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Printed By
Advent Print Group, Andover

Hi-Fi+ is published twelve times a
year by: Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd

ISSN 1465 5950



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editorial

No one would have believed, in the first years of the 21st Century, that vinyl was long for this world. No one could have dreamed their records would be worth more than a pittance. Few men even gave a thought to the LP. And yet, across the gulf of time, minds immeasurably younger than ours regarded old vinyl with envious eyes, and slowly, and surely, they drew their plans for its return.

OK, yes, I've been listening to *Jeff Wayne's Musical Version of The War of the Worlds* again. On LP. And it's great! It's great that LP is not just proving to be a hipster fad or a fashion accessory. It's great that we can devote almost a whole issue to a medium that by all accounts should have died off in the last century.

The 'vinyl revival' could so easily be a vintage fetish, with people trawling eBay, swap-meets, and 'audiojumbles' for parts of audio's glory days. And it's true that Classic-Fi has a big part to play in the resurgence of vinyl. But it's also fair to say that some of the best LP performance ever can be had from the latest and greatest audio gear.

A good turntable needn't cost a fortune, and companies like Rega and Pro-Ject recognise the new generation of vinylistas might view installing a cartridge as an arcane and lost art, so they often provide complete kits that require minimal adjustment. But not everyone wants so easy a record-playing life!

In fact, vinyl replay has become a very broad church, encompassing everything from the 'fit and forget' brigade to the inveterate tweekers, box swappers, and multiple cartridge users... and all points in between. There is some sharing of skills across the generations, too.

However, we lost the battle for 'vinyl' – it's now 'vinyls'! I think we can live with that, if it means there will still be LPs and great things to play them on in the future.

Meanwhile, on the digital side, things are in a state of flux. Tidal is becoming the popular choice for day-to-day audiophile listening, replacing Spotify for the hard-core enthusiast willing to pay a small premium. Then again, people are still downloading hi-res files, and even buying CDs. Perhaps CD will stage a comeback, and I can listen to *War of the Worlds* on CD...

This month marks the launch of our first Digital Buyers Guide – a free-to-download, complete round-up of the best products we've seen, the best products to come, interviews with key designers and so much more. Our first guide is available at: www.hifiplus.com/buyers_guides/

Finally, congratulations to Martin Rainer from West Sussex in the UK, who wins a pair of Russell K's excellent Red 100 loudspeakers!

Alan Sircom
editor@hifiplus.com

ISSUE 125 (AMPLIFIER SPECIAL) ON SALE: UK JULY 2, 2015 ... US AUGUST 6, 2015



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Or email them to editor@hifiplus.com

incoming!

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LETTER OF THE MONTH WINS A DRAGONFLY

Both AudioQuest and Hi-Fi+ are passionate about music and the sound it makes. We know what makes a good audio experience, and we know what makes it better. Most modern audio equipment is good, but with the right attitude, right advice, and the right components, the sound it delivers can move from 'good' to 'great' to 'fantastic'. AudioQuest has to deal with a lot of queries regarding audio systems, because almost everything in an audio system is connected with a cable. The company has amassed a wealth of information on a range of topics in audio, both in general terms and with a team comprising keen, specialist audio experts willing to impart their expertise.

Which is why we've teamed up with the good folks at AudioQuest to award the letter of the month a free AudioQuest Dragonfly

Carbon Compliance

I am new to this whole record player thing. Last year, I bought a Rega RP1 turntable package, but I broke the stylus recently. I was going to buy a replacement Rega Carbon stylus, but my Dad piped up and suggested I 'upgrade' to a 'moving coil', but when I asked the dealer who sold me the deck, he mumbled something about 'cartridge compliance'. My Dad reads your mag, so I thought I'd ask someone independent. What is a 'moving coil' and why is it not compliant with my turntable? Also... is it 'vinyl' or 'vinyls'? My Dad seems to go crazy whenever I call them 'vinyls'...

Matt Hanson, via email

Dear Matt

Many thanks for your question about vinyl, and to answer your last question first, the plural of 'vinyl' used to be 'vinyl', but it seems to have changed.

The job of a pick-up cartridge is to turn the physical or mechanical process of tracking and following the grooves that have been cut in the surface of the vinyl record into an electrical signal. As the name suggests, a 'moving coil' or MC cartridge has a coil of wire that sits inside an electromagnetic generator made of a group of magnets, as the stylus moves from side to side following the grooves. The main alternative – and the type used by Rega for the Carbon is a 'moving magnet', or MM. Again a descriptive term, MMs have a small magnet that sits inside an electromagnetic generator made of coils of tiny wire.

Moving coil cartridges are more complicated to manufacture, and as a result are often more expensive, they typically have a much lower electrical output than moving magnet cartridges so you will need to have



a phono input that will be able to accept that lower signal level. Some amplifiers have a switch next to their phono input that will let you select an optimised circuit for each type, some MC cartridges even have high output so you can attach them directly to a MM input.

Meanwhile, compliance is a measure of the softness of the suspension inside the cartridge that holds the cantilever. You will find that the arm on your Rega Turntable will have some specifications that cover the weights of cartridges and the compliance range that it will work optimally with. Years ago Moving Coils cartridges were often heavier than Moving Magnet cartridges and had suspension systems that didn't work well with lighter tonearms, but nowadays this isn't too much of a problem.

So, a moving coil cartridge isn't necessarily an upgrade or a problem because of compliance. However, I'd suggest that the matching of the right kind of cartridge to your amplifier and your budget is more of a consideration.

Robert Hay, AudioQuest

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Go Deeper



▶ Hole in One?

My son recently purchased a Linn LP12 turntable (second-hand) from Guildford Audio. It has a wood Benz-Micro cartridge, but Trevor Martin was unable to tell us the make and model of this beautiful tonearm, with holes in the armtube not unlike Swiss cheese!

My son feels he has a great bargain at a total cost of £2,400. I'm inclined to agree.

John Whitaker, Surrey

We think the arm is an Audiomods micrometer arm kit, based on the classic Rega armtube. The price of the arm varies according to specification, but this one looks to have the full upgrade package, including stainless steel VTA finger lock, alloy armrest and custom headshell shims. It is hard to tell from the images but it may also have Cardas wiring. The full package costs around £595 as a kit of parts, but this does not include time spent building the complete product.

Putting a value on this arm is therefore difficult, because a £600 bill of materials places the arm in very high-end territory, but we'd suggest that £2,400 purchase price for the LP12, arm, and Benz-Micro Wood cartridge is an exceptional deal. Well done! - Ed

Colourful language

Sir, I have often wondered what the '+' in Hi-Fi+ was intended to signify. Following your comment on the Russell K Red 50 Loudspeaker in the May 2015 issue, "There will be a contingent of listeners who will protest that any loudspeaker tuned to deliver a bit of a lift in the upper bass cannot be considered 'high fidelity' because in such a rigid definition means 'flat frequency response'." I see it means add whatever colouration you happen to like. As to your defensive addition, "I'd suggest they shut up and listen... etc." it does you no credit.

Personally I have no problem with anyone enjoying music however, they like it served, coloured or otherwise, but I don't see why you need attack those who prefer it neutral as possible.

Andrew Smith, via email

The Red 50 is a small box loudspeaker. Small box loudspeakers have a limited range of options, by virtue of both the physical constraints of the loudspeaker itself, and the typical room dimensions that usually apply under those conditions. Designers have a choice of measuring 'flat' and sounding 'too thin', or going for a physics-compensating 80Hz 'lift' and sounding 'just right'.

Ultimately, in these conditions 'more coloured' is also 'more tonally accurate', which paradoxically means 'more coloured' is also 'less coloured'. And thanks for making my point for me. - Ed

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How to be your own turntable guru

by Michael Trei

After many years when only the hard-core vinyl enthusiasts were showing much interest, playing records and using turntables has suddenly become hot again. But this renewed interest brings with it a sticky problem. Thirty years ago, records were the music source of choice, and every audio retailer had an analogue setup guy, someone who could get your new rig tweaked and ready to go. Today most of those turntable gurus have moved on (or, sadly, passed on), and many new turntables are now sold through online outlets, leaving the end user to fend for him or herself.

The good news is that several turntable manufacturers have recognized this knowledge gap, so they ship lower cost models complete with a pre-installed cartridge and simple enough instructions to get the rest of the job done. But, if you have any plans to step up above the entry level, you may find that you'll need to screw some of the bits together yourself.

Get yourself situated

Setting up a turntable requires a good amount of attention and focus, so pick a comfortable and well-lit spot to do the work. Some exotic turntables can only be assembled in their final location, but whenever it's possible, I like to work at a large sturdy surface such as a kitchen table. Just be sure to pick a time when the kids aren't going to be running around creating havoc.

Most of what we call turntable setup, is really centred around installing and adjusting the cartridge in the tonearm. Sorting out the rest of the turntable is typically quite straightforward. Just follow the instructions for your particular model showing how to attach the belt, install the platter and mat, and loosen any transit screws. With some designs you'll need to add oil to the main platter bearing, while with others you may have to insert the tonearm into its mounting collar. If you're resurrecting an old forgotten record player from the attic, check to see if you can find a scan of the original manual at Vinyl Engine, a great information resource for all things turntable related.

The one key tweak that applies to almost every turntable, is the importance of getting everything level. Put your spirit level directly on the platter, and adjust the feet or underlying shelf so that it reads perfectly true in every direction. An out

of level turntable platter will create added friction and noise which will mask low level detail, and that's exactly what we're trying to dig from those grooves.

Once the basics are done, you can get down to the challenging, er, fun part, which involves installing and adjusting the phono cartridge. Nothing will spoil your new vinyl experience more quickly than trashing a brand new cartridge that you scrimped and saved for several weeks to afford, so give yourself plenty of time to proceed deliberately and carefully.

To help allay that fear, most new cartridges come with some kind of protective cover for the stylus assembly, and it makes sense to use this whenever possible during the setup. There will be a few points in the process where you'll need to have the stylus naked and exposed, but at other times it's a good idea to keep it covered up.

Making the connection

I always find that it's easier to make the electrical connections first before physically mounting the cartridge on the tonearm, but others insist that you should do it the other way around. You can make your own call.

At the back of the cartridge you'll find four pins where you need to attach the four colour-coded wires that exit from the business end of the tonearm. Normally the cartridge pins have some kind of colour coding that corresponds to the wire colours, although some manufacturers like to make it a bit more cryptic by marking the pins with R+, R-, L+, and L-. Basically, the standard colours for the left channel are white for the positive connection, and blue for the negative, while the right channel uses red for the positive and green for the negative. Some arm manufacturers like to complicate things by throwing a black or yellow wire into the mix, so check the manual if there's any doubt.

Personally, I prefer to attach the wires without using any tools, by grasping the end of the wire between my bare fingers and pushing it directly onto the pin. I find that I can get a

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Opening up an overly tight clip is a bit trickier, but pushing a toothpick into the clip – or opening it with a jeweller’s screwdriver – can help.”

better feel for what’s happening, and when I try using needle nose pliers or tweezers there’s always a greater danger of bending the clip over. The pins themselves are supposed to be a standard diameter, but it seems that some cartridge manufacturers missed the pin size memo, so you may need to carefully adjust the tightness of the clip to get an good firm connection. If it’s too loose, try using needle nose pliers to very gently squeeze the clip together. Opening up an overly tight clip is a bit trickier, but pushing a toothpick into the clip – or opening it with a jeweller’s screwdriver – can help.

Mounting it up

Once your wires are snugly attached, you need to physically mount the cartridge on the arm. Almost every cartridge manufacturer now uses M2.5 metric thread mounting screws, and most manufacturers supply suitable screws with the cartridge. Many cartridges have blind threaded screw holes, making it a doddle to run the screws down from the top through the headshell and into the top of the cartridge. If you’re not so lucky and need to use separate nuts, it’s often simpler to run the screws up from underneath the cartridge, with the nuts positioned on the top of the headshell. Once you’ve figured out the best way, position the cartridge so it’s near the mid point of the slots in the headshell, then tighten up the screws until they are just barely starting to get snug.

Now you’re ready to fine tune the alignment. But before you whip out your alignment protractor, you need to get the tracking force roughed in.

A weighty subject

Many tonearms have a built-in stylus pressure scale, and the most common type uses a small freely rotating ring on the front of the counterweight, with markings for the stylus pressure in grams. To use this properly, first you need to calibrate the position of the ring on the weight, then add the stylus pressure you want by rotating the entire weight. With the anti-skating set to zero, place the cartridge end of the arm just off the right of the edge of the platter, then rotate the counterweight until you find the point where the arm will ‘float’ at around the same height as a record sitting on the platter. At this point the cartridge would be applying zero grams of pressure if it was on the record, so you can calibrate the counterweight by

turning just the little numbered ring, while keeping the weight itself still, so that the ‘0’ is at the top. Now apply the tracking force you want by turning the entire weight anti-clockwise until the required stylus pressure is showing at the top of the dial. Most cartridges come with a recommended tracking force, or a range that you want to be in. With new cartridges the best performance is often found near the top of the recommended range, but you may find that as the cartridge suspension beds in with use it helps to dial it back a bit.

If you need to use an external scale, the simple but excellent Shure SFG-2 has been getting the job done for decades. More recently it has been joined by various digital strain gauge scales, ranging from cheap Chinese made eBay specials that sell for just a few pounds, to purpose made devices like the Ortofon DS-1. Most of these digital gauges give very accurate readings, although you should avoid those where the measuring platform is at a significantly different height than a record sitting on the platter.

Covering all the angles

Now that the stylus pressure is in a safe range, it’s time to set the overhang and horizontal tracking angle, a.k.a. zenith. People have written books on the subject of overhang alignment, but for most users, the differences between the thoughts of guys like Mr. Baerwald, Mr. Loefgren and Mr. Stevenson really aren’t all that important. I normally recommend using the protractor and alignment that came with your arm whenever possible.

Universal protractors that will work with any arm typically come in two types. For many years, almost everyone used what’s known as a two point protractor, where you adjust the cartridge until you find the point where it will line up squarely on two different grids on a flat plate. While a two point protractor can be perfectly accurate, it’s accuracy depends on how precisely you can judge a tiny amount of visual misalignment. That’s often a tough call, so for many years the gold standard was a protractor called the Dennesen Soundtracktor. This used a gantry with a point that you would align with the pivot point of that arm, resulting in perfect alignment using a single point. Unfortunately Dennesen stopped making Soundtracktors decades ago, but more recently some of Mr. Dennesen’s patents have expired, and we now have a new

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flood of Dennesen-like devices such as the Feickert Analog NG, The Pro-Ject Align It, and for the truly obsessed, the costly Acoustical Systems SMARTractor. These all do a great job, with far greater precision than a basic two point plate protractor.

Vertical tracking angle or more accurately stylus rake angle, is another subject that can get analogue junkies worked up into a frenzy. This involves getting the tall and narrow stylus footprint on the sides of the groove wall to match the way the record was originally cut. Think of the vibrations embedded in the record as being like folds in a curtain, and the stylus is like a tall rod that you want to move across the curtain to read the folds. If the angle of the rod doesn't perfectly match the folds, you're going to get a less precise read of how the curtain looks. Most manufacturers design their cartridges so that when the arm is parallel with the record, the stylus rake angle will be correct, but that doesn't mean that a little careful tweaking won't yield an improvement. Some arms allow you to raise or lower the back of the arm to make subtle changes to VTA; others, most notably Rega, feel that the added rigidity of a nonadjustable mounting outweighs any possible benefit.

Azimuth adjustment is very similar to the stylus rake angle, only in this case you want the V shape of the stylus to fit the groove squarely when viewed from head on. A tool like the Musical Surroundings Fozgometer lets you adjust this by balancing the channel to channel crosstalk, but again, getting the cartridge so it's perfectly square on the record is 95% of the battle. Most tonearms don't allow for this adjustment at all.

Skating away

Anti-skate is the final thing you need to set, and it's also perhaps the most contentious. This is an outward force applied by the tonearm, to counteract the inward skating force created by the friction of the stylus riding in the groove. Anti skating is always a compromise, as it will vary depending on how deep of a cut the record is, whether it's a quiet passage or a loud one, and even whether you're at the start or the end of the side. Peter Ledermann who has rebuilt thousands of cartridges for SoundSmith, says that most of the well-used stylus he sees show greater wear on the outside than on the inside, and this tells him that most people are using too much anti-skate. He suggests using a blank record, and setting the anti-skate so that the cartridge moves slowly inward as it rides on the blank surface.

This covers all of the points of a basic turntable setup, but some of these adjustments can affect each other. Therefore it's always a good idea to go back and recheck your stylus pressure and other settings before snugging down all of the various fasteners and calling it a job well done.

Finding the sweet spot

Once your turntable is aligned to perfection, you need to find a suitable spot to locate it in your system. Far more than with other components, what you put your turntable on can make or break the performance you achieve. The turntable is trying to read the tiny little squiggles that form the groove in the record, so any unwanted external vibration getting into the system can mask the subtle low-level information that you're trying to hear. There have been many schools of thought about what makes good turntable support, but everyone agrees that you need to keep the turntable away from sources of vibration. Don't put the turntable in the same bookcase as your speakers, and certainly don't do what I saw a few times back when I was a college student, and plunk it on top of the nice flat top surface of one of your speakers. If playing records makes you want to dance around the room, then a wall mounted shelf is often the best solution to avoid the dreaded skipping record.

While most audio components are pretty much plug and play today, a turntable requires a little more care and expertise to deliver a great analogue music experience. Analogue setup pros are pretty thin on the ground these days, but with just a little handy work you should be able to get your own rig back in the groove. +

USEFUL RESOURCES

Acoustical Systems

URL: www.arche-headshell.de

Analogue Seduction

URL: www.analogueseduction.net

Clearaudio

URL: www.clearaudio.de

Dr. Feickert

URL: www.feickert.de

Musical Surroundings

URL: www.musicalsurrroundings.com

Ortofon

URL: ortofon.com

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VPI Industries Prime turntable

by Alan Sircom

VPI Industries is one of the shining stars in the US high-end firmament. Based in New Jersey, the company has been making turntables, tonearms, and record cleaning machines for decades. VPI has recently been passed from father to son, Mat Weisfeld taking over from his father Harry a couple of years ago. Nu-VPI emerged with clever turntables like The Traveller, and modifications to existing high-performance turntables like Scout and Classic. Prime is Mat's first true 'from the drawing board' high-end deck, and he has hit the ground running. Those who know the guy are hardly surprised by this – he's the sort of guy who leaves dynamos gasping for breath.

However, Prime is also like a distillation of all things VPI. It has elements of the TNT. It draws from Scout and Scoutmaster. And Prime learnt from Classic. So, VPI's Prime calls upon the same inverted bearing, machined aluminium platter, and Delrin plate/cone and rubber isolation system from the Classic, but with an external motor block like a Scout, and a vinyl-wrapped MDF plinth that is drawn straight from the TNT playbook. This resolves the other big potential problem with father-son handovers – the son's desire to make his own 'mark' on the company, that he changes everything the company stands for. It's a delicate balance between being 'a safe pair of hands' and going a bit Shakespearian tragedy. Fortunately, Mat seems to have that balance perfectly achieved. The Prime shows someone willing to build on the VPI legacy, yet not be hide-bound by it.

This is why using the same steel-shaft and chrome-hardened ball bearing from the Classic (and the Scout 2) is clever in two ways; it means the Prime falls back on one of the most tried and trusted bearings in the high-end, and – for those who've not used a VPI before – it's the key to the turntable's low-maintenance 'service' routine: a few drops of motor oil every year. The hardest part of this is putting the date in your diary.

The signature part of the Prime, however, is the JMW 10 3D arm. This is essentially the 10" version of VPI's evergreen – and ever popular – unipivot tonearm, but with a clever twist. In place of the regular alloy armwand, VPI supplies this package with a 3D printed arm, made out of a high-purity, non-crystalline epoxy. This is a direct replacement for existing

users, or those wanting a collection of different armwands for different cartridges. The advantages of a 3D-printed armwand are fairly substantial for a tonearm – it becomes a one-piece structure, as light and as rigid as possible. Even tonearms with carbon-fibre armtubes (which do the light and rigid thing really well) have to resort to good ol' metal for the bearing housing, where the JMW 10 3D arm is one complete structure. The 3D manufacturing process is currently slow, so if every JMW user became a JMW 3D user tomorrow, there would be a back-order list that would make Morgan cars blush. But, it's both a high-tech and a high-practicality solution, and I can't help feeling it's also one that is actually being passed down to the end user.

A 3D printed arm is an exercise in smart and modern engineering thought. Even though we are in the midst of the vinyl revival, high-end tonearms are not built in massive quantities any more, and the numbers made means the cost of each arm is equivalent to building a one-off prototype. Prototyping today is done on a 3D printer. So why not build low-number tonearm parts on a 3D printer? It's simple, clever, and improves the performance. What's not to like?

As ever with VPI though, there are some upgrades to consider, bringing the turntable still further up the audio performance spectrum. These include the Synchronised Drive System off-board PSU and a Periphery Ring clamp. They have been discussed before in the context of other decks in the VPI range. We went *au naturel*, relying on just the standard rubber matt and the hold-down clamp.

I wanted to use this with the excellent Benz-Micro Glider SLR cartridge, but had a recent klutz-related cantilever disaster, so instead drafted in an old, yet wonderful, Ortofon MC7500 moving coil cartridge and the excellent Origin Live Aladdin moving iron design. It didn't matter about the SLR, though, because even the Aladdin showed what this system was capable of, and the MC7500 showed just how far you can take that system.

For a potentially complicated build like a turntable, the Prime is very easy to put together. It comes complete with everything you could need to set up a turntable, including protractor, stylus weight gauge, and a folder that is a comprehensive build manual. You might not need this. VPI has also put together a YouTube video of someone building ▶

▶ the Prime. Start to finish, this takes 15 minutes, although realistically it's going to take an hour or more if you're new to turntables, or less than an hour if you're not. OK, so some wag has commented that this build requires an engineering degree, but unless you are so technologically challenged that your screwdriver set comes with a fire extinguisher, installation is not a difficult process.

The arm is perhaps the hardest part to install, as the rest of the Prime's set-up comes down to levelling, spacing, and inserting. The arm itself is still relatively easy to install, because as a unipivot, removing the armwand simply involves undoing the connector at the top of the bearing housing, and this means you can attach cartridges fast. The 'hardest' part is VTA adjustment and setting it to your requirements. But, as you can adjust this 'on the fly', that's not a problem.

The Prime is every bit the high-end table. It has the deep, stentorian bass depth and dynamics, the high-frequency shimmer and sizzle, and the disappearing midrange that you would expect from one of the top tables, and it also has the almost eerie absence of background noise that sets the great apart from the merely good. And, like all good decks, it manages to make LP surface noise appear less troublesome.

How the Prime does this is fairly straightforward. The combination of turntable that's extremely well isolated from its environment, an arm that's similarly decoupled from its surroundings, and an armtube that is extraordinarily free all mean the deck introduces little to the sound, just allowing the cartridge to track the recording with complete accuracy.

I don't want this to sound like faint praise, because it's actually farthest from that, but what the VPI Prime does so well is to act blamelessly in the record-playing process. It removes a level of imprecision and inaccuracy to the sound that people often come to accommodate in their music playing, but really shouldn't ever have to. This comes across perfectly when listening to 'Courting is a Pleasure' from Nic Jones' *Penguin Eggs* album [Topic/Three Black Feathers]. This is extremely traditional English folk, in the late 1970s tradition of worthy folk played well by acoustic guitarists, but doesn't give up its charms (and its soundstaging) easily. Here, that absence of self-noise, the precise speed, and the tracking ability of the arm all paid off, making this difficult album a joy to hear. By getting out of the way entirely, the VPI Prime simply let the cartridge do its intended job. Most other turntables make this music 'fall' out of the speakers, but with the VPI it just sang! ▶





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“It’s like putting you in the control room where the master tape is playing; tiny, nuanced gestures normally lost in the mix are easily resolved here.”



► This is an extremely detailed, yet not harshly analytical sound. It’s like putting you in the control room where the master tape is playing; tiny, nuanced gestures normally lost in the mix are resolved easily here – not in a surgical strike on all things audio, but like an honest, blameless reference point that we should ultimately strive to achieve.

We British types have a peculiar connection with how something ‘times’, but through the Prime, you begin to see this is making a feature out of a limitation; that deep, powerful bass doesn’t make for a taut, boppy sound unless it’s on the recording. So, Zakir Hussain’s *Making Music* [ECM], presents itself as an expansive soundstage. The pace and energy of the players is retained (and they are fast – John McLaughlin is the guitarist!), but not in a forced way. The Prime has excellent contrast, texture, and musical shading, too. All the hallmarks of a super-deck, save for the price!

In wrapping this review up, the thought process ran along the lines of, ‘how much would you expect to pay for a turntable like this?’ in terms of outright performance and build. And, in both cases, I came up with the same answer. Moreover, those who heard and saw the VPI Prime *in situ* were tasked with the same question, and they typically came up with broadly similar responses. And that answer was that if you snuck in a ‘1’ in front of the price tag, few people would be any the wiser. VPI’s Prime has the look, the feel, and more importantly the performance of a £10,000 turntable package.

The company with the following of VPI could easily struggle in the handover from father to son. But with Prime, and especially with the JMW 10 3D tonearm, Mat is proving himself not simply a safe pair of hands, but an innovative designer with a good pair of ears in his own right. This would be an extremely competent turntable from the drawing board of an established expert with decades of experience under his belt, but from a comparative newcomer, the Prime is a true star. Very highly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Belt-driven, non-suspended turntable, with 3D printed unipivot tonearm

Turntable

Chassis: Black textured vinyl over MDF, with an 11-gauge steel plate bonded to the underside

Isolation: Four adjustable Delrin corner assemblies

Motor: 500rpm, 24-pole AC motor in a separate aluminium and steel housing

Bearing: Inverted design, hardened stainless steel shaft, 60 Rockwell chrome hardened ball, phosphor bronze bushing, PEEK thrust disc

Platter: machined 6061 grade aluminium, 9kg

Wow & Flutter: >0.1%

Speed accuracy: >0.03%

Rumble: >-85dB

Tonearm

Pivot to spindle distance: 258mm

Effective length: 273.4mm

Overhang: 15.4mm

Offset angle: 19.98°

Average RMS distortion: 0.311%

Internal wiring: Discovery wire, optional Nordost Valhalla

Dimensions (WxDxH): 53.5x40x19cm

Weight: 24.5kg

Price: £3,750

Manufactured by: VPI Industries Inc

URL: vpiindustries.com

Distributed by: Renaissance Audio

URL: www.renaissanceaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0)131 555 3922



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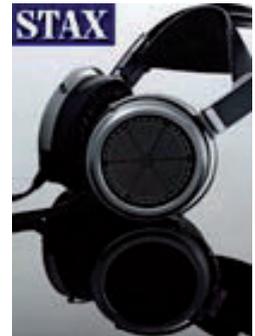
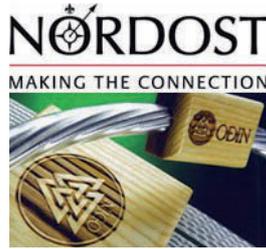
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TechDAS Air Force Two turntable

by Alan Sircom

Of all the high-end superdecks, few generated quite as much interest as TechDAS' Air Force One. Everything on a turntable that could be pumped up or held down by air or vacuum, was... and was made to a standard that most other turntable makers could only dream of. With the Continuum project now history, the 'One has become the turntable among 'Vinylista Extrema'. However, the price of the 'One is a big ask for many enthusiasts, and the Air Force Two goes some way to address this (a still cheaper Air Force Three was shown at the Munich High-End 2015). This new turntable is a far smaller, transcription style design, with provision for three different arms. Weird and wonderful!

TechDAS took all the elements of the Air Force One and worked out what could be simplified. This isn't an easy task: simplifying an air bearing or a vacuum hold-down system without fundamentally wrecking the advantages of such components in the process is extremely difficult, especially as Nishikawa-san (TechDAS designer and CEO) is convinced – rightly, in my opinion – that compression is pivotal in the design of any air-bearing system. This means the default, lower-cost way of making an air-bearing (a fishtank pump) is out of the running, and any TechDAS design has to rely on a custom-made solenoid-valve system with extremely small air holes, and an air condenser to cancel out ripple. And, like it's bigger brother, the Air Force Two is required to be capable of being used with more than one tonearm, although in standard guise, for most people one arm is probably more than enough. While there is no 'easy way' put simply, the easy way to cut costs is not the right way to make a cheaper Air Force One.

Given that important set of limiting criteria imposed on the Air Force Two design before one fires up the CAD program, just how can you reduce prices? Well, first you remove the option of three different platter surface materials, replacing the 29kg stainless steel platter with a 10kg, solid cast aluminium design in the process. And you replace the air suspension system with oil-damped adjustable towers in each corner of the turntable plinth. And that's about it. OK, so this means a redesigned, slightly smaller, lighter plinth, but the free-standing asynchronous, DC-controlled AC motor block, the air bearing and vacuum disc hold down, the adjustable speed control, and the separate (yet silent) air pump/condenser/power supply box are essentially the same. There is also a commonality of design, although the Air Force Two is more squared off. Although not by much; in fact, the shape of the Air Force Two is not regular, and it's reasonably large, too.

That 'commonality of design' is well worth exploring. Although by its very nature, the Air Force Two is a handbuilt design, absolutely nothing about it gives the game away. This is not in anyway intended as a backhanded compliment, but the TechDAS designs have that air of reliable professionalism that you might find in a military component instead of a domestic turntable. Don't misunderstand this; such equipment is designed to be heavy duty, easy to operate device, capable of doing something complicated millions of times with almost no complaint. The Air Force Two has the same confidence about it. It's push-button control, and those push-buttons light up when activated. Speed control is shown on a blue LED panel on the control block in front of the deck, and speed adjustment (both 33/45rpm speed change, and fine-tuning of speed) are given equal emphasis. This air of complete reliability also comes from the cast upper and lower chassis, the big and powerful build, and the grey on grey finish that makes it look like it should be archiving vinyl in the Library of Congress or the British Library.

The Air Force Two's standard armboard position limits the options to a 9" or 10" arm, but the outrigger rear arm position can also take a 12" arm. Nishikawa-san is the distributor of Graham arms in Japan, which is why so many users end up recommending the Phantom as a natural partner to TechDAS designs, but in reality almost any arm can show what it is capable of sitting on the Air Force Two's subchassis. Construction and build are not simple, but this has more to do with physically moving the substantial parts around, rather than any strange installer voodoo. Given that I suspect most Air Force Two owners will either be 'tear up the manual' types who view the set-up procedure as something to be relished, or wealthy types who would happily pay someone else to do the installation job for them, I suspect going into detail about building a TechDAS in the home is little more than self-flagellation. Just remember that, when it comes to turntable set-up and Aesop's fables, "slow and steady wins the race", so take your time! ▶



“The TechDAS designs have that air of reliable professionalism that you might find in a military component instead of a domestic turntable.”

“It’s an expensive way of appeasing Fluffy or Nibbles, but if ‘Nibbles’ is next-door’s guard Rottweiler, the Silencer is money well spent.”



KLAUDIO KD-CLN-LP200 RECORD CLEANING MACHINE

The TechDAS came with an unexpected extra feature, in the boxy, upright shape of the £4,000 KD-CLN-LP200 from audio newcomer Klaudio. The name is mostly descriptive; it’s a 200W LP cleaning machine, but entirely skips over the whole ‘ultrasonic cleaner and dryer’ part.

Although Klaudio is a new brand, its parent company Koolance has been a major player in the liquid-cooling field since the turn of the millennium, and a lot of the mechanics are common to both cooling and ultrasonic cleaning.

Unlike previous cleaners, this is an entirely detergent, near-enough contact-free method of cleaning: the disc is placed vertically in a slot at the top of the LP200, it squirts distilled water from a reservoir evenly across the disc, does its ultrasonic thing, and then air-dries the disc. It’s all completely automated; you just select washing and drying time, depending on the LP crud-factor. There have been some concerns over the use of a 200W ultrasonic motor, as in theory prolonged cleaning could damage the disc: Klaudio’s website shows what happens to a red and a blue vinyl LP run for nine hours at high heat – aside from dirt removal, nada. Thus, a five minute clean is unlikely to damage an LP, and no-one’s going to turn their nose up at a five minute blow j... blow dry. Optional adaptors for 10” and 7” records are available, and there’s even an automatic disc loader for those with thousands of records to clean.

There’s also one more ‘option’ that really isn’t optional for the LP200 in the home – the £1,500 ‘Silencer Acoustic Dampening Case’. The case uses similar damping layers to the ‘blimps’ used by stills photographers on movie sets to cut the sound of a DSLR mirror clattering, and this offers a claimed 50dBA attenuation overall. In fairness, the LP200 isn’t significantly noisier than record cleaners like the Nitty Gritty, but it’s the ‘ultrasonic’ component that is the problem. If you (or your neighbours) have pets, an un-blimped LP200 is like Metallica turning up for a soundcheck on your driveway for them. It’s an expensive way of appeasing Fluffy

or Nibbles, but if ‘Nibbles’ is next-door’s guard Rottweiler, the Silencer is money well spent.

I’m pretty good with my LPs. They get played, and reviewers are not known for their fastidiousness, but somehow my LPs are in generally fine fettle. So, my take on RCMs has usually been limited to helping out those second-hand finds that need a little TLC. And in this context, the LP200 is all the TLC you could ask for. Five minutes cleaning and five minutes drying restores them to the way they looked when they first left the inner sleeve. OK, so there’s nothing you can do about the scratches and divots taken out of an LP by a 1970s stoner missing the spindle, but the remarkable thing is most of those pops and crackles that you thought were just a function of overplaying just go away.

And then, the really crazy part hits. You get one of your cleanest, or newest, LPs... and the same thing happens. The surface noise just drops away, fairly significantly. Even thick 180g virgin pressings get noticeably quieter and the music just flows a little easier.

The Klaudio KD-CLN-LP200 raises the bar in terms of record cleaner price, but it also raises the bar in terms of record cleaning. LPs leave the LP200 in pristine, museum-grade condition, and you really can hear the difference, too. Serious record collectors – start saving!

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“It’s rock solid, both figuratively and metaphorically.”

- ▶ Once set-up, the Air Force Two becomes the ultimate analogue musical reproduction machine, and it stays that way. It’s rock solid, both figuratively and metaphorically: the performance it makes is powerful, deep, and completely controlled, and the reassuring build and absolute stability means it will stay that way for years to come. This is not some high-end extravaganza that you need a road map to navigate to its off-switch – instead, the Air Force Two has all the operational niceties of something like classic Technics direct drive turntable, writ large.

The truth is, I burned through a lot of LPs in very short order listening to the TechDAS Air Force Two, because playing music through this deck is such a pleasure. It manages to combine the authority, weight, and solidity required of a high-end deck with a lot of the easy and unforced sense of timing found in more down-from-the-stratosphere models. The Air Force Two breathed life into an old favourite of mine; a Decca SKL of Gilbert & Sullivan’s overture to *The Pirates of Penzance* from the late 1950s. It was one of those ‘you are there’ moments, where more than half a century vanished and you were listening at the New Savoy Theatre in London. This was a remarkable play of a remarkable recording; the recording completely pitch-stable (a by-product of living in the digital age is turntables that are not pitch-perfect soon get outed), vibrant, and jumping out of a near silent background, despite the intervening years.

So it went on, through Joe Jackson [*Night and Day*, MoFi], Zakir Hussain [*Making Music*, ECM], even to Martha and the Vandellas *Dance Party* [Gordy, reissue]. This last was telling, because it sounded at once fabulous and awful. Fabulous because it delved deep into the recording, and awful because the deeper you went, the more you realised there wasn’t much to salvage beyond the stock Motown sound. That the Air Force Two didn’t try to make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear in the slightest was a significant bonus for the turntable design.

Most of all, though, the Air Force Two shines thanks to the absolute authority it imposes on the music, and yet it’s not so authoritarian as to refuse to allow the music to let its hair down a little. Even complex polyrhythms, such as found in the intrinsically funky West Coast big band meets ska in ‘Footprints’ from the Jazz Jamaica All Stars *Massive Vol. 1* [Gearbox], are not an issue here. The Air Force Two’s absolute (yet not clinical) precision snaps the album into sharp focus, letting those Zappa-esque vibraphone runs play on beautifully.

The TechDAS Air Force Two is one of those turntables that takes ‘Awesome’ in its stride. It always sounds awesome, even when it’s resolving something straightforward like Tom Waits voice. But when faced with an orchestra, complex music, or the kind of rhythmic drive that’s supposed to be the domain of lighter-weight turntables, the Air Force Two just gets out of the way and lets the music shine through. Just shy of £30,000 is a lot to pay for a turntable, but you do get a lot of highly recommended turntable, too! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Belt-driven turntable with air-bearing and vacuum hold-down

Drive system: Belt drive with surface polished lyurethane flat belt

Chassis: Precision aluminum castings, weight 32.6 kg

Platter: Solid aluminum (A5056), weight 10 kg

Motor: AC synchronous motor. Speed controlled by DC amplifier

Speed: 33.3rpm/45rpm, Precise speed adjustment function

Wow & Flutter: below 0.03% (W.R.M.S)

TT dimensions (WxD): 685x460mm

Total weight: 47kg

Air Pump and Supply Unit

Power consumption: 50W

Dimensions (WxDxH): 43x16x24cm

Weight: 10kg

Accessories supplied with Air Force Two:

Tonearm base wood × 1 (drilled for specified tonearm)

Platter cover “The Platter Top” × 1
AC power cable × 1 (180cm length)

Optional items & Accessories

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Clearaudio Absolute Phono Inside phono stage

by Jason Kennedy

People have been coming up with new ways to build a better record player for over a century, so somebody must have thought of it before. But only now has the technology advanced sufficiently that a company managed to put a phono stage inside a headshell. Clearaudio did just that last year with the Absolute Phono; it results in a slightly thicker headshell than most, but it provides the first stage of gain with the bare minimum of connecting cable between it and the cartridge coils. This avoids exposing the miniscule output voltage of a moving coil cartridge to radio frequency pollution and should mean that noise is significantly lowered as a result.

What appears to have given this idea a boost is that unlike the majority of phono stages that use voltage amplification,

it is also possible to use current amplification. Clearaudio is not the first to put such an approach into practice, but they did manage to build current amplification into a phono stage that is partly in the headshell with the rest in a separate case. All of which is fine if you want a Clearaudio tonearm but it has limited potential if you prefer something else. This has spawned the Absolute Phono Inside, a stage that uses the same current amplification technology in a box that can be connected to any tonearm and cartridge.

This claims to “almost match” the 10dB signal to noise advantage claimed for the ‘outside’ version because current amplification obviates the need for cartridge loading and eliminates coupling capacitors in the signal path. The impedance is actually 120 Ohms (for unbalanced), but the ▶



“On the output side, however, there are only XLR connections. I guess at this price point, balanced input preamplifiers are not uncommon, except among us pesky British reviewers!”



- ▶ current amplification aspect is said to mean that it's easy for any moving coil to drive. When you consider that many stages have a fixed 100 Ohm impedance that doesn't seem too bizarre.

The Absolute Phono is a fully-balanced design to keep noise to a minimum and has both balanced and single-ended inputs. On the output side, however, there are only XLR connections. I guess at this price point, balanced input preamplifiers are not uncommon, except among us pesky British reviewers!

The Absolute Phono Inside is a two-box stage with some rather elaborate boxes. These feature aluminium clamshells that are separated by panzerholz (high density engineering plywood). This arrangement provides a degree of damping without undermining overall rigidity. One box contains a power supply and mains connection, with an on/off switch as well as a dimmer for the blue circular light on the stage itself. The light surrounds an on/off switch that flashes to indicate on, off, and mute states. Fit and finish are to a very high standard and the RCA sockets in particular are very high quality. In fact, it's a lovely box, as is the power supply.

While it's beautifully executed, the price seems high for the size of the components. The Inside contains some high quality parts in Vishay Dale resistors and Clearaudio Silver Glimmer capacitors, but one suspects that you are paying for the time spent in R&D as much as anything else.

Having only balanced outputs meant I had to use a Gamut D3i preamplifier that was fortuitously in for review rather than my usual Townshend Allegri; this is no hardship, but it does make things more sonically lively. Down to earth Gotham balanced cables go some way to redressing the balance, and the end result was not that far from the calm, neutral presentation that I find best for assessment

purposes. I started off with a Rega Apheta cartridge (which prefers a 100 Ohm load) aboard a Rega RP10 turntable. This worked extremely well, the Absolute Phono Inside revealing an extremely spacious soundstage populated with solid, 3D notes on Mop Mop's percussive *Isle of Magic* [Agogo Records]. The amount of detail that comes out of this is quite remarkable; you can almost hear the layers of the multitrack. This does not get in the way of the music, but rather the realism it brings enhances it. I also very much like the way that it's tonally rich: some phono stages do detail in a slightly dry, pale fashion that doesn't serve the timbre of instruments as well as it might. This Clearaudio is not one of them.

Mike Valentine's D2D recording of Vivaldi's 'The Four Seasons' [Interpreti Veneziani, *Chasing The Dragon*] also turns out to have more 'air' on it, more of the room it was so enthusiastically made in, and as it was made with original instruments, it is overflowing with tonal riches. The two violins in 'Spring' have stunning presence and vivacity that really brings the piece to life in front of you. With an older recording of a newer tune, the Grateful Dead's *Songs for Allah* [Audio Fidelity], the focus is very much on what the songs are about, that and the quality of playing from musicians at the height of their technical powers. Again, we get richly rendered notes from picked guitars and beautiful harmonies from Jerry Garcia and his men. This stage is extremely revealing and very low on character, it lets you relax, listen, and enjoy to the extent that nothing else matters except the quality of the song. But it also makes you very picky about the actual songs you play.

I decided to switch cartridges from the original to the new Apheta (2) as it was waiting patiently to strut its stuff. This has lower moving mass and higher output (albeit only 15% higher). It is, however, considerably more refined and revealing, again with a cleaner, warmer, and quieter presentation that lets you ▶



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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-piece, solid-state, MC phono stage

Phono inputs: One pair single-ended (via RCA jacks), one pair balanced (via XLR connectors)

Analogue outputs: One pair balanced (via XLR connectors)

Input Sensitivity: not specified.

Input impedance: 2–100 Ohms

Input capacitance: not specified.

Output impedance: 64 Ohms (balanced)

Output level: not specified

RIAA linearity: deviation less than 0.1dB

Distortion: not specified

Signal to Noise Ratio: 90dB (A-weighted)

Dimensions (HxWxD):

Phono stage preamp: 56 × 240 × 145mm

Power supply unit (PSU): 56 × 240 × 145mm

Weight: 6.45kg

Price: £8,995

Manufacturer: Clearaudio

URL: clearaudio.de

UK Distributor: Sound Foundations

Tel: +44-01189 814238

URL: www.soundfoundations.co.uk



To see how the Absolute Phono Inside would deal with a different MC I brought in the big gun, an SME Model 20/3A with a Van den Hul Condor XCM/SPED. The optimum load impedance for this is 200 Ohms, yet it sounded spot on with the full range of dynamics and bandwidth. This record player brought authority and precision to the proceedings, delivering the vibrant tones of the Marty Paich Big Band's *The New York Scene* [Discovery]. Here Jimmy Guiffre's clarinet is sweet on 'I've Grown Accustomed To Her Face', but Art Pepper's alto sax is not far behind in the beguiling stakes. It's a beautiful sound that no amount of words could make more lyrical. In truth, I usually find the softer standards a bit saccharin for my tastes, but when you make the window this clean it's possible, even easy, to appreciate the genuine nature of the sentiment. Having such great musicians does no harm either.

A more familiar disc in the form of Conjure's *Music For The Texts Of Ishmael Reed* [American Clavé] exemplifies the Clearaudio's remarkable ability to pull detail out of well worn tracks. It's the cymbal work that makes its presence felt for almost the first time here: highs with genuine shape and solidity are rare even with analogue front ends of this calibre, so it's a treat to 'see' them so clearly in an image that has remarkable height and depth. The track 'Jes Grew' is thick with percussion of the 'hand on drum' variety, so the bass line is sometimes lost or at least goes to ground under the acoustic camouflage they create: not here – now it's possible to appreciate just how sinuous a line Steve Swallow creates.

The Clearaudio Absolute Phono Inside is probably the most compact phono stage in its class, but it proves that small is beautiful when it comes to revealing sonic character and musicianship. There are very few more affordable phono stages that approach it for sheer transparency, and I have to say it makes the notion of the headshell mounted version very enticing. For anyone who already has a decent record player, it might be time to go Inside for a long while. +

► hear more music and less mechanics. This means higher SPLs without discomfort and better clarified low level information such as reverb characteristics and precise instrument identification in complex mixes. The Clearaudio makes all this perfectly, well, clear. I have in the past found this company's products to be on the bright side, but generally that was a function of acrylic platters, and the Absolute Phono Inside seems to be totally neutral and transparent to the source. If that source is of high calibre then the music you hear is going to be of the same standard, compelling in fact.

It also does bass rather effectively, Burnt Friedmann and Jaki Leibzeit's *Just Landed* [Nonplace] is my go-to low end vinyl slab, and this was presented with great spatial resolve and precise timing. It can often get bogged down in the heavy bass line, but with this source and phono stage one's attention is drawn to the melodic aspects. The bass is there, but kept under control so that it doesn't smear the higher notes.

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Step-by-step... from Avid to Avid, Ingenium to Diva II

by Steve Dickinson



Steve Dickinson wanted to respark his inner turntablist. He tried two Avid turntables and here's why he ended up with a Diva II...

I'm not what you would call an early adopter. I resisted getting a mobile phone for years, and smartphones and tablets have only lately entered my life.

It was the same with CD players, and even after getting my first player, it was a long time before the silver disk displaced vinyl in my affections. But displace it it did, and my turntable has languished if not unloved, then certainly unregarded, for rather longer than perhaps is good for it, or me. The trouble is, good though a well-fettled Rega Planar 3 undoubtedly can be, it isn't in the same league as a dCS Puccini, with or without its U-Clock. I want to enjoy my now unplayed vinyl again, but anything I listen to it on is going to have to raise its game a fair bit.

So, where to go from here? Like many people, having bought My First Turntable™ in the form of a lower-end Rega or Pro-Ject, the obvious place to look would be further up those manufacturers' ranges. But, I've always had a bit of a thing for the Avid turntables. Until recently, even the entry level models were a bit of a leap, but the introduction of the £800 Ingenium, reviewed elsewhere in this issue, has put Avid firmly in the 'possibles' pile. Add a decent arm and cartridge and we're in the £1,200-1,500 bracket occupied by the higher-performance part of the Rega range, for example, so if we're going to get a bit serious about vinyl, the Ingenium is a contender. And if the £800 Ingenium is a possibility, would it be worth the stretch to the £1600 Diva II? With these questions in mind, Conrad Mas from Avid dropped an Ingenium and a Diva II off, together with a Pro-Ject Carbon tonearm fitted with the excellent Ortofon 2M Blue moving-magnet cartridge.

Happily for this thumb-fingered ignoramus, installing the arm on each table was straightforward and, having established a setup of arm height and tracking weight within limits, a little tweaking was done by ear to find each turntable's sweet spot. Listening was done through the, rather good, built-in MM phono stage in my Albarry AP11, feeding the M1108 monoblocs to my ▶



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The Ingenium and the Diva II share some common features, but differ in some important ones. Unlike the more expensive Avid designs, neither Ingenium nor Diva sports a suspended subchassis. This is obvious in the Ingenium, whose 'T' shaped chassis sits atop three free-standing Sorbothane feet, one at the end of each limb of the T. The Diva looks more like the *Volvere*, *Sequel*, and *Acutus* models, sitting on three pods arranged in an equilateral triangle. I assumed this was some form of suspension, like the *Volvere* but probably simpler. In point of fact, the pods house more Sorbothane rather than any form of suspension and are part of the chassis rather than having the chassis resting atop them; ultimately, both the Ingenium and the Diva II are rigid designs. Both use free-standing motors; the Diva II upgrades from the Ingenium's 240v unit with on/off switch in the mains cable, to a considerably heavier 24v motor and dedicated power supply. Speed control is by alternative diameter pulleys in both cases.

The main bearing, subplatter, and platter are common to both, and the Diva II comes as standard with a record clamp where this is an option on the Ingenium. Given an identical arm and cartridge, the obvious question is: what benefits do the differences between the designs bring, and are they worth the financial stretch?

The Ingenium provides an undoubtedly confident and authoritative sound, making those typical entry-level turntables sound somewhat diffident. Its presentation was big, beefy, and dynamic with strong bass definition and power; it feels more like a full-range transducer, with more of the fundamental of notes in evidence. It's a sound that a habitual CD user would appreciate, eschewing any sense of vagueness that cheaper vinyl sometimes uses to paper over the cracks. Large-scale orchestral, such as *Rhapsody in Blue* [Decca SPA 525] is more spacious, with depth and body to the image, and a more expansive dynamic range. I won't tread on the toes of the review in this issue, but the Ingenium was, for me at least, a definite contender.

If you're going for the Ingenium, by the way, then the optional record clamp is worth the extra cost. Without it, you lose important levels of midrange definition and texture; pace, drive, and solidity are clearly improved and the musicianship in general is 'tightened up'. You can assume that any comparisons with the Diva in this review used the clamp for both turntables.

So then I tried the Diva II. I could sum it up as 'more of the same, with a definite nod toward the big Avid turntables like the *Sequel* and *Acutus*' which would be both true and unfair at the same time. Unfair because it might give the impression that you can get *Sequel* performance for Diva II money, which you don't, and also because at twice the price of the Ingenium, getting 'more of the same' probably isn't stating things strongly enough. ▶

“Timpani don’t disturb or unbalance the performance. The Diva II keeps its head while lesser tables are losing theirs.”

▶ The difference, and what would have me drinking a little less each week until I’d saved the extra funds for the Diva II, is that the Diva II also brings a degree of extra control, authority, and musical integrity to supplement the additional scale, weight, and dynamic range of the Ingenium. Instruments like marimba (‘The Animals’, from Sky’s *Five Live* [Ariola]) or xylophone (the closing track from Mike Oldfield’s *Incantations* [Virgin]) have a woody depth, resonance, and sense of mass the Ingenium only hints at, and in particular the decay to notes, notably anything with a degree of bass, or drums, is longer and all the more satisfying. The effect on the Oldfield track is to give the xylophone playing more of a sense of bounce and forward motion, musical purpose wrought from a rightness in the timing married to a satisfying depth of tonal colour.

The overall effect is that music works more effectively, ‘Anitra’s Dance’ from the Marriner/St Martin-in-the Fields account of Grieg’s *Peer Gynt Incidental Music* [EMI] does feel more like a dance than simply a set-piece, and ‘In the Hall of the Mountain King’ builds not only in tempo, but also in intensity. That Decca *Rhapsody in Blue* also contains a recording of Copland’s ‘Fanfare for the Common Man’ which, via the Diva II, has not only a sense of space and distance to the opening fanfare, but the sheer power of the timpani is quite arresting; they have impact in the truest sense yet, despite their power, the timpani don’t disturb or unbalance the performance. The Diva II keeps its head while lesser tables are losing theirs.

Having listened almost exclusively to CD for the last decade, I’ve become more sensitive to the small instabilities in pitch that can bedevil vinyl replay systems. Both the Avid turntables acquit themselves respectably in this regard, and faffing around with belt tension by shuffling the motor this way and that definitely gets results, but the Diva II’s heavier motor and dedicated PSU are clearly ahead in this particular aspect. On paper, the motors have similar output, but the 24v unit used for the Diva II does appear to generate more torque, noticeable when, for example, cleaning the surface of discs with a carbon-fibre brush. The upshot is that piano in particular, and any music with sustained notes or lengthy decay, is both more satisfying and less irritating. It also usefully benefits musical timing. Dave Grusin’s *Mountain Dance* [Arista] trips along nicely, and with a better sense of how the percussion is being played – the speed and subtlety of the cymbal work being brought out particularly well. There was a time when I dismissed this track as just West Coast noodling, but it now it has regained a sense of performance it had somehow lost.

Voices, whether spoken or sung, are more natural and expressive. Vocal leads take proper place front and centre, rather than shuffling meekly further backstage, and voices have a natural balance of timbre without obvious emphasis. Richard Burton’s narration on *The War of The Worlds* [CBS Records], for example, avoids any tendency towards reverberant chestiness and remains both intimate and authoritative, without being declamatory.

As suggested earlier, the Ingenium is offered with a record clamp as an option, but the same clamp is standard for the Diva II. I tried a few tracks on the Diva II *sans* clamp and it quickly becomes apparent that this is no mere accessory. Without the clamp, first impressions may be that the turntable has more bass, but anything more than a cursory listen shows that this is an illusion borne out of the fact that what bass there is, is loose, diffuse and flabby, ill-defined, and less tuneful than when the clamp is applied. Without providing that essential underpinning support the bass dominates and overpowers, hence why the ear is drawn to it. The clamp literally tightens everything up; bass is firmer, more agile and more tuneful, and allows the rest of the music to assume its proper place.

▶ This helps keep bass-heavy pieces, such as ‘Montagues and Capulets’ from Prokofiev’s *Romeo and Juliet* ballet suite [Philips], from becoming ponderous. There is power and energy, the bass propels the music forward rather than dragging it down, and there is good scale. The orchestra has mass and energy, rather than simply occupying space. The Diva II gives a good account of the way large and powerful musical forces can be controlled and kept in check, so sudden loud or quiet passages are all the more effective. There is a sense that the Diva II is more rhythmically confident: more Prokofiev, and Lieutenant Kijé [EMI] struts and strides boldly. It does this while also providing that added depth of tonal colour – the timbral and spatial differences between the various woodwind parts, for example, becoming more apparent, so you begin to appreciate how the composer has chosen the musical forces at his disposal and has set about using them to best effect.

The upshot is that the extra scale and authority the Diva II brings, coupled with the ▶

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“It remembers how to have a good time, but knows how to keep things under control so you don’t end up with an almighty mess.”

► greater control and rhythmic integrity, makes the Diva II a very worthwhile step up from the Ingenium. The Ingenium is a very engaging and entertaining listen, digging way more from your vinyl than a budget table can hope to manage and presenting it to you with an ebullience and infectious enthusiasm which engages and holds your attention. Imagine a Labrador puppy, grown to full size but still full of youth and enthusiasm. Now take that puppy after two years of guide dog training. Still a youthful and enthusiastic companion, but also purposeful, reliable, and worthy of your trust. This is the Diva II. It remembers how to have a good time, but knows how to keep things under control so you don’t end up with an almighty mess. It’s a grown up turntable that remembers how good it can be to be a teenager. (Maybe that’s why I enjoyed revisiting so many of the albums from my formative years in the workup for this review).

It’s a fair jump, from £800 to £1,600, and once you’ve factored in a suitable arm and cartridge, the Diva II isn’t something you’d buy on a whim. There is no doubt in my mind that, had I only the funds for the Ingenium, it’s exactly the sort of turntable I’d want because it has the fundamental qualities I wouldn’t want to be without. But... the Diva II is only £800 more (or twice the price, depending on how you look at it). With the same arm and cartridge you’d be looking at around £2,200 as against £1,400, or over half as much again. But it offers so much more in terms of making your music make more sense. I suspect that if I bought the Ingenium, I’d wish I’d gone for the Diva II, and if I went for the Avid Diva II, there is much less likelihood that my vinyl would once again be relegated to the cupboard under the stairs. An extra £800, to reacquaint myself with an important chunk of my music collection? You betcha. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Avid Diva II turntable

Type: Belt-drive, rigid subchassis turntable

Speeds: 33 1/3, 45 rpm, via different diameter pulleys

Motor: 24v 12mNm ac synchronous with dedicated PSU/control unit

Arm Mounting: SME (standard), adaptors (to order) include Pro-Ject, Rega, Jelco

Platter: MDF with cork mat, 2.5Kg mass

Bearing: Inverted stainless steel

Thrust point: Tungsten carbide/sapphire

Suspension: Triple layer 3 point elastomer

Dimensions: Turntable (overall) 450×390×140mm

Weight: 9Kg

Price: £1,600 (turntable)

Pro-Ject Carbon tonearm £510
Ortofon 2M Blue moving-magnet cartridge £170

Manufacturer: AVID HIFI Ltd

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AC/HFP/80

Van den Hul Grail SB phono stage

by Jason Kennedy

Did you know that frozen water crystals reflect the sound vibrations that they are subjected to prior to freezing? I didn't, until I visited AJ van den Hul in his somewhat cryogenic listening room some time ago. He had a book of photographs of such crystals with captions that indicated the type of music that had been used; a Japanese book as it happens. One conclusion that could be drawn from this is that because the human body is around 60% water, this is what produces the physiological response that we feel when listening to music.

AJ van den Hul has moving coil cartridges in his water; he has been making them since the dawn of time, or 1980 as it's formally known, so he knows a thing or two about the fiddly beasts. He also made his own phono stage some time ago, but it never got to these shores. All this changed with the Grail, a distinctly different phonograph preamplifier. The Grail's RIAA equalisation circuit uses coils rather than capacitors; an approach that is unique to this stage, and the subject of this review – the top dog Grail SB.

It is by far the heaviest phono stage I have ever encountered; the specs don't say how much, but it's definitely over 30 kilos. This is not because there is a massive transformer in it *a la* power amps but because the case is

made out of heavy gauge steel. The top and bottom plates are at least 6mm thick and the sides about 10mm. The thinking behind this bomb and theft-proofing is that it provides comprehensive shielding against the vagaries of RFI, EMI, and all other variations on radiation. It makes sense for a phono stage that has to equalise and amplify the smallest voltage signals in the entire audio chain to require a quiet environment to deliver the best results, and vdH has done its best to achieve that. There might, of course, be an issue of noise being generated by the power supply if that were not in a separate, more manageable case.

When it was launched the Grail SB had a switch on the back marked on and off+charging, as it was a battery powered device. That switch has now disappeared, and the battery element has been abandoned, because battery life was not living up to expectations. What you get on the back panel of the current SB (short for 'symmetric balanced') is a large array of connections for a phono stage, these consist of two sets of inputs (single-ended RCA and balanced XLR) plus balanced and single-ended outputs as well. In theory this suggests that you could have four cartridges connected to the Grail SB, but in practice the maximum is two; if you use the balanced inputs, you will only get output from the balanced outputs, and vice versa. As one input is marked 'MC' and the



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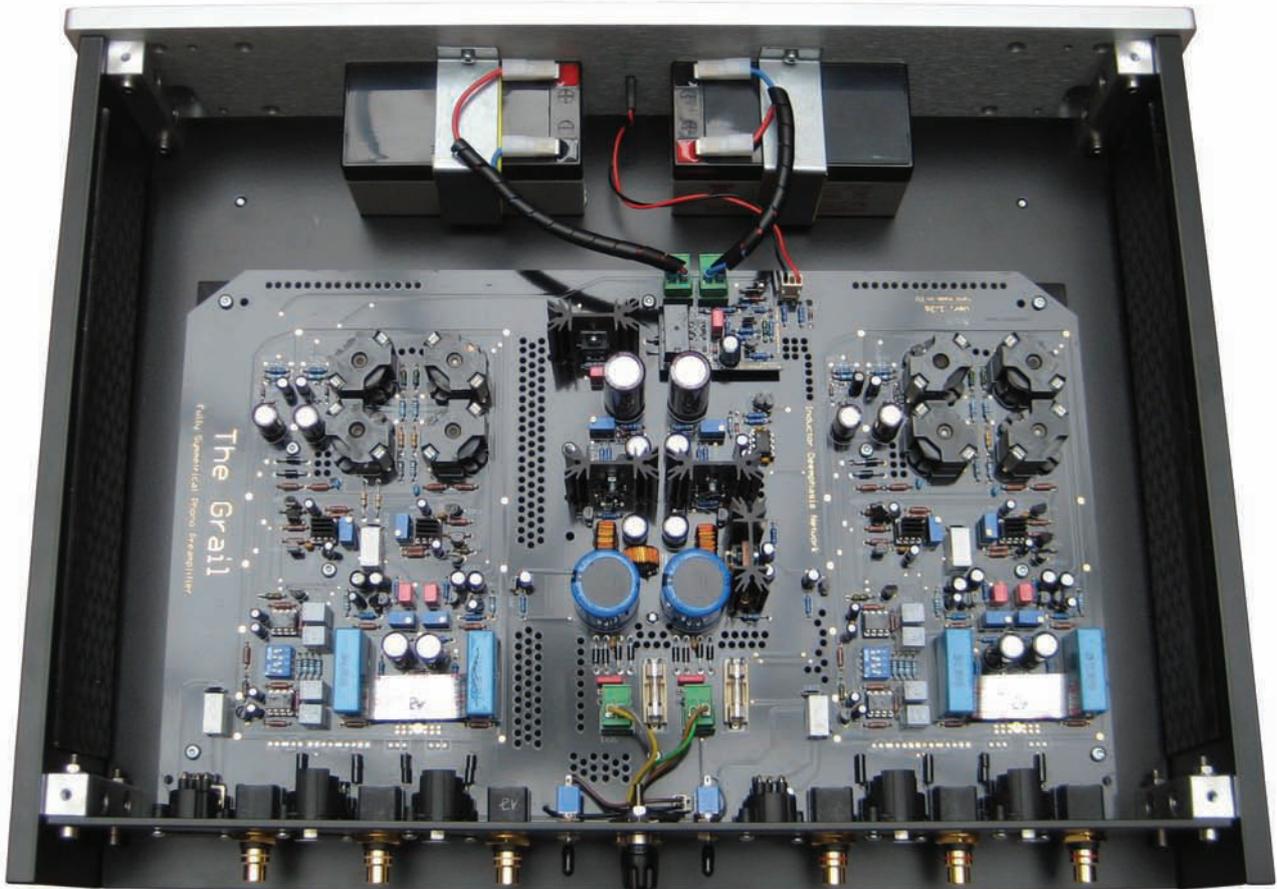
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▶ other 'MM' you are effectively limited to just the one cartridge, unless of course moving magnets have potential beyond that thus far encountered.

There are no switches on the back of this stage and not many inside either. That's because it automatically adjusts input impedance to suit the cartridge connected with an impedance range of 40 to 400 Ohms. There are internal dip switches for gain in six stages between 33dB and 73dB with the latter three steps being designed for moving coils. The circuit board is isolated to minimise microphonic distortion and the PCB itself has gold paths, a material chosen for its resistance to anti-oxidisation rather than conducting abilities, which are not in the same league as copper or silver. The case itself can be had in off-white or black, with white or natural wood side cheeks. Van den Hul also makes a matching Emerald line stage and Excalibur monoblocks.

Listening commenced with a Rega Apheta cartridge in a Rigid Float tonearm aboard an SME Model 20/3 turntable. Not an entirely traditional record player but one that has

been providing some very snappy and engaging sounds in recent times. The first impression is 'wow!' This is prompted by the dynamics that the Grail SB finds on Patricia Barber's 'Company' [*Modern Cool*, Premonition], the impact from drums and the muscularity of double bass is in a different league. Fairly rapidly, it becomes clear that this is an unusually transparent phono amplifier, one that produces remarkable solidity of stereo, strong leading edge definition without glare, and lovely bass lines that are full of texture and tonal depth. I got a great result with a favourite track from *Music For The Texts Of Ishmael Reed* [American Clavé] by Conjure, where it was Taj Mahal's voice that made the impression, with the microdynamics that the Grail SB found in the track giving it so much feeling and emotional depth.

A better known tune, Steely Dan's 'Show Biz Kids' [*Countdown to Ecstasy*, ABC], revealed the way Steve Gadd's metronomic precision on the drums combined with Walter Becker's bass line to lock down the groove. The Grail SB is as transparent to timing as it is to fine detail; nothing seems ▶

“I got a bit more output, but once again the Grail SB delivered a neutral and even balance without any adjustment.”

► to get lost as the signal passes through its heavily shielded electronic enclaves. As I had a Van den Hul cartridge on hand it seemed churlish not to try it, so the Condor XCM/SPED was duly installed, aligned, and tweaked. This produced a more substantial, muscular sound that also delivered top notch temporal precision, as well as serious dynamics. Drumkits were solidified further and trumpets unveiled the secrets of the techniques employed by their players. Leo Kottke’s steel strings on *Great Big Boy* [Private Music] were positively effervescent with energy, the zing of guitar and cymbals being underpinned by a richly hued fretless bass line. But, what really struck home was the pathos of the title track – a recollection of what the guitarist’s life had become in the days when success first came calling, viz “I was 29 and it absolutely stank” (it took Kottke a while to adjust, it seems).

Moving over to an alternative turntable in the Rega RP10 with an Apheta 2 in the headshell, I got a bit more output, but once again the Grail SB delivered a neutral and even balance without any adjustment. This combination rendered more of the low end from an old Alfred Brendel recording of Beethoven’s ‘Piano Concerto No.4’ in G (*Brendel plays Beethoven*, Turnabout). The timing was stronger with the Apheta 2 in play and the shine of the piano evident despite its 1962 vintage, but ultimately it was the musical flow of the piece that the Van den Hul revealed so well. It can turn a less than great recording/pressing into something that is musically powerful and engaging, and this makes it a very useful piece of kit for those with more interesting record collections. Records bought for reasons other than mere sound quality: Miles Davis’ *Bitches Brew* [CBS] and other records bought for reasons other than sound quality certainly fall into that category. *Bitches Brew* has some passages that sound appealing, but plenty of others that are a challenge. Here the golden horn really pierces through the fug of bass, drums, and keyboards on the intro before Bennie Maupin’s chocolate tones on the bass clarinet usher in a denser period, one that’s full of intense and fiery playing.

Put on a truly great recording in the form of Patricia Barber’s *Modern Cool* again and you get an in-the-room presence that’s uncanny despite the obvious reverb in use.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-piece, solid-state, MM/MC phono stage
Phono inputs: Two pairs single-ended (via RCA jacks), two pairs balanced (via XLR connectors).
Analogue outputs: One pair single-ended (via RCA jacks), one pair balanced (via XLR connectors).
Input Sensitivity: for 250mV resp. 0,707Vss output level on amplifier output
Input impedance: MC 40 to 400 Ohms, MM 47KOhm/50pF
Input capacitance: not specified
Output impedance: 330 Ohms
Output level: not specified
RIAA linearity: not specified
Distortion: not specified.
Signal to Noise Ratio: not specified
Dimensions (HxWxD): 98 × 475 × 335mm
Weight: c.30kg
Price: £11,390

Manufacturer: A.J. Van den Hul bv
URL: www.vandenhul.com

UK Distributor: Flamingo Audio
Tel: +44(0)121 212 9288
URL: www.flamingoaudio.co.uk

You can also follow all the instruments while one of them solos or Barber sings; there is a degree of analysis available that could undermine a less than musical turntable, but the RP10 is not one of them and it makes the job of lifting the arm from the groove very difficult. Out of interest I played a digital version of the same track through my streamer to see what it would reveal, but the effect was quite the opposite; it revealed that the record player and phono stage could extract considerably more detail, and infinitely more musical engagement. And I’m not talking about the charm of vinyl here. This is not about warmth; it’s about absolute resolution, genuinely high resolution for that matter.

The Grail SB is a brute of a phono stage in form, but as nimble as a ballerina when it comes to responding to the whims of the signal extracted from a vinyl groove. The automatic nature of the impedance matching is a real boon and the ability to run two cartridges will be very handy for the multi-arm brigade. It could be prettier and it could be lighter, but it couldn’t be much more revealing and engaging. +



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Tannoy Definition DC10T

by Alan Sirhan

I had started down this Tannoy review with high hopes of literary superlatives. I'd backed up King's '71... and expected to begin my Definition DC10T review with something like: "This is a day later. All I'd got is 'If you can bring your head when all about you are turning it down and claiming it on '100', and 'You'll be a Tannoy Man, my son!' Hardly worth the effort really, but at least Kipling fans can sleep safe in knowing the poem goes untroubled for another month."

But the Definition DC10Ts are worthy of some epic words. Because they are epic. They look good, sound good, are easy to drive, will sound fine in big rooms and small, are practically impossible to blow so best try, believe me! and put a huge smile on your face.

These are the largest of a three-model range (the others are a smaller DC8T floorstander and a single-two-way other DC8 standmount). The Definition range itself represents the upper-middle Tannoy 'line' - above this come the Dimension and Heritage ranges and the mighty Kingdom Royal. The DC10T features Tannoy's distinctive 254mm (10-inch) Dual Concentric driver - a large doped paper cone unit with a 25mm 'Tubo Waveguide' horn-loaded titanium dome tweeter built into the acoustic center of the cone unit. The tweeter here is one of Tannoy's Wickland designs, extending up into the supertweeter range. A matching beamed pulp 254mm bass driver (only without the tweeter) sits below the dual concentric unit.

Tannoy's love of the super-tweeter (this one reaches to 35kHz) is based in part on the idea that instruments have extended ranges beyond the audible and the Overhath equipments that show human brain states are more in line with the original unamplified music when listeners are played recorded music that retains the extended frequency range. Controversy still rages over the relevance of this in real-world listening, but regardless metal dome tweeters that extend to outside of conventional hearing are mutually less prone to ringing effects in our audible range.

The cabinet is a thing of beauty. It's a high-gloss curved and elegant tower with two rising points above the hi-fi wire panel and a chrome curve along the bottom edge to match the cone surrounds, which looks fantastic in the right room. It's a bottom-heavy loudspeaker, which means the speaker's lines don't need to be broken up with a large grille. It's also not broken up by lines for the speaker grilles, as they are affixed magnetically. Physically, this size of speaker doesn't seem troubled by the room itself. The speaker is best placed a couple of feet from the rear and side walls, but once again



EQUIPMENT REVIEW Tannoy Definition DC10T

The speaker is not that fatiguing and can help put the speaker up against the rear wall.

One of the unique aspects of the rear panel is that each speaker terminal. It's an interestingly convenient to amplify with a similar grounding terminal, which is said to enhance dynamic range and cut down on RF interference. I say 'said to' because usually grounding really amplifiers were then on the ground other than when the review was in progress. Indeed, that terminal's some precision-welded technology, ergonomically beamed components to the crossover network and silver-plated high-purity copper in the hook-up wire.

Like most Tannoy speakers, the DC10T is loaded with quality gear. It's driven by a 100W amp, but through that means on paper it can be driven by practically anything, it needs greater amplifier muscle than it first seems. It was happy with more power (the Musical Fidelity M4 power amp, added in this case), and with the D-Phaser (added last night) than I was with some single amps. However, a good low-powered amplifier would still do, and the Sugden A2.1SE delivered a fine performance.

"This size of speaker demands a medium-to-large room, even though the speaker doesn't seem troubled by the room itself."

My biggest job as a reviewer of these loudspeakers is not to overstate their biggest strength. But it's difficult: there are possibly too many for that. I have with a lot of speakers. Overing them is the serving a baroque, score to take the both end up being the excuse for a city. In the case of the DC10T, this is because they can take a bit of punishment, go back to an enjoyable manner without tiring and they have a vibrant bass line.



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Linn Majik LP12 turntable system by Alan Sircom

Writing about the Linn Sondek LP12 turntable in any of its guises runs the risk of going over old ground, because there is a lot of ground to cover in the turntable's fortysomething years on the planet. With 100,000 LP12s sold in that time, it represents one of the most important fixtures in the high-end audio firmament. And, although many enthusiasts have moved on from the LP12, those figures command respect.

In fact, such is the respect the LP12 commands that even the derogatory term used by some of its former users – 'the old fruit box' – seems a little more gentle (and a lot less swearsy) than it could be.

Part of the reason for its continued success is philosophical, but not in the way you might imagine; it is a perfect example of what has become known as the 'Trigger's Broom' Paradox (in the popular BBC sit-com *Only Fools and Horses*, the street-cleaner Trigger wins an award for using the same broom for 20 years, although it had 17 new heads and 14 new handles during that time). People may have bought an LP12 in the 1980s and never changed it, despite changing every component in that turntable over the years. It is at once changeless and changing, which is a part of the fascination.

But, let's be honest here – the turntable wouldn't have stayed in production since 1972 if it weren't built to a high standard from the outset. It harks back to a time before pithy mission statements like, 'by enthusiasts, for enthusiasts', when people who bought turntables were normal human beings who liked music and didn't want to buy a turntable that needs a check-list in order to turn it on the right way, and who didn't want an alien invasion or an oil-rig in their living room. The Majik LP12 connects with that 'no fuss turntable' concept well, possibly even better than more nuanced Linn LP12s further up the hierarchy.

Back in 1972 when the LP12 first appeared, the deck was a simple thing with a big switch to turn it on. It sat in a wooden plinth, the platter and arm bounced on a suspension, and it all sat on simple rubber feet. An external power supply would have been something exotic, fancy, and superfluous. Fast forward to 2015, and that ably describes the Majik LP12, too. An ABS rocker switch has replaced the big glowing red push-button, and the Grace arm and Supex cartridge oft spied

on early LP12s have been swapped out for a carbon-fibre Pro-Ject 9CC arm and a Linn Adikt moving magnet cartridge. And, of course, virtually every part has been subtly improved over the years, as electronics, engineering tolerances, and materials science developed. But the LP12 is still recognisably a child of the 1970s.

The original LP12 was a kit of parts, but this quickly became a dealer-based set-up procedure. The importance of the dealer set-up has become so fixed in the Linn ethos that even fitting a new cartridge typically involves a professional re-set. Dealers are trained in the ways of the LP12 set-up jig (that's a frame designed for easy access, not a 'Tune Dem' dance), P-clips, and springs and grommets. End users talk of some set-up engineers in hushed, reverent tones: trusty, sensible types with down-to-earth names like Derek or Peter. In fact, the quality of set-up comes down to familiarity, repetition, not cutting corners, a sense of unflinching devotion to getting the right bounce to the suspension, and nice red uniforms. Seriously though, there is no magic to the LP12 set-up, just an ability to apply good engineering practice to the process. Consistently.



“Virtually every part has been subtly improved over the years as electronics, engineering tolerances, and materials science developed.”

And if you want to be spoken of in similarly hushed tones, just apply that good practice to a few thousand LP12s first!

This dealer set-up has become a sticking point for some, who feel regular service intervals are unnecessary. However, my take on this is simple; having seen and heard what can pass for DIY installation of even the most basic turntables over the years, an occasional service by a trained engineer is a good thing, and from Linn's perspective, it establishes a degree of consistency across the customer base. It is like herd immunity from poor set-up, if you like. In theory, at least: the reality is all set-ups are equal, but some are more equal than others.

But, how does the Majik LP12 sound? Extremely good, in a kind of no-fuss, maximum fun kind of way. It's the kind of sound that makes you forget about the typical criteria we discuss in audio magazines, and instead focus on the musical performance behind the 'quicksilver transient response' and the 'limpid pools of pellucidity'. I guess this is a function of the Linn 'Tune Dem' concept, where demonstrations revolve around listening to the tune rather than audio or musical elements, and the LP12 is so good at achieving this, one

wonders whether the LP12 has been shaped by that focus on the Tune Dem, whether the Tune Dem came out of the performance of the LP12, or there was a meeting in the middle somewhere...

Tune Dem or not, the LP12 makes a lot of high-end exotica seem somewhat 'po-faced' by comparison. And the Majik continues that line of listening. Other turntables are more detailed, have better soundstaging properties, more of those tiny 'microdynamic' nuances in the presentation that obsess many listeners. The Majik LP12 simply side-steps all those filigree parts of the audiophile experience and cuts to the musical quick.

'Side-steps' is probably the wrong term. That implies these subtle cues are not present, where in fact the Majik LP12 simply appears to put those more nuanced aspects of performance in their place, instead of front and centre. The LP12 still has a lot of insight into the mix, but it's more than that. Or less, depending on your view.

Those usual 'record X did Y to the sound' comments about products become superfluous twaddle with the Majik LP12. You put on a piece of music because you like ▶



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VERDICT





“Music played here just hangs together beautifully, adroitly moving from musical theme to theme.”

▶ it, then you do the same again and again. That’s it. From a reviewer’s perspective, you wonder how you are going to turn this listening session into bite-size descriptive properties. Ultimately, though, except for these four pages, that doesn’t matter. You aren’t drawn to the hi-hat or focus on the bass guitar, any more than you might be in real life. You do get drawn into the general timbre of music playing, and if the recording accents the hi-hat or the bass guitar, then that will also be the case on the LP12.

This is coherence and consistency at work. Music played here just hangs together beautifully, adroitly moving from musical theme to theme with a distinct sense of warmth, energy, and fun to the performance. Wholly accurate? No, but when you listen to the LP12 in its Majik garb, accuracy seems not to matter so much.

You can hear some of what our American counterparts point to as ‘The British Sound’ in terms of frequency extension. The Majik LP12 bass has a gentle bloom and a slight roll-off next to more traditional ‘high-end’ sounding decks, but that actually gives the Linn a delightful ‘bounce’ to the sound. Similarly, the treble lacks that high-end ‘shimmer’, but this gives a feel of ‘space around the notes’ to the LP12 presentation in a musical rather than dimensional feel.

Perhaps the best way of describing this fundamental difference between what the Majik LP12 does and more ‘po-faced’ turntables is if you imagine going to that ultimate gig you wished you’d seen: Hendrix at Monterey, for example. The LP12 is like going to that gig with a similarly Hendrix-loving friend, while some of the more detail oriented turntables are like going with an ‘on message’ guitar tech. The former will be gushing with enthusiasm; the latter will be discussing how difficult it is to maintain intonation with the Fender Stratocaster’s whammy bar (which he will undoubtedly call a vibrato arm). The LP12’s warm-toned enthusiasm wins over on so many records, it’s hard not to smile when playing LPs.

The Majik LP12 is also a great leveller of LPs. Those carefully massaged 180g virgin vinyl albums sound good, but so do the bin-end charity store discount specials. The difference between worst and best album in your collection is made less immediately noticeable. That being said, good vinyl still sounds very good on the Majik LP12, but lacks that absolute ‘warts ‘n’ all’ function of über-turntables to extract all there is to extract from the vinyl. At least, at the Majik level: what the LP12 extracts at this point is the musical marrow, but there is more to extract. In part, this is what the Upgrade Path is about. ▶

“It’s been almost a quarter of a century since I last spent time listening to an unmodified LP12, but it proved to be something of a homecoming.”

▶ No discussion of the LP12 is complete without discussing the Upgrade Path; a hierarchical move through good, better, and best turntable parts taking the Majik LP12 (or, notionally, any LP12 from the last 42 years) and building it up to the Akurate LP12, the full-bore Klimax LP12, or some intermediary step. This runs through two upgraded sub-chassis (the Kore, then the Keel), two upgraded and external power supplies (the Lingo, then the move to a DC motor with the Radikal), two upgrades to the arm (Linn’s Akito and Ekos SE), and two moving coil cartridges (the Klyde and the Kandid). The Klimax also brings the Urika phono stage into the turntable itself, and there is an optional Trampolin baseboard for greater isolation.

Starting with the Majik, and upgrading a piece at a time, Linn recommends the Kore, followed by the Lingo, the Akito, and the Klyde, to bring the turntable to Akurate level. Linn then follows the same round of upgrades a second time in the same order (Kore to Keel, Lingo to Radikal, Akito to Ekos SE, Klyde to Kandid, and ending in the Urika), bringing the deck to, er, Klimax. The company is less comfy with out-of-sequence upgrades, such as upgrading the Lingo before the Kore, or upgrading an otherwise all-Majik turntable with a Keel sub-chassis. Not everyone goes along with this strict pecking order, however.

Moreover, with an inherently modifiable design and tens of thousands of LP12s still in daily use, a small army of aftermarket options are available. Power supplies, replacement sub-chassis, top plates, arm boards, arms, cartridges, mats, and plinths are available from third-party suppliers. And, like any hot-rod community, there will be those who swear by, and those who swear at, any such modifications. The best are like Brabus to Linn’s Mercedes Benz; the worst are like spinners. Linn remains aloof on such things, now.

OK, so the lid is an optional extra now, and if you play 45s, you need an adaptor for the pulley. But 40+ years on from those first decks, the Linn LP12 remains one of the true stalwarts of the high-end. It’s been almost a quarter of a century since I last spent time listening to an unmodified LP12, but it proved to be something of a homecoming. If you spend some time with the Majik – regardless of whether you plan to upgrade the turntable in the future – you’ll find it sparks something fundamentally musical in the way few other audio products can. Very highly recommended! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Complete turntable, arm, and MM cartridge replay system

Linn LP12

Type: Belt-drive turntable with three-point suspension

Platter: Two-piece Mazak 8, felt mat

Bearing: one-point bearing

Motor: 24-pole synchronous AC motor

Belt: Neoprene flat belt

Speeds: 33.33rpm (45rpm with optional pulley, or upgraded PSU)

Dimensions (W×H×D): 44.5×14×35.6

Weight: 10kg

Plinth finish options: Black Ash, American Cherry, Rosenuť, Maple, Walnut

Pro-Ject 9cc

Type: carbon-fibre gimballed tonearm

Effective length: 230mm

Effective mass: 8.5g

Overhang: 18mm

Weight: 250g (excl counterweight)

Linn Adikt

Type: Moving magnet cartridge

Cantilever: Aluminium

Stylus: Gyger II

Tracking force: 1.5-2g (1.75g nominal)

Load resistance: 47kOhms

Load capacitance: 150-200pF

Output (5cm/s, 1kHz): 6.5mV ±1.5dB

Separation: 25dB @ 1kHz

Weight: 7g

Price (as complete package): £2,700

Manufactured by: Linn Products

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booplinth custom LP12 plinth

by Roy Gregory

“Aside from adding corner braces and reinforcing blocks early on, Linn has left the plinth essentially unchanged.”

Linn’s venerable LP12 Sondek – over 40 years young – has become so synonymous with the succession of upgrades that have been applied to the basic deck since its launch, that it’s now almost impossible to talk about the turntable without applying some qualifying suffix. Of course, most of those upgrades have originated with Linn itself, reaching so deep that platter apart, pretty much nothing else remains of the original – although any Sondek can be updated to current spec if the inclination exists and funds allow. In fact, these days, there is no one Sondek, but three distinct levels of parts and all the pieces to step between them.

But one element of the deck has remained almost untouched since the earliest days: aside from adding corner braces and reinforcing blocks early on, Linn has left the plinth essentially unchanged, a decision that has opened the way for a recent flurry of alternative plinths from third party sources – although interestingly these have tended to concentrate on aesthetic or practical considerations, offering alternative woods or extended footprints intended to accommodate longer tonearms. Now comes yet another ‘after-market’ plinth for the LP12, but this is very definitely a plinth with a difference...





Whereas virtually all the other LP12 plinths, whether they come from Linn or alternative suppliers, feature the same simple hardwood picture frame construction, the booplinth is built from bamboo – a material that isn't actually a wood at all. So much has been written about this almost 'magical' material (magical at least from a sonic standpoint) that I won't repeat it all here, but the key thing to know is that this fast growing, carbon-positive grass is formed from long, resin bound fibres. Its tubular structure means that in order to create useable sheets of material you can actually make things from, you need to slice it into strips that are then pressure laminated to form slabs. The end result is incredibly strong, resilient and yet relatively light. It also creates a random structure built from differential strips of a random material, and as well as being seriously random that makes it deeply dispersive in nature, aided by its fibre/resin matrix nature. Its mechanical appeal is matched only by its eco credentials, which explains why it is cropping up in everything from the shelves in hi-fi racks to loudspeaker cabinets – with readily demonstrable sonic benefits all round. This is the material from which the booplinth is built.

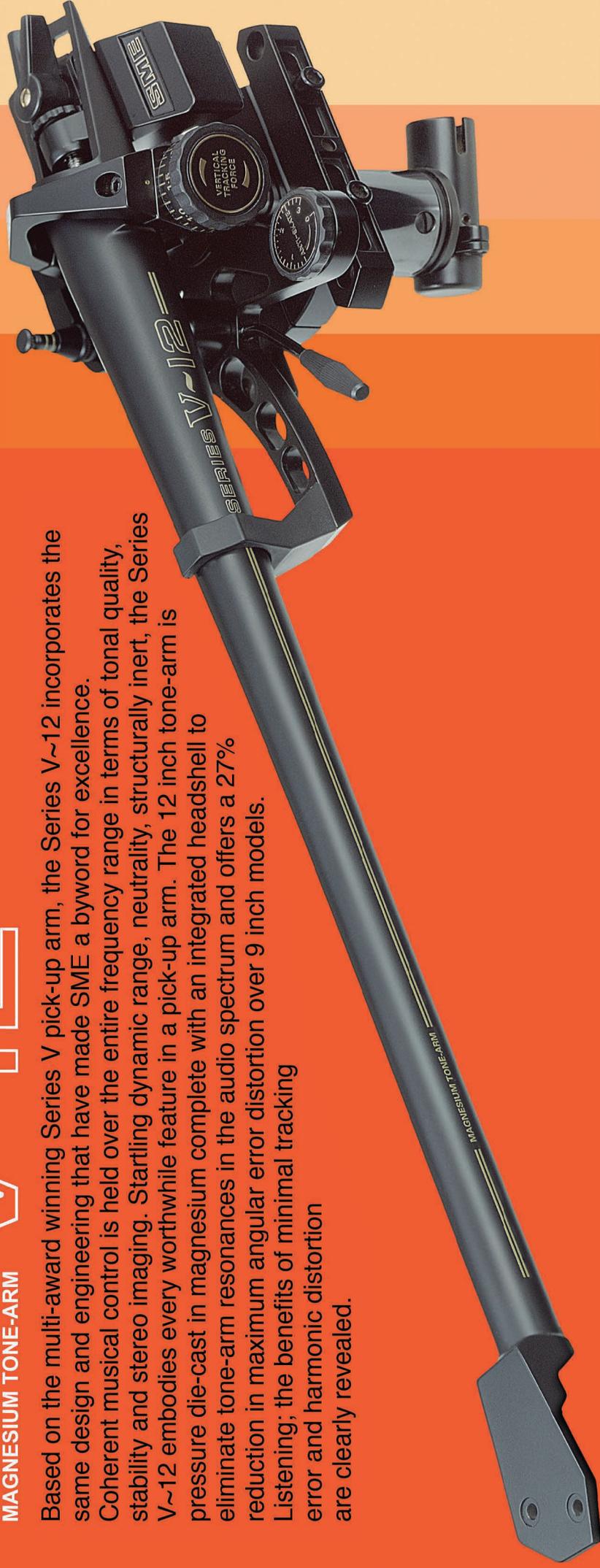
But that's not the only major difference between boo and the neighbours. The other thing that sets this plinth apart is that it's CNC machined from a single slab of bamboo. Compare that to the standard LP12 plinth that consists of no fewer than 17 separate structural elements, including separate strips of wood that are attached to the inner face of the frame and act as shoulders on which the top-plate rests. In contrast, the booplinth's one-piece construction is both stronger and mechanically more stable, while the nature of the process that creates it guarantees that those bits that are supposed to be level and parallel actually are, those corners that are supposed to be 90 degrees really are right angles – and stay that way. One of the great, unresolved debates in Linn folklore revolves around which age and/or colour of plinth sounds best. The answer is, they all sound different, irrespective of vintage or hue, and if you look at how they're made and what they're made from, that's really no surprise. The booplinth doesn't just promise superior sonic and mechanical performance, it should also deliver much greater consistency. ▶

“The booplinth's one-piece construction is both stronger and mechanically more stable, while the nature of the process guarantees that those bits that are supposed to be level and parallel actually are.”

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SME

“The best pick-up arm in the world”

“Such a serious price-tag asks some pretty serious questions and demands equally serious answers.”

► Which all sounds good until you come up against the wince-inducing price tag of £1,650. Yep – you read that right: around three times the cost of a replacement plinth from Linn (there’s a reason that they make them that way).

Now, I could tell you how difficult it is to CNC mill bamboo, that the complex multi-profile shape of the LP12 plinth requires machining in two stages, from above and then below and that that means that with a CNC machine dedicated to the task you can still only produce six plinths a day. I could point out that both the manufacturing technique and the material itself result in greater precision and closer tolerances, that the price should include installation, and that the booplenth comes in four different colours (to start with): and it would all be true – but it would still cost £1,650. Such a serious price-tag asks some pretty serious questions and demands equally serious answers. It’s not just a case of does the booplenth make a difference, but how big is that difference and, just as importantly, where (if at all) does it fit into the great hierarchy of LP12 upgrades? I don’t normally indulge in ‘awayday’ reviews that involve visiting alien listening rooms and systems, but in this instance, it really was a necessity. The need for multiple decks and on the fly changes meant a visit to Brian and Trevor’s in Manchester: audio consultants, Linn specialists, and the people behind the booplenth.

They still had the pair of (as near as possible) identical ‘tables that they’d demonstrated at the Bristol show – ‘junior’ Sondexs with bonded sub-chassis, AC motor, Lingo power supply and each carrying an Akito tonearm and Adikt MM cartridge. Internals were of similar vintage and the cartridges had almost identical running times. But in this case and to take things a step further, the decks were both swapped on and off the same shelf and connected to the same Lingo and tonearm cable, eliminating acoustic and cable/ancillary variation and narrowing sonic differences down to the plinth and nothing else – which made the extent of the musical difference between the two decks all the harder to credit. Playing familiar material, the bamboo plinth wrought such a monumental improvement in clarity, timing, tonality, pace, dynamics and separation that it rendered the result a slam dunk – even before you consider the substantial musical benefits. Because that’s the real clincher here: the booplenth isn’t just better hi-fi, it makes significantly more sense of the music and delivers a substantially more convincing performance. Leave the increase in intelligibility to one side, this was the most convincing ‘tune’ demo I’ve ever heard, making the LP12 better at exactly what LP12s are supposed to be best at.

Record after record revealed the same result, bass notes that gained shape, character, and attack, better separation between instruments, more presence, more immediacy, more sense of real people playing real instruments, more music and less system. Listening to Suzanne Vega’s revisiting of ‘Tom’s Diner’ (on *Close Up Vol 2, People And Places*) the muddy grumble that filled the lower registers on the deck with the standard plinth was transformed by the booplenth into discrete bass guitar notes with pitch, leading edge attack,

texture, tone and detail. Vega’s voice stepped forward, more convincing, more immediate and far more natural – and the cello? I’ll leave that to your imagination. On this simplest of tracks the difference was unmissably obvious: what was ordinary, congested, and compressed with the standard plinth was rich, vibrant, alive, and musically compelling with the booplenth. And, as things get more complex, the differences became both more obvious and more musically significant.

With my hands firmly on the demonstration tiller, the next step seemed obvious (at least to me): I had intended to work my way up the LP12 hierarchy to see where the booplenth fits in, but it dispatched the standard plinth with such negligent aplomb that the only logical response was to wheel out a fully loaded LP12, complete with Keel, Radikal, Ekos SE, Kandid cartridge and on-board Urika phono-stage – or, around £5K plays £15K. No contest you might well think – and you’d be right: the booplenth-ed deck, bonded sub-chassis, cheap arm, MM cartridge and all, absolutely buried the LP12 Klimax. Playing ‘Listen To The Radio’ from Nanci Griffith’s *Storms*, you couldn’t fault the detail coming off of the Linn flagship, but the song was leaden, lacking pace and its normal insistent sense of rhythmic drive. The individual elements were all there, but they just didn’t hang together. The rhythmic hitch kick that propels the song into its second verse passed almost unnoticed and the piano break lacked separation, shape, and attack. Back in the land of boo and normal service was blessedly restored: the track sprang forward with proper musical enthusiasm, Nanci’s vocals took on a carefree, engaging quality, locked to the rhythm, that hitch kick propelled the song forwards (just as it should) and the piano took on a presence ►



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▶ and stabbed attack to its phrases that had been entirely absent on the Klimax deck equipped with the standard plinth.

Which of course, left only one other thing to do: drop the Klimax innards into a booplinth. Trevor duly obliged and we sat back to see whether the natural order had been restored. Which it had, but only in part. Now, all the benefits of the Klimax rig were working for it and finally working together – it's just that even so, the 'junior' set up (somewhere between an LP12 Majik and an Akurate) got uncomfortably close. It might not have matched its bigger and much more expensive brother in terms of subtlety and detail, but boy was it fun to listen to – the very quality which established the LP12's reputation in the first place.

Which brings me to perhaps the most interesting thing about the booplinth. It doesn't just slot straight into the LP12 upgrade logic, it jumps the queue straight to first place. Doesn't that upset the front-end first apple cart? Actually, no. If the turntable is the foundation of and defines the record player's quality, then what's the foundation of the turntable? That would be the plinth – the mechanical element that ties all the others together. Think about the parts that make up the deck, how they interrelate and what happens to noise generated within the structure and suddenly it all starts to make sense – and suddenly the venerable LP12 has got a whole new lease of life. It's 30-years since I last owned a Linn Sondek, but all of a sudden, I'm taking the idea seriously again.

The booplinth represents the biggest and most musically fundamental upgrade I've yet heard to the LP12 – and that includes all the various Linn parts. For anybody who has played with bamboo in an audio system already, that probably won't come as a surprise: it's the scale of the improvement that's going to be the shock. How much of that is down to the material and how much to the improved manufacturing accuracy and mechanical integrity is impossible to say, but the sonic and musical results are simply astonishing. £1,650 is a lot of money – but to put it into context, it's way less than you'll be

charged for a Keel, a Radikal or a Urika and the booplinth makes a bigger and musically more important difference than those three put together. The booplinth is available in natural bamboo and cherry, ebony, or black stains – with dark rumours of a Nextel option too. It's time to pick a colour, because no matter how new or old your LP12, or how far up the upgrade ladder it's climbed, the booplinth should be your first/next priority. Once you've heard it there's no going back. But look on the bright side – the LP12 has never, ever sounded this good, this musically engaging, or this much downright fun. +

DETAILS

booplinth – engineered bamboo plinth upgrade for the Linn LP12

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Audio Note Lounge

Ultrasonone Edition 5 'Limited' headphone

by Nicholas Ripley



There's a phrase in British English that might not be universal – 'shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted'. In this case, it means reviewing a pair of strictly limited edition headphones that have all but sold out. There are just a handful of pairs of the Ultrasonone Edition 5 still available, they are extremely expensive by headphone standards, and if you have to sell your kids into slavery or hand over a kidney to buy them while you can, it might just be worth considering.

Ultrasonone is a German headphone brand, which is exceptionally popular among professionals, and growing in popularity with domestic headphone users. Most of the range is built in Taiwan, but the top-deck models are built in the company HQ in Tutzing, to the south-west of Munich. The company has two principal selling points unique to its headphones – the S-Logic drive unit placement designed to make a sound more like traditional stereo, and LE (low emission) or ULE (ultra low emission) drive units, which are claimed to limit listener fatigue, by limiting electromagnetic radiation so near the listener's ears.

S-Logic (also known as 'Natural Surround Sound') is perhaps the key seller for the Ultrasonone brand, and as an increasing number of traditional audiophiles begin to dabble with the world between their ears, so this form of driver layout will undoubtedly prove more widely popular. It works by offsetting the acoustic centres of the drive units in the ear-cup itself. Most conventional dynamic headphones have the drive unit centred to the position of the ear canal of the listener, and as a result the sound is more or less 'beamed' direct into the ear itself. This exacerbates an effect known as 'lateralisation' where the sounds generated by a pair of headphones seem to appear inside the head of the listener. Most headphone makers have recognised and compensated for this effect, but not entirely, and it can be a discomforting feeling, especially noticeable for longstanding audiophiles more used to the sound from loudspeakers in a room. By repositioning these drivers inside the ear-cup, using a funnel-shaped arrangement, it creates ▶

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AGAINST

- only available in black

Getting rave reviews from “5 globes and a pound sign”, a “recommended” product, and being favourably compared to a “£9,500 phonostage” is not an everyday occurrence for one costing just £995. But then Timestep’s T-01MC is no ordinary Phonostage, it has Japanese ultra low noise FETs, PTFE and gold input/output connectors, a custom made transformer with an interwinding electrostatic shield, a silicon steel band and a steel outer case to eliminate hum.



Stereo, Mono & 78 rpm Artisan Noriyuki Miyajima has been making phono cartridges in Japan for more than three decades. Only recently discovered by American and European audiophiles, they have since received rave reviews all over the world and deservedly so.

Every Miyajima cartridge is handcrafted in-house by a dedicated full-time team of six based in Fukuoka.

The cartridge bodies are individually precision-milled from rare and exotic hardwoods including ebony, rosewood and African blackwood (mpingo). These dense natural materials lend a vibrant and natural tonality to the sound.



Clearaudio Goldfinger - Miyajima - Benz LPS - Denon DL103 - DL-102 mono - Audio Technica AT33
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“Beyond this, all else is luxury: sheer, unadulterated, headphonic luxury.”

► more of a sense of ‘exterior’ soundstaging, akin to the sort of imaging one finds in loudspeakers. Open-backed headphones do not seem to create lateralised imagery with the same fervour and are often popular choices among loudspeaker-based audiophiles. In the Edition 5, S-Logic is taken to the next step, with a revised funnel-shape and a titanium-coated 40mm driver. This is dubbed S-Logic EX.

A bonus to this Natural Surround System is listeners tend to play music around 3-4dB quieter than through conventional headphone systems, which should promote better ear health over the years.

Meanwhile the neodymium magnets powering those titanium-coated drivers are heavily μ -metal shielded, in line with Ultrason’s ULE (ultra low emission) technology. Ultrason isn’t that comfortable with the idea of rare earth magnets delivering hundreds or thousands of Gauss of magnetic field strength a couple of centimetres from an owner’s noggin (especially for professionals, who spend hours every day with their brain inside a magnetic field), so the company shields the magnets inside its headphones. The jury is out as to whether there are any health benefits to this (it appears to be a corollary to the ‘mobile phones cause brain cancer’ scare of a few years ago), but all that μ -metal shielding does make the headphones both feel weighty without feeling heavy on the head, and it does seem to help reduce environmental noise.

Beyond this, all else is luxury: sheer, unadulterated, headphonic luxury. The Edition 5 naturally comes in its own presentation case, complete with fabulous case candy, including a custom-made headphone stand, and two sets

of black/silver braided cables (one 1.5m long with a 3.5mm jack, the other 4m long with a 6.3mm jack, both connecting to the headphones with high-quality Neutrik plugs). While the black anodised aluminium headband is classy, it’s as nothing compared to the headband, ear cups, and pads. The headband and earpads are crafted from leather from long-haired Ethiopian sheep – this was chosen for its extreme softness and comfort. And it really is soft and comfy, making even buttery soft calves leather feel coarse and rough. Whether the leather of Kenyan or Eritrean sheep would have the same softness is not up for debate.

The cups themselves are made from ‘moor oak’. This is oak from hundreds (or even thousands) of years ago that fell into peat bogs and, deprived of the oxygen required to rot, instead part-fossilised. Moor oak, also known as ‘bog-oak’, ‘Quercus’, or ‘morta’ is extremely rare, extraordinarily expensive, not dissimilar to tropical hardwood in density and aesthetics, and is highly-prized by pipe smokers, due to it being practically fireproof and resin-free. It’s also extremely dense and neutral sounding for audio use, especially when laser etched with an aluminium logo and treated with seven layers of varnish.

The Edition 5 gained the suffix ‘Limited’ because the company made just 555 pairs. It’s a celebration of ten years of the Edition series, which began in 2003 with the Edition 7. These hand-crafted headphones took a considerable amount of time to produce, and typically change hands in minutes on the second-hand market, but there are a rare few still left unsold.

Of all the audio products I’ve heard, or even heard of, I don’t think any can match the break-in time required of the Edition 5. It’s been documented by one careful listener, and confirmed by Ultrason, its users, and even Synthax (its UK distributor). Essentially, the sound of the ‘sone will change and change for the first 700 hours before finally settling down. That’s a solid month of music playing through the headphones before they finally end the break-in process and sound as good as they could. And yet, it doesn’t matter a damn to those who use them, because the process is a (mostly) enjoyable ride, and the end result is well worth the effort.

This is, quite simply, the best headphone I have ever heard. And, if you are predominately a loudspeaker listener, ►



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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: closed-back dynamic headphone
S-LogicEX 'Natural Surround Sound'
technology ULE technology

Impedance: 32 Ohm

Driver: 40mm, titanium plated

Magnet: NdFeB

Frequency range: 5–46,000 Hz

SPL: 96 dB

Weight (excl. cord): 280 g

Features: Two detachable cords: Black-silver braided high flex cable – Short cord: Length 1.5m, with angled 3.5mm NEUTRIK plug, gold plated – Long cord: Length 4m, with 6.3mm NEUTRIK plug, gold plated

Full metal headband

Marsh/bog oak ear cups

Dark chrome PVD plated ear cup rings

Ethiopian sheep leather earpads and head pad

Price: £2,995

Manufactured by: Ultrasone

URL: www.ultrasone-headphones.com

Distributed by: Synthax Audio (UK) Ltd

URL: www.synthax.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1727 821870



what the Edition 5 does for you are simple: I rediscovered Tchaikovsky and John Coltrane, and discovered that I like King Tubby and Portishead through these headphones.

In fact, I keep writing 'loudspeakers' instead of 'headphones', because the Edition 5 don't sound like headphones to me. I'm of the age and audio-experience who typically consider headphones as a necessary evil of night-time and mobile listening, but the Edition 5 is a different beast. It makes me relish times when late-night listening demands headphones, and suddenly 7:30pm becomes 'late night' listening. The Edition 5 just feels naturally right, with instruments out there in space in front of you, and going back to 'regular' headphones is to go back to a nether-world of musical spectres floating in and around your frontal lobes by comparison.

I am duty bound to find flaw in anything, but short of having to put them back in a box so some lucky sod can enjoy them for years to come, I am struggling. I guess if your experience of good audio is firmly in the headphone camp, then the significance of that 'natural surround' may be lessened, and you may prefer a more 'conventional' in-head experience. But that's not for me.

There is some good news at the end of this tale, too. There's an Edition 5 Unlimited that, as its name suggests, is not restricted to just 555 pairs. It doesn't have quite the handcrafted appeal, and does without the moor oak ear cups and the Ethiopian sheep leather ear pads. It's also not quite as infinitely close matched as the Edition 5. I've heard these Unlimited versions briefly and compared them to the 'Limited' model, and they get very, very close indeed. Meanwhile, if you are lucky enough to find one of the 555 pairs of Edition 5, do virtually anything this side of breaking a few Commandments to own them. +

▶ this is probably the best headphone you will ever hear, too. You will need a good headphone amplifier to realise this to its fullest extent, but suitably driven, this is a headphone to savour. It manages to produce sound of great beauty, of melodic integrity and harmonic richness and structure, but also a sound of unparalleled dynamic shading and shimmer. Add to that detail of such crystalline subtlety as to make musicians come alive in front of you, a tonal balance so intrinsically right it's almost impossible to fault, and articulation of instruments and voices so refined and yet so extended that you simply bask in the music being played.

Hundreds of hours of listening is pointless for a review, but a pleasure with the Edition 5. They went from being 'excellent' to 'outstanding' to 'oh wow!' in a linear manner that meant you just turned up the smile each time you listened to them. The best musical examples I can find to illustrate

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The Kuzma XL DC Upgrade – when less really is more

by Roy Gregory

It was the Stabi M that first introduced a DC motor to the Kuzma line, a deft technological sidestep that delivered some serious sonic and practical benefits – and one that in the short term at least, challenged the XL's status at the top of the Kuzma tree. So it was only a matter of time until DC drive arrived on the flagship 'table, as officially recognized with the launch of the Stabi XL DC, a step that coincides with a reduction in the asking price from £22,000 to just under £20,000. A high-end audio price reduction? The end of the world is nigh!

The XL DC sports but a single motor, which reduces the amount of metal and machining considerably. Mind you, what a motor... The XL DC might only use one motor pod, but that pod is even bigger than its already impressive AC predecessors. Along with it, you get the substantial power supply used by the Stabi M, built into the same large, shoebox chassis as the existing XL4 supply, providing fine speed adjustment for both 33 and 45, with a "hidden" 78 facility too. But the best thing about implementing the DC evolution on the flagship is that the XL's modular design is easily upgradeable; the entire AC drive system can be replaced lock, stock, and barrel with the DC set-up – albeit at the not-inconsiderable cost of £7,500. Which seems like a lot until you see the size

and then heft the weight of the box in which the upgrade kit arrives.

Open the box and what you find inside is the aforementioned power supply, the large diameter drum that houses the motor – now fitted with an attractive top-plate that integrates its appearance much better with the rest of the deck – two XLR equipped umbilicals and a large, flat disc. Machined from solid brass (like the rest of the XL, except the platter) this sits beside the 'table and gives you control over stop/start, 33 and 45, allowing you to site the main power supply and speed-controller well away from the 'table itself, but execute basic control without groveling on the floor.

There's also a special polymer belt. The part played by this stiff, flat, bright blue belt in establishing and maintaining the 'table's speed stability is not to be underestimated, its lack of elasticity crucial to maintaining the stable relationship between motor pulley and sub-platter. Precisely spaced using one of Kuzma's trademark cylindrical spacers, the heavy motor pod stays put and the belt's constant tension maintains both consistent stiction and distance, with no tendency to 'walk' the separate motor housing.

“The XL's modular design is easily upgradeable; the entire AC drive system can be replaced.”





TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

DC motor upgrade for the Kuzma XL turntable

New motor, power supply and belt, to replace existing two or four AC motor system

Speeds: 33, 45 with 'stealth' 78 rpm, fine tunable

Upgrade price: £7,500

Kuzma XL DC turntable complete (no arm, one arm tower): £19,999

Manufactured by: Kuzma d.o.o.

URL: www.kuzma.si

Distributed by: Audiofreaks

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Tel: +44(0) 20 8948 4153

► How does the DC drive compare to the four-motor alternative? It's the musical performance that needs to justify the upgrade price and that doesn't disappoint. The quieter background, reduction in grain, and increased transparency and focus are all to be expected. What is more surprising is the obvious increase in dynamic range (associated with that lower noise floor) and the significant increase in musical flow and articulation. An expansive soundstage was always an XL feature, but the DC drive brings with it a far more clearly defined acoustic space, better locational definition and improved dimensionality of individual images. It's especially obvious on orchestral recordings, where the spread of musicians and presence of the orchestra are further enhanced by a richer, more natural tonal palette and the more emphatic dynamic delivery, but smaller, starker recordings benefit too. Suzanne Vega's recent re-recording of the classic 'Tom's Diner' is a case in point. The repetitive bass underpinning gains shape and texture, attack and pitch when driven by the DC motor. Vega's voice becomes much more solid and immediate, and her phrasing more articulate, the cello interlude gains body to go with its strings and steps up and into the same recorded space. The end result is a more credible and more definite musical delivery, with more of the performance, and less of the system reproducing it.

The latest round of motor mods to Kuzma's long-standing XL flagship certainly deliver the musical goods – along with some non-essential aesthetic and operational niceties that are definitely good to have. As well as dropping the price of a new Stabi XL DC, they offer existing owners a worthwhile upgrade, allowing the venerable XL to keep pace with the latest round of resurgent direct-drives. But there are two other things to consider, one for XL owners and the other for the rest of us...

DC motors don't always deliver the sort of musical weight and authority that comes with the Kuzma implementation; some similar 'upgrades' to existing designs, driven by comparatively recent issues with the consistent supply of high-quality AC motors, have been noticeably less successful. Kuzma's DC motor pod might be large, but it looks like a pretty thin filling when sandwiched between its huge and hugely sophisticated power supply on one side and the massive XL platter on the other. Less might indeed be more, but size also matters and like all high concepts, you need to appreciate just how to apply it.

Meanwhile, for owners of original two-motor XLs for whom the cost of the DC upgrade looks a little steep, the XL4 still sounds better than the two-motor set up and you can expect an imminent increase in the availability of secondhand XL4 motors and matching power supplies. Strike while the iron's hot: just don't listen to the XL DC unless you are prepared to put down the cash. It really does offer that big a step up in the Stabi XL's musical performance. +

COMPETITION

WIN! Five AudioQuest Nighthawk headphones worth £499 must be won!

AudioQuest is giving away five pairs of its hot new Nighthawk headphones. These CES Best of Innovation award-winning semi-open around the ear headphones use state-of-the-art technologies such as a 3D printed grille that mimics the latticework in a butterfly's wing, 50mm biocellulose diaphragms, a 1.2 tesla magnet, and 'liquid wood' ear-cups. This is a by-product of paper manufacture, which manages to combine the properties of wood and injection-moulded plastic. Early indicators suggest Nighthawk might just turn out to be one of the great headphone classics of our time!

When they are available this Summer, the Nighthawks will retail at £499, but we have secured five sets of these revolutionary headphones. In fact, you might even get to win them before we get to review them, such is their high demand. This means five lucky *Hi-Fi+* winners will be some of the first people to take the Nighthawk for more than just a test flight! **+**



Competition Question

What are the AudioQuest Nighthawk's ear-cups made from?

- A. Liquid Wood
- B. Mimetic Polyalloy
- C. Cobalt Thorium G

Please email your answer to: competitions@hifius.com. Or, send your answer on a postcard (including your name, address, and contact details) to "AudioQuest Nighthawk (Competition), *Hi-Fi+* Magazine, Unit 3, Sandleheath Industrial Estate, Sandleheath, Hampshire, SP6 1PA". The competition closes on August 6th, 2015.

Competition Rules

The competition will run from June 4th, 2015 until August 6th, 2015. The competition is open to everyone, but multiple, automated or bulk entries will be disqualified. The winner will be chosen at random from all valid entries, will be contacted via email (where possible) and their name will be published on the AudioQuest website and in the magazine. The Editor's decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into. Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd. is compliant with the Data Protection Act and UK laws apply. Our policy is such that we will not pass on your details to any third party without your prior consent.

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Music First Audio Baby Reference V2 passive preamplifier

by Jason Kennedy

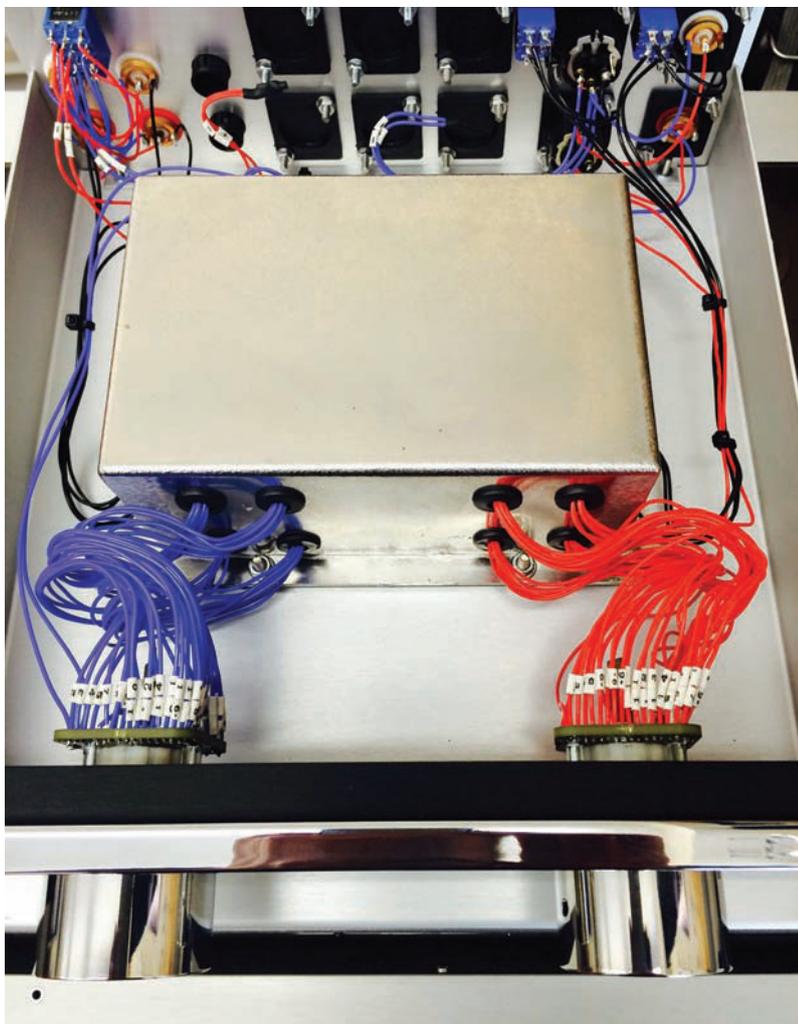
The Music First Audio transformer-based passive preamplifiers seem to receive universal praise, and well-respected reviewers around the globe have declared them to be among the very best. And yet, when I have tried them in the past they have not had the same effect on me. They were always very clean, open and devoid of the grunge that powered preamps have so much difficulty suppressing, but still... close, but no cigar. That is until now. There may only be two letters in the suffix to this latest model, but it has turned the Baby Reference into a fully-fledged giant slayer in my system.

Music First Audio is, basically, Jonathan Billington, whose father and his partner Christopher Stevens started Stevens & Billington Transformers in 1963. Jonathan started making TVCs (transformer volume controls) in the early 2000s, after a certain Thorsten Loesch (now of AMR and iFi) started buying transformers to use instead of passive pots. Nowadays, MFA makes a small

range of compact preamplifiers in a workshop in Hastings, East Sussex.

Until the arrival of this preamp, the Baby Reference was second from top dog in MFA's catalogue, but the V2 version has put its best full-length design out to pasture. V2 differs in two significant ways from the standard Baby Reference. First, it is essentially custom made; the features and finish are down to the end user. You can choose how many in- and outputs it has and whether they are RCA phono or XLR connections, you can have remote control and one or two volume controls, and you can have any finish that





“Internally, the V2 is replete with PTFE-insulated, silver-plated copper wiring.”

the Hastings fishing fleet's registration letters and that significant founding year.

All of which should mean that the V2 is a more expensive beast than the Baby Reference, which continues with standard TX102 Mk4 transformers, but that's only just the case. If you limit things to two inputs and one output (or vice versa) the Baby Reference V2 can be had for £6,120, rather than the £5,900 asked for a six input Baby Reference. Optional extras include six inputs for £720 and remote control for £600; there's even a headphone amplifier available for £420. Delivery times are also similar for both preamps at three weeks, unless you opt for a volume pot with more positions than the '30+mute' models that MFA keeps in stock. The steps on this pot are 2dB wide (which might be too big for some systems/ears) and if you have particularly inefficient speakers or listen to unusually low level source material at high levels, it's possible to add a switch that increases output by 6dB.

Internally, the V2 is replete with PTFE insulated, silver plated copper wiring, the quantity thereof relating to the fact that every volume position has its own connection. Also notable is the single rectangular casing for the transformers rather than separate cylindrical ones found in a TX102. This provides the air-gap that's a key to the performance. The RCA connections are very high quality as is build overall. So, I don't like separate volume knobs but I do like chrome plating.

Listening kicked off with the V2 between a Van den Hul Grail SB phono stage and an ATC P1 power amp driving PMC fact.8 speakers, a situation in which it proved to have easily enough gain. Almost immediately, it became clear that this is a very special

Jonathan can source, including chrome plating. Another nice touch is the option to choose input names, or limit the inputs to one and avoid a switch altogether. The review sample that MFA supplied had two inputs and a switch on the back plus two volume controls, which gives you balance adjustment, but is not something I would want to live with. But this bespoke unit was not made for me!

The real difference between this and a regular Baby Reference is to be found in the transformers that are used to attenuate the signal, the heart of the preamplifier in this case. These have been changed in several ways. There is now an air gap between the transformer and the shielding pot that surrounds it. This reduces the ability of the transformer to 'talk' to the pot and thus reduces leakage from one channel to the other. This gap is achieved with rubber pads top and bottom, that also have the effect of isolating the transformer from vibration. The transformers themselves also have a different winding structure; the symmetry has been changed and a network has been added to the output to reduce ringing. The final touch is thinner 0.2mm μ -metal laminations in the transformer core. This new transformer is called 'RX63', which derives from



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“I don't know these guys from Germany but the sound was fantastic...”

*Michael Fremer Stereophile,
T.H.E. Show Newport 2013*



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► preamplifier, but an example serves to reveal just how critical this part of the audio chain really is. I played some acoustic jazz and was struck by how well timed the double bass was – just off the beat and with loads of tonal depth in a clearly defined acoustic. The more I heard, the better it got; the key strength that this preamp has, which it does better than pretty well everything else I've heard in recent times, is speed. You can hear everything stop and start; there is no blurring of edges whatsoever, so the faster the attack and decay, the more obvious it is that most preamps cannot keep up. What this sounds like is incredibly natural and effortless playing whatever the music; the denser the music, the more rewarding is the absence of smear in this regard. This is very clear on drum kits, such as the one played by Rob Turner on Go Go Penguin's coincidentally named album *v2.0* [Gondwana]. He likes to work the snare, and the MFA lets you hear every strike where most blur them into a continuous series that's devoid of the tiny gaps that differentiate them.

Passive volume controllers are often accused of lacking dynamics, or of not being able to track variations in the level of notes or crescendos as well as active alternatives. What I found here is a preamp that is uncannily revealing of the compression used in recordings, this proved a bit too revealing with some albums but made for massive differences in character between them – in fact, differences great than I have previously encountered. With some material this can sound like limited dynamics whereas in fact it is plain transparency to dynamic limiting applied in the studio. Jeff Beck's recent *Live at Ronnie Scott's* [Eagle Records] has a stonking version of 'Goodbye Pork Pie Hat/Brushing Away The Blues' on it that sounds so much better than the original seventies cut, the scale and dynamics are su-ruddy-perb. By contrast Jimi Hendrix's 'latest' live release, *Miami Pop Festival* [Experience Hendrix] is small scale and clearly compressed, a result of its origins, vintage and contemporary mastering mores. You get more intensity with Jimi because of who he was, but this degree of revelation will not suit all record collections or tastes.

Luckily vintage is no indicator of sound quality: ZZ Top's 'La Grange' [*Tres Hombres*, Warner Bros] sounds cracking. Billy Gibbons was at the top of his game back in the early 1970s, and his confidence is palpable when this track's finer details are rendered so comprehensively.

The Baby Reference V2 can also pull rabbits out of hats with some albums: Funkadelic's eponymous debut [*Westbound*] usually sounds like a fairly grungy recording, but this digs deeper and reveals the plethora of voices and instruments that combine to such terrific effect. In case you were wondering, "Soul is a ham hock in your cornflakes" among other things. It does the same on *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* by Joe Cocker [A&M], which makes one suspect a mid prominence but the highs and lows are clearly evident; it's as if a mask of electronic hash has been removed so that the music appears unobscured for the first time. On 'The Letter', the backing vocals are as incredible as ever but what really strikes is the quality of the rhythm section. The drumming of Jim Keltner and Carl Radle is nothing short of phenomenal; no wonder it's the best track on the album.

The more I listen to this preamp, the more convincing it sounds. The fact that there is no electronic amplification going on gives it a major advantage; no grunge in means no grunge out. I tried it with amplifiers from Linn, Gamut, ATC, and

the Class D examples fitted to PMC twotwo 6 active monitors. I tried both single-ended and XLR cables, including 5m examples of the latter for the PMCs. Nothing seems to phase the MFA, and everything seems to benefit from its grain free immediacy... not least being the listener himself.

As you might surmise I'm rather impressed with the Music First Baby Reference V2, it's one of those products that I dare not use too much because it'll make living without it unbearable. They say it's better to have loved and lost, but they obviously weren't anticipating the heartbreak that the departure of a truly great preamplifier can inflict. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Transformer passive preamplifier.

Volume control: 31 position switch, optional 46 position switch

Analogue inputs: One pair single ended (via RCA jacks) or one pair of balanced inputs (via XLR), option for up to six inputs of either type

Analogue outputs: One pair of balanced outputs (via XLR connectors), One pair of single-ended outputs (via RCA jacks)

Headphone output: optional

Remote control: optional

Input impedance: Not specified

Output impedance: Not specified

Bandwidth: Not specified

Gain: unity, optional 6dB

Distortion: Not specified

Signal to Noise Ratio: Not specified

Dimensions (HxWxD): 97 x 250 x 275mm

Weight: 3kg

Price: £6,120

Manufacturer: Music First Audio

Tel: +44 (0) 1424 858260

URL: www.mfaudio.co.uk

Melco N1Z digital music library *by Alan Sircom*

A revolution in digital audio has been taking place over the last half-dozen or so years. Whether we like it or not, digital audio is migrating away from shiny discs of polycarbonate, and moving – seemingly inexorably – toward non-physical forms, like streaming and downloading. This is often called ‘computer audio’, for good reason: in most cases, a computer audio system features a computer somewhere in the signal chain. It may be a dedicated or a disguised computer, but it’s still a computer, and the big problem there is many audiophiles are not comfortable with that intrusion.

This isn’t just a modern-Luddite (if that isn’t a contradiction) rejection of the new. It’s based around the simple fact that an off-the-shelf computer might not be the best environment for excellent replayed sound quality, and that there might be something a little more capable and dedicated for the task.

Which is where the Melco N1Z comes in.

Melco, history fans, is a company that started life in 1975, and is an acronym of Maki Engineering Laboratory COmpany. Makoto Maki (who still runs the company as CEO) began by making very serious, very high-end turntables, in part because audio is Makoto Maki’s great passion. However, with the impending end of all things turntable with the birth of CD, Maki decided to cast his manufacturing net a little wider, started producing memory buffers for the then nascent home computer market, and called this division BUFFALO Inc. Fast forward to 2015, and there aren’t that many turntable makers running a company worth a little over a billion dollars!

Despite being one of the biggest players in the computer storage game, Makoto Maki’s great passion for audio never dimmed, and the recent market shift from ‘audio’ to ‘computer audio’ set him thinking about converging business and pleasure (or ‘business’ and ‘older business’). The symmetry of a company with a reputation for data storage and a history in audio designing a dedicated device for audio data storage should not be lost on anyone.

Unlike a regular computer audio device, streamer, NAS drive, or other key component in the audio chain, the Melco N1Z is billed as a ‘music library’. It’s actually not a bad term, because the more you think of what the N1Z does for a living, the more you begin to think of it as a music library.

What the N1Z does in effect is act as go-between, either storing your files on its own SSD drives, or creating extensions to its own record-keeping of any files connected to the Melco. Unlike UPnP Media Renderers, there is no ‘push’ or ‘pull’ component to this – a file on a USB hard disk, a USB dongle, or on a network hard drive connected to the N1Z’s ethernet port is added to its library if, and only if, you specifically navigate the N1Z to that file. On balance, this is a good thing, because if files are inserted or removed on a whim by the user, you might end up in rescanning your file Hell.

More importantly, the N1Z acts as a buffer between your audio system and the outside world. According to Masakazu Araki, Senior Product Producer of Audio at BUFFALO Inc., “The Melco N1 is designed and manufactured as a high-end source component for digital music. It is designed to be not like IT peripherals, but like consumer electric appliances, to reduce/stop any stresses normally encountered by computer audiophiles.” Melco recognised that an increasing number of listeners were migrating over to networked audio, but plugging their high-end renderers and players into domestic network switches and routers. These are designed for computer use, but don’t have the same audiophile credentials as a dedicated audio device. The N1Z (and its cheaper, HDD-based brother, the N1A) have a dedicated and very well isolated USD output and light-piped LAN port specifically for audio devices, and a big part of the Melco’s daily functionality is to provide barrier nursing for your sensitive audio equipment. Melco takes this barrier to the next level in the N1Z, by running separate power supplies to the internal and external data interfaces.

Alongside these functions, the Melco N1Z also (some might say, primarily) acts as a high-resolution audiophile NAS drive, with 2x 512GB of SSD storage onboard, and the provision for driving external storage as expansion disks. However, being an audiophile device, rather than one aimed at a computer enthusiast, this is a NAS drive that can act as its own network, or can be used in the same way a conventional PC connects to your audio system, through USB. As standard, it runs Twonky as its NAS backbone, but increasingly Melco users are gradually switching over to MinimServer, because of its superior methods of searching, cataloguing, and storing files. Put simply, you can use the N1Z in a system with as much or as little flexibility as you like.



There's a mild negativity toward computer audio, largely from those who think it inconvenient and bewildering. I get that. Looking over the previous page, from the position of someone coming to this field for the first time, there are a lot of acronyms and discussions about networking, streaming, and interfacing. But, in a very real sense, the process of describing something like the Melco N1Z is a lot harder than actually understanding the N1Z. In a way, a description of its functionality is akin to describing each and every blade on a Swiss Army Knife in infinite detail, where in reality, you just use it. The Melco is that kind of product; detailed to describe, and easy to use. Think of it as a CD transport mechanism with a very, very long memory. It's shaped like a conventional piece of audio equipment for that very reason. OK, so you do need to put some thought into installation and ideally need something like a tablet or a smartphone to work your way through its library, but using it isn't rocket surgery.

Perhaps, though, it's best not to think of this in terms of 'computer audio' at all. That might be hard. We've become used to next-generation audio components looking like audio equipment, but when you scratch the surface, there's yet another small PC motherboard and stripped-down version of Windows or Linux running on an EPROM. The Melco is genuinely different. It is not a PC, nor is it a Raspberry Pi in a fancy box. Remember that back-story? Melco is a billion dollar computer peripheral manufacturer and storage king, run by an audiophile. The N1Z is what happens when you let that story play out to its logical conclusion. This is a dedicated, unique device, designed by probably the only team with the resources and enthusiasm to create a truly 'Tabula Rasa' next-generation audio device. Which is why behaves like an audio device: you turn it on and off, rather than boot it up and power it down, and if you yank the plug out of the wall accidentally, you won't end up with dead hard disks. ▶



▶ The N1Z is capable of supporting all sorts of files, from MP3 right up to DSD, and – as can be seen from the rear panel – it's laid out in the kind of logical manner that means you don't need a black belt in geek-do to understand how to connect it up. If you use network connections, 'LAN' hooks the N1Z to the outside world (and any additional storage) and 'Player' connects the N1Z to a media renderer. On the USB side, 'Backup' will create an off-board get-out-of-jail-free card USB store of your files stored on the N1Z (and is also the port used for upgrading the server program, should you decide to swap from Twonky to MinimServer), 'Expansion' allows you to add additional music stored on a USB hard drive, and the generic 'USB 3.0' connector allows you to connect the N1Z to a DAC.

We connected it to rather a lot of DACs in fact, ranging from the AudioQuest Dragonfly at one extreme to the Nagra HD DAC at the other. Nestling between them came the outstanding Exogal DAC (we had hoped to include that this issue, but there are only so many hours in the day... check back next month), the Devialet Expert 250, and the old but gold Wadia 121. For the networked side, I used my Primare NP30, a Linn Majik integrated, and Nick Ripley's Naim SuperUniti. I spent half the test running Twonky, and half running MinimServer, playing a wide selection of files, using PlugPlayer to control the N1Z in USB settings, and the relevant streaming app to drive it elsewhere. I also went through the body of documentation provided to Melco dealers to help smooth the set-up process, and both followed this to the letter, and then tore it up and went my own way. In short, I tried to break the N1Z through sheer weight of digital.

I failed. I failed spec-friggin-tacularly.

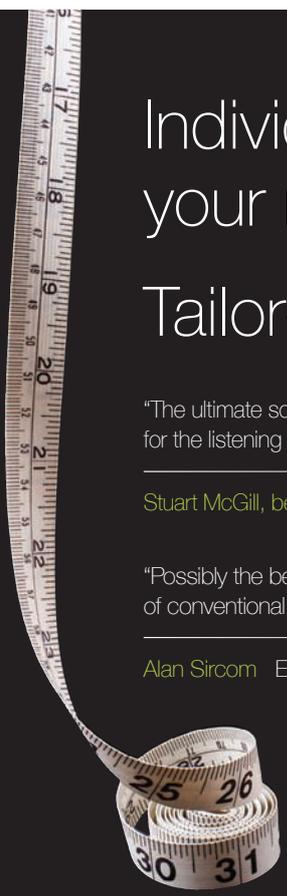
In every case, no matter what I tried to do to it, it worked. And in every case, no matter what I tried, it just made whatever it was hooked to sound 'better': more alive, more open, more dynamic, more of what people who still like CD like about CD. It's a hi-fi writer cliché, but the N1Z sounded like music.

Why they sound 'better' is easy to describe, until you realise this is digital audio, and the reasons shouldn't figure. Digital shouldn't have the potential for quieter backgrounds or greater realism, because those things should be intrinsic to the recording. Any yet, in listing the Melco N1Z across a wide range of devices, the common factor was that quiet background and a more 'real' presentation. It's no accident this appears in an issue filled with vinyl, because it shares more of that sense of 'presence' that a good LP system can deliver than almost anything I've heard from stream, rip, or download. At least, almost anything this side of 'sharp intake of breath' price tags. But best of all, it manages to do this to your existing system, either in replacing your laptop, or slotting into your network. It's a 'drop-in' solution that really works.

Musical examples seem a little trite, here, because it works so well, so universally. But, I did use both a collection of files used by the demonstrator, and those from my own hard disk. Some of which was audiophile noodle nonsense, but pumping out Elbow's anthemic 'One Day Like This' [*The Seldom Seen Kid*, Fiction] made a convincing argument to say this was pressing all the right buttons both sonically and emotionally. Moving over to Esa-Pekka Salonen and the LA Phil playing Stravinsky's *Right of Spring* [DG] did the same, and Roberta Flack singing 'The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face' [First Take, Atlantic] delivered the sort of swell of emotion you rarely get from listening to anything this side of a crackly old first pressing on LP.

This is not a minor step-up in performance. It's a 'realising the potential of the medium' step-up in performance. It's a 'making the most convincing argument for high-resolution audio files I've yet heard and enough to possibly win over this DSD sceptic' step-up in performance. But also right now, it's sadly also a 'I wish it did gapless and streamed Tidal', too.

I'm reliably informed Maki-san is a reader of the UK press, so this part's more or less a one-to-one dialogue, but please, please, pretty please push gapless playback and a ▶



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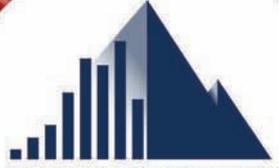
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Roy Gregory wrote for AJ van den Hul in the HiFi+ magazine, "...Optimising the pick-up to match not just the electro mechanical demands of your system but your own preferences as well, reaps an impressive dividend, a performance boost that elevates already impressive performers into genuine giant killers. After all, why have someone else's view of perfection when you can have your own?"

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► dedicated app up the priority list. In fact, I expect most Melco users would put up with using PlugPlayer or Kinsky or any other app for a few extra months if gapless playback was resolved a little bit faster. And if MinimServer manages to create the same front-panel display as Twonky, showing the track playing directly, that would be neat, too.

Everything else in critical terms is either inane (the logo is cheesy, and the product will win no prizes for industrial design) or not really Melco's fault – the N1Z follows good power management and goes into sleep mode if left too long to its own devices. This is called 'abiding by the rules'. However, some networked systems don't work well with NAS drives waking from slumber. However, most who look at what the N1Z can do, and those who have a chance to listen to it learn to overcome such trivialities, rather than accommodate them.

If this is reading like a gushing rave, that's because it is. The Melco N1Z is the product the audio industry needs to calm and win over those still reluctant to move into the 21st Century's interpretation of digital audio. The N1Z is not 'cheap' (although the N1A is considerably more affordable), but it is in the realm of 'attainable' for most serious audio enthusiasts. And it delivers the goods, in spade-loads.

If you have a problem with computer audio, and that problem is the word 'computer', then the Melco N1Z is the solution. The N1Z is the audiophile's replacement to the computer or the network, because it sounds better than both. If you have been holding on file-based audio you can stop now! The N1Z gets the strongest recommendation. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: USB/Ethernet File-based music library

File types supported: DSF, DFF, FLAC, WAV, ALAC, AIFF, AAC, MP3, WMA, OGG, LPCM

Ports: 2x RJ-45 LAN, 2x USB (+dedicated USB charging output)

LAN port interface: 10BASE-T (10mps, full/half duplex), 100BASE-TX (100mps, full/half duplex), and 1000BASE-T (1000mps, full duplex). All auto negotiation, TCP-IP protocol, CMAS/CD access

USB terminals: Backup (USB 3.0, rear panel)
Expansion (USB 3.0, rear panel)
USB3.0 (rear panel)
5V power supply USB port

Internal hard drive: 2x 512GB SSD, 'audio grade'

Power supplies: separated between net and audio

Dimensions (WxHxD): 37x6x35cm

Weight: 7kg

Price: £6,200

Manufactured by: Melco

URL: www.melco-audio.com

Distributed by: Kog Audio

URL: www.kogaudio.com

Tel: +44(0)2477 220650

Velodyne DD10Plus subwoofer

by Jason Kennedy



Can you ever have too much bass extension? I don't think so, but you can have too much bass. Getting clean, extended low end is a holy grail of sorts and one that has always been close to my heart. Subwoofers would appear to be a straightforward way to achieve this, because they are active for maximum control and are usually less expensive than loudspeakers that can deliver the same authority. Yet, most subwoofers muddy the midrange and even the treble. They produce harmonics at much higher frequencies than the fundamentals they are designed to reproduce and these are clearly audible. The other problem is that low bass can set off room modes and make the result oppressively heavy at certain frequencies.

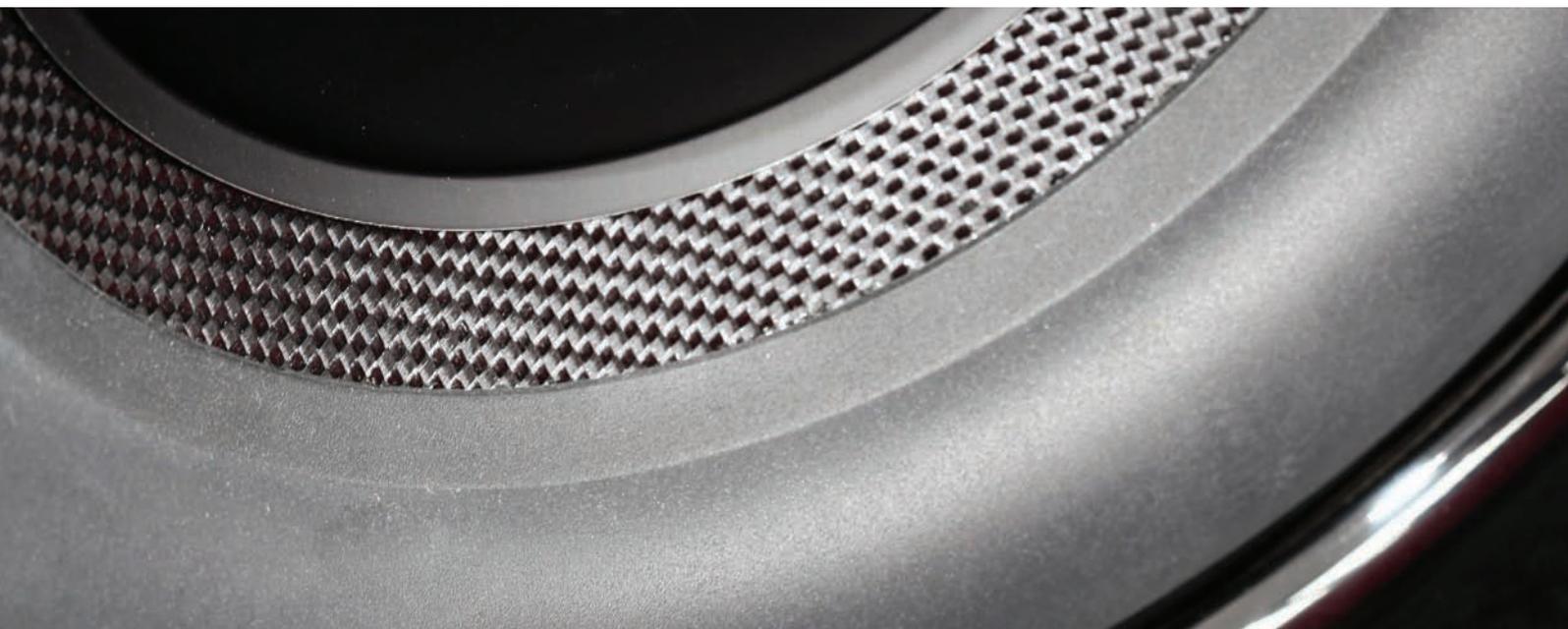
Making a sub that only delivers low notes but does not boom in the process is not as easy as it logically should be. Velodyne is a Silicon Valley based company that has been making active subs since the early eighties and patented a servo control system for woofers in 1985. Velodyne makes several ranges of subwoofer including wireless and in-wall types but the Digital Drive Plus series, which consists of four models sits at the top of the tree. The DD10Plus is the smallest in the range, with its 10inch (250mm) driver; if you want to really move air there is an 18inch model. But, it's not that simple because bigger does not mean better; it means better for bigger rooms. No matter how well controlled a sub is, it needs to be the right size for the environment and in most British homes smaller is better (also more is better, but that's another kettle of boom). The driver in question has a Rohacell cone, the same you might recall as Bowers & Wilkins uses for its serious 800 Diamond series models.

The DD10Plus is a hefty and fairly imposing lump. Its curved sides and piano black finish help to minimise the perceived size, but it would be difficult to hide, especially if you position it for best results. Position is crucial for loudspeakers, because of the way their low frequency output interacts with the room. It's therefore even more critical with a sub that only produces low notes. Digital Drive indicates the use of Class D power amplification – in this case 1250 Watts of the stuff, which is controlled by DSP to allow full parametric

equalisation, a facility that can be used to iron out fluctuations in the in-room response, change the crossover frequency, invert polarity and phase, and tweak roll-off. When used with the Digital Direct software, it's possible to vary a baffling array of parameters and measure the response in real-time. This is essentially a job for the installer, but the software is available for owners to have a go with as well.

I started out by sending full signal to L/R channels and sub and then found an optimal position for the DD10Plus in front of and between the speakers. I then tried out the various set-up options available in the DD software. This revealed that trying to flatten the response had a negative effect on the overall sound, and that in my room the response is pretty good anyway with only a small dip at 80Hz. Listening proved that leaving the EQ untweaked produced a better result than a relatively flat one.

“Making a sub that only delivers low notes but does not boom in the process is not as easy as it logically should be.”



I used the DD10Plus with PMC twenty.22 bookshelf speakers and adjusted its output level to suit. This takes a few tracks to get right, because the effect on the sound should be to add space as much as low-end rumble. For example, a good sub can help show that the reverb on Led Zeppelin is huge [Deluxe Edition HDTracks 24/96], expanding out into the room and enveloping you. Doug MacLeod's *Exactly Like This* [Reference Recordings] also reveals more of the size and nature of the studio it was made in albeit in more precise fashion because of the contemporary nature of the recording and the relatively natural reverb it contains. Muting the sub reveals that it bolsters the bottom end, which means that the kick drum has more weight, but also helps the vocal and guitar to seem more relaxed, making the soundstage wider than usual.

The next step was to establish whether using the crossover in the DD10Plus would



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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Front-firing, powered subwoofer with sealed servo enclosure.

Driver complement: One 250mm Rohacell bass driver with aluminium chassis.

Inputs: Hi-level speaker input with binding posts, line-level inputs via RCA and XLR, RS232.

Outputs: Through-puts on RCA and XLR, high pass output on RCA and XLR, RS232, video, S-video, 12V trigger.

Low frequency extension:
18.7Hz at -3dB

Amplifier power: 1250W RMS

Hi-pass crossover: 80 or 100 Hz at 6 dB/octave.

Lo-pass crossover: 40 Hz to 199 Hz (variable in 1 Hz increments) selectable slope Default: 80 Hz @ 24 dB/Octave.

Dimensions (HxWxD): 360 x 330 x 422mm

Weight: 30kg

Finishes: Piano Black lacquer

Price: £2,999

Manufacturer: Velodyne Acoustics Inc

Tel: +1 408.465.2800

URL: velodyne.com

Distributor: REDLINE LTD

Tel : +44 (0)1268 858222

URL : www.red-line.co.uk

- ▶ provide an improvement on these results. There are only two crossover frequencies (80Hz and 100Hz), but this can be tweaked with 6, 12, 18, and 24dB slopes representing first through fourth order roll-offs.

This approach meant I had to use two pairs of long interconnects from my Townshend Allegri preamp to the sub and from there to the ATC P1 power amplifier. This set up sounded very different to the previous one. Bass articulation seemed to move into a different league and the mid and high end covered by the PMC twenty.22s became extraordinarily detailed. Meshell Ndegeocello's 'Peace Beyond Passion' [Maverick] revealed all manner of subtleties as well as the muscularity of her bass playing; in truth it was so good that turning off the Velodyne was not an option. The only drawback with this approach is that with a revealing speaker the limitations of the crossover in the sub become apparent, the sound is a little stark and edgy. It's pretty engrossing though; timing is spot on and the scale and air in each recording is immediately apparent.

I also tried it with some active PMC twotwo 6 bookshelf speakers, this delivered an even faster, more dynamic, and thril-powered performance. I've heard more refined systems, but not many that offer up this much detail, low end power and sheer enjoyment for the money.

The Velodyne DD10Plus proves that subwoofers can be as sophisticated as any other speaker when they are properly set up. The massive flexibility of the DSP system means that it can be tuned to suit almost any room and audio components, and while better results can be had with two subs, one is quite a treat if you use the onboard crossover. This Velodyne is more than well worth a try if you want to get the most out of your music collection. +

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Ensemble ONDIVA loudspeaker *by Alan Sircom*

Some time ago, the Swiss firm Ensemble was best known for its standmount loudspeakers, with designs like its outstanding ELYSIA minimonitor. Over the years, the company has diversified into audio electronics, cables, tables, platforms, and floorstanding loudspeakers. But it never forgot the success of those early days and the importance of the standmount. Which brings us to the new Ensemble ONDIVA, and its matching ONDIVA ARC stand.

The ONDIVA is a standmount, rear ported, two-way design, with a distinctive 'wave' shape ('onda' is 'wave' in Italian), and they are designed to sit on the decoupled and deliberately flexible ARC stand.

The ONDIVA features a resonance-damped 28mm textile dome tweeter coupled to a similarly resonance damped coated-sandwich 180mm woofer, with a 12dB/octave anti-resonance mounted crossover switching over at 1.8kHz. With a slightly above average sensitivity of 88.5dB and a nominal eight-ohm load, the loudspeaker is exceptionally easy to drive, although I suspect many will be used with the company's FUOCO integrated amplifier, anyway. Inside the cabinet, the ONDIVA uses Ensemble parts throughout: PROCAP capacitors, DALVIVO and MEGALINK conductors and all the gold-plated parts are treated with the company's CONTA+ treatment. Everything is considered, right down to the anti-magnetic screws!

The ONDIVA comes supplied with four little white nylon screws sticking out of the centre of four doughnut-shaped 'feet'. These screws are actually positioning guides to accurately place the ONDIVA on the ONDIVA ARC stand, and once suitably positioned should be removed. This simple, blindingly obvious way of placing a dedicated stand in the optimum position for the loudspeaker is also a very efficient way of decoupling the loudspeaker from the stand itself. Bear in mind, however, that any fine-tuning of loudspeaker position should be performed with these screws in place, just in case the loudspeaker shifts from its optimum point on the stand. It should also be remembered that these screws are used specifically with the ONDIVA ARC: Ensemble provides a set of eight regular screws and rubber feet for other stands.

The ONDIVA ARC has a basic, but effective, cable management system, which routes any loudspeaker cable along the centre-line of the ARC, matching its bow-like shape. This is not a problem when using Ensemble's own cables (or similar), but may prove a little bit of a challenge with Nordost-style flat cables, and especially thick, heavy boa constrictor-like cables with weighty boxes, which could in theory prevent the ARC from doing its job of decoupling the ONDIVA from its surroundings. However, although the requirement for Ensemble electronics and cables is not mandatory, I suspect many of these loudspeakers will end up being used with Ensemble's new DALVIVO loudspeaker cable.





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“Urs Wagner of Ensemble holds two things as self-evident; first, that music is not only a force for good, but has life-affirming, health-giving properties, and second, that these properties are best realised through the medium of acoustic instruments.”



► Urs Wagner of Ensemble holds two things as self-evident; first, that music is not only a force for good, but has life-affirming, health-giving properties, and second, that these properties are best realised through the medium of acoustic instruments, recorded in a live acoustic environment with as little processing as possible. Typically, that means classical music. These two elements not only define Urs' wider outlook on life, but shape the products Ensemble manufactures. And the ONDIVA is no exception.

The ONDIVA is not a loudspeaker 'voiced' uniquely for classical music, but instead is referenced against the live concert hall and is 'less experienced' with music beyond that reference point, reflecting the ethos of the designer. The ONDIVA actually fares well with music far beyond its designer's experience, and predominately steers clear of 'opera singers trying to sing rock music' syndrome. That becomes clear because the ONDIVA is one of the few ported loudspeakers that passes the Trentemøller test: you can play 'Chameleon' from *The Last Resort* [Poker Flat] without the fast-paced nothing-but-a-transient ticks and beats 'gumming' up the bass ports.

It's not that the ONDIVA cannot play something like Avenged Sevenfold or Slipknot, it's just that it puts you in the kind of state of mind where you don't feel the need to play Avenged Sevenfold or Slipknot. Whether that's a good thing or not largely depends on how much of your listening time is spent listening to metal. If that really is your 'thing', the ONDIVA is unlikely to rattle your cage.

Rockist caveat aside, the ONDIVA is a lovely loudspeaker. It has a unique property that is common to every Ensemble loudspeaker I've heard to date, and that's a room-filling property that can only be replicated by omni-directional designs. The ONDIVA still has a distinct sweet spot between

the loudspeakers, but the off-axis performance is excellent. You can be sitting far to the left, right, walking round the room and even behind the loudspeakers and the tonal balance doesn't shift as markedly as most other dynamic drivers. This isn't just a novelty, it once again points toward that 'live instrument in a live room' effect, because that's how most live instruments behave in rooms.

The key aspects of the performance are fast-paced transient information and natural dynamic range. These are properties best exploited by acoustic instruments in a natural acoustic space, and such recordings are brought into the room by the ONDIVA. So, albums like *Somethin' Else* by Cannonball Adderley [Blue Note] sounds tight, smoky, and 'in the pocket', while 'The Lover of Beirut' from *The Astounding Eyes of Rita* by Anouar Brahem [ECM] sounds misty and ethereal. As they both should. However, 'Lucky' by Kat Edmonson from her *Way Down Low* CD [Spinnerette] accents the close mic'd qualities and she sounds artificially breathy and faux. Which probably says as much about modern studio technique and popular recording style as it does about the loudspeaker.

I can't help coming back to the word 'nice' time and again. This sounds like faint praise, but a loudspeaker this nice is easy to listen to, easy to love, and very, very good. It doesn't hide the truth of a recording – far from it, in fact – but the music it makes is very satisfying, just very nice.

The ONDIVA has a property that seems unique to really good loudspeakers; namely, that it makes you set a natural level for a recording, and that's not necessarily as loud as you might expect with rock, or as quiet as you might think from a string quartet. In fact, if anything, you tend to turn classical 'up' and rock 'down' through the ONDIVA; not because the loudspeaker accents the harshness inherent in non-classical ►

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▶ albums, but because it gives you the opportunity to play classical instruments as loud as they really can be (anyone who's heard Mahler's Eighth at full roar in a live setting will know precisely what I mean).

This sense of scale gives the ONDIVA a unique feather in its cap. If you close your eyes, it will never once give the game away about its size. You will be convinced that you are listening to a large, full-range loudspeaker, rather than a wave-shaped two-way perched atop a single bar of a loudspeaker stand. This scale – best achieved with full orchestral works – borders on the uncanny, and is a delight to hear.

ONDIVA is a consummate detail retriever, especially (but not exclusively) in terms of soundstaging properties. But that soundstage is not designed to draw you in or impress you: the ONDIVA's soundstage is wide and deep, but you don't realise this immediately, as you might with some loudspeakers that present a huge soundstage as some form of impressive opening gambit. It's more a slow, inexorable realisation that the soundstage is orchestral in its scope.

What is truly impressive about the ONDIVA sound, however, is the solidity of those images within that soundstage. An audiophile obligation is to play a well-recorded version of Sant-Saëns *Danse Macabre* during a listening session. And solo violin is a perfect example of how good the ONDIVA is at producing an instrument rooted in space. The music is designed to be something of a hallucinogenic maelstrom of sound, but it's always music, not musicians, that should be swirling around you. And the ONDIVA does this brilliantly.

There is a lot to like about the Ensemble ONDIVA, especially if your tastes run to more acoustic, arguably more cerebral material. This is one of the nicest loudspeakers you can get today. And that is something to savour. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

ONDIVA loudspeaker

Type: Two-way, rear ported dynamic standmount loudspeaker

Driver units: 1×28mm soft dome tweeter, 1× 180mm sandwich woofer, both custom made

Crossover: 12dB/oct, 1.8kHz crossover point

Frequency Response: 38Hz-25kHz (-6dB, in room)

Harmonic Distortion: 0.8% (average, above 100Hz)

Sensitivity: 88.5dB (1m/2.83V/pink noise)

Nominal impedance: 8 ohms

Recommended power: 50-180W

Connections: four-way binding posts, 6mm (recommended) or 4mm banana plugs, 8mm spades

Finish: Highly polished lacquer

Dimensions (W×H×D, excluding stands): 35×38×31cm

Weight: 15.8kg per speaker

Price: £10,980 per pair

ONDIVA ARC loudspeaker stand

Dimensions (W×H×D, excluding loudspeaker): 25×65×25cm

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Price: £2,200 per pair

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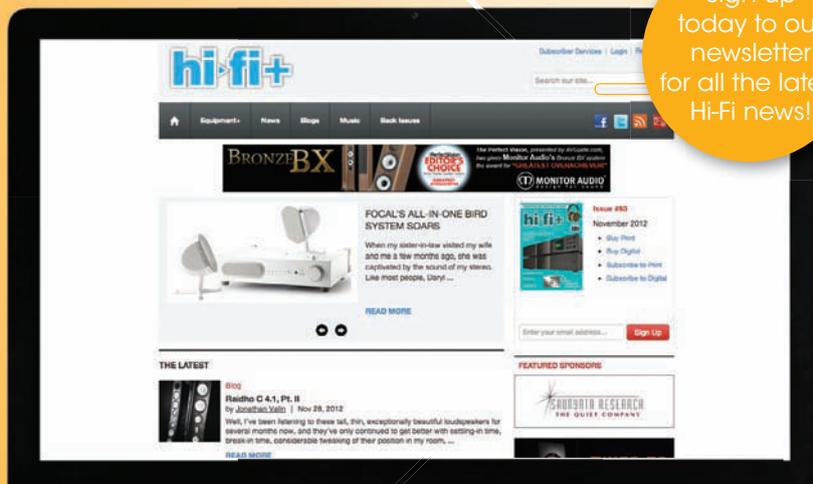
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Mad Scientist Audio BlackPod Ceramic Footers

by Nicholas Ripley

Mad Scientist Audio is the small husband and wife team of Bob and Kay Prangnell, working out of Auckland, New Zealand. Bob Prangnell has been a keen audiophile for over 40 years, and, when not designing electronics hardware and software, he loves nothing more than a spot of left-field experimentation.

A couple of years ago, Prangnell hit upon what he calls 'Black Discus', a proprietary epoxy-based composite, which is said to eliminate the demon RFI, but I think is more successful as a constrained layer damping material.

Mad Scientist's BlackPod Ceramic Footers are like a solid Oreo with a filling of Black Discus, with one face of the Oreo sandwich containing a ball made of one of three materials; Alumina ceramic, Zirconia ceramic, and Tungsten Carbide cermet. Prangnell prefers the sound of different kinds of ceramic ball in test, and you'll either buy a set of two Alumina and one Zirconia or spend \$30 more and buy a pair of Zirconia with one TC ball. We were given precisely five to test, two each Alumina and Zirconia, and one Tungsten Carbide, allowing us to build two different sets for comparison.

You can place anything audio-related (and less than 80kg) on three of these feet, with the ball facing upwards or downwards, typically depending the relative hardness of the surfaces. Mad Scientist suggests starting with source components or valve amps, and recommends a lot of experimentation to find the ideal layout. I found it best using the odd one out of the three directly under the centre of the power transformer, and the other two placed to minimise wobble on one component (balls up – literally, not metaphorically), while on a CD player, the lone pod was best under the transport mechanism (facing ball down) while the other two were at the rear of the player with balls up again. Clearly, experimentation is key.

Typically, I've been wary of using aftermarket footers because they often tangle with the tonal balance, pitching the treble forward and bright. These don't; even in standard Ceramic Footer guise, they retain a neutral balance throughout. As you experiment, you find the sound becomes smoother in some positions, more dynamic or more taut in



others. You'll go through a couple of weeks of *audiophilia nervosa*, then settle down for the long listen.

Regardless of fine-tuning, the sound takes richness, dimensionality, and tonal beauty throughout. Bass is powerful and controlled, too, and this is where spending that little extra on the TC/Zirconia trio comes into its own – the standard guise gives greater bass weight at the expense of tempo and bass precision, while the better set restores temporal precision throughout.

The acid test for such components is more on their removal – do I miss them enough to put them back? With the standard Ceramic BlackPod, the answer was 'probably', but the TC ball version, they were a definite worthwhile inclusion to the system, with no great downsides. That represents something of a footer first for me! Strongly recommended, especially in the TC version. +

DETAILS

Mad Scientist Audio: BlackPod Ceramic Footers

Price: \$179 (Ceramic BlackPod), \$209 (Ceramic BlackPod with TC Ball)

Manufactured by: Mad Scientist Audio

URL: www.madscientist-audio.com

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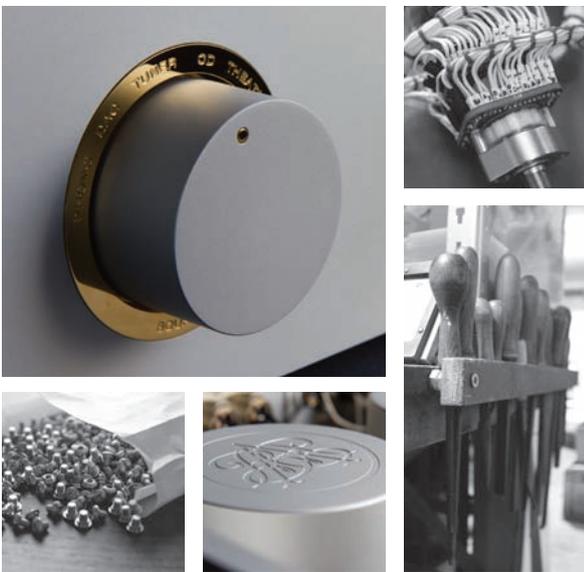
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record reviews

How To Read Them

The information contained in the record reviews is presented in the following way. Albums are identified by label and – where possible – serial number. Beneath this you will find one or more icons which denote the available formats for the recording. The first icon refers to the format reviewed.

The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information, the scale rates a standard, good quality pop recording as slightly below average.

This issue's featured reviewers are:

DD – Dennis D Davis

JK – Jason Kennedy

SM – Simon McEnery

	CD		120g LP
	Gold CD		150g LP
	HDCD		180g LP
	XRCD		200g LP
	Double Disc		10" LP
	DVD		Availability As S/H LP
	SACD		Vinyl Double Album
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			High-Res Download



Dark Jovian EP

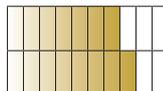
Amon Tobin

Ninja Tune

Amon Tobin is a master of the dark arts, a man who knows how to get the deepest, most hollow and, well, dark bass onto disc and place it in a subtly dystopic soundscape with great attention to nuance. He sometimes seems to be making soundtracks for the movies of Tarkovsky or Ridley Scott, but that's fine if you appreciate a good swathe of ambient electronica that buzzes and crackles around the edges. *Dark Jovian* therefore is not crammed with jolly ditties, but neither is it truly miserable; the absence of lyrics ensures as much and some might find the bass synth explorations to be strangely cathartic. The important thing is that it's a clean sound without the usual heavy compression associated with the genre and the absence of bludgeoning beats also ensure that it can be played at sensible levels.

Dark Jovian is an eight track EP with two remixes and a reshape, so there are five original tracks. Tobin describes them this way: "What I was really trying to do was to interpret a sense of scale, like moving towards impossibly giant objects until they occupy your whole field of vision, planets turning, or even how it can feel just looking up at night." I'd say he's succeeded. **JK**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Love Letters And Other Missiles

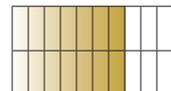
Julia Biel

Rokit

Julia Biel has a distinctive, borderline quirky voice... but not one that goes the full Newsom by any means. She wears red ribbons in her black boots (apparently this is important to her) and sings of an emotional life in an idiosyncratic style that finds her performing at jazz festivals across Europe without really sounding like a jazz artist. Her work has hints of trip-hop and Radiohead, so it's clearly on the edge of the mainstream. It's more interesting and intelligent than most contemporary singer/songwriter fare.

Biel has the assistance of a very capable musician in Idris Rahman, who plays every other instrument on the album as well as providing horn arrangements. He is joined by Seb Rochford the drummer/leader of Polar Bear and a few others who lay down some fine grooves around Biel's voice. "Blood is thicker than I want it to be. No matter what, you stick to me" is the chorus of 'Licence To Be Cruel' and gives some insight into the Biel vibe. Bittersweet but occasionally plain sweet, and even loved-up, this is an emotional map with subtle contours and occasional precipitous drops with some fine backing and a production that's aimed at young ears, but doesn't usually offend older ones. **JK**

RECORDING



MUSIC





Ben Webster & "Sweets" Edison

Ben Webster
ORG 117-3

SA

It's the middle of 1962 and while big bands had largely failed to survive the post-World War II period, their superstars continued to retain their vitality and popularity. Two of those stars – one (Ben Webster) from the Ellington band, and another ("Sweets" Edison) from the Basie Band – recorded their third album together backed by George Duvivier on bass, Hank Jones on piano, and Clarence Johnston on drums. These guys play at the top of their game, and it was one of the greatest games ever.

There is no development of new styles here, with the players opting instead to polish and refine their West Coast style to perfection in a small band setting with a killer two-horn front line playing standards to perfection. Add to that the fact that in 1962 Columbia was still producing some of the best sounding recordings of all time, and this stands out as required listening. I weed out duplicates from my collection ruthlessly, but love this recording enough to have kept my original mono 'demonstration' label original and the ORG 45 RPM vinyl issue. The SACD layer of this new issue is of demonstration quality, so add this to my list of duplicates I won't part with. **DD**



Coming Forth By Day

Cassandra Wilson
Sony Legacy 88875064601

180g 33 RPM

After a long stint as a Blue Note artist, Wilson switched to Sony in 2015 just in time for Billie Holiday's 100th birthday anniversary. This Holiday tribute album is available in a deluxe double LP, a CD and (as a Record Store Day special) a 10" LP with two cuts of Wilson on one side, the other with Billie Holiday versions. All but one of the dozen songs on the LP is a Billie Holiday 'cover' and Wilson stamps the music with her own signature. This should come as no surprise to fans; she has a distinctive sound among contemporary jazz vocalists.

Wilson went to producer Nick Launay to help carve out an atmospheric space much smokier and more mysterious than any live nightclub sound could ever achieve. Add to that a rhythm section from Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, Van Dyke Parks string arrangements, and contrasting guitar styles of Nick Zinner and T Bone Burnett, and you end up with a lot that could have gone very right, or could have instead sounded overblown. Fortunately, Wilson and Launay have succeeded in turning this into one of Wilson's very best releases. Despite the heavy studio effects, the sound is quite good, with the vinyl version separating out the lines all the better. **DD**



Wild Man Dance

Charles Lloyd
Blue Note B002243401

180g 33 RPM

Now in his late 70's, Lloyd continues to surprise us in the best ways with his musical development. Just compare this new album to Lloyd's second album from 1965, *Of Course*, *Of Course* and the first thing you notice before slipping the vinyl out of its covers is the remarkable transformation, from a young beatnik look in 1965 to the fanciful whirling dervish-like cover photo of 2015. He continues to enhance this track record with his first release as a Blue Note artist in many decades.

The first tip off as to how good this record is comes from the cover photo: it fits in well with the Eastern European infused atmosphere. The first track sets the mood with Lloyd's tenor circling around a throbbing rhythm section in hypnotic fashion. Lloyd has absorbed a lot of influences over the decades but I can't recall hearing the Coltrane influence so prominent, underscoring Lloyd's lifelong integration of spirituality and musical restlessness. Hauntingly beautiful throughout, this performance was recorded live at a jazz festival in Poland. Mastered by Bernie Grundman with help from frequent Lloyd collaborator Joe Harley, the sound serves the ethereal mood perfectly. This should be at the top of your 'must buy' list. **DD**





Compadres

Dave Brubeck

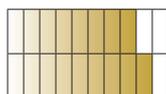
Speakers Corner 9704

180g 33rpm

Dave Brubeck disbanded his classic quartet after 17 years in 1967 in order to devote more time to composition. Overlapping that transition was a commitment he had made to perform with the second Newport Jazz Festival in Mexico in 1968. Recorded live during that festival, Brubeck was joined by bassist Jack Six, drummer Alan Dawson and Gerry Mulligan. Performing mostly Brubeck and Mulligan compositions with a couple Mexican standards.

Compadres enjoys the benefits of many live recordings, indulging in faster tempos and seeming less tame than many of the better known studio recordings. Opening with Mulligan's composition 'Jumping Bean', Mulligan runs through a brisk display of baritone dexterity over a slightly Latin inflected drum foundation, followed by a standard ballad 'Adios, Mariquita Linda' with Brubeck and Mulligan trading leads in one of their most beautiful performances. Equally compelling is the display of interplay between the featured soloists on 'Ampola', proving that Brubeck could survive life after Desmond without losing his signature sound. Don't let the unimaginative cover photo throw you—this is music that holds up as well into the twenty-first century as did the man himself. **DD**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Open Our Eyes

Earth, Wind & Fire

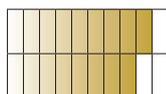
Audio Fidelity AFZ5 202

SAID

Creative genius Maurice White named his group EWF after elements of the astrological chart, rather than stringing names together. Perhaps White knew how often he would switch musicians or maybe he simply didn't want his group to sound like a law firm. In any event, by 1974 White got the mix of people and music right, resulting in this breakthrough commercial success. *Open Our Eyes*, EWF's fifth release, sounds bigger, edgier, and smoother than the mere eight musicians would account for.

The first five songs are some of the best music of this genre from the 70s, and helped fuel EWF up the charts. The hits 'Mighty Mighty', 'Devotion', 'Feelin' Blue', and 'Kalimba' are funk masterpieces that are excellent dance tunes. However, the album suffers from two problems. Half the album seems like filler, and EWF's followup album, *That's The Way Of The World*, was a much better LP and contains major hits for which EWF is remembered today. Recorded by Doors and Love engineer Bruce Botnick, the sound was outstanding and any deficiencies in sound from original pressings are the result of oil embargo vinyl. Steve Hoffman's SACD remastering is superb, and the digital medium allows easy programming of hits without the misses. **DD**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Takes To The Hills

Mose Allison

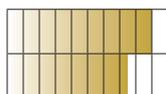
Pure Pleasure BAI17031

180g 33rpm

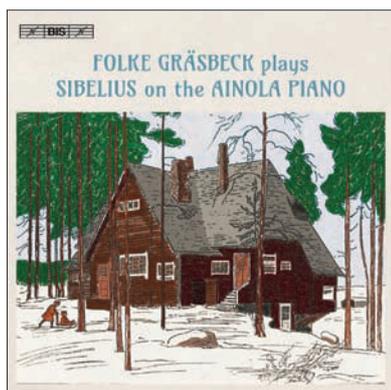
Record store owners always had a hard time with Mose Allison—some filed him in blues and others in jazz. Allison's unique delivery and writing style kept him from fitting neatly to any category. He started his career as a recording artist for Prestige Records in the 1950s. He mixed bebop and boogie-woogie piano style with the vocal delivery style of beatnik coffee house and stand up comedy. Born in 1927 at a Mississippi crossroads, not far from where Billy Joe McAllister was thrown from the Tallahatchie Bridge for whistling at a white woman, Allison came on his blues by emulation of the blues giants percolating through the delta during his childhood.

This 1961 LP was his third and final release on the Epic label while under contract with Columbia. Backed by a top flight jazz ensemble including Paul Motian, Addison Farmer, and Henry Grimes, Mose explores a broad selection of songs, but the star of the set is his rendition of Willie Love's 'V-8 Ford Blues', although his take on Big Joe Williams' 'Baby Please Don't Go' is also a stand out. This LP does not frequently turn up used that often and is a fine introduction to Allison's style. The original had fine Epic sound and the reissue is well mastered by Ray Staff. **DD**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Folke Gräsbeck plays Sibelius on the Ainola Piano

BIS 2132

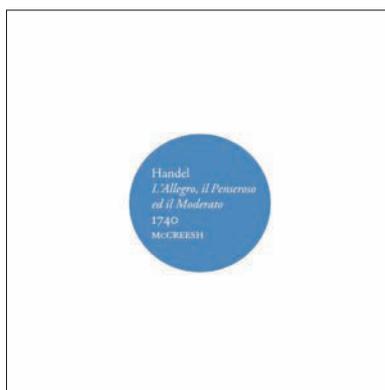


BIS's series of Sibelius recordings has covered the masterpieces, but also revealed some fascinating works that are less well-known. His piano pieces deserve greater recognition, and Folke Gräsbeck, an acknowledged Sibelius expert, is a fine exponent of them.

On this recording we have some of those obscurer pieces alongside better-known works like 'The Spruce Tree' or 'Souvenir from the Eight Piano Pieces', op. 99. There are also transcriptions of orchestral pieces such as 'Valse Triste', 'Pan and Echo', and even Sibelius's own arrangement of 'Finlandia'. Much like Sibelius's songs, there is often an intense distillation of the depth of feeling you find in the symphonies or tone poems, and this collection reveals this fully.

Gräsbeck has recorded some of the pieces in this programme already, but the interest here lies in his use of Sibelius's own Steinway (given to him on his 50th birthday in 1915), still in Sibelius's home, Ainola (now a museum), and where this was recorded. The sound on this recording is lovely. There is a little bit of an aged quality to the piano, but in the sense of a decent wine rather than any hint of decay. The fact that it's been recorded in a small space simply adds to the feeling of immediacy and intimacy. **SM**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Handel - L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato

Gabrieli Consort & Players, Paul McCreesh

Signum SIGCD392



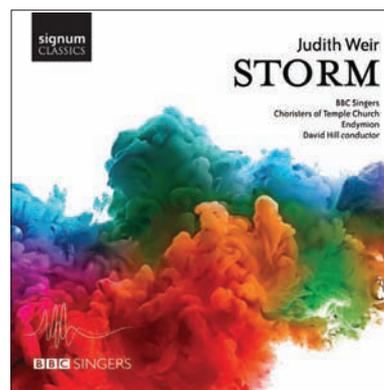
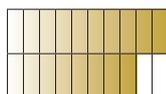
The Gabrieli Consort and Players and Paul McCreesh return to Handel for the first time in a decade, with this recording of Handel's setting of two Milton poems and one by Charles Jennens (il Moderato). It was much altered during Handel's lifetime, so McCreesh has returned to the original version of 1740, with the addition of some concerti that may well have graced that performance.

It's a joy to hear the Gabrielis giving us Handel again. The attention to detail, the vibrant tone, the briskly invigorating tempi, and the seamless ensemble are everything you could wish for. In particular, some of the wind playing is exquisite, but all the orchestral playing is fine.

The choral singing and the soloists are largely excellent. Jeremy Ovenden has the perfect tone and crisp diction for Handel, while Gillian Webster often has the most elegant and creamy legato. The famous 'As Steals The Morn' comes from this piece, and is gorgeously done.

Special mention has to go to treble Laurence Kilsby (a former winner of the BBC Radio 2 Young Chorister of the Year), recorded here shortly before his voice broke, whose singing is mature and stylish. **SM**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Judith Weir - Storm

BBC Singers, Endymion, Choristers of Temple Church, David Hill

Signum Classics SIGCD421



This CD is a retrospective of the Master of the Queen's Music's choral music, from the 'Missa del Cid' of 1988 to 2013's 'The Song Sung True'.

We get the full range of Weir's writing here, from the carefully crafted 'Magnificat' and 'Nunc Dimittis', very much in the Cathedral tradition, to the 'Missa del Cid', a pretty idiosyncratic piece that is nonetheless wildly inventive. Lastly we get 'Storm', a suite based around *The Tempest*, more whimsical than Britten's writing or Adès's take on Shakespeare, though occasionally moving.

It's clear from these pieces what a sympathetic writer Weir is for choir, but the BBC Singers on this recording leave us with no doubt. Their singing is by turns sensitive, rich, and excitingly dynamic. They are joined by Endymion on 'All the Ends of the Earth' and 'Storm', and the spare textures of both pieces work very well with these forces, particularly as recorded in the Temple Church, under David Hill's expert direction, and with the Temple choristers. The warmth of the acoustic probably accounts for some indistinct text in places, but that doesn't detract from an interesting recording. **SM**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Classic Albums

Album of the Month: Kraftwerk – Trans Europe Express

by Alan Sircom

By the late 1970s, 'Krautrock' was all but a memory. Neu!, Faust, and Ash Ra Tempel were gone, and Can's *Future Days* were behind them. Kraftwerk's 1975 LP *Radio-Activity* had failed to capture the same success of the band's break-out *Autobahn* from 1973. But, *Radio-Activity* also saw a couple of significant changes to the band line-up, with electronic percussionists Karl Bartos and Wolfgang Flür joining the original Kraftwerk polymath duo of Ralf Hütter and Florian Schneider. The album had also been Kraftwerk's first to dispense with flutes, guitars, and violins. A purely electronic album with two unique electronic percussionists would prove a template for later albums, creating a pivotal moment for the band, and music in general in the process. The result would be 1977's seminal *Trans Europe Express*.

Kraftwerk remains notoriously reluctant to discuss anything about the story behind its music, but some snippets of information are gradually appearing of the events at the time. These snippets include talk of the disciplined approach to touring and writing, and the purchase of a 32-step, 16-channel analogue sequencer to accompany the band's increasing collection of synthesisers, vocoders, and Orchestrons (a keyboard instrument similar to a Mellotron, with sounds recorded on optical discs instead of tapes).

In the wake of the *Radio-Activity* tour, Hütter and Schneider were busy writing a new album with a working title of *Europe Endless*, and met with David Bowie and Iggy Pop at Kraftwerk's Düsseldorf Kling Klang studio. This meeting proved important, shaping the lyrics and the reputedly even influencing the stark sound of the album. As a result of this meeting (and a conversation with rock critic Paul Alessandrini) 'Europe Endless' was 'downgraded' to a key track on the album, and Kraftwerk's long standing obsession with travel (*Autobahn* before this, *Tour de France Soundtracks* some years later) came to the fore. The result was *Trans Europe Express*, named after the train service.

Of course, anyone who has heard *Trans Europe Express* knows this instinctually. The album is defined by a train-like rhythm, especially in the title track and its segue into 'Franz Schubert' and 'Metal on Metal'. The combination of Hütter's Orchestron-derived string sounds, Schneider's sophisticated sequenced ARP, Moog, and even homemade synths, and the unique percussion pairing, created a sound that was at once rhythmically tight and yet ethereal, industrial yet dreamlike, dour yet uplifting. It's a dual concept album; the continent spanning, pounding beat of the *Trans*

Europe Express side, and the almost nihilist stark film-score of tracks like 'Showroom Dummies' and 'Hall of Mirrors'.

Receiving positive reviews and faring well in the stores at the time, *Trans Europe Express* could have easily drifted into obscurity, overshadowed by the 1980s Electronica movement of the UK with bands like New Order, Human League, and Depeche Mode, were it not for two things. First, all these bands kept on crediting Kraftwerk for shaping their sound, and a 1982 single called 'Planet Rock', by Afrika Bambaataa & the Soulsonic Force.

'Planet Rock' went on to become the foundation stone of rap music, and the track would not exist without Kraftwerk's driving beat and Orchestron break from *Trans Europe Express*.

Today, Kraftwerk still sounds like their music is being beamed in from tomorrow, and despite using 1970s electronic instruments, *Trans Europe Express* retains a timeless quality, one that spawned generations of musicians in a variety of genres. A true classic. +



Recorded: 1976 at Kling Klang Studio, Düsseldorf, Germany

Released: March 1977

Label: Kling Klang

Producers: Ralf Hütter, Florian Schneider

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