally. If you are after a SACD/DAC hybrid, don't rule out Yamaha's excellent CD-S2100 which is a seriously capable bit of kit.

JK: If you want to stream DSD the SA-14S1 is an interesting proposition, whether it would perform as well as a good standalone DAC is hard to say, but usually the latter have the upper hand. The other question should be why stream DSD? If you have a good SACD player the chances are you will be able to get better results by playing the discs. There is very little mainstream material available to buy in the .DSF or .DFF DSD formats and it's often difficult to discern the provenance of the files that are available, not many large record companies have released material in these formats. However there are a number of very good DACs that

Which is best the Denon AVR 3806 or a new Sony STR-DN1030?

are DSD compatible such as the Antelope Platinum DSD, Ayre QB9 DSD and the Chord Hugo portable and I would recommend auditioning any or all of these in comparison with regular PCM DACs like the Metrum Acoustics Octave Mk2 to establish whether the flavour of the digital month is worth the asking price.

Centre piece

Dear friends, congratulations for the great articles you have published over 30 years. I have been fond of your reviews since 1984, when I bought my first mag in Rio. And now I need your advice.

I have two receivers: Denon AVR 3806 (brought in 2006) and Sony STR-DN1030 (I was given two weeks ago), both for music and video, but now I have to choose one of them to be the 'centre' of my room. Of course, I can't play two receivers at the same time. If you had this difficult choice to make, which one would you put in your room?

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My system consists of Dynaudio Contour 1.8 MKII (front), Dynaudio Contour 2.3 (center), Dynaudio Audience 8 (rear), Marantz CD6004 (CD player), Sony MDS-JB920 (MD player), Chord Carnival and Ocos speaker cables, van den Hul interconnects and Kimber D-60 coaxial digital cable.

Best regards from Brazil, where you have a lot of fans and followers.

Rusel Barroso

ES: Hi Rusel, this would depend on whether you absolutely need any of the functions of the Sony, but I suspect that in any audio sense of the word the older Denon will monster it, particularly with the speakers that you have.

DP: Like Ed, I would expect the Denon to sound slightly superior to the Sony, but frankly I don't think there is a lot in it and you might find the much newer Sony has better functionality that is more relevant to today's audio and video formats. Indeed, this would probably be my choice, and I would sell the Denon and reinvest the (admittedly small) funds back into the system. For example, you might want to try an IsoTek EVO3 Premier mains cable (£100 in the UK) and this would push the Sony's sound to an altogether smoother, sweeter place. I would also be tempted to buy a set of FoculPods (£20 approx), which are Sorbothane isolating feet and again bring a substantial improvement to the sound. On top of this, make sure all your contacts are nice and clean, using the excellent Kontak cleaning solution which is £15 or so here in Britain. Good luck!

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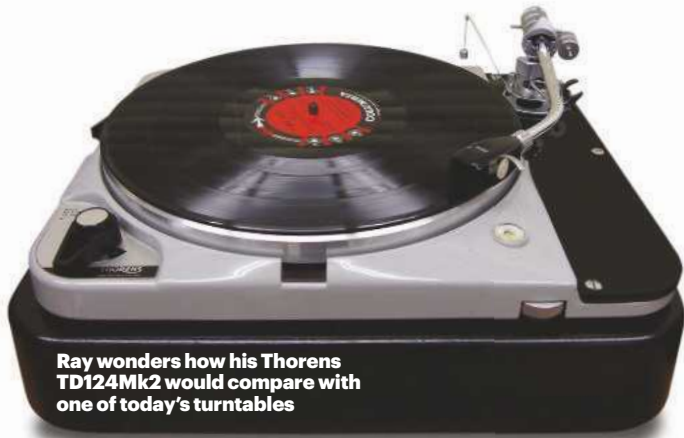
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Ray wonders how his Thorens TD124Mk2 would compare with one of today's turntables

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Step back in time

This letter is motivated by a desire to visit

high-end classic systems of the seventies and then to make comparisons with today's exotica.

I'm sure such a feature would appeal not just to older readers, but also tickle the inquisitive nature of current audiophiles.

In the mid-seventies, my best ever system comprised: Quad 33/303, Thorens TD124Mk2/SME3009S2/Shure V15Mk3 and IMF TLS50 Export Monitors. I think it cost about £400. My middle-class salary at the time was £4,000/anum, so we can say 10% is pretty accurate. Today, we could compare this with a salary of £40,000/anum and the challenge would be to see what £4,000 can buy and how it compares.

The challenge, however, will be to find the original components. What do you think of the idea?

Ray Ganderton

DP: It's a great idea, Ray. When I am off duty I frequently make such comparisons; much of my own system is comprised of retro kit from the seventies and eighties. It's a fascinating comparison and I think it's fair to say that modern hi-fi is far more capable in absolute terms than classic kit, but can all too often be rather less charming and/or fun to listen to. This invites the

question, should we go for accuracy or enjoyment – because all too often they are not one and the same thing. Some absolutely top-notch modern systems can do both, but not that many. Seventies systems such as the one you mention (which I have heard and/or owned in full or in part over the years), sound bigger, fatter, fuller, more sumptuous, sweeter and generally more gutsy – but are also opaque, confused, muddled, veiled, floaty and vague. As ever, it's a case of you pays your money and you takes your choice!

Brothers in arms
Hi, I own a Gyrodec with Technoarm and would like to upgrade the arm. I had my mind set on a SME V, but would like to know if there are any more affordable choices that are just as good.
Kerem Zorlu

NR: Greetings Kerem. The SME is certainly a great arm, but I don't know whether it would be the perfect match for your Gyrodec. Have you considered the Jelco 750 silicone-damped unipivot? Or, better still, the ISOkinetik

Neville suggests the ISOkinetik Silver Melody 750 for Kerem's Gyrodec

Silver Melody 750 with silver internal wiring and the hybrid magnesium and rosewood headshell upgrade, which really sounds fantastic? A more traditional arm and one that I know works brilliantly on a Gyrodec is the Encounter or Illustrious from Origin Live.

ES: Rather predictably, I would suggest the SME IV, but also recommend the Audio Note Arm III as one of the happiest partners I've seen for the Gyrodec in many years. It's beautifully made, easy to fit and sounds exceptional.

JK: It is pretty much impossible to buy better quality for the price of the SME IV. But it's quite a high price and there is at least one alternative that could give you a serious upgrade, that is the Rega

Can you advise me on which tonearm to get for my Gyrodec?

RB2000. The Technoarm is essentially a modified RB250 with Michell's own counterweight among other upgrades. The RB2000 is the finest arm Rega makes and has the phenomenally high tolerance bearings. It will have the same basic character as your Technoarm, but is much more resolute, dynamic and fast. I have one on an RP10 and have to say that the combination is a genuine giant slayer.

DP: Like the others, I'd suggest the SME Series IV! Having used both on my Gyrodec, I can

confirm that the SME IV is about 95% as good as the Series V, and is considerably cheaper. It is also a lovely visual match for the deck, looking like it was designed especially for it. You'll find the SME V brings a massive improvement in sound compared to the Technoarm, with a vastly more powerful and extended bass, far tighter and stronger sound staging and a treble that is like an open-reel mastertape. The SME IV is a fraction lighter and brighter sounding, but it's marginal and is way less than some say. There are arms that are more exciting than the SMEs, such as the Audio Origami PU7, and these give a more animated sound and a greater sense of rhythmic flow. But still I keep coming back to the mastertape-like thoroughness and detail that the SME arms provide, and of course the superlative build quality. They are also totally serviceable and amazingly good when it comes to aligning cartridges. Yes, as you can see, I'm a fan!

CW: The SME V is a thing of beauty, but many believe they can get close to this performance for a fraction of the cost by taking the much loved Rega RB300 and breathing some extra magic on it. To this end, both Johnnie 7 at Audio Origami and Mark Baker at Origin Live (at either end of the UK) are masters of the art, but with quite different approaches around rewiring and structural modifications. It is important to be clear about the musical virtues that you'd like to achieve as some upgrades will be better suited.



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Pick of the pops

While the introduction of a vinyl album chart is a milestone for the format, **Lee Dunkley** wonders if a music chart is even relevant any more and if so, who's listening?

Like many readers, I dare say, my early fascination with music first came from listening to the countdown of the best-selling singles in the Top 40 chart, compiled by Gallup in my time – having replaced the British Market Research Bureau as the body that collected the sales figures – and broadcast by BBC Radio 1 every week. Listening to the chart was a routine that I stuck to religiously throughout my early to mid-teens; sat beside my Sanyo radio cassette player poised to hit the record button the instant the presenter stopped talking over the song intro so that I could capture it for myself and endlessly play it back in the days that followed.

Listening to the charts was a rite of passage for any self-respecting young teenager in the late seventies and early eighties, eager to hear about the bands climbing up or down the rankings, and pretty much the only way to keep up with the music trends of the day. Unlike many, I favoured the Tuesday lunchtime chart countdown that announced the very latest positions, quite literally hot off the press – they arrived with the BBC just the day before – and not the Sunday evening countdown that most music fans are likely to remember with misty-eyed nostalgia.

Up until 1987, Tuesday was the day when the chart for the week ahead was announced with the new positions, based on the previous week's sales to the end of trading on the Saturday before. The Sunday evening show is the one that we all remember listening to in the back of the car on journeys home after visiting relatives or friends, or while eating a Sunday tea of bangers and Smash or Alphabetti Spaghetti. But it was Tuesday's official chart announcement that the BBC's *Top of the Pops* show was based on and consequently broadcast on the following Thursday evening, giving the programme makers little time to pull in the big-name artists that were climbing the charts that week.

Whatever show you favoured, listening to the chart was the highlight of the week for any young music fan of my era – and with it being pre-internet it was pretty much the only way to keep track of what was happening to your favourite bands and the top tunes of the time.

Today, the way the charts are compiled is very different and open to so many varied influences that you could argue that they have lost their cultural significance for music fans. But in April we received news about the

launch of a new vinyl weekly chart compiled by the Official Charts Company. While the first vinyl album chart following rising sales of the format is very gratifying for fans and a milestone for its supporters, is it really that relevant and are we even influenced by a record's position in the top 40 any more?

While there's undoubtedly an upturn in the number of artists bringing out albums on vinyl, not every new release is available on the format, or easily accessible to potential purchasers. What's more, the way the chart data is being collected by the Official Charts Company appears to be focussing on mainstream acts and seems to have been set up simply to support the larger labels. Smaller indies like the ones that kept vinyl alive during the years when it wasn't quite so fashionable aren't even being counted.

The data is collated by record shops sending sales figures directly to the Official Charts Company, with any store able to take part. But this means investment in a system and a financial outlay that many smaller record sellers simply aren't prepared to make. After a busy (or otherwise) day, the last thing many smaller establishments will want to have to do is send in their sales figures. Revival or not, the chart isn't going to be seen as a priority by these independents who are so often the ones responsible for shifting the black stuff anyway.

Barcode fiasco

For sales of any record to have a chance of counting towards the chart, there needs to be a barcode to scan on the sleeve, and many niche independent labels often can't afford to include one. The absence of a barcode may even be an aesthetic creative choice by some artists, and if their records are being sold successfully through the stores that aren't supplying sales info to the chart, then there's no incentive to include one anyway.

Already we're seeing a skewed vinyl chart biased towards the rock-focused larger retailers with the right kind of system infrastructure, and it looks to be tailored to benefit bigger mainstream artists and labels. With a number of acts shunning shops altogether and distributing their records direct to their fans online, the vinyl chart is already looking unrepresentative and behind the times ●



Kitty, Daisy and Lewis' album *The Third* is a new release that doesn't have a barcode

Smaller record labels that kept vinyl alive aren't even being counted



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AC/HFP/86

DAT's the way I like it!

A chance discovery of a cache of DAT tapes brings back some happy memories for **David Price** as he rekindles his love of the long-forgotten digital format

Remember Digital Audio Tape? I loved it, because it was my first taste of how digital audio could sound beyond what was offered by Compact Disc. In today's world of 32-bit/384kHz DACs, its 16-bit/48kHz digital vital statistics don't sound so impressive, but in 1987 many were in awe. Indeed, they were right because it soon became the new standard for digital mastering – many early nineties albums were mastered on what was regarded as the peak of digital sophistication.

The idea of being able to own a digital tape recorder that was the same as that used to master music had great appeal to me personally, so just before I moved to Japan in the early nineties, I elected to record some of my (then) 3,000-strong LP collection onto a friend's DAT machine and take it with me. The idea was that I'd rent an apartment in central Tokyo, buy a DAT player, amplifier and speakers and 'play my records' via DAT through my new system. I duly made dozens of recordings from my Linn LP12/Ittok/Supex SD900 on to 120-minute DAT tapes, and flew to Narita airport with them in my hand luggage.

When I got there, my weapon of choice became the new Sony TCD-D3 portable, the world's first 'DAT Walkman'? It was a lovely thing, as all first-generation Sony products are. I soon found myself commuting across Tokyo on the New

Sonically it sounds very good, unlike my music taste of 25 years ago

Keio Line, from Sasazuka to Shinjuku where I worked, listening to my LP copy of Kate Bush's *Never For Ever* in pristine digitally recorded sound. In the evenings, after an Asahi Super Dry or three with friends, I would return to my swanky bachelor pad (barely larger than the broom cupboard in my current house, incidentally) and fire up the hi-fi, with the DATman keeping the joint jumping.

It was wonderful while it lasted. DAT tapes cost pennies in Japan, and nearby was a CD library; I'd go there, rent out a disc for 100 yen (40p, back then) and do a direct digital copy of it on my DAT. My music collection swelled, and I revelled in the new era of digital recording. My enjoyment was momentarily interrupted when Tokyo experienced one of its largest earthquakes for nearly a century; I kept my DATs on a shelf over my bed, and they all came careering off. It's an odd feeling, waking up at 3.30 in the morning to find the building swaying violently and hundreds of tapes crashing down on your head – but I've had worse!

My TCD-D3 failed me once during this period, so I duly took it back to the supplying dealer for repair. Despite it

being just outside the guarantee period, the Sony service engineer looked mortified that it had chewed up my tape, and gave me one of those extra low honorific bows that you normally see from Japanese

bosses apologising for bankrupting their companies. The shop phoned me the next day to say that the machine was ready, and had been stripped, cleaned, serviced and rebuilt free of charge. None of that: "It will be ready next week, mate", oh no! It came with a free DAT tape and a letter of apology from a senior Sony sort; it was almost as if they thought the entire Japanese nation had been disgraced!

Time moved on, and so did I. Since I returned to Blighty in 1998, I barely ever fired up my Sony again. But recently I came across my cache of old DAT tapes, and couldn't resist a trip down memory lane. There was my musical life, frozen in time a quarter of a century or so ago, in 16-bit resolution. The TCD-D3 whirred, hummed then noisily powered itself down, refusing to play any tapes. More than a little crestfallen, I decided to find a DAT service centre in the UK – which is not as easy as you might think in 2015.

All's well DAT ends well

After a bit of searching around, I came up with Paul Carrington (paulcarrington.co.uk/repairs/). I had expected the fix to cost a bomb – if indeed it was fixable at all – but he quoted me £49.99 plus £5 postage, which I thought more than reasonable. Paul also offered to rebuild my old rechargeable battery while he was at it; this is specific to the D3 so cannot easily be replaced, and mine had long since died. This was done for an additional £50 and so it now has the latest NiMh cells instead of the original NiCads inside, giving 150mAh extra juice with a correspondingly longer playing time.

So now I am fully wired for retro digital sound, ploughing through my old tapes on a perfectly fettled Sony DAT portable. Sonically, they still sound very good indeed – unlike my music taste of 25 years ago, which isn't quite the same as it is now. That's one thing that not even Paul – with his soldering iron and expert knowledge – can fix! ●



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Paul Rigby, theaudiophileman.com

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Devil's in the detail

When **David Vivian** set out to buy his first hi-fi and couldn't afford loudspeakers, a pair of Koss Red Devils introduced him to a new thrilling world of bedroom listening...

I guess we all remember with rose-tinted affection the components we dared to call our first 'hi-fi system'. If we started early – I was in my mid-teens and funded the purchases by stacking shelves at Dartford's Co-op in my summer hols – it was likely that our choices would be guided by impecuniosity rather than naked desire but that, with a little help from a sympathetic hi-fi shop, a lifelong love affair with music and its reproduction could be ignited.

My journey began in a small establishment at the bottom of West Hill called Woods & Porter. It sold cameras on the ground floor and hi-fi from a larger room upstairs. I've just checked on the internet and it still seems to be there, it's now reduced to repairing photographic kit and taking passport photos – the once magical hi-fi floor, I suspect, having been given over to storage many decades ago.

But I'm glad the photo of the place shows the first floor window overlooking the street because, behind it, took place an event that changed my life. I'd come to Woods & Porter a disappointed and disillusioned young man. For my birthday I'd been given something called a Pye Black Box, a sleek looking all-in-one music centre with a black Perspex lid that purported to be 'hi-fi'. I didn't know what hi-fi sounded like at the time but, without wishing to appear ungrateful, I was pretty sure it had nothing to do with the muffled, distorted noise issuing from the built-in

I could live in my own private musical universe forevermore

elliptical speakers of the Black Box. Claiming it was faulty (it couldn't make sense of ELP's *Brain Salad Surgery* so, in my book, it was) I got my birthday money back, added it to the modest accumulated contents of my brown envelopes from the Co-op and set off in search of a serious stereo.

I don't remember the name of the thin man that led me up the stairs to see if it was possible to achieve an understanding between my laughably slim budget and a hi-fi system, but his 'quality first' approach did produce a neat solution. He was blunt: I couldn't, at this time, afford a pair of loudspeakers, at least not a pair that would do justice to the BSR McDonald MP60 turntable, Goldring G800 pick-up cartridge and Trio KA200A amplifier he suggested. My heart sank, but he merely smiled and left the room. He returned with a small box containing a pair of Koss Red Devil headphones. They were red. Wow. What's more, as the Trio amp had a headphone jack on its gleaming front panel, I could just plug them in and was good to go, no need for loudspeakers. Double wow.



A pair of Koss Red Devils like these turned David into the hi-fi fan we know today

I'd never heard anything like it. The stereo, the soundscape, the detail and, yes, the bass. How was it possible? It was big, it played tunes. I was beyond thrilled and spent the next three months in my bedroom listening to *Brain Salad Surgery*, *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* and *Tubular Bells*. I even began to wonder if headphones were all I needed. With things sounding this good, I could live in my own private musical universe forevermore. It was also about this time that the chance for another stretch of shelf stacking proved too tempting to turn down.

Back for more

Several brown envelopes later I was back at Woods & Porter and handed over the cash for a pair of Richard Allan Pavane speakers. I never listened to the Red Devils again. It wasn't because the speakers sounded better. In hi-fi terms, the headphones ran rings around those bulky boxes. What I hadn't appreciated was how much more enjoyable and relaxing it was to have the sound spread out in front of me in a rough approximation of real life than dancing between my ears. Suddenly, I found myself listening to more music and invited my friends round to share the experience instead of sitting in my room alone. My hi-fi road map was determined from that moment on and I now only ever listen to headphones professionally or on a plane journey, very seldom purely for pleasure.

Today, a £300 pair of cans, with the help of a good headphone amp/DAC, can take you places sonically even the most expensive high-end speakers struggle to reach. It would be great to think that this remarkable fact is the driving force behind burgeoning headphone sales to kids the same age as me when I bought those Red Devils instead of being just another manifestation of an increasingly insular, gadget-centric society. Alas, all I hear is the bass-bloated Beats of a different drum ●



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Blast from the past

As the vinyl resurgence continues unabated, **Ed Selley** notes an unlikely return from yesteryear that captures the excitement of receiving a mystery package in the post

Progress can be an entirely merciless thing, and when a technology or concept becomes outmoded there is seldom any return for it or the associated trends that went with it. It is possible that in possessing the potential to sound truly excellent, vinyl is not strictly bucking this trend, but the current popularity of analogue has meant that a blast from the past is making an unlikely return – the album club.

In a world of streaming services and online stores offering overnight shipping, the idea of a subscription service that routinely mails one or more albums once a month seems wilfully archaic. By the time that CD was well established, they were rare beasts indeed and while there have been honourable exceptions to this, as a commercial venture, the album club looked to have been consigned to the history books a long time ago.

Not only does the album club appear to be staging a return, but it seems to be doing so from multiple organisations. In an age of instant media gratification, why are people signing up to enforced choices that are delivered by snail mail?

Speaking to Tyler Barstow of US-based Vinyl Me Please and Craig Evans of the UK's start up Flying Vinyl, there is some common ground in the motivation for starting up their respective concerns. Both are in their late twenties

Content is often exclusive and in some cases in very limited quantities

and feel a disenchantment with the current situation where music is a commodity, rarely paid for and never 'owned.' Their intention is to create something tangible in a society that consumes rather than listens to music.

Both believe that the physicality of vinyl is the key to achieving this. One defining aspect of both companies and indeed their surprising number of peers is the attention to detail that goes into the selection and creation of the chosen material. Beyond the music, substantial effort is made to secure high-quality sleeve art, printed on the best card stock available with extensive release notes and in the case of Vinyl Me Please, a cocktail recipe to best suit the listening experience. Flying Vinyl will be concentrating on the 7in single as its format of choice with Evans arguing there is no more focussed way of listening to music.

The business of securing content sees both companies putting in significant legwork in terms of negotiation and logistics. The interest from labels in supplying their content has also risen significantly in the last year or so, but there are still some significant hiccups in managing the



Flying Vinyl delivers a bundle of 7in singles every month

chaotic nature of pressing vinyl nowadays. It does seem to be working, and while the membership numbers have started from a low base – the first Vinyl Me Please release went out to 14 people – they are climbing all the time.

One reason why the clubs seem to be gaining traction is that the content is frequently exclusive to them and in some cases available in strictly limited quantities. I'm not above admitting that having something that other people don't is weirdly satisfying and many of these releases are one-time-only deals – some clubs offer previous releases for sale, but others do no such thing. As such, there is the same enthusiasm crossed with a slight frenzy that sees lengthy queues on Record Store Day only with the knowledge that your copy is going to turn up with no unnecessary effort on your part.

Share and share alike

For me, the final piece in the puzzle is that although you are compelled to wait for the record to arrive, the means of sharing your thoughts and communicating with others about the experience is instant. In the days after a record is released, an album club's Twitter feed is awash with members discussing their experiences. Social media has made the club part of the experience an immediate and tangible thing to match the business of owning the record. The camaraderie and collective belief that they are experiencing music in a different way is readily apparent.

This bolsters the argument that the vinyl resurgence is in part a cultural and fashion driving movement as much as a sonic one, but I'd point out that the costs of these clubs – while similar to organisations in other sectors like books, coffee or beer – is sufficient that members have to be genuinely interested in the product to take the plunge. With membership on the rise and new companies entering the fray, it looks like another extinction has been averted ●



ED SELLEY
Club promoter

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Happy days are here again

There's nothing wrong with spreading a little bit of happiness around the world, but wonders **Nigel Williamson** is this really the sort of job the UN should be doing?

It would be churlish to want to deny the world its United Nations-sanctioned International Day of Happiness last month. Indeed, it seems rather mean that we are only allowed one a year, but did we really need Ban Ki-Moon using the occasion to launch the UN's official "world's happiest playlist"? The UN secretary general revealed that he is "never happier" than when he is listening to Stevie Wonder's *Signed Sealed Delivered*. To compile the rest of the UN's happy toons list he enlisted a bunch of celebrities to nominate their favourite songs from the sunlit uplands – and a miserably predictable bunch of platitudinous standards they came up with, too, by the likes of the Spice Girls, Kylie Minogue, Destiny's Child, Michael Jackson and Justin Timberlake.

What was perhaps most dispiriting was that on what was supposed to be an 'international' list, Anglo-American pop virtually wiped out the rest of the globe. In three dozen pieces of music, the entire continent of Africa was represented by just one song (Miriam Makeba's wonderful 1967 hit *Pata Pata*) and Asia by a solitary Bollywood anthem (A. R. Rahman's *Infinite Love* – sung in English, natch). The Latin world – responsible for some of the most joyous dance music on the planet – was not represented at all. You might have expected an organisation that calls

Singing along to *I Feel Good* is not going to reduce the conflict in the world

itself the United Nations to at least pay lip service to cultural diversity by including, say, the Gipsy Kings' *Bamboleo*, some

Arabic pop, a little salsa, possibly a calypso?

As if the tokenism and First World imperialism weren't bad enough, the excruciating triteness of the exercise was epitomised by Pharrell Williams – writer and singer of the ubiquitous 2014 hit *Happy*, which ironically didn't make the cut – when, at a ceremony at the Empire State Building to launch the playlist, fatuously enthused: "We believe that happiness can change the world." No kidding, Einstein; but that's also what they claimed in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* as they dished out the soma.

Even Ban Ki-Moon – no doubt with Stevie Wonder playing in his head – appeared to get carried away with the euphoria of the occasion. "We are using the universal language of music to show solidarity with the millions of people around the world suffering from poverty, human rights abuses, humanitarian crises and the effects of environmental degradation and climate change," he gushed. Well sure, Ban, that's great. But how?

Of course, there's nothing wrong with good old escapism and leaving our cares behind for a few moments; but singing along to James Brown's *I Feel Good* or *We Are Young* by Fun is not going to reduce the sum of conflict in the world and it is daft to pretend that it will, however much the UN employs Fatboy Slim to tell us: "We can solve most injustices if we unite behind a backbeat."

Now I'm acutely aware that I'm beginning to sound like an old grouch here, so let me say that I enjoy a happy, upbeat, hedonistic song as much as the next miserable cove (my own personal nominations for the playlist might have included Nina Simone's *Feeling Good*, Van Morrison's *Brown Eyed Girl* and K'naan's *Waving Flag*). But I can't help feeling the UN ought to have better things to do than feeding music to the masses as an opiate to enable us to forget the world's problems.

Yet perhaps my real objection was how narrowly the parameters of what constitutes music that makes us feel happy were drawn. Personally the music that makes me 'happiest' tends not to be euphoric, forget-about-tomorrow party anthems, but music that uplifts our souls in a more subtle and profound way; yet on the UN list only Yo-Yo Ma's nomination of the prelude from Bach's *Cello Suite No. 1* reflected this deeper, more nuanced capacity.

When I need to forget my troubles, I don't leap up and down to Michael Jackson or Kylie Minogue. I turn to Miles Davis's *Kind Of Blue*, Mozart's *Requiem* or the thoughtful, introspective songs of Joni Mitchell, Carole King, James Taylor and even Leonard Cohen, all of which in their contrasting ways are life enhancing and capable of transporting me to a better place.

Perhaps the paradoxical truth is that nothing quite has the capacity to make us feel good like a classic, tear-jerking song of loss, longing and heart break. I'd defy anybody to listen to The Righteous Brothers' *You've Lost That Loving Feeling*, Marvin Gaye's *I Heard It Through The Grapevine*, Whitney Houston's *I Will Always Love You* or Adele's *Rolling In The Deep* and not to feel instantly better. Happiness, it seems, is in the ear as well as the eye of the beholder ●



Could Stevie hold the answer to world peace? Ban Ki-Moon thinks so



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Like clockwork

Despite its modest performance, there's no denying the appeal of Garrard's hardy and ubiquitous SP25 turntable, says **David Price**

Barely a moment went by in the seventies when someone, somewhere, did not play a vinyl record on a Garrard SP25 turntable. As popular as a Mini 850, it fulfilled the same role in society, being classless fun, cheap to buy and run and child's play to use. You didn't buy a Garrard SP25 for what it was, but for what it did – play records reliably, while serving up an enjoyably musical sound.

Like the aforementioned car, it was of questionable build quality in some respects, but was always better than the cheapest products of its type on the market. When it did go wrong, it was easily fixable; there was nothing new fangled or overly 'electronic' lurking within. The SP25 series gave music to the masses, and fuelled the British music boom for over a decade from the mid-sixties onwards.

It was as if Garrard had been destined to do this. By the time this deck came out, it had been a turntable specialist for nearly 50 years; it was a great and estimable company in 1967 when the SP25 mk1 hit the shops. Although audiophiles today only remember two Garrard products – the 301 and the 401 (its best by a country mile) – the company made a vast range of record players. They could be supplied as a chassis, or in a teak plinth with a dustcover. Enterprising hobbyists, and that was most people with an interest in hi-fi back then, would opt for the cheaper chassis and contrive some sort of wooden box to save a pound or two.

The provenance goes way back to 1721, when Garrard and Company was appointed Crown Jewellers of London, whereupon it was tasked to take care of the British crown jewels

and royal crown. Because of its reputation for craftsmanship, the company found itself making precision rangefinders for the British army at the start of World War 1 and the end of the war saw the start of production of lathes and tools, and then spring-wound motors for the (then) new-fangled gramophones.

From this point, the marque never looked back. The premises were switched from London to Swindon, because of a surfeit of skilled engineering apprentices from the Great Western Railway Company, and the motor was refined. Some say its 'Super' Gramophone motor was one of the best spring motors ever made. In 1928, electrical motors began to be developed, and by 1930 the company had its first record player. The 201 was Garrard's debut premium turntable and used a bespoke direct

Spanning the centuries: a brief history of Garrard

1721	1930	1967	1975
<p>Garrard and Company are appointed Crown Jeweller of London while JS Bach releases his Brandenburg Concertos</p> 	<p>The company produces its first turntable, the 201. Meanwhile, Mr and Mrs Rollins 'produce' their son, Sonny</p> 	<p>Garrard unveils the SP25 mk1 as Procol Harum rule the pop charts with A Whiter Shade of Pale</p> 	<p>The fifth generation of the SP25 is the last gasp for the turntable and the Bay City Rollers bid it a fond farewell with their hit Bye Bye Baby</p> 

drive motor; it found a home at the BBC and other professional installations. Just like the SP25 that followed over 35 years later, it had four speeds; 16, 33.3, 45 and 78rpm.

The SP25 can trace its lineage back to the first Garrard record changer, the RC1 of 1932; by 1938 the RC100 could play both sides of either a 10 or 12in disc. After the end of the Second World War in 1945, the connection with the jewellery division was lost, and Garrard pushed ever harder into turntables – with the 301 surfacing in 1954 and laying claim to the mantle of best turntable in the world. At the more affordable end of the market, the Autoslim series began in 1959. This was after a major fire, which forced the company to borrow factory space from nearby Plessey Company Ltd. Garrard became part of the Plessey Group soon after, and this was really the beginning of the ‘modern’ age, as we know it, for the company.

1964 saw the first high-end record changer (the Lab 80), and three years later the affordable SP25 version followed. It was a prolific time for the

Some say its ‘Super’ Gramophone motor was one of the best spring motors ever

company, for it had just introduced another seminal deck, the 401 in 1965. Like the 401, the first SP25 was idler drive, and a pretty robust system it was. Sadly a little too much of the 16W motor’s torque was transmitted into the LP record itself via the mazak platter topped by a thin rubber mat with metal trim ring, making it sound agricultural by modern standards, but it was a solid machine that could withstand serious abuse.

Compared to the turntables that came along a decade or so later, the SP25 was a crude thing in some respects, but it rather endeared itself to the British buying public. It was the first rung on the hi-fi ladder; although humble it was not seen as a toy. It sported what was regarded as essential at the time for a product of its type – semi-automatic operation.

Despite having automatic stop – which invariably sullies the sound of a tonearm – Garrard did attempt to do a decent pick-up on the SP25. Its straight-pipe, aluminium tubed tonearm was better than many price rivals of the day, and was adjustable for both tracking weight and bias. The

company had obviously thought about its design because it even had an underslung counterweight, an idea that resurfaced on the SME Series V two decades later! The arm’s friction was such that it wasn’t particularly happy tracking at less than around 2.5g, which precluded it from the generation of high-compliance moving magnets, which were to arrive a few years later.

The deck was refined over the years, but in truth, all the SP25s from the first to the fourth (which surfaced in 1974) were largely the same. The mk1 and mk2 were semi-automatic designs, whereas from the mk3 fully automatic operation was standardised. There were various minor stylistic changes too, and the tonearm received some revisions; the first two incarnations of the SP25 had detachable headshells whereas after this Garrard used a fixed shell with a detachable slider. This was designed with convenience in mind, and wasn’t as good from a sound quality point of view as the SME types that many rivals began to adopt. From the mk5, launched in 1975, it got a J-shaped armtube and rounded underslung counterweight, presumably in a bid to make it look more like contemporaries. In truth, this arm was less impressively made than the earlier variants.

The other key change to the SP25 was the drive system. Let’s not forget that Garrard was highly accomplished at making motors, and all SP25s up to and including the mk4 got idler drive. When new and working properly this was decently speed-stable and gave a gutsy, powerful sound that wasn’t too dissimilar to the new generation of direct drives, aside from being a little less slick and quiet in operation. The mk5 – again following contemporaries like the Pioneer PL-12D – acquired a

The definitive seventies turntable



SOUNDING OFF

Garrard SP25s could never be described as great-sounding decks, but they are cheap and have real period charm. If you can find a well preserved one, especially with the rubber-tipped idler wheel in good original condition, then you’ll be able to enjoy the gutsy, upfront sound that the decks offer. So much about the SP25 is down to the cartridge fitted; the arm isn’t good enough for a finely balanced, high compliance elliptical design, so you’re best using the pick-up that was so often supplied when new – a Goldring G800 or G850. With tracking weights of 3g they’re not going to be put off by the highish friction (in modern terms) of those mussy pick-up arms. Other good matches include the Shure M75/6 and the Arcam C77 if you’re really feeling adventurous.

Some people modify the SP25, usually removing the automation; indeed Garrard itself did this with the Disco Driver 80, a rather oddball offshoot of the SP25/V1. It will sound better, but make sure you don’t allow the deck to lie dormant with the idler gear engaged (ie ensure you don’t turn it off from the mains while still in play mode), because you could flat-spot the idler wheel. Carefully set up in a decent plinth and correctly lubed and fitted with a decent – but mechanically compatible – cartridge, the deck will sound powerful, musical and full of energy and drive. Poorly preserved and/or stored, it will have chronic wow and flutter problems, and lots of rumble too – so choose carefully!

belt drive and like its tonearm it wasn’t a runaway success. It was a little quieter and more refined in operation, but for many the mk4 sounded better. From the SP25/IV onwards the plinth was more swish with the then obligatory smoked dustcover, whereas earlier variants had been clear.

And in the end...

In a bid to keep up with the times, by 1977 Garrard knew that it needed a range of hi-fi turntables that placed more emphasis on sound and style, and less on convenience. While the rest of the turntable world was betting either on direct or belt drive, its new range offered a choice of both. The GT20, 25 and 35 had belt drives in a choice of fully manual, semi auto or fully automatic guises; the DD130, 131 and 132 was the same, but with direct drive. Although good, neither range could match the onslaught from the Japanese, and the company began to fall into financial trouble. The SP25/V was summarily dropped, and Garrard was sold to Gradiente Electronica of Brazil in 1979. At the time it came as a shock that a brand as strong could fail, just years after having some of the best selling products in the market. Such was the pace of change in the seventies hi-fi market ●

London calling

The capital may be a mighty expensive place to live, but **Ed Selley** finds a dealer with great affordable systems

Barely a week goes by without a faintly hysterical article bemoaning the cost of living in London appearing somewhere, and there is no escaping the fact that the capital is an expensive place to live. This means that many hi-fi dealers have followed the area's upmarket cost and are firmly high-end in their portfolio and outlook. Affordable hi-fi frequently doesn't get a look in.

Bartlett's on the Holloway Road in North London remains an honourable exception to this upward trend. Founded in 1958 by Robert Bartlett before being taken over by his son George, the store has always tried to focus on the requirements of the

surrounding area and this ensures that it is firmly set on more real-world brands, products and systems. This means that a number of classics rub shoulders with a large stock of desktop audio and more lifestyle products. Additionally, the store has a thriving inhouse repair service – a rare thing in this day and age.

After the sad death of George Bartlett in 2012, ownership of the store passed to his wife Wendy with day-to-day operations being carried out by store manager Simon Talbot. As is the norm, I give Simon the challenge of putting together three different systems that best highlight Bartlett's philosophy and then settle back to enjoy the results.



THE EXPERTS



Bartlett's Hi-Fi

175-177 Holloway Road, London N7 8LX
0207 6072296
bartlettshifi.com

project-audio.com
arcam.co.uk
pmc-speakers.com
europe.yamaha.com/en
qacoustics.co.uk
dali-uk.co.uk



System test music



THE CINEMATIC ORCHESTRA
Man With a Movie Camera
Vinyl



FINK
Distance And Time
CD



LAURENT GARNIER
Unreasonable Behaviour
CD

System 1 – Modern master

IF YOU ARE looking at the pictures for this system and wondering where the rest of it is, this will be a crash course in the shape of modern hi-fi. The lion's share of the functionality is actually in the speakers, but what better way to complete an up-to-date setup than with the format of the moment?

The core of the system is a pair of Q Acoustics BT3 active speakers. These compact two-way standmounts are classics from the brand, but with a twist. One contains a 2x 50W (claimed) amplifier and a useful clutch of inputs. These include two analogue connections, one RCA and one 3.5mm, an optical input and aptX-capable Bluetooth. The result is that if you have a suitable source, the BT3 is a system in its own right that can handle an impressive selection of components. Both speakers contain a 100mm mid bass driver and a 25mm soft dome tweeter and you can attach a sub.

Take the stage

Fun though Bluetooth is, Simon takes advantage of the analogue inputs to add a turntable. As an enthusiastic Pro-Ject dealer, Bartlett's stocks the complete lower section of the company's turntable lineup. The Debut Carbon Phono USB has the phono stage built in, which limits the number of boxes you need to make this system run.

The Debut range has been with us for nearly 20 years and the policy of continuous improvement means

that the Carbon Phono USB is a world away from the original. The carbon fibre tonearm, high gloss finish and fit and finish are seriously impressive for the price. When you combine it with the equally exactly constructed Q Acoustics speakers, you have a system that takes up negligible space, but that offers impressive flexibility.

All of which would be completely irrelevant if it didn't sound any good, but the first minute of the Cinematic Orchestra's mighty *Burnout/The Awakening Of A Woman* is enough to show that this is a system that delivers on the performance basics regardless of how it might deviate from a 'normal' setup. Like its passive relations, the BT3 has a refinement and believability that is deeply

There's a refinement to the presentation that keeps the Pro-Ject honest

impressive given the price. The plucked bass that defines the piece is perfectly reproduced with the depth and decay that is very good indeed.

The Pro-Ject deserves a good deal of the credit here too. Fronted by the supremely capable Ortofon 2M Red cartridge, this is a vinyl front end that really delivers on the promise of the format at an extremely appealing price. Surface noise is minimal, the pitch stability rock solid and the whole experience feels rather more

high end than the £400 price suggests it should be. With the rough and immediate *Too Bad Jim* by RL Burnside, it delivers the brilliance of the delta blues without showing the limitations of the recording.

Switching to the Bluetooth input of the Q Acoustics reveals that the decoding is as accomplished as the rest of the package. With a lossless version of James McMurthy's *Complicated Game*, stored offline from Tidal, there is a refinement to the presentation that manages to keep the Pro-Ject honest and furthers my belief that Bluetooth is capable of spectacular results if properly implemented. The pin sharp timing, wonderfully smooth upper registers and genuinely impressive bass from what are fairly titchy cabinets combine to fantastic effect.

I love systems like this. Our living spaces are often tight and the time we have for listening to music can be limited. This is a brilliantly logical answer to these twin problems, but one that still delivers an absolutely joyous sound. There's always a degree of satisfaction when a collection of cost-effective electronics delivers such an impressive performance, but it is even more satisfying when the system goes on to offer such flexibility, solidity and outright prettiness. As an opening gambit, this is quite a statement of intent.

Old meets new and the results are spectacular



- 1 PRO-JECT DEBUT CARBON PHONO USB TURNTABLE £399
 - 2 Q-ACOUSTICS BT3 SPEAKERS £349
 - 3 Q-ACOUSTICS 2000ST STANDS £100
- CHORD CO. CRIMSON VEE3 INTERCONNECTS (1M PAIR) £70
-
- TOTAL £918

System 2 – Flexible friend

THIS SYSTEM CAN'T quite match the first for simplicity and thanks to the more sober colour scheme lacks a little of the visual impact, but although it may look a little more conventional this is still an innovative and very flexible collection of electronics. It also combines two of the most highly regarded names in the business at a price that remains entirely sensible.

At first glance, the Arcam CDS27 looks faintly old fashioned. While the death of CD has been greatly exaggerated, the market for standalone players at the £800 price point is not what it was. Arcam sweetens the deal a little by adding SACD playback, but from the front at least there isn't much to make it stand out from the crowd. Take a look around the back and the CDS27 reveals an extra layer of functionality that makes the package rather more interesting.

Sweet streams

This is because the Arcam is also a fully equipped UPnP streamer that supports sampling rates of up to 24-bit/192kHz with wired and wireless options and has the full app control you would associate with a normal streamer. The benefits are easy to appreciate. The Arcam can function as a regular CD player while you make the move into streaming. As an of-the-moment product, it takes some beating.

The partnering A19 amplifier doesn't have quite the same twist in the tail, but the spec is nothing to sniff at. With 50W of claimed power into 8ohm, a useful clutch of inputs

including a phono stage and a headphone socket, the A19 is classic Arcam – all the amp you'll ever really need. Even here, the spec has some neat touches. There are no digital inputs or Bluetooth, but it can power devices from Arcam's rSeries to add these features if you need.

The system is completed by the PMC twenty.21. The smallest member of the twenty series, this two-way standmount still manages to squeeze a transmission line over 1.72m in length into the compact cabinet. This means even the fairly small 140mm driver of the twenty.21 should give some reasonable low-end heft. Like its larger siblings, the PMC is beautifully made and a handsome speaker. Like system one, this is a collection of electronics that few rooms will struggle to accommodate and it looks good in the process.

This setup is no decorative bauble, though. The way that the Arcam/PMC combination handles Fink's *Distance And Time* is a wonderful combination of the strengths of both brands combining to be more than the sum of the parts. Greenhall's distinctive vocals are rich, detailed and refined – all the trademarks of the Arcam's house sound. This is underpinned by bass that is deep, fast and well integrated with the rest of the frequency range in the manner of all PMC speakers.

When you combine these attributes, the results are extremely listenable. There is enough drive and attack to keep you interested, but this is matched with sufficient refinement that it never becomes fatiguing to listen to. With the rough and ready

but entertaining *Nightless Night* by Husky Rescue, the combo delivers the frenetic punch of the record without revealing too much of the slightly ragged recording. For real-world ability across a wide range of music, this is a hugely talented ensemble.

Give it something better, though, like the glossy production of the Jurassic 5's *A Day At The Races* and the sheer attack, punch and rhythmic drive that it brings to the performance is pure unadulterated fun. The twenty.21 is a compact and fairly unassuming speaker, but it runs with the driving bassline in a way that some floorstanders can't match. The 50W of the A19 might not be the most volcanic output going, but it can grip the PMC with assurance.

In design terms this system is a world away from the first, but the ethos of Bartlett's shines through just the same. The extensive facilities, useful spec and design and the sensible pricing combine to create another system that has real-world appeal. Can Bartlett's bring this same combination of abilities together to make it three out of three?

Arcam and PMC combine clever specification and killer sound



- 1 PMC TWENTY.21 SPEAKERS £1,485
 - 2 ATACAMA HMS1.1 STANDS £200
 - 3 ARCAM FMJ A19 AMPLIFIER £650
 - 4 ARCAM FMJ CDS27 CD PLAYER/STREAMER £800
 - CHORD CO. COBRA VEE3 INTERCONNECTS (1M PAIR) £115
 - CHORD CO. RUMOUR 2 SPEAKER CABLES (3M PAIR) £204
- TOTAL £3,454**



System 3 – Silver lining

WHILE A BIG jump in price, this setup is still firmly attainable. A sense of high end at this price is no mean feat, but both brands featured know a thing or two about finish.

Having left two-channel to focus on the AV market, Yamaha returned a few years ago in some style. Balancing impressive engineering with unashamedly retro looks, the 2000 Series has given way to the 2100 Series and while the styling remains old school, the specs are very much 21st century. The CD-S2100 is a CD/SACD player built around the Silent Loader mechanism, but like the Arcam it has a surprise on the rear. This consists of a selection of digital inputs and a DSD-capable USB.

The AS-2100 partners the SACD player and claims 105W into 8ohms, a plethora of inputs including an MM/MC phono stage and wonderfully complex tone control circuit that can be switched out when not in use.

Five alive

These are combined with Dali's lovely Rubicon 5 floorstander. This three-way design employs Dali's trademark wood fibre driver with the equally distinctive 29mm tweeter and 45mm ribbon design. In the past, Dali hasn't always made the most attractive speakers when using this combination, but the Rubicon is a handsome speaker with very elegant proportions. This setup takes up a little more space than what we've already seen, but it does so with presence and elegance.

Returning to the Fink CD sees an increase in scale and authority and an almost liquid quality to the upper registers that makes this system something you could spend hours listening to without fatigue. The ribbon in the Rubicon can find nuances and detail that elude other speakers, but the immense refinement of the Yamaha duo ensures that it never switches over to becoming harsh or aggressive.

Make no mistake, there is some iron behind the civility. A blast of

Laurent Garnier's *Unreasonable Behaviour* shows that there is plenty of low-end shove and that it is fast, precise and well controlled. Above all, there is a sense of fun. The older Yamaha 2000 Series could sound a little lacking in energy, but the 2100 Series finds the soul of the music and delivers it to the Dalis that need no invitation to maintain the pace.

This gives the system a chameleonic quality that means for people with a wider spread of music in their collection this is a surefire winner. The collection of instrumentals that is Air's *Premieres Symptomes* is dealt with as effortlessly as the pub-band-come-good rock of the Yellow Moon Band. The scale and soundstage rises and falls on demand and the headroom on offer is considerable and you'd have to have very patient neighbours indeed before you showed any signs of it reaching its limits.

This is an extremely viceless collection of components. Like the other two systems, it makes no unreasonable demands of modern life. The connectivity is extensive and offers both the ability to handle computer audio and allow for a more than half decent turntable to be connected too. You can sit there watching those gorgeous VU meters moving with perfect precision and enjoy a sound that is utterly joyous, be you listening to the most delicate acoustic material or the heftiest electronica. Yamaha and Dali have a sure fire means to ensure you love your music collection again.



Perfect build with perfect sound – what's not to like?

- 1 DALI RUBICON 5 SPEAKERS £2,399
 - 2 YAMAHA CD-S2100 CD PLAYER/DAC £1,600
 - 3 YAMAHA A-S2100 AMPLIFIER £1,700
- ATLAS HYPER SYMMETRICAL INTERCONNECTS (1M PAIR) £210
ATLAS HYPER BI-WIRE SPEAKER CABLES (3M PAIR) £356

TOTAL £6,265



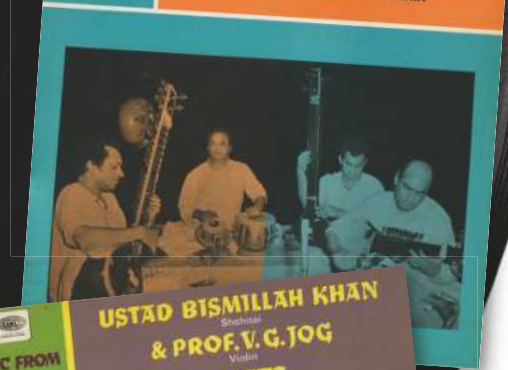
It is always enjoyable to visit a dealer where there is an underpinning philosophy, and when combined with systems that are real-world, it's very satisfying. Bartlett's demonstrates that dealers do not need to move relentlessly upmarket to stay successful. Simon and

his team have a genuine enthusiasm for their products and as these three systems demonstrate, an ability to extract performance from them that is more than the sum of their parts.

The way that these systems sound is a convincing demonstration that

you don't need to re-mortgage to enjoy clever functionality, solid build, handsome looks and genuinely musical performance that has you wanting to keep listening. Bartlett's is proof positive that not everything in London needs to cost the earth.

LABELLED WITH LOVE



MUSIC FROM INDIA

This excellent sixties series is your gateway to the enthralling world of Hindustani classical music. **Simon Berkovitch** is your guide, heading East

Within the context of popular music, East met West in 1965. That year, hitherto-unheard exotic noises tumbled from the grooves of some of the UK's key releases. Distinctive 45s from The Kinks (*See My Friends*) and The Yardbirds (*Heart Full Of Soul*) emulated the sound of the sitar, indisputably the most widely known instrument used in the performance of Indian classical music, on electric guitar. The Beatles went further still, with guitarist George Harrison adding sitar lines to one of the decade's most enduring recordings – *Norwegian Wood* from *Help!*. The Rolling Stones' *Paint It Black* single the following year helped to cement

the multi-stringed instrument's place in the premier division of pop culture.

Through his subsequent association with Harrison – key to popularising Indian classical music in the West in the sixties, as classical violinist Yehudi Menuhin had done in the fifties – the name of sitar virtuoso Ravi Shankar was soon the one to drop. The Beatle effect can't be underestimated: the incredible popularity of the Fab Four inevitably had some bearing on EMI – The Beatles' record label – launching an exploratory series of Hindustani classical music in 1965: *Music from India*.

There are two traditions of classical music in India: North (Hindustani) and South Indian

(Carnatic). *Music from India* focuses on the former, predominantly instrumental subgenre, and over the course of 11 excellent cuts, some of the most important contemporary master musicians and their wonderful, otherworldly (to Western audiences, at least) instruments of choice landed on discerning record turntables.

The first release sets out its stall in fine style, with two virtuosos in duet: Vilayat Khan (sitar) and Bismillah Khan's haunting shenhai – a small reed instrument similar to the oboe. The second sees Ravi Shankar with Ali Akbar Khan on sarod (deep sounding and lute-like) accompanied by tabla (Indian percussion) and tambura

(stringed, drone instrument played in a repeated cycle).

Other performers in the *Music from India* series include Prof VG Jog (violin), Alla Rakha and Shanta Prasad (tabla), and Nikhil Banerjee (sitar). Each and every one of the musicians showcased deserves further investigation. An extensive glossary of musical terms – from *chikari* (drone strings) to *tora* (fast runs and repeated notes) – on the rear of each release also helps the listener to navigate this brave new world.

Now, 50 years on, the vinyl-only series remains a wonderful introduction to the world of Hindustani classical music. It's well worth the work required to track them down.

Ravi Shankar

A musical legend who did more to promote Indian music in the West than any other

Pandit (Hindu for 'master') Ravi Shankar needs little introduction: the musician and composer is the most world-famous sitar player of the 20th century – who, incredibly, performed into his late eighties.

His first LP, *Three Ragas* (a raga being an Indian scale using ascending and descending patterns) was recorded in 1956 in London, and Shankar toured Europe in the early sixties.

The fantastic *Portrait Of Genius* (1964) helped to bring his name to a wider audience, but his popularity soared when The Beatles introduced the instrument to pop music buyers. Indeed, his adoption by the emerging Western counterculture is best illustrated by his appearance at the Monterey and Woodstock festivals, documented on LP.

Shankar's two contributions to the Music from India series showcase different styles. His first, with sarod player Ali Akbar

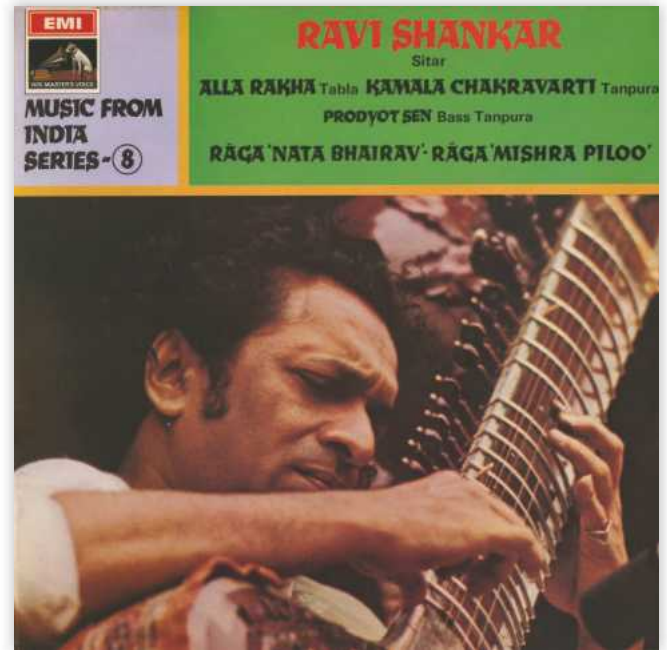
Khan, is a fantastic *jugalbandi* performance. Emerging in the forties, *jugalbandi* is a duet performance in which both musicians act as lead players, often on different instruments. Despite their differences of tonal quality, in the hands of these accomplished performers, the sitar and sarod interplay on this

Portrait Of Genius brought his name to a wider audience

record is breathtaking, and a great introduction to the form.

Two ragas comprise Ravi Shankar's second appearance, the eighth in the series, accompanied by Ustad Alla Rakha, one of India's greatest drummers. The first, *Raga Nata Bhairav* is an enrapturing original piece; the second, *Raga Mishra Piloo* is a spellbinding performance of one of the most popular ragas in India.

The master of the sitar began his career as a dancer at the tender age of 10



Ustad Bismillah Khan

The master of the shehnai who single-handedly elevated the wind instrument to classical level

Before *Ustad* (Persian for 'master') Bismillah Khan took the simple-looking shehnai – similar to the oboe – to his lips, it was primarily associated with temples and religious occasions. As with other wind instruments, the shehnai calls for a great deal of finger-dexterity and superb breath control from the player.

In the hands of this incredible performer, it entered the sphere of Hindustani classical music.

In 1965, both Bismillah Khan and sitar player Vilayat Khan appeared at the Edinburgh Festival, enrapturing both public and critics. The musicians are captured on blistering form on the first instalment of the series, *Duets*, released the same year. Accompanied on tabla by the sublime Shanta Prasad, the slowly unfurling *jugalbandi* raga that occupies the album's first side captures the performers operating at near-tepathic levels of interplay.

The shehnai returns *en masse* for his second appearance. Billed as Bismillah Khan and Party on the ninth instalment in the series (1969), the other players create drones – the ideal accompanying sound texture for the leader's virtuoso performance. Rhythmic accompaniment is played on the

The shehnai calls for a great deal of finger dexterity

dukar (two small kettle drums). The results are extraordinary, life-affirming performances.

Like Pandit Ravi Shankar, his contemporary, this amazing musician and prolific recording artist enjoyed a lengthy life, passing away in 2006 at the grand old age of 93. Such was the esteem in which Bismillah Khan was held, the Government of India declared this a day of national mourning.

Bismillah Khan mastered his instrument of choice in a very short space of time



Ali Akbar Khan

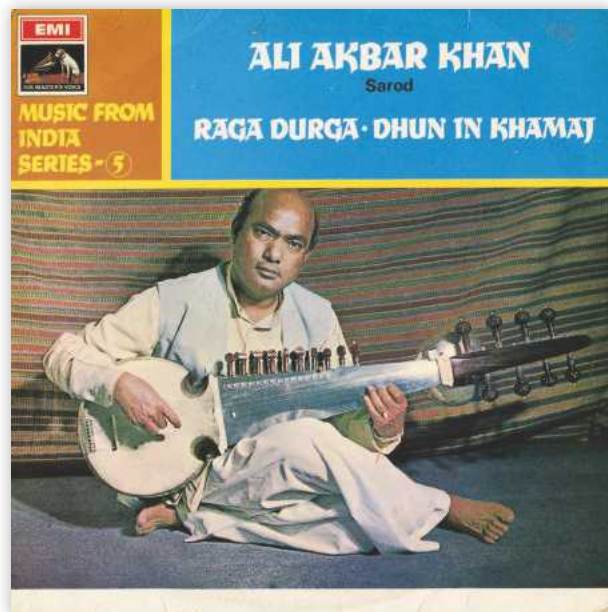
The virtuoso who brought the sarod to an international audience

Following a rigorous apprenticeship that saw him practicing up to 18 hours a day, Ali Akbar Khan gave his first performance on the sarod – a 25-stringed, metal fingerboard skin-faced lute – at the age of just 13, accompanying Ravi Shankar on the sitar three years later, marking the first of the two musicians' many *jugalbandis* recorded together. In addition to his *jugalbandi* with Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan contributes the fifth instalment of the seminal series: *Raga Durga & Dhun In Khamaj* (1966).

Able accompanied by the accomplished Mahapurush Misra on tabla, who began to study the percussion instrument when he was four, it's an exhilarating workout for a notoriously difficult-to-play instrument, here in the hands of a master. Indeed, he once wrote of his instrument of choice: "If you practice for 10

years, you may begin to please yourself. After 20 years, you may become a performer and please the audience. After 30 years, you may please even

your guru, but you must practice for many more years before you finally become a true artist. Then you may please even God."



Nikhil Banerjee

From child prodigy to one of the finest sitar players of his generation

At a very early age, Banerjee began the study of the sitar under his father, Jitendra Nath Banerjee. Years of intense practice under his tutors led the young Banerjee to develop a unique improvisatory approach to traditional *ragas*, skilled in both melody and rhythm.

This is heard to great effect on 1968's slower-paced *Ragas: Lalit, Sindhu Bhairavi & Puriya Kalyan*, with gorgeous renditions of popular dawn and morning *ragas*. Here, Banerjee performs with Viram Jasani on tambura and table player Kanai Dutt, who made several recordings with this distinguished but publicity-shy sitar player.

The same year as this beautiful recording for the series, Banerjee was awarded the honorary title Padma Shri, for distinguished contributions to the arts.

Considered to have been one of the finest musicians of his generation, posthumous concert recordings have helped to keep his name alive,

deserving to be spoken about with the same reverence as both Ravi Shankar and Vilayat Khan. Sadly, he died aged just 54 in 1986.



► SHOPPING LIST

Once The Beatles opened the floodgates, sitar-inspired music was *de rigueur* for sixties pop and rock groups. Here are eight of the best



The Byrds
Eight Miles High/Why
Both sides of this superb single are inspired by Indian classical music, as well as John Coltrane.



The Rolling Stones
Paint It Black
Brian Jones provides the Eastern flavour on this cut and plays tambura on *Street Fighting Man*.



The Beatles
Love You To
Recorded in 1966, George Harrison's finest contribution to *Revolver* features tabla, sitar, hand-drums and tambura.



Traffic
Paper Sun
The debut single for Steve Winwood's folk-jazz-rock outfit is propelled by a distinct '67-vintage sitar riff.



The Doors
The End
On the dramatic closer to the group's debut album, guitarist Robbie Kreiger provides the raga rock textures.



The Moody Blues
Om
The psychedelic Brummies are at their most spiritual on this 1968 gem from their *In Search Of The Lost Chord* LP.



Tomorrow
Real Life
Permanent Dream
Frantic, fluid string plucking from Yes guitarist Steve Howe on this storming acid rocker from 1968.



July
The Way
One of the stand-outs on the cult UK psych act July's sole album (released 1968) is this rather sitar-heavy workout.

Xpression Carbon

Xpress your sound,
Xpress your look...



March 2014



February 2014



January 2015



February 2014



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platter with Bordeaux
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The Xpression Carbon is the latest version of Pro-Ject Audio Systems' original turntable, the Pro-Ject 1. This new model employs a brand new carbon fibre tonearm with an Evolution-inspired support structure. The superior motor, with isolation blobs designed by Ortofon, drives a high-quality platter that can be fitted with either a Cork or Felt mat. The plinth is available in three stunning finishes*, and the arm is rounded off with an Ortofon 2M Silver cartridge to create a comprehensive package that would suit any system.

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 **Pro-Ject**
AUDIO SYSTEMS

* Bordeaux finish shown

REVOLUTION



How could we improve the T+A R Series? After painstaking analysis, the only option was to start again from the ground up, using the latest techniques developed for our multi award-winning HV Series. Ultimately, the only facet that remains unchanged is the name, together with the original great idea: to design a collection of devices perfectly matched to each other, representing in terms of sound and technology the absolute extreme of what is possible in keeping with the R Series stylish yet compact form. The amplifiers of the new R-series are of symmetrical construction, exploiting the double-mono principle and our High Voltage technology. The Multi-Source player features separate High-Resolution converters for DSD and PCM formats, whilst the audiophile turntable can be fitted with various tone arms and cartridges. The previous R-series was considered the standard of perfection in casework, so we have raised the standard even higher, with the whole case now consisting of machined thick-walled aluminium. But even better than reading about our new R Series is to listen to it, and your specialist T+A dealer is already looking forward to seeing you.

T+A

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100 Lead Belly
The Smithsonian
Folkways Collection



100 Bert Jansch
Bert Jansch



101 Sibelius
Lemminkäinen
Legends,
Pohjola's Daughter

Musicreviews



**ALBUM
OF THE
MONTH**

Blur
The Magic Whip

★★★★★

CD Parlophone

IN THE YEARS since Damon Albarn put Blur on hiatus in 2003, he has bloomed into the smartest, most ambitious and interesting British pop star of his generation. While his one-time rival from the Brit-pop wars, Oasis, have repeated themselves with ever diminishing returns, Albarn has embarked upon a giddily audacious range of eclectic projects. There was the hip-hop electronica of his cartoon band Gorillaz; the Chinese opera *Monkey – Journey To The West*; a tie up with the Clash's Paul Simonon in *The Good, The Bad and The Queen*; his adventures in Mali and beyond with Africa Express and a grown-up English opera about the Elizabethan occultist John Dee. He's now reported to be working on a musical based on a much-loved children's book. In between, there have been a handful of Blur reunion concerts, but with so much else going on in Albarn's endlessly inventive

musical churn, the sudden appearance of Blur's first album since 2003's *Think Tank* – and the first to feature guitarist Graham Coxon since 1999 – comes as a joyous surprise. Albarn once said that the moment he felt he was repeating himself was the day he would retire. No chance of that, for *The Magic Whip* represents another brave new chapter, more nuanced and exploratory than anything Blur achieved at the height of their fame.

Albarn works best with a creative foil who can take him out of his comfort zone, whether it's African or Chinese musicians pushing him in new directions, the challenge of working with a theatrical director or collaborating with artists as diverse as Michael Nyman and Bobby Womack. Whatever the merits of Blur's admirably solid rhythm section, they were never able to provide Albarn with that kind of spur, which is why he

mothballed the band. So the key is the return of Coxon – and the all-round musical intelligence of his old friend and sparring partner has galvanised Albarn to come up with a stellar set of new songs.

Lonesome Street updates Syd Barrett's whimsical English psychedelia; *New World Tours* has an almost classical feel. The dubbed-up punk electronica of *Go Out* is weirdly and wonderfully off-kilter; *My Terracotta Heart* is one of Albarn's most haunting minor key ballads. *Ghost Ship* is Blur-goes-lounge-pop. *Ong Ong* sounds like Ray Davies meets the Beach Boys' *Smile* and the Bowie-esque *There Are Too Many Of Us* was inspired by the 2014 terrorist café siege in Sydney, which Albarn witnessed. However much you play spot the influences, Albarn channels them into something uniquely, dazzlingly inventive, that leaves you wondering how on earth he does it. **NW**

Picture credit: Linda Brownlee



HOT PICK

Lead Belly

The Smithsonian Folkways Collection

★★★★★

Five CD box set

Folkways

EVERYONE KNOWS LEAD Belly's legendary songs from the countless covers by the likes of the Beach Boys (*Cotton Fields*), Creedence Clearwater Revival (*Midnight Special*) Led Zeppelin (*Gallows Pole*) and the White Stripes (*Boll Weevil*). Today fewer are acquainted with the power of the striking, declamatory original versions recorded by the ex-convict between 1933-48. This compendious 108-track set housed in a handsome, 140 page

Lead Belly emerges not simply as an antique voice, but as a vigorous, vital and virile presence

book with extensive notes and historic photos, sets the record straight.

It's amazing what sensitive remastering can achieve. With the hiss and crackle eradicated by digital transfer, Lead Belly emerges not simply as an antique voice of indisputable historical importance sputtering through the ether, but as a vigorous, vital and virile presence in the here and now, the pulse true and strong as life is breathed back into the legend and the myth is made man again. **NW**

MUSICREVIEWS



Angelique Kidjo
Sings With
The Orchestre
Philharmonique
du Luxembourg

★★★★★

429 Records

CD

FRESH FROM WINNING a Grammy for best world music album with 2014's *Eve*, Kidjo here explores the unlikely marriage of African rhythms and European conservatoire tradition with a 110-piece orchestra. The classically trained ensemble captures the energy and intricacy of African rhythms on such Kidjo favourites as *Malaika* and *Kelele* with impressive brio and surprising sensitivity, while the big-voiced, big-hearted Benin-born singer and UNICEF goodwill ambassador confirms the status she assumed on the death of Miriam Makeba as the foremost female voice in African popular music. **NW**



Young Fathers
White Men Are
Black Men Too

★★★★★

Glitterbeat Records

CD

THE MERCURY PRIZE winners are back with their second album and something to prove. The follow up is a more assured beast than their original slice of angst-ridden, quirky hip hop. There are less words this time, but considerably more invention in the tunes and beats, taking them further from their hip hop roots and deeper into the genre-twisting explorations we've seen from the likes of Tricky and Massive Attack. Not that they sound like either of those, or anyone else for that matter.

The sound is still rough and ready, sounding like it was recorded in a basement – as indeed it was – but with imagination to spare. **DO**



Lulu

Making Life Rhyme

★★★★★

CD

Decca

IT WORKED FOR Tom Jones. Now it's Lulu's turn to have a go at a passionate, soulful album. And it works! The lady always had a magnificent voice, even if the material post *Shout* didn't always live up to the promise. Here she's gone back to her blues and soul roots and it's done her a power of good. Originally conceived as a covers album, she apparently became inspired to contribute her own songs and these are more than up to the mark. The sound fits neatly with the modern soul sonics of Adele or Emeli Sandé with plenty of nods to the classics of the sixties and seventies, but with a modern sheen and crispness that sounds just right for now. **DO**



Do you agree with our reviewers?
Decide for yourself and listen to
some of this month's tunes at
www.hifichoice.co.uk

AUDIOFILE VINYL

★★★★★

HOT PICK

Bert Jansch

Bert Jansch

180g vinyl

Transatlantic (Sanctuary Records Group)



I DON'T HAVE

many regrets, but one of them is not going to see Bert Jansch when I had the chance. In my defence I was not fully aware of his

genius at the time, but it's too late now. This has been remastered using the original half-inch tapes from his 1965 debut, the sound being remarkably vital for the vintage albeit occasionally peaky. You can easily hear why it cemented his reputation as a live act not to be missed (kicks self again). Jansch was just about

the closest thing that we in the United Kingdom had to Dylan, albeit a far better guitar player if not as spectacular a songwriter. He was, however, considered the first British singer/songwriter.

His influence was huge, not least on Jimmy Page who was "absolutely obsessed", a fact that you can hear on almost any Zeppelin album. Johnny Marr said that without him "rock music as it developed in the sixties and seventies would have been very different". For me it's his instrumentals that go deepest, with the version of Davy Graham's *Angi(e)* the most exceptional on here, but the songs are excellent as well, check out *Do You Hear Me Now* and *Needle Of Death* for the flavour. **JK**

HIGH RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS



Universal Togetherness Band
Universal Togetherness Band



FLAC 24-bit/48kHz

B&W Society of Sound



Troyka
Ornithophobia



ALAC/FLAC 24-bit/44.1kHz

Naim Label

CHICAGO'S UNIVERSAL TOGETHERNESS Band never reached the heights of soul jazz fusion contemporaries Maze or Earth, Wind And Fire but they did record. A lot. Thanks to associations with Columbia College's music dept they were given all but unlimited studio time. This compilation pulls together the cream of the crop of the recordings. The sound is warm and full, as befitting the times, but there's plenty of clarity in the production too. **DO**

TROYKA ARE A three-piece British jazz trio who like to walk the line between melody and noise. Lyrical passages rapidly morph into atonal, meandering conversations in complex time signatures between Hammond organ and guitar, but always with a clear and steady pulse. Influences range from free jazz to prog rock to psychedelic film soundtracks and most points in-between in a crisply produced set that gives the instruments plenty of room to shine. **DO**

Jean Martinon

Chicago Symphony Orchestra
The Complete Recordings

HOT PICK



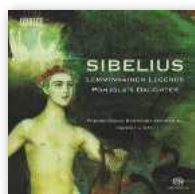
10 CDs

Sony/RCA

JEAN MARTINON BECAME principle conductor of the Chicago Symphony orchestra in 1963 following the death of Fritz Reiner. The ten discs in this set bear eloquent witness to Martinon's stay in the Windy City. The performances are crisp and vital, yet elegantly phrased and idiomatic, with technically outstanding orchestral playing. The recordings here have long been out of print, being hard to find and hugely collectible on vinyl. The newly remastered stereo tapes sound excellent for their time, and demonstrate the high standards RCA was achieving in the sixties. The booklet gives plenty of useful info as to recording dates and venues, making the set a collector's dream. **JH**



With 10 discs and an informative booklet this is a collector's dream



Sibelius
Lemminkäinen Legends; Pohjola's Daughter
Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra



Hybrid SACD

Ondine

HANNU LINTU'S PERFORMANCE is very good, and the Finnish RSO certainly plays well. Lintu gives a very straight reading, and his interpretation is solid and free from quirks. Lintu has the added refinement of SACD – though actually the sonic differences aren't as great as one might expect. That said, the new DSD recording sounds very open and natural, with a broad dynamic range and some deep powerful bass. The sound is more relaxed and effortless than the previous Ondine recordings of Sibelius, being opulent yet detailed. Every strand can be heard, without obvious microphone spotlighting. **JH**

BLU-RAY DVD ★★★★★

Foo Fighters
Sonic Highways

HOT PICK

DVD

RCA



This substantial release charts Dave Grohl and his band recording eight tracks in eight American cities, and each episode includes an indepth documentary about the musical history of that city. The Chicago episode covers the blues and punk scenes as well as Cheap Trick's guitarist Rick Nielsen, who joins them in the studio. But it also has a lot about Buddy Guy who unsurprisingly does not. This is a gripping eight-plus hours for any music lover. Sound quality is about par, dynamics are quashed but that doesn't get in the way of 'musical maps'. **JK**

DEMO DISCS



Alan O'Rourke from Ruark Audio reveals some of the music used to develop products



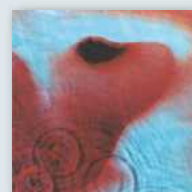
Meshell Ndegeocello
Peace Beyond Passion

With superb musicianship and production every track here is a gem, which will fully test your system.



Joni Mitchell
Hejira

By far my favourite Joni album. What makes it so special is Jaco Pastorius' beautiful fretless bass playing, which weaves magic into each of Joni's songs.



Pink Floyd
Meddle

My all time favourite Floyd album. From *One Of These Days* to *Echoes*, this is an album that over 40 years on still sounds great on a good system.



Larry Carlton
Alone/But Never Alone

This smooth jazz album from 1986 shows Larry Carlton as a true master of his instrument, backed by a team of equally brilliant musicians.

HI-RES HIGHLIGHTS

Our pick of the best hi-res downloads released over the past month...



There's a whole host of Lou Reed albums, including the fantastic *Transformer* on HDtracks (hdtracks.co.uk), along with REM's *Up*, *Sleeping With Sirens* by

Madness and Tori Amos' remastered version of *Under the Pink*. Linn Records (linnrecords.com) has Japanese percussionist Kuniko Kato performing *Xenakis* (above), Joe Stilgoe's *New Songs For Old Souls* and a new performance of Monteverdi's *Ullisses* by Boston Baroque. Finally, High Res Audio (highresaudio.com) has Kyle Eastwood's *Timepieces*, Indra Rios-Moore's *Heartland*, Joe Satriani's *Surfing With The Alien* and Benjamin Richter's *The Grand Momentum*.

Minitest

BLUETOOTH ADAPTORS £35-£90

Into the Blue

Piping music from your portable device without a cable is much easier than you'd think. **Rob Lane** checks out four ways to do so

With an increasing number of music fans downloading tracks and albums through the likes of iTunes or music streaming services straight to their smartphone, tablet or portable device, it was inevitable that one day we'd see Bluetooth being incorporated into hi-fi components like integrated amplifiers and loudspeakers. Only a few years ago the short-range wireless codec was seen as too lo-fi in sound quality terms to be worthwhile for a

hi-fi fan, but along with aptX it has upped audio quality standards considerably and though it's not as good as a wired connection, it is appearing on many new integrated amplifiers as a useful option for those that are looking to stream music from a phone or tablet and enjoy it through their hi-fi system.

With a variety of connection options and features available, I opt to stick to stereo RCAs feeding Bluetooth signals via an inbuilt DAC to a NAD C356BEE

integrated amplifier driving ATC SCM40 floorstanding loudspeakers.

I use U2's *Songs Of Innocence*, ripped with Apple Lossless, concentrating mainly on the atmospheric *Every Breaking Wave* and iTunes download tracks from Ryan Adam's *Live At Carnegie Hall* and Johnny Marr's *Playland*. For comparison purposes, I play the same tracks directly from iTunes via an Apple MacBook Pro linked to the NAD amplifier using a 3.5mm-jack-to-RCA phono cable.

Harman/Kardon BTA 10

PRICE: £50 TELEPHONE: 01707 278113 WEBSITE: harmankardon.co.uk

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Harman/Kardon
BTA 10

ORIGIN
China

WEIGHT
35g

FEATURES
TrueStream; power
adaptor

DISTRIBUTOR
Harman UK

COMFORTABLY THE SMALLEST

model here (at 50 x 16 x 50mm (wxhxd), the BTA 10's weight is slightly at odds with its size – reassuringly so when you hold it in your palm. The four sides are matt finish, while the top is gloss and gently slopes down on each side to form a basin. Its reassuring weight is backed up by the rubberised underside, which in theory should – along with its weight – help it stay put when connector cables are plumbed in. Connections include mini-USB and 3.5mm-jack audio out. H/K supplies a power adaptor with Euro-zone or UK plugs, and a choice of 3.5mm-jack-to-jack and 3.5mm-jack-to-RCA cables. The BTA 10 can memorise up to eight different Bluetooth devices, but doesn't support aptX.

On plugging in, an intense blue light flashes intermittently through the top of the unit, becoming constantly lit once paired. Rather disappointingly, the light isn't dead centre. When

connected to an amplifier, the BTA 10 finds itself in something of a cable tug of war, which, despite its generous weight and rubberised underside, means that it struggles to maintain position, making Blu-tack to hold it in place a must.

Simply the best?

Harman claims that its TrueStream technology delivers the "best audio performance" and enhances the listening experience of Bluetooth streaming. I'm certainly very impressed. U2's *Songs Of Innocence* sounds as good via the BTA 10 as it does direct from my Mac, with *Every Breaking Wave* retaining all of its emotional impact across the wireless connection – H/K's claim that the BTA 10 produces "amazingly crisp" audio quality cannot be denied.



There's a tiny bit of hiss that's only audible when the volume is turned right down with my ear close to the speaker. In terms of range, the BTA 10 isn't daunted by walls. Its claimed 10m reach is surpassed and it maintains a stable connection from another room or storey ●

VERDICT

A lovely little adaptor, the BTA 10 produces excellent sound for a reasonable price



Lindy BTX-50 Audio Receiver Pro

PRICE: £55 TELEPHONE: 01642 754000 WEBSITE: lindy.co.uk

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Lindy BTX-50 Audio Receiver Pro

ORIGIN
China

WEIGHT
60g

FEATURES
AptX; NFC; optical digital output; 3.5mm-jack output

DISTRIBUTOR
Lindy

THE BIG BOY of the group – with 84 x 23 x 75 dimensions (wxhxd) and weighing in at 60g – the BTX-50 resembles the front of a racing car, and on paper looks the part too.

Including NFC (Near Field Communication) and Bluetooth 3.0 wireless capability, it adds optical digital and 3.5mm-jack connections, and recommends you use the former. However, despite supplying RCA hookups (which bizarrely need to be plumbed into a supplied adaptor cable), Lindy neglects to include an optical cable. It's powered via a USB-DC cable, so you'll have to hook it up to a computer, or get an adaptor. All cables are generous in length. Like the H/K, the BTX-50 supports up to eight devices. Lindy should note, however, that it might want to consider including its recommended audio connector on future shipments.

Testing the Bluetooth connectivity, a blue power light indicator at the front flashes intermittently until paired



with a device, at which point it remains constant. My device finds the BTX-50 in seconds, but sadly this is where the good news ends.

Mission impossible

Once a track is selected, so much hiss is audible that it makes it impossible to comfortably listen to any of the music I stream to the device. Ramping up the volume disguises some of the now background hiss, but it's always in evidence, seriously compromising performance. *Every Breaking Wave* punches through the hiss at higher

volumes, although this isn't a great performance and the subtleties and emotional impact of the track are compromised owing to the high levels of interference.

Wireless signal range manages to reach the claimed 10m without obstructions, but drops when walls get in the way ●

VERDICT

Well appointed, the BTX-50 confuses with its cabling and is seriously compromised by hiss



Philips AEA2700/12

PRICE: £35 TELEPHONE: 0207 9490241 WEBSITE: philips.co.uk

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Philips AEA2700/12

ORIGIN
China

WEIGHT
40g

FEATURES
MultiPair; NFC; aptX; optical & coaxial digital outputs; 3.5mm-jack output

DISTRIBUTOR
Philips Europe

BREAKING WITH CONVENTION thanks to its streamlined chrome finish, the Philips is the second largest in the test with 74 x 28 x 74mm (wxhxd) dimensions. As well as Bluetooth 3.0, it supports aptX and NFC. Unlike the others, it only pairs with three devices, although MultiPair means they can be connected simultaneously, without having to un-pair and re-pair. Press play on a second or third paired unit, and the song on the first stops with the new one taking over.

Connections include optical and coaxial digital outputs, alongside a 3.5mm stereo jack output that comes supplied with the appropriate jack-to-phono cable. Power is supplied by a 9V DC power adaptor, but the plug at the end of the adaptor is a two-pin Euro type and a UK adaptor will be required.

Power it up, and a blue light on the top flashes intermittently. My device finds the Bluetooth hi-fi adaptor

almost immediately, although the connection is briefly lost before it reconnects again, at which point the Philips' top-light stays constant.

The price is right

Performance is great with no loss of detail during *Songs of Innocence*, with *Every Breaking Wave* plucking those heart strings with gusto. There's a little less bass than others, but it is very detailed if more obviously compressed. A barely audible hiss (you need to put your ear right up to the loudspeaker to hear it) doesn't

detract from what is a very good overall performance.

Another one with a 10m range, the Philips isn't concerned with walls and operates without interruption. Overall I am very impressed by the AEA2700/12. It has great sound, good looks, a cool MultiPair gimmick and comes at a very attractive price ●

VERDICT

A good-looking Bluetooth adaptor, which produces great sound at an amazing price



Arcam miniBlink

PRICE: £90 TELEPHONE: 01223 203200 WEBSITE: arcam.co.uk

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Arcam miniBlink

ORIGIN
China

WEIGHT
40g

FEATURES
PCM 5102 24-bit
DAC; aptX;
3.5mm-jack output

DISTRIBUTOR
Arcam UK

A BEAUTIFUL PEBBLE-SHAPED unit, with a flash of silver streaking through its middle, the miniBlink is easily the most aesthetically pleasing model here. It's a similar size to the Philips at 60 x 30 x 75mm (wxhxd), and weighs the same at 40g. The lack of rubberised feet on the underside keep those perfect clean lines going, but it's a concern in terms of solidity.

The miniBlink can either be powered by mini USB or a wallwart adaptor supplied with four different regional plugs. The power lead is accompanied by two stereo cables – 3.5mm-jack-to-jack and 3.5mm-jack-to-RCA. There's no digital out, unsurprisingly given Arcam sees the miniBlink as a DAC as much as a Bluetooth adaptor.

My fears that the miniBlink will slide around once cables are connected are unfortunately realised, which is a shame as this detracts from what is a lovely looking piece of kit. As with the Philips, a Bluetooth-logoed button atop

of the Arcam needs to be pressed in order that it can be 'discovered' by devices. A flashing red light turns a constant and appealing purple once the two are paired.

Blink and you'll miss it

Arcam makes great claims for the miniBlink's hi-fi credentials, and it has already garnered awards and plaudits (see *HFC* 387) since its launch. Using a high-end Burr Brown PCM 5102 24-bit DAC, and the aptX transmission system (which claims to improve upon the regular Bluetooth SBC codec), the miniBlink has certainly been designed to be a quality hi-fi product, and it sounds very good indeed.

Every Breaking Wave sounds great, with plenty of punchy bass and emotional depth to bring the track to life. Hiss interference is barely audible, but the miniBlink doesn't



quite live up to expectations given its relatively high price, and I can't help but expect a bit more in the context of this test.

In terms of wireless range, it is fine until walls get in the way – although it doesn't drop out immediately. Ultimately, this is a fine mini DAC, but is beaten here by cheaper rivals ●

VERDICT

A great-looking solution with a top pedigree, the miniBlink just falls short for the price



Mini test verdict

THIS IS AN interesting lineup of Bluetooth hi-fi adaptors at various price-points with some useful features. In last place the Lindy is let down by the sort of interference that you simply cannot ignore at any price. Sure, the other three adaptors also hiss a little, some more than others, but with all of these the interference is only audible when right next to the loudspeakers and does not at any time detract from the audio performance when listening to music streamed from a Bluetooth-enabled device at typical volume levels. The hiss produced by the BTX-50 makes it impossible to be able to fully evaluate its performance and so it's difficult to recommend it in any meaningful way.

On paper the Arcam has the potential to beat the rest, with serious

hi-fi credentials and Apple-esque packaging bound to turn heads. A great performer, it's no surprise that it has garnered so much praise since its release. Ultimately, the miniBlink's considerably higher price point means it misses out on a badge in the context of this test. But this doesn't detract from what is an excellent audio performance.

The Philips is something of a bargain. Top sound and features – along with great looks, a comparatively practical design and a very competitive price – make this adaptor the runner up. However, the clear winner is the Harman/Kardon BTA 10. The proprietary TrueStream system is very effective at producing crisp, full sound reproduction with a

decent amount of bass, and the losenge-like design is very appealing, despite the off-centre light. It does have a tendency to dance around a bit when cabled-up, but Blu-tack will remedy this. The price is about right, too.



The H/K BTA 10 doesn't support aptX but turns in impressive sonics with iDevices and maintains a solid signal beyond 10m. Ultimately it strikes the right balance between performance, features, price and design.



This test highlights the brave new audio world where smart phones and tablets are now music sources. Indeed, we're getting to the stage now that computer audio is for dads with their ripped CD collections, while the kids are alright with streaming from their mobile devices and downloads!

Cabled-up DACs are undoubtedly the way to go for those wishing to improve on computer audio, and presumably most device-based music will

find its way to your amp and loudspeakers more directly, whether that's via a DAC or not. But Bluetooth has grown into the favoured short-range wireless tech that's found on pretty much every smart device around, and it deserves to have a place in any hi-fi system. Audio quality has improved considerably in recent years and easily allows music lovers who favour smart devices to experience their tunes through a proper hi-fi system.

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Clint Digital

Odin wireless speaker



HAILING FROM DENMARK,

Clint has been a player in the DAB market since 2008 and Odin is its flagship model from the new Asgard ecosystem of multi-room speakers. Clint says Asgard embodies the essence of the gods from Norse mythology after whom it is named with qualities such as toughness, endurance and power.

Weighing nearly 7kg, Odin is certainly a hefty beast for a speaker if not a Norse god, and is about the size of a cylinder vacuum cleaner. Fashioned from durable aluminium, it comes in white or dark grey. Clint recommends locating the unit on the floor, near a corner, maybe placing it on an optional foot stand (£46) that angles the drivers upwards by 8°.

The enclosure has a bevy of over-sized, plasticky buttons on its top that comprise volume, play/pause, multi-room and mute. You're more likely to control the speaker from a computer or using the iOS/Android app on a smartphone.

Norse code

There's a USB input on the rear that can charge and playback iOS devices and a 3.5mm jack input for analogue sources. Otherwise, it's all about wi-fi, and mainly AirPlay. Ironically for a protocol that's named after a real Norse king, Bluetooth has been eschewed. You can, however, stream music directly to Odin over a peer-to-peer wi-fi network, which Clint calls Music Direct and the speaker can also connect to DLNA sources. It is compatible with a decent range of wirelessly streamed formats including AIFF, ALAC, WMA, AAC, FLAC and WAV, supporting files sampled at up to 192kHz.

A button on the back is provided to help get Odin hooked on to a network, which is a relatively simple process if your router supports WPS. There's no display, just a row of LEDs that change colour and rate of pulsing to indicate their status.

The app isn't exactly the first word in device control either, lacking for example a 'now playing' button, but



it does allow you to adjust the bass, mid and treble, plus you can set up two speakers as a traditional stereo pair or add three more units to form a multi-room system. Within the app you can easily find internet radio stations, access music stored on the device and launch Spotify Connect (if you have a subscription). Other external apps such as Tidal can just as easily be used by choosing the Odin in the AirPlay menu.

The first thing to say about the performance is that the power output makes a big impression with the claimed figure of 50W, and with not that much effort it is easily capable of filling small-to-medium-sized listening rooms. Unleashed on an all-thumping techno treat such as David Guetta's *Shot Me Down*, streamed in higher quality on Tidal, the attack from the bass is quite astonishing, reaching low and throwing air around the room liberally. Not that there's a lack of control, and the bass never feels woolly or disconnected from the midrange. The upper frequencies of the synth have an engaging smoothness to them and Skylar Grey's gorgeous vocals are pleasingly well rounded.

Upping the ante on the vocal front with a burst of Adele's *Set Fire To The*

Rain, and the Odin's fine handling of the mid and upper range is so exquisite it's impossible not to feel a tingle on the back of the neck. This all happens at medium volume levels with the unit able to deliver the goods without sounding strained or over worked. It also proves itself highly adept at picking out the complex layers of sax, guitar and percussion of David Byrne and St Vincent's *Who*. Texturally, the delivery is arguably a tad too finely polished, robbing the track of some of its natural warmth.

Hitting the sweet spot

A single unit, even if it has left and right drivers, is never going to generate properly satisfying stereo imaging and in terms of the soundfield there is a definite sweet spot. Clint hasn't quite managed to nail the dispersion so that all listeners get a satisfying blend.

In terms of sheer power, Odin has enough reserves in its tank to take on Naim's awesome Mu-so (*HFC* 391). Ok, so it can't match the latter when it comes to refinement – either in build quality or performance – but given that Odin is nearly one third of the price it is a viable alternative for anyone looking for a room-filling sound from a single speaker. **AJ**

DETAILS

PRICE
£320
TELEPHONE
01732 765105
WEBSITE
clintdigital.com

OUR VERDICT



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Chord Company

Sarsen speaker cable

APART FROM SOUNDING great, the cables that connect your power amp to your speakers often have to be routed inconspicuously around the edges of a carpet. Therefore, something that can handle the power from the amplifier has to be balanced with a cable that is both flexible and thin.

Loudspeaker cables don't get much more discreet than the Sarsen, which combines a clever mixture of materials to produce a high-performance speaker cable with a diameter of less than 4mm. Chord says not to let the diminutive size of the cables fool you. The company believes that when the correct choice of materials is used for the construction of the cables, then the result can be a tight bass that is well defined and properly tuneful, thus giving the music a real sense of drive and rhythm.

The Sarsen uses FEP (Fluorinated Ethylene Propylene) conductor insulation, housed in a 3.8mm white PVC jacket. Chord notes that the right choice of insulation makes a big difference to performance. The conductors comprise two 18 AWG multi-stranded oxygen-free copper in a twisted-pair configuration.

Bananas and spades

The cable can be terminated in 24 karat gold-plated banana plugs, direct gold-plated copper spade connectors or BFA Camcon connectors. Banana plugs are fitted to the sample on review here. As with all good-quality cables, directionality is important and the correct connection from the amplifier to the speakers is marked with small arrows on the heatshrink that is fitted to the ends of the cables and banana plugs.



In use, I find that the Sarsen delivers a very clean and open sound to my loudspeakers. Bass response does not feel constrained either. In no way do I get the feeling that the output from my amplifier is being squeezed through restrictive conductors.

So if you really have a problem with the size of a speaker cable, but don't want to compromise on performance, the Sarsen is well worth considering – and represents great value for money too. **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE
£8 per metre, plus
£96 for 8 banana
plug terminations

TELEPHONE
01980 625700

WEBSITE
chord.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



ISOkinetik

Graphite Headshell

HAILING FROM THE ISOkinetik range of accessories, this detachable headshell is made from high-density graphite (HDG) carbon formed of microscopic spheres that have a high capacity for dissipating vibrations. Unwanted vibrations can be transmitted from a cartridge through the tonearm and back again which can negatively affect sound quality, and the graphite material dissipates the mechanical vibrations and stops them from entering the audio system.

This headshell is suitable for any tonearm that features a SME-style 0.5in connector headshell, such as SME, Jelco and many other high-end tonearms. It weighs 16g and given that my standard metal headshell weighs 12g, an adjustment to my turntable's tonearm tracking force is necessary when swapping between the two. The ISOkinetik headshell has a brass finger lift and includes

a clamping arrangement at the neck to allow for easy adjustment of the cartridge azimuth alignment, should this be necessary to ensure that the stylus is perpendicular to the record. It is fitted with copper wire leads as standard, but a silver wire version is available for an additional £20.

Shelling out

In comparison with my standard metal headshell, the HDG model offers a noticeable improvement in clarity and detail. The top end is crisp and effortless without any hint of harshness. Bass is tight and well controlled and a rather nice Memoir

Jazz recording by Oscar Peterson exemplifies this with a fantastically musical and tuneful bass line, alongside the infectious rhythmic piano accompaniment.

The high pricing of this ISOkinetik Graphite headshell is a reflection of the cost of the raw HDG material, and the difficulty in machining it to such an accurate and high standard of finish. The fine engineering makes it a thing of beauty to look at and the sonic improvements offered by this upgrade make it a worthwhile investment for those with a high-end tonearm, and so it comes highly recommended. **NR**



DETAILS

PRICE
£200

TELEPHONE
0208 2418890

WEBSITE
isokinetik.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



WychWood Audionics

F3 filter system



THE BENEFITS OF effective mains treatment on the performance of a system are widely acknowledged to be worthwhile and, depending on what other activity is going on around you, can be more effective than a number of other upgrades. One of the biggest issues of mains filters is separating the effective from the decorative. While some products are extremely capable, others are simply dressed up bits of standard mains paraphernalia or worse still, not actually certified for use in their supposed role.

Enter WychWood Audionics and its range of F3 filters. Born from the rather merciless environment of internet hi-fi forums, F3 is a compacted reference to 'Foo-Free Filter.' Foo in this instance refers to marketing pseudoscience and to this end the F3 series is designed to avoid anything that might be seen as remotely foo-ish. That said, the principles that the system works under differ to the norm.

Protect yourself

The core of a F3 system is a main power strip. This takes the form of a F3 gantry in the shape of the eight-way F3 Prime for £189 or six-way F3 Lite for £149. Both are built around a bespoke two-stage RFI/EMI filtration system and 3.5kW of total power output, but the Prime adds a 16A RCBO circuit breaker, which gives nigh-on instantaneous trip protection and enormous potential current and surge protection. Both units are fitted with an IEC socket allowing you to choose the length and type of cable you need for your system.

Where the F3 series deviates from the norm is that in addition to the

main filter, you can add a second layer of filtration in the form of a F3 Micro. This is a single plug filter that sits between the Prime or Lite and a specific piece of equipment. This serves two functions. For devices that are potentially very sensitive to mains-borne interference – such as phono stages or preamplifiers – you can add an extra layer of filtration, but additionally if you have an electrically noisy piece of equipment connected to the F3, the Micro serves to prevent any nastiness making it back onto the main filter. This keeps the initial costs down, but allows for additional protection as and when you need it or can afford it.

None of the gain in refinement comes at the expense of dynamics or energy

The enclosures are aluminium and are finished to an extremely high standard with damped rubber feet for isolation and good-quality sockets. The asking price also includes a full clutch of relevant safety certification, which means that none of the hoped for boost in performance comes at the cost of reduced safety.

The F3 system has a fairly stiff initial test in that the mains treatment that it replaces for the review is IsoTek's mighty Evo 3 Sigmas (HFC 394) at roughly seven times the price of a F3 prime and a threesome of F3 Micros. The WychWood can't quite manage the exceptional drop in noise floor and general sense of effortlessness that the IsoTek can, but it produces an exceptionally capable performance for the price. Compared with any

conventional eight-way socket, there is an immediate and appreciable improvement to the separation between instruments and a reduction in overall noise levels.

The other area where it has an advantage over many similarly priced rivals is that none of this gain in refinement comes at the expense of dynamics or energy, which can occur when a mains treatment system lacks the required current delivery or has been smoothed to within an inch of its life. There is plenty of bass impact and none of the timing or sense of attack that the Naim review system excels at is blunted or removed by the F3 being in situ.

The power and the glory

The F3 Micro filters are generally effective when used selectively too. With the external XP5 XS power supply I use with the Supernait 2, the gains are slight, but the Avid Pellar phono stage and Ingenium turntable both benefit. Indeed pretty much the only black mark against the WychWood is that the F3 Micro switches from useful to compulsory when a Rega RP3 turntable is substituted as it generates a ground hum when connected to the Prime that vanishes with the Micro for reasons I'm not completely clear on.

Mains treatment is a highly contested product category, but this is a very clever and well thought out product that delivers on the promise of improved performance at a very competitive price. If you want an extremely capable and flexible mains treatment solution and you don't want to spend a fortune, this is by some margin the most effective solution I have seen. **ES**

DETAILS

PRICE
From £149

TELEPHONE
01757 706372

WEBSITE
evoaudio.uk/
wychwood.htm

OUR VERDICT



Intune Audio

ARCAM | Quad | ProAc | Musical Fidelity | Audiolab | Bowers & Wilkins | Pro-Ject
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Arcam A49 Integrated

Arcam FMJ D33 DAC
Arcam CDS27 CD Player / Streamer
Arcam FMJ A19 Integrated Amp
Arcam FMJ A39 Integrated Amp

Bowers & Wilkins 683S2
Bowers & Wilkins 684S2



KEF LS50
KEF R700

KEF Reference 1

Musical Fidelity M3Si Integrated amp
Musical Fidelity M3SCD CD player
Musical Fidelity M6Si Integrated amp
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Linn Lingo, excellent used
Linn Basik Plus, vgc+ used
Lyra Erodon Step up used
Michell Hydraulic Reference, Fluid arm, excellent used
Michell Technoarm A in black as new mint boxed used
Michell Synco/ RB250/Eraic, great condition used
Michell Focus with Hydraulic platter and Linn arm used
Michell Orbe, DC motor, SME V boxed dem
Moth phono stage dem
Musical Fidelity XLP8/V8 phono stage dem
Naim Aro, excellent boxed dem
Naim Stageline S excellent boxed dem
Naim Stageline N vgc used
Oracle Delphi, Zeta, due in used
Project PhonoBox SE phono stage, excellent value dem
Project RPM 10 turntable with arm and platform used
Project Debut Carbon, excellent boxed used
Project Xpression mk2, arm and cart used
Project RPM 4 Turntable/Arm with cover, great! used
Project Perspective, SpeedBox SE, Shure V15Mx used
Rega Planar 2, RB250, excellent boxed used
Rega RP6, exact cartridge, vgc boxed used
Roksan TMS 2 with Reference PSU, boxed as new used
Schaus Laufwerk mk2 with Unipivot tonearm, due in used
SME 3012, excellent used
SME 3009/3, excellent boxed used
SME V, excellent, boxed, due in used
SME V12, nr mint boxed dem
Technics 1210, near mint, Alphon Xenon used
Technics 1210, near mint, boxed used
Technics SL110 with SME 3009 used
Thorens TD150, SME3009 good condition new
Thorens TD160 HD turntable new
Thorens TD160, Audio Technica arm, boxed used
Thorens TD160, Rega arm, replinthead, lovely! used
Thorens TD209 turntable package dem
Thorens TD2030 Blue turntable new
Thorens TD125 c/w SME3009, excellent used
Tom Evans Groove, 0.85m/100 ohm, excellent used
Townshend Elite Rock c/w Excalibur, boxed excellent used
Transfiguration Orpheus L, good condition used
VDH Colibri M/C cartridge dem
VDH Condor M/C cartridge dem
Voyd, Voyd, split phase psu and RB900 used
VPI Scout, JMW arm excellent used
Wilson Benesch Act 1 Tonearm, nr mint superb used

Radio/Recorders

Arcam Alpha 10DAB tuner, excellent used
Arcam T61, vgc+ used
Cyrus FM7, vgc+ used
Denon TU1800DAB, excellent boxed used
Musical Fidelity ASDAB, sealed box used
Naim NAT03, excellent used
Naim NAT01 and NAPST chrome, serviced, vgc+ used
Naim NAT101 & SNAPS, excellent. £500 Naim service used
Nakamichi DR10, excellent used
Nakamichi DR1, vgc used
Nakamichi BX2, excellent used
Nakamichi S80, near mint boxed used
Pioneer CT91a reference used
Pux 701ES DAB Tuner used
Revox PR99, crated used
Tandberg TCD440a, superb! used
TEAC V8000S, super used
TEAC X1000M, serviced, superb used
TEAC X10R, serviced, superb used
Technics RS1500 in flightcase near mint used
Rotel RT1080, excellent used
Yamaha KX1200 excellent used
Yamaha CT7000, vgc used

Amplifiers

dem Call
Almaro 318B with cage, excellent boxed used
AMR 777 Integrated dem
Anthem Integrated 2 Valve Integrated used
Arcam P90, vgc+ used
Arcam A85, vgc+ used
Arcam Alpha 8P, vgc+ boxed used
Arcam Alpha 7, vgc+ boxed used
Arcam C31 preamplifier, remote excellent used
ArtAudio Jota 520b, excellent used
Audio Flight Pre and Flight 50 Class A power used
Audio Analogue Bellini VB and Donizetti Cento, superb used
Audio Analogue Puccini SE amp, Black dem
Audio Analogue Class A Integrated - HUGE! dem
Audio Project ap60 integrated dem
Audio Research Ref 610 Monoblocks, vgc boxed used
Audiolab 8000Q/Ms, silver, excellent boxed used
Audiolab 8000C excellent boxed used
Audiolab 8000P vgc boxed used
Audiolab 8200A vgc boxed dem
Audion Sterling Plus KT88 Integrated boxed dem
Avali Lab Series Pre/Power, excellent remote used
BAT VK50se preamplifier, vgc+ used
Bryston 4Bsst2, excellent boxed, used
Bryston B100sst excellent boxed used
Chapter Audio Couplet Power Amplifier dem
Chord Electronics CPM2650 Integrated, ex boxed used
Chord Electronics CPA3200/SPM1200E used
Consonance Cyber 10 Integrated dem
Consonance Ref 8.8 integrated valve amp dem
Consonance Cyber 211 monos c/w Pavane valves dem
Creek OBH21, excellent used
Creek 4330mk2, excellent used
Cyrus acA7.5, excellent boxed remote used
Cyrus Power, vgc+ used
Cyrus XPower, excellent boxed used
Danzel NHB108B, excellent £20k+ new dem
Denon PMA1500AE, excellent used
Graaf GM50B Mk11 Integrated dem
Graf GM100 valve power amp used
Jolida Envoy 211 Monoblocks, £7k new, superb used
Leema Hydra 2, vgc+ boxed used
Leema Elements Amplifier, excellent dem
Leema Tucana 2, excellent dem
LFD L51 lineage, reasonable shape used
Linn Majik Kontrol & 4100 Power, excellent used
Mclintosh C22 & MC275 Commemoratives, boxed used
Mclintosh MA5100, excellent! used
Meridian 501V preamp, excellent used
Meridian 501 Pre used
Micromega IA100, great integrated, boxed dem
Moon W7RS, excellent used
Musical Fidelity M3i, excellent boxed, REDUCED used
Musical Fidelity A1000 Two box monster Integrated! used
Musical Fidelity A1 FPB Preamp and PSU, excellent used
Musical Fidelity 550K Superchargers, sealed boxes! used
Musical Fidelity X-T100 Integrated dem
Musical Fidelity Pre 8 and 2 x MA65 chrome fronted used
Naim NAP100, vgc+ used
Naim NAP82, excellent boxed used
Naim NAP250, olive excellent boxed used
Naim NAP250, very late olive excellent used
Naim NAP42.5/NAP110, vgc used
Naim NAP250, excellent late olive boxed used
Naim NAP150, excellent boxed used
Naim NAP202 with NAPSC, boxed used
Naim AV2/NAPV175, remote, excellent boxed used
Naim NAP180, excellent boxed used
Naim NAIT 5, excellent remote boxed used
Naim NAP150, excellent boxed used
Naim NAP155XS, excellent boxed used
Naim NAP90/NAP92, vgc used
Naim NAP250, chrome bumper used
Neutonia Salis Integrated, classy Restek built used
Onix OA32 Integrated, excellent used
Onix OA25 Integrated, excellent used
Pathos Logos Integrated dem
Placette Audio Passive Linestage dem
Prima Luna Prologue 3 Preamplifier vgc+ used
Prima Luna Prologue 2 Integrated, good shape dem
Prima Luna Prologue 3 Preamplifier, REDUCED dem
Puresound L300 valve preamp dem
Quad 99 Pre/Power, excellent, remote, Quadlink used
Quad 405, from used
Quad 33/303, vgc, serviced used
Resolution Audio Opus 21 S80 Integrated used
Renaissance RA02 Monos, vgc and excellent value used
Roksan Kandy K2 Power, nr mint boxed used
Sugden Masterclass Monoblocks, in titanium used
Sugden A21a line Integrated used
Sugden Masterclass Pre/Monos in Graphite used
Sugden Masterclass Pre/Monos in Titanium used
Sugden Masterclass Integrated in Titanium dem
Tag/McLaren 60iRV, excellent boxed used
Talk Electronics Hurricane/Tornado Pre/Power used
Tannoy TA1400, excellent boxed used
TEAC Distinction A1000 Integrated, ex demo used
Trio L07C good condition used
Union Research Preudio Integrated, excellent boxed used
Union Research Simply Italy Integrated dem
Union Research SZK Integrated, excellent dem
Yamaha AS500, excellent boxed used
Yamaha A-S3000, nr mint boxed dem

Digital

used 1199
Arcam Alpha 8, excellent used
Arcam Alpha 8se, excellent boxed used
Arcam CD17, excellent used
Arcam CD73, vgc+, remote used
Arcam CD37, remote excellent, reduced used
Atoll 100SE DAC used
Audio Alchemy digital transmission interface/psu used
Audio Analogue Maestro SE CD used
Audio Analogue Paganini (later model) dem
Audio Synthesis Transcend CDT (Modded SONY) dem
Ayre Evolution DVD dem
Bryston BDA1 DAC, excellent boxed dem
Cary Audio CD306 Pro, near mint boxed used
Chord Audio Sonnet CD & Nevo remote dem
Chord 'One' CD player dem
Chord Qute EX DAC, excellent boxed dem
Consonance CD120 Linear used
Consonance CD2.2, new sealed new
Consonance Droplet, vgc+ dem
Creek Destiny Integrated CD player, boxed dem
Cyrus Discmaster/Dacmaster, vgc+ used
Cyrus CDX12, mint boxed just back from Cyrus used
Cyrus CD8, boxed remote used
Cyrus CD7Q chip, vgc+ used
Cyrus DAD3, remote, vgc+ dem
Cyrus CD8se, boxed remote used
Denon DNP720AE, near mint boxed dem
Etron Acute 3, mint boxed used
Exposure 2010CD, remote used
Goldenote Kala, near mint boxed dem
Kela Design Katana cd player (no remote) used
Kelvin Labs DAC, rare used
Leema Elements CD player sealed box new
Linn Majik CD, just factory serviced, excellent! used
Linn Karik 3, excellent boxed remote used
Marantz CD6003, excellent boxed used
Marantz CD17, remote, excellent used
Marantz CD63K1, remote, boxed excellent used
Marantz NA7004, nr mint boxed used
Meridian 506/20 with MSR used
Meridian G08, remote boxed used
Meridian 563 DAC reasonable condition used
Meridian 500 Transport, excellent boxed used
Meridian 602/606 combo with remote used
Metrum Acoustics Octave NOS DAC used
Micromega MyDAC, excellent boxed used
Micromega Leader, remote used
Musical Fidelity 3.5 CD dem
Musical Fidelity KW SACD, new laser, upgraded ps used
Musical Fidelity M1 DAC, excellent boxed dem
Musical Fidelity M1 CDTB dem
Musical Fidelity M3 black boxed dem
Musical Fidelity M1Clic dem
Musical Fidelity XDac, excellent used
Myrryad Z20DAC, excellent boxed used
Naim CD5i, excellent boxed used
Naim DAC, nr mint boxed dem
Naim CD5si, near mint boxed dem
Naim CD53, excellent boxed, remote used
Naim CDi, excellent boxed used
Naim CD3.5, vgc used
Naim CDX2, excellent boxed used
Naim CDX2, 2009, excellent boxed used
Oppe BDP83se, excellent boxed dem
Peachtree DAC1, excellent dem
Prima Luna Prologue 8, ex demo boxed dem
Quad 99CDP, excellent REDUCED dem
Rega Planet 2000, excellent used
Rega Apollo R, excellent used
Rega Apollo 35th Anniversary, excellent used
Rega Io DAC, excellent used
Rega Saturn, excellent boxed used
Roksan Kandy K2CD, excellent boxed used
Rotel RCD965BX, excellent boxed used
Sugden Masterclass CD original version used
TAG McLaren DAC 20, excellent dem
Tube Technology Fulcrum CD transport dem
Tube Technology Fulcrum DAC (inc DAC64 chip) dem
Yamaha CD-S3000 near mint dem

Loudspeakers

new 799
Acoustic Energy AE 1 Mk11 in Gloss black dem
Acoustic Energy AE 1 Mk11 in Gloss black used
Apogee Duetta Signature (Reality rebuilt) Superb used
Art Audio Siletto in Maple dem
Aspara Acoustics HL6 in Oak new
Audio Physic Tempo in Cherry, fair dem
Audiovector Si3, near mintboxed dem
Call Audiovector Si3 Super, near mint boxed dem
Aurum Cantus Music Goddess in Gloss black dem
Avalon Ascendant Mk2, mint crated, £10k new used
B&W 805s in cherry, excellent used
B&W CDM1se in cherry, excellent used
B&W CDM1nt boxed, excellent used
B&W DM601S3, vgc+ used
B&W DM602S3, vgc+ used
Castle Howard, excellent used
Crest Chester vgc later versions used
Davone Ray, vgc in walnut, great! used
Eminent Technology LFT8, some marks used
Epos M22 in Cherry dem
Ferguson Hill FH0078 & 'desktop' audio set boxed used
Final Audio Electrostatics with ES400 Sub dem
Focal Electra 1008, mint boxed dem
Focal Electra 1028, mint boxed dem
Focal Electra 1038, mint boxed dem
Gallo Nucleus Reference 2, rare, superb & boxed used
Heco Celan 500 in Silver dem
Heco Celan 300 in Mahogany dem
Heco Statement in gloss black, £3k new dem
Kef Q100, brand new, sealed box new
Kudos C10, boxed vgc and cheap used
Leema Xandia Mk1 in black new
Leema Xero in Mahogany dem
Living Voice IBX R2 in stunning Zebrano, excellent used
Mark & Daniel Maximus with treble extenders E2500sh dem
Mark & Daniel Mini in Grey inc. Marble cabinets. dem
Martin Logan Mosaic, excellent boxed used
Martin Logan Quests, superb sound, reduced used
Martin Logan Prodigy, excellent used
Martin Logan Summit X, ex demo dem
Mission 782se nr mint boxed used
Mission Freedom 5, vgc in Rosewood used
Mission 752, rosewood excellent used
Monitor Audio R58 excellent dem
Monitor Audio GX300, ebony near mint boxed new
Monitor Audio GX 5.1 Home Cinema set BARGAIN used
Monopulse Model S new
Monopulse Model A speakers new
Monopulse Model C new
Musical Fidelity MCB Floorstanders, boxed vgc+ used
Naim Nsat x4, NCent and NSub, boxed excellent used
Naim Ovator S400, excellent dem
Naim Credo, excellent used
Naim SBL, vgc+ used
Naim SBL mk2, vgc+ used
Nola KO speakers in black dem
Nola Micro Grand Reference inc stands, £15k new dem
PMC GB1, excellent, new boxes used
PMC Twenty 21, excellent boxed, ex dealer demo used
PMC Twenty 22, excellent boxed, ex dealer demo used
PMC Twenty 23, excellent boxed, used
Proac D38 in Yew, boxed fair used
Proac D28, good condition in cherry boxed used
Proac D18, good condition in cherry boxed used
Proac Studio 140 mk2, nr mint boxed dem
Proac Studio 110, excellent boxed dem
Proac Studio 115, excellent boxed dem
Quad 21L Floorstander used
Quad 11L2, excellent boxed used
Red Rose Rosebud £2.5k new with (used) stands dem
REL Sterling, black ash vgc used
Revel M22, excellent boxed new
Revolver RW45 floorstander in Cherry dem
Revolver Cygnis Gold in Black, £14k new dem
Sonus Faber Elipsa, superb boxed used
Sonus Faber Crema Auditor, boxed used
Spendor A6, in Walnut excellent boxed used
Sunfire True Sub subwoofer dem
Tannoy Prestige Autograph Mini, ex boxed used
Thiel CS7.2, vgc, just refurbished... used
Totem Mini Signature, boxed near mint used
Totem Mite in black dem
Totem Rokk in mahogany, excellent used
Totem Staf, near mint boxed new
Usher N6311, transit damaged to clear dem
Usher Mini Dancer 2 in Maple, excellent boxed dem
Vandersteen Quattro 2, accessories, transformers etc used
Velodyne DD18 sub in black dem
Veritas H3 (Lowfiver drivers) in gloss black, 100db dem
Wilson Audio Duette, excellent dem
Wilson Benesch Actor floorstanders dem

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Black Rhodium

Sonata VS-1 analogue interconnect

PRICED AT £500 for a 1m pair, the Sonata VS-1 interconnect is positioned as a middling proposition in Black Rhodium's comprehensive stable of cables. Extensive attention to detail appears to have been applied to every element of its design and construction. At its heart are two silver-plated copper cores for positive and negative signal flows. Some audiophiles claim copper cables give more satisfying bass weight and pure silver cables provide subjectively sweeter, more extended treble, but many would agree that, done well, silver-plated copper can deliver the best of both worlds. The cable cores are connected in opposite directions as Black Rhodium claims from extensive listening tests that this provides the lowest noise floor. These cores are also twisted to reduce their surface area and help reject unwanted radio frequency interference (RFI) that congests many households from wi-fi, radio signals and mobile phones.

Taking charge

PTFE insulation is used for its claimed low dielectric loss and low distortion characteristics – “reducing the impact of subtle but detrimental time-smearing of musical signals”. Ambitiously, Black Rhodium has set out to reduce any issues that could be created from friction between internal insulation and the outer screen by the inclusion of a conductive, ‘low microphony’ layer that is designed to dissipate any potential electrical charge that could be generated from the cable being flexed or vibrated, even at a microscopic level.

Black Rhodium has deployed one more weapon against distortion. The VS part of the product name stands for ‘vibration stabiliser’, which is performed through the addition of hefty, polished weights that securely clamp to the cable half way along. These act as extra mass to increase the inertia of each cable. This stability is intended to reduce the distortion caused by cables being vibrated by components or



airborne sound waves. The stabilisers can be loosened and repositioned to increase effectiveness and convenience (the cable needs to be protected at any new weight position to ensure the clamping grub screw doesn't damage the screening).

After running the cables in, the immediate impression from playing a lossless rip of Wild Beast's *Wanderlust* is a very clean delivery with highly extended treble and firm, well-defined bass. The opening snare drum shimmers with high-frequency detail, while the synth bass line has great depth and a juicy, snarling menace from sharply defined leading edges. Backing vocals build beautifully in transparent silky layers as Hayden Thorpe's voice leaps forward in the soundstage. Imaging is extremely stable and deep and I sense this is from so much of Black Rhodium's anti-distortion know-how being combined into one cable.

Switching to The Staves *Black and White* on CD reveals real purity in delivering the close harmonies of these talented sisters. Some competitive cables would appear to have more fulsome warmth around vocal frequencies, but the cleanliness of this midband is very compelling and almost certainly more accurate.

Playing a superb HDCD recording of Tatiana Troyanos singing *L'amour Est*

Un Oiseau Rebelle from *Carmen* demonstrates just how well the Sonata deals with large swings in musical dynamics. The intimate vocals rise softly out of an inky black soundstage. Quiet, yearning emotional nuances are conveyed with real subtlety and increasing intensity, but the full dynamics of the London Philharmonic Orchestra are effortlessly expressed in a way that can deceive you to the large dynamic range you are listening to.

Feature comforts

The Sonata VS-1 is fully loaded with features and should bring positive virtues to almost any system. It's rather tempting to think a £500 interconnect is only appropriate for higher-end systems, but more modest systems can be lifted as convincingly as upgrading a source component or amplifier. Both RCA and XLR terminations deliver similar high-quality results. The vibration stabilising weights are beneficial, but may need finessing to fit your system layout. Refined, extended treble, firm, deep bass and a beautifully coherent and communicative midband seamlessly flowing from very dark silences demonstrates that Black Rhodium has successfully addressed distortion. Thoroughly recommended. **CW**

DETAILS

PRICE
£500 for 1m pair
(RCA or XLR)

TELEPHONE
01332 342233

WEBSITE
blackrhodium.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



audio affair . co . uk



BUYING FROM A DEDICATED HI-FI DEALER

When it comes to putting together your hi-fi, only an experienced specialist can give you the help and advice you need and let you try before you buy

It's difficult to imagine there are that many people that haven't purchased something off of the internet at one time or another. Unlike your local high street or shopping centre, shopping online offers a wealth of choice and is invariably considerably cheaper. In fact it's actually possible to live comfortably without ever leaving your home, using just your credit card and laptop to provide you with all the food and amenities you could ever need. And hi-fi equipment similarly follows this trend, with every brand under the sun available at the click of a button and often at prices that are lower than you might find in physical bricks and mortar premises.

But just because you can, it doesn't necessarily mean that you should. While it might seem anachronistic to visit a real-life store when you could have something delivered to your door with a few clicks of the mouse, there are solid reasons why using the services of a reputable hi-fi dealer makes the most sense. If buying a product covers three stages (system matching, demo-ing and installing), dealers can assist you with all of them.

Whether you are looking to buy a complete system or simply change a component in an existing one, the likelihood is that you'll have a budget in mind and will have already started to put together a shortlist of likely candidates based on reviews, positive online comments and word of mouth. It is possible to select components based on this method, order them up unseen and then assemble them to

There is no substitute for listening to a system to hear what it is capable of

form a decent system – after all, you'd imagine that putting a five star-rated source, amp and speakers together would yield a five star setup? In reality, this isn't always the case (see *System Synergy*) and furthermore is 'decent' all you are striving for when greatness can be achieved?

Personal touch

Good dealers have brand portfolios that have taken years to collate and this is done with a view to finding



Going to a physical premises is the best decision you can make

manufacturers that compliment one another in a way that is greater than the sum of their parts. On more than a few occasions, we have listened to systems with dealers that combine equipment that we would not have dreamed of putting together based on their on-paper suitability. We have heard tiny standmount loudspeakers fill exceedingly large rooms and towering floorstanders behave themselves surprisingly well in confined spaces. Not only did the results sound good, they were far better than more accepted combinations of components. There is no short cut in gaining the experience to combine equipment in this way, and it can be tremendously beneficial to any hi-fi fan.

Neither is this an experience that's dependent solely on the dealer's

At higher price points, many dealers will be in a position to offer a home demo

personal tastes. If you are the sort of person who strives to listen to rock at volume levels you can feel as well as hear, you are going to need electronics that are rather different to someone striving to recreate a simple choral piece at low volumes. Once again, a good dealer should be able to tweak the components used in a system to best suit your preferences.

Try before you buy

The final proof of the efficacy of their suggestions is listening to the finished article before you part with any cash. The ability to demo equipment is perhaps the single most compelling reason why you should always consider buying from a dealer. Beyond measurements, preferences, and even beyond previous experience, there is no substitute for sitting down and listening to a system to hear what it is capable of for yourself. What might have worked well for previous customers with similar budget and requirements as you could be a non-starter when you sit down to listen to it. When you consider the amount of money you could be parting with, this is vital to know and makes the difference between long-term satisfaction and buyer's remorse. If you listen to the results of your consultation and like what you hear, so much the better but it also offers a starting point from which components can be swapped with a view to finding the perfect setup.

At higher price points, many dealers will be in a position to offer a home demonstration. Making use of such a service is perhaps the single most effective means of securing a system that will consistently deliver the performance that you are looking for. Speakers in particular are hugely room-dependent devices and being able to test them in the space you intend to use them is the only sure-fire way to get the results that you want.

Once you have handed over your hard-earned cash, your hi-fi dealer can still be of use to you. While a basic system of a CD player, amp and speakers might not prove too taxing for you to install, many dealers have amassed considerable expertise in the masterful art of turntable setup and help to avoid expensive mistakes if not carried out properly. If you are taking your first steps into computer audio, many dealers now have the experience and means to assist you with getting up and running at home, which for many will be very welcome in avoiding time-consuming setups and frustrations when you get home and unpack your equipment – and some dealers will even budget to include the required ancillaries in your system to ensure best results.

A dealer is for life...

The skillset that a good dealer possesses is not limited to buying a system the first time out. Indeed, the more you use a dealer, the better they can tailor their suggestions to suit you. If you choose to add a new source to an existing system, the dealer that supplied the original equipment is going to have an advantage in selecting suitable candidates to best match the components that you already have. The results of your demos can be squirrelled away and referred to for future recommendations.

As your relationship develops, your dealer will be able to better work out what is a worthwhile update for you and what might look good on paper, but fail to deliver in reality. In some cases, dealers have evolved such effective and consistent upgrade programs that systems they sell are instantly recognisable as being theirs pretty much on sight. This might sound like a one-size-fits-all approach, but when combined with the basic choices and decisions on equipment made at the start of the system, this insider knowledge can produce extremely effective results that have found dozens of happy owners.

Unlike an online transaction, the relationship with a dealer doesn't have

SYSTEM SYNERGY

One of the most indefinable areas in the successful assembly of a great system is the relationship between components. Logic dictates that taking our recommendations for a piece of source equipment, amplifier and speakers while paying a small amount of attention to the claimed performance to avoid glaring incompatibility will most likely result in a great-sounding system. Sometimes this is the case, but maddeningly just as often the product of this combination doesn't deliver the performance that you think it should. Synergy is a peculiar thing and very often what creates a great-sounding system is a complex blend of different components that's not necessarily made up of what you might expect.

Achieving this synergy is usually achieved one of three ways; luck, trial and error and experience. We are all due a little luck from time to time, but hoping it will put in an appearance at the same time as you spend out on a system might not be the best idea you've ever had. Trial and error can get a little expensive and wearisome, which leaves us with experience. The single most accessible receptacle of this experience is a good hi-fi dealer. They have carried out the trial and error so that you don't have to.

So does this mean our reviews aren't useful? Of course not. What we set out to do is judge a piece of equipment on its own merits and bring new and exciting components to your attention. We will identify flaws and bugs that the product might have and if we feel it is a strong example of the genre at the price point. With both our *Dealer Visit* and *Beautiful System* features we explore the wider synergy of components, but there's plenty more to experience and tailor to your specific requirements by visiting your local hi-fi dealer.



Matching components holds the key to a successful setup

to end once you have found a system that you are happy with and active stores will host open days from manufacturers they represent. This can be a great way to help give you some useful suggestions on where you take your system in the future, or show off the latest technology developments and tips. The idea of added value means different things to different people, but dealers should be a resource that keeps you happy with your existing equipment while helping to shape where you might take it further down the line.

When things go wrong

Nobody wants to consider the possibility of a piece of equipment they are spending substantial sums of money on going wrong, but the reality of complex electronic equipment is that it is not immortal. One of the biggest advantages that dealers offer is the ability to help you secure the best aftersales service possible in the event of any problems. In some circumstances, dealers can do an impressive amount of diagnostic and repair work on site, but mainly



System matching is vital and a dealer's range can help here

they offer a logistic base where manufacturers can collect and return equipment to, and ensure that nothing goes wrong with the process.

Another service that is worth considering is trade-ins. In these days of ebay, forum classifieds (and indeed our very own *Reader Classified* pages, starting on p122) and various other methods of selling equipment yourself, a trade-in can look a little self defeating as the dealer has to offer a price that includes the ability to mark up and sell the product on, but there are some logical reasons to consider using the facility. The first is that you can be given an agreed price then and there with no comebacks. The second is that the trade-in money can be directly applied to anything you are buying from the dealer. Of course, items that have been traded in to dealers can often be a very worthwhile thing to consider in your own system building – especially if it came from them in the first place, meaning that its age and provenance is easy to prove.

Cost versus benefits

The services and benefits that a good dealer can offer are considerable, but the reality of running and maintaining a physical premises (some of which are stunning buildings in their own right) means that a bricks and mortar retailer is going to struggle to be the absolute

cheapest when you start looking for prices online. The simple act of offering a consultation, let alone a demonstration can take a considerable amount of time, which must be budgeted for as must demonstration stock, media, supporting equipment and additional members of staff.

How you view the 'worth' of these costs is obviously down to you, but we

A good dealer should be able to tweak the components to best suit your preferences

would contend that spending a little more to secure exactly what you want beats missing the target and spending out over and over again. If you and your dealer can get a handle on exactly what you are looking for in terms of sound and performance, you should be able to achieve far more bang for your buck even allowing for the price premium incurred compared with buying online (see *Cutting a deal*).

Ultimately, people will ascribe different values to the services that dealers offer and some of you will not feel that they are particularly applicable. In our *Dealer Visit* features we have seen systems for under £1,000 all the way through to the

CUTTING A DEAL

All dealers have overheads to meet and businesses to run so simply strolling through the door and asking for money off is unlikely to be a particularly popular strategy. This being said, it is not impossible to secure a good deal when you visit a physical dealer premises.

The path of least resistance is to check with the dealer beforehand to see if they are running any offers on one or more of the brands they represent. Manufacturers often offer incentives to dealers that are passed on to you and it may be that one of these dovetails with your budget and requirements. On a more localised level, it is also worth checking if a dealer has a product that you are interested in either ex-display or as a trade in. A little research time online can often find at least one example of a relatively mainstream product being offered at a reduction.

Dealers will often – within reason – strive to secure your custom so if you have discussed your budget and there is a small gap between that and a successful transaction, you may be able to negotiate. Please note, this isn't a given. A product in high demand is very unlikely to secure a meaningful discount because if you aren't prepared to buy it at the list price, somebody else will. You may find, though, that accessory items and products that are nearer the end of their production runs can be more negotiable.

Not all negotiation is necessarily financial, though. As mentioned previously, where physical dealers can really assist you is in saving your time and sanity. If you are buying a category of product for the first time – network players and turntables being especially applicable in this instance – securing the assistance and knowhow of a dealer in getting it up and running can be far more valuable than shaving a few pounds off of the list price.

cusps of half a million pounds. Some have several hundred watts at their disposal while others barely break into double figures. They span a bewildering variety of sizes and functions, but what unites them is the simple, unadulterated joy they bring to music. If you are after the best possible sound for your pound, we would factor in the small costs of having a dealer help you on your way. You are assured the very best advice, customer service and support, and whichever way you look at it the results are unquestionably worth it ●



Getting a demo is one of the main advantages over buying kit online

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DESTINATION: DORSET

A pet food store is the last place **Rob Lane** expected to get his vinyl fix, but among the dog food are *Pet Sounds*, *Love Cats* and *Super Fury Animals*...

My first memory of vinyl records was sitting on my father's knee putting 45s onto his Pye radiogram," explains Mark Dicker, owner of the Doghouse record store in Bridport, Dorset.

"He really liked Johnny Cash, Jim Reeves and the Stones. He had a real ear for a hit and always surprised me with the music he liked; very eclectic for the late sixties and early seventies. Later, when we moved into a pub, he used to give me the singles out of the jukebox when he changed them every week."

We're talking next to rows and rows of vinyl, deep in the bowels of Mark's unusual second-hand vinyl emporium in Dorset's 'Notting Hill-on-sea', and Mark's on a roll.

"The first 45s I actually paid for in 1972 were *Life on Mars* by Bowie – still an all-time favourite – and *Hocus Pocus* by Focus. I was a drummer in a local band by then and loved the jazz-tinged, Buddy Rich-influenced drumming by Focus' Pierre van der Linden."

Mark certainly couldn't be accused of lacking enthusiasm for music and when you consider the ingenuity he's had to employ to ensure he can keep selling vinyl, it's obvious that this is a man who loves the format as much as he loves the tunes imprinted within the grooves.

Doghouse, you see, only exists thanks to the dietary requirements of pets and the love and generosity of their owners. Hidden (there didn't used to be a Doghouse sign above the door) at the back of the beautifully adorned

Animal House 'pet and animal supplies' store, Doghouse is a labour of love for Mark and his musician/composer assistant George. There's certainly no real money to be made from second-hand vinyl; Mark makes his living from the pet supplies.

"I have a great admiration for anyone who runs or is thinking of running a record store – they must be mad," he says. "The decent ones are always run as a lifestyle thing, mainly by music fans, where there's no expectation to make a genuine living. You can always tell when a shop is run totally for profit because there is no coherence and no soul."

Mark initially set up a record store in Bridport's twice-weekly street markets in 2005

There's plenty of soul here. And rock, electronica, pop, jazz – the lot! But there's bags of the soul that Mark's referring to as well. Set up in three small rooms – two for LPs, one for singles – Doghouse's walls are covered in classic and contemporary rock and pop posters, testament to his love of music.

It's also, as you'd expect, stuffed full of lovely vinyl, so many cuts that it's difficult to really know where to start. I kick off with a flick through the £1 bargain section and am not

disappointed, coming away with decent copies of Scritti Politti's *Cupid & Psyche 85*, The Waterboys' *This is the Sea*, Roxy Music's *Flesh And Blood* and *Slade Smashes* (greatest hits). Two hours later, I am still there, fingers aching, and am still only in the first room! This is a record store that demands your time; somewhere to while away an afternoon.

Mark began his record shop journey in 1998 in Bude, Cornwall. When his restaurant ran into difficulties, he needed to find a way to make ends meet, and the confluence of a sizable record collection and sudden availability of a rental unit gave the answer.

Arcade fire

"I lost the restaurant and needed to do something, fast. A small unit came up for rent in an arcade in Bude so I decided with a little help from friends Archie and Andy that I could sell some of my then vast collection of records," explains Mark. "I had, at the time, approximately 14,000 singles and something in the region of 8,000 LPs – all vinyl of course."

This worked well, up to a point. The problem was that as many people who wanted to buy wanted to sell, so it was hard to turn any sort of profit – even frequenting the region's record fairs. So Mark decided to also sell by mail order via *Record Collector* magazine, and subsequently then online. It was around this time, in 2002, that personal



Push past the dog chews, cat food and animal beds and there's a wealth of vinyl to discover



The man behind Doghouse, Mark Dicker

reasons led Mark to leave Bude and head east to Dorset. He settled in Bridport, itself with something of a reputation among musicians and music fans alike – Billy Bragg lives locally, Bobby Gillespie is a regular visitor, and the renowned Electric Palace venue (an old twenties opera house, then cinema) – over the road from Doghouse – has seen the likes of Johnny Marr and PJ Harvey gracing its stage.

Mark initially set up a record store for Bridport's twice-weekly street markets in 2005, but when the owner of the adjacent pet stall passed away, he saw a way of making a reasonable living while still running a "lifestyle-choice" record store.

"After the old boy died, everyone who passed my record stall would ask for him, and it became obvious to me that there was money to be made. I decided to ask his wife if I could buy his stall and stock, and the next thing I know I'm running a joint store with pet supplies and records!"

Pet Sounds

By 2012, Mark had moved onto bigger and better things, ditching the stall and opening Animal House just over the road. Initially set up purely as a pet shop, it wasn't long before he had started to mix Pedigree Chum with pedigree vinyl.

A rental storage unit had been in use for the original pet stall, but once Animal House was open and there was no need to store stock elsewhere, he initially utilised the facility to store his vinyl and sell online. But it was cheaper to start storing the vinyl at the back of Animal House, and a natural progression to start selling some of the stock from the shop itself. Soon, Mark was running a dedicated record store alongside the pet shop, hardly a Lennon and McCartney partnership but successful nonetheless.

Surprisingly the name Doghouse has nothing to do with the pet shop. Mark's (now ex) wife

came up with the monicker because he was always in the doghouse with her for various misdemeanours! But the name is very appropriate and both pet shop and record store have regular, dedicated patrons.

According to Mark, as well as confused pet owners who find themselves surrounded by vinyl having taken a wrong turn past the cat litter, Doghouse is frequented by a "cross section of society".

"There isn't a particular type of person who comes in to buy records – not like the old days when it was usually middle-aged men," Mark explains. "We get young, old, male and female customers – and rock royalty too. Alan Hull from Lindisfarne and American jazz keyboardist Darius Brubeck are two of the nicest people I've had the pleasure of meeting. They were both performing locally and popped in for a browse. Bobby Gillespie is a regular – his dog (a lovely, grey Staffy) loves to pee in the shop!"

Gillespie bought Benny Hill's *Ernie (The Fastest Milkman In The West)* during one Christmas visit, along with the usual treats for his dog and although he's "always friendly", he's invariably in a rush due to rushing back to look after his children.

Mark's personal collection of vinyl may not be as big as it was before he started selling his records in Bude, but it's still vast and, as a result of running Doghouse, always in flux. He usually retains between 1,000-2,000, 500 of which are "really rare". Mark has never been "that fussed" about original pressings, but he "really, really likes" first pressings of ASD, SXL, SD and SAX classical labels: "Just amazing records and recordings at the pinnacle."

He has a theory as to why vinyl has seen a resurgence recently, and it's one worthy of the streets of bohemian Bridport.

"I think it's to do with humans being analogue, random creatures in what is essentially an analogue universe. A record

▶ KING OF VINYL

Mark bought his first LP from Rhythm Records in Redhill Surrey: *In The Court Of The Crimson King* by King Crimson – although it wasn't actually for him. (He also bought *Autobahn* by Kraftwerk at Rhythm Records long before it became a hit: "It had a picture sleeve; very rare now.")

"I had borrowed my friend Michael's copy of *In the Court Of The Crimson King*, and being a complete idiot, had managed to scratch it. So, I replaced it with the copy bought at Rhythm Records and kept Michael's. I still love the album and regularly listen to it on my Brennan, having ripped it to avoid playing the original vinyl too often."

Other favourite LPs include *Foxtrot* by Genesis and *Moving Waves* by Focus – the latter surviving being thrown off the school bus by the local bully in the early seventies.

Mark's favourite artists include: Elvis, Billy Fury, The Stones, The Who, early Fleetwood Mac, Van Morrison, King Crimson, Yes, Gabriel-era Genesis, Santana, Pink Floyd (up until and including *The Wall*), Kraftwerk, Supertramp, Weather Report, Miles Davis, Robert Palmer and John Martyn.

"I love Weather Report mainly due to Jaco Pastorius' bass playing – to die for," enthuses Mark. "Genesis because of Peter Gabriel, The Who 'cos of Keith Moon – best rock drummer ever – old Fleetwood Mac due to Peter Greene – I've got his signature on 2001's *Show-Biz Blues* compilation."

But Mark's all-time favourite artist is Van Morrison and he's lucky enough to have met the legendary Northern Irishman.

"I was selling vinyl at the Bath record fair in 1998, when Van Morrison came over to my stall. He bought a copy of *The Newport Folk Festival 1963: The Evening Concerts: Vol. 1!* Shook my hand and said 'nice one'. It's not every day you get to shake the hand of your hero."

Mark's passion for buying new music eased off during the eighties, as he was busy having a family, but the mid nineties pricked up his ears again, with dance and grunge making the biggest impression: "I remember the first time I saw Nirvana on *The Jonathan Ross show* – amazing and still amazing today."

But it was *Leftism* by Leftfield that really renewed Mark's interest in new music, opening the floodgates for vinyl 'dance' purchases of Faithless, Underworld, Chemical Brothers, Orbital, The Orb and Ozric Tentacles.

"I have never stopped buying vinyl," says Mark. "Recent new cuts include Tinariwen's latest, *Emmaar*, the new Floyd LP and *The Unthanks' Mount the Air*."

And Mark remains seduced by second-hand vinyl, regularly appropriating discs as they come into store. Recent 'finds' being 1968's *Shades Of Deep Purple* (the band's 'phase 2' singer is based in nearby Lyme Regis), the *Mission Impossible* and *Man From Uncle* soundtracks plus Roy Budd's *Soldier Blue*.

exists in the real world, is tactile, smells nice and combines music, art and words in one concise package.

"Digital is alien. If we lose the ability to generate electricity then all the digital bits of kit we own become redundant. Using a bit of ingenuity, people will always be able to put together an instrument to play a record (clock, needle, piece of cardboard). DACs are great, but why go to all that bother when you can just spin some vinyl?"

You don't need to own a pet to find an excuse to pop into Doghouse, but shopping for furry friends is often the reason why people, myself included, make that first visit. Once bitten by the Doghouse bug, however, you'll be forever smitten. Just don't expect to find any Pet Shop Boys – I didn't! ●

WIN:

Three sets of in-ear headphones

We've got bundles of in-ear headphones to give away to 14 lucky winners

Pop quiz time. What's the biggest growing sector within the hi-fi industry of the last four or five years? Bluetooth adaptors? Hi-res music streamers? Portable music players? No, give up? Would it come as a surprise if we were to reveal that headphones is the answer? Probably not given the fact that the rest of the page is filled with pictures of them... Headphones have always been popular with hi-fi enthusiasts as the perfect way to listen at home without disturbing others or as an effective solution to making the daily commute to and from work less of a drag. But recently they have become big business and pretty much every serious hi-fi manufacturer (and some not so serious ones) have jumped onto the bandwagon in an effort to grab their share of the profits.

It's not entirely clear exactly why it is that headphones suddenly became a must-have

accessory among the painfully fashionable – sadly, you don't see them swanning around showing off their DACs in the same way – but much of the credit is down to the Beats brand, which devoted fashionistas will happily spend £300 on to look the part.

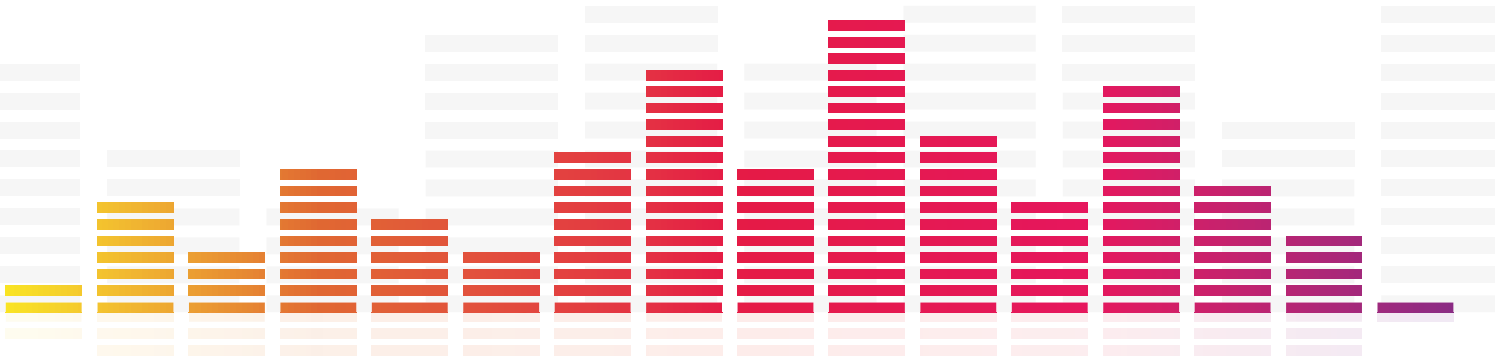
Hitting the jackpot

Through a clever combination of celebrity endorsements and product placements Beats has become *the* headphone to be seen in, and if you're in the music business and not endorsing Beats, then you're not that big a star. While Beats' owner – hip hop artist Dr Dre – successfully sold the company to Apple last year for a reputed \$3 billion, the truth is that Beats headphones aren't actually great for hi-fi fans. They're bass heavy and come up rather short when it comes to reproducing those all-important higher frequencies that audio fans love to hear.

All of which means that the smarter headphone buyer that's interested in audio quality is a bit more discerning, caring less about the logo on their device and more about the important business of how it actually sounds.

This month instead of giving away a single large prize to one lucky person, we thought it'd be nice to spread the love a little wider and so we've gathered 14 sets of three in-ear headphones bundles so that you can have a set for each of your devices.

In-ears provide superior isolation to over-ears, allowing you to block out other people's noise, without disturbing them with yours. They are lighter, more comfortable and can be easily stashed away when not in use. To be in with a chance of winning one of the sets we have available, answer the simple question opposite and post it to us. Good luck!



Final Audio Design Adagio III

Japan's Final Audio Design has been creating premium audio equipment for more than 40 years, consistently designing exciting products that pursue natural audio playback with a spacious, fluid and clean feel.

The Adagio III earphone features a BAM mechanism, optimising air movement inside the housing and controlling unwanted vibrations, for powerful bass and a deep 3D spatial expression. A specially developed elastic-coated cable eliminates microphonic noise while the exclusive eartips ensure enhanced sound isolation. Worth £60.



Final Audio Design Heaven II

Also from Japan's Final Audio Design, the Heaven II in-ear headphones replicate the intense sensation of fast-paced complex music with a combination of impressive speed and accuracy. Custom-designed balanced armature drivers deliver concentrated bass performance and perfectly balanced spatial separation.

The handmade housing is crafted from solid stainless steel by Japanese engineers with full focus on sound without compromise. They received a Recommended badge in HFC 397 for their solid all-round performance. Worth £80.



SoundMAGIC E10

Founded in 2005 in China, SoundMAGIC has built up a solid reputation as a manufacturer of high-quality earphones at prices that won't break the bank. The E10 In-Ear Sound Isolating earphone is no exception, reflecting precisely what earphones should be like. They boast a solid metal construction, potent bass with balanced musical detail and vibrant colour combinations.

SoundMAGIC's acoustic engineers carefully configured the drivers of the E10 to produce exciting sound with powerful bass and balanced musical detail. Worth £35.

TO BE IN WITH A CHANCE OF WINNING, ANSWER THIS SIMPLE QUESTION:

The Final Audio Design Heaven II is constructed from what?

- A) Magnesium
- B) Copper
- C) Stainless steel

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Welcome to *Hi-Fi Choice* Reader Classified, a free private ads service for buying and selling second-hand hi-fi components.

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Wireworld Polaris 5 s/c, 2m pair bananas-to-spades £195 (£500): **07772 711432** or email: **richard.schofield@kcl.ac.uk** (High Wycombe, Bucks).

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Regrettably no box. Can demo. £450 new, asking £375: **01582867139** or email: **mikethompson48@hotmail.com**. (Bedfordshire)

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NAIM NAC72 preamp: £310 and Naim NAP140 power amp £315 - both boxed, plus Roksan Artemiz tonearm: £500 - all excellent condition: **01527835759** or email: **andy@tryndei.freeserve.co.uk** (Worcs).

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