



Music icons

Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young
unveil exclusive new tracks

Look no wires!

Ditch the cables with these
stylish Bluetooth speakers



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. **389**

October 2014

Power pack

McIntosh's MXA70: the compact
system with the mighty big sound

33

PRODUCTS ON TEST:

Grado, JBL,
Micromega,
Ruark, Sony
& Teac

**MONITOR
AUDIO
AIRSTREAM**
three prizes
to be won



GROUP TEST

Groove riders

Six phono cartridges designed
to upgrade your vinyl listening



Spendor D1

EXCLUSIVE: the mini monitor
that's breaking all the rules



Powerful Dynamic Natural



New entry level HEGEL H80 integrated amplifier:

More powerful, less additives, more inputs, more possibilities... But still that addictive HEGEL sound.

HiFi+ (UK 2014):

"It's a well-built, deceptively powerful amplifier with an excellent digital audio stage. 'It fights well above it's weight' is a cliché of the highest order, but it really applies here. Excellent!"

- Alan Sircom - Editor

The Absolute Sound (USA 2014):

"I hope more people will participate in the deeper enjoyment of music in their homes because products like the H80 make it more accessible. The H80 is the real deal...and a sweet deal, too." - Kirk Midstkog - Reviewer

HiFi & Musik (Sweden 2013):

"It will take a while for me to recover after this. This may be the best value for the money I have reviewed in my career." - Jonas Bryngelsson - Editor

Lyd & Bilde (Norway 2013):

"Home run (klokkeren inntertier)! To say that HEGEL did it right with the H80 is an understatement. AMPLIFIER OF THE YEAR" - Lasse Svendsen - Editor



Derby: Musicraft

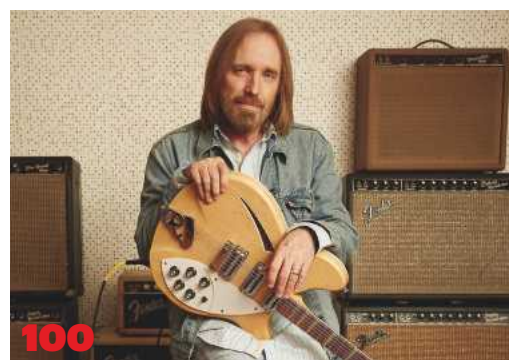
Edinburgh: Loud & Clear

Kent: Igloo Audio

Hegel: www.hegel.com



Music reviews



Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers

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!



Access to downloadable high-resolution music doesn't appear to be working terribly well for the majority of UK music fans, with delays and restrictions galore to UK territory sites. At the beginning of the year the hi-fi and music industries anticipated that the future of hi-res material was indeed looking

bright, as US high-resolution music store HDTracks announced that it was set to launch a UK site by April this year. The first quarter of 2014 came and went with little or no further publicity following the announcement, and the eagerly anticipated launch that looked set to promise UK-based music fans unrestricted access to a catalogue of some 10,000 24-bit tracks appeared to be on the back burner. In June I contacted HDTracks' press department about the planned launch date of the UK site, but heard nothing back.

Despite the lengthy delays a UK HDTracks site has arrived at last, but without any kind of fanfare or publicity. The UK version has snuck under the radar possibly because of the seriously pared-down catalogue of genuine high-resolution material available compared with its US parent site. While we are happy to see a HDTracks site in the UK, it seems that there are some territory restriction issues still yet to be resolved.

Of course, high-resolution music can be enjoyed by anyone that owns a turntable, and this month's six-way *Group Test* – starting on page 24 – reveals the best cartridges to upgrade your vinyl listening.

Lee Dunkley Editor

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EDENBRIDGE, KENT TN8 6HF

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GROUP TEST

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Never miss an issue – turn to p62 for our latest subs offer



Plug 'n' play

The VPI Nomad all-in-one turntable package that's geared for modern vinyl users

PRICE: £795 **AVAILABLE:** SEPTEMBER **CONTACT:** 0131 5553922 **WEB:** RENAISSANCEAUDIO.CO.UK

EVERYONE WILL RECALL the very first record turntable they owned – the one that got you hooked, starting down the hi-fi road as you set about listening and discovering the joys of vinyl for the very first time. No matter what turntable model kick started your vinyl habit, we are pretty certain that your deck didn't look anything like as good or as complete a solution as the new Nomad turntable package from American hi-fi brand VPI Industries.

The company was founded in 1978, and has an established reputation for bringing the merits of vinyl to new audiences, and its latest models have set out to do just that. Few turntables have looked set to offer such a great start to the joys of vinyl listening as VPI's new Nomad deck – scheduled for UK launch on 1st September.

The Nomad is VPI's most affordable model to date, and it is firmly aimed at the modern music fan looking for a flexible turntable package with

headphone amplification and phono stage built in – simply plug in a favourite pair of headphones or connect up the RCA output to a spare line level input on your amplifier and speaker system and hey presto! It's undeniably a uni-friendly deck, but with a build and specification that is also likely to appeal to anyone looking to simplify their home setup without major compromises.

The full-size MDF plinth measures 470 x 109 x 343 (WxHxD) and the



Few decks have looked set to offer such a great start to the joys of vinyl listening as VPI's new Nomad...

belt-driven platter is powered by an outboard PSU – there's a manual speed change pulley for 33 and 45rpm selection speeds. The 10in gimballed/yoke bearing tonearm is a stainless steel rod – developed from a the maker's acclaimed Traveler deck – and preinstalled with a Ortofon 2M Red cartridge.

The built-in RIAA moving magnet phono stage is output via RCA connectors to allow it to be connected directly to a hi-fi amplifier and

speaker system without the need for any additional boxes – simply grab a pair of interconnects, hook it up to your existing system and you're away. Headphones are plugged into the 3.5mm mini-jack on the surface at the front of the plinth next to the rotary volume control and power switch.

Edinburgh-based Renaissance Audio is the distributor bringing the Nomad package to VPI dealers in the UK. Look out for our exclusive first review coming to these pages next month.

COMMENT

CAN MUSIC LEARN FROM TV?

It's pretty much universally accepted that we're living in a golden age of TV. Over the last 10 to 15 years we've been treated to a host of glorious dramas – you know the ones: *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*, *House Of Cards*, *Game Of Thrones* – that have pretty much reversed the fortunes of what was a flailing TV industry. Where once it was considered low rent to appear on TV, it is now widely regarded as good as, if not superior to, the stuff that's being churned out of Hollywood. And so we have film stars and directors going out of their way to work on material made for the small screen as it offers so much more creatively than the big screen.

So what's all this got to do with music? The interesting thing about the TV industry is that it has managed to take a medium that was free and turn it into something we're willing to pay for. Compare this to the music industry and somehow the exact opposite appears to be the case. Despite a number of similar channels to subscribe, stream or download content, people by and large expect to get their music for free. How is it that the TV industry has managed to completely reverse its fortunes while the music one appears to be trapped in a business model that looks doomed to fail? And, perhaps more importantly, is there anything the music industry can learn from TV's success to reverse its fortunes?

Here in no particular order are a few suggestions that might help out...

Target adults and not kids as they're the ones willing to splash the cash. Dare to be different. Don't make the musical equivalent of another cooking show, people like being challenged and forced to think, so let's have less from the *X-Factor* factory and more genuine creativity. Embrace technology in the way TV has done so with HD and 3D and ensure that we don't have to listen to duff compressed versions of the music we love. And perhaps most important of all, invest in talent and quality. These TV shows aren't cheap to make but they are reaping the rewards, couldn't music work in the same way?

We're not going to pretend that we have all the answers, but surely some different thinking could help shake things up... ►



dba Envy range

Spherical carbon speakers using Formula 1 tech

PRICE: FROM £649 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01327 704033 **WEB:** DEMANDBETTERAUDIO.CO.UK

DEMAND BETTER AUDIO'S new Envy range of loudspeakers "come from the pursuit of sonic perfection, achieved through a commitment to design and technology" and are manufactured from carbon fibre provided by MCT Ltd – a manufacturer that provides many of the leading Formula 1 racing teams with the material for their cars. A departure from the more traditional 'boxy' approach to construction, Envy features a single-piece carbon fibre sphere enclosure, which is claimed to minimise audio anomalies like diffraction and colouration.

The drivers include an 80mm woven carbon super-wide midrange, a 3in voice coil that is specially shaped for optimum response and dispersion for the bass and a tweeter dubbed the RT1C-A by dba. This HiVi Planar-type driver is a proven and capable method of reproducing high-frequency sound, dba claims. Chief acoustician, Daniel Burns, told *HFC*: "The spherical shape is not a gimmick, but a technique to deliver a pure listening experience".



IN BRIEF

PRO-JECT'S DUAL PURPOSE BOX



● The Stereo Box S is the latest product from Pro-Ject Audio Systems designed for those looking for low-cost vinyl playing system. The combined integrated amp and phono stage has three analogue line inputs alongside a Moving Magnet phono stage, and has been specially designed to complement the manufacturer's Box Design S range. The compact solution is fitted with a Class D amplifier section based on Pro-Ject's popular Stereo Box S, with a 30W (into 4ohms) per channel output via 4mm speaker connectors. Additionally there's a 3.5mm jack input and a remote control handset. It's available to buy now for £200. **HENLEYDESIGNS.CO.UK**

Quad Vena goes wireless

PRICE: £600 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01480 452561 **WEB:** QUAD-HIFI.CO.UK

Now in its 78th year, Quad has made its first step into the world of wireless audio with the launch of Vena – its compact integrated amplifier, which provides aptX streaming over Bluetooth.

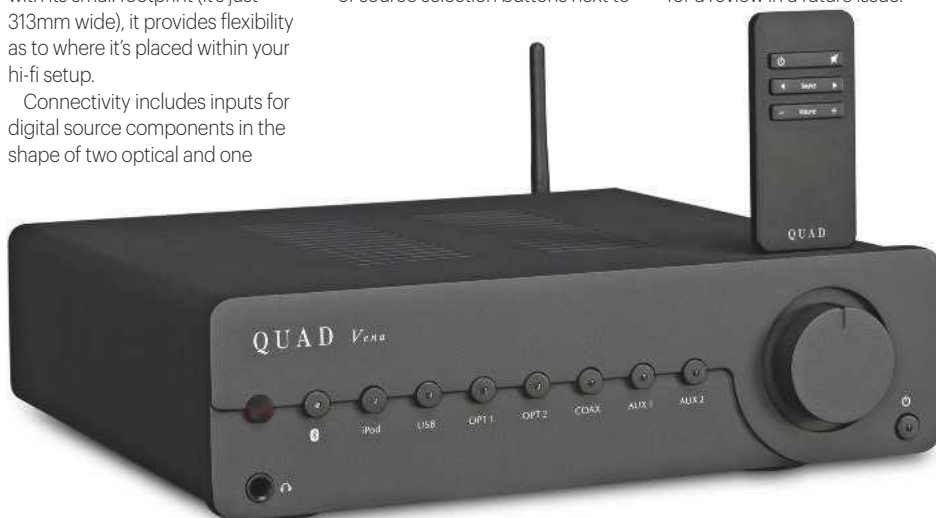
Offering Class AB amplification, Vena sports the same Cirrus Logic CS4398 DAC chipset that's utilised in the company's flagship Platinum CD player, offering up to 24-bit/192kHz resolution. And with its small footprint (it's just 313mm wide), it provides flexibility as to where it's placed within your hi-fi setup.

Connectivity includes inputs for digital source components in the shape of two optical and one

coaxial input, alongside RCAs and a pair of asynchronous USB ports (Type A for Apple devices to be docked, charged and played and Type B for PC/Mac connection). Outputs incorporate optical and coaxial options, with a pre-out for adding an external power amp. A "high-quality" headphone source is also built in and accessed via a front-mounted socket.

The front is home to a simple row of source selection buttons next to

a large volume control and a remote control is bundled to make operation easier. The Vena sports Quad's classic Lancaster Grey finish, but three more exotic options are expected to be released later in the year, adding an additional £100 to the price. Quad tells us "Vena's sound is richly musical, delivering an effortless, wide-bandwidth performance with free-breathing dynamics". Look out for a review in a future issue. ►



"The Truth, nothing more, nothing less..."



"This level of performance,
convenience and style makes for
an award winning product."

Jeff Dorgay, Tone Audio Magazine, January 2013



"Oozes quality in both
construction and sound"

Paul Rigby, Hi Fi World, March 2013



Ingenium offers the same obsessive design philosophy of our more expensive designs, a ground-up construction engineered for pure audiophile performance.

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Riding of Yorkshire HU1 1JU Tel: 01482 223096

O'Brien Hi-fi, 60 Durham Road, West Wimbledon,
London Tel: 020 8946 1528

The Audioworks, 14 Stockport Road, Cheadle,
Cheshire, SK8 2AA Tel: 0161 428 7887

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Desktop debut

Wharfedale launches Bluetooth DS-1

PRICE: £150 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 01480 447700 **WEB:** WHARFEDALE.CO.UK

WHARFEDALE SPEAKERS ARE recognised the world over, so it was only a matter of time before the renowned British loudspeaker brand introduced a Bluetooth desktop model to its extensive line. The DS-1 is a bookshelf speaker measuring just 110 x 190 x 150mm (WxHxD), and is the company's first Bluetooth-equipped wireless model. It is touted as the ideal solution for those looking to add a pair of speakers to enjoy desktop music, and builds in 14W (claimed) of amplification to power the 100mm bass and 20mm treble drive units. With support for high-quality music streaming from compatible aptX devices like smartphones and tablets, as well as instant device recognition and pairing from Near Field Communication (NFC) devices, the DS-1 looks to be a well-equipped model at the price. Additional wired connectivity comes via a 3.5 mini-jack input and level, source and pairing controls are also provided. The DS-1 is available in a choice of piano black or white finishes.



IN BRIEF

TURNTABLE ACCESSORIES



● Hot on the heels of last month's Analogue Works' Turntable One (£800) review packaged with Jelco SA-250ST tonearm (£300) and Ortofon 2M Red cartridge (£85), distributor Divine Audio has unveiled a range of accessories to accompany its turntables including armboard adjusters and height rings as well as replacement parts tailored to AW decks. Gimp mats in various materials are reduced to £12 and vinyl enthusiasts looking to take care of their collection are catered for with an extensive range of accessories that include alignment tools, bearing oil and a spirit level to help your deck run smoothly. The Northamptonshire-based distributor has a straight-talking, fuss-free ethos and supplies all of its products direct. **ANALOGUEWORKS.CO.UK**

Canor's new digital hub

PRICE: £3,295 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 0118 9814238
WEB: SOUNDFOUNDATIONS.CO.UK

Slovakian valve specialist Canor is gaining recognition in the UK and has recently unveiled the CD1.10 digital hub. The CD format may not be dead and buried just yet, but any maker knows that in order to survive in the slowing market the now humble CD player needs to do that bit more to stay in the game.

For this reason Canor has launched the CD1.10, a high-resolution CD player and DAC that employs two dedicated Burr-Brown

PCM 1792 DACs – one per channel – and is capable of handling PCM and DSD 24-bit/192kHz music files. Switchable digital filters are incorporated for fine tuning, the maker tells us, and external digital sources can be connected by optical, coaxial and USB 2.0 inputs.

Both XLR and RCA analogue outputs are fed by a pure valve output stage with audio circuitry painstakingly designed and developed for best performance.

The company tells *HFC*, "the Canor CD1.10 has been crafted for optimum sound quality combined with excellent flexibility and usability. The disc tray is discreet, while the dot-matrix display is eye catching and easy to read, even at a distance". It's built to partner its own amplifiers, with simple and ergonomic control via a multi-function knob on the front of the unit. It comes supplied with a metal-bodied remote control. ▶



oppo



PM-1

Planar Magnetic Headphones



Proprietary Planar Magnetic technology
Life-like, natural sound quality
High sensitivity & scalability

Plush padding & reduced weight for comfort
Comprehensive set of cables and accessories

HA-1

Headphone Amplifier



Class A balanced power amplifier
Toroidal power transformer
USB DAC with DSD support

ESS 9018 Sabre³² Reference DAC
IR Remote & Bluetooth control included

BDP-103D

Universal player with Blu-ray



Dual-core fast loading	4K up-scaling
Darbee Visual Presence	True 24p™ video
Dual HDMI inputs/outputs	Network streaming
	7.1-Channel analogue output



BDP-105D

Flagship universal player with Blu-ray



Darbee Visual Presence	Toroidal linear PSU
Upgraded USB DAC supports DSD 64/128	Headphone amplifier
Dual Sabre ³² Reference DACs	Coaxial and optical digital inputs

oppodigital.co.uk

"I've got a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore..."

A voyage of musical discovery: Nuance. Emotion. Artistry. Over the decades, MartinLogan has produced loudspeakers with the sole purpose of getting you back to the music.

Having mastered electrostatic technology with the CLS, a skill now embodied in the hybrid Summit X and the full-range CLX Art, MartinLogan has re-imagined speaker technology. MartinLogan speakers address systems from purist two-channel to multi-channel home theatre, with a range including BalancedForce™ Dynamo™ subwoofers, surround-sound and centre channel speakers,

It is no exaggeration to say that MartinLogan speakers are as beautiful as speakers can be and bear aesthetics worthy of the sound they reproduce. They enhance your musical pleasure and your living space.

Because, as Dorothy learned, there's no place like home.



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MARTIN LOGAN



Lenco PlayLink

Swiss manufacturer launches wireless, multi-room system

PRICE: PLAYLINK 4 £189, PLAYLINK 6 £289 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** Lenco.COM

LENCO HAS BECOME the latest manufacturer to produce a wireless speaker able to stream music from portable devices for multi-room audio. The PlayLink 4 and PlayLink 6 both utilise Class D digital amplification and boast three drivers ('boomer' bass reflex, and a pair of mid-range/tweeters), which are offset with a 6° angle shift from the speaker axis to improve the stereo claim. Compatible with NFC (Near Field Communication) devices, PlayLink uses Bluetooth or wi-fi to communicate

wirelessly with smart devices, NAS drives or cloud-based sources, the speakers support WAV, FLAC and ALAC audio files of up to 24-bit/192kHz. Up to 10 speakers can be connected simultaneously for enjoyment of your music in multiple rooms and any pair can be set up to operate as a left or right channel. Connections include a 3.5mm stereo analogue input and a LAN input on the PlayLink 6. The PlayLink 4 is 210 x 102 x 129mm, while the larger 6 is 280 x 124 x 172mm.

Tangent's Bluetooth DAB+

PRICE: £150 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01923 205600 **WEB:** TANGENT-AUDIO.COM

Boasting a beautifully designed wooden cabinet, Danish manufacturer Tangent's portable DAB+ radio has been produced for use within the home or out and

about. With a 3in full-range speaker and claimed 100Hz-20kHz frequency response, additional functionality comes thanks to the inclusion of Bluetooth connectivity.

This means that the Tangent can effectively be used as a speaker for wireless streaming from smart devices like tablets or phones.

Connections include a 3.5mm Aux input, stereo headphone and record outputs, alongside a USB port for charging your smart device on the go. The Tangent has DAB+, DAB and FM tuners and five presets, while an LCD screen displays the signal strength, scrolling text, battery status and radio station name. It can be mains powered when at home or takes six rechargeable AA batteries for use out and about – with a claimed six to eight hours running time. The Tangent is available in a choice of walnut veneer and high gloss white, black and red finishes.



IN BRIEF



WiDAC WI-FI AUDIO RECEIVER

● Crystal Acoustics has unveiled a new wi-fi audio receiver capable of adding wire-free streaming to any hi-fi setup. The WiDAC utilises both AirPlay and DLNA to stream from smart phones, tablets or PCs via wi-fi. Crystal Acoustics claims that the 'reach' of the WiDAC is large enough to make it possible to stream from a bedroom to a living room, for example, while a high-quality Wolfson DAC combines with an optical digital output to ensure optimum sound performance. The compact WiDAC is available now for £60.

CRYSTALACOUSTICS.COM



LP PAST TIMES

● More likely to appeal to fans of vintage collectibles than audiophiles, the GPO Attaché is a beautifully built retro turntable in a suitcase for music on the move. It comes with a pair of built-in speakers, headphone output plus analogue line outs for an amplifier, and there's a USB slot for playing back MP3s or recording vinyl to a USB stick. It offers a choice of 33, 45 and 78rpm speeds and is available in Sky Blue, Pillar Box Red or Vintage Brown leatherette finishes. It comes bundled with a power cable and USB stick for digitising vinyl and is available to buy now for £90.

GPORETRO.COM

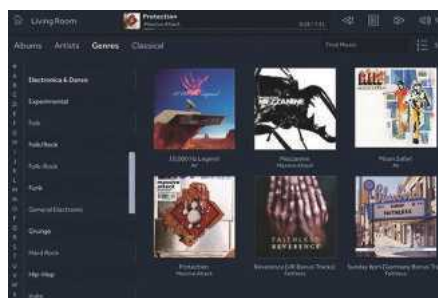
Webwatch

Andrew Simpson casts an expert eye over his pick of the best hi-fi websites and online content



Rubicon microsite

Following last month's news of Dali's new Rubicon loudspeaker lineup, the Danish speaker brand has now launched a dedicated microsite for the range packed with product info, pics, white paper and in-depth video. Point your cursor to dali-rubicon.com



Kinsky gets Kazoo'd

Linn's Kinsky music software recently got revamped and renamed. Kazoo takes over where Kinsky left off with a host of new features including faster searching, classical music browsing and multiple room grouping, while the Kazoo server also replaces Songbox bit.ly/1A5HsiR



Record cleaning

It may look like an LP being iced, but that's actually wood glue squirting on to the surface of a record in this recently resurfaced video. The idea is you coat the vinyl surface in glue and peel off 24 hours later for a static free sound. Easy eh? bit.ly/XbbeoA



Vinyl mapping

From online music marketplace Discogs comes VinylHub, a website using Google Maps to pinpoint every record shop on the planet. And with over 60k page views and 1,000 shops added in its first 48 hours, it's off to a roaring start. Find stores near you at vinylhub.com



How sound works

Tuning your room is arguably as important as the hi-fi kit that you populate it with and this video from Acoustic Geometry is an easy to understand guide to how sound reflections affect acoustics, complete with Nerf gun practicals youtu.be/JPYt10zrcIQ



Practical pick-ups

Audio-Technica's been perfecting its pick-ups since the early sixties, so it's only fair that the company shares its knowhow, and the cartridge corner of its website includes one of the most comprehensive vinyl glossaries and guides we've seen bit.ly/1ozHX1g

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CHOICE TWEETS



HI FI RACKS LTD
(@HIFIRACKSLTD)

#throwbackthursday does anyone else remember being told putting CDs in the freezer would improve the sound, or was it just me?



BRISTOL SHOW (@SVSBRISTOLSHOW)

The UK's largest hi-fi and home cinema event Friday 20th - Sunday 22nd February 2015!

#Bristol @MarriottBristol



AUDIO LOUNGE (@AUDIOLOUNGE)

10 of the week's best vinyl releases t.co/qV6d95VPnP



PHIL BARTON (@RECORDSHOPMAN)

Hey Vinyl people. Don't forget there is now a Sister Ray in the East @SisterRayAce choc full of marvellous wax curated by Johnny & Milly



LOTUS HIFI (@LOTUS_340R)

LOTUS are now retailing the full range of AURENDER music servers. "With streamed music I have been fairly..." <http://t.co/Sn3ffnIWI>



MARTIN LOGAN (@MARTINLOGANLTD)

Check out the latest @MartinLoganLtd video on @YouTube starring the beautiful Crescendo youtu.be/aa8AHKIWTom



HIFI (@FRANKHARVEYHIFI)

TAKE A VIRTUAL TOUR OF OUR DEMO ROOMS <https://t.co/WWHORfeb1N>.



BANG & OLUFSEN (@BANGOLUFSEN)

"You can't trust your ears" - our tonmeister Geoff Martin on the concept of loudness: <http://bit.ly/1uCOBTc> #audio #sound



TRANSCRIPTORS (@TRANSCRIPTORS)

Subscribe to our new newsletter. Keep up to date with the latest news, product information



EPOS (@EPOSLTD)

Here is a development photo of the forthcoming K3 floor-standing loudspeaker. It's standing next to the K2 :) bit.ly/1sCyqpc



THE CHORD COMPANY
(@CHORDCABLES)

If you missed it, Nigel's latest review is @nickmulvey music album First Mind - A good read over tea break! bit.ly/1jrpyvm



STONEAUDIO.CO.UK (@STONEAUDIO)

Privileged to get to Listen to Arcam's impressive sounding New A49, 400W, Class G, Stereo Integrated Amp, out soon pic.twitter.com/CFy46pgGzT



SIMPLE AUDIO.CO.UK (@SIMPLEAUDIO)

New software update out now for the Roomplayer+, read all about it on our blog bit.ly/1srQvty

Connect. With the Future...



K2 BT

- aptX Bluetooth streaming input
- Increased output for greater power and clarity
- Improved circuitry for greater efficiency
- Even better sound performance

ROKSAN

The award-winning Roksan K2 series has now been expanded to include a new integrated amplifier. The K2 BT improves on the original K2 Integrated with brand new circuitry and a higher output than ever before. The inclusion of aptX® technology also adds a whole new source input to the amplifier. Now you can stream your favourite music from a Bluetooth-enabled device in original 16-bit CD quality.*

Available Nationwide Now



Distributed by Henley Designs Ltd.

T: +44 (0)1235 511 166 | E: sales@henleydesigns.co.uk | W: www.henleydesigns.co.uk

* On compliant devices.

Return of the Mac

Here's a small system with bags of charisma and retro charm – but you'll have to pay big money for it, says **David Price**



► DETAILS

PRODUCT
McIntosh MXA70

ORIGIN
USA

TYPE
Integrated
audio system

WEIGHT
23.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
559 x 276 x 457mm

FEATURES

- Claimed power output: 50W per channel into 8ohms
- 4x digital inputs: optical; coaxial; USB; AES/EBU
- 2x analogue inputs: RCA and XLR

DISTRIBUTOR
Jordan Acoustics Ltd

TELEPHONE
01202 911886

WEBSITE
mcintoshlabs.com



The small system isn't a new idea. Indeed, those outside the rarefied climes of separates hi-fi would

probably regard it as the norm. After all, do we really need yards of pressed steel casework, acres of cables and multiple power plugs? For that reason alone, since the late seventies when Aurex sold its first microsystem, many folks wanting decent quality sound from a system taking up only a small space have eschewed traditional hi-fi.

In the case of the new McIntosh, there's an extra dimension – if you pardon the pun. You see, it's a rather special brand. Those who are older will have known it for a good many decades, and know that traditionally the company makes very high quality – and seriously large – separates. Its amplifiers are a particular favourite of mine, not just because of the sound but also the retro styling, which has never really gone out of fashion.

In the MXA70, you see the latter in full effect. It looks like a McIntosh amplifier that's shrunk in the wash. The two power meters are pure affectation; in practice they're pretty useless because the ballistics of the needles

It has a smoothness and a refinement you wouldn't expect from a mini system

aren't fast enough to capture peaks. The reason they're fitted, of course, is that they are iconically McIntosh; it would be like a late fifties Chevrolet without fins, were it not thus equipped. So not only is the MXA70 a high quality mini system, it is a McIntosh too, and advertises its status from the moment you power it up and those meters start glowing bright blue back at you.

The problem is that it costs £5,995, not an inconsiderable sum. Who would pay such an amount for a product such as this? I suspect the company wants to sell to existing customers – who doubtless have a spare bedroom or four, plus a kitchen and triple garage to fill with sound. And there's also that new demographic, lifestyle consumers who want a lovely thing – that just happens to play music.

The MXA70 is a smallish, but not tiny, one-box system that comprises a power amplifier, DAC, analogue preamplifier and a good-quality headphone amplifier that sports a new adaptation of McIntosh's Autoformer technology to give three headphone impedance ranges. Added to this, there's a Headphone Crossfeed Director (HXD) ►

feature to allow high-quality recordings to image like conventional speakers, the company says. Last but not least, there's a pair of very nice looking compact loudspeakers bundled, too.

The amplifier section is an old-school Class AB design using the company's ThermalTrak output transistors, said to have precise bias current control for ultra-low crossover distortion. It's claimed to deliver 50W into 8ohms, although the company says it isn't rated

A solid and conscientious product with oodles of high-end charm

for 4ohm operation. The DAC section uses the popular Burr-Brown PCM1795 DAC chip, and offers coaxial, optical, AES/EBU and USB inputs; two line inputs are offered, one via RCA phones and the other via XLRs.

The supplied loudspeakers are made in the USA and are very well presented. A 20mm dome tweeter with dampening cloth surround, said to give high sensitivity and an extended response free of break-up modes, is fitted. At 2kHz this crosses over to a

100mm treated paper (with a rubber surround) bass unit, using a curvilinear cone profile. A fairly complex 14-element crossover is fitted, and sensibly includes a self-resettable fuse. McIntosh says second-order filters are used on both midrange/bass and tweeter for improved power handling and vertical dispersion.

The MXA70 is a beautiful thing to look at, with an excellent finish. From the mirrored lower chassis to the flawless satin black of the transformer casings, there's nothing not to like. The binding posts are good and chunky, and McIntosh supplies two runs of good spade-ended loudspeaker cable. The blue fluorescent front panel display matches the power meters perfectly, and the control knobs resemble grown-up McIntosh products, although the action on the volume control is a bit sharp.

Sound quality

Starting with the standard analogue input and MXA70 sounds lots of fun. It has a clean, fast and direct sound, but is decently sophisticated too; indeed it reminds me of a full-size Macintosh amp. It's certainly not a soft and fluffy



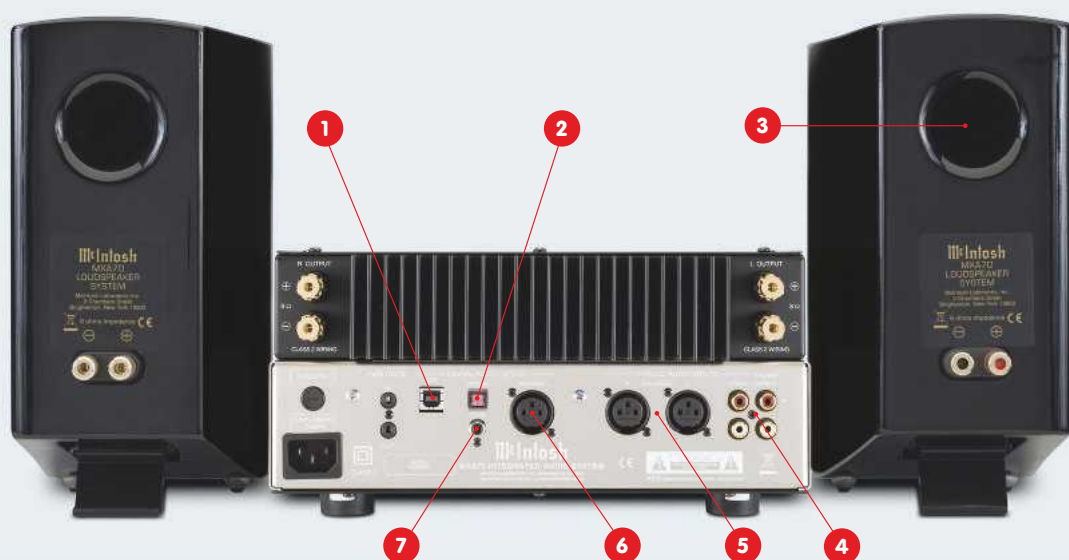
It's hard to compare the McIntosh MXA70, because there's nothing on sale quite like it. Prospective purchasers might look to something like Naim's SuperUniti with stablemate Focal Electra II 1008 Be standmount speakers (£3,045). It isn't quite as compact, has a wider feature set including uPnP streaming, more power and more upgradability. The sound is considerably better too, with a more open and dynamic character and lots more detail. It sounds more musical, more three dimensional and as good as any other grown-up hi-fi around at this price. That said, it isn't the wonderfully easy 'plug and play' design that the McIntosh is.

delivery; there's no artificial added warmth but it has a smoothness and a refinement that you wouldn't expect from a mini system. 4hero's *Give In* via the unbalanced analogue input really communicates the urgency and the intensity of the music.

The loudspeakers are optimised for tabletop or bookshelf use, and benefit from being pushed closer to a rear wall than is normal, and slightly toed-in. Thus positioned they made a nice noise, but you'd never accuse them of having an overly powerful or extended bass. This is simply because of the physics involved; they're small and simply cannot reach down to the bottom octaves. Again, given the fact that it's a small system, this could even be seen as a plus point, as they're not likely to set off room resonances.

Feed the unit with a good CD transport via its coaxial in, and the sound tightens up further, and fills out a little spatially. It's a pretty wide presentation, and suddenly acquires even more thrust, at the expense of a little warmth. The McIntosh has a lot of get-up-and-go and this is even more apparent when you dispense with the analogue input. Supertramp's classic *Breakfast in America* album is a little forward on CD, but the Macintosh remains smooth and enjoyable with no

CONNECTIONS



- 1 USB type B input
- 2 Digital optical input
- 3 Rear-facing bass ports
- 4 Analogue RCA audio inputs
- 5 Analogue XLR audio inputs
- 6 Digital AES/EBU input
- 7 Digital coaxial input

65 YEARS OF SOUND

McIntosh is one of the United States' most respected hi-fi brands, and has excellent provenance by any standards. Frank McIntosh founded it in 1949, in Silver Spring, Maryland, and now builds its products at the Binghamton, NY factory where the company has been since 1956. It is, and always has been, an amplifier specialist – from the original 'Unity Coupled Circuit' design and the company's first AE1 preamp in 1950 to its debut power amplifier in 1954, the MC60 (which

originated the company's trademark chromium chassis, as seen on the MXA70) – and has always made interesting products. It has never stayed out of the limelight, from its involvement with the Woodstock festival in 1968 where it supplied the amplification, to the Grateful Dead 'Wall of Sound' gig in 1974 where 28kW of power was served up, it has had a close involvement with the pro world. It has been responsible for a range of innovative loudspeakers, and some

superb tuners, too. Later in the eighties and nineties, it moved into offering superb bespoke car audio systems, and even an aftermarket one for Harley Davidson motorcycles. In 2005, the Reference System reminded people that its heart was in high-end separates hi-fi, offering a breathtaking sound from an admittedly rather large stack system. Recently, it has gone the other way with a range of high-quality, compact one-box systems of which the MXA70 is the flagship.



shrillness or glare. It gives a bright, bracing sound, but one that never descends into fatigue-inducing hardness. Indeed, it really manages to capture the poignancy of the song, tracking the dynamics well and doing really well with the rhythms.

Room to breathe

Via USB, Air's *All I Need* is sweet and spacious, the unit never proving boring but certainly not overly hard either. The fulsome bass guitar is carried well, giving a bouncy and sumptuous feel, and you can really hear the instrument starting and stopping in the mix. The drive it gives to the song keeps things in the groove, while the midband carries the vocals with sensitivity and sophistication. It images well and pushes things wide stage left and right, although it doesn't drop things back quite as far as it should. Overall, it functions very capably being driven with a computer as a transport.

The main problem here is the speakers; they're good but they're not as special as the main unit, by a fair way. Which is why the company has made serious provision for headphones, that and the fact those living in space-limited places may rely on them. Via Philips Fidelio X1s, it's a satisfying sounding product giving one great insight into the music. What it can't do is give the clarity, power, precision and grip of a full-sized system costing a similar amount of money; still the McIntosh covers its tracks well and is never less than a pleasing partner to play music on.

Conclusion

The McIntosh MXA70 is a lovely system alright, one that's very hard to dislike. Any concerns that the company has done a cynical 'cash-in job' to leverage its brand should be abandoned here; the unit is a solid and conscientious product with oodles of high-end charm. Still, it is not going to get you replacing your main system, I suspect. It's a fine small system, but isn't wondrous in any sonic sense. Indeed its problem is that there are several very good, and substantially cheaper one-box systems on sale that match or even better it for sonics. That's why, if you want style and/or the kudos of the brand, you should seriously consider this dinky diamond, but don't expect it to give the ultimate sound-per-pound, because it doesn't. Part of what you're paying for is the cachet of owning a real genuine McIntosh product, and for many that will suffice ●

The blue front panel display matches the iconic meters perfectly

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Lovely styling; great build; fun sound

DISLIKE: Lacks scale and insight; expensive

WE SAY: Charming, characterful one-box system, but it will cost you!

Q&A

Charlie Randall
McIntosh President



DP: Why have you produced a one-box audio system? Isn't McIntosh a separates brand?

CR: Yes, we are a high-end separates brand, but we are not just that. We've been offering complete audio systems like the MXA70 for five years now. That's because we saw the need for a smaller, self-contained systems that still produced high-end sound for people who may not have the space for a larger separates system. Regardless the size of a McIntosh model, the same level of audio engineering, quality control and hand craftsmanship goes into it so that resulting sound performance will always be to McIntosh's standards.

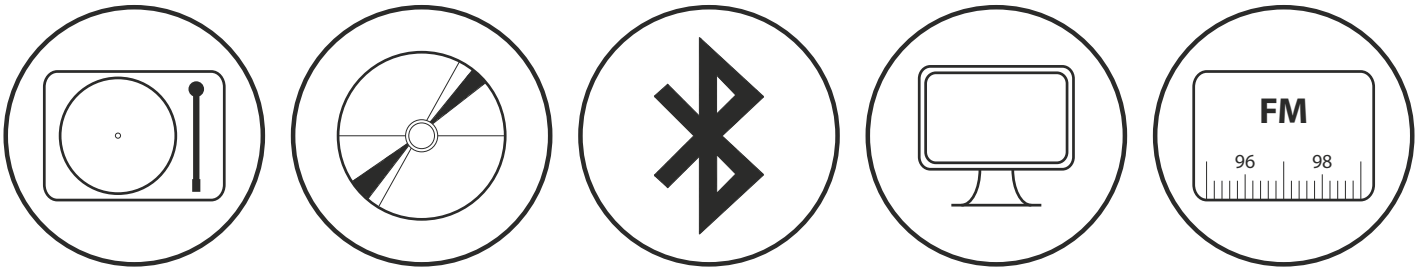
What is special about the headphone stage?

Well, it can deliver 1W minimum into any headphone impedance from 8 to 600ohms. This is made possible by the unique McIntosh Autoformer, which matches the amplifier to the wide range of headphone impedances in three ranges. The Autoformer also optimises the signal to noise ratio for each impedance range.

How would you describe the sound of the MXA70?

It is very clean, accurate and full; it has a wide panoramic with depth of sound stage imaging. The loudspeaker enclosure aids with this. The enclosure is cast aluminium with a high gloss black finish and includes a bottom device for setting the speaker at either a 10° upward angle or straight firing. The enclosure's rear port enhances the bass response.

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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

This month's cartridge group is supported by rigorous listening tests, backed up with objective lab testing

CARTRIDGES GROUP TEST

INSTALLING A CARTRIDGE for optimal set up can't be hurried, so it's not practical to carry out this round up with our listening panel. This requires a more tailored procedure, with each pick-up being given at least 48 hours of play to free up their internal suspension before testing.

This is done on a VPI Scout 1.1 turntable, which is of sufficient quality to not hold any of the cartridges back. It allows extensive levels of adjustment through its accompanying VPI JMW tonearm for VTA, tracking force and azimuth. VPI's heavy duty steel cartridge alignment jig is

used alongside a Shure SFG-2 tracking force gauge to set alignment and measure downforce.

Each cartridge is tested at the recommended tracking weights, with fractions of grams added and subtracted until a preferred sound is achieved. Cartridges are tested with the tonearm parallel to the record's surface when playing, with finite degrees of adjustment made to arm height for fine-tuning VTA until an audible 'sweet spot' is found. They are put through the same repeat cycles of music from four different records, each chosen to reveal varying audio traits.

RESULTS EXPLAINED

Output level

+10

Tracking ability

+40

Frequency response

0

Distortion

+50

Generator symmetry

+10

KEY: ■ Group average

■ % below average ■ % above average

OUTPUT LEVEL

We measure the output level of a MM cartridge, loaded into 47kohm, using a 1kHz tone cut at a standard 5cm/sec. A healthy output will be around 5mV.

TRACKING ABILITY

Two tests are used here, one against the physical excursion of the groove (up to 80µm) the other looking at THD vs. level up to +18dB (re. 0dB/5cm/sec).

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

Measured from 20Hz-20kHz (-8dB re. 5cm/sec) using both lateral and vertical cuts. Our calculations are derived from the former, in-phase L+R modulations.

DISTORTION

Not only do we check distortion at the standard 1kHz (5cm/sec) but also vs. frequency from 20Hz-20kHz. The best MMs will offer <5% THD through the audioband.

GENERATOR SYMMETRY

This unique evaluation compares the differences between response and distortion performance using lateral (L+R) and vertical (L-R) groove measurements.

REFERENCE SYSTEM

Turntable:

- VPI Scout 1.1 and VPI JMW tonearm

Phono stage:

- Primare R32

Amplifier:

- Musical Fidelity M6PRE/M6PRX

Loudspeakers:

- Dynaudio Focus 260

TEST MUSIC

Syd Barrett

The Madcap Laughs
Octopus



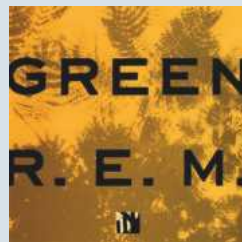
Little Dragon

Nabuma Rubberband
Paris



REM

Green
Turn You Inside-Out
I Remember California



Eric Robinson's World of Music –
The National Philharmonic Orchestra
Italian Serenade
Prelude to Act I "La Traviata" (Verdi)



OUR GROUP TESTS

and In-depth Review are subject to exhaustive lab testing by Paul Miller using the QC Suite Functional Testing Station (left). Paul has tested more hi-fi equipment than any reviewer in the world, so you know you're in safe hands.

We don't publish pages of graphs, but we do understand the importance of transparency. So, readers may view full QC Suite test reports for our key reviews by clicking on the red download button on our website.
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Group**test**

CARTRIDGES £265-£510

Groove riders

Looking to take your turntable to the next level? **Andrew Simpson** puts six premium pick-ups through their paces

WHILE A TURNTABLE and tonearm are the most obvious moving parts of a vinyl spinning system, it's the cartridge that's at the business end of things, tasked with rolling up its sleeves and getting deep down and dirty to dig out all the music that's packed into those LP grooves. It's a big ask for such a small component, so it's vital that the cartridge you choose is up to the job and won't hold its partnering kit back.

Needle work

At the budget end of things, most cartridges are usually of the moving magnet (MM) type, which offer healthy outputs for feeding a 'standard' phono stage with 47kohm loading. Go beyond £200 and things get more interesting, with different designs bringing alternative benefits and compromises to the MM

approach, helping to take your turntable to the next level.

Of the six upgrades we've cherry picked for you, Grado's Reference Platinum 1 employs the moving iron (MI) approach to generating its signal via a quality package that belies its price tag. Both the Benz Micro and Sumiko models adopt the moving coil (MC) principal, while being capable of feeding a standard MM phono stage, with the former presented in sparkling silver livery and the latter shunning its exterior for better sonics.

Representing the moving magnet school are the keenly priced Goldring and the group's most expensive golden boy from Nagaoka, with both offering VFM via their replaceable styli. Finally, who says top quality low output MCs are the preserve of the high end? Not Ortofon, as its brand new Quintet Blue reveals. ▶



ON TEST



**Benz Micro
MC Silver**
£275 p27
Swiss made MC promises plenty of class from a brand used to mixing in vinyl's high-end circles, but can Benz cut it on a budget?



**Goldring
2500 £395 p29**
Well-built metal bodied MM tops Goldring's 2000 range with a '2 SD' diamond stylus and a healthy output to get the most from your music



**Grado
Reference
Platinum 1**
£265 p31
It might be the cheapest model, but this is the only one packed in wood for music at its natural best



**Nagaoka
MP-300**
£509 p33
Penultimate pick-up from the long-standing, no-nonsense Japanese brand. Will it prove that all that glitters is gold?



**Ortofon
Quintet Blue**
£325 p35
This new model from the Quintet series offers lots of spec to show that low output MCs don't always equal high prices



**Sumiko
Blue Point Special
EVO III £295 p37**
With its exposed internals the BPS EVO III looks like the pick of the bunch for the hardcore audiophile, but the question is can you handle it?



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Benz Micro MC Silver **£275**

Will this entry-level high output moving coil bring some welcome Swiss sheen to your turntable's sonics?

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Benz Micro
MC Silver

ORIGIN
Switzerland

TYPE
High output moving
coil cartridge

WEIGHT
5.7g

FEATURES
• Quoted
output: 2mV
• Cantilever:
aluminium
• Stylus: fixed/
elliptical
• Tracking weight:
2g

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With company founder Ernst Benz's background in making delicate instruments including Swiss watches, Benz Micro has an enviable reputation with the cartridge cognoscenti. Since 1994 it has been in the hands of product collaborator Albert Lukaschek, who runs the company today.

For Benz Micro, £275 is the entry-level point into its MC only cartridge range that extends all the way up to its £2.5k ebony bodied LP-S showpiece, and thankfully the Silver still packs some Swiss pedigree within its modest price. It is almost identical to its price-matched Gold sibling, but with a healthier 2mV output compared with the Gold's 0.4mV, so it can be plumbed into a phono stage's standard 47k MM input.

The Silver boasts Benz's recently redesigned rear pole piece with a locking azimuth and suspension mechanism and features a cross-coil armature with strong hybrid magnets made of neodymium, boron and iron. Like the Gold model, it uses a soft butyl rubber O-ring damper that's custom made in the US for Benz by a company that supplies gaskets to the aerospace industry. Benz hasn't scrimped on the diamond either, and treats the Silver's alloy cantilever to a Fritz Gyger elliptical stylus.

While its solid sides and colour-coded pins offer some help, having to locate long bolts that pass through the cartridge body into circular nuts

that nestle within recesses at the cartridge's base makes the Silver one of the trickiest pick-ups on test to install. And while the Silver's mirror finish may bring some bling to your platter, its reflective surfaces and sloping front panel make alignment even more vexing.

Sound quality

It doesn't take much music to realise that the Silver is cut from Benz Micro cloth with its well ordered and wide open soundstage. The classical chords of *La Traviata* fill all corners of my room with ease, highlighting that the Benz has one of the most expansive left-to-right soundstages of all the models on test.

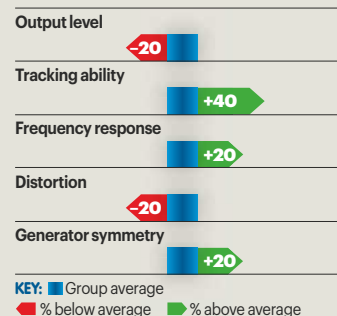
The Benz Micro isn't a particularly forward sounding cartridge, especially in the midrange, which makes for a very easy listening experience, especially over extended sessions, but on some material I would welcome a bit more bite. On Barrett's track for example, the way some of the other cartridges allow the more forceful guitar strikes to cut through the air with greater degrees of attack gives the music a shade more excitement. This trait is further evidenced with the REM songs, which sound very pleasant and panoramic, although a dash more vivacity would help give the music a bit more edge.

Bass is well ordered across all the test tracks, and if your system could do with extra control in this respect then the Benz may prove a welcome

ON TEST

First thing's first: as with all Benz MCs the Silver is phase-inverting, so you may choose to ignore the colour coding on its rear pins. This new high output MC is not quite as beefy as Benz's Micro ACE model (2.25mV versus the latter's 3.2mV into preamp loads above 1kohm), but the 40dB midrange separation is exceptional and quite the best of this month's group. Unequalised distortion is low at 2.4% (re. 1kHz/5cm/sec), but the equalised trend is higher, reaching a full 16% at 10kHz (re. -8dB). Just like the Sumiko MC, this is a reflection of the Silver's very extended high frequency response, which climbs 1-2dB from 2-10kHz before lifting to +4dB at 20kHz! This is most obvious with lateral cuts, providing a boost to central (vocal) images. Compliance is moderate at 20cu and tracking secure to 80um at a moderate 1.9g downforce – distortion is just 0.9% at +18dB (re. 5cm/sec at 315Hz). **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



tonic. The soft edges of the lower bass notes within *La Traviata* are perfectly captured and voiced well back within the mix. Although the Benz's bass doesn't extend as far down as some of the other models on test, such as its price-rivalling Grado, it still gets the Little Dragon track to make my feet start tapping along, thanks to the rhythm and texture on offer in the upper bass. The REM material, however, isn't quite as forgiving and while these songs sound clean and enjoyable across midrange and treble, the lack of low-end wallop tends to make the music sound thinner in comparison to the more meaty sounding pick-ups on test ●

HIFIChoice

OUR VERDICT

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

LIKE: Articulate and balanced sound
DISLIKE: May be too gentle for some; not that easy to install
WE SAY: Even handed cartridge that makes for a fatigue-free listen

OVERALL



exposure
high fidelity engineering

3010s2

unleash the passion with real hi-fi sound

hi-fi |'hī'fī| informal
adjective
of, used for, or relating to the
reproduction of music or other
sound with high fidelity.
noun (-pl. -fis |'ha 'faizl|)

high fidelity

noun

the reproduction of sound with little
or no distortion, giving a result as
similar to the original as possible.



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Goldring

2500 £395

This metal-bodied moving magnet scores highly on spec, but how will it measure up in the musical stakes?

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Goldring 2500

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Moving magnet
cartridge

WEIGHT
8.2g

FEATURES
• Quoted
output: 6.5mV
• Cantilever:
Permalloy
• Stylus: removable/
2 SD fine line
• Tracking weight:
1.7g

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With a history that stretches back to when Edward VII was king, Goldring has a long-standing legacy for quality phono products.

The recently launched 2000 series brings the brand bang up to date, with the lower priced 2100/2200/2300 models rubbing shoulders with their 1000 series cousins, which have proved popular with audiophiles for many years. All 2000 models use permalloy in their armature tubes to reduce mass with super permalloy in their shielding and fixed pole shoes, while powerful samarium cobalt magnets account for their high outputs. The 2400 and flagship 2500 model also get their delicate internals housed within aluminium bodies for added rigidity. Each ascending price point within the range buys you a better stylus, and the 2500 eschews the 2300's Gyger II and the 2400's Vital fine line, opting for a '2 SD' diamond on the tip of its tapered cantilever.

Being a moving magnet design, it has a replaceable stylus and swapping it is just a matter of pulling the curved stylus and cantilever housing forwards of the cartridge body, hence you can leave the body fitted to your tonearm in the process. All styli in the 2000 range are interchangeable, so if you can't afford the 2500 you can fit a cheaper replacement from further down the range.

The cartridge body's threaded mounting holes makes initial

installation straightforward, although the cartridge pins are quite close together, so you need to make sure that the tonearm cables' exposed connecting lugs aren't touching when hooking it up. Due to its curved front profile and stepped sides, getting the Goldring aligned takes a bit more effort than most, although its well exposed cantilever does help.

Sound quality

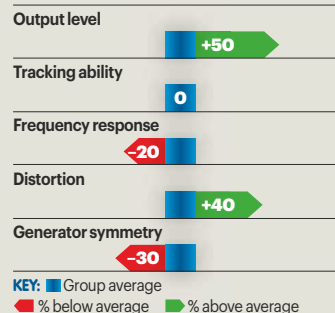
The first thing you notice about the 2500 is the higher levels of background noise it throws up compared with the other pick-ups on test when its finely profiled needle hits an LP's lead-in groove. Whether this is due to its very healthy output and refined tip reaching deeper into each groove I can't say, but I do know that when the music begins this is quickly replaced by vast amounts of detail, which the Goldring's diamond is able to uncover. The slow building strings of *La Traviata* sound exceptionally clear, as it etches the chords into the air with precision.

The midband is equally strong and explicit with perhaps the sharpest delivery of all the cartridges on test, while sounding more forward. In many ways the 2500 is reminiscent of some of the digital streamers that have graced my system in recent months, such as its polished presentation. Closing my eyes with the Goldring working its way through Barrett's *Octopus*, for example, I can be easily convinced that I'm hearing

ON TEST

Goldring's specification for its 2000 series suggests they share the same generator (graded, I assume, by performance), but differentiated by stylus. The 2500 is certainly a more subtle performer than the company's 2200 model and at 4.5mV (re. 5cm/sec), delivers the highest output in this month's test. The 2500 is free of the 2200's treble peak of +6dB/15kHz, but still has a +2dB emphasis from 6-8kHz that may well emphasise surface noise. This peak broadly coincides with a drop in output with vertically modulated grooves, suggesting the 2500's soundstage will be punchier in the centre than towards the far left or right. Distortion is also lower with in-phase (0.3-1.6%) than anti-phase detail (3-4%) right across the audio range. Without exceeding a 1.75g downforce, tracking is pretty good at 70-80um but the high 30° VTA suggests some tuning of arm height will be useful. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



the 2010 CD remaster and not it's vinyl counterpart, such is the pick-up's penchant for clarity. When the music gets a little more demanding, however, these levels of insight and its forward nature can become a bit too full on. While sounding explicit, the guitar work in the REM tracks begins to harden up as the music gets more complex and I find myself limiting the volume to keep everything in check.

Across the REM tracks I'd also welcome a bit more warmth in the bass regions to bring some analogue richness into the music, but for systems needing more sparkle, the Goldring may be ideal. ▶

HIFIChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Superb build and spec; analytical and lively sound
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Might be too hot sounding for some systems
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WESAY: Well built and clean sounding cartridge that will inject life into dull sounding decks. Partner wisely
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL





THE CONCEPT 40 LOUDSPEAKER

Q Acoustics introduces 'Concept 40', an elegant new floorstanding loudspeaker which sets new standards of sonic performance at its price.

Award-winning pedigree

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June 2014

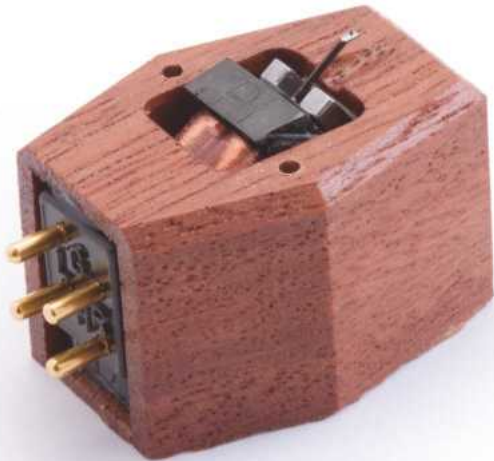


"Surprising sonic agility and composure... a wonderfully inviting sound"

What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision,
May 2014



www.Qacoustics.com



Grado

Reference Platinum 1 £265

From this US family business comes an alternative to the MM and MC brigade that gets back to nature

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Grado Reference Platinum 1

ORIGIN
USA

TYPE
High output moving iron cartridge

WEIGHT
6.5g

FEATURES
• Quoted output: 4.8mV
• Cantilever: four-piece OTL alloy
• Stylus: fixed/elliptical
• Tracking weight 1.5g

SUPPLIED BY
Analogue Seduction

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WEBSITE
analogueseduction.net; gradolabs.com

With its ever expanding range of headphones, it's easy to forget that Grado Labs cut its hi-fi teeth selling cartridges almost 50 years ago. Unlike most cartridge manufacturers, Grado prides itself on the moving iron (MI) approach to pick-up design. Instead of a magnet attached to the upper end of the cantilever that moves against fixed coils in the cartridge body (or vice-versa for MC models), Grado mounts a piece of iron to the cantilever while a fixed magnet sits over the cartridge's internal coils, providing magnetic flux within its 'flux-bridger' system to generate a signal. The Platinum's loading is 47k, so a standard MM phono stage is all that's required. Unlike Grado's cheaper Prestige pick-ups, the Platinum's stylus isn't customer replaceable.

Judging by the finish of its hand-crafted mahogany body and its carved wooden carry case, it's hard to believe that this is the cheapest model on test. Even the stylus guard is mahogany, and the Platinum's quality isn't just timber deep. Despite being the entry-level Reference model, it employs an optimised transmission line (OTL) cantilever with four separate sections of varying thicknesses bonded together to eliminate resonances, while its coils get ultra-high purity long crystal (UHPLC) oxygen-free copper wire.

Fitting is fairly straightforward thanks to its tapped mounting holes,

although you need to take care not to strip their wooden threads and the lack of colour coding on the cartridge pins can lead to mistakes when wiring it up. Its 16mm-tall body is higher than average, so be prepared to raise your tonearm for the correct VTA, but alignment is aided by the flat sides and vertical face.

Sound quality

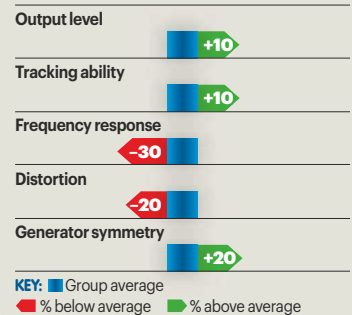
You don't need to spend much time in the Grado's company to realise it's a bit of a honey and quite a different beast to the more analytical sounding species from within the group. It brings a softer tone to *La Traviata*, as though the performers have relaxed into their seats to let the music flow forth with a little less urgency in comparison to the Goldring and Sumiko's deliveries. The rich tones also add weight to the Barrett material, which brings a greater sense of scale as the instruments seem to gain more mass. Soundstaging isn't as wide as the Benz Micro, but nor are instruments as centrally congested as the Goldring's presentation, and it's how instruments are presented that reveals more of the Grado's hand. On the Barrett track, it shifts the focus so that the guitar is less jangly in the treble and instead I hear more of how the notes resonate, rather than the leading edges of strings being struck by nail or plectrum. While this richness will appeal to many and could help to calm an overly bright system, the Platinum's sound can

ON TEST

Grado offers a generalised specification for its pick-ups, which suggests that the 'moving iron' generator is at least very similar in all its models. In practice the '4.8mV at 5cm/sec' output is rather optimistic with 2.7mV being achieved in our tests, albeit with an excellent L/R channel imbalance of just 0.12dB at 1kHz. At 1.6g (1.5g is recommended) the Platinum 1 tracks like a dream, sailing through the 80um bands and achieving an equalised distortion of -0.6% at +6dB and +9dB (re. 5cm/sec at 315Hz), increasing to just -0.7% at +12dB, -0.8% at +15dB and -1.4% at +18dB with just the faintest signs of mistracking.

The Platinum's 20cu compliance suggests it's best suited to medium-to-low effective mass arms. The response shows a -2dB droop through the presence region (hence the 'rich' balance) followed by a +3dB high treble peak at 15kHz. Fortunately this is too high to give it's sound any sting! **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



seem a bit muddy in the bass, which lacks the refined control of the Ortofon and Sumiko models.

The plentiful bass and analogue tone is the ideal tonic for the REM tracks, casting them with the right blend of depth and smoothness, which gives them just the right amount of warmth and expression to remain loyal to their harder-edged nature without becoming too visceral and fatiguing. Cymbals are crisp with vocals sounding open and unprocessed and while the Grado is bettered by others in the group for instrument separation and bass control (if not extension), it's a very musical performer nonetheless ● ▶

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Warm sound with good bass; lovely finish
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Not the most focussed pick-up
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: Rich analogue-sounding cartridge that's fantastic value for money
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL



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Nagaoka

MP-300 £509

This Japanese pick-up has considerable hi-fi pedigree and looks set to add a golden glow to your vinyl system

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Nagaoka MP-300

ORIGIN
Japan

TYPE
Moving permalloy
cartridge

WEIGHT
8g

FEATURES
• Quoted
output: 3mV
• Cantilever: Boron
• Stylus: removable/
SuperFine elliptical
• Tracking weight
1.8g

SUPPLIED BY
Analogue Seduction

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Despite the glamorous garb, you can clearly spot that this is a Nagaoka a mile off, thanks to its distinctive squared-off shape that's been consistent with the company's cartridges for decades.

As well as producing its own modestly priced range of pick-ups, Nagaoka is also a leading styli and precision-made magnet supplier to other cartridge makers around the globe. All Nagaoka cartridges are moving permalloy designs (or magnetodynamic permalloy, hence the 'MP' moniker within each model name). The range starts with the budget-priced MP-100 at £85, which sports a conical stylus and samarium cobalt magnets. The MP-300 is the penultimate model and trumped only by the £628 MP-500, which shares the same slender boron cantilever as the 300 and also gets a SuperFine line diamond in place of the 300's SuperFine elliptical tip.

Internals are of equal high order, with a powerful samarium cobalt magnet in its generator, an anti-ferro magnetic permalloy shield and a carbon fibre reinforced plastic shoe. Its replaceable stylus is a simple push-fit design with replacements interchangeable across the range. Like the 500, the 300 has two mini bolts to hold the cantilever assembly in place, which you need to remove when swapping its stylus.

While the MP-300's retro looks may be appealing, its retro approach to

tonearm installation is less so. Nagaoka's traditional mounting system of open side lugs, long bolts and circular nuts makes for a fiddly fit. The cantilever's set back position under the front of the cartridge also makes it harder to see, although the cartridge's square front and sides are a decent visual aid when lining everything up.

Sound quality

As soon as the needle hits *La Traviata*'s grooves I'm given a flavour of its unique personality. The strings sound bold and powerful, with a tone and clarity that puts it somewhere between the strident sounding Sumiko and the softer voiced Grado. As the sound of the strings project forward of my speaker plane as well as sideways, they have a real sense of body, which adds gravity and texture to the music.

Bass is equally noticeable, and the MP-300's output is near the Grado's across the REM material with perhaps a little less depth in exchange for a bit more control. Even at low volumes, Bill Berry's gathering drum rolls during *I Remember California* sound like low rumbling thunder of window rattling proportions, backed up by Mike Mills' bass guitar, which is separated out convincingly.

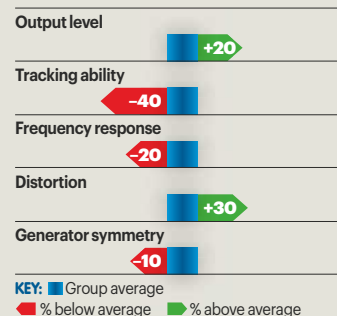
At the other end of the spectrum, while treble sounds strongly defined, it isn't given the freedom to really escape the soundstage in the same way as its cheaper rivals allow, such

ON TEST

The general hallmarks of the MP-300 are not dissimilar to Nagaoka's upmarket MP-500 particularly in respect of its response shape – the +2dB lift at 8-12kHz conferring plenty of bite – and impressively low distortion. Lateral modulations are evidently reinforced more strongly so this 'bite' will be more obvious from strings and percussion in the centre rather than periphery of the soundstage.

The MP-300 is a little less compliant than expected, but similar to the Grado at 18cu, but tracking is good enough at 70-80um, the elliptical stylus starting to lose its grip at around +15dB (re. 5cm/sec). Low-to-medium effective mass arms are recommended as is some extra damping, if on offer. The MP-300's 3mV output is about average for this group, but the 0.6dB channel imbalance could stand some slight improvement. However, channel separation through the midrange is excellent at -40dB. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



as those from Ortofon and Sumiko. Yukimi Nagano's vocals on the Little Dragon track are clearly articulated, but her voice has a tendency to sound more held within the mix, rather than being set free to soar above the soundstage so that her high notes can take flight. The percussive cymbal taps in the right channel are easy to place and clearly defined, but lack the final degrees of spine-tingling shimmer to really light up my listening room.

Its timing is one of the best on test, with an assertive beat that sounds in control without forcing the pace, which really favours the dance-driven nature of Little Dragon's melodies ● ▶

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Articulate sound with lots of rhythm
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Not the easiest to install; can sound closed in
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: Solid all-rounder with good bass, but could do more for the money
FEATURES ★★★★★	

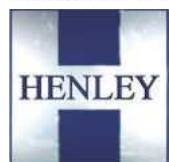
OVERALL



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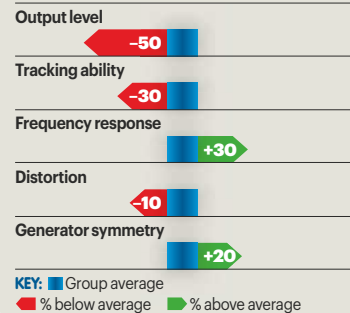
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**ON TEST**

Ortofon's new Quintet Blue is the only traditional medium-output MC in this month's test, besting its claimed 0.5mV into a 100ohm load at 0.62mV with a superb 0.1dB channel balance and acceptable >25dB separation through the midrange. In practice, its performance is not dissimilar to Ortofon's own Vivo Blue MC. The Quintet Blue's compliance is a symmetrical 16cu in vertical and horizontal planes and the 'nude elliptical' stylus offers secure tracking up to ~70um groove modulations, just losing its grip at +18dB (315Hz).

Just like the Vivo Blue, the Quintet Blue's high frequency distortion and response are both lifted with lateral cuts, reaching +1dB through the presence band and mid-treble, suggesting that its soundfield may be emphasised stage front. Equalised distortion (-8dB) is low at <1.5% up to 2kHz, but climbs to a peak of 16% at an inaudible 17kHz. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Ortofon

Quintet Blue £325

With its simple looks and solid body, will this new Blue MC make its mark against its high output rivals?

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Ortofon Quintet Blue

ORIGIN
Denmark

TYPE
Moving coil cartridge

WEIGHT
9g

FEATURES
 • Quoted output: 0.5mV
 • Cantilever: aluminium
 • Stylus: fixed/nude elliptical
 • Tracking weight 2.3g

SUPPLIED BY
Henley Designs

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WEBSITE
henleydesigns.co.uk; ortofon.com

From entry-level bargain moving magnets like the 2M Red to its budget busting £5k Anna MC statement, Ortofon seems to have a cartridge for everyone. Starting at £200, the company's new Quintet MC series challenges the notion that MCs should cost a king's ransom to justify investing in over a good MM design.

The five-strong Quintet range comes housed in bodies made of a special acrylonitrile butadiene styrene (ABS) thermoplastic material, chosen for its lightweight and durable properties. Internally each model packs fixed neodymium magnets and each step up the Quintet ladder brings improvements to coil wires, cantilever material and stylus profile.

The Blue improves on the £200 Red by using an elliptical stylus of the nude type, whereby the whole stylus is a solid diamond that's bonded to the cantilever, instead of an elliptical diamond tip bonded to a metal shank that's in turn bonded to the cantilever. The Blue also upgrades the Red's standard copper coil wire with pure 4-nines copper taken from the £500 Bronze model. At the top of the Quintet tree sits the Black variant, which boasts a nude Shibata-shaped stylus affixed to a boron cantilever and Ortofon's Aucurum coil wire (gold plated 6-nines copper). A mono model at the same price point as the Blue completes the range.

At 18mm the Blue has the tallest body of all the models on test, so it's

worth checking that your arm can be adjusted to accommodate its height and VTA. Once at the right height, its rectangular body and threaded mounting holes make it easy to align, although its output pins could do with being more widely spaced to make wiring up a bit easier.

Sound quality

Being the only low output MC on test could imply that the Ortofon will be the most demanding of its partnering phono stage, to ensure its signal is brought up to MM levels without undue influence.

A few bars into the Little Dragon song shows how unfussy it actually is, as it presents all the detail in the track with real dynamism. It may not be as highly revealing as the Goldring or Sumiko models, or have as much overall warmth as the Grado, but the line it treads between these models makes for a highly engaging compromise. On the Barrett track, lead guitar notes in the instrumental section sound sharp but never harsh, with chords struck firmly before reverberating with natural echo.

Its soundstage is expansive left to right, of a similar size to the one rendered by the Benz and it also possesses a greater talent for bringing instruments within it to life. On *La Traviata* it really plays to how the piece moves from quiet passages to louder sections with great effect, pulling you into the music. Each instrument gets the space to let its

notes grow, which it knits together into a cohesive whole, revealing its measured and neutral presentation.

Picking up the pace with the REM tracks shows it is equally capable when letting its hair down. *Turn You Inside-Out* makes a grand entrance that's full of impact and depth, while the guitars are cranked up with raucous energy, without becoming too hard edged when the volume heads north.

Bass is well articulated and evenly presented without being overly emphasised or rolling off too early, making its presence and detail felt without becoming overwhelming on more demanding bass-heavy music ▶

Hi-Fi Choice**OUR VERDICT**

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

LIKE: Open and detailed sound; well built

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

DISLIKE: Tall body may need tonearms with adjustable height

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

WE SAY: Fantastic sounding mid-price MC that does everything right

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL

MUSICAL FIDELITY

MF-100

SUPERIOR PERFORMANCE HEAD PHONES

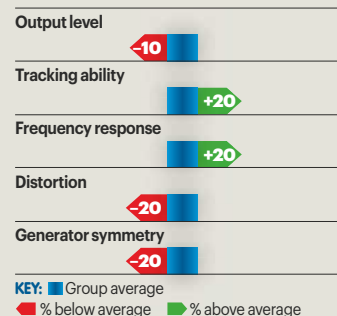


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**ON TEST**

This 'naked' high output MC is packed full of energy and character. Output is healthy for the breed at 2.5mV (re. 5cm/sec) into a standard 47kohm load and while compliance is, as Sumiko specifies, a little on the low side at 15cu and best partnered with medium/heavyweight arms, it still tracks like a dream sailing through the 80um band and incurring just 1.1% THD at +18dB. Distortion looks to be on the high side at 17/15% (L/R) at 10kHz, but this is as much a reflection of the EVO III's exceptional bandwidth (other pick-ups roll-off earlier and so cannot generate the ultrasonic harmonics). Even when well run-in, the EVO III has a powerful presence and treble response (+1dB from 3-10kHz and up to +3dB/20kHz and beyond) that will be noticeable with strong central rather than peripheral stereo images. You can play with the arm pillar height to tweak the elliptical stylus' VTA and ameliorate any excess sizzle! **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Sumiko

Blue Point Special

EVO III £295

The latest incarnation of this classic high output MC boasts a naked design to get to the heart of the music

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Sumiko Blue Point Special EVO III

ORIGIN
US

TYPE
High output moving coil cartridge

WEIGHT
8.3g

FEATURES
 • Quoted output: 2.5mV
 • Cantilever: aluminium
 • Stylus: fixed/elliptical
 • Tracking weight: 2g

SUPPLIED BY
Analogue Seduction

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analogueseduction.net; sumikoaudio.net

Californian cartridge maker Sumiko acts as both importer and distributor for some seriously high-end brands including Sonus faber and Audio Research, as well as selling its own range of pick-ups.

The EVO III sits atop the company's entry-level Oyster range, with its blue finish distinguishing it from the equally stripped back £595 hand-calibrated Blackbird model that's the starting point in the Reference series. To keep prices down, the BPS gets an aluminium cantilever with a special coating in place of the Blackbird's boron variant.

What clearly sets it apart from every other pick-up on test is its obvious lack of a protective body, leaving its generator exposed to the outside world. Sumiko's reasoning being that the best way to prevent resonance from a cartridge's outer shell entering the replay chain is to do away with the outer shell altogether, an approach that's also adopted by many top-flight cartridges with four-figure price tags.

Looking at the Sumiko's intricate working parts up close reveals a very high standard of craftsmanship, although with its exposed internals seemingly vulnerable to clumsy fingers, you might expect that an iron nerve and expert steady hand are essential to getting it safely set up.

You do need to take extra care, of course, but thanks to its large top and rear plate, you have plenty of surfaces to grip. And while its pre-threaded mounting holes and widely spaced cartridge pins bring some relief, achieving spot on alignment is always going to be a bit of a challenge given the lack of an outer shell to align it by.

Sound quality

A quick lap of my test music reveals that the Sumiko's tonal balance is more sensitive than most to VTA. With the VPI arm wand parallel to the LP's surface, the treble sounds overly bright, with emphasised sibilance on the REM material that makes the cymbals sound 'spitty'. Dropping the arm pillar so that the arm wand slopes slightly upwards towards the headshell (to make the cantilever's angle of ascent not as steep) pays dividends in calming the top end down. It's still explicitly detailed, meaning I'm able to hear REM at their aggressive best, with guitar riffs ripping free from the soundstage and fired at me centre stage, but the excessive brightness is gone, replaced by a live experience-like energy that's hard to ignore.

In many respects the Sumiko is similar to the Goldring with lightning fast transients, but at the extremes it's less clinical in the midrange and treble and more expressive.

While Barrett's vocal overdubs are easy to distinguish, it's the lilt of his voice and its unique nuances that the BPS turns its attention to, revealing the heart of his performance.

Similarly with the Little Dragon track, the subtleties in the treble sound more enchanting here than with the other five pick-ups.

At the other end of the scale, the bass doesn't quite have the depth or warmth of the Grado or Nagaoka, but still packs a decent thump that's well defined. Imaging is also a key string to its bow, which is made clear by how it builds a tangible orchestral picture during *La Traviata* of impressive scale and depth. ▶

Hi-Fi Choice**OUR VERDICT**

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Detailed and vibrant sound; superb quality engineering
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Open body is not for the heavy handed; very sensitive to VTA
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: Classic high output MC that's bristling with energy, making it superb value
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL

Group test verdict

After countless laps on the wheels of steel to take this month's pick-ups to their limits, **Andrew Simpson** pulls into the pit lane with his final verdict

EVERY CARTRIDGE IN this group has plenty to offer, and what you go for comes down to system matching, budget and personal taste.

The Nagaoka isn't a bad sounding cartridge by any means and offers a similar performance to last year's Nagaoka, which was our crowned winner. Price hikes over the years means the MP-300 now costs more than twice as much as the MP-150 and it's substantially bettered by cheaper competition.

Next up is the Goldring and if your system needs a shot in the arm this could just be the ticket, but as a long

term solution the Goldring is just too revealing, so partner wisely if your system is already on the bright side.

The third pick-up to head for the car park is the Benz Micro, which offers surprising levels of Swiss precision for under £300. But while I expect it's genteel and open soundstage will appeal to many, it's a bit too well mannered and would benefit from more vivacity and a stronger voice to really make its mark.

The Grado takes third place by offering a sound that's full-bodied with a rich tone and an analogue warmth, making it a joy to listen to.

It's also superb value for money and with its hand-made wooden shell it could have easily passed for the most expensive on test despite being the cheapest. Where it loses out to the Sumiko is in the accuracy and refinement stakes.

The Sumiko's model name may sound more Subaru forecourt than high-end vinyl and its naked design is enough to give vinyl newbies nightmares, but when set up for optimal performance it's a stonkingly honest cartridge for the cash with a level of sophistication and detail that belies its price.



WINNER
While on paper the Blue's spec doesn't better its rivals, it's the execution of its engineering that earns it top marks. It offers the most comprehensive and enjoyable performance with all music, showing Ortofon has clearly hit upon another magic formula.



Make/model Benz Micro MC Silver



Goldring 2500



Grado Reference Platinum 1



Nagaoka MP-300



Ortofon Quintet Blue



Sumiko Blue Point Special EVO III

	Price	£275	£395	£265	£509	£325	£295
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	Even handed cartridge with a fatigue-free and well mannered nature	Analytical MM that's great with detail, but might be too revealing for some	Wood bodied moving iron bargain with a warm analogue character	Capable all-rounder, but needs to do more with the music for the money	Superb sounding all-rounder that shows analogue at its best. Excellent value	Open-bodied classic that challenges rivals in the musical detail and vitality stakes	

Key features

Type	MC (high output)	MM	MI (high output)	Moving permalloy	MC (low output)	MC (high output)
Quoted output	2mV	6.5mV	4.8mV	3mV	0.5mV	2.5mV
Replaceable styli	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Weight	5.7g	8.2g	6.5g	8g	9g	8.3g
Cantilever/stylus	Aluminium/elliptical	Permalloy/2 SD fine line	OTL alloy/elliptical	Boron/superfine ellip.	Aluminium/nude ellip.	Aluminium/elliptical

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TURNTABLE: Michell TecnoDec £897 **HFC 309**

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PHONO STAGE: Rothwell Rialto £380 **HFC 381**

February's phono stage Group Test winner, Rothwell's plain-looking little Class A box gives a sublime performance across both of its MM and MC inputs, making this a worthwhile investment for a lifetime of cartridge upgrades.



TRACKING FORCE GAUGE: Shure SFG-2 £38 **HFC 385**

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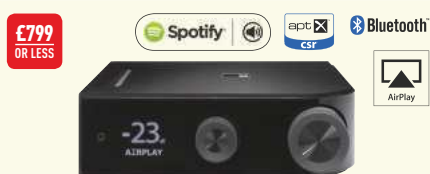
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ROKSAN • CASPIAN M2 • CD / AMPLIFIER

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Choice EXOTICA ATC SCM40
FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER **£3,275**



The BFG

In the SCM40, ATC has a sizeable floorstanding loudspeaker that's set way away from the fray, says **David Price**

There's something odd about ATC's SCM40 – it doesn't look or feel like almost any other loudspeaker in its price class. It's almost as if someone has forgotten to style it, like they've taken three drivers and put them in a box designed to do the job and then gone home. This is in marked contrast to many rivals, which have all kinds of stylistic flourishes. Despite looking rather 'old school' – albeit in a timeless sort of way – the SCM40 is actually a new model that came out in 2013, replacing a 2007 design of the same name that looked as if it had been launched in 1988! ATC, it seems, doesn't pay too much attention to matters of fashion.

A reminder that so many reflex ported designs aren't doing bass right

Construction quality is another matter. There is absolutely nothing about this speaker to suggest it is built to its price, and you're reminded of this when you try to move it. The drive units look highly anachronistic, and that's because they are – especially the midband driver. The Gloucester company began its life building drive units for professional monitor speakers, and then started making its own. Founder Billy Woodman seems as fascinated by transducers as he was 40 years ago when ATC was born, and it has a dome mid unit unique to this marque.

Very few companies make midrange domes these days, because they're hard to get right. Instead, most prefer to use a small version of a coned bass driver to handle these frequencies. The benefit of a dome, as well as excellent dispersion, is that it is phase-coherent with the dome tweeter – which is to say it radiates sound waves in a similar manner. This brings excellent integration to that critical tweeter/midrange driver

relationship, and you can hear it in every speaker so designed, from the classic Yamaha NS-1000M to the SCM40. This 75mm soft dome mid driver uses a hand-doped acrylic diaphragm and suspension system, using a "secret ATC formula". It mates to an ATC-designed and built 25mm dome tweeter with a doped polyester diaphragm and suspension, with alloy wave guide. The bass driver is 164mm in diameter and features a hand coated paper pulp diaphragm, chosen for its balance of low mass, damping and rigidity, and there's a huge motor assembly behind.

A three-element crossover is fitted, comprising a low pass filter, band pass filter and high pass filter. The efficiency of the system is set by the bass driver with the mid and HF padded down accordingly, the company says, so it's kept as simple as possible – this is achievable because the drivers are designed around it. As with all ATC three-ways, the crossover points are 380Hz and 3.5kHz. One problem with this speaker is that it's not particularly easy to drive. ATC says its impedance curve is flat, so the amplifier shouldn't require Herculean reserves of current, but it sure does need watts! Quoted sensitivity is low for a big box – 85dB/1W/1m – which means over 60W is the order of the day. I try several solid-state amplifiers and all get hot and slightly bothered at very high volumes. This is in part because ATC has gone for an infinite baffle cabinet, which asks more from whatever is driving it.

Sound quality

There are too many loudspeakers describing themselves wishfully as 'studio monitors', but here we have something that is far closer to this than most. The big ATC is unerringly revealing of what you put into it, and certainly doesn't sugar the pill. But if you imagine that it is cerebral, analytical and dispassionately forensic then think again. Feed it a high-quality source via a smooth, punchy solid-state amplifier and you get a startlingly fine sound back.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
ATC SCM40

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
3-way floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
31kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
265 x 980 x 300mm

FEATURES
• Infinite baffle
cabinet design
• 25mm soft
dome tweeter
• 75mm soft dome
midband driver
• 164mm bass driver

DISTRIBUTOR
ATC Loudspeaker
Technology Ltd

TELEPHONE
01285 760561

WEBSITE
atcloudspeakers.
co.uk

In essence, you get a large, wideband sound that's starker and more open than anything else I've heard at this price. This is made more apparent by its superb bass; arguments rage about the relative merits of infinite baffle boxes, but ATC has got this one working brilliantly. The only downside is that it makes lesser amplifiers feel like a jogger running in concrete trainers!

Kraftwerk's *Tour de France Soundtracks* is breathtaking – rarely have I heard its low frequencies in such sharp relief. Positioned just 30cm from my rear wall and toed-in slightly, the speed, power and grip is superlative – it easily outdoes more expensive big boxes like Spendor's D7 or Sonus faber's Olympica II. The attack transients on the synth bass are superb, starting and stopping with the speed of an LED. On songs with vast tracts of low frequencies such as the Moog bass on 4hero's *Cosmic Tree*, the bottom end is rock solid, prodigious and ultra tight, but give it an indie guitar track like REM's *Maps and Legends* and the speaker is relatively circumspect. Basically, it tells you what's going on if it is going on, and if it isn't then it doesn't! This is the mark of a serious wideband monitor loudspeaker, and a reminder that so many reflex ported designs simply aren't doing bass right. Conventional-holed boxes have practicality and

Tri-wiring is an absolute breeze thanks to the high quality of the binding posts



Q&A

Richard Newman

ATC transducer/R&D engineer



DP: What does the SCM40 set out to achieve?

RN: We designed this product to improve upon its predecessor through the incorporation of the new ATC SH25-76 tweeter, a better cabinet construction and further refined crossover design. The SCM40 aims to offer the extremely high performance and good value for money in a package suitable for most living/listening rooms. It sports the same bass and mid drivers as the previous model, but the tweeter has undergone a huge upgrade. It's the product of seven years' development and is the only dual suspension 25mm tweeter on the market that we are aware of. The dual suspension design allows us to overcome the issues associated with ferro-fluid designs. The speaker sounds dynamic and honest.

Why choose an infinite baffle cabinet design?

Many sources of non-linear distortion in loudspeaker drive units are directly related to excursion. By tuning a port to essentially clamp the motion of the bass driver at its resonant frequency (Fs) we are able to keep the non-linear distortion low. It's this approach we adopt in our larger loudspeakers, where it should be noted that Fs occurs at a very low frequency. At frequencies below the port tuning the bass driver essentially operates in free air, undergoing large excursions and producing all manner of undesirable non-linear distortion. In large systems where Fs is so low we can control the motion right down to the lowest frequency in the audio band, but in smaller systems the lack of control below Fs would result in a poor performance. So an infinite baffle design on the SCM40 gets control over the bass driver across its complete operating band and in turn reduces non-linear distortion. The 12dB/oct roll out associated with an infinite baffle design also provides a fantastic transient response resulting in a bass that sounds tight, controlled and fully representative of the audio signal.

IN SIGHT



Selling for £3,495, Spondor's D7 is an established favourite. It is extremely well built and finished, displays real engineering depth and turns in a very fine sound. It manages to deftly balance out detail retrieval and musicality, while being easy to drive and easy going on ancillaries. Not so the ATC SCM40, which is an altogether more revealing speaker – it cuts right into what's really good in the recording and tells you all about it as bluntly as a Yorkshireman in a bad mood. If the ancillaries and recording are great the ATC flies ahead of the Spondor; most obvious is the brilliant bass grip and searing midband detail. They're both excellent speakers and worth auditioning.

ease-of-drive in their favour, but can bring problems related to phase integrity across the whole frequency. This often means the bass can sound like it's a fraction of a second behind.

Not so the SCM40, and the way it integrates its superb low frequencies with the midband is a joy; in this region it's more searching than many, but is never harsh unless the source and/or song is too. It sounds like a veil has been lifted from in front of the music and it gives an explicit insight into the proceedings. I am impressed by how deep it digs into Thomas Dolby's *Airwaves*; it ekes its way into the groove and throws out loads of info. It sets up an accurate stereo soundstage and hangs images back when needed, but projects well when called upon. It proves highly coherent in its handling of phase, everything snaps into focus and arrives at the right place and time.

Despite that big, prodigious bass, you would not call the ATC warm. It has quite a revealing balance that isn't afraid to 'do' bright when the recording and/or ancillaries dictate. Treble is airy, spacious and well etched. The looped hi-hats on Beatmasters *Who's In The House?* are crispy and scratchy, which is just how they should be. There's no gilding of

the lily with the SCM40, everything is handed to you in an accurate and unalloyed way. Some may find it bright; it's certainly a fearless critic of your ancillary components, so if you've got some £1,000 separates and you'd like to buy the ATCs to partner them until you've saved up for better, you should be prepared to be reminded why you need to save up!

In practical terms, this is the biggest problem – they are too revealing for most front ends and certainly those in their price class. Most buyers with this sort of money will not want something that tears into recordings in such a way. Play some classic Blue Note jazz in the form of Lou Donaldson's *Alligator Bogaloo*, and it's wonderfully sonorous and insightful, swinging along like you wouldn't believe. But move to the Byrds' *Eight Miles High* (recorded around the same time) and it sounds disappointingly thin and insubstantial; it's still musically enjoyable, but doesn't half sound poorly recorded.

Conclusion

Given a serious source and recording, the new ATC SCM40 is superb – I know of no price rivals that give this level of accuracy, speed and insight. It strings the rhythmic elements of the mix together brilliantly, punching out subtle dynamic inflections in a marvellously satisfying and visceral way. But then again it will have you fretting about how best to drive it for years to come, because you know it's capable of a level of transparency you'd normally only expect from loudspeakers at three or four times its price. It's certainly a great speaker to commit to and build a system around – but if you're looking for something that's simply going to make 'a nice noise' regardless of partnering equipment and recordings, then others are certainly going to be a more appropriate match ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★☆

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Superlative clarity; excellent phase coherence; sublime bass

DISLIKE: Hard work for an amplifier; too revealing for most

WE SAY: A great modern monitor loudspeaker, but not for all



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AudioGate 3

HIGH DEFINITION AUDIO PLAYER SOFTWARE



DS-DAC-100

1BIT USB-DAC

DS-DAC-100m

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KORG



Thinking big

Spendor's new D1 is the greatest in a long line of mini-monitors that stretches back four decades **David Price** is impressed

Famed for producing loudspeakers since the days of the BBC LS3/5A back in the mid seventies, Spendor made vast numbers of the mini monitor as well as offering its own SA1, which shared the BBC design's tiny dimensions but was turned through 90°. The D1 you see here is the successor – the result is a tiny loudspeaker that's purposed to deliver extremely high-quality sound.

Purists may look on disapprovingly, but the venerable BBC design is virtually prehistoric by modern standards. The D1, however, uses the latest thinking in drive units, cabinet construction and bracing and crossover design – rather than being a rival to the BBC box, it's the spiritual

They throw out a bewilderingly wide soundstage given their size

heir. While it shares the size, it has none of the drawbacks; the LS3/5A's embarrassingly low power handling and insensitivity simply aren't an issue for the D1. Instead we have a thoroughly modern mini monitor.

Like the iconic BBC design, this new Spendor has an infinite baffle. The reason for this, says designer Philip Swift, is that doing it this way provides the best possible phase coherence, and also gives the benefit of far more controlled boundary reinforcement. The D1s are designed to work rammed against a rear wall or on a bookshelf, where they'll get a welcome extra thump down below.

Spendor has spent a lot of time on the woodwork; it uses asymmetric aperture bracing of its thin walls. The idea is not to store energy like a capacitor, but rather to let it disperse as fast as possible, and with as little resonance. Just like its big D7 brother, Spendor's 'Dynamic Damping' with small low mass constrained polymer dampers at key energy interface points convert energy into heat.

The D1 also gets two brand new D-series drivers. First is the 22mm Spendor Linear Pressure Zone tweeter, which has a sequential geometry micro-foil. Its stainless steel front plate forms a damped acoustic chamber directly in front of a lightweight woven polyamide diaphragm, and this incorporates a phase-correcting microfoil to equalise soundwave path lengths across the diaphragm surface. This also generates a symmetrical pressure environment on both faces of the tweeter diaphragm so the tweeter always operates in a balanced linear mode, says Swift.

Whereas the latter incarnation of its SA1 predecessor, launched in 2009, used Spendor's EP38 cone material, the D1 employs EP77 – a material first developed for the D7 last year – in a new 150mm size for its mid/bass driver. This is claimed to be rigid but non-resonant, and is mated to a cast magnesium alloy chassis, high efficiency motor system, optimised electro-dynamic damping. The polymer surround and elastomeric damped suspension minimise driver break-in time due to their stable molecular composition, Spendor says.

The two units swap over at 4.8kHz via a crossover sporting high linearity plastic film capacitors and high saturation inductor cores. No series attenuating resistors are used, and silver-plated copper wiring is fitted. The rear terminals are of super quality, but non-bi-wirable.

Sound quality

Come to the D1s cold and your first impression is the lack of bass, but once you're over this, you begin to find yourself impressed by just how big this speaker sounds – assuming you have a decently powerful amplifier, of course. Direct comparison with the old SA1 model shows that the D1 is a little more efficient, but it's still not good by modern standards. It's brilliant by LS3/5a standards, of course, but next to your average modern KEF or Tannoy baby box, the Spendor is

quieter. So any prospective purchasers will need an amplifier of at least 60W RMS per channel to get decent levels even in a smallish room.

Suitably set up, run close to the back wall and toed-in just a touch it gives an unforgettable sound. Talk about squeezing a quart into a pint pot – it throws images wide left and right, in an amazingly unselfconscious way. Aside from an obvious lack of 'thump' and 'grunt' from the lowest octaves of the music, it shows absolutely no concessions to its diminutive dimensions. It is smooth, well integrated between the mid/bass unit and the tweeter, and yet has a naturally spry and airy disposition that's bubbling with detail. Fed Kraftwerk's *Tour De France Étape 3*, it bops along – of course, it loses all the body of that lovely thumping bass synthesiser, but still seems able to communicate its presence. You hear the leading edges, but not the actual thunderous bass itself. This works surprisingly well, as it allows the listener's brain to fill in the gaps.

Given a bit of hip-hoppy acid jazz in the shape of Galliano's *Stoned Again*, the D1 sounds like it is on springs. Wonderfully bouncy, the little box imparts the song's every rhythmic inflection and microdynamic accent. Elements of the mix dash around the room, these speakers throwing out a bewilderingly wide soundstage given their size. Inside this, things are balanced; vocals appear very intimate, with a fine texture to the

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Spendor D1

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2-way standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
5.7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
165 x 305 x 190mm

FEATURES
• Infinite baffle cabinet design
• 22mm linear phase hybrid soft dome tweeter
• 150mm EP77 polymer coned mid/bass driver
• 600mm stand option (£595)

DISTRIBUTOR
Spendor Audio Systems

TELEPHONE
01323 843474

WEBSITE
spendoraudio.com

Three finishes are available including Dark Ebony as shown



Q&A

Philip Swift

MD, Spendor Audio Systems



DP: Why make this loudspeaker?

PS: We wanted to create the definitive best-ever small loudspeaker. Not everyone wants floorstanders, and since the original Spendor SA1 (1976) and LS3/5A (1982) we have established a strong worldwide niche market for small Spendor loudspeakers.

Why do an infinite baffle design?

With a conventional reflex design, bass is enhanced by a resonant port output. The 'peaked' resonant output introduces serious phase errors between direct sound from the driver and the port. That ruins the natural timing and integration of music. For Spendor that is a totally unacceptable compromise.

Why not make the D1 cabinet as solid as you can?

Solid implies high mass. That might be good for marketing, but it is rarely good for sound. Mass stores spurious energy and unless the energy is dissipated very fast and silently it is released slowly and the 'overhang' causes unacceptable 'blurring' and 'slowing' of the sound, across all frequencies. The Spendor D1 avoids this by having a relatively light but very rigid structure with 'dynamic damping'. It literally brings a breath of fresh air to the sound.

Why isn't it bi-wired?

A good single-wired loudspeaker will deliver consistent good sound with all good cables and amplifiers. Bi-wired designs are highly sensitive to the smallest changes in cables and amplifiers. Some 20 years ago bi-wiring often made good sense, but not today.

How would you describe the sound of the D1 loudspeaker?

It's a captivating musical experience. Gloriously detailed and dynamic, with deep and articulate bass!

IN SIGHT



- 1 22mm soft dome tweeter
- 2 Infinite baffle cabinet design
- 3 Robust binding posts
- 4 150mm EP77 polymer coned mid/bass driver

singer's voice. Bass drums thunk with great speed and snares cut through the mix like the proverbial cutting implement through animal fat. The lack of overhang in the cabinet, added to the innate speed of the drivers, means that the music almost seems to be speeded up.

Feed the D1 with a well-recorded classical piece such as Karajan conducting the Berlin Philharmonic playing Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* on Deutsche Grammophon, and you're struck by the air and space. The new tweeter is streets ahead of the previous dome fitted to the SA1, offering more insight and atmosphere. The SA1's certainly isn't bad, but the D1's is superb at the price, indeed I am not sure you'll find a better HF unit on a sub £3,000 speaker. It isn't a fancy ribbon design, but has much of the openness, sparkle and lustre – this is most welcome with classical because it carries the subtle textures of the strings with impressive delicacy and refinement. It's able to snap everything into focus, and work in perfect unison with the mid/bass unit. Only on swinging dynamic peaks do you notice the D1's sound; generally it sounds wonderfully untrammelled, but when the music gets loud and complex there's a subtle sense of compression. Once again this is physics rearing its inevitable head, because there's only so much one 15cm cone can do on its own!

In absolute terms, this is the biggest issue with the D1, although you have to be running pretty high levels and even then the compression is less than any similarly sized box, including the previous SA1. Heidi Berry's *Washington Square* shows the D1 to be far better at tracking the dynamics

of the various instruments, whereas its predecessor seems flatter and less detailed. Compared with some of the best full-size speakers there's a slight homogeneity to the tonality; it doesn't quite have an electrostatic-like insight into a recording, but is still excellent at the price.

Conclusion

It's not an easy life being a little loudspeaker, because the laws of physics loom large in your purview. There are many things a baby box simply cannot do, so the trick is to design a speaker that doesn't try, and focus instead of what it can do well. The new Spendor D1 does precisely this, and very skillfully too. It sounds remarkably expansive, spacious, detailed and dynamic considering its diminutive dimensions. It's also far better than the outgoing SA1 than the £300 price differential would suggest. So overall, I would say this is one of the very best mini-monitors currently on sale – or indeed ever made. It's an essential audition if you're spatially challenged or unwilling to let large loudspeakers change your life ●



There are very few direct competitors to the D1; there are plenty of bookshelf speakers, but few are as compact. The closest is ATC's new SCM7. It's a little bigger, weighs a little more, but shares the D1's infinite baffle design. It's a bit cheaper at £810 and this is reflected in the sound; it's great fun to listen to and has a bass that belies its size, but it lacks the subtlety and insight that the D1 has. It's a little fuzzier and less transparent, and brings a tonal homogeneity to everything it touches, which the D1 doesn't. The ATC is an excellent speaker, and one of the very best small speakers at its price, but it can't hold a candle to the versatility of the superb Spendor.

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL



LIKE: Highly musical and detailed sound; excellent image projection

DISLIKE: No low bass means sound won't be to all tastes

WE SAY: Brilliant mini-monitor, one of the very best ever

Two Head[amp]s Are Better Than One!

"A level of musical enjoyment beyond what its price tag suggests. Well engineered great sounding unit that brings music to life. Superbly musical... the best at its price."
Hi-Fi Choice



Dedicated to MM and high output cartridges - the £260 Gram Amp 2 SE

"Extracting both the music and emotion with utter conviction. The midrange textures were almost tangible, the treble sweet and airy, the bass deep and authoritative."
Audio Video



Dedicated to low output MC - the £280 Gram Amp 3 Fanfare

Upgrade - the £185 PSU1 power supply steps these legends up a gear!

High output MM cartridges and low output moving coils are as different as chalk and cheese. Each needs a different type of circuit to perform at its best, so why compromise by using a 'one box does all' phono stage?



"The optional bigger power supplies managed to lift the performance, particularly the sense of scale and openness."
TNT Audio

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DSD delight

The AI-301DA is a versatile amp that will play hi-res formats and more. **Adrian Justins'** problem is deciding which room to use it in

Once upon a time if you mentioned the words computer and audiophile in the same sentence you would have been chased out of town. Those days are long gone and thanks to hi-res audio downloading there's now a turf war going on for ownership of your desktop by hi-fi manufacturers eager to cash in with products that deliver maximum sonic satisfaction for those of us who like to listen as we learn or earn.

Understanding hi-res formats can be more daunting than deciphering the Da Vinci code in Nooksack, but one thing that is incontrovertible is that owning DSD files and not having an external DAC is like owning an E-type and keeping it in the garage. One such example is the AI-301DA, which boasts a Burr-Brown PCM1795 DAC and an asynchronous USB input. It's also a Class D amplifier with a subwoofer pre-out and has a slew of inputs that could well see the unit gainfully employed in a living room alongside a TV, DVD or CD deck.

The AI-301DA has a few other tricks up its sleeve, including a built-in headphone amplifier and aptX Bluetooth for the first time on a Teac

amp. Another nice touch is that Teac provides free software, called Teac High Res Audio Player, which extracts those DSD files out of your computer and passes them on to the DAC.

If you use your computer within a USB cable's length of the TV or CD player you're well placed to take advantage of all of the AI-301DA's talents. Just remember if you want to extract every last bit of sonic goodness out of any computer-stored hi-res files you need a cabled connection with the AI-301, as Bluetooth wireless is not up to maxing your hi-res music files. If Teac had opted for AirPlay as well as or instead of Bluetooth, we'd be talking about wirelessly streaming hi-res files.

Whichever setup you plump for you'll be listening to the unit's 80W Class D power amp, made by ICEpower of Denmark. This uses a hybrid feedback oscillating modulator and a multi-variable enhanced cascade control, which minimises heat generation sufficiently to negate the need for a cooling fan.

The amp is styled in classical component form, but has pleasingly compact dimensions (just 215mm wide). Design-wise it successfully

straddles hi-fi, computer audio and living room domains without seeming too brash, too minimalistic or looking like it's been knocked together in someone's garage. It feels reassuringly solid and inert and has a nicely milled motor-driven volume knob.

The front power button clicks pleasingly when pressed and the input LEDs light up unambiguously to tell you which source is in use. If used with a TV or deck across a room chances are you'll struggle to decipher the light show but you can use the dinky handset, which is plasticky but seems durable and thankfully has dedicated buttons for each input. You'll probably also need the remote in a desktop setup as the volume level can't be adjusted using a computer keyboard (although you can manually drag the volume slider within iTunes).

The 6.35mm headphone jack will connect your cans to a dual 100mW output (at 32ohms load) while the back of the AI-301DA provides just enough space for the slew of digital and analogue inputs comprising two pairs of RCA phono, a digital optical input and a coaxial input, the latter two offering 24/192 and 24/96 compatibility respectively.

The heavy duty speaker terminals are banana plug-compatible and made from plastic-covered metal. A subwoofer pre-out, USB service port and USB type B completes the impressive jack pack. In asynchronous mode the latter USB eliminates jitter by bypassing the computer's inferior internal clock.

The aforementioned Burr-Brown PCM1795 DAC eats 5.6MHz DSD and 32-bit/192kHz PCM signals for breakfast, should you choose to cook some up via the USB input. This

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Teac AI-301DA

ORIGIN
Japan

TYPE
Integrated amplifier with USB DAC and Bluetooth

WEIGHT
2.1kg

DIMENSIONS
215 x 61 x 254mm (WxHxD)

FEATURES
• 2x 40W Class-D power amplifier
• 2.8MHz/5.6MHz DSD native playback; 32bit/192kHz hi-res
• Burr-Brown PCM1795 DAC
• aptX Bluetooth

DISTRIBUTOR
Onkyo Europe

TELEPHONE
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WEBSITE
www.teac-audio.eu

Reassuringly solid, but an LCD display would be a nice addition

allows native DSD bit streaming and converts 5.6MHz files directly to analogue signals without the need to first convert them to PCM, although it also supports DoP (DSD over PCM) conversion.

If using the unit for soundbar duties there's a handy auto-on function, so turning the TV on will kickstart the amp into life from its snoozing state, and vice versa.

Using a USB connection and the Teac HR Audio Player software you may think all your hi-res troubles are over, but that is not quite the case. On a Mac the software is easy to download and install as no additional drivers are required. It's also a cinch dragging and dropping files to create and save playlists, but (unlike other software such as Audirvana) file compatibility eschews all of Apple's formats. So while you can play DSD (2.8 and 5.6), FLAC and MP3 via the HR Audio Player, you have to use iTunes for M4A, AIFF and ALAC, as well as DXD WAV files. You also need to manually switch the audio output to USB or back again using the computer's sound preferences and may have to tinker with the frequency settings using the Audio MIDI utility. As such, it's a shame the AI-301DA doesn't have an LCD display that tells you the incoming format, bit rate and sampling frequency.

Sound quality

The AI-301DA can muster two channels at 40W (claimed) and has enough in its tank to comfortably drive a pair of speakers with an impedance between four and eight ohms. Going straight in for the kill I am blown away by the clarity and openness of my DSD collection. The violins and cellos in Vivaldi's *Concerto in D minor opus 4 no.8 Allegro* have an energy and vitality that almost penetrates my joints. The mid-range simply shines and the low frequencies

are mesmerisingly smooth. Compared with a standard resolution version the piece is much more beguiling and I am happy to listen to it repeatedly in a way that I'd never do otherwise.

Dropping down a resolution notch or two to a 24/96 FLAC download of Steely Dan's *Time Out Of Mind* is still totally engaging with a punchiness that's normally absent when listening through a built-in computer DAC or speakers. Donald Fagen's vocals are airy and resonant and the percussion has an unexpected dimensionality about it that seems to come from above.

Fantasia on Greensleeves, another hi-res FLAC download, shows the AI-301DA has a deftness of touch

A slick device that channels networked music effortlessly to your hi-fi

with sumptuous strings that are immaculately timed, grabbing me by the emotional collar and carrying me away to a leafy meadow. I can almost taste the cucumber sandwiches before I am rudely awakened by a bit of head-thumping bass from Lorde and her *Royals*. This time I listen via Bluetooth and as pleasingly coherent as it is, with no loose or woolly bass notes I don't feel the same spine-tingling quality to her vocals as I do with better-quality formats.

The gap between wireless and hard-wired connections is proven by a comparison of CD and Bluetooth versions of Diana Krall's *My Love Is*. The latter is decent and has plenty of verve and gusto, but there's a small but significant increase in detail with the CD version. Krall's seductive vocals are a touch more resonant and the double bass twangs that much more so that the long low notes hang

tantalisingly as you sense the air vibrating around the strings.

Teac's choice of a digital amplifier rather than a Class A/B one means the AI-301DA has an inherently clinical edge to its sound. This seems to matter less with higher quality sources than it does with more compressed ones, but it can be quite unforgiving with low bit-rate music streamed from Spotify or vTuner internet radio, where holes in the dynamic range are dissatisfying.

Conclusion

There's an awful lot to like about the AI-301DA, especially the way it handles DSD files over USB by combining flawlessly with the Teac HR Audio Player software. It's a shame the software can't handle Apple's own hi-res formats, but you can revert to iTunes where necessary.

The amp is excellently built, looks the part and is highly versatile in terms of its file handling and source compatibility, although its lack of AirPlay or Ethernet makes it more limited when used in a living room situation. Still, given the highly reasonable price it makes a more than compelling case for itself as a desktop amp for the computer-using audiophile generation ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Good design; DSD handling; inputs

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: iTunes incompatibility; clinical digital sound; no AirPlay/wi-fi

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: Superb with hi-res; versatile enough to use in the living room and compact enough for the study

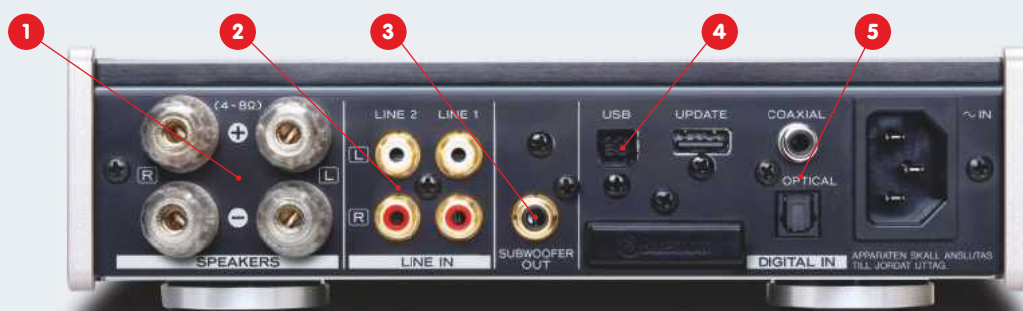
FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

CONNECTIONS



- 1 4mm speaker binding posts
- 2 Analogue line inputs
- 3 Subwoofer output
- 4 Asynchronous USB input
- 5 Coaxial and optical digital inputs



My oh my!

You don't have to be a nihilist to enjoy Micromega's cute new MyAmp integrated amplifier and DAC, says **David Price**

The name says it all. In a Googled-up world that monitors your every online movement in order to better sell you things you want to buy, this new miniature Micromega box catches the zeitgeist perfectly. The MyAmp is your amp, because you're an individual. It's something that's made for you – yes, just you, and everyone else like you!

Well alright, I'll excuse it the rather obvious name, because that's the only thing predictable about it. Actually, if you were ninety nine out of a hundred small amplifier manufacturers, you'd probably do it differently – by which I mean much

more cheaply. Looking inside the MyAmp, the cynic in me had expected to see a few nondescript Class D modules or some such – basically the easiest and most inexpensive way of getting it to make a squeak. But, surprisingly, the company has gone the Class AB power amplifier way. This doesn't in itself guarantee superlative sound, but it does tell us that the designers haven't been content to take the obvious option. Micromega uses a Class AB circuit that claims a solid 30W RMS per channel and twice that into half the load – this suggests the MyAmp's 260W LLC Resonant Mode power supply (claimed to be equivalent to a

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Micromega MyAmp

ORIGIN
France

TYPE
Amplifier/DAC

WEIGHT
1kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
140 x 75 x 140mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power output: 2x 30W RMS (8ohms)
• 1x USB, 1x optical, 1x coaxial digital inputs
• 3x analogue inputs
• ESS Sabre Hyperstream 24-bit/192kHz DAC
• Headphone output

DISTRIBUTOR
Wireworld UK

TELEPHONE
0208 9919200

WEBSITE
wireworldcable.co.uk

250VA transformer with 15,000µF capacitors) is up to the job.

The MyAmp is designed to be small and relatively powerful then, but its other key criterion is convenience. After all, what would be the point if it needed a raft of extra boxes to give it meaningful functionality? To this end, the unit has a built-in ESS Sabre Hyperstream DAC giving 24/96 via its electrically isolated USB input and 24/192 via optical and coaxial digital inputs. This means you can plug your CD player, DAB radio, Blu-ray player or PlayStation in, as well as your computer to play your hi-res files. This is undeniably handy, but another feature that's really nice to have is aptX Bluetooth, and the MyAmp is thus equipped. There's something really nice about pumping out your favourite tunes via the world's most convenient remote control, namely your smartphone or tablet.

Then there's the analogue inputs; three of them to be precise. Three's a great number – just the one pair of RCA line ins (to connect the phono stage from my turntable) would probably do me. Importantly, unlike a number of similar 'personal audio

products', the MyAmp doesn't convert it to digital before going back to analogue – the analogue signal remains unalloyed as it progresses through. Other features include a 3.5mm headphone socket, a sub output and remote control sockets around the back. The binding posts are big and chunky, just about the best I've seen on a little amp.

In use, the Micromega works well. The 256-step volume control with its very fine 0.5dB steps is a little fiddly via the fascia buttons, but easier by the remote control; source selection is simple enough either way. A credit-card type remote control is supplied, which I suspect is how most people will use it.

Sound quality

I first heard the MyAmp driving a pair of large Focal Scala v2 Utopia loudspeakers at this year's Munich hi-fi show back in May, and was taken aback by how good it sounded – specifically its surprisingly open and expansive character. With a detailed midrange and unexpectedly powerful bass for its size and price, it doesn't sound like most small amplifiers. Even driving my reference £7,000 Sonus faber Olympica II loudspeakers and fed from a £9,000 dCS Debussy DAC, the Micromega isn't exactly overwhelmed. Most people, however, will use it with more sensibly priced ancillaries; my sample spends much of the review period driving Q Acoustics 2050i speakers, fed from my laptop computer via USB.

Via any of its three analogue inputs, the little MyAmp remains enjoyably smooth and even, never descending

into coarseness, even with thin sounding and forward source material such as *Gangsters* by The Specials. Indeed this track proves great fun, with a bouncy and supple bass, a clear and detailed midband and a crisp, lustrous treble. There is certainly no sense of this dinky integrated being a cheap 'lifestyle' audio component; instead it sounds precisely like the fine compact amplifier that it is.

Moving to some slicker and more sophisticated soul music, and the Micromega continues to impress with Isaac Hayes' *Cafe Reggios*, which

Sophistication such as this is really rather unexpected from a product of this price

sounds surprisingly sumptuous and inviting. This track is beautifully recorded and has some delicious silky string sounds running right through, which the MyAmp handles very respectfully. Unlike lesser small budget amplifiers, it remains both smooth and composed, doing just enough to give a realistic timbre to those gorgeous sweeping strings. At the same time, the amp bounces along in the bass and serves up a satisfyingly spacious recorded acoustic. In absolute terms, you can tell that there is a very slight softness to the cymbals, and lower down it doesn't quite have the transparency of more expensive amplifiers, but it still makes a good stab at getting things right.

It's time to try some seriously powerful percussive music and so K-Klass' *Rhythm is a Mystery* is duly cued up – a powerful, pounding house track from the early nineties with massive tracts of thumping synth bass. If this doesn't get an amplifier out of its comfort zone then nothing will, but the MyAmp responds rather demurely. It kicks out great big slabs of low frequencies, and even at high volumes it remains relatively composed, showing few signs of being perturbed by what it is being asked to do. It gets a bit warmer admittedly, but doesn't seem to be sweating musically, remaining balanced across the frequency range with no obvious signs of discomfort higher up. This track can sound just a little bit forward, partly because it was recorded on early nineties DAT machines, but the Micromega doesn't make a fuss and remains eminently listenable. Indeed, it should be able to drive any average or above average sensitivity pair of speakers; anything above around 88dB should really move air in your listening room. I find it works extremely well with a similarly priced pair of Q Acoustics 2050i floorstanders.

After confirming that it is capable of very respectable sound through its analogue input, I move to hi-res digital via the USB input. Kate Bush's *Fifty Words For Snow* album at 24/96 is a joy to listen to. Such deep, rich, sonorous piano sounds on *Snowflake* are unexpected from a diminutive design such as this. I am also impressed by the icy clarity of Kate Bush's voice, as it's precisely the sort of thing that many budget amplifiers ►

The elaborate pattern on the side isn't for show, it's a convection cooling duct

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Stereo RCA analogue inputs
- 2 Subwoofer output
- 3 Optical digital input
- 4 USB type B input
- 5 Coaxial digital input
- 6 4mm speaker binding posts

Q&A

Abbas Hussain
MD, Wireworld Ltd



DP: How does the new series of My boxes sit in Micromega's range?

AH: The new owner of Micromega, Didier Hamdi, wanted to have a range of products that offered outstanding performance for the money. The My range demonstrates the exceptional talent of the design team at Micromega and that the company is prepared to invest heavily in development and tooling. We're moving away from conventional hi-fi products, and there are some unique new flagship products in the pipeline – watch this space!

What would you say were the design aims for the MyAmp?

We wanted to meet the exacting requirements for both the digital generation and serious audiophiles at an affordable price and in a small space; delivering functionality and performance way beyond its price point. We think we've succeeded.

Why use Class AB when many rivals have opted for Class D?

Well, Class AB sound is much preferred by audiophiles, it's generally thought to be more musically engaging and natural. However, it is true that this type of circuit generates more heat and requires a substantial power supply. With this in mind, Micromega has designed an advanced miniaturised cooling system and power supply to be able to make an uncompromising sounding amplifier in such compact dimensions. It was a big ask, but we did it.

Why use an ABS polymer case?

We didn't go for the predictable pressed steel or aluminium case for sound engineering and performance reasons. First, it leaves more money to spend on the electronic components (because less goes on the casing), and second ABS has real performance advantages over metal cases. For example, it has influence on the high frequency circuitry and is more immune to ringing and vibration, which is important as most semiconductors are microphonic. This really gives worthwhile performance gains.

Styling is elegant and minimalist, although the small buttons can be fiddly



can fall over trying to get right. However, the MyAmp proves remarkably civilised compared with some rivals at the price here; it is a pleasure to experience such a wide and cavernous sound. There's a certain directness and closeness you get from the digital input, which the analogue inputs don't quite have, and it makes this track particularly moving to listen to it.

Bluetooth is undoubtedly a great convenience feature, although it shouldn't really be used for serious hi-fi listening in my view, even the desirable aptX version fitted to the

There is no sense of this dinky integrated being a cheap lifestyle component

MyAmp. But one would never say this about the coaxial input, because when driven by a Cyrus CD Xt Signature transport things sound excellent. Of course, it cannot match the clarity, transparency and scale of some £1,000 amplifiers but then you wouldn't expect it to. But put on a well recorded classical music CD such as a DG pressing of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* and you hear a spacious, smooth and detailed sound that only gives a little away in terms of neutrality and fluidity to slightly pricier and larger designs. Even with such delicate and subtle programme material the Micromega performs remarkably well, giving a decent sense of the scale and dynamics of the recording.

The biggest criticism one would make is the lack of stereo depth, which isn't exactly untypical for integrated amplifiers at this price.

Conclusion

Micromega has always been a purveyor of unusual and quirky products – it's a long way from the rather bland, predictable and generic designs you often see coming from Japan, for example. So it was never any surprise that the MyAmp was going to be an interesting little box, and so it proves. In addition to its clever industrial design, the unit appears to have been built very well to do the job for which it is purposed. The small, robust case doesn't get too hot even at high volumes, and is just big enough to house an amplifier able to drive most real-world loudspeakers to reasonable sound levels – and indeed, it tickles them in a really enjoyable and charming way. The Gallic flair that the aesthetic and ergonomic design shows also applies to the way it makes music. Despite giving an engaging sound, it remains surprisingly refined; sophistication such as this is unexpected from a product of this price. If you're looking for a compact amplifier to make music in your study, bedroom or kitchen I can think of few that are better than this ●



£400 buys you NAD's Bluetooth-equipped D 3020, and in some ways it's a more attractive package. But it has one less analogue input and uses Class D modules, which don't sound as good and don't seem to have the current driving ability of the MyAmp. The French design proves more fun to listen to, across all types of music. The NAD really is good – being an exceptional implementation of Class D – but the Micromega is better still at its price, sonically. It's less gloopy in the bass, more animated and seems a bit more spacious. In absolute terms it's less processed sounding and just seems to flow along a bit better.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Size; style; packaging; sound; flexibility

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WE SAY: Lovely, characterful, compact integrated amplifier; best in class

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March 2014



February 2014



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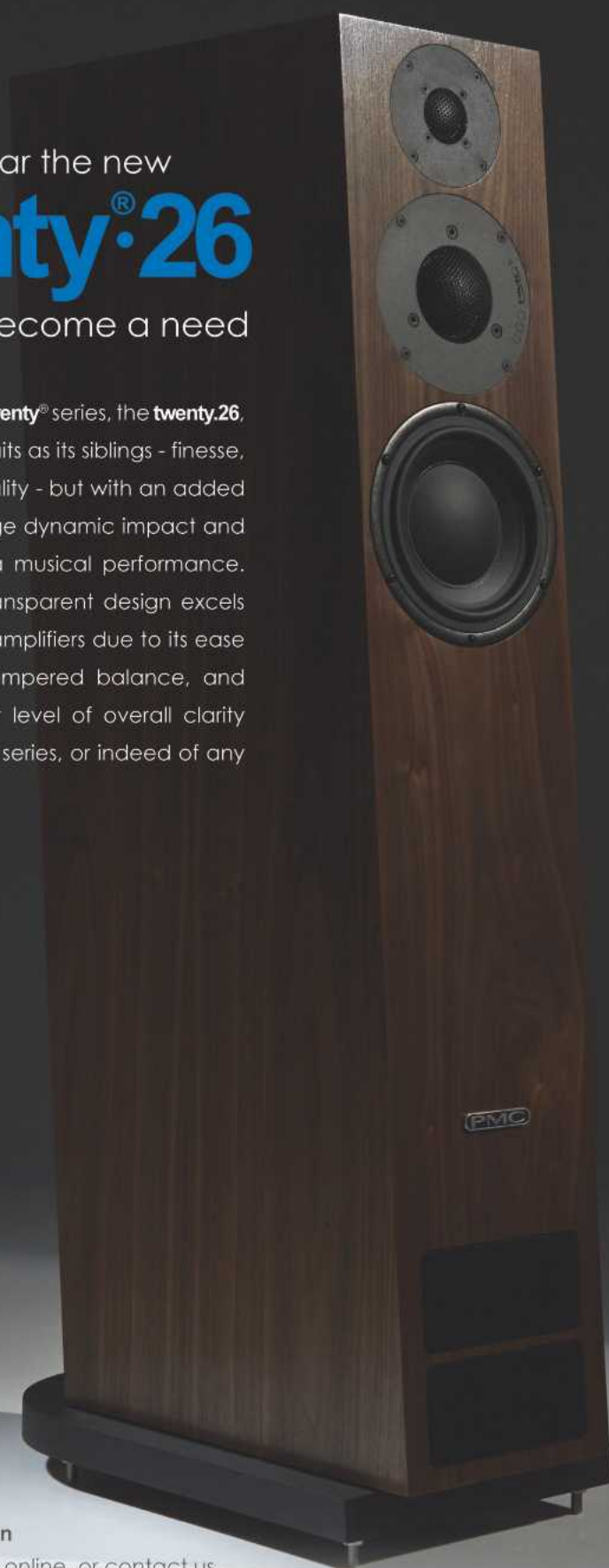
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Retro life

Vintage style is very hip, but is this wireless speaker system from JBL bang on trend or a step too far? **Lee Dunkley** checks it out

Looking a little bit like a piece of furniture you might find back in a seventies living room housing a radiogram, JBL's Authentics L16 is anything but old school. The design of this one-box audio system is actually based on the company's Century L100 bookshelf loudspeaker and utilises foam grilles similar to those found on the popular seventies model, giving the L16 a retro feel that is very much on trend today.

Measuring over 800mm wide, the walnut-veneered unit is a thoroughly modern one-box audio system with more wireless connectivity options than you can shake a smartphone at, including AirPlay for iTunes and iOS, DLNA for Android and Windows devices and Bluetooth – although there's no mention of the aptX codec. As well as extensive wireless options including Near Field Communication (NFC), the L16 also has two USB inputs beneath the removable top plate for charging devices – sadly wireless charging isn't available on European models for Qi-compatible devices. Wired sources are catered for via digital optical socket as well as a set of stereo RCAs that offer selectable input sensitivity between line-level or MM and MC phono inputs, allowing it to play signals direct from a turntable.

It is a solidly built unit with an excellent finish. Hidden behind the wraparound detachable foam speaker grilles there are three speaker drivers

per side – 1in tweeter, 2in midrange and a 5.25in bass driver – making the L16 a stereo three-way design. Each speaker is driven by a dedicated 50W (claimed) power amplifier. Bass reflex ports are found underneath the unit surrounded by a substantial metal housing – this is one of the reasons for the L16's considerable weight, no doubt – as well as the aforementioned socketry for wired input connections. It's a clumsy arrangement given that you have to connect wired sources underneath the cabinet – rear panel connectivity would have been a much more elegant and practical solution. Wireless setup is a simple process of linking the L16 to your wi-fi network or pairing with your Bluetooth or AirPlay device.

Appy and you know it

System functions are mainly taken control of by JBL's music player app – available as a free download – as well as providing access to your networked music library. Two dials are neatly inset at either side of the top face of the cabinet to enable source input selection and adjustment of the volume without the need to reach for your smart device. Additional controls can be found on the app for tweaking the bass, mid and high tone settings. There's also Harman Clari-Fi technology that claims to improve the sound of compressed music files by analysing and enhancing the audio signal.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
JBL Authentics L16

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
Wireless streaming speaker system

WEIGHT
16.3kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
818 x 294 x 369mm

FEATURES
• Three-way bass reflex stereo speaker system
• 2x USB (charging only); optical digital input
• Switchable line-in; MM and MC input
• AirPlay; Bluetooth; DLNA wireless

DISTRIBUTOR
Harman Consumer UK

TELEPHONE
01707 278100

WEBSITE
uk.jbl.com

Sound quality

The L16 has a wide and chunky cabinet for a one-box speaker system, but even so the drive units – and most importantly the tweeters – are less than 1m apart, so you're not going to get a wide spread soundstage to approach anything like that of stereo hi-fi standards. What you do get is a very big sound that easily goes loud and is capable of filling a medium-to-large sized room, but it's not a sound that manages to break away from the confines of the cabinet.

Playing *That's Alright* by Laura Mvula *Live With Metropole Orkest* streamed over AirPlay, the L16 opens with a pleasing tone and keeps pace with the track's energetic rhythm. As the orchestra builds behind the vocalist, the JBL shows off impressive capabilities, producing a warm and rich sound with the complex arrangement that's not entirely authentic, but is easy on the ear. As the track builds, however, the JBL shows its weakness and instrument placement feels cramped and lacking a sense of space around instruments that sees them lost in a congested mix of sounds and difficult to pick out.

Treble is in good measure, but it's not the last word in detail, and the L16 has a relaxed nature that's easy to listen to and masks poorer quality material. Bass is full and surprisingly extended for the size of the cabinets, but it is a little augmented at the factory settings, and requires some tweaking of the tone controls to achieve a more balanced and even sound across the frequency range.

Conclusion

The L16 handles a wide variety of wireless sources and is capable of playing material streamed at all kinds of quality levels up to 24/96. Its styling and sonic signature is a little yesteryear and soft for my tastes, but it's ultimately the narrow soundstage and high price that score against it ●

Seventies styling disguises a host of connectivity options that bring the L16 bang up to date



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Versatile wireless connectivity; goes loud and makes music fun

DISLIKE: Retro style may not appeal to all; poorly located sockets for wired sources; high price

WE SAY: A fun one-box audio system with a classic style of its own



Just play

Audiovector has approached active speaker design with a distinctive twist, **Ed Selley** finds out if it delivers the goods

Apparently, wireless speaker systems are like buses. No sooner had Elipson's impressive Planet LW and Bridge system passed through the *Hi-Fi Choice* review process (*HFC* 387) than the Audiovector Ki 1 Super Discreet System hovers into view. On paper, the similarities are striking. The Audiovector system comprises a pair of the Ki 1 standmounts and the company's Discreet hub that form a self-contained system uncannily like the Elipson.

Audiovector has a long and distinguished history of going about the business of loudspeakers in a slightly different way to everybody else, though. The Discreet wireless system you see here is installed in the Ki 1, but thanks to the upgradable nature of the Audiovector range it is applicable to over 30 models in the company lineup and you can take an existing pair of passive speakers and convert them to this spec. The conversion process involves changing the terminal panel to include a pair of compact Class D amplifiers – one 40W and one 60W – and a switch that confirms whether each speaker is the left or right channel. More complex models include switches to alter in-room performance, but the Ki 1-based system does without that.

The revised back panel still features a pair of speaker terminals, but these

now connect to the Discreet hub that is the second part of the active system. This is a small plastic chassis that is fitted with a matching pair of speaker terminals (and there is only a single pair, hence the need to decide between left and right on the speakers themselves) and a selection of inputs – two optical, one coaxial, an analogue connection on a 3.5mm jack and aptX Bluetooth. Audiovector makes slightly liberal mention of AirPlay before mentioning that this would require an additional AirPort

The scale and assurance is the perfect foil for pretty much any music

Express to function, which needs to be taken into account. High-res 24-bit/96kHz playback is also only available via the optical connections with the coaxial limited to 16/48.

These are the only real omissions in an otherwise rather clever piece of equipment, though. The Audiovector's trump card is that this pair of active speakers and hub only requires a single mains input as power is distributed via the dedicated run of speaker cables that is supplied with the system. This means that the system makes few demands on plugs,

rack space and doesn't require any significant investment beyond the active package itself.

The aesthetics of the Audiovector active system are perhaps unsurprisingly very similar to the passive version of the same speaker. The Ki 1 is a diminutive speaker, but feels solidly assembled and the drive units – a silk dome tweeter and a woven fibre mid bass driver are shared with the passive versions. The middle 'Super' spec of the three available levels of Ki 1 is supplied, which fractionally increases the frequency response over the standard Ki 1. The styling is a little on the busy side with a silver front panel that has a lot going on with drivers, bass ports and various fastenings all crammed into a fairly small space, but the effect is far from unpleasant.

The hub is unavoidably small and made out of plastic, but is soft to the touch and the small size means it is unobtrusive enough. The system of different coloured LEDs to denote different inputs is simple but effective and the Bluetooth pairing is easy and reliable. Audiovector doesn't supply a remote, but other remotes can be made to control the hub and after some experimentation this works reasonably well. If all else fails, a volume toggle is fitted to the rear panel to allow physical adjustment.

Sound quality

Connected to a Cambridge Audio 752BD Blu-ray player via optical to act as a streaming source and a Lenovo ThinkPad connected over Bluetooth for testing streaming, the active Audiovector makes an interesting comparison to the passive Ki 1 Super that passed through as part of a group test (*HFC* 371). As might be expected, the fundamental character of the Audiovector does not change too significantly in the move ▶

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audiovector
Ki 1 Super Discreet

ORIGIN
Denmark

TYPE
Two-way active
standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
Speaker: 4.15kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
140 x 260 x 220mm

FEATURES
• 3x digital, 1x
analogue input
• aptX Bluetooth
• 1x 40W, 1x 60W
Class D amplifiers
• 24-bit/96kHz
digital processing
(optical only)

DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Designs

TELEPHONE
01235 511166

WEBSITE
audiovector.com

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Speaker terminals
- 2 Coaxial input
- 3 Optical inputs
- 4 Analogue input
- 5 IR/RS232 output
- 6 Volume toggle

Q&A

Ole Kilfoth

Founder and owner Audiovector



ES: How did you decide to make use of the hub as part of the system?

OK: The decision to use the hub for powering the amplifiers with 24V and at the same time transmitting the data via the same cable was based on the fact that everything is up sampled to 24-bit/192 kHz for better performance. This is not (yet) possible without problems in a wireless transmission. And the speakers need power anyway. This is now done in the most discrete way via 3mm white cables and without fat power cables.

Do the majority of Discreet systems start life as such, or are many upgraded from passive speakers?

The majority start as a Discreet system, because it is early days. We have had a few customers who have upgraded from passive Si 3 Avantgarde Arreté/Naim separates to save space and please their wives. They have not been disappointed.

Does altering a speaker to active operation confer the same benefits as designing one from the outset?

Actually Discreet speakers are passive Audiovector speakers with built-in amplification. The separate curves of the drivers are the same for passive and active Discreet versions. The fact that a Discreet three-way speaker uses three amplifiers, reduces losses as on any active speakers. This is just more compact. And digital all the way. The only converter is the A-D for the analogue input. One of the beauties of the system is you can avoid conversions unless you use a turntable.

Are there plans for a simplified active option with RCA or XLR inputs and no hub?

The system does not work without the hub. All signal processing is going on via a NASA-specified powerful DSP chip in the hub.

One day the function of the hub will be integrated in the speaker's amplifiers. That is when every possible signal will be streamed directly from the sky. Until then we think people will want to connect CDs, TVs, turntables, etc to the hub.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Silk dome tweeter
- 2 Left/right channel selection switch
- 3 Terminals to connect to hub
- 4 Woven mid/bass driver
- 5 Front bass ports

from passive to active, but there are some little details that stand out.

The most significant of these is that where the passive Ki 1 Super trades off a little energy at the frequency extremes for midrange lucidity, the active system seems to roll off less at the top end than previously. There is an additional power to vocals and high-frequency instruments that gives the system some extra realism. This additional top-end grunt integrates well with the rest of the frequency response and doesn't come at the expense of the lovely midrange cohesion that the Ki 1 demonstrates in passive mode. The bass response doesn't have the same perceived augmentation although the figures suggest it is also enhanced over the passive version.

What this means is that with the 24-bit/96kHz FLAC of Pink Floyd's *The Division Bell*, the Audiovector excels at delivering an energetic and consistently engaging performance that is wider and more expansive than the two diminutive boxes delivering the sound suggests is possible. The scale and assurance it has is the perfect foil for pretty much any genre of music you can think of, which when combined with the liveliness of the Ki 1 is an enticing combination. At the same time, the sense of fun never tips over into anything you might perceive to be inaccurate or coloured.

The decoding in the hub complements the Ki 1's presentation exceptionally well and due to the symbiotic nature of how the two products work together, it is hard to tell where the attributes of one ends and the other begins, which surely must be the intention. Some parts of the performance are easier to pin

down, though. The Bluetooth performance both in stability and range terms and in musical performance is exceptionally good and more than a simple convenience feature. In many ways it is a better partner to the optical connections than the inexplicably hamstrung coaxial connection.

Conclusion

As a package – and due to the way it operates it really can't be viewed any other way – it does an awful lot right. On occasions, I have viewed the company's inbuilt upgrade policy as being a little bit of window dressing, but here it makes a lot of sense. Viewed either as a straight purchase or an interesting upgrade, the Discreet system is compact, well finished and manages to take an already capable standmount speaker and extract a little more performance from it while upping the convenience levels at the same time. It isn't completely perfect, but what it does it does with enough capability and assurance to make this a system well worth seeking out ●



It is impossible to avoid making comparisons between the Audiovector and the Elipson Planet LW and Wireless Bridge. The Audiovector is undoubtedly more flexible with more inputs (some of which are hi-res) and the fact it uses a single mains socket. It cannot rival the superlative build of the Elipson, though, and the Planet comes with some deeply impressive mounting options available. Sonically, the two are closely matched. The Audiovector is more exciting, but the Elipson produces astonishing bass and a wonderful soundstage. Time to find a dealer that stocks them both and give them an audition...

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Lively and entertaining; build quality; connectivity

DISLIKE: Not pretty; limited bass; oddly limited coax input

WE SAY: A distinctive highly effective take on the active speaker that makes a great deal of real-world sense



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SPEAK EASY

David Price chats with IAG loudspeaker supremo Peter Comeau about his life, times and latest designs...

Shenzhen, South China

When I last sat down to talk to Peter Comeau he was just about to move to Shenzhen in South China, as the newly appointed director of acoustic design at International Audio Group. It was a big move, because he'd recently done a similar job at Mission, and then briefly run his own specialist valve amplifier and loudspeaker company – how would he fare, I wondered? Not everyone can uproot themselves to the other side of the planet and start at the bottom of one of the biggest cultural learning curves this world offers.

Having caught up with him recently, he seems to be loving it. It's been a long journey for someone who started off reading Electronic Engineering at Plymouth University in the early seventies. Now four decades later he is running a large engineering department, supervising a wide range of projects for famous IAG-owned brands like Wharfedale, Quad, Audiolab and Castle. It's been a long journey, in more ways than one.

Peter originally got into the industry via retail in the mid-seventies, although admits he, “could go back to the sixties for when I first started tinkering.” His fascination with hi-fi caused him to read a degree in electronics, and after this a retail job funded his hobby upon graduation. “There were openings for people who knew something about hi-fi. Unlike now, not many people did back then. Representatives of companies would come to our shop and ask us what we thought of their products. In some ways I

was used as a research tool – I remember Leak coming down and showing me the supposedly phase-perfect, stepped baffle loudspeakers, to see if the R&D people had done their job properly!

Peter loved this, and rapidly became highly knowledgeable in his field. This led to him doing some reviewing, principally in *Hi-Fi Answers* magazine, in the mid seventies. “It enabled me to get a viewpoint across,” he tells me, “the reason I started reviewing was that working from retail, I was coming from the

We thought that if we can't buy a good affordable loudspeaker then no one else can!

point of, ‘well if you've got these loudspeakers, you need this amplifier’. Not many people did that. They would spend two or three pages describing the circuit design and technical specification of the product, and then there would be a paragraph at the end about the sound quality, almost like a throwaway. There would be much more time spent on whether it developed a perfect 10kHz square wave. So I was able to get into print and say, ‘no don't use this amp with these speakers’. Not only was this a much more experiential approach, it was more informative.”

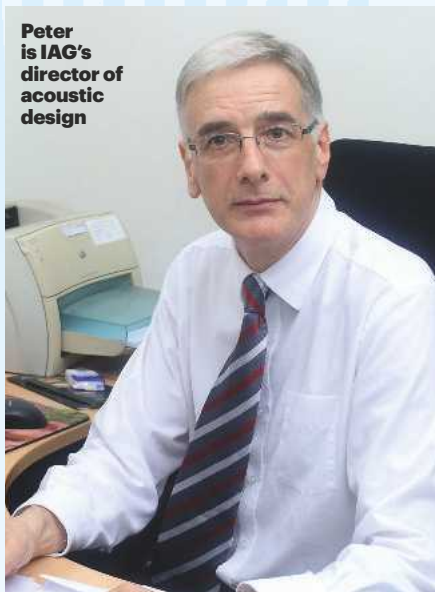
Peter was one of the first writers to use this approach, one that is now taken for granted

and considered to be the norm. But by 1976 he had itchy feet. It was prompted by hearing how bad so many budget loudspeakers were. “What was apparent was that at that time, in order to have a good-sounding loudspeaker, you needed to spend a fair amount of money. My friend Stuart Mee and I saw an opening; we thought that if we can't buy a good affordable loudspeaker then no one else can! So in 1976 we started Heybrook and launched the HB2 two years later. The HB3 and HB1 followed on, and the latter has become the stuff of legend for its wonderfully musical sound even today. On the forums people still rave about them”, he adds!

Jewel in the crown

One of the brands that he now curates is Wharfedale. This is a budget line, but a fiercely competitive market sector and the Diamond series gets regular updates to keep it selling well. He is just putting the finishing touches to the Diamond 200s, coming out in October in the UK. “I find this particularly interesting,” he tells me, “because some 40 years ago, I designed my first pair of speakers, which sold for £129 per pair – the Heybrook HB2. And now, here I am still designing speakers which cost £129 per pair! It makes you wonder how this can work, but obviously there are advantages of manufacturing in China – economies of scale and also the economies of materials are much greater now than they were back then. It's fascinating that we can still make loudspeakers, not just at

Peter is IAG's director of acoustic design



that price, but which perform as well as they do at that price, because people are much more demanding now than they were in 1978 when I first started working on them."

He confesses that he loves doing the new Diamond designs because it's such a big challenge. The Diamond, of course, is the jewel in the Wharfedale crown. The original miniature speaker was such a breath of fresh air back in the mid-eighties, but Peter is adamant that it's a veritable fossil compared with his latest range. "If you look at the sophistication that goes into the new drive units, it's extraordinary that we are using a woven Kevlar cone, which has a moulded pattern to stiffen it, and we also control the break up with a specific pattern on the surround, which absorbs the energy from the edge of the cone that much better. Thanks to computer-aided design the drivers can now

be made more efficient, more linear and lower in distortion. Then there's the cabinet, which uses chipboard with outer layers of MDF which not only controls resonance, but also what we call 'hear-through' – the ability of sound waves to get from inside the cabinet to the outside of the cabinet."

Comeau describes the crossover as, "a work of art" no less, and goes on to explain how modern technology has allowed him to do much more precise things. "It took me 18 months to develop the HB2, because it was literally soldering components onto a board and trying to figure out what sounds good and what doesn't. Now I can use computer software as a tool to enable me to see roughly what the speaker looks like and sounds like even before I have made a prototype. This gets me there faster; of course I have to do extensive fine tuning, but it has taken me just two weeks to do one pair of speakers for the Diamond 200 range, to get to the point where I am happy for them to go into production. That's only two weeks, plus a few days of manipulating the software, not 18 months! There has been a major advance in the way we can design speakers now to make them far more revealing, far more accurate. Basically the most important thing is that they're far more musically enjoyable than before."

It's fascinating that we can make speakers which perform as well as they do at the price

All that jazz

If Wharfedale is IAG's cheap and cheerful brand, then Quad occupies precisely the opposite end of the market. He is working on two new ranges of conventional moving coil loudspeakers, both likely out in December, which share some technology with the new Diamond range. "It's a different formulation though," he says, "and we are using a different basket and a different surround. Basically we are still making sure there is differentiation between the brands, largely because of the customer expectation for what the products of a certain brand do. For example, the Quad customer traditionally will probably play a lot more classical and jazz than they would pop. There are still plenty of Quad buyers who play rock music, but looking across the full spectrum of Quad owners they tend to fall into the type of listener who expects to be drawn into the music rather than having it pushed out. It's a different aspect to the performance, so we have to use different methods, different technologies and materials to achieve that."

One key example is the new ribbon tweeter. This marks a big departure for Quad, and should take the treble performance much closer to that of the range-topping electrostatics. "The ribbon is 'just' a tweeter, it doesn't do the midband", he tells me. "I know

CUT CLASS

Wharfedale's original Diamond is the most iconic small speaker of recent decades. Back in 1985, the company came up with a radical new idea – a box substantially smaller than most existing 'bookshelf' designs. At the time it sounded remarkable for the price, but Peter Comeau feels it doesn't stand up so well to the new Diamond 200 series.

"The new speaker's cabinet is less revealing of its own character, so it's letting you hear what the drive units are doing and the drivers themselves are more linear with lower distortion and less coloration. Some years ago I developed a filter slope system, which gives a phase-coherent crossover and also controls directivity of the drive units as well, so we can get a seamless transition from two- or three-way systems, which sounds as if it has come from a single drive unit. It gives a much more open sound, more transparent than the original."

Rather than the polypropylene coned mid/bass driver of the original, the new Diamond range uses Kevlar, which is a far stiffer and lighter material. But



still I put it to Peter that this isn't such a special thing these days. "Well, this is just one material and there are very different ways of moulding it and treating it. You have to heat-treat it, and add protective layers on the top and bottom to seal it as well. One Kevlar from one designer will be different from another one."

a lot of people have tried, but it is very difficult and fraught with problems – the major one being directivity. You can get good horizontal spread but it's very difficult to get good vertical spread, and that's so oddly obvious. The unit itself has been designed with a Chinese manufacturer; we're not necessarily trying to reinvent the wheel, rather we want to bring our own flavour to get what we want. It uses a composite foil; if you use a single aluminium foil as used to be done, then the problem is it just breaks if you ask it to handle any kind of high power. Doing it my way – a composite sandwich – you can get very good dispersion and still keep a clarity of sound."

"Over at Audiolab, we have been developing some exciting active loudspeakers," Peter says. "Indeed, the active speaker concept is an interesting one for me because the first time I got into it was with Heybrook. The breed was promoted heavily for a very short period of time, but it didn't work then because people were buying hi-fi in a very traditional way. There was a lot of emphasis on the customer buying the best turntable he could, then the best tonearm and the best cartridge – all from different manufacturers. So naturally you'd buy the amp from 'the best' amp maker, and the speakers from 'the best' speaker brand, and so on. The idea of active loudspeakers involved us going to the customer and telling him that he didn't need 'the best' amp anymore because the amp was now built into the speakers. This was reducing his

IAG owns several classic British brands including Audiolab, Castle, Quad and Wharfedale





There are advantages to having production based in China

choice, so the buyer would go, 'no, I'm not comfortable with that, and anyway I've already got this great amplifier, all I need is a decent pair of speakers, and I don't want to buy speakers with amplifiers in!'

"Fortunately, we're in a different place now. We've got a raft of people coming along who are saying, 'okay I'm storing all my music on my iPhone, or my iPod or iPad, or my laptop, and I just need to plug that in something'. And away we go, the customer no longer needs a litany of boxes. Why do they need all that clutter? That's the reason we're doing active loudspeakers. And for Audiolab it's easy because we've already got the M-DAC, Q-DAC or the 8200CDQ DAC/preamp."

When Peter was doing Heybrook, he got involved in the Active Loudspeaker Standards Organisation along with Arcam, Linn, Meridian, Naim and Nitech, "and then we watched the bottom drop out of the market". He's a little sad about this, because he's

convinced that active speakers sound better than passive designs – providing everything else is equal. This is a big caveat he says, because, "you can't apply the same filter technology to active filter technology as you can to passive filter technology", he explains.

"You haven't got the resistances, inductances and capacitances between the drive unit and

The customer no longer needs a litany of boxes. That's why we're doing active loudspeakers

the amplifier any more. You've got an amplifier driving a drive unit, so the amplifier somehow has to cope with the characteristics of the drive unit, and the drive unit behaviour is altered by the characteristics of the amplifier – so that alters how you design a crossover. The pluses are that as a designer you have much greater control of what the end product will be; you're not just putting a speaker out there that will have a peculiar impedance across the frequency range, and expecting the purchaser to marry it up to the perfect amplifier. Every amp you latch a pair of speakers on to, the system will sound different. That equation is solved in the design of an active loudspeaker, because you can now go ahead and design a speaker that performs exactly as you expect it to."

Getting active

For Peter, the downside of active is "in the mind of the designer". He thinks that some tend to fetishise certain aspects of a design – for example they will go out of their way to achieve 'zero distortion', which results in something that sounds "utterly boring, or screechingly, horribly awful" because they've taken their eye off all the other things that go on. "It still

AVON CALLING

"We're almost into old school with Castle, it's a very traditional-looking loudspeaker. So we're not going to do anything 'funky' or avant-garde, but on the other hand the sound's got to be right up to date", Comeau says. "One of the things that always fascinated me was transmission lines, a perfect compromise between bass reflex and infinite baffle – but they never worked, what most manufacturers end up with is an 'enhanced bass reflex'. Yes you can get low trouser-flapping bass, but somewhere about that there's a weak region between 100Hz and 200Hz and nobody seemed to figure out why that was."

After a two-year research project, Peter thinks he has found the answer. Indeed he says: "We know we have because we can mathematically prove it. It's going into a new product called Castle Avon, and the two floorstanders in that range are true transmission lines that utilise a particular principle that enables us to drive the line over a wide bandwidth so we can now generate a power response in the room that is flat from 30Hz right up to 300Hz or 400Hz. It's in fact down to line geometry and how you drive the line. This research came from the work that Castle originally did with Quarter Wave. I love the new Avon series, it's a not-too-big a loudspeaker that sounds enormously powerful. It's a transmission line design that works, for the true enthusiast."



makes me laugh when I look at amplifiers that are claimed to be ultra-wide bandwidth. Why? Why would you ever want to do that? At the same time you have plenty of amps out there that sound really good, but which are bandwidth-limited."

For Comeau, such people are not asking the right questions. "They're not looking at the loudspeaker as a music reproducer, they're looking at it as some technical device. I've seen people come into our research department and they start playing around with some technical problem, and they start trying to 'correct' that with DSP, for example. That's where things go wrong in active loudspeakers – people think, 'at last, I've got full control therefore I can correct everything'. A lot of this approach to acoustic design comes down to whether you're a theoretician, or a craftsman. My feeling is that the craftsman approach gives the greatest benefits of yielding an enjoyable musical performance at the end of the day" ●

Mission Aero to launch in September



Quad's 9AS active speaker



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MA MONITOR AUDIO

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 serious vinyl junkie.



ANDREW SIMPSON

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

Andrew's been passionate about hi-fi since he was a wee nipper. When not obsessing over his next upgrade, he can be usually found under the bonnet of his 1973 MG Midget.



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.



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➤ Goodbye to CD

I love your mag, and have even taken up subscribing to it! I'm about to move home, into an apartment whose decor will make housing my 800 or so CDs in an accessible way somewhat difficult. I've resolved, therefore, to go CD-free.

My forays in this domain have been pretty unsatisfying so far. The difficulty is finding a digital source that compares to my favourite CD player. The

two standout products reviewed recently by Mr Price. The Sony HAP-S1 and the Chord Hugo. Given that the vast majority of my music is at good old 16/44.1, which might give my system the best sound? I could use the Sony as either a source or just let it do the whole lot. I find the convenience this would bring very appealing. In the second scenario, the Hugo would replace the V90.

I worry that either of these might be overstretching whatever remains of my original system. I'm particularly interested in your thoughts on the digital output of the ATV1. Would this handicap the Hugo? Is the Hugo too 'good' for the RA-01? Do I need to consider a more comprehensive upgrade? There's no way I'll get my

hands on a demo Hugo out here in NZ, so I'd appreciate your thoughts. I have pretty broad taste in music.

Consider Wayne Shorter's *Speak No Evil*, Macklemore's *White Walls*, Cashier No 9 *Goldstar*, Cowboy Junkies *Blue Moon* and David McAlmont *Diamonds Are Forever* as examples.

Any feedback would be welcome. Thanks,

Grant, Wellington,
New Zealand

JK: Apple TV boxes are versatile and good value, but not the last word in sound quality. If you really want to hear the potential of file streaming, a component that's dedicated to audio is the way forward. The Sony HAP-S1 would be a good choice, but as you surmise the amp and speakers in your system will not do it full justice. However

it should make your digital files sound as good if not better than the RCD-951 in most respects and you could use it as the first step in a full system upgrade over time. The alternative that will compete with your CD player in the all important timing and engagement stakes is Naim's UnitiQute streamer. This will give you the drive and energy that you crave plus a neat form factor.

ES: Part of the problem here, I suspect is that the RCD-991 was a fairly distinctive sounding product when it was new. If it is what delivers the goods for you, the 20-bit DAC and general architecture is not commonly replicated in newer equipment. This being said, the Hugo's adjustable filter settings and sheer processing power might appeal in this instance and keep you covered for other formats and resolutions going forward.

What's the best option for me to make my system CD-free

best sounding config of my available kit I have so far is: Rotel RCD-951, Rotel RA-01 amp, QED interconnects and silver anniversary speaker cable into Kef iQ5 se speakers.

My CDs have been ripped to AIFF as I reasoned this is the best uncompressed codec available that also supports metadata. Having used XLD, I assume the digital file is identical to the CD. But streaming these through an Apple TV3, optical out into a V90 DAC and through to the RA-01 is just never as good as the 951. I now have an ATV1 with the files on its hard drive. This is a little better, but still not 'CD quality'.

Anyhow, resolving to try a little harder, I am considering

Naim's UnitiQute streamer will give Grant's system drive and energy



► Bring the noise

My hi-fi system consists of Quad 99 pre and power amps, original 99 CD and 99 tuner through Mission Elegante e82 speakers, using QED XT400 speaker cable and a Russ Andrews Classic mains cable.

I'm wanting to upgrade my speakers and am considering the following: Monitor Audios Silver 6 or 8, Tannoys, Neats, PMC, Spondor or even Quads. I'm just not sure whether to stay with floorstanders or to go for standmounted models. I'm willing to spend up to £2,000 if I have to. My music tastes vary a lot from Bon Jovi, Queen, Slade, Nickleback, and Celine Dion. My room size is 3 x 4.5m. Any help you could give me would be much appreciated, also congrats on such a great mag.

John Potter, by email

ES: I'd be straight off to Spondor in this instance. The Classic series might not be the most fashionable range of speakers in styling terms, but they should partner well with the Quads and there is virtually no genre of music I haven't heard them do justice to. In the size of room you list, the SP3/1R2 would be well worth seeking out.



Tested in March, Dynaudio's Excite X34 has a super sweet treble

AS: Hi John, I'd suggest you start by auditioning alternative floorstanders from the brands you've suggested, to replace your multi-driver Missions. At £1,750 PMC's GB1i offers plenty of grunt and will really inject some energy into your music. Don't be fooled by their singular 6.5in bass drivers, as PMC's ATL transmission line design ensures you'll have plenty of bottom end, and their sound may be more balanced in your room than the Missions. The PMCs aren't overly sensitive, but they're relatively easy to drive and should work well with your power amps. I've also had great experiences with Neat's SX2 floorstanders, which I've found to be more even sounding and forgiving than the PMCs, and at £1,400 they're also quite a bit cheaper than the GB1i model. If your tastes extend beyond rock, it's worth auditioning both models with a range of music to hear everything they have to offer. Finally consider Dynaudio's Excite X34 that we tested back in March (HFC 382) as a smoother sounding alternative with a very sweet treble.

► Rising amp

Hi, I need help for these two questions regarding my gear. I've been using a tiny Creek OBH 22 passive preamp for a couple of years, leaving behind my active preamps (Audiolab, Rotel). I use short-length Kimber cables to interconnect CD, phono etc. I'm quite happy with the sound (transparent, no electronics glare), perhaps I miss that little bit of higher treble/bass/presence, but it is almost unnoticeable (or maybe I was used to the colourations of the active electronics?).

I wonder if it would be really worth swapping the Creek OBH 22 for something

like the MFA passive preamp or Townshend Audio passives. Would I notice a clear improvement over my Creek or just minor changes in sound?

My BW CD7NTs are bi-amped with Audiolab 8000PX/8000P (UK) and Kimber cables (in my experience, bi-amping has noticeably improved the sound of my setup). I use a REL sub as well. The rest of my gear is a MF CD player, Audiolab MDAC, and Thorens/Rega/Roksan/Graham Slee setup for playing records.

I'm quite happy with the sound, but I guess I could get a bigger/bolder one, with

more impact and meat to it (I mainly listen to rock/pop, though any other kind of music is played as well). What would be the next step to clearly improve my amplification?

Which power amps would you recommend in the range of max €3,000 each (I would consider searching the second-hand market to find the right bargains)?

Due to having children and not a huge amount of room, I'm not considering either valve amps (unless they aren't huge and don't run hot) nor those American monster power amps (big Krells, Conrad Johnson etc) unless they are not too big.

Thanks in advance

Juan, Madrid

nuisance, but a small price to pay for such high sound quality considering the cost.

ES: Although both types do without a mains supply, it is important to remember that the MFA and Townshend are transformer coupled preamps, which behave a little differently to 'straight' passive ones and I suspect that the sound will

What would be the next step to clearly improve my amplification?

change – hopefully for the better, but certainly significantly. If you are looking for a bit more 'meat' to the sound, you will hopefully find that TVC-type preamps would be an ideal place to start looking for such a thing. Going on to combine this with something with plenty of power and richness like Audio Analogue, Electrocompaniet or Musical Fidelity would hopefully add some of the richness you seek.

AS: Passive preamps seem to gathering quite a following, and having heard the MFA Classic and Baby Reference models

Musical Fidelity's M6PRX offers plenty of juice for a clean sound





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driving various valve and solid state power amps with equally impressive results, it's easy to understand why. So the short answers is yes, thanks to the quality of MFA's transformers and top quality hand-built internals you should notice significant improvements in sound quality compared with the Creek – although as with everything, I'd suggest road testing in your system first and making sure it's a sonic match for whichever power amp you decide to go for.

Power amp-wise you have lots to choose from, and I've had great results from Musical Fidelity's M6PRX (£3,100) for the last few years, which offers plenty of juice on tap for a clean, neutral yet powerful sound that really brings the music to life, plus it sports balanced inputs if these are on your checklist. But being a full-size and hefty Class AB beast, is also runs hot, so this may not tick you specific boxes. You should also consider Audiolab's 8200MB monoblocks (£1,000 each), which also offer bags of power and detail, while

Which speakers should I audition and how much should I spend?

being a physically more discreet solution than the MF as they're housed in separate shoebox-sized cases. As an alternative to the traditional Class AB approach, also look to audition Primare's A34.2 power amp at £1,750, which is built around the company's latest Ultra Fast Power Device (UPFD) Class D technology and makes for a less obtrusive solution that won't act as a part-time lounge heater like its warmer running Class AB cousins, while still providing a sizeable and organic sound.

➤ **Hi-fi fever is back**
I have been subscribing to your excellent magazine for a year or so this time around having re-caught the dreaded hi-fi bug after a 10 year break. As a result, I invested heavily in some fabulous new equipment, retaining only the turntable and speakers. The full system



B&W's 804S might be worth hunting down on the second-hand market

comprises: Linn Akurate DS streamer; Linn Akurate Kontrol pre-amplifier; Linn Akurate 4200 power amplifier – bi-amped to B&W 703 speakers. Michell SE Gyrodec with upgraded power supply, Leema Elements phono stage, Origin Live Encounter tonearm and Ortofon 3M Bronze cartridge. Tellurium Q Black speaker cable and XLR interconnects between the Linn separates.

While I love my B&W 703s, I suspect that they are now the weak link in the system. I chose the Linn products because I preferred the relatively laid back sound when compared to a similar Naim set up, for example. Since I blew my budget twice over, I will have to wait a while before I consider a speaker upgrade or maybe buy second hand. So what do you think would be an appropriate budget and which speakers are worth giving an audition?

The listening room is 4.6 x 4.2m with the speakers on the longer wall, which seems to work best. Listening distance is around 2.5m and

the speakers can sit up to 0.4m away from the back wall. I listen to a wide range of music including pop, rock and classical. Many thanks in advance for your time and consideration.

Jon Parsons, Leicestershire

NR: Hi John, I can understand why you love your B&W 703s and I know you are thinking of replacing them, but in my personal opinion they are going to be a hard act to follow. Looking at the rest of your system, I see you have opted for the Ortofon 2M (?) Bronze moving magnet cartridge. Before tackling the speakers, have you considered changing your cartridge? Although not a bad cartridge by any means, there are some amazing options out there and your Leema Elements (and the Linn Akurate Kontrol for that matter) will support both MM and MC cartridges. I feel something more up-market will suit your superb Michell SE Gyrodec and Origin Live Encounter combination. Just a thought!

AS: I agree with Neville in that the 703s will indeed be a hard

HINTS & TIPS

CONNECT A TURNTABLE TO AN AMP WITH NO PHONO INPUT

What can you do if you want to play some records on a hi-fi, but your amp doesn't have a phono input? A phono input has circuitry to provide the amplification and equalisation required by modern phono cartridges. There are two solutions to this problem, depending on whether you already have a record deck or not.

If you are looking to buy a record deck, there are a number on the market that contain the necessary amplification and equalisation built in and the output can simply be connected to any unused input on your amplifier. The Sony PSLX300, for example, has this facility.

If, however, you wish to use an existing deck, you will need an external phono amplifier and there are many to choose from to suit all pockets. For example, some very low-cost battery-powered devices are available at under £20, such as one made by Eagle. For a better quality unit, the PP2e Phono Preamp from NAD supports both moving magnet and moving coil cartridges and can be purchased for under £100. In either case, the turntable plugs into the phono preamp and the line out to any available input on your amplifier.

GETTING THE MOST FROM YOUR TURNTABLE

If you're having problems playing records, it may not be that the record itself is damaged. Many of the problems may be curable with some simple steps.

Firstly, make sure that your record deck is set up correctly, for example by checking that the deck is level with a spirit level and verifying that the tracking force is set within the cartridge manufacturer's specifications. Then ensure that your record is clean – a wipe with a cloth or brush may not be enough and a proper clean with a wet cleaner will be required. You will be amazed just how much surface noise can be cured by cleaning.

Occasional clicks may not be due to scratches, but may be caused by static electricity discharge. An anti-static gun is readily available that will neutralise static on records if this is a problem in your environment.

A whooshing sound, especially at the start of a record, may indicate a warped disk. There are some record flatteners on the market, but they can be quite pricey. Clamping a record between two glass sheets and placing it in a 200 centigrade oven is an option but somewhat risky! Far better to avoid the problem in the first place by correct storage vertically in a rack.



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Neville suggests
PMC's Fact 12s
for Bruce

first issue of *Hi-Fi Choice* started in 1975 with Angus McKenzie on cassette decks, but could you tell me how long the A5 issues ran for and when *HFC* changed to A4?

Ray, by email

JK: As one of the people who joined the magazine for its A4 relaunch, I can tell you that this happened in late 1987. The last of the A5 issues was published in the same year, but I can't tell you precisely when. I can say that things were very different back then. The A5 books contained dozens of reviews of one particular product type and consisted of new reviews plus reprints of reviews created for previous issues. They look very dense by today's standards and must have cost a fortune to produce, but it was the fire that fomented the magazine you read today, not nearly as pretty but backed by genuine expertise and in-depth knowledge.



LETTER
OF THE
MONTH

Blasts from the past: how the old A5 version of *HFC* used to be before moving to the A4 design

act to follow and I can understand why you've held on to them until now. That said, if you like the Linn house sound for its relaxed and highly musical approach consider Audiovector's Si range. These speakers have various upgrades paths and options, but more crucially they sound incredibly open thanks to their vented tweeters and aren't as sensitive to room positioning as many moderately sized floorstanders like the 703s. They're of Danish descent and not that well known on these shores, so you may be able to find a second-hand bargain if you're patient. It may also be worth looking out for a used pair of Bowers & Wilkins 804S, which come up for sale from time to time. These should bring significant improvements over your 703s and the quality of the cabinet construction combined with the driver technology makes them a superb buy if you can find an unmolested pair. The 804S model takes a bit more driving than the Audiovector Si range, but it has a more muscular sound that's more explicit. Do let us know how you get on!

➤ **Speakers' corner**
I am assessing an upgrade for my system, I have a personal choice of amp in the Macintosh 6700. But I am not at all clear on which speakers to consider from the following four. It is not practical to hear all four, so can you suggest two I should audition? I should say that the Sasha is not realistically a contender as I just cannot

When did you stop publishing Hi-Fi Choice in the old A5 size?

believe that it could be twice as good as the others, and I think qualities are based on price – the best at this price.

The choice is between: Art NEO 10, Fact 12, Tannoy 10, Audio Physic Avantera Super + and the Sasha.

Bruce Grant

NR: Hello Bruce, it's a brave person who sticks his neck out to recommend a particular

speaker from a range as there are so many considerations. However, let it never be said that we reviewers shy away from tricky situations! My first choice to try would be the PMC Fact 12s as they are transmission line speakers and this type of enclosure is my personal favourite. Well-designed transmission lines, like the PMC, offer a wonderfully controlled and colour-free bass down to the resonant frequency of the bass driver and then compensate for the drop off in response below bass resonance, thus extending the response still further. The other ones I would consider are the Tannoy DC10s (rear ported) as they are beautifully made and also have a good pedigree like the PMCs and should give a fully, rich and unrestricted sound.

➤ **Size is everything**
I am wondering if you can offer some help. While I enjoy reading the current issues of *Hi-Fi Choice* I also enjoy the 'old' A5 issues from years ago. I do know that the

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The big reissue

Bands tend to reissue classic albums with the same frequency that Status Quo does farewell tours, **Lee Dunkley** wonders whether or not it's all just a big con

Regular readers will know that we often carry reviews of the latest album reissues in our *Music Reviews* pages. But what do you feel when your favourite artist announces an album reissue?

When the hard-to-believe 20th anniversary of *Definitely Maybe* by Oasis was about to roll around earlier this year and the record company seized the opportunity to announce a reissue of the band's first album, Liam Gallagher took to Twitter to tell fans not to buy it, saying: "HOW CAN YOU REMASTER SOMETHING THAT'S ALREADY BEING MASTERED. DONT BUY INTO IT. LET IT BE." Undoubtedly Liam's less than encouraging comments to potential purchasers not to bother with the album's timely reissue were probably a response to some deep-rooted bitterness over the acrimonious split from his former band mate and brother, but does he have a point?

The reluctance to remaster and re-release a classic album has been expressed many times before, and it leaves me wondering what we want from a reissue from our greatest music artists? And what factors are important to us when considering whether we should purchase it or not? There's a lot of cynicism over record company's reissuing classic albums with added bonus material, and I firmly believe that an album is a piece of work that should remain in its original form, untouched so that new audiences get to hear and appreciate it as the artist originally intended. It

I am less bothered by reissues and would prefer a mint copy of the original

form or another for the sake of extra material, or include often obscure tracks that were never intended to see the light of day.

Milking the cash cow dry

This year we've already seen big anniversary reissues from Elton John, Pink Floyd, Morrissey and Led Zeppelin to name just a few. Led Zeppelin are currently in the midst of a multistage reissues campaign and are already following the recently remastered reissues of their first three albums with a second phase reissue programme that starts in October and will include previously unheard material including alternate versions of familiar songs. Fans appear to be feeling a bit ripped off with protracted reissues like this, and the recent announcement has left many disgruntled at the numerous ways record companies are squeezing every last

certainly shouldn't be bolstered with bonus tracks to lure existing fans into buying something they quite probably already own in one

penny they can out of the fans and artists.

Portishead recently announced the reissue of their landmark debut album *Dummy* on 180g vinyl to celebrate 20 years since its original release, but the band has tried to do things differently. The album's reissue was announced on Twitter and on their website, and despite saying that they would never venture into the world of special editions the first 1,000 copies of the album that popularised the term 'trip-hop' – owing to its unique mix of hip-hop beats and downtempo samples – will be pressed on blue vinyl before reverting to heavyweight black vinyl. Rather impressively, though, there's no additional material on the reissue that went on sale on 25th August, and even more encouragingly all the tracks are exactly as recorded on the original 1994 release.

As an owner of around 500 CDs and 5,000 downloads, I have recently been bitten for a second time by the vinyl bug and am painstakingly trying to re-establish my collection by hunting down albums that were either lost during the early days of the car boot sale craze, or that I couldn't afford to purchase the first time. I look mainly for albums that are as I remember them. They must have the original cover and sleeve notes, with the tracks in the same order as the original release, and no extras. I am less bothered by remastered albums, and would prefer a mint copy of the original pressing if available via Discogs, but classic albums of my era can be difficult to track down, and I for one am pleased to see so many reissues of albums I've either lost or want to own on vinyl.

There are many schools of thought on the issue of album reissues, and what we want from them. I was very pleased to see Elton John's *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* reissued earlier this year remastered and available on heavyweight vinyl. It's one of those albums that can conjure up some of my earliest memories of listening to music. Ok, I think I would have actually still enjoyed listening to it had it sounded just as it did on my dad's eight-track tape system in his Ford Capri where my memory thinks it got played on repeat for most of my childhood, but the cleaned up, remastered and sparkly version I now own and play on my Rega RP6 turntable sounds pretty special to me ●



The reissue of *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* sounds as great now as it did in Lee's dad's Capri



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AC/HFN/83

Round the horn

Never a big fan of horn loudspeakers **David Price** might finally have found one that disabuses him of his hatred for them, in the vast form of JBL's Everest DD67000

Horn loudspeakers and I have had a difficult relationship. My first real contact with the breed came only fairly recently, a decade or so at the Munich High End Show. I remember venturing into one room to see a group of gentlemen of advanced years, huddled around an obscure valve amplifier connected to the most ridiculous looking pair of giant horn speakers ever. Well you would need to be getting on a bit to tolerate that treble hardness, I mused, obviously being the only one in the room who felt like he'd had the top of his skull lopped off with a Japanese fighting sword after hearing a trumpet solo from some old obscure jazz LP!

My other contact with horns has been at gigs, and here I understand them more. After all, what better device to shift vast amounts of air and epic amounts of decibels out at a huge crowd? Forget old men with hearing aids listening to ragtime from behind lace curtains – serious PA stacks with multiple horn drivers and bass bins firing at you is more like it! But however dizzying fast and visceral the sound is, would you really want it in your living room? Not being 14 years old anymore, the answer to that is no.

Or would I? You see, not so long ago I chanced across the most amazing domestic loudspeaker I have ever heard. On several recent occasions, starting with this year's Las Vegas Consumer Electronics Show, I bumped into JBL's new

Suddenly music comes alive, it sounds so vivid, so immersive

ultimate", and JBL is no exception – so I was instantly turned off by the hype. But I ventured into a largish booth only to hear an absolutely stunning sound. The Everest DD67000s were just like horns in some ways – in good ways. Which is to say the speed was amazing. I always bang on about this, but most domestic speakers sound like damp sponges if you've just come back from a live concert or gig. Yet only real music sounds faster than these JBLs, and even then, barely.

Open all hours

Speed is all well and good, but what if you're getting a hard, honky, coloured sound that is but a distant relation to the real thing. Not so these speakers, because I was struck by how incredibly open they are. They were like walking into the Nevada desert, where there's nothing to block your view – you could hear for miles and miles. I knew I was listening to a horn, but it didn't sound like any other. And then there

was the bass, which seamlessly crossed over from that treble/mid driver, in a way that I've never heard before. Almost every hybrid speaker shouts its compromises from the rooftops, but from this JBL all you get is one seamless, even and smooth wall of sound.

Blisteringly fast, wonderfully powerful from top to bottom, shockingly open and transparent – how is this possible from a horn speaker?

No offence, gents, but JBL speakers have traditionally been great for punchy rock music, but your average Quad owning classical music fan with delicate sensibilities has traditionally steered well clear! The answer lies in the fact that it's the company's flagship speaker, and it has put a huge amount of time into finessing the design, and used the right materials to do the job.

It sports two 380mm bass drivers. In performance cars, whatever any Honda VTEC driver tells you, there is no substitute for cubic inches – and the same goes for speakers. Big, wide diameter bass cones move air better than anything else, and the Everest has two of them. Not only that, but the cone is a sandwich of foam and pulp, making it super rigid but very light. In the midband and treble it gets a pure beryllium compression driver; as every *Breaking Bad* fan should know, this is the lightest stable metal in the Periodic Table, and makes the aluminium or magnesium that most people use in their tweeters look as unwieldy as iron. The big JBL has a 100mm diaphragm to deal with the midrange and lower treble, then hands over to a 25mm version of the same that runs right up to 60kHz – both use the company's proprietary Bi-Radial horns.

You really must hear these before you die – or at least go deaf! It's hard to describe the sensation, even for a seasoned hi-fi reviewer. Like drinking an ice-cold beer on a sweltering beach, you get a huge sense of relief. Suddenly music comes alive, it sounds so vivid, so immersive, so tactile. And yet there's no harshness, despite the recording being thrown into such sharp relief. Dynamics are breathtaking, but still the speaker doesn't shout at you, while stereo soundstaging is as large as life itself. JBL has done a remarkable thing with the Everest DD67000s, it has civilised horns. Now, all I need is £70,000 and a house big enough to fit them ●



It might be named after a mountain, but this is one horn that doesn't shout at you



DAVID PRICE
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Bounce to the beat

Vinyl is back. And the latest spinners are better than ever. But with the wealth of rigid designs available **Andrew Simpson** wonders if vinyl is losing the spring from its step

Finding the right hi-fi kit to tick each of our boxes is probably the biggest challenge facing every hi-fi buyer. It's what drives this very publication's dedication to helping you get the best sounds for your buck. For most of us, selecting a system is about navigating around various compromises like meeting listening needs, environment and wallet.

In contrast, the experience of swiping through my digital music library via the various networked devices knocking about the house is a much more prosaic ritual. All too often it's basically a means to an end, to find the album I want to play as quickly as possible.

As a reviewer, this conundrum is made even harder. Not only do we have to choose a system that meets the above criteria, it must also offer sufficiently revealing yet unbiased sonics to present its partnering equipment in an honest light. Add to this that it must also be well made and easy to handle, to ensure it can withstand the daily rigours of testing and being passed from pillar to post without spitting out the dummy.

This was brought home to me when faced with this month's cartridge round up. For the past decade my reviewer's vinyl rig of choice has been my reliable Pink Triangle Export GTI. I've been toying with the idea of semi-retiring it for some time, not because its sound is no longer up to scratch – it can still give most superdecks a run for their money when it comes to raising the hairs on the back of the neck

– but because of the effort required to keep it on song.

Like many mid-to-high-end decks of the era, the Pink employs a suspended sub-chassis to better isolate its moving parts. And the main bearing, platter and arm are mounted to an internal chassis that hangs on three dangling springs, which means the platter wobbles like a jelly each time a slab of vinyl is put on it. The suspension is soft, to the extent that placing a weighty or flimsy LP on it usually affects platter height, necessitating suspension tweekery to get everything sounding nice again.

So it's perhaps plain to see why I need something a little easier to live with, that's better equipped to take frequent cartridge and arm swaps in its stride. A quick glance at the decks on offer in the mid-to-high-end ranks highlights how the suspended approach to turntable design has fallen by the wayside in recent times. Iconic spinners like Michell's GyroDec and Linn's Sondek LP12 are still proudly flying the British flag for the bouncy approach, with Inspector

Morse's favourite Roksan's Xerxes offering a slightly different take via rubber pads instead of springs, but how many completely new designs have we seen in recent years that favour suspension over rigidity and/or mass? There aren't that many.

From a turntable designer's point of view it's easy to see why, as engineering a rigid deck allows you to create a much simpler structure, which may be easier to produce and assemble. There's less room for error when the deck leaves your factory, ensuring what the customer hears at home is closer to what the designer hoped for. Likewise, customers have also played their part in influencing the turntable market, as the increasing pressures of modern lifestyles means your average buyer wants a deck that requires minimum effort to produce maximum musical enjoyment. The fact is many buyers are simply put off by the thought of placing their LPs on a platter that bounces up and down with glee each time it touches its surface.

Suspended belief

The suspended sub-chassis approach to isolating a turntable from external influences was first introduced by the late Edgar Villchur in his ground-breaking Acoustic Research turntables back in the early sixties. Villchur's concept used a three-point sprung sub-chassis to provide a greater degree of isolation for the deck's bearing, platter and tonearm that were mounted on it. This went on to influence some of the most iconic decks of the last 40 years including the aforementioned Sondek, GyroDec and a host of equally worthy machines from the likes of Ariston, Heybrook and Systemdek whose offerings are still in demand on the used market.

These days, rigid chassis designs dominate the turntable mainstream and more cash usually means more mass, as evidenced by some of the German heavyweight decks that have made a name for themselves in recent times. But as the resurgence in valve amps, current dumping tech and reel-to-reel recorders highlights, the hi-fi industry often goes back to its past to create the products of the future, and I wouldn't be at all surprised if sprung turntables bounce back when hi-fi's next tide turns ●



Andrew's Pink Triangle is looking forward to a well-earned retirement

Many buyers are put off by placing LPs on a platter that bounces



ANDREW SIMPSON
Hi-Fi Choice writer

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Make time for music

We all like to sit down and listen to music, but asks **Nigel Williamson** how many of us just listen without getting distracted by all the other nonsense that's going on in the world?

One of the reasons I enjoy writing for this august publication is that I know *Hi-Fi Choice* readers are a highly discerning audience and take their music seriously. After all, if you spend large sums of money on the best audio equipment money can buy, then whether your taste is for rock, jazz, world music or classical, you are going to listen carefully and appreciate every note and nuance.

But I've recently been making an anecdotal study of how people consume music and I've come to the conclusion – and let me say this as politely as possible – that *HFC* readers are probably freakish in their attentive listening habits. Most people seldom listen to recorded music with anything like their full attention; they use it as a distraction while cooking dinner, driving to work, tweeting and texting and generally going about their humdrum daily routine.

No harm in that if it gets you through the day and it is undeniable that music can make most chores and tasks in our daily grind considerably more pleasurable. But there comes a point when music becomes mere background noise to our daily lives, a reassuring hum, the presence of which we barely notice until it stops and we are startled by the silence, a commodity it seems you can only find in the modern world by climbing a mountain or trekking into a

Turn off the TV and phone and make music central to our lives again

forest (and even then, best make sure it's not on a flight path). We now even have entire genres of music deliberately created not to require our attention, from 'dinner jazz' to the banalities of the 'drive time' playlist.

My admittedly unscientific survey of listening habits suggests that even many of those who call themselves music lovers and are regular purchasers of CDs seldom have time to sit down and fully immerse themselves in the listening experience; friends, family, the demands of digital media or essential household tasks invariably intervene before too long. David Harrington, the leader of the Kronos Quartet, once told me that he sets aside one hour every day to listen to a piece of music he hasn't heard before and that time is sacrosanct with no distractions allowed. But for most of us, our modern lives have become too congested to justify ring fencing time to listen to music without doing something else at the same time; it somehow seems idle and self-indulgent not to multi-task and to tackle those jobs around the house or office that we've been putting off while listening to Mahler's fifth or

the Arctic Monkeys' latest offering, for example.

Yet we don't treat a book with such cavalier disregard for the subtleties of the creator's vision. Even in this age of digital eReaders, a novel requires our full attention. We can read it on the bus or the tube, but it is still an act of total immersion in which we lose ourselves in another world. So why do we not treat recorded music with the same respect and fold away the newspaper, stop texting our friends and listen with the same attention as we would in a concert?

Perhaps the answer is that there is too much music invading every aspect of our lives. Music has become ubiquitous. It comes unrequested and with no off-switch in supermarkets and in elevators, in airport lounges and in restaurants. Has its constant presence devalued the listening experience and the sheer quantity of unwanted music diluted our appreciation of quality?

The big switch off

A few years ago Bill Drummond, the Scottish musician who found fame in the eighties with KLF, launched 'No Music Day' in order "to draw attention to the cheapening of music as an art form due to its mindless use in contemporary society".

As a principled stand against the bland muzak being piped at us in the world's shopping malls and waiting rooms it's an initiative that has much to commend it. But as a music lover, the concept of a day without music has always left me feeling uneasy. Why not come at the problem from the other end and concentrate on the quality control? Instead of railing against being forced to listen to cheap music in inappropriate situations – understandable and justifiable though the complaint is – let us instead make time in the day to listen to great music properly in circumstances that allow no distractions and create a unique sense of place, time and occasion around the audio experience.

What we need, perhaps, is not a 'No Music Day' but an 'Only Music Day' – a day when we turn off the TV and the phone, ignore the emails, tweets and texts and allow time to immerse ourselves fully in the listening experience and make music central to our lives once again ●



Making time for listening to music without distractions is something we should all do



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Do the Harlem shuffle

Fresh from another long drive listening to music **Richard Stevenson** ponders the one piece of equipment that delivers the most insight into his eclectic record collection

Which piece of your audio equipment gives the greatest insight into your music collection and its recording quality? Perhaps a high-end turntable that can sniff out detail from a groove like a truffle hound? Maybe a CD player that buffers data from the disc and re-reads until it gets a perfect error-free stream? You could suggest the sheer resolution of a 24-bit/192kHz DAC with a hi-res FLAC file. Then again, you might agree with me and say your iPod.

Yes, I am talking about Apple's pivotal music player with its compressed file system and two-cent output stage. I find it the single best source component to reveal both my musical tastes and the vagaries of its recording and production quality, even though I have all of the above hi-fi components too. Now before I get flamed down by Angry SME User of Tunbridge Wells, hear me out.

It is all about the device's ability to shuffle your entire music collection and play every song you own in a completely random order. Arguably you can do that manually with your CD or record collection, just not as quickly or as randomly as the iPod. There are well over 10,000 songs on my 160GB iPod and a typical shuffle session could easily be Janis Joplin followed by Muse, followed by Hayden, followed by Metallica, followed by Nico and finishing off with Miles Davis via dalliance with

Gregorian chant and a short choral interlude. You don't get radio stations with that sort of playlist!

As the iPod

I am convinced that individual iPods have their own music biases

changes tracks you get an immediate and very vivid portrayal of the differences between volume (level), clarity, dynamic range and compression of the two, often highly disparate, recordings. These variances are very obvious because the previous track is so fresh in your mind's, er, ear. You just can't get that sort of immediate A-B comparison when swapping CDs or cueing up vinyl. By the time you have fumbled with a gate-fold and an inner sleeve emblazoned with 'HOME TAPING IS KILLING MUSIC' the moment has gone and your brain has reset.

Mind you, putting your iPod on shuffle is not without its issues. The very first CD pressing of Pink Floyd's *The Wall* is probably one of the lowest level recordings I own and it's just as quiet on the iPod. Who isn't tempted to wind the volume right up while air guitaring to *Comfortably Numb*? Which is all fine until the iPod decides to play something loud and highly compressed immediately after, like Eminem. There you are winding down the last chords of

your Floyd air-solo and a second later some rapper is shouting obscenities loud enough for the whole street to hear and you are flipped over the back of the sofa by the sound pressure wave of the first bass note.

If two tracks are recorded roughly at the same level it gives even greater insight into the mixing and mastering quality. Listen to Beverly Craven's *Promise Me*, with its crisp recording and soundstage wider than Wembley arena, closely followed by any track from Kate Bush's *Directors Cut*. The latter will sound flatter than a hedgehog on the M1. Quite why the producer decided to use Blu-tak rather than foam for a pop-shield over her mic remains a mystery.

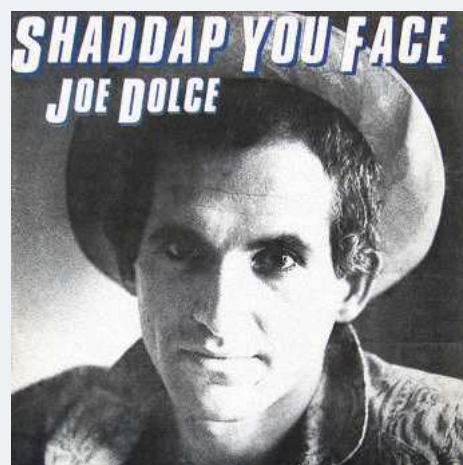
Random access memories

The other issue with putting your iPod on 'shuffle' is the sheer randomness itself. Every 20 or so songs a track will come up you won't recognise at all, leaving you fumbling through the menus to see what it is. You can also guarantee that the little device will unearth all those embarrassing-to-own tracks when your friends are listening. Telling them that you have no idea how Joe Dolce's *Shaddap You Face* got on your iPod doesn't wash.

While it may sound like a Cupertino conspiracy theory, I am also convinced that individual iPods have their own music biases. My 3rd-Gen iPod had a fixation with The Doors and no shuffle session would be complete without Jim Morrison every few tracks. My 4th-gen was a proper classic rocker. It started virtually every shuffle session with a song from Free's *Heartbreaker* album and wouldn't play anything recorded after 1979 unless manually provoked.

The current iPod has temperament swings like a pubescent teenager. One day it will string together a series of power ballads and love songs, and the next day it's all doom-laden goth rock and death metal. Seriously, it's such an issue when I get home after a long drive listening to music from the iPod, Mrs S usually asks me how I am and what sort of mood the iPod is in.

While 'all track random' modes on PC-based music players achieve a similar effect of highlighting recording differences, I find it takes an iPod on shuffle to really open your eyes to your own music collection ●



One of the joys of shuffle is the forgotten tracks that get played when you least want them...



RICHARD STEVENSON
Hi-fi writer

Minitest

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Adrian Justins ditches the cables in favour of Bluetooth as he checks out some of the best ways to enjoy wireless audio

Ruark MR1

PRICE: £300 CONTACT: 01702 601410 WEBSITE: ruarkaudio.com

LIKE THE NOVAS below right, the MR1s are a genuine pair of actively powered stereo monitors and at 17cm high are ideal for desktop use, but can also be used elsewhere. Each loudspeaker is rock solid and has a long-throw 75mm woofer and a 20mm textile dome tweeter, both with fully shielded neodymium magnets.

Ruark has opted for a linear Class A-B stereo amp, claiming 20W of output power. As well as aptX Bluetooth streaming there's a 3.5mm line input and an output for a sub. A switch allows you to attenuate the signal from sources with high-level line outputs to prevent distortion.

Operation is straightforward thanks to a mini remote control handset. A multi-coloured LED indicates the

selected input and status, blinking rapidly when maximum volume has been reached and blinking intermittently when in standby.

Sonically, the MR1 is a consistent and highly satisfying Bluetooth performer. Whatever you throw at it, you get a marvellous, warm sound that's energetic yet controlled and balanced with no obvious shortcomings. With Martin Garrix's *Animals* the bass is solid, while the high end is refined and vibrant. Vocals in *Don't Give Up* by Peter Gabriel and Kate Bush manage to hook me in, and combine effortlessly with the simplicity of the bass and synth to make a great sound.



VERDICT

Well built, pleasingly styled and easy to operate, the MR1s have power and grace in spades



Sony SRS-X7

PRICE: £259 CONTACT: 0845 6000124 WEBSITE: sony.co.uk

AT ONLY 30CM wide the SRS-X7 is never going to be able to deliver much of a stereo spread. But, of course, the main advantage to the diminutive size is that it is portable. Sony has obliged further by including a rechargeable Li-ion battery that claims to provide six hours of music listening from a Bluetooth source.

More excitingly, it not only has Bluetooth connectivity with NFC and aptX, it can also hook up to your home network via a smartphone app that's compatible with wi-fi and AirPlay. The speaker array comprises two 40mm full-range drivers, a single 62mm woofer and dual passive radiators. Power comes via a 32W rated S-master digital amp with DSEE for enhancing compressed music.

The SRS-X7 is a clean looking, elegantly designed unit with a smattering of touch-sensitive buttons

on the top. The rear hosts an Ethernet jack, 3.5mm aux in and WPS button for activating the wireless network. The SongPal app is the most enjoyable way of operating the unit (there's no remote), giving it far more versatility than any other model here.

The SRS-X7 is no slouch in terms of its power output and is capable of delivering a lively and engaging sound, but its reach is limited and it starts to feel cramped as you stray more than a metre or so from the speaker. Up close it's not an unreasonable sound, with equal emphasis throughout the speaker's frequency range so that every element of Garrix's *Animals* pings out forcefully. Overall, like the Sony's angular shape it's a bit in your face and lacks the sonic subtleties achieved by other models here, and vocals can feel a tad flat.



VERDICT

Worth considering for its app control, versatility and size, but it's not the most satisfying listen





Once much maligned, Bluetooth is now widely recognised as a viable short range wireless transmission standard from almost any nearby smartphone, tablet or computer source linking to compatible speaker systems. Pairing is usually straightforward and simply a case of selecting pairing mode on both the source and speaker and then waiting for them to find one another – and most speakers will remember the last device they paired with. NFC (Near

Field Communication), as used by the Sony and Harman Kardon models here, allows simple one-off contactless pairing with many Android phones. Bluetooth has also been boosted by aptX, a codec standard that delivers good quality streaming at up to 352kbps. The material used to assess the sound quality of each of the speakers includes *Don't Give Up* by Peter Gabriel and Kate Bush and *Animals* by Martin Garrix.

Tangent Classic BT

PRICE: £399 CONTACT: 08456 049049 (John Lewis) WEBSITE: tangent-audio.com

WEIGHING IN AT a hefty 5kg, the Classic BT needs a sizable spot away from walls and hard surfaces that might help to overcook the bass output. With a 10m wireless Bluetooth range the Danish-designed speaker streams at good quality aptX from a compatible device or standard quality from smartphones or tablets not equipped with aptX.

The oval shape with walnut or ash veneer is an ingenious form factor, but Tangent keeps things simple from a features point of view with two 50W channels (claimed), each comprised of one 3cm and one 12cm driver, plus a 5cm bass reflex port each round the back, where there's also a 3.5mm aux line-in and USB for charging your portable devices.

Unsurprisingly, given the size of the enclosures, bass is the dominant characteristic. The bass guitar at the

beginning of Gabriel's *Don't Give Up* has plenty of meat, and is mesmerising. Vocals in the mid and high range aren't bright or strained, but don't have as much forward presence as some other models. Martin Garrix's *Animals* proves that the Classic BT is no shrinking violet in terms of power and the sonic imaging is impressively broad.



VERDICT

Big and bold in design, this is a hefty piece of kit with a substantial, bass-dominated sound



Harman Kardon Nova

PRICE: £260 WEBSITE: uk.harmankardon.com

BRINGING REAL EXCITEMENT to a desktop both visually and aurally, the Novas have a transparent plastic enclosure providing a view of their elegantly sculptured turbine housings. Each speaker is like a mini bowling ball, lopped at either end to accommodate the front drivers and rear passive bass radiator. Each houses a 2.5in woofer and a 1.25in tweeter, fed with a claimed 20W per channel of Class D amplification and a proprietary Harman DSP.

The right speaker is tethered to the left by a 1m cord, which is just long enough for most desktop installations. The rim of the left is home to all of the controls, and sockets include a 3.5mm aux and digital optical input. With no remote control, operation is done using the slew of capacitive touch controls found around the rim. The Bluetooth implementation is of

the standard variety, so no good quality aptX compatibility here, but NFC pairing is included.

Boy, do the Novas like to party, showing no restraint with the bass radiator going like the clappers, they need to be given plenty of space on a nice absorbent surface to avoid over vibration or physical interaction with surrounding objects. The sonic signature is a mix of high energy at the top end and steady, emphatic bass at the low. Mid and high frequencies in Garrix's *Animals* positively bounce around the room, while the bass thumps along to the beat unreservedly. The Novas have plenty of power to hand and can reach almost uncomfortable volume levels without distorting. There is a slight rattle or resonance caused by the bass in *Don't Give Up*, but the vocals have plenty of breathing room.



VERDICT

Backed up by good socketry, the Novas deliver a punchy, vibrant sound that's bags of fun





Second nature

Robert Harris fondly looks back to the glory days when Audio Innovations unveiled its mono block power amp, the Second Audio

During the eighties valve amplification sparsely occupied the high end, by then a rarified technology greeted with a sniggering scepticism by engineers – its sonic potential unheard by most but the more discerning of audiophiles. UK-based firm, Audio Innovations, would help change this by introducing a range of popular mid-priced and entry-level high-end tube amps.

The Second Audio monoblock power amp was a radical departure for Audio Innovations, despite maintaining its high-value philosophy. It was a rather odd proposition when introduced in 1987: a 15W per channel amplifier in an era when high-end tube amps tended to compete with solid-state super amps, by aiming for the 100W-plus barrier.

So why such a low output for a high-end amp? The short answer: the use of output triode valves, which have very real power limitations.

The triode amplifier goes back to 1912, with the De Forest Audion. Output triodes would be used to good effect until the turn of the fifties, when output tetrodes and pentodes would take over during the rise of hi-fi, an era that was a golden age.

Output tetrodes and pentodes produce higher distortion, of a more objectionable odd-order type, and their high output impedance yields poorer bass damping. However, the big money tends to go into amplifier power supplies, so with tetrodes and pentodes producing roughly twice the power (for a given scale of power supply) all would be forgiven. The sonic nasties of these newer tubes could now be swept under the carpet,

HFC lauded it for having a musicality like no other. And yet it measured woefully

thanks to some judiciously applied negative feedback, which was largely unnecessary in the triode era due to the tube's inherent linearity. With less waste heat to dissipate in the chassis, these beefier amps would also come in at a lower production cost.

Looking back, the abandonment of output triodes comes across as the opening salvo in a competitive environment to gain more power at lesser cost. It led to the near universal abandonment of Class A operation, in

favour of Class AB, with a reduction in linearity, and the addition of switching distortion to boot, these artefacts now slathered over with increasing levels of feedback.

These developments were in many ways positive – smaller, less efficient but domestically acceptable speakers became viable. However, this design approach would exert a toll of its own. The prioritising of power efficiency over linearity also became a convention for the high end. Thus, certain technologies with a great deal to offer were pushed aside – none more so than the output triode, which disappeared by the mid fifties.

The Second comprises two fairly large monoblocks of unusual appearance, following conventional 440mm dimensions. Audio Innovations utilised its standard art deco cabinet design, with its attractively clustered tube arrangement forcefully emphasised by a large horizontal fingerprint-prone perspex plate.

Aesthetically, the Second can be considered quite handsome, if allowance is made for the painted (or rough powder coat) sheet metal finish, and protruding Allen bolts, betraying its cottage industry origins.

Each Second Audio is endowed with a mains transformer of considerable heft, featuring six secondary windings – two for the high-tension voltage supplies to the tube plates, and a dedicated low hum DC supply for each 2A3. Bulk foil non-magnetic resistors, and point-to-point (hard) wiring to avoid the use of PCB tracks, is used throughout.

Four and eight ohm binding posts are fitted to suit high and lower impedance loudspeakers. A switch on the back changes the earth to minimise hum, and small pots under the amp can also tune it out.

Sounding off

When designed with care, triode amplifiers can offer a degree of performance that other amplifiers struggle to achieve. The Second Audio provides exceptional treble and midrange quality, and I am tempted to describe its performance as an exemplar of 'purity' – a word intentionally applied to surpass the oft-used term 'clarity'. Bass is powerful but some may find it somewhat loose. However, this isn't necessarily a fair criticism, since it is always characterful and detailed, rather than boomy and ill defined.

In a way, however, an excellent triode amplifier can transcend such distinctions. With purer recordings, there is an almost metaphysical thereness to the sound, which could be characterised as 'live'. It doesn't quite follow the convention of the classic tube amplifier. Rather than relaxing and smooth, music can spring forth with an uninhibited intensity, a vivid colour that can make some otherwise excellent amps sound recessed, especially in the midrange. And yet the Second remains grain free. It never becomes ragged, unless pushed too hard or fed a poor recording. Indeed, poorly captured digital recordings are rarely forgiven.

The First Audio, as the first amp of this new range, heralded the re-emergence of the triode, but had limited real-world application, since it only produces 7.5W per channel. Its output was limited, both by pure Class A push-pull operation and the use of the 2A3 tube, which is noted for exemplary fidelity and meagre power handling. Sound quality seems to have trumped every other consideration.

Triodes tend to be treated as the frail sickly sibling of the amplifier world. This is perhaps due to the approach of some designers who

strap relatively weak driver valves to single-ended output triodes.

By contrast, the Second doubles up the First Audio's 2A3 configuration, doubling power and bass damping. Early versions of the Second use a driver stage with four ECC88 small-signal double triodes, albeit rather wastefully since two ECC88s are only half-utilised. The final version (early nineties) of the Second uses four ECC82 small-signal double triodes in a more robust low impedance shunt regulated push-pull (SRPP) configuration, to drive the output tubes.

In other words, these amps can lift surprisingly heavy, despite their low RMS output. As long as reasonably efficient speakers are used in an average sized room, the Second will create a sense of great dynamic power, which is deeply impressive with both rock and classical. The sound is effortless so long as the amps are not pushed to their limits, so insensitive or particularly difficult speaker loads should be avoided.

The Second Audio features two gain stages before the output tubes. The early ECC88 version has a bafflingly high sensitivity of under 100mV. The later version, using lower gain ECC82 tubes, is still sensitive but at a more tolerable 200mV or thereabouts. Perhaps one robust driver stage could have sufficed with no feedback in the circuit to swallow up gain, but at least the Second's 220Kohm input load and high sensitivity will suit passive preamps well.

Weak construction, at least by high-end standards, betrays the Second Audio's competitive pricing. Such a gripe could be excused, but its large transformers, which constitute a major source of vibration that upsets tubes, do not seem well isolated despite being in close proximity.

The chassis design can also be criticised since the 2A3s are pressed

FIX UP, LOOK SHARP

When the maker of any product shuts up shop, the service base inevitably fades with time and a buyer beware philosophy should always be adopted.

One of the latter day manufacturers of AI's mains transformers is still around. SP Wound Components, of Dorset, can supply them at a reasonable cost. However, the wrong transformers have been supplied in the past, perhaps because there were three versions of the Second, featuring different HT supplies. These transformers are easy to identify because very loud hum can be heard from the chassis.

The output triodes are a tight fit. This puts paid to fitting some of the larger more exotic 2A3's introduced since the millennium. The bi-plate Golden Dragon/Chelmer 2A3s originally supplied with the Second perform poorly by modern standards so it's important to upgrade to a modern monoplate design like the Sovtek 2A3, although it is harder to find due to the scaling back of production.

The use of eight-pin 2A3s is another quirk with these amps, because the 2A3 is specified for a four-pin connection. However some reputable tube suppliers can change the 2A3 bases from four to eight pin.

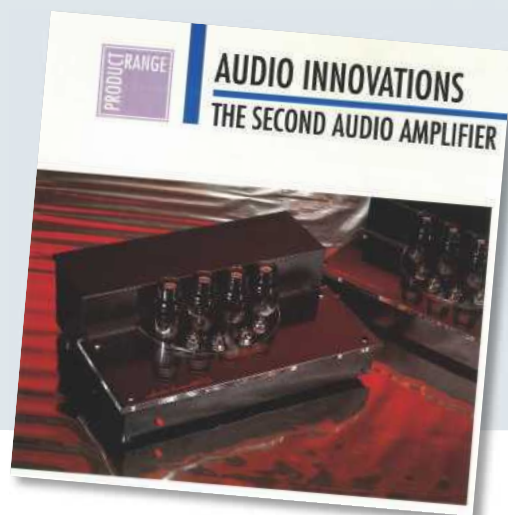
together, with not much space for the central 2A3's to dissipate heat. For this reason the amps should have a lot of space above them, perhaps more than most of their ilk. As a pure Class A design, they will run at 100 percent power dissipation, regardless of the presence of a signal, so power down if they are not going to be used for a long spell.

Measure for measure

It is perhaps one of the supreme ironies that the output triode, a technology so noted for its quality in audio circles today, disappeared at a time when the hi-fi industry was fast establishing itself. The Second Audio, as one of the very first experiences of the output triode in the modern audiophile market, clearly had a major influence on the rebirth of the output triode. Its resurgence was part of a growing realisation that objective audio tests do not always wholly correspond with subjective sound quality. This dissonance was much in evidence in reviews of the time, and a HFC review by John Bamford, lauded the amp for having a musicality like no other. And yet it measured woefully!

Its historical importance notwithstanding, when nursed a little back to full health by an engineer familiar with valves, the Second can still be rightly thought of as one of the better examples of amplification around today, fusing the virtues of zero-feedback output triodes with impressive dynamic ability, and a real-world load tolerance ●

An Audio Innovations' brochure about the celebrated Second Audio



Eton riffler

Studio AV may have a split premises, but **Ed Selley** finds its pursuit of great sound is entirely single minded

Dealer visits have taken place in some unusual locations before – converted chapels and mills, former hotels and even some dedicated retail premises. What it hasn't done up until now is visit a dealer that has two physical locations that count as one store. This unusual setup is exactly what Studio AV in Eton employs. Founded by Jim Punter in response to what he felt was incomplete service from existing dealers in the area, the store has a conventional shop front while the demo rooms are in a different building across the road. While a little unusual, there is little arguing with

the rooms themselves, which walk a neat balance between excellent audio performance and real-world suitability.

Studio line

Studio AV has an interesting portfolio that mixes the widely known with the unusual. As well as two-channel, the company is also able to demonstrate, advise and install multi-channel AV and custom install systems. This visit is all about stereo, though, and the three systems are exclusively two channel – unusually all fronted by CD players. Ably assisted by Dominic Lye and colleague Ram Romanay, I sit down to listen to how Studio AV translates into systems.



THE EXPERTS



Studio AV
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01753 863300
studioav.co.uk

densen.dk	naimaudio.com
wilson-benesch.com	dcsltd.co.uk
avalonacoustics.com	vtl.com
vitusaudio.com	estelon.com
telluriumq.com	



System test music



CFCF
Outside
CD



**TRENT REZNOR
AND ATTICUS ROSS**
The Social Network
CD



NITIN SAWHNEY
Prophecy
CD

System 1 – Hip to be Square

THE FIRST SYSTEM partners some classic British names with a debonair Dane to produce a very likeable combination indeed.

Densen is a brand that goes about producing audio equipment with little regard for what the competition is up to. Technology such as zero feedback, Class A output stages and unique aluminium casework make for a very distinctive product. The B420 XS is the entry-level CD player in the range, but all the core technologies are present and correct. The clean lines and razor-edged casework give Scandinavian flair to proceedings.

As Densen periodically attracts the title of 'Scandinavian Naim', it is fitting that this B420 XS fronts a pre and power combo that actually comes from Naim. The 152XS preamp and 155XS power amp are the most affordable such models in the company lineup, but like the Densen the DNA is all present and correct from the DIN connections to the complete absence of a mains socket on the preamp (it takes power from the power amp or an external PSU). The 155XS disposes of 60W per channel, although these are the well-fed Salisbury watts that always seem to go a little further than you might expect.

Back to Square Two

The system is completed by a pair of Wilson Benesch Square Two floorstanders. Wilson Benesch made its name with speakers that make liberal use of carbon fibre and extrusions. The Square range, now in its second iteration features more conventional cabinets that mean that the impressive drivers can be sold at a more affordable price. The Square Two is the smallest floorstander in the range, but still boasts a hefty 7in mid bass driver and stands nearly a metre tall. As a combination, it all looks rather purposeful, but how does it sound?

Kicking off with CFCF's *Outside* – a deft poke in the eye for anyone that feels that electronic music is the sole preserve of the warehouse scene – this system is at once reassuringly familiar and at the same time, capable of little surprises to remind you that this trio of brands is rarely encountered together. The deftness that the system handles the bass line of *Strange Form Of Life* with is classic Naim. It starts and stops with

an urgency that is utterly compelling and lends all music a life and vitality that is the hallmark of the brand.

Coupled to the Wilson Benesch, though, this speed is bolstered by depth and authority that further aids the realism. The Square Two is a deceptively relaxed performer – it never sounds forced or like it's working especially hard – but there is a depth and power to the presentation that makes this 'small' system sound impressively big and hard hitting. Switching to the boisterous retro rock of The Yellow Moon Band reveals a speaker that is capable of rocking out, but doing so in an immensely refined way.

And the Densen? The influence of the CD player is perhaps less obvious

This compact setup is built like a Swiss watch and offers plenty of scope

than the big speakers from Sheffield, but it is there true enough. Finishing up the listening session with Marina and the Diamonds reveals a warmth and texture with voices that is less apparent on my own all-Naim setup at home. The Densen is never overly soft or syrupy – there is plenty of drive and punch on display – but there is a tonal sweetness that makes Marina Diamandis sound that little more human and relatable. Combined with the rest of the system it adds that welcome little splash of warmth that means that the sheer pace and scale on offer is lent an intimacy and insight that makes listening to this system long term a breeze.

There's a huge amount to like here. This relatively compact setup is built like a Swiss watch and offers the scope to support plenty more inputs if you need them and manages to combine the ability to go effortlessly loud with impressive performance at lower volume levels. This might not be Studio AV's comfort zone, but it still knows exactly what it's doing.

- 1 DENSEN B420XS £1,850
- 2 NAIM NAC 152XS £1,095
- 3 NAIM NAP 155XS £1,250
- 4 WILSON BENESCH SQUARE 2 £2,950
- TELLURIUM Q BLUE INTERCONNECT £180
- TELLURIUM Q BLACK SPEAKER CABLE £50/M
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £7,145**



Danish minimalism meets Wiltshire steel to great effect



The Square Two is the sensible face of Wilson Benesch and offers an exceptional sonic performance

System 2 – The big idea

IT'S TIME TO jump up the pricing structure as we introduce three other members of the Studio AV portfolio. It's also time to move over to valves for pre and power amp duties and with the increase in price comes a significant jump in ability.

VTL is an American company based in Chino, California that comes with a style of design altogether beefier than some European counterparts. The TL-5.5II preamp and ST-150 power amp have a heft to them that is significant even at the price. Neither are they the sort of minimalist, low output devices you might expect from valve designs. The 5.5 pre has seven inputs (two of which have an XLR option) and a tape loop, while the ST-150 can deliver an un-valvelike 150W of power on demand.

In reality, the Avalon Idea floorstander doesn't need all 150 of those watts to strut its stuff. The smallest and most affordable member of the Avalon range is commendably sensitive, but like its bigger brethren is happiest with a respectable amount of power behind it. In keeping with the Avalon family, the Idea boasts the trademark sharply angled front panel, which cuts away from the pair of 7in drivers and 1in tweeter. Although shorter than the Wilson Benesch's from system one, they convey a sense of purpose that the superficially bigger Square Two simply doesn't.

Living the high life

Providing the digital front end for this American duo is a fine piece of British decoding. The DCS Puccini is the entry-level DCS player, but as you might expect from a device that costs as much as a well-specified Ford Fiesta, it is hardly an economy product. Everything from the swooping, almost organic front panel to the carefully evolved DSD upsampling (DCS was at this long before it was cool) feels unashamedly high end. It serves to finish off the system and complete a very serious looking collection of equipment indeed. With the talents of system one fresh in my mind, can this little lot really be worth more than three times the price?

It is to the eternal credit of the increasingly clear way that Studio AV goes about its business that this system is not about forcing a 'valve

sound' or even the implied power of 150W down your throat. Instead it presents music in a way that is enticing after five minutes, bewitching after 20 and would probably have me selling an internal organ if you left me with it for an hour. What it does is combine utterly unburstable scale and dynamics with tonality that is absolutely top drawer.

Returning to the CFCF album, the combination of genuinely deep bass and open soundstage puts a new spin on the intended scale of the recording and allows a menagerie of incidental detail to become apparent. At no stage does this ever sound forced or unnatural and the Avalon's never impart unrealistic size or width to the performance, they simply grant it a space that makes it sound quite phenomenally real.

This is combined with a sense of drive and timing that means that when you ask the system to pick up its skirts and reproduce the faster tempo of Younger Brother's *Vaccine*, it can turn in a performance that gets the head nodding as well as or better than a number of solid state rivals. Indeed the tonal realism of the system coupled with the boundless refinement makes it an exceptional partner for electronic music. With the magnificent but rough and ready Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross soundtrack for *The Social Network*, the system is in its element. Bass you can feel as well as hear combines with the vast soundscape and fine incidental detail to great effect. What makes the system so useful here is that it manages to smooth down the rough edges of the recording without losing the drive and fury that it needs to remain believable.

This is the big jump forward in performance that the price of this system demands, but it still boasts a manageable footprint and real-world flexibility. It would be foolish to pretend that this is anything other than a significant sum of money, but you'll be the proud owner of a truly world-class system if you do take the plunge.

- 1 VTL ST-150 POWER AMP £6,400
- 2 VTL TL-5.5II PRE AMPLIFIER £6,900
- 3 DCS PUCCINI CD PLAYER £11,999
- 4 AVALON IDEA £7,900
- TELLURIUM Q ULTRA BLACK INTERCONNECTS £390
- TELLURIUM Q ULTRA BLACK SPEAKER CABLE £260/M
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £33,199



The VTLs deliver huge power ably complimented by the DCS



The Avalon can generate sound far beyond its sensible dimensions

System 3 – Stone cold sonics

THE FINAL SYSTEM resides in the largest of the Studio AV demo rooms, but thanks to the size and sheer presence it possesses it still dominates the space. This is not a system of household brands and there are better known products vying for your attention at the price, but even before you play a note this trio of components is making a strong case for itself.

The Estelon XB is a shape that defies easy description. The speaker is the result of careful attention to diffusion and standing waves to create the most inert form possible, but the effect is something that bridges the gap between box speaker and willfully weird sculpture with an effortlessness that you probably couldn't achieve if you tried. The cabinet is made out of a patented marble-based composite and combined with the extraordinary ceramic drivers, you have a speaker that is almost as entirely stone based as the sculpture it looks like.

Dane's world

Partnering these monolithic Estonians is another Danish audio brand. Vitus audio is unashamedly high end, but even at this fairly exalted price point there is a useful dose of Studio AV practicality on show. The SCD-025 CD player might be a bit of a whopper, but it features digital inputs to allow it to serve as a DAC to other devices. The matching SIA-025 is an even more unusual beast as it is a true integrated amplifier in a segment of the market where pre/powers (as a minimum) tend to dominate.

The specifications of the Vitus units read like a wishlist of components you'd choose in a money-no-object design program and the casework is very nearly as monolithic as the Estelons. Confronted with this system for the first time it's a toss up between listening to some music on it or searching for clues to the ancients inscribed somewhere on it.

I'd advocate listening to music on it over archaeological examination,

though, as this is a truly outstanding combination. There is little escaping the fact the Estelon is the most sonically influential part of the system and this is in part because of what you don't hear rather than what you do. Specifically, that extraordinary cabinet isn't a gimmick. It disappears from the performance in a way that is akin to an electrostatic speaker – albeit one capable of a bass performance that would require a panel the size of a snooker table to achieve.

A rendition of Nitin Sawhney's *Prophesy* is truly invigorating. ESKA Mtungwazi's ethereal vocals on *Sunset*, simply appear from nowhere, locked centre stage and supported perfectly by the stripped back instrumentation and underpinned by the dense and potent percussion.

While a decent recording is the best way to show this system off, one of the neatest abilities the Vitus electronics bring to the system is that for something so outstandingly revealing, it is also extremely forgiving. UNKLE's *Where did the night fall: Another night out* is a fine album that's hamstrung by dense recording and a cavalier attitude to dynamic range. These amazing devices take this rough and ready work unpick the mass of sound and manage to give a genuinely listenable silk purse from a sow's ear.

This is a rare moment when a high-end system makes a case to heart and head and wins out to both. It possesses a manageable footprint and the speakers are sizeable, but this is a system that lets your music appear as if from nowhere, exactly as the artist intended.

- 1 **ESTELON XB £22,000 (+£3,000 FOR SPECIAL ROCKET RED FINISH)**
- 2 **VITUS AUDIO SCD-025 £16,500**
- 3 **VITUS AUDIO SIA-025 £18,500**
- STILLPOINTS ESS RACK FROM £7,750**
- STILLPOINTS ULTRA 5 ISOLATORS £570 EACH (4 PER SPEAKER)**
- TELLURIUM Q ULTRA SILVER SPEAKER CABLE £500/M**
- TELLURIUM Q BLACK DIAMOND XLR INTERCONNECTS £1,150**
- ENTREQ SYSTEM GROUNDING (SILVER TELLUS AND 2 X ERTHA SILVER) £2,170**
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £57,000**



The Estelon is half speaker, half sculpture and is a mighty performer



The Vitus pairing matches sensible dimensions with an awesome performance



Studio AV has some traits in common with other dealers I've visited in the London area in that the systems that I listened to will all fit into the sort of room their customers are likely to own. Where the Eton concern stands out is the extremely consistent way that all three

of the systems can so effortlessly work with both pristine material and rather less perfect recordings, too.

The other aspect that stands out is that the systems demonstrate that CD still has a huge amount to give as a source. I still have grave misgivings about the

little plastic boxes and I'm completing my 'no CD year' as planned, but these three systems extract superlative performance from the silver disc and show that whatever the future holds for computer audio, the boys in Eton have got you covered for CD in the future.

LABELLED WITH LOVE



Charisma

Now that the Pythons have taken to the stage for one last silly walk, **Simon Berkovitch** revisits the prime years of the group's vinyl home

Singer-songwriter Peter Hammill has hardcore fans, but it's arguable that larger-than-life entrepreneur Tony 'Strat' Stratton-Smith is the ultimate die-hard: he set up a record label to release Van der Graaf Generator's excellent 1970 album *The Least We Can Do Is Wave To Each Other*.

Strat was the manager of The Nice, the Bonzo Dog Band and the aforementioned VDGG in the late sixties, and his brainchild Charisma quickly established itself as one of the UK's key progressive labels, alongside the likes of Dawn, Harvest and Vertigo.

During its lifespan (1969 to 1986), Charisma boasted an eclectic roster – from progressive and cosmic rock (Genesis and Hawkwind), eccentric comedy (Monty Python and Vivian Stanshall) and singer-songwriters (Clifford T Ward). The solo projects of Genesis members Tony Banks, Steve Hackett and – most successfully of all – Peter Gabriel also came out on Charisma, alongside work from Alan Hull (Lindisfarne) and the super-prolific Peter Hammill.

The initial LP label design of a 'pink scroll' with the legend "The Famous Charisma Label" – admirably cocky for an independent finding its feet –

is one of two that gets vinyl collectors' hearts pumping and wallets opening. Early releases from the likes of Audience, Genesis and VDGG that boast this design are now very rare and can command three-figure sums in some cases.

This morphed into the most recognisable Charisma logo with the 'Mad Hatter' (pictured above) in the early seventies. The 'Hatter' logo was introduced in 1972 and graces the majority of the label's most sought-after LPs from this period.

Distribution was key to Charisma's success. In the UK, it was originally an offshoot of B&C Records (home to heavy

acts Atomic Rooster and Nazareth), which eventually became part of Strat's empire.

The first Charisma record not in collaboration with B&C was the initial flight from Rare Bird (1969). Importantly, hit 45 *Sympathy* came from Rare Bird's debut album – a European success that put fire in the label's engine (as well as all-important money in the coffers).

Charisma also dabbled with new wave and reggae in the early eighties, forming a sub-label, Pre, that signed Delta 5 and Prince Far I and licenced avant-garde records from Tuxedomoon and The Residents from the latter's Ralph Records.

Monty Python

And now for something completely different: genuinely innovative comedy records

Capitalising on the success of the cult series, the BBC released an LP of Monty Python's Flying Circus' greatest hits (including *Nudge, Nudge* and *Dead Parrot Sketch*) in 1970 – a cheeky, rather than anarchic, live recording. Free from Auntie's vinyl division and signed to Charisma, experimentation was go – with the studio, their own material and, indeed, the vinyl format itself.

Another Monty Python Record (1971) comes across like a post-punk record sleeve with its scribbled, recycled cover. It largely comprised sketches from the second series (including classics *Architect's Sketch* and *Spanish Inquisition*), as well as new routines (*Be a Great Actor*). The following year's *Monty Python's Previous Record* again dished up rare material for fans – a version of *Fairy Tale* from the second German episode of the TV show. (These two were reissued as double album *The Worst of...*)

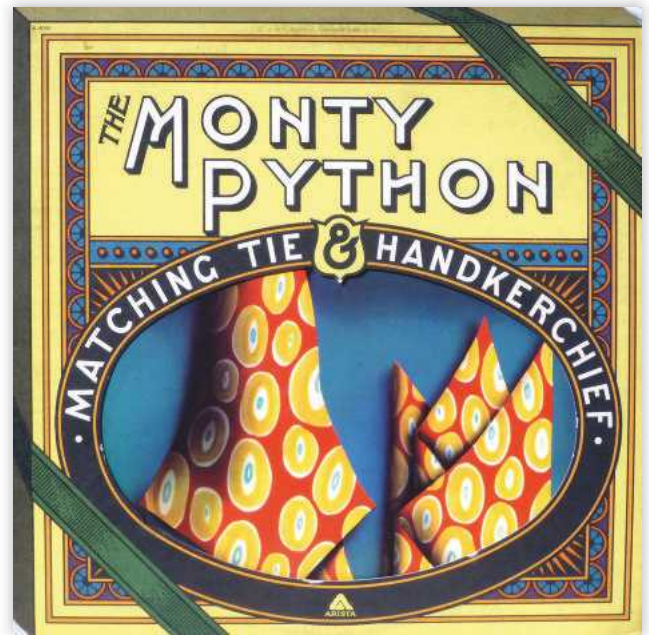
Matching Tie and Handkerchief (1973) was the most ambitious outing yet. Largely made up of new material, this was the first 'three-sided' LP: on initial pressings, the B-side (both sides were labelled 'side two') had two grooves cut into it, with different material in each groove.

Stage (*Live at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane*) and screen (*The*

Matching Tie... was the Pythons' most ambitious outing

Album of the Soundtrack of the Trailer of the Film Of...) LP outings followed, the latter capitalising on the success of the *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* film.

By 1980, the mega-successful Pythons were contractually obliged to produce another album for Charisma, reflected in the wry title of their final outing *Monty Python's Contractual Obligation Album...*



The Pythons innovated with both comedy and the LP format

Van der Graaf Generator

Seat-of-the-pants art rock from "the Hendrix of the voice" and his intrepid crew

It's unfair to pin 'progressive' on Van der Graaf Generator – they are a far wilder and more unhinged proposition than their contemporaries Yes and labelmates Genesis, as their spectacular run of LPs for Charisma testifies.

VDGG's turn of the decade instrumentation of modified organ, sax, piano and drums at first glance had more in common with a soul review, but the music coaxed out of those instruments was a mutant strain of post-psychedelic rock, helmed by chief songwriter Peter Hammill.

Second album *The Least We Can Do Is Wave to Each Other* (1970) was the first on Charisma and the last to feature the five-piece incarnation of the group, the lineup stabilising around the classic quartet of Hammill (vocals), Hugh Banton (organ), David Jackson (sax) and Guy Evans (drums). This lineup recorded *H To He, Who*

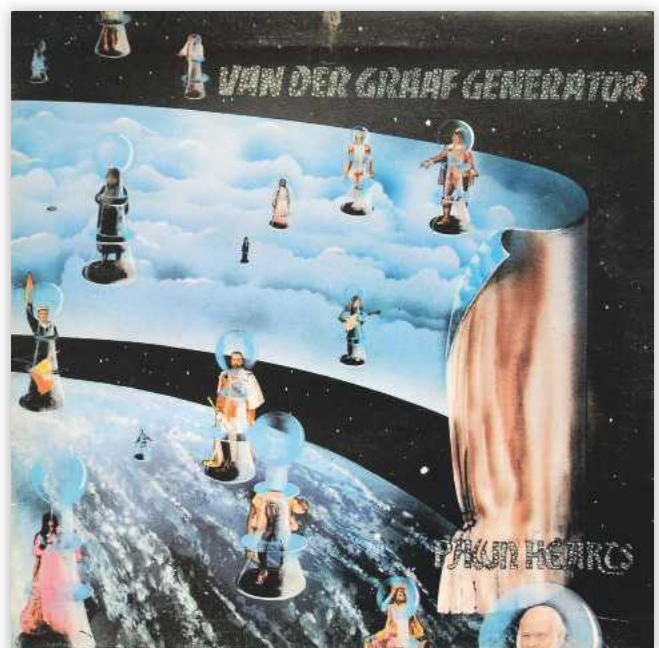
Am The Only One (also 1970) which spawned live favourite *Killer* and featured Robert Fripp.

Despite VDGG's catalogue being sonically challenging, fourth album *Pawn Hearts* (1971), the apex of early seventies experimental rock, peaked at number one in Italy.

The apex of experimental seventies rock

It contains some of the group's most memorable work, including epic, side-long journey *A Plague of Lighthouse Keepers*.

The classic quartet split in 1972, but reunited for mid-seventies albums *Godbluff* (1975), *Still Life* and *World Record* (both 1976). Peter Hammill was also extremely prolific outside of the group, recording a fantastic range of solo albums for Charisma.



VDGG reformed back in 2005 and still perform together now

Genesis

The Charisma constant, through prog rock to slicker stadium pop

Ever-present throughout Charisma's lifetime, Genesis recorded 12 studio albums for the label – beginning with *Trespass* (1970) and ending with *Invisible Touch* (1986) – that saw the group mutate dramatically in terms of both direction and personnel.

Signing to the label, second album *Trespass* ushers in the progressive rock era for the band, as lengthier songs with complicated structures became the order of the day.

Subsequent albums *Nursery Cryme* (1971) and *Foxtrot* (1972) further mined this progressive seam, with epics *Supper's Ready* and *Watcher Of The Skies* lurking in the latter's grooves (1972).

Genesis' stage presentation took a bizarre turn around the time of *Foxtrot*. Peter Gabriel began roaming the stage in elaborate, bizarre costumes. The aim was to bring to life

the characters and concepts in the group's songs still further.

The Gabriel era came to a close with double album *The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway*

(1974). Step forward drummer Phil Collins, who helmed the group into the eighties, at which point Charisma ceased to be.



Hawkwind

Channelling the spirit of a new age with Captain Calvert back on board

Space-rockers Hawkwind had gone through some turbulent lineup changes by the time they inked with Charisma. All ties with the *Space Ritual* era of the band were not severed, however, as poet, singer and unpredictable frontman Robert Calvert returned to the fold.

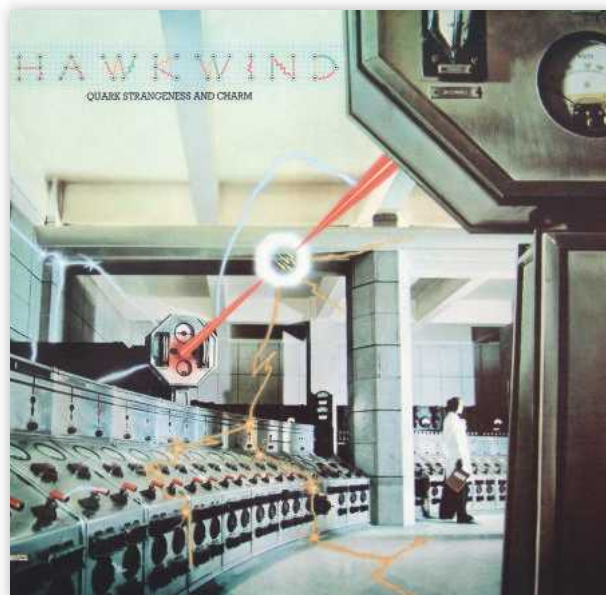
Astounding Sounds, Amazing Music (1976) marked the start of the ambitious Charisma era. Each track was conceptualised by Calvert as a standalone science fiction story.

The following year's *Quark, Strangeness and Charm* (1977) was another leap forward. The first album without co-founder Nik Turner, *Quark* contains some classic Hawkwind.

Unusually, *25 Years On* AKA *Hawklords* (1978) turned to the new wave for inspiration instead of the space rock of yore. Due to a legal dispute to the use of the Hawkwind

name, the initial run of LPs had the former moniker before settling on *Hawklords* for subsequent pressings... and now reverting to the original.

Hawkwind's final LP for Charisma *PXR5* emerged in 1979, chronologically out of step with *Hawklords* due to internal disarray in the band.



► SHOPPING LIST

While the Pythons and Genesis rang its tills, Charisma was also home to a diverse range of underground treats. Here are eight worthy of investigation



Topo D Bil
Witchi Tai To
Assorted Bonzo Dogs and a rumoured Who drummer join forces for this super-catchy 1970 ditty.



Leigh Stephens
And A Cast Of Thousands
This 1971 cut is a hard to find jazz-infused odyssey from the *Blue Cheer* axe hero.



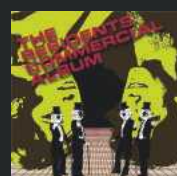
Le Orme
Felona and Sorona
This 1973 English version of the Italian group's prog opus features lyrics written by VDGG's frontman.



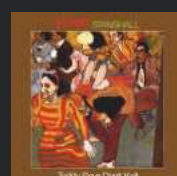
Rikki Nadir
Birthday Special
Rare 45 released in 1975 from Peter Hammill's pre-punk alter ego, Rikki Nadir.



RD Laing
Life Before Death
Released in 1978, this spoken word oddity comes from the sixties' most notorious 'anti-psychiatrist'.



The Residents
Commercial Album
Misleadingly monikered madness licenced from Ralph Records for Europe in 1980.



Vivian Stanshall
Teddy Boys Don't Knit
Wonderful bit of 1981 eccentricity from the former frontman of the Bonzo Dog Band.



Michael Nyman
Draughtsman's Contract
The beautiful soundtrack to Peter Greenaway's arthouse film from the UK composer.



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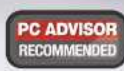
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100 Patricia Barber
Modern Cool



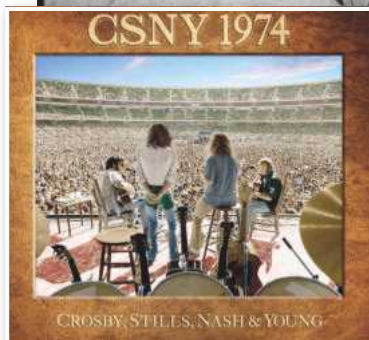
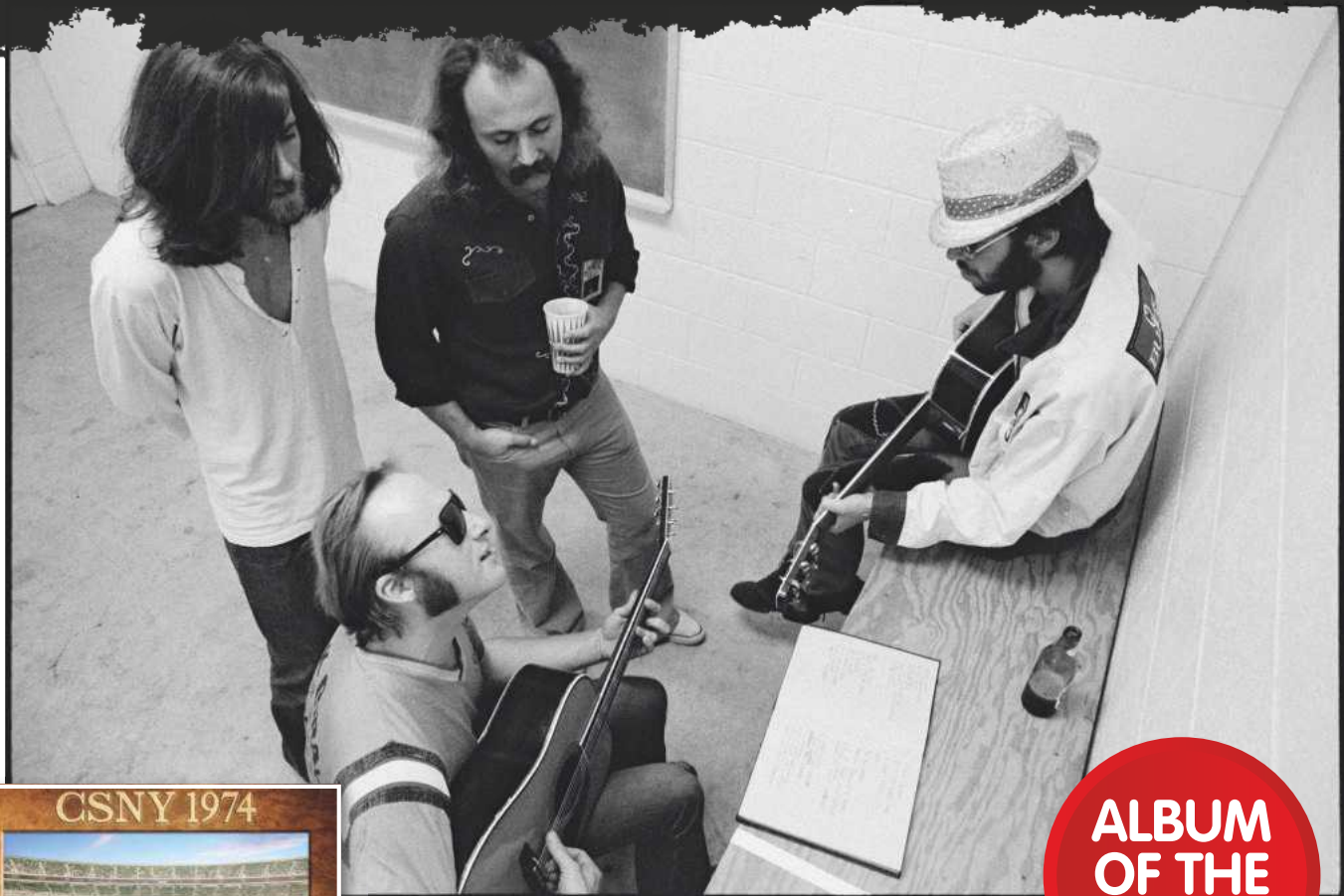
101 Florilegium Series
The Baroque Era



101 Gjertrud Lund
Hjemklang

Musicreviews

Picture credit: Joel Bernstein



Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young CSNY 1974

★★★★★

**ALBUM
OF THE
MONTH**

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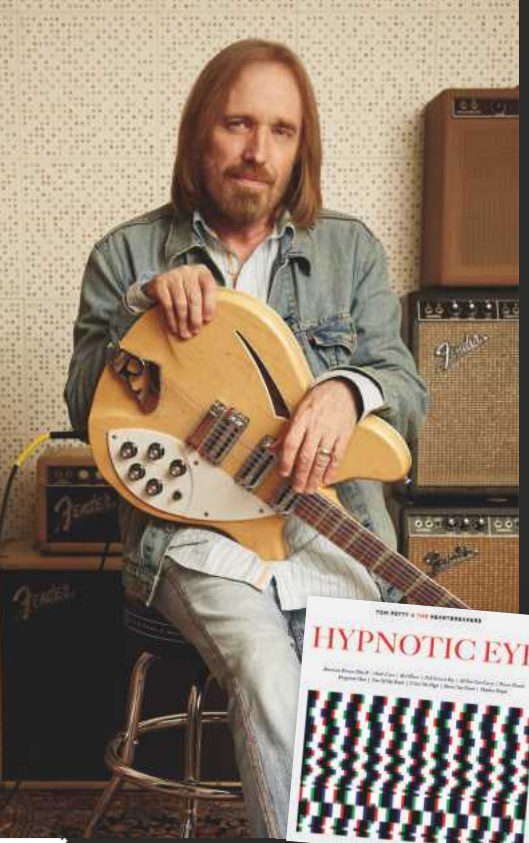
IN 1974, CROSBY, Stills, Nash and Young were the biggest band in America and the juggernaut summer stadium tour they undertook involving 30 shows in 24 American cities plus a trip to London for a Wembley Stadium showcase reflected their status. But although the group was at its commercial pinnacle, the seeds of destruction had already been sown. Everyone was doing way too much cocaine and egos were running rampant. Success had turned to excess; travel was by private jet and the rock star self-indulgence had reached such heights they even had their own personalised silk sheets and pillowcases – screen-printed with a design by Joni Mitchell, naturally – which were sent ahead to their five-star hotel stopovers. It became known as ‘the Doom Tour’, although musically the quartet were still sharp and capable of greatness, with Neil Young in prolific vein and armed with more high-calibre songs than he knew what to do

with, Stephen Stills in dynamic form and the sunshine harmonies of David Crosby and Graham Nash lending everything a burnished glow. As many as 10 of the shows were recorded for a possible live album – yet it has taken 40 years for it to appear. By the end of the tour, relationships were so fractious that all four would not record together again until 1988’s *American Dream* and the tapes were consigned to a vault and forgotten – until now.

The tensions around ‘the Doom Tour’ were not merely personal. The hippie ideal that CSNY had once appeared to represent was fracturing all around. Charles Manson had drenched the dream in blood, the Watergate scandal was in full hue and cry and Nixon was about to be impeached. The love and peace ideals of the Woodstock generation had been replaced by paranoia and psychosis. But the turbulence of the times added a potent edginess to the music. The group boldly decided to

present as much new material as possible and came up with a set list of 40 songs, presented in acoustic and electric segments with individual showcases. As CSNY were about to fall apart, these live recordings are the only band versions of songs such as Young’s *Revolution Blues* and *On The Beach*, Crosby’s lovely *Carry Me*, Stills’ *Myth Of Sisyphus* and Nash’s *Fieldworker*, all of which subsequently found their way on to solo albums. There are also five Young songs that have never previously been released, including the splendid *Pushed It Over The End*.

Add reprises of early hits such as *Wooden Ships*, *Teach Your Children*, *Déjà Vu* and *Suite Judy Blue Eyes* and you have a poignant and powerful snapshot of a unique moment in time, as lingering ideals rubbed uneasily with the dawning of a harsher reality to create a fascinating swansong to a lost era. **NW**



Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers

Hypnotic Eye

★★★★★

CD

Reprise

PETTY HAS ENJOYED a glittering career, but if you are one of the many who thinks he has never really bettered the thrill of his dynamic breakthrough late seventies hits such as *Breakdown* and *American Girl*, then his first album with the Heartbreakers in four years will warm the cockles. *Hypnotic Eye* is probably the sharpest, hardest-rocking set he's recorded since George Harrison and Bob Dylan roped him into the Travelling Wilburys a quarter of a

The garage-rock muscle of the Rolling Stones combined with the jangle of the Byrds

century ago and he found mellowness and maturity.

The garage-rock muscle of the Rolling Stones combined with the harmonic jangle of the Byrds, and a snarl and urgency in his voice the likes of which we've not heard in a long time – just another ageing rocker trying to rediscover his lost youth, you might say. At 64, it's fair comment; but he really has no right to pull it off quite so convincingly as he does here. **NW**

MUSICREVIEWS



Sarah Jane Morris

Bloody Rain

★★★★★

CD

Fallen Angel

SINCE TOPPING THE charts back in 1986 with the Communards on the hit *Don't Leave Me This Way*, Morris has sidestepped the mainstream and forged her own independent path. Her voice is as expressive as ever, sounding like a British Nina Simone on a set of protest songs about such varied subjects as child soldiers, homophobia, honour killings and political tyranny. Backed by a brilliant cast that includes jazz saxophonist Courtney Pine and James Brown's horn man Pee-Wee Ellis, it packs a dramatic punch, often uplifting, occasionally harrowing, but always passionate and challenging. **NW**



Red Snapper

Hyena

★★★★★

CD

Lo Recordings

BEING ASKED TO provide the soundtrack to cult seventies Senegalese road movie *Touki Bouki* – recently restored by Martin Scorsese – is a good reason to come out of retirement. The album develops and extends the themes of the soundtrack into fully formed songs and cohesively complete pieces of music.

There's a retro feel to the synth and guitar sounds, with plenty of Blaxploitation-era wah-wah and funky organ chops evoking prime Afrobeat. The album also marries prime vintage grooves with some ace melodies and infectious riffs – old meets new to create a timeless original sound. **DO**



Amira Kheir

Alsahraa

★★★★★

CD

Sterns

WITH ROOTS IN both Sudan and Italy, Amira Kheir makes a speciality of combining surprising influences to create a distinctive sound that is at once thrillingly different, while also being pleasingly familiar. She blends elements of traditional Sudanese folk songs, their effect most evident in the thrillingly guttural inflections of her voice and use of non-Western scales, with more familiar (in the West) acoustic jazz stylings. Her band includes acoustic guitar, double bass and percussion, with occasional input from trumpet, oud and other instruments, and together they create constantly shifting sands of rhythm and harmony on which Kheir's highly expressive voice glides. **DO**



Do you agree with our reviewers?
Decide for yourself and listen to
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AUDIOFILE VINYL

★★★★★

HOT PICK

Patricia Barber

Modern Cool

180g vinyl

Premonition Records



IT'S HARD TO believe that this is the same album I reviewed on Blu-ray recently, that probably says more about the gulf in quality between turntables and BD players, but this is a

remaster so it should be different. That it's black and white better, totally visceral and absorbing, beautifully timed and impeccably delineated marks the superiority of the format. The vinyl delivers a presence in the room that is palpable, with a decent system you can dim the lights and be there in that moment. Premonition's Barber

recordings have always been top notch, but this remaster moves the goal posts – Doug Sax, for it was that master of mastering, has still got it.

Modern Cool originally recorded in 1998 was made by Barber on piano and vocals, Michael Arnopol on bass, John McLean on guitar and Mark Walker on drums with assistance from trumpet, udu and choir. They play accessible contemporary jazz with flair and energy. They do the full range from serene to muscular and they have tone. The sound is warm, sophisticated and expansive. Not many records sound this good, this wide open, dynamic and wide band. Barber is not a darling of the hi-fi fraternity just because of her finely nuanced songwriting. **JK**

HIGH RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS



Gjertrud Lund Hjemklang



ALAC/FLAC 24/44

Linn Records

FOR HER FIRST album Lund has written a hauntingly beautiful suite of songs that combine modern jazz tropes with elements of folk and early music from around the world to create a unique blend of distinct sounds. Backed by an acoustic quartet that includes some thrillingly liquid, effects-heavy electric guitar work augmented by trumpet, her low alto voice coaxes and teases these deliciously different songs into vibrant life. **DO**



Curios Captive



FLAC 24/48

B&W Society of Sound

TOM CAWLEY'S OUTSTANDING jazz piano trio made their debut in 2007 and they've been making strikingly powerful, deeply emotive music since. His playing is informed almost as much by the romantic classical tradition as by the lyrical playing of Oscar Peterson, EST or Brad Mehldau. Subtly supported by his partners in rhythm, who aren't afraid to explore more contemporary flavours, including hip-hop beats, he's free to paint a wide range of pictures. **DO**



HOT PICK

The Baroque Era

Music by Bach, Handel, Vivaldi, Purcell, Arne, etc L'Oiseau Lyre Florilegium Series

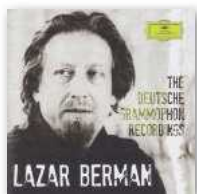


50 CDs

Decca

THE EARLY SEVENTIES witnessed a revolution in the performance of early music. The aim being to authentically recreate the original sound of the period. And, to add that extra slice of authenticity, the record label itself had to specialise. So in 1974, Decca resurrected its L'Oiseau Lyre label, and launched Florilegium. It would grow into one of the biggest and best labels for authentic performances. This is the first of three Florilegium boxsets, and it's devoted to music of the Baroque era. The recordings are good and offer a nice weighty richness and bloom compared to the lighter thinner sound typical of DG/Archiv. There's also the original LP sleeves used for each CD. **JH**

With 50 discs to choose from, there's enough Baroque music for everyone



Lazar Berman The Deutsche Grammophon Recordings



10 CDs

Deutsche Grammophon

LAZAR BERMAN WAS a powerhouse pianist, with a big technique and a bold sound. This release brings together the 10 albums he recorded for DG, released exactly like the original LPs, but not (alas) with the original album cover art. The music is mainly Russian – Prokofiev, Rachmaninov, Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, plus Chopin and Liszt. Berman's Tchaikovsky 1 with Karajan still sounds marvellous and the complete *Annee de Pelerinage* has some impressive moments, though Berman's playing lacks a certain poetry. The recordings are good – clean solid mid/late seventies analogue, with plenty of immediacy in typical DG fashion. **JH**

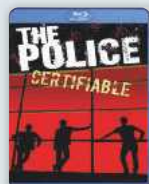
BLU-RAY DVD ★★★★★

The Police Certifiable

Blu-ray/CD

HOT PICK

A&M/Polydor



Unceremoniously breaking up at the height of their popularity, the antipathy between certain members of the Police made it look unlikely they would ever play together again. But time is a remarkable healer and in 2007 Sting, Stuart Copeland and Andy Summers announced a reunion tour that took them to Buenos Aires in 2008. The event is one of the best sounding and looking live releases I've enjoyed. There's a smidgen of jazz bass from his Stingness, some fine stickwork and angular guitar solos in all the appropriate places. **JK**

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WIN:

Monitor Audio A100 network media amplifier and Radius 90 loudspeakers

Monitor Audio has got prizes galore up for grabs for three lucky readers

Esex-based Monitor Audio has made a departure from its usual speaker production and come up with its first ever streaming amp in the shape of the A100 network media amplifier. And what an astonishing debut it is too, enabling those that have their music stored on smartphones, tablets or PCs to listen to it as mother nature intended – via a proper system.

The beautifully designed A100 sports AirPlay rather than Bluetooth and can handle 24/192 ALAC or FLAC lossless files. It has 2x 50W output and there's enough clout on hand to drive any small-to-medium-sized monitors rated between 4ohms and 8ohms impedance. Reviewed in last month's *HFC*, we were suitably impressed giving the A100 4.5 stars and a Recommended badge, while noting that "the rewards sonically speaking are stupendous".

Additionally it has a front-mounted USB port for old-fashioned tethering and the combination of digital optical and stereo phono analogue inputs means that you can hook up a CD player or even a TV. There's also an output for connecting up a powered subwoofer to give bass that extra low-level grunt. Talking of speakers, you'll be needing some to be able to enjoy your music and we're delighted to say that Monitor Audio is also throwing in a pair of Radius 90 standmount loudspeakers.

With a quoted power handling of 100W and frequency response of 80Hz-35kHz (-6dB), they might look small but they pack one hell of a punch. Combining a 25mm C-Cam dome tweeter with a 100mm C-Cam bass driver (and with a flared, profiled bass port around the back) they blew the bleeding doors off when we reviewed them back in *HFC* December 2013. Scoring the full

five stars and the recipient of one of our prestigious Recommended badges, we noted: "They're able to make a sound that is almost TARDIS-like – one that totally defies their physical dimensions. They can fool the ear, leaving the listener questioning the evidence that their eyes are giving them... creating a wonderfully fast, engaging and incisive sound that is sophisticated and seamless."

Monitor Audio has also provided stunning prizes for two runners up including the £250 Airstream S300 and £200 WS100 wireless multimedia system. The S300 is a 140W speaker able to stream wirelessly from the internet, smart devices, tablets and PCs via AirPlay. The WS100 5in speaker cubes are also fitted with C-CAM drivers and employ wireless SKAA technology for listening to music around the home with the minimum of fuss.



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Grado

SR125e headphones

THIS MAY BE a new pair of cans from the New York-based company, but you'll have a tough job telling it apart from the model it replaces in the Prestige line of headphones. The new 10-strong e Series is the third generation of cans from Grado Labs, and this new model looks pretty much identical to the SR125i that won a Recommended badge in our headphones *Group Test* back in March (HFC 382).

The SR125e has the same styling and hallmarks of the brand that make it instantly recognisable as a pair of Grado headphones, with the usual chunky foam pads covering large cabinets housing the 40mm dynamic drivers, bold branding on each earpiece and a slim headband that all adds up to the yesteryear look and feel that divides opinion. I am a fan of it even if it does make me look like a communications operator from the forties when I am wearing a pair. The thin headband covered in leather is perhaps not as luxuriously upholstered as some rivals at the price, but it sits comfortably on my head and the foam earpads don't get hot and sweaty like some vinyl-clad types. All in all the styling has a functional elegance that I rather like.

Brooklyn bond

The simplistic design may not exude much in the way of sophistication by today's standards, but its practical and the earpiece enclosures slide up and down the antenna-like poles with ease to ensure a snug fit. Apart from the new 'e' suffix at the centre of each earpiece, the open back on-ear cans look the same as their predecessor, but Grado has revisited each element of the new series to refine the performance, including adjustments to the magnetic field of the drivers for a more uniform movement of the voice coil and fine tuning the cabinet structure to prevent stray resonances from interacting with the earpiece drivers. The Brooklyn company has even used a different glue for greater strength, reliability and less mass, apparently.



The captive Y-shaped cable is a 1.7m heavy-duty length that looks to be the same diameter as the power chord plugged into the back of the Musical Fidelity M1HPA headphone amp I'm using to drive the Grados, yet is terminated with a 3.5mm jack plug. There's no doubt that the chunky cable is of the highest quality, but it's interesting to see that Grado has opted for a mini-jack over a full-size 6.35mm jack termination as these wouldn't be my first choice of cans for listening to music on a portable device out and about. The cumbersome cord has no inline remote and the open-back nature and considerable sound leakage from the vented earpieces won't win you any friends among fellow travellers. These cans are much better utilised for home listening, using the supplied 6.35mm headphone adaptor, although their open nature means that they let in external noise too, and you will need a quiet environment to enjoy them at their best.

The SR125es aren't geared for the sound of the crowd, instead they produce a nicely balanced frequency response that allows you to sit back and enjoy the music without it becoming fatiguing. Unlike some fashion-lead models, these headphones aren't going to swamp you with bass, but this isn't to suggest

that they're limited in the lower frequency range in any way. They have a pleasantly extended response that digs out oodles of low detail on Elbow's version of Peter Gabriel's *Mercy Street*, and you're not left wanting in the bass department.

Warming the cockles

The SR125es aren't tweaked for big dynamics and can sound a little restrained at times. This characteristic could also be described by some as having warmth, and aids the Grado's suitability for longer listening, meaning that before you know it a couple of hours have slipped by. It's easily done, and Laura Mvula's vocals on *Live With Metropole Orkest* wash over me in an effortless way as the open and airy sound place me in a prized front row seat.

The SR125es are something of a dichotomy when it comes to their suitability for use on the move or home listening. Their musicality is undeniable, but despite the 3.5mm jack plug fitment, the bulky cord, sound leakage and styling are unlikely to make them desirable for the streets. Even at home you'll need a quiet space to enjoy them at their best, but any compromises are worthwhile for such a good performance at this price point. **LD**

DETAILS

PRICE
£150

CONTACT
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WEBSITE
grado.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



Hifi Hanger

Single Input Passive Preamplifier



BEING A PREAMPLIFIER is a thankless task. It's the hi-fi equivalent of a goalkeeper in football – if you screw up then you are rubbish and should be replaced, and if you don't then all the glory goes to the star striker instead! Whereas turntables, DACs and tuners mysteriously make sound from thin air – or so it seems – all a preamp can do is spoil whatever it is given, however good it was in the first place. It's not the greatest job in hi-fi, and certainly one of the hardest – and like goalkeepers, a good one is hard to find.

Experience has taught me that even £10,000 preamps can do a surprisingly poor job. Despite being massive behemoths with beautiful fascias resplendent with snazzy switchgear, they are often humbled when you contrast them with no preamplifier at all. Indeed, even compared with some highly affordable passive designs, such as Creek's late lamented OBH-22, many expensive preamps do badly. Indeed, the giant-killing antics of the aforementioned Creek, plus the Townshend Allegri and MF Audio Passive Pre, have put the cat among the pigeons in the past five years.

Getting it right

A simple passive preamp like the aforementioned Creek and this new Hifi Hanger design is, of course, an attenuator; a variable resistor that is placed in a small box and wired to two pairs of RCA phono sockets. You would think that with so little to go wrong, how could such a thing not sound great? Well, actually, anyone who's tried to make their own soon realises that even with something as elementary as this, it's perfectly possible to jigger it all up. Just choose a low-quality volume pot, poor socketry and cheap wiring and you'll be going back to active preamps in a trice!

The PSA-01 single-input passive stepped attenuator uses a 20kohm, 21-step potentiometer with gold-plated contacts treated with switch lubricant. It sports surface-mount resistors wired to twisted



pairs of 7-strand silver-plated copper cable sleeved in PTFE. The shortest manageable lengths have been used, says the manufacturer, for the purest signal path, and the RCA terminals are high-quality gold-plated Neutrik. All in all, this package seems very good value for £155, especially considering how well presented the unit is. It looks superb in its own minimalist way and the volume knob is a classy item; most passive preamps have a distinctly downmarket feel, but this does not. Better still, it has been hand assembled in Hampshire by a qualified electronics engineer, rather than being an imported device from an anonymous OEM.

You might think that with virtually no parts, passive preamplifiers should all sound great, but this isn't the case; many are done poorly and can come across as dull and uninvolved – opposite to the edgy, forward sound of most active designs. The Hifi Hanger Passive Preamp is a good compromise, and at the price proves a very strong performer indeed. It isn't quite the solution to the world's preamp problems, because it does have a sound of its own, but it is in no way bad – and once again, for the money it is superb.

In essence, it very slightly becalms the sound, and takes the last few percent of dynamics out of the

equation. At the same time, it seems to slow it down very slightly, adding a little 'drag' to transients. The result is something that sounds just a few percentage points away from the original. Spatially, it flattens the stereo soundstage ever so slightly, pulling some rear-ground information forward, while dropping the very quietest detail away into the noise floor.

Keeping it real

Tonally it's pretty neutral, retaining the power of a well played bass guitar, and keeping the sparkle of ride cymbals. It introduces just a touch of grain to the upper midband, so close-miked female vocals, for example, can sound a fraction more edgy than before, but there's relatively little in it. The overall effect is of a source very close to the original line-level source, but the better your system is the more you will notice the differences. No preamp ever gets it right, and this tiny and remarkably inexpensive unit does surprisingly little wrong at the price – making it ideal for budget and mid-price systems. It won't dent sales of high-end designs, but is superb value and lets those who don't need a profusion of sources spend more money elsewhere. Highly recommended. **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE
£155

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01420 472316

WEBSITE
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OUR VERDICT





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Tel: 01642 267012 or 0845 6019390 Email: choice@2ndhandhifi.co.uk

Shure SE112 earphone

AS ONE OF the companies responsible for the high-end earphone market, Shure has been hard at work pushing its range ever further up the scale and recently launched its most expensive earphone ever. All of which makes this all the more surprising. At just £46, the SE112 is the least expensive earphone in the range and indeed is the least expensive that the company has ever made.

Thanks to Shure's focus on the pro audio sphere and with it a general disregard for shininess for the sake of it, the SE112 doesn't feel out of place in the company's lineup. The rubberised parts and sober colours help it look much like the rest of the range and the build is more than reasonable. Internally, the SE112 uses a pair of dynamic drivers rather than the balanced armatures used further up the range. These are

mounted in a fairly large housing that is reasonably comfortable and supported by Shure's excellent range of aftermarket earbuds if the three sizes of rubber domes supplied don't suit. There is a small carrying pouch, but no inline remote which at the price is entirely understandable.

Lively up yourself

The Shure manages to keep the basic neutrality that its more expensive models are renowned for and the SE112 is civilised and controlled even when pushed to high levels. At the same time, there is a useful sense of liveliness to the performance that makes it more than some wannabe monitor. Give it a bassline and the Shure responds with an enthusiasm and agility that makes it consistently entertaining.

What really makes this earphone stand out from the pack is that

despite the firmly terrestrial price, it can easily reveal the nuances of a recording and is able to reap the benefits of lossless and high-resolution audio while not tearing compressed material to shreds. It even manages to benefit from the performance boost of external headphone amplifiers, which is genuinely unusual at the price. This is an earphone priced at the 'disposable holiday special' point that you could easily live with long term, all of which makes the SE112 something of a star at the sub-£50 price. **ES**



DETAILS

PRICE
£46

WEBSITE
shure.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



SLiC Innovations Eclipse C interconnect

BEING SOLD IN the UK via MCRU, SLiC Innovations is a brand new cable company. Often, these come and go like ships in the night, so does the world really need another?

Well, perhaps. The first encouraging sign is it is well made and terminated, standing up to the rigours of a reviewer's system where wires are constantly being pulled out and pushed in.

SLiC is rather bashful about 'sharing' any details about the cable. It will not specify what's inside, aside from the fact that its name stands for Super Low Interference Cable, and it sets out to "drastically reduce signal disturbances created when current flows through conductors". The manufacturer says it has been optimised to work across an ultra-wide frequency range, up to 300MHz – so it should cope with CD's 20kHz nicely, then! The price is a not

inconsiderable £492 for a 1m run, with £75 per extra half metre from then on. Other terminations and lengths are available; for details see www.slicinnovations.co.uk.

Total Eclipse of the heart

I have heard umpteen mid-price cables this year, but can't help but be impressed with the Eclipse C. Initial impressions are that it's unearthing vast amounts of detail, throwing out large amounts of bass and has a lovely swing to it. UB40's superb *Signing Off* is on another level to the band's later more commercial fare, but is not a great recording. But the SLiC seems to unearth an extra half octave of bass and make it sound wonderfully fluid and bouncy. It's so detailed that it also pulls out all kinds of hum and analogue tape print-through sounds out of the mix that

I've not heard before. This is startling for a £500 cable, it's usually wires twice the price that dig this deep.

Tonally, it is superb. Smooth but never bland, it handles the slightly edgy vocals on 4hero's *Give In* with aplomb. Vocals sound searingly transparent yet tonally smooth and dark. Soundstaging and depth perspective is excellent, low level detailing is beyond reproach and the way it plays music in a rhythmic, dynamically expressive way is compelling. Don't be put off by the company's lack of pedigree, this brilliant cable will soon win it a great reputation. **DP**



DETAILS

PRICE
£492 per 1m
CONTACT
07908 056978
WEBSITE
mcru.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



Orange Amplification

DIVO VT1000 valve tester



OWNING A PIECE of valve hi-fi is a real delight and there are many who will argue that it is the only way to enjoy pure and high-quality sound reproduction. However, it does have a downside – valves do have a limited life. Just how long that life is depends on the type of valve and its operating conditions. Generally speaking, power valves, such as output triodes, tetrodes and pentodes will need to be changed after 1,000 hours of use. However, the small signal valves in your preamp and driver valves should be fine for 10,000-20,000 hours.

Some people resort to changing their valves regularly, but by far the best way is to test them using a specialised tester. Second-hand testers abound on ebay and the like, but most require some technical knowledge to use them and some comprehensive testers are very expensive, even second hand.

Fortunately for us valveheads, Orange Amplification has brought out a tester that is both reasonably priced and very easy to use. The DIVO VT1000 is a fully automatic and portable tester that uses an inbuilt processor to perform a comprehensive range of tests (over 20, including mutual conductance) quickly and accurately. It is supplied with a meaty switched-mode power supply, similar to the sort that comes supplied with laptop computers. The VT1000 was originally designed for use with guitar amplifier valves, but it will, of course, work equally well with those that are used in hi-fi equipment.

Testing, testing

Using the VT1000 requires no knowledge of valve theory. The unit has one octal and two nine-pin valve sockets for different gas bottle types. Simply insert the valve to be tested into the correct socket, select the type from a list with the up/down buttons and press the 'OK' button to start the test. The list of valves is conveniently printed above a row of 15 LEDs, which are also used to show the relative gain or quality of the valve.



Most of the common preamp and driver valves are supported, including the double triodes ECC81/ECC82/ECC83 (12AT7/12AU7/12AX7), ECC99 and 12BH7. Power tetrodes like the 6L6, 6V6, 5881, 6550 and the KT66/KT77/KT88 range as well as output pentodes EL34/EL84, are also supported. Note that power triodes (like the 300B) or rectifier valves are not supported – a list of all the valves that are can be found on the manufacturer's website.

The instructions stipulate that you should not test hot or warm valves. Many of the tests carried out by the automatic procedure assume a cold valve and these are compared with the internally stored test data for that gas bottle. Under testing, it will become warm and this heat will alter the impedances inside. If the same valve is then repeatedly tested before being allowed to return back to room temperature, or if a warm valve is tested having just been used in your equipment, then false readings will be given. Therefore, warm valves should be left to reach or return back to room temperature before testing commences.

I find that testing an ECC82 is a breeze. The whole set of tests takes about two minutes and the row of LEDs counts down to show the progress. When it has finished, I am pleased to see that the green 'Good'

LED is illuminated, showing it has passed the tests. The two halves of the valve are checked simultaneously and a single LED is lit on a scale showing the relative gain and indicating that the two halves are perfectly matched. If not, a pair of LEDs are illuminated on the scale, one flashing and one constant, indicating just how well matched each half is.

Light up your life

Similarly, I test an EL84 by plugging it into its dedicated socket, selecting the valve from the list and pressing the 'OK' button. Two minutes later, a single LED is lit indicating a relative gain of '9', together with the 'Good' green LED showing once again that the valve has passed the test. Finally, I dig out an old ECC83 that has been previously fitted to my phono amplifier. When tested on my trusty old B&K Model 606 valve tester it showed emission values on the two halves of 80% and 68%, so I replaced it. When I test it in the VT1000, the red 'Fail' LED lights up, along with a flashing LED and a constant LED showing relative gains of '11' and '4' – clearly the two halves are not matched.

This is an excellent comprehensive tester that is good value for money, really easy to use and so comes highly recommended. **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE
£349

CONTACT
0208 905 2828

WEBSITE
orangeamps.com

OUR VERDICT





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Northwest Analogue

Cartridge rebuild service

THERE IS SOMETHING very personal about moving coil cartridges – they often lie very deep in an analogue addict's affections. Trouble is, of course, that they wear out and not all are easy to replace. There are some excellent modern designs from a number of manufacturers, but sometimes people don't want a new cartridge, they just want their old one back and working better than ever. This has created a space for devoted specialists that can refurbish ailing moving coils (and indeed moving magnets, if you so wish) such as North West Analogue.

No aspect of the cartridge is left unturned – if you so wish. Usually it's the diamond stylus tip that needs replacing, but cartridges come in to Dominic Harper for complete rebuilds, or specific repairs. He has a passion for analogue that is up there with anyone else in the industry (and that's a pretty high set bar). He trained as a tool room machinist when he left school and went on to work as technician testing "all manner of things to British standards", he tells me. Dominic has been playing vinyl for as long as he can remember, and confesses that he, "can't quite accept digital, no matter how it's done". Twenty years ago he became especially interested in cartridges, and then "started messing around" with them five years ago.

Dom'll fix it

Actually, this man's "messing" isn't like yours or mine; he has the steady hand of a neurosurgeon and the eyesight of a particularly peckish hawk! Plus a well equipped lab and all manner of equipment, and a huge amount of knowledge of virtually every cartridge ever made. Indeed, he can quickly tell you who makes which cartridges for what brands, being seemingly able to spot the build signatures of any number of individuals or companies that you might not necessarily expect. Interesting stuff, but Dominic himself is now a cartridge builder as well as a rebuilder, and when the



general public gets to hear his first product then he may well become as famous as any of the folk whose products he currently fixes.

His cartridge service ranges from a simple retip to extensive surgery. "It dawned on me that many cartridges could be modified, sometimes dramatically quite simply, with just cantilever upgrades. Since then I have taken things further and continue to do so", he says. This work includes coil changes, damper changes and magnetic circuit changes, plus of course body material experiments. Basically there's very little this man cannot do for your poorly pick-up.

One popular option on his rebuild menu is a new cantilever, and Dominic can supply all sorts from boron to sapphire (he's not a fan of aluminium, though, quite rightly in my view). Fascinatingly, though, he has developed his own material called DHC; beyond describing it as "a solid rod of various metals", he is keeping mum about what the material is, for understandable commercial reasons. He now hand makes his own dampers and can supply and fit these, but often says that all that is needed is realignment. Then there's the stylus tip, of course; he mainly uses Fritz Gyger FG II and FG S, which "are the best available, in my opinion". The latter he says is the more resolving

of the two, but requires "intense alignment and will not suit some cartridges". A typical rebuild includes a checkover, alignment, new DHC cantilever and new FG stylus – for this he charges £600.

Silver service

Northwest Analogue performs this on my expired Supex SD900, and it makes a dramatic difference. I remember when this cartridge was new, many years ago and I don't think I've ever heard it so good as Dominic's rebuild. Wonderfully open, fast, delicate, tight and detailed, it seems possessed of much the lovely definition and delicacy of the latest Lyras, but still has just a touch of that legendary, warm and romantic Supex sound. Dominic seems to have kept the best of both worlds; my original Supex seemed slower and more lethargic, and a little lacking in get-up-and-go. By contrast the NWA rebuild seems like this venerable moving coil has downed a pint of Red Bull and gone to the gym; the music proves so much more powerful and articulate – yet there is no loss of subtlety or finesse. Overall it's a great upgrade, and inexpensive too considering the end result. Even if you just want the basic retip at £275, you shouldn't overlook this very special service. **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE
From £275
CONTACT
01772 616458
WEBSITE
northwestanalogue.com

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

ISOkinetik

Melody Two interconnect cables

BUILDING ON THE success of its Melody range of cables comes the Audio Enhancement Melody Two interconnects. A step up from the Melody One, the Melody Twos are twice the thickness of the wire used in the predecessor.

These handmade cables are produced from high-purity copper, supported in a dielectric material of ISOkinetik's own composition, screened using its own silver-plated copper shielding material and finished off with a purple flexible sleeving. The solidly made RCA phono plugs are gold plated and firmly fixed to the cable with heatshrink sleeving, which is colour coded to indicate the left and right channels. As with all good-quality interconnects, there is a preferred direction in which the cables should be used and this is indicated by a small red ring of sleeving at one

end. The signal should flow towards the end with the red ring so the other end should be connected to the audio source, such as a CD player.

Cable manners

After running in the cables for a suitable period, I connect them between my CD player and preamplifier to see how they perform. First to spin is a recording of Vivaldi's *Concerto For Two Violins And Two Cellos* (RV575) played by La Serenissima. The rendition is easy to listen to and each instrument is clear in its own right, but also in harmony with the other instruments. In other words, you can point at each of the violins and cellos as individual players, rather than them presenting as an indistinct image.

For a complete change of genre, I decide to play *John Henry* by Eric Bibb for vocals and acoustic guitar.



The subtle nuances of the guitar are breathtakingly realistic and even seem to be coming from below Eric's voice – superb!

The Melody Two interconnects are available in lengths of 1, 1.5 and 2m, and prices range from £120 to £200. They make an excellent upgrade to any audio system and are definitely worth an audition. **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE
From £120 for 1m
CONTACT
0208 2418890
WEBSITE
isokinetik.co.uk

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

Russ Andrews

Kimber PowerKord-8 power lead

NOT EVERY PIECE of audio equipment is fitted with an IEC 3-pin connector – my cassette deck being one such example. Instead, it requires a cable fitted with a 'figure of eight' plug, otherwise known as a shotgun connector due to its appearance. There are already many mains cable upgrades out there to replace the humble 'kettle lead' for IEC connectors, so it is good to now see a Kimber PowerKord fitted with a figure of eight connector available from Russ Andrews.

The PowerKord-8 is based on the Russ Andrews Classic PowerKord and uses the same Kimber woven cable technology. As with the Classic PowerKord, eight of Kimber's hyper-pure copper conductors are woven in a unique pattern, insulated with Teflon and housed in a flexible braided protective sheathing to achieve a highly efficient and clean

method of getting current through to the equipment. Russ Andrews has perfected a new technique for attaching a figure of eight plug onto its cable. At the other end, there is a high-quality UK mains plug fitted with a Russ Andrews 13A fuse. The PowerKord-8 is available in lengths of 1, 1.5, 2 and 3m.

Current affairs

The solid and chunky, yet flexible PowerKord-8 certainly feels like a real upgrade. It is pretty easy to swap between cables on my cassette deck between the supplied 'shaver lead' and the PowerKord-8 to carry out some proper A/B testing. I certainly find an overall improvement in the sound with the PowerKord 8 fitted, particularly with image placement and focus. I also find improvements in the lower registers with the bass

drums feeling deeper and tighter with more impact. The sound is more compelling to listen to and somehow fuller in presentation. There is even an improvement in overall refinement across a wide range of music genres and this, coupled with a discernible ease in the way the music is reproduced when compared to a standard lead, means that it gets a full five-star rating from me. **NR**



DETAILS

PRICE
£89 for 1m
CONTACT
01539 797300
WEBSITE
russandrews.com

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

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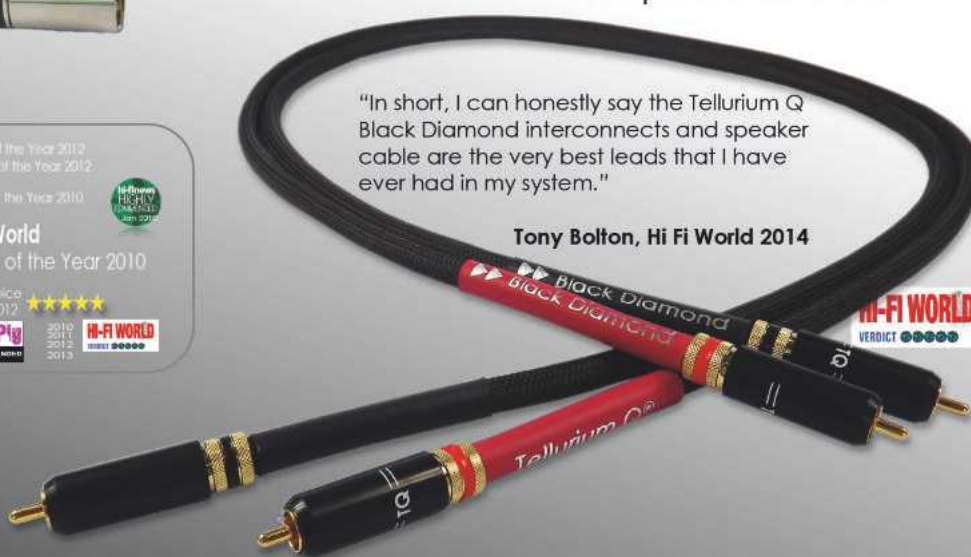
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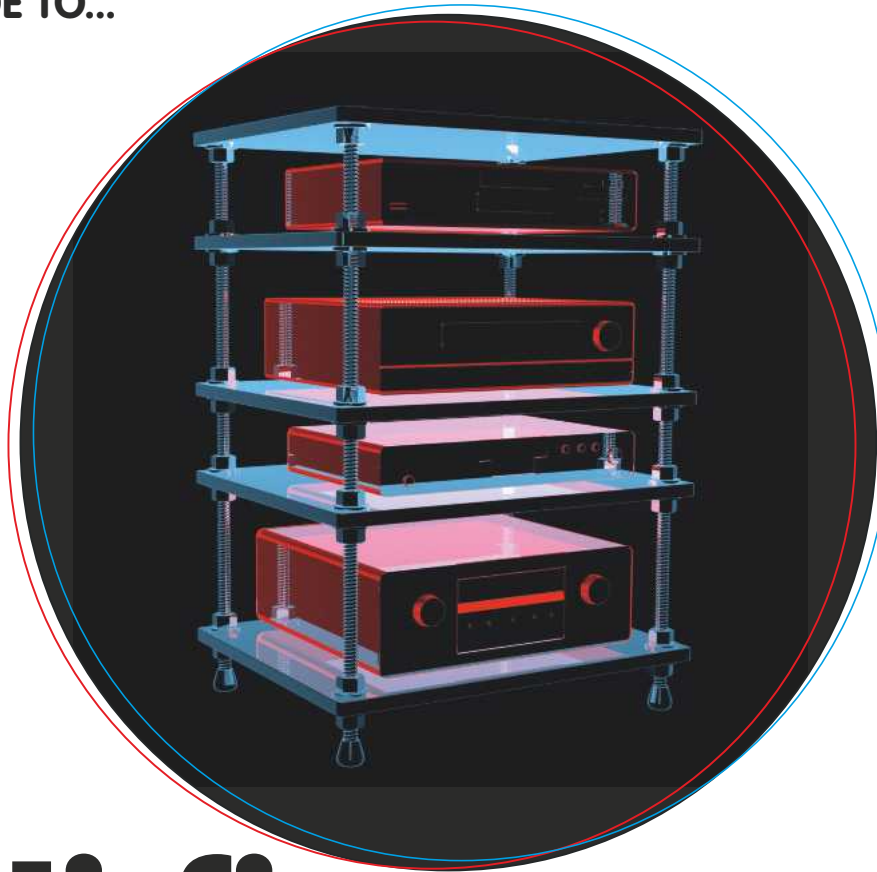
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Hi-fi furniture

A system only sounds as good as the table that supports it, right? Let's examine why stands matter

The Sound Organisation Table was, arguably, the first piece of audiophile furniture on the planet. Well, sort of. Actually, hi-fi furniture is as old as audio itself. In fact, audio was originally sold like furniture. Sound reproducing equipment was usually purchased because of its looks and its ability to sex up the décor of your living room. Nothing new there eh, Linn Kiko owners?

Nowadays, of course, most hi-fi equipment stands freely in the open air, but prior to the seventies the fashion was for hi-fi equipment installed in cabinets so that only the front panel was visible. Hard to imagine it now, but almost every piece of hi-fi was designed so it could be flush-mounted into a console, as well as being used freestanding. Quad II power amplifiers were hidden inside slabs of oak that looked like chests of drawers, Garrard turntables nestled above, while most loudspeakers were often simply off-the-shelf units

screwed into matching enclosures. This may have been the highest watermark of the hi-fi spouse-acceptance factor, but it didn't do much for the sound. While a high-quality fifties audio installation may have looked like it had been designed around the same time as the owner's Georgian suburban semi-detached, it

It's all too easy to overlook the importance of a good support stand

would win no prizes for audiophile purity. Enthusiasts chose to mount their equipment in cabinets or consoles because it looked better and got rid of unsightly cables and wires – not because it made sonics any better. So when, in the late seventies, Linn suggested that the Sondek LP12 turntable sounded better if placed on a lightweight coffee table, a few

eyebrows were raised. Prior to this, most of us placed our turntables on a heavy solid support to shield it from vibration. But, the coffee table certainly seemed to work with the LP12. It didn't cause a sensation, as the hi-fi world was still relatively unattuned to the more complementary aspects of the hobby.

Back then, the notion of using special cables seemed frankly rather odd, let alone bespoke equipment stands.

Time for change

From this tiny seed a mighty oak would grow. And so it was that, by the early eighties, London-based Linn/Naim retailers The Sound Organisation had launched a purpose-built turntable support.

It was specifically intended for the LP12, and consisted of a square-section steel frame with four moveable support points. At first, it was greeted with incredulity. Not the sort of cloying cynicism some cable refuseniks have for audiophile wiring these days, just a sense of surprise and puzzlement. It soon took off, however, on a small scale as The Sound Organisation was able to demonstrate the difference with every Linn Sondek it sold – or didn't as the case may have been. On the very first Sound Org turntable table (as they were called back then), the support points used bolts. Later, these supports were replaced with upward-facing spikes brazed onto the frame. The idea behind the table was straightforward; a light but rigid frame supporting a thin platform made from particle board. Being slim and light, the platform did not store low-frequency energy. It, therefore, acted as a high-pass filter, making the LP12's suspension function more effective. At least, that's how it was explained at the time! A modern-day proponent of this philosophy is Russ Andrews with

Quadraspire was one of the stands that filled the gap left by Mana



his Torlyte equipment supports that are made up of a honeycomb-like structure, which makes it incredibly light but very strong. There was no mistaking the fact that when placed on a Sound Org table, the Sondek did sound fresher and more detailed, giving a smoother cleaner, more relaxed sound. Bass seemed to go deeper, and stereo soundstaging was wider and more precise. Clarity improved, making complex music easier to follow. Comparing the sound produced by different equipment was something audiophiles had been doing for years. But the Sound Org table added a new twist to a familiar story. In essence we were now listening to the effect one (passive) component was having on another. It wasn't like comparing turntable A with B and choosing a winner. For example; turntable A might well sound slightly superior to turntable B. But, when B

The improvement offered is something hard to achieve by other means

was placed on a better support stand, it suddenly outperformed its rival.

This was a whole new paradigm. We suddenly realised how easily our perception of a product could be influenced by what it stood on. Although originally designed for the Sondek, the Sound Org table worked its magic with other turntables. It also improved the sound of amplifiers, cassette decks and (fast forwarding a bit) CD players, too. Suddenly, it became *de rigueur* to have four or five Sound Org tables – one for each piece of kit. Inevitably, the Sound Org table brought forth a whole rash of imitators. Most of them were 'Me Too' copies from people trying to get in on the act, taking certain aspects from the original design without quite equalling it.

Mana mania

In the late eighties, however, one rival stand appeared that could and did offer something more; the Mana. Now

here's where it starts to get rather interesting. No question, the Mana table worked extremely well, but aspects of its design seemed to fly in the face of the basic principles that were established by the Sound Org table. For starters, the Mana was a heavy rigid stand that used a solid L-section steel frame, rather than a hollow square section tube. But it was the shelves that represented the most radical departure. The lower ones were made from a heavy MDF, while the upper shelf was fashioned from plate glass. Glass – eek! Moreover – and here's where it really starts to get weird – the Mana stand was designed to be stacked; one sub-section on top of the other. The best-sounding shelf was always the top one. So, given enough cash, and a tall enough ceiling, you could carry on stacking Mana tables and keep improving the sound of your hi-fi.

Even more than the Sound Org table, the Mana stand seemed to focus the music and improve tempo/timing. Bass was firmer and tauter, and overall there was an increased sense of stability and solidity. The sound was noticeably better focused and more purposeful, with superior clarity and fine detail. The improvement was noticeable with any component you chose to place on the Mana stand – be it turntable, CD player, or amplifier. At this point in time, the whole subject of support tables – and how/why they did what they did – began to look a shade confusing.

Which approach is right?

Going back to Linn's original 'coffee table' suggestion, the idea had been to use a rigid, but lightweight support that would not store energy at low frequencies, thereby preventing the equipment from being affected by all of the nasty horrible LF resonances that tend to infiltrate our listening rooms. We'd been thinking of support stands as decoupling devices – something that would filter out harmful vibrations by improving isolation. The Mana table clearly delivered great results sonically, but did not offer much (if any) decoupling. Indeed, more correctly,



Seismic Isolation platforms are designed to limit vibrations

DESIGN FOR LIFE

What you place your hi-fi system on is big business and if you are in the market for something nice there are plenty of designs out there that will suit a wide variety of pockets. However, if you are after something special and a bit different, your choice is somewhat limited. Proper hi-fi racks designed to support audio kit have to combine good looks with a structure that performs well acoustically, so it's not something that is likely to be stocked by your local furniture supplier.

Hi-Fi Racks Ltd, based in Rutland, produces a unique and stylish range of audio equipment supports that can be adapted to suit your requirements. All of its products are designed and individually handmade in the UK using high-quality solid hardwoods. Adding to its established Podium and Akorner Reference range, it has recently released the Podium Slimline. The Slimline is sold as a standard four-tier rack, but can also be custom made to the dimensions of your choice. As all the racks are modular, they can be expanded as your systems grow over time.

Also doing audiophile things differently is Paul Beckett, designer and maker of extremely expensive – and arrestingly beautiful – clocks. His Onkk Isoo four-shelf system support (on test last month) shows both originality and audiophile best practice. It assuredly does not look like traditional hi-fi furniture and seems more at home in Habitat than an audio specialist.

The rack is an assemblage of platforms, and you can buy as many as you like in whatever height to suit your equipment. Each one acts as a cell and forms a path for resonance grounding via a knife-edge at the base and a V block at the top. The upright is damped by a large Acetal washer which, "lowers the frequency of the oscillating nature of vibration below that which can be detrimental", says the designer. An Acetal cam system on each leg locks the platforms laterally together.

The 25mm MDF platforms are just large enough to accommodate standard separates, while the hardwood uprights are available in custom heights to accommodate any scale of equipment and come in a choice of wenge or oak, although bespoke orders are available. Paul says that the woods sound subtly different, so customers can buy to aesthetic or sonic taste. The densest timber, wenge, is said to give the crispest and most transparent sound while less dense hardwoods are better at taming bright systems with their warmer balance. The basic package comes with four shelves (and subtables); spacing is individually specified. There's a no-cost option of a top-table (not shown) if you don't want the top cell configured to accept another level. Construction quality is high, and the racks come in a choice of soft white or satin black.



it served to mass-couple components to the floor. Scary!

Should we have been so surprised by this? After all, isn't one of the great things about hi-fi the fact that there are always half a dozen ways of doing the same thing? Quite often, each approach is diametrically opposite and conflicting, and everyone violently disagrees about what's right. As the eighties turned into the nineties, you started to see stands growing ever heavier and becoming more and more rigidly coupled to the floor. At the same time, others were taking the opposite approach, trying to isolate as much as possible. The only winners were reviewers who did a roaring trade discussing that week's 'in' support system. Audio furniture was now being taken very seriously, and choosing the right support was considered crucial to getting a good sound.

The Mana approach was particularly addictive, as you knew that a further worthwhile improvement could be had by adding another support on top of the one(s) you already had.

Back to the future

Just as hi-fi products come and go, so does hi-fi furniture. Mana ceased trading in the middle of the last decade, leaving room for several new brands, including Audiophile Furniture to Quadraspire, and latterly PAB and Hi-Fi Racks – all using slightly different approaches to produce real upgrades in sound. Townshend Electronics has continued to impress with its Seismic Sink platform and stands, too. But perhaps the lessons of the past have been forgotten slightly; audio furniture seems not to be taken as seriously as it used to be in those heady Cold War days. And why bother? Your equipment still works regardless of what it's placed on. Alas, it's all too



The Mana stand seemed to focus the music and improve timing

easy to overlook the importance of a good support stand, and take for granted the benefits offered. Instead, everyone's gone cable crazy...

Only if you've witnessed someone demonstrate the sonic difference between a proper equipment support and an ordinary piece of furniture, will you appreciate how big the improvement can be. Moreover, the nature of the improvement offered is something hard to achieve by other

In hi-fi there are always half a dozen ways of doing the same thing

means; it's something fundamental and profound. In other words, that elusive extra 'something' that makes the music and performance sound involving and real may only be achieved when the equipment is properly sited on good support stands. Until this aspect is sorted out, your hi-fi system (regardless of who made it and what it cost) will only deliver a fraction of its capability. So before you lavish vast sums on kit and cables, think of where you're going to put it. After all, you wouldn't buy a Ferrari without a garage, now would you? ●

ABSOLUTELY PABULOUS

An interesting alternative take on the design of support stands and platforms comes from Polish manufacturer PAB. It offers a decoupling platform that suspends a marine ply shelf via four pieces of string from a turret – one at each corner. Individual adjustment of each string allows the suspended shelf to be levelled. The PAB platform is available in two versions to suit equipment of different mass, but the design principles remain the same.

Although firmly supported, the shelf is free to move laterally. So, the equipment is decoupled without being isolated. Sonically, the PAB platform seems to make the musical presentation more relaxed and 'effortless'. Clarity and fine detail are significantly improved. In particular, you seem to get much better stereo imagery, with a greater sense of depth placement and positional accuracy. The sound seems smoother and at the same time richer and more colourful, being both easier to listen to and more involving. The improvement really has to be heard to be fully appreciated. There's no loss of clarity or dynamics, but the presentation is definitely more flowing and delicate.

The PAB platform improves the sound of CD players and amplifiers, but (perhaps surprisingly) it also delivers a big difference with a laptop computer used as a music source. Again, there are noticeable gains in detail along with a more effortlessly natural musical presentation. PAB also makes an equipment support stand that has two string-suspended shelves, with space at the top for a separate platform. Buying just a single platform for an amplifier or CD player delivers worthwhile benefits, but adding a couple more further enhances the result. Most audiophiles, having experienced what one PAB platform does, will want to add a second or third. Essentially, the end result is a truer and more musical sound.



PLATFORMS

Although it is likely to add to the clutter on your audio rack, an equipment platform is nevertheless a worthwhile addition. It not only helps to isolate your equipment further from external vibrations, but it also prevents the item itself from transmitting sounds to other parts of your system. A platform is, of course, particularly important for record decks and indeed CD players where mechanical vibrations can cause an increase in jitter, resulting in an overall degradation of the audio signal.

Other items of equipment such as power supplies and amps can also benefit from isolation, where the transformers can be a source of mechanical noise. Furthermore, valve-based equipment is more susceptible to microphony, where mechanically transmitted sounds can cause the elements inside a valve to vibrate, which directly modulates the audio signal.

Apart from providing isolation, some platforms can actually play a part in dissipating vibrations as part of their design, which is also very beneficial.

SEISMIC SHIFT

Townshend Audio has been working on Seismic isolation platforms for a long time. It started with cases that enclosed an air chamber and has steadily been refined. The latest incarnation is the most elegant and well made, it also avoids the need for inflation by using a range of cleverly damped springs to accommodate different weights of component.

Its Seismic Platform consists of a steel top plate that has a damping layer underneath and a second steel plate beneath that. This sandwich creates a constrained layer that minimises vibration in the platform. At this point most support makers stick some rubber feet on and consider the job done, not Townshend. These feet are called Seismic Load Cells and consist of stainless steel cups at either end of a rubber bellows-type arrangement that forms a damped spring. A spring alone would bounce for ages if moved, this approach means the platform sits still should there be footfall around it or movement in the component on top.

What makes the Seismic platform effective is that the Load Cell can move in three dimensions, so that when the spring is chosen to match the weight of the component it supports, it will isolate it from vibration above 3Hz. In other words all but seismic activity and no one wants that, especially not in the living room. As you can have a Load Cell for weights anywhere between one and 32kg (there are four per Platform) it's possible to choose a Platform that will accommodate almost any piece of equipment. The potential drawback is that some components do not have balanced weight distribution, the mains transformer may be at one end or in the case of valve amps all the transformers could be at the back. In such situations a weight specific system is difficult to level, which is why Townshend supplies Load Cells in different spring rates on the same platform, just mention what you are planning to support and it will pick the appropriate springs.

Seismic Platforms come in three sizes ranging from 43 x 30cm (size 1) to 52 x 40cm (size 3) with prices increasing according to the spring rates.

NEXT MONTH: Guide to iTunes. How to get high-quality audio playback from Apple's music software.

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SONUSFABER Concertino speakers with Sf piano black stands in excellent condition, with boxes, £625. Musical Fidelity X-Dac v3 £250. Pair 3m bespoke Silver High Breed Quintessence speaker cables, banana termination, £95: **02476 679165 or email: davidhirst244@o2.co.uk (Coventry).**

JPS Superconductor FX. 1m, locking RCA plugs £100.

Clearer Audio Silverline Optimus 75 coax 0.5m £100. JPS Ultra Conductor bi-wire speaker cable, 4.7m, two connectors at amp end, four connectors at speaker end £230. Two-box DNM Series 2A preamp. Two RCA line level inputs and moving coil input £350 ono: **01296 437314 or email: jez35@btinternet.com (Bucks).**

RUSS ANDREWS Kimber Kable Hero HB

ultraplate Phono Analogue interconnect 0.5m. Boxed as new £200 (save £199): **07800 606892 or email: schandler@dopag.co.uk (Worcestershire).**

FURUTECH Reference Series Three 2m power cable. New £1,230, sell for £700 ono: **07899 721899 or email: yatestherapy@googlemail.com.**

RUSS ANDREWS HP1/PA1 preamp/headphone amp/Poweramp combo. 50Wpc, all VGC, interconnect included. Excellent neutral sound, will demo. Group Test winner. £390 Buyer collects: **01483 891925 (Surrey).**

TECHNICS Hi-Fi 360 Series (X840) complete 12-piece system inc turntable, d/ cassette deck and CD player. Brochures/instructions, genuinely hardly used, offers and full list of system: **01708 471149 or 07973 439730 (Essex).**

POWER supply for Class A amplifiers, self contained, suits John Linsley Hood's 1969/1996 designs £299.

SEAS 10in drivers for Dynaco A25/26 repair? £100. Prices include posting: **0207 4998729.**

CYRUS Pre VS2 Preamp, PXX-R Power supply and DAC X, Silver, original Boxes. VGC 4/5 years old. Will ship by post if required. £650, will split if required: **01946 862815 or email: paul.derrington@outlook.com (Cumbria).**

WANTED Chord Signature speaker cable, 4-5m or over: **01475 529216 or email: Lporsche997@aol.com.**

EPOS M5 speakers. Stunning cherry finish, boxed, never used, free stands £195: **07747 390307 (Wiltshire).**

MARANTZ CD17 KI Signature – CD player, black, excellent condition (no marks), remote, manual, original box. Digital/analogue out. Internal volume control. £325: **07920 101740 or email: SiLoPeRi@gmail.com (Hornchurch).**

MOON CD5.3RS CD player. Boxed and in excellent condition £750 ono. Collection only: **07913 236601 or email: farrow_jim@hotmail.co.uk (Barking).**

AMITY HPA4X headphone amp with L&R volume controls (cost £350) £140. Two pairs of SoundStream 99.99% pure copper speaker cable terminated, 7ft pairs, never used, half price at £25 a pair. Will post: **01772 468116 (Leyland, Lancashire).**

LEAK 2075 speakers, excellent condition, no scratchers, can demo.

Collection only due to size and weight £650: **01472 885413 or email: bilton1234@virginmedia.com (Grimsby).**

ROKSAN Kandy K2 int. amplifier, black, 17 months old, as new and boxed. £595. Would prefer demo and collection to posting: **0113 2188797 (Leeds).**

SPENDOR S3/5R² black speakers £400. REL T3 Sub, black £200. Linn Pekin tuner, black £150. All unmarked and perfect working order: **01952 728773 (Shropshire).**

STAX SR-007 reference system, ie: SR-007 electrostatic ear speaker with matching SRM-00711 direct coupled dual triode vacuum tube energiser. Original owner, absolutely new £2,200 ono: **01505 346791 (Renfrewshire).**

ATACAMA Eris Eco 5.0 rack, brand new, unused. Silver with dark oak shelves (bamboo) £300. Base 225mm, mid and top 175mm. Collection only: **079388 35982 (Middlesex).**

ART EXPRESSION loudspeakers. Black finish; virtually new condition. Superb sound! Complete with matching stands, boxes and paperwork. Will demonstrate. £950: **07736339194 or email: j.boswell@rbht.nhs.uk (Bromley).**

MORROW AUDIO MA 1 one metre pair stereo interconnects, rave internet reviews £35: **01243 528010 (West Sussex).**

ART Stiletto speakers (pair), slim floorstanders in maple



B&W DM601 S2 speakers, ash black, mint condition with box and manual. Collection only, happy to demo (RRP £200) £100: **01902 884694 or email: jukey39@yahoo.co.uk (West Midlands).**



REGA Apollo 35th Anniversary Limited Edition in black (VGC, light use) £375. Rega Mira 3 integrated amplifier in silver (Best Buy, *Hi-Fi Choice*, Class B, Stereophile, immaculate with a great phono stage – less than a week's use, bought in 2012) £300. Both boxed with remotes. Focal Profile 908 standmount speakers in Classic finish with matching Focal S908 stands (Best Buy, *Hi-Fi Choice*) £395: **07772 711432 or email: richard.schofield@kcl.ac.uk (Bucks).**

BUYING TIPS **BUYING SECOND-HAND** can be a great way to pick up a bargain. A formerly expensive second-hand component might well prove a better long-term bet than a brand-new product if the price is right. **DO SOME RESEARCH** on which brands have a good service back up, so if something does go wrong, you can get it fixed. Unless you purchase from a dealer, you're unlikely to get any warranty, so it's up to you to ensure the fitness of any gear that you buy. **USUALLY** speakers should be less prone to breakdown than amps, and amps should be more reliable than CD players. But any abused component could be trouble – have a proper demo and judge the seller as well as the goods!



COPLAND integrated amplifier CSA-14 £475 ono:
01424 773404 or 07999 828283 (Hastings, East Sussex)

finish, wonderful sound and in excellent condition with original packaging, grilles etc. £475 ono: **01925 572936** or email: **whites96@virginmedia.com (Cheshire).**

Q ACOUSTICS 2050i speakers for sale, white gloss finish, immaculate condition, £400. Buyer to collect: **07940 659384 (Brighton).**

ORTOFON MCA10 battery-operated preamp, excellent condition comes with new batteries. 1x Ortofon MC10 Super cartridge, boxed, plays well, but may need a re-tip (no way of checking), £50 including postage. 1x BTE passive preamp, 3inputs, American Walnut, excellent condition, very little use, £50 including postage: **01382 644815 (Dundee).**

NAIM Nait 5i integrated amp in excellent condition original box, still under warranty receipt provided, £499: **07967122765.**

YAMAHA YSP 2200 sound bar and subwoofer, all cables and leads and instructions, only 18 months old (RRP £750) £390: **01294 822562 (North Ayrshire).**

VPI Scout 2/JMW 9T/Linn Klyde. £1,750 ono: **0208 4649044.**

GALE 401 speakers with chrome ends, fully

reconditioned, original paperwork and boxes, first reasonable offer secures: **01825 722936 or email: spartridge37@btinternet.com (Sussex).**

MICHELL Gyro SE with Origin Live Rega RB600, Goldring 1642. Mint condition £875. Audiolab 8000 Q (British) £280. Audiolab 3000P £180. Acoustic Energy AE1 Classics £575. All mint condition: **01484 427426 (West Yorkshire).**

ARCAM irDAC £195, mint condition and boxed: **02392 453382 (Havant).**

WANTED Technics DVD stereo system SC-DV-150 or later version. Good condition essential. Quadrophonic amplifier also desired: Sansui QRX 9000 or 999 or Pioneer equivalent: **01985 213952 (Wiltshire).**

ATACAMA Equinox hi-fi rack in piano black with glass shelves. Five shelves and not four in mint condition (RRP £430) £150: **07905348812 (Watford).**

WANTED Quad 50E mono amplifier, must be in good working order: **07946 522644 (Sheffield).**

REGA Brio amplifier. Two years old, moderate usage £300. Monitor Audio BX5 floorstanders, two years old, perfect condition £250: **07908945608 (Battersea).**

ATC integrated SIA2150 mint condition, superb sound, just £1,250: **01225 706783 (Wiltshire).**

AKG VQ701 Quincy Jones Signature Line Headphones in white, one and a half years old, mint condition, boxed (£340 new) £170: **07905 348812 (Watford).**

AERIAL ACOUSTICS 10T speakers in Rosewood (£8,000 new), asking £2,200. Lexicon processor DC2 (£4,000) VGC £950: **0152614055 (Fleet, Hants).**

NORDOST Red Dawn RCA interconnects. Superbly transparent sound, mint condition, were £300 will take £100: **01484 427426 (West Yorkshire).**

WANTED four track tape deck or recorder for up to 7in spools: **01535 661278 (West Yorks).**

PINK TRIANGLE LPT Rega £300. Musical Fidelity £100 Electa amp, £600 CD, £50 tuner £550. Linn Index speakers £70. Sony Sports Walkman £25: **01708 457691 (Essex)**

CHORD Signature links x4, brand new, unused (cost £90) £60. Chord cobra Plus sub lead, 10m (cost £147) + 3m (cost £70) £100 for both + p&p. Russ Andrews RGB Scart (cost £200) £60: **01772 812992 (Preston Lancs).**

STAX SR-007 Omega Reference system (ie SR-007 electrostatic earspeaker with matching SRM-00711 direct coupled dual triode vacuum

tube energiser), original owner, absolutely new £2,200: **01505 346791 (Renfrewshire).**

ARCAM CD37/SACD player (black) £699. Roksan Kandy K2 integrated amplifier (silver) £550 and K2 CD player (silver) £550. Both only months old with latest remote control RMX-111. Denon TU1800 DAB/FM tuner (silver) £175. All items in immaculate condition with original boxes: **023 80738935 or email: golf3385@hotmail.co.uk.**

EAR 509, Mk 2. Pair of mono valve amps, 100W per channel. Very good condition, late eighties, little use. Can demo. Buyer to pay postage or collect, £2,000: **07527 567829 or email: abaird2011@btinternet.com (Berkshire).**

MUSICAL FIDELITY A1 integrated amp (2008), A1CD both in excellent condition and boxed.

£1,000 for both ono. Will split: **07791529128.**

Q QUAD 99 System consisting of amp, preamp, CD and tuner in original boxes, mint condition, complete with leads and remote control. Prefer buyer collects. £800 ono: **0208 8576346 or email: pp.marden31@ntlworld.com (Bromley).**

NAKAMICHI DR-3 cassette deck (only 6 tapes ever played/rec) including 10x TDK SA90-2xTDK MA90 blank tapes unopened and 2x 1m pairs of QED silver spiral interconnects (for play/rec). Includes original box and manual, £165: **01202 515474 or email: johnlangley17@talktalk.net.**

MARANTZ Champagne PM 7200 KI amplifier in mint fully working order. C/W KI certificate, manual, remote and packing carton, £300: **07505 920373 (Warrington).**



LINN Basik turntable, includes Akito arm and instruction book, in very good condition £250. Collection only: **07958 739227 or email: sharpe@interalpha.co.uk (West Sussex).**

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WE HEAR...

CHORD ELECTRONICS' CLASSIC DIGITAL integrated amplifier, the SPM2800, is just about to be revamped. Now in MkII guise, our spy tells us that it will feature the very latest Chord DAC technology, offering consumers a raft of inputs and the benefit of Chord's superb digital-to-analogue conversion and amplification in one lavishly – as is usual for the brand – crafted box. No word on price, yet...

THERE'S NO DENYING THE EXCELLENCE OF Quad's electrostatics. But even their most ardent supporters will admit that they lack bass power and treble extension. A little bird at IAG tells us that the company has a special research project ongoing, attempting to refine the design to provide a serious step change in performance. This could result in an ultra high-end 'statement' Quad electrostatic. Nothing is confirmed as yet, but it's a tantalising possibility!

ANOTHER PRODUCT FOR THE ME GENERATION: Cambridge Audio's One is a brand new compact one-box music system, giving streaming, CD playback and aptX Bluetooth, plus ye olde DAB and FM radio for when your parents come to stay. It has a built-in DAC (using a Wolfson WM8728 chip) with USB, optical and coaxial inputs and a 30W Class AB amplifier section. Price is £349.95, but you'll need to add loudspeakers.

FOLLOWING ITS MOVE INTO COMPACT one-box systems, McIntosh is gearing up to launch the company's first-ever headphone to complement the recently released dedicated headphone amplifier, the MHA100. It's said to be a circumaural design and "fittingly high-end" according to our mole, but pricing is not confirmed yet.

THROUGH THE PAST, SMARTLY...



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 63 OCTOBER 1988

Not content with providing the ultimate guide to everything you need to know about recording with cassette and a test rounding up 20 headphones of varying prices – back in the days

when headphones were more of a niche product and not produced by hip-hop moguls wanting to make a fast buck – the October issue of *Choice* focussed on DAT recorders. Typically, we went out of our way to procure review stock, gathering five decks at great personal risk... "The hi-fi industry is none too happy with us because DAT has not been officially launched on the consumer market – but if you want a machine badly enough there are several dealers in London selling grey imports". And the verdict? Pioneer's D-1000 was the best of the bunch, though sadly "It will never go on sale in this country"...

Meanwhile, Ronald Regan decided to tear down the US embassy in Moscow over fears that Russian listening devices were tuning into his nonsense, while in the UK interviews with the IRA were banned from being broadcast, leading to strange voiceovers being adopted...



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 147 OCTOBER 1995

Though the October issue was dominated by our round up of the ultimate hi-fi kit of the year, perhaps the most interesting article is written by Barry Fox, who in his *Opinion* piece talked about noise cancelling

headphones. What's of interest is not his thoughts on the technology, but an early view of what the internet had to offer. "It costs around £4 an hour on CompuServe connect time... For that you get the occasional nugget, surrounded by an immense amount of garbage. The Rolling Stones will, for instance, sell you souvenirs and give you the chance to download excerpts from their latest album in super low-fi. I tried several times but always got error messages instead of music. Perhaps the master plan is that surfers may give up and buy the CD instead. If so, it failed on me."

Someone that might have been more impressed by the internet, French woman Jeanne Calment became the oldest person ever when she reached the ripe old age of 120 years and 238 days. Meanwhile, OJ Simpson was found not guilty of the murder of his wife and her lover...



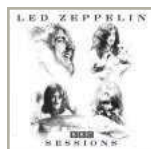
DESERT ISLAND DISCS

This month **Luke Creek** from Epos Loudspeakers picks four of his all-time favourite long players...



JAMES BLAKE OVERGROWN

I discovered this guy about two years ago, and last year he got a Mercury Music Prize for this album. I played this a lot at CES this year, and adore *Retrograde*.



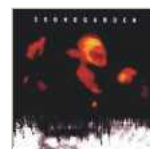
LED ZEPPELIN BBC SESSIONS (LIVE)

Their sound invokes memories of my father coming home with new prototypes. All 18 minutes 37 of *Dazed and Confused* is my highlight.



MAJOR LAZER FREE THE UNIVERSE

This is my 'go to' album when pushing a system to its maximum. I also like the dancey feel, although some of the lyrics are a little risqué!



SOUNDGARDEN SUPERUNKNOWN

This reminds me of hot summer days in the nineties, sitting by the side of a lake in Sussex fishing. Happy times! My standout track is *The Day I Tried To Live*.

Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

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