

hi-fi news

THE HOME OF REAL HI-FI

& Record Review



PURPLE PROSE & SMOKIN' SOUNDS

A STEREO SURPRISE...

ARC unveils its first *solid-state* integrated!



'Leak Stereo 20, still rocking in 2010'
Vintage review, p118

Roksan Radius 5.2
A revamped UK classic



CES 2010
Inside: all the hot hi-fi on show

Electrocompaniet
Hi-rez ECD1 DAC from Norway

High output speakers
Five 'valve-ready' floorstanders

- **PLUS** 13 pages of music • **VINYL RELEASE** Neil Young's *Everybody Knows...* on 180g vinyl
- **AUDIO MILESTONES** Tannoy Dual Concentric • **INVESTIGATION** Cutting art of vinyl
- **ON LOCATION** Linn Records • **HI-FI @ HOME** From Bush record player to Oracle Delphi

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MUSICAL FIDELITY

PRIMO Pure Class A Tube Preamplifier

New from Musical Fidelity. 14 tubes. Triode. Class A.
Fully balanced. Zero feedback. Mega technical performance.

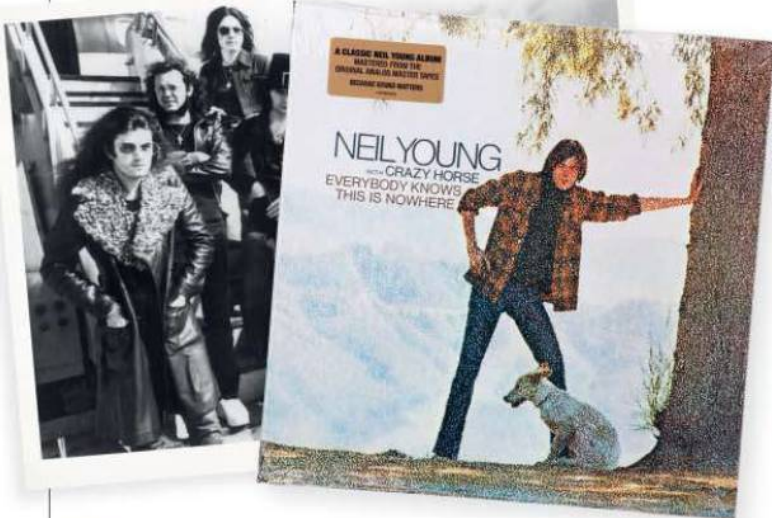




ABOVE: Heavyweight amps with a middleweight price from ATC, p62



LEFT: Bespoke valve phono preamp and matching MC transformer, see p60

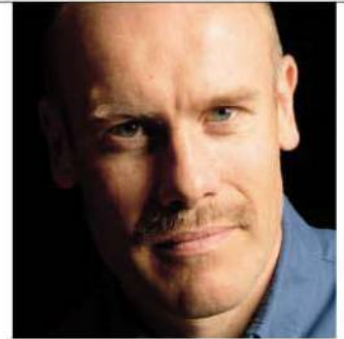


VINYL: Neil Young's *Everybody Knows...* is re-released as a 180g LP (p72) while Deep Purple's *Machine Head* is our Vinyl Icon (p74)

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So it was that Ken Kessler and I found ourselves looking at our watches, the interminable cab ride our penance between doses of one exquisite high-end audio experience and the next. You can read our extended five page Show Blog from p9.

Equally impatient, the cabbie swung his unnecessarily large vehicle onto the freeway by way of a 'short cut'. Sensing that the gearbox was about to erupt through the floorpan, my gaze swung to the various dials on the dash, and a green clockface caught my eye. 'What sort of Chrysler is this?' I enquired. 'A new hybrid,' he volunteered, 'not mass produced yet, but we've got four in the fleet for trial.' I paused, allowing the roar to dissipate within my underpants, 'so what's the mpg?' Came the proud reply, 'I'm getting about 11 to 15 but some of the guys have got 18...'



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Over at the Convention Centre, however, reduced power consumption was headline news, along with 3D entertainment, from the flat panel specialists.

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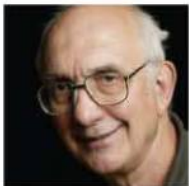
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Chrysler, please take note.

PAUL MILLER EDITOR

HI-FI NEWS' EXPERT LINE UP: THE FINEST MINDS IN AUDIO JOURNALISM BRING THEIR EXPERIENCE TO BEAR ON ALL AREAS OF HI-FI & MUSIC



BARRY FOX
Investigative journalist supreme, Barry is the first with news of the latest developments in hi-fi and music technologies



JOHN BAMFORD
HFN's Features Editor has a penchant for massive speakers and hi-res audio. JB travels the globe for our On Location specials



KEN KESSLER
is currently our Senior Contributing Editor and almost singularly responsible for the renaissance in valves and 'vintage hi-fi'



KEITH HOWARD
has written about hi-fi for 30 years, and edited *Hi-Fi Answers* for nine. KH performs our speaker and headphone lab tests



STEVE HARRIS
Former Editor of this very title from 1986 through to 2005. A lifetime in audio and a love of jazz makes Steve a goldmine



JOHN HOWES
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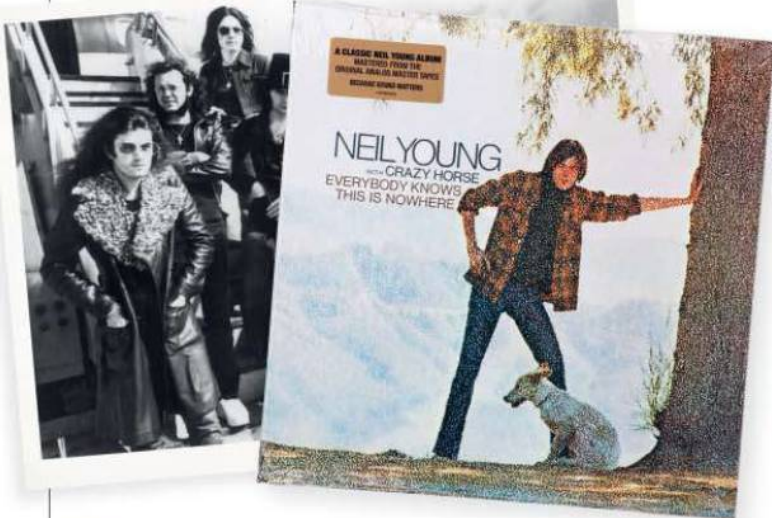




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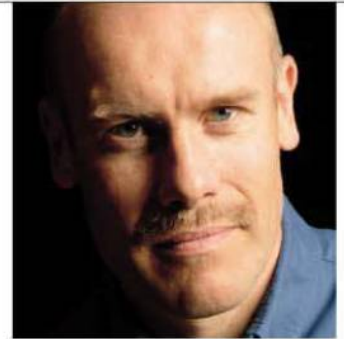


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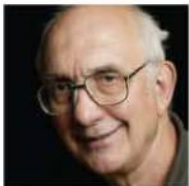
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B&W 800 Diamond Series

DIAMOND TWEETER TECH EXTENDS TO ALL NEW 800 SERIES SPEAKERS

Until now B&W's diamond tweeter technology has only been available in its flagship 800/802 Series speakers. Now revamped to include a more efficient quad-magnet design, this famous tweeter dome has, for the first time, been filtered down into every model of its latest, seven-strong 800 Series Diamond range.

Alongside the revised magnet assembly, the tweeter is also cushioned by a new surround material, offering superior dispersion properties, while bass performance has also been improved thanks to a dual magnet motor system that enhances the linearity of its larger cones.

Heading up the range is the 800 Diamond (£18,500), whose previous incarnation was used in London's Abbey Road Studios and George Lucas' Skywalker Sound in California. In addition to the new motor and voice-coils, the low frequency tuning and alignment of this floorstander has been adapted to deliver a 'fuller and more consistent bottom end performance'.

Next up is the 802 (£11,500; pictured right) the 'practical' version of its flagship stablemate. It retains the signature tweeter head design but benefits from a slimmer profile. The 800's voice coil and bass enhancements are also included.

The 803 Diamond (£7500) sports a more traditional floorstanding cabinet, incorporating three 7in bass drivers instead of the two 8in cones featured in the 802 and 800 speakers.

The 804 (£5750) is the smallest floorstander in the range with a similar footprint to the 805. The foundation of this new Diamond series is represented by relatively diminutive 805 standmounts (£3750; pictured left).

To transform the 800 Diamond Series into a surround sound set-up, two centre channel speakers are also available. The HTM2 (£3950) compliments the larger speakers in the series while the more compact HTM4 (£1950) is a perfect match for the smaller 804 and 805 cabinets.

All the speakers in the range are available now and for the first time come in a stylish gloss black veneer, together with the more traditional Rosenut and Cherrywood finishes.

Bowers & Wilkins,
01903 221 500
www.bowers-wilkins.com



Naim's quite digital hub

NAIM'S UNITIQUOTE ALL-IN-ONE CONNECTED SYSTEM FOR HI-RES STREAMING

UK manufacturer Naim Audio has launched a more compact and affordable version of its Uniti all-in-one wireless audio system – the UnitiQuote.

Bereft of a CD drive, this digital hub is geared more for the playback of connected media including wireless streaming of digital audio stored on UPnP-enabled home network devices like Naim's own HDX hard disk system, PC or Apple Mac.

The UnitiQuote supports playback of all popular compressed and lossless digital formats including MP3, AAC, WMA plus the streaming of hi-res 24bit/96kHz WAV and FLAC files.

Priced at £1350, around £650 cheaper than its larger sibling, the UnitiQuote also features FM, DAB and internet radio plus iPod/MP3 player connection via a front-mounted USB port or 3.5mm input.

Around the back are two optical and coaxial S/PDIF digital inputs plus an analogue input to service legacy audio sources.

The built-in stereo amp borrows technology from Naim's well known NAIT 5i integrated, with power rated at 2x45W into 4ohm and 2x30W in 8ohm. The 'Quote will be available in March.

Naim Audio, 01722 426 600
www.naim-audio.com



Cambridge Universal

UNIVERSAL BLU-RAY PLAYER WITH A UNIVERSAL PRICE TAG

With the first 'universal' CD/DVD/DVD-A/SACD-compatible Blu-ray players costing upwards of several thousand pounds, Cambridge Audio's announcement of a £400 Profile 2.0 universal BD solution looks set to cause a tremendous stir. Its Azur 650BD player will handle all aforementioned formats, including HDCD-encoded CDs, while decoding Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD Master Audio through its 7.1 channel analogue outputs.

Two USB ports are included along with HDMI 1.3c and Ethernet connections. The transport and DSP is sourced from Mediatek which, together with a little help from Cambridge's engineers, promises exceptionally fast disc and java-menu loading times. **Cambridge Audio, 020 7940 2200; www.cambridgeaudio.com**



Meridian Third Gen 808

NEW 808 CD PLAYER BOASTS ENHANCED ERROR CORRECTION

Meridian's third iteration of its 808 Signature Reference CD player features improved CD data recovery and upsampling, all courtesy of a CD-ROM based drive and custom apodising upsampling software.

The 808.3's error correction regime appears sufficiently powerful not only to correct playback read-out errors but also interpolate missing data in the original recordings.

Similar, the apodising filter is said to calculate and achieve upsampling from 44.1kHz to 192kHz while removing pre-echo during DAC conversion.

Further improvements on earlier models include twin 'SpeakerLink' digital outputs to support Meridian's DSP

loudspeakers plus numerous digital inputs for the connection of other audio sources, making the 808.3 into a digital preamp.

Another noticeable addition is the ID40 Sooloos input card for seamless integration with Meridian's Sooloos Digital Media System, allowing the streaming of stored digital music across your home network.

This CD player comes in the company's standard graphite, silver and black finishes while, plumping for Meridian Select, you can choose a bespoke colour to match your interior. Available now, the 808.3 Signature Reference will set you back £10,000.

**Meridian, 01480 445 678
www.meridian-audio.com**



Monster Pro Earphones

US MANUFACTURER UNVEILS TURBINE PRO COPPER IN-EARS

Hot on the heels of its Gold edition high performance headphones, Monster has rolled out its second, alternative model, the Turbine Pro Copper in-ear speakers. According to Monster,

while the Gold pair delivered a punchy bass quality the Copper version has been developed to offer greater control and accuracy over all frequencies.

A major factor in the Turbine's performance are Monster's foam made SuperTip noise-isolating buds. Inside these tips is a silicon insert, employed for its superior dampening properties.

Both earphones will be available in the UK from March at £250, or £280 with Monster headphone cable.

**Monster, 01923 693 766
www.monstercable.com**



Visit Hi-Fi News at Bristol

HI-FI NEWS STAGES UNIQUE AUDIO EVENT AT BRISTOL SHOW

Following our packed demonstrations at last year's Bristol Sound and Vision Show, *Hi-Fi News* will be returning with a new audio event for 2010. This year's show is a week later, from Friday 26th to Sunday 28th, but the Bristol Marriott Hotel venue remains unchanged.

Opening times for the show are 10am-5pm each day with entrance fees of £8 for adults and £4 for students/senior citizens.

Accompanied children under 16 may enter for free.

Once inside the show, the *Hi-Fi News* event will be free to enter for music enthusiasts of all ages. Our interactive demonstrations will start on the hour from 11pm to 4pm, with tickets available on the day from our booth on the ground floor where back issues and special subscription offers will also be available. We look forward to welcoming you!

SOUND & VISION

THE BRISTOL SHOW

Upcoming Events

IMPORTANT DATES FOR YOUR HI-FI DIARY

- 26-28 FEB** Sound & Vision, Marriott City Centre Hotel, Lower Castle Street, Bristol
www.bristolshow.co.uk
- 27-28 MAR** London High Fidelity Show, Heathrow
www.chestergroup.org
- 6-9 MAY** High End 2010, Munich, Germany
www.highendsociety.de

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Consumer Electronics Show

Words: Paul Miller Pictures: Ken Kessler



If ever an event was a barometer of the commercial health of the broader audio and AV industry then the Consumer Electronics Show, staged every January in Las Vegas, is the very thing. Fortunately, the news for 2010 looks to be good and getting better as attendance was up.

More importantly there was a mood of renewed optimism among the high-end manufacturers demonstrating their luxury kit at the Venetian, pictured opposite. Last year's despair was replaced by

determination as new turntables and loudspeakers filled the corridors high in the Venetian Towers with the sound of music.

Class D amps and phono stages were much in evidence, but fewer new MC pickups. Blu-ray players were shown by Electrocompaniet and Krell [p14] but the number of new CD/SACD players was also obviously on the wane. By contrast, and hinting to future trends, wireless servers and USB DACs were on the increase [see On Location, p112].



Available in black/chrome or the silver/chrome pictured here, the Conductor is the latest must-have tube preamp from German specialists, Audio Valve. Balanced inputs and outputs are offered with four 6H30 and 6922 valves offering +14dB of gain. The lower box houses its outboard power supply. See www.audiovalve.de.



From Merrill-Williams Audio, the REAL 101 (Rubber Elastomer Acoustic Laminate) turntable makes comprehensive use of an elastomer damping to isolate the motor, arm/spindle, bearing and chassis. See www.realturtable.com.



Not available until 2011, Nagra showcased its fabulously-engineered 300B integrated amp. Dubbed the 300i, this is a stereo push-pull design rated at some 2x20W/8ohm – a significant feat from pairs of these venerable triodes. See www.nagraaudio.com.



This open-baffle Granada speaker from Canada's Lotus Group features an active crossover and rare Feastrex Type II field coil driver with separate power supply and phosphor-bronze frame. Fed by a Hanns Acoustics CD-20 player and Pass Labs XA30.5 amp, the \$70k Granada offered up some particularly open and liquid-sounding music on the 30th floor of the Venetian Tower. See www.lotusgroupusa.com.

Open Source Amplification

new from Chord



CPM 2800 Digital Streaming Integrated Amplifier

The CPM 2800 is a force to be reckoned with... Based on our advanced amplifier and preamplifier technologies, not only does it boast analogue and digital inputs (XLR, RCA, COAX, OPTICAL and USB), but also, our unique Bluetooth technology, streams high quality audio from your phone, PDA, PC, iPod with updoc or any other Bluetooth enabled device directly to the DAC. Whatever your software choice the CPM 2800 is the amp for you....

Windows Media player, windows media centre, iTunes, winamp, twonky media, qtime, BBC iplayer, spotify, last FM, Foobar, EAC, sensation, 4ad, Radio, launchcast, AOL Radio, Y Music, Public Radio, Absolute, iTunes Live, Capital FM, Galaxy, Kiss FM, Heart, Virgin Radio, IGR, Classic FM, X FM, Shout Cast, You Tube, My Space, Hot 97FM, Simply Music, Wunder Radio, allRadio, Adobe Media Player, VIC Media Player, Real Player, E=MC2, X1-Amp, Airport Express, Amazon S3, AVS4you, songbird, koraris, blackberry, facebook, mediamonkey, cbs24, amarrk, abc, limewire, Kazaa, Windows Media player, windows media centre, iTunes, winamp, twonky media, qtime, BBC iplayer, spotify, last FM, Foobar, EAC, sensation, 4ad, Radio, launchcast, AOL Radio, Y Music, Public Radio, Absolute, iTunes Live, Capital FM, Galaxy, Kiss FM, Heart, Virgin Radio, IGR, Classic FM, X FM, Shout Cast, You Tube, My Space, Hot 97FM, Simply Music, Wunder Radio, allRadio, Adobe Media Player, VIC Media Player, Real Player, E=MC2, X1-Amp, Airport Express, Amazon S3, AVS4you, songbird, koraris, blackberry, facebook, Vuner, Napster.

Basically... Everything!

for more information

01622 721444

sales@chordelectronics.co.uk
www.chordelectronics.co.uk

CHORD

Chord Electronics Limited



A homage to the single-driver Western Electric horns of the 1930s, Silbatone's Aporia has itself been re-voiced to lend it a more forward and lively 'jazz-orientated' sound. Dubbed the Iris SE, the ruby-red cabinet is dominated by the huge maw of its horn, powered via a flat Manger driver loaded into a curved throat and fitted with a turbine-like diffuser to the front. At 130kg a piece and a sensitivity of 91.5dB the Iris SE is best suited to medium output tube amps. See www.silbatoneacoustics.com.



Along with its Couplet 250S and 1000S amplifiers, Chapter Electronics highlighted this solid aluminium beast of a CD player. The 24kg top-loading Sonnet uses a Sanyo mechanism with an ESS processor/DAC solution and is projected to cost £6895. www.chapterelectronics.co.uk.



The Xciter series of 'compact desktop' hi-fi components is gaining ground with the launch of this new S/PDIF and USB DAC from Cary Audio Design, pictured here with a prototype CD ripper and music server, below. The DAC features an AKM4399 32-bit converter and metal can LME 49713 and LME 49710 output devices. See www.caryaudio.com.



Inspired by the 'Low Boys' of yesteryear, the Polarix centre channel speaker from Wilson Audio is designed to complement its Alexandria and MAXX speakers in extremely high-end home theatre installations. What about a stereo pair? www.wilsonaudio.com.



We photographed these units in prototype form at the Munich show in 2009, but here are the latest editions to Pro-Ject's miniature 'Box-Design' series. The Stereo Box (top left) houses a 2x20W/8ohm Class D amplifier and will retail for around £360. It's the perfect partner for Pro-Ject's iPod Dock Box (top right) and the very new, super-slim CD Box, pictured underneath. See www.box-designs.com.

MUSICAL FIDELITY

M6i Integrated Amplifier

200wpc integrated amplifier. Balanced inputs. USB. Home theatre bypass.

M6CD/DAC

24bit/192k true upsampling CD player. 3 digital inputs.





'Learn the rules so you know how to break them properly' says Trenner & Friedl of its deceptively-dressed two-way, ported loudspeaker. The multi-ply birch cabinet accommodates two paper-coned drivers including an HF unit horn-loaded to help achieve a high 94dB sensitivity. The sound? Remarkably open and expressive when driven from an RA Box 8W amplifier. www.trenner-friedl.com.



For those who lusted over the inaugural EAT Forte turntable comes this new single-chassis Forte S design pitched at a still-not-inconsiderable €5670 complete with Pro-Ject 12in tonearm (€4170 without arm). The two motor/dual drive belt regime is retained along with electronic speed control and the vinyl mat. The huge alloy platter itself is slightly smaller here – weighing 16kg instead of 20kg. See www.euroaudioteam.com.



Hot on the heels of its DSi200 integrated amplifier [see p24], Audio Research showcased yet another bespoke Class D amplifier. The DS450 power amp is substantially beefier at 2x450W although it is based around the same proprietary (PWM) switching MOSFET output stage as its integrated brother. See www.audioresearch.com.



California bred, these sculptured separates delivered a cosmic sound, worthy of the name Constellation Audio. The new Altair preamp was joined by Orion phono stage and Sirius DAC/CD player, the latter with a costly NEO VRDS mech from Teac/Esoteric. See www.constellationaudio.com.



Edwin van der Kley of Siltech was showing this innovative and as yet unnamed tube preamp under the banner of the 'world's quietest'. Edwin has spent years acquiring unused tubes from 1959-62 and guarantees at least 10,000 hour lifetimes per set. Hard-wired and hand-built, this battery-powered design has clearly been conceived to set new standards. See www.siltechcables.com.

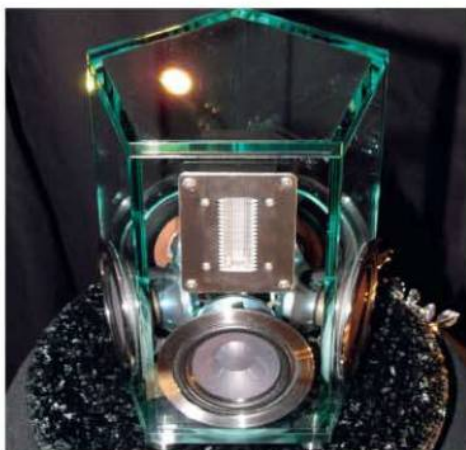
SHOWBLOG First sight of new products & technology



Alongside its new Compact Reference speaker, TAD (Pioneer Corp's high-end affiliate) showed this incredible \$26.5k D600 CD/SACD player built onto a 70kg cast-iron base! The player features a proprietary master clock and twin PCM1794 DACs from Burr-Brown. See www.tad-labs.com.



Nothing up in the air about this 40kg Sleipner Reference turntable from Bergmann Audio. Touted as a 'turntable without bearing' the platter is both supported and centred on a cushion of filtered air supplied by a separate 20kg pump. Speed control is fully electronic. The linear-tracking air-bearing tonearm has its armtube and headshell fashioned from carbon-fibre. See www.bergmannaudio.com.



Last year we saw the massive glass Arabesque speakers. This year the Netherland's Crystal Cable demonstrated more modest ambitions with the super-cute Pentatone standmount design featuring a bass/mid driver on each of its five facets. The drivers look to be smaller-scale versions of the Audio Technology bass/mid and RAAL ribbon tweeter used in its bigger brother. See www.crystalcable.com.



Launched to complement its S-1200 Full HD AV processor/preamp, Krell's Evolution 555 Blu-ray player was demonstrated to grand effect through a SIM2 projector. Whether replaying multichannel Dolby TrueHD, DTS HD-Master Audio or stereo CD/DVD, the audio section benefits from ESS Technology's 32-bit Sabre DACs in combination with Krell's own differential CAST analogue output stages. See www.krellonline.com.



One of the big hits of the show, Vandersteen's \$45k Model 7 is a four-way loudspeaker employing an active (400W) dual-12in subwoofer system. Each of the ScanSpeak mid-bass, mid and HF drivers are modified to include Vandersteen's own carbon fibre/balsa composite cones. See www.vandersteen.com.

New products and revised classics

- Ayre QB-9 USB digital to analogue converter
- Esoteric C-03 preamplifier and A-03 pure class A power amplifier
- Lyra Delos and Kleos moving coil cartridges
- Ayre CX-7eMP, C-5xeMP disc players and K-5xeMP preamplifier
- Esoteric D-07 digital to analogue converter
- Stax SR-404 and SRM-600 limited edition earspeaker system
- Brinkmann Bardo magnetic direct drive turntable
- Esoteric E-03 phono preamplifier
- Sumiko Palo Santos Presentation moving coil cartridge



Perhaps better known for its 'High Energy Conductivity Cables' Cable Research Lab also has a couple of speakers on its books, including this three-way Alphama floorstander. Behind the fret-like grille lies a 25mm dual-ring radiator tweeter, two 102mm paper-coned mid drivers and a 165mm paper bass unit. Sensitivity for this sealed-box design is rated at a high 90dB and loading a nominal 8ohm. See www.cableresearchlab.com.



Just part of the hugely sophisticated (and Swiss) Souolution range on show. Based around a high-end JPL-2580M mechanism from StreamUnlimited, the dual-mono 740 CD player acts as a digital hub with four digital input and output connections, custom DSP and large RAM buffer. A second DSP includes Sonic 2 software from Anagram Technologies, applying 8x oversampling with reduced ringing. Auditioned with Wilson Maxx 3s, the combo sounded insightful and supremely dynamic. See www.souolution-audio.com.



Flying the flag for the venerable 300B triode is Silbatone's flagship Reference 300 amp, a cost-no-object design featuring 'semi-silver' foil and nickel-core output transformers, silver litz internal wiring and the rare Bendix 6900 driver tube. Rated output is 8W into 4/8/16ohm loads. Silbatone reckons this is the only such amp capable of driving the likes of the Wilson Watt/Puppy. See www.silbatoneacoustics.com.



Single-cone speakers are on the rise as Acoustic Technologies demonstrated with its Classic Series full-range floorstander employing a 3in titanium coned driver. With its acoustically-tuned enclosure, silver internal wiring, Cardas CCGGL binding posts and absolutely no crossover, the Classic will accommodate 15W of amplifier power to deliver a remarkably large-scale and tightly-focused sound. Price is \$2650 per pair. See www.singledriver.net.



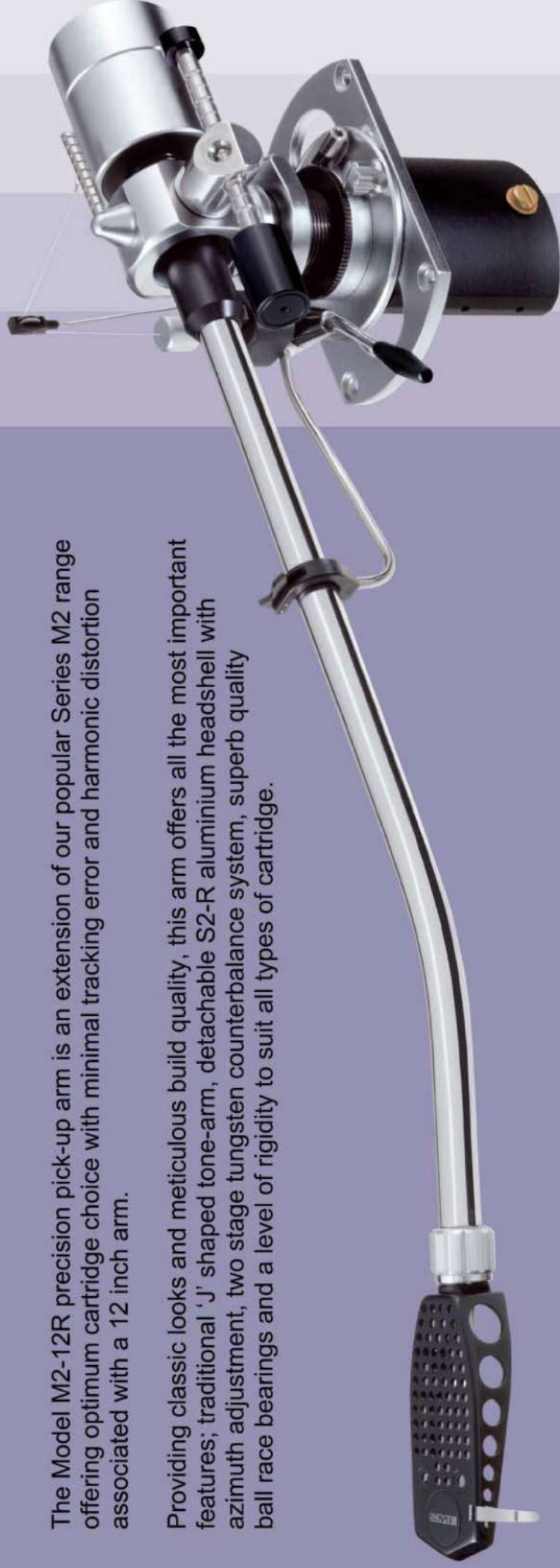
Not just a USB 2.0 DAC supporting resolutions up to 24-bit/96kHz, this compact 'Le Mans' solution from Furutech also includes a Class D amplifier module from Texas Instruments. The 60W claim emblazoned on its fascia refers to 4ohm loads – figures closer to 40-45W are likely into 8ohm. S/PDIF and AES/EBU digital inputs are also included. See www.furutech.com.

Next
month
Ken Kessler reports from
THE Show at CES 2010

SERIES M2-12R

The Model M2-12R precision pick-up arm is an extension of our popular Series M2 range offering optimum cartridge choice with minimal tracking error and harmonic distortion associated with a 12 inch arm.

Providing classic looks and meticulous build quality, this arm offers all the most important features; traditional 'J' shaped tone-arm, detachable S2-R aluminium headshell with azimuth adjustment, two stage tungsten counterbalance system, superb quality ball race bearings and a level of rigidity to suit all types of cartridge.



SME

“The best pick-up arm in the world”

Secrets from the groove

Barry Fox brings you an historical insight into the dark art of cutting vinyl

Reader Julian Ashley chokes on the idea of new LPs being cut from commercially pressed CDs. 'Tell me it isn't true...' he asks in the *Yearbook 2009 Sound Off* pages. I also choked when I heard what the engineers at Air were saying [see *HFN* Nov '09]. If the only available source is a CD, I thought, why not just buy the CD? Curiosity aroused, I dug out my original notes on LP know-how from what has since become known as the 'golden age of vinyl.' [See box-out p20].

The 1960s brought a hi-fi boom built on the stereo LP. But in the 1970s record company greed and incompetence nearly killed the goose. To cut costs LPs got thinner, so warped causing wow and distortion from tracking weight fluctuation. LPs got noisier too because reject discs were recycled, complete with their paper labels. Clumsily cut masters, poorly electroplated stampers, and clumsy factory press control only added yet more noise and distortion.

QUICK FIX

The quick and easy fix was to artificially 'equalise' the recorded sound; make it sound louder like a modern TV commercial, and drown the background noise. The tougher solution, from resourceful companies such as Mobile Fidelity in the USA and Nimbus in the UK, was to 'supercut' higher quality versions of commercial recordings, offering them at twice or three times the mass market price. Early cutting heads used in the 1930s could



handle frequencies up to around 10kHz. During the war, Decca doubled the frequency for military sonar testing. Natural music has only weak high frequency content and if the cutter heads are cooled with helium gas they can cope with 20kHz. But in the 1970s a lot of music was far from natural.

Nimbus, with deep classical roots, did not talk much at the time about cutting pop records. But as chief cutting engineer and technical director Gerald Reynolds recalls:

'We were doing a lot of pop music mastering and the industry was going through a phase of putting on extreme amounts of top level, for instance cymbals and synthesizers. We had to tell them to tame their EQ. I was not prepared to risk the health of my cutter heads. They burn out if overloaded with high frequency energy.'

One answer to extreme high-end was to cut at half speed. Indeed early LPs were cut at low speed, out of sheer necessity. The master tape and the disc cutting turntable ran at half speed, to halve the high frequencies going to the heads. But as soon as cutter head technology could cope, the studios switched to real-time cutting for the reason that at half speed everything costs twice as much in engineering time.

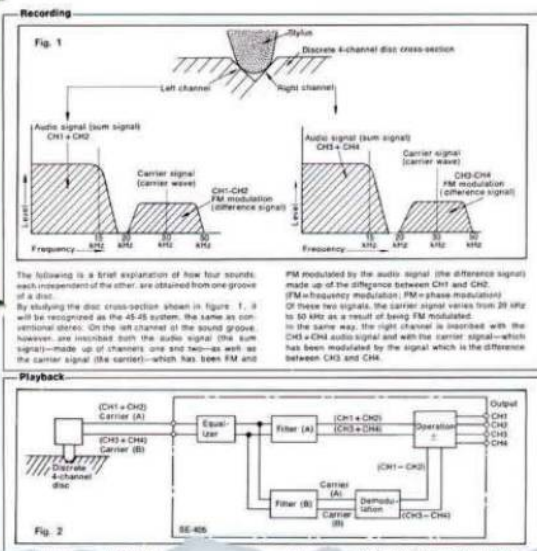
JVC picked up the idea again for CD-4, the failed quadraphonic LP system. The CD-4 format needed over 40kHz bandwidth, and no existing cutter could cope. So JVC built a CD-4 facility in California, run by engineer Stan Ricker.

Driving the heads with half pitch frequencies effectively quadruples the power handling, making a 600W system behave like a 2400W rig. When CD-4 flopped JVC was left

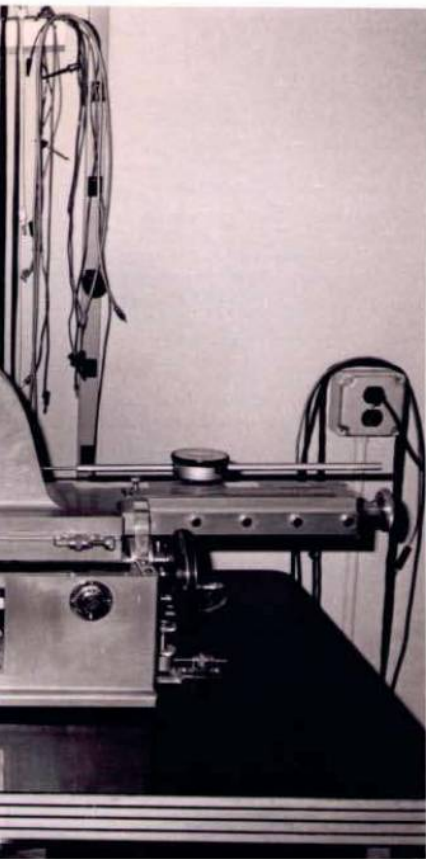
RIGHT: Gerald Reynolds, chief cutting engineer and technical director at Nimbus and now Wyastone. He remembers cutting a Walton piece: 'the pistol shot was so loud it lifted the cutter head clean off the surface of the master.'



A BRIEF EXPLANATION OF THE CD-4 SYSTEM



BELOW: The original lathe used by Peter Goldmark to cut the first LPs in the 1940s. During his time with Columbia Records, Goldmark was instrumental in developing the 33.3rpm long playing record



with the half speed cutting centre laying idle, and Stan Ricker, on full pay, twiddling his thumbs.

So Ricker started experimenting with half speed cuts of conventional LP material and found that in some cases the cut disc sound was better than the original master tape.

YOU WHAT?

This isn't as crazy as it sounds. At the slower tape reproduction speed there is less hysteresis loss in the tape heads. Transient rise time is halved and everything in the system 'cruises', like a high power amp with the volume set low.

Says Gerald Reynolds: 'Nimbus did do some half speed cutting, but only out of necessity. I remember once we had to cut a Walton piece with grand overture that had vacuum cleaners and pistol shots. The tape had been recorded at

30ips and we could only handle 7.5 and 15ips. Even then the pistol shot was so loud it lifted the cutter head clean off the surface of the master.'

Young engineers now freshly discovering long forgotten skills – and hi-fi buffs buying newly cut LPs – should perhaps be warned that half-speed cutting is not in itself a quality guarantee. The bass frequencies are halved too, and may be too low to

cut. So the final recording sounds bass-light. Also there is the same old commercial problem that everything takes twice as long and costs twice as much in studio time.

The cutting equipment that JVC installed in California was not just existing equipment switched to half speed. It was custom designed to minimise bass loss, with equalization matched to half speed reproduction and no transformers.

Adds Reynolds: 'We used valve cutting amplifiers from Neumann, with 300W per channel, which gave more headroom than a solid state 600W amplifier. And valves give soft clipping if you ever get to the point of overloading. You notice that especially on piano transients. You should get a ping but without the headroom you get fuzz.

'We also used a dynamically adjusted low pass filter to save the heads from excessive HF levels. The Neumann valve amplifiers had a new front end built by Jonathan Halliday (the brains behind CD cutting technology that is still used round the world to cut DVDs and Blu-ray discs). We were using only passive gain control with no other electronics in the chain. Jonathan Halliday also replaced the drive

screw for the control movement of the cutter head to improve control.'

Where did all this equipment go? Gerald Reynolds has no idea.

Nimbus started pressing CDs in 1984, pressed its last LP in 1986, and went through all manner of financial turmoil, including ownership by Robert Maxwell and re-birth as Wyastone. The LP hardware went to a broker and was

sold on. At one time co-founder the late Count Numa Labinsky bought back some of the LP pressing

equipment but it was never used, and so it was sold on again.

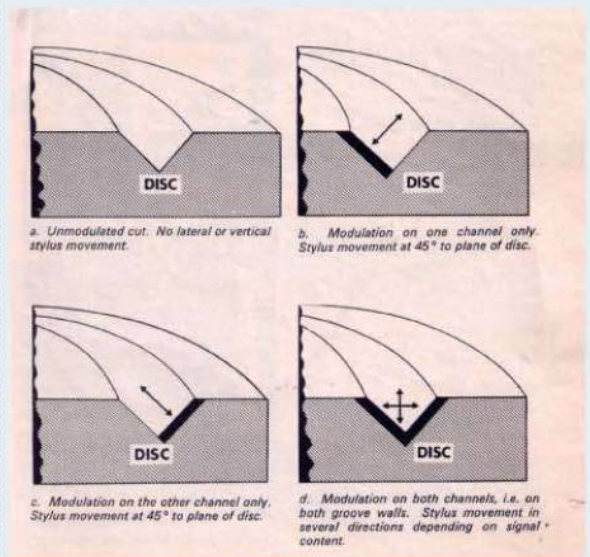
PRE-DIGITAL STRUGGLE

In today's digital era it is easy to forget how vinyl engineers had to struggle with phasing and gain. If there is too much out-of-phase sound between the left and right channels, the cutter head has too

ABOVE: Engineer Stan Ricker who headed up JVC's CD-4 quadrophonic cutting system in the early '70s. CD-4 required records to be cut at half speed; when the format failed Ricker started experimenting with half speed cuts of conventional LP material – with surprising results



BELOW: The structure of a record groove showing how stereo recordings require stylus movement in several directions



INVESTIGATION

much vertical motion, creating deep grooves which affect the flow of chemicals in the plating baths. Too much vertical movement also means the replay stylus will bounce in the groove causing distortion

If the sound is loud, there is lot of lateral movement, so the grooves must be widely spaced to avoid one groove crashing into the next.

THINKING AHEAD

The early answer was to set the cutter spacing wide for the whole recording. But this severely limits playing time per side. In pre-war years Parlophone had dreamed of vari-pitching, setting the groove pitch to suit the music, but could not make it work. With the coming of tape it was easy to fit an advance head to the tape deck which listens to the sound ahead of cutting and adjusts the groove pitch and spacing to match. But not all vari-pitch systems are equal.

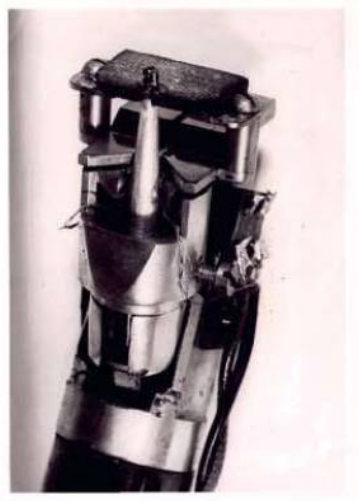
Neumann lathes came with a standard two spacing updates per revolution.

Nimbus improved this to eight per revolution. CBS Labs in Connecticut – where Peter

Goldmark cut the first LPs in the 1940s – developed a two-stage process, which was used in the CBS cutting rooms in New York and London. The master tape was run once through a computer to memorize the content and then the memory log used to control the cutter pitch with 200 updates per revolution.

The Nimbus team set itself an even greater challenge when it started cutting hi-fi discs at 45 rpm.

'The idea of Super Analogue Masters came from the 12in



45rpm disco recordings that were popular in the 1970s,' recalls Gerald Reynolds. 'SAM gave us the greatest improvement in vinyl sound quality. We taped at 30ips with Ampex ATR-100 machines and cut at 45rpm. We issued a Comparison set with several records variously sourced from analogue and digital recordings, most cut at 45rpm, except for one at 78rpm. That is by far the best – if you can play it. The problem there is making the disc flat

enough to play at 78rpm.'

EMI picked up on the idea, releasing Dynamic Sound 45rpm LPs, but

these offered a playing time of only 15 minutes per 12in side. Using once secret technology, also built by Dr Jonathan Halliday, Nimbus pushed stereo playing time to over half an hour per 12in 45rpm side.

'Admittedly that was with low level sound like a harpsichord,' says Reynolds, 'but we managed between 24 and 25 minutes of orchestral music and 22 to 24 minutes of pop. The trick was to let the cutter head know not just what level sound was coming next but also what level of sound had been cut in the previous groove. So it was looking back in time and predicting. With speech recording we were getting 60 minutes from a 33rpm side, in stereo. Although there is limited stereo spread with speech.'

IT'S AN ART, TOO...

Not every cutting engineer relied on cutting edge science, though. I once spent an afternoon with George Peckham [see Investigation, *HFN* Feb '09] who had initially worked for EMI and the Beatles before starting

GOLDEN YEARS...

The golden age of vinyl did not just happen. It was the result of fateful twists and unexpected consequences. Until 1939 studio recordings were made by cutting direct to a 78rpm master. US recording engineers then borrowed an idea from RCA, which had tried to sell 33.3rpm discs to the public in the early 1930s. The groove size and pitch were the same as for a 78rpm disc but the lower speed gave a longer playing time. Lack of an industry standard and loud background noise caused by the low speed tracking killed consumer sales. But studios could use low noise lacquer discs at 33.3rpm and 16in discs to allow extended 'takes'. The downside was that the 33.3rpm recording then had to be copied to 78rpm masters for commercial pressing, which inevitably lost some quality. This explains why recordings made before 1939 may sound better than those made over the next ten years.

Studio recording quality improved again in the late '40s when Ampex and 3M delivered the first tape recorders based on technology developed by BASF and Telefunken in Germany, and commandeered by the US military at the end of World War 2. This spurred CBS Labs into launching the 33.3rpm LP in June 1948. Development of light electromagnetic pickups let CBS use soft vinyl plastics, and a narrow 'microgroove', for longer playing time and low background noise.

Although the standard for stereo was set in 1958, it took until the '60s for stereo releasing to become the norm, start the hi-fi boom and bring happy times for the record industry. The 1970s saw mass production quality collapse and create the market opportunity for short run supercuts.

Gerald Reynolds has only one regret from the vinyl age – that Nimbus did not stockpile mint copies of the supercuts produced in the 1970s.

ABOVE LEFT: An original stereo cartridge made by Alan Blumlein at EMI Labs in the 1930s; Blumlein patented stereo in 1931

his own cutting studio, The Master Room, along with technical guru Sean Davies. Peckham was the first cutting engineer ever to win an American Grammy award and in 1972 two-thirds of the discs in the British and US charts had all been cut by him – often with a nickname like Pecko or Porky scratched in the inner groove to identify his work.

I wanted to find out how Peckham had managed to cut so many LPs with so much level and such long playing time.

I never did get a clear answer. He wasn't being secretive. 'I just have a go,' he told me.

Those were the glory days of the pop music industry and Peckham could afford to cut by ear, experimenting with EQ settings while pushing meters into the red and wasting masters until he got one that sounded right both to him and the musicians. ☺

LEFT: Legendary UK mastering engineer and American Grammy Award winner George Peckham. His approach? 'I just have a go...'

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INVESTIGATION

Even with half speed cutting, the need to copy from tape to disc inevitably sapped some quality from the master. So in the 1970s the audiophile industry again looked back, even further, to the pre-tape days when recordings had to be cut direct to disc.

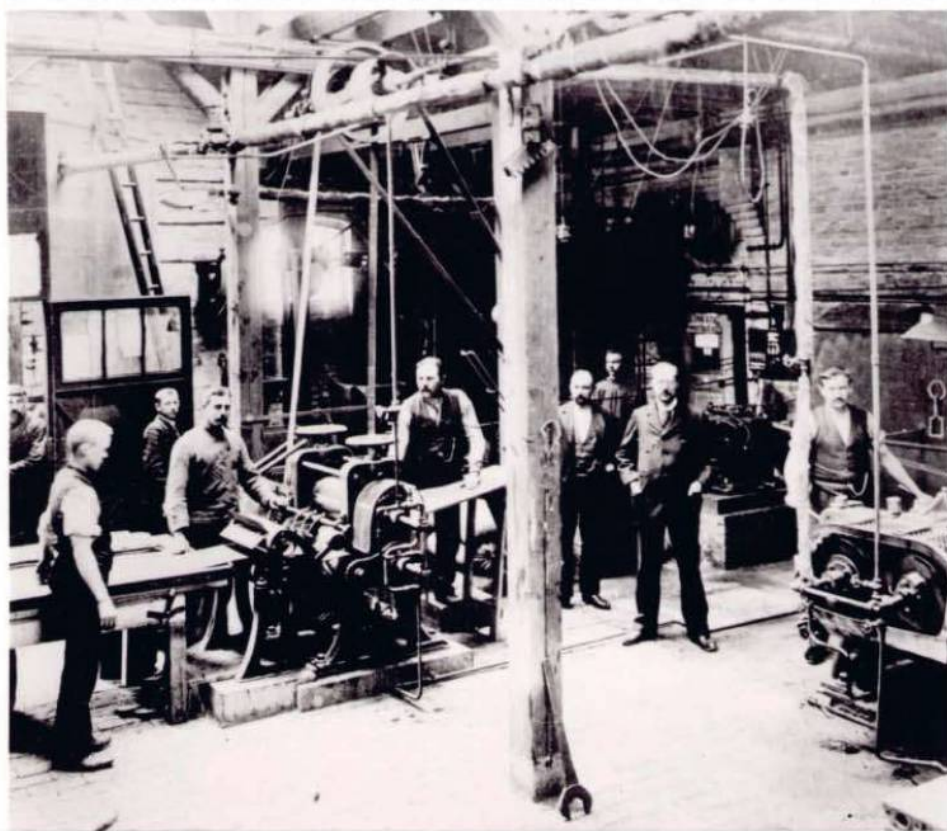
This method sees the studio sound mixed live and fed direct to the disc cutting lathe. There is no quality loss but also no opportunity for editing. At best the recording captures musical excitement and tension in the highest fidelity; at worst it captures mistakes, or the sound of musicians playing safe to try avoid making mistakes.

ACCIDENTS WILL HAPPEN

Master lacquers are notoriously variable in quality and if the surface is blemished the recording must be junked. The master lacquer is inevitably destroyed by the first stage of the electro-plating process needed to produce metal stampers. If the metal plating is blemished there are no second chances.

Doug Sax, the American musician and producer who pioneered direct disc recording in the 1960s and 1970s (initially with Sheffield Labs and Lincoln Mayorga) spent a quarter of a million dollars on recording the LA Symphony Orchestra with three lathes to produce three masters at the same time. One whole day's recording, valued at around \$75,000 was lost when something went wrong with the electro-plating bath to which all the masters had been rushed after the session.

Why the rush? Because Sax and others had found that the master lacquer has 'memory' and some of the high frequencies will be lost as



ABOVE & BELOW: Then and now – shellac discs are made at the DG factory in Germany around 1900 while (below) Gerald Reynolds is pictured in Wyastone's modern, hi-tech, all-digital burn-to-order facility – see www.wyastone.co.uk

the material relaxes in the hours after cutting. So direct cut plating for supercuts was usually done within one hour of lathe cutting.

BURN TO ORDER

Nimbus is now known as Wyastone and is doing a roaring trade in burn-to-order CDs. So I asked Gerald Reynolds what he thought of the resurgence of interest in vinyl?

'I can understand it because vinyl does two things to flatter music. When you put the needle down you immediately get low level rumble which feels like ambience and that goes a long way to help the sound of close-miked recordings which have no recorded ambience. Also, vinyl rolls off the high frequencies in a helpful manner, for instance if the original recording is too edgy.

'When we were making both CDs and LPs we would do comparisons at public demonstrations and for music societies, for instance with the Hanover Band recordings. We played the first movement of a piece from an LP, the second from CD and the last from LP. What people noticed most of all was how muddy the sound gets at the end of an LP, because of inner groove distortion.'

'I would not want to go back,' he concludes. 'It is so difficult to make good LPs. It's the unpredictable nature of the process that drives you mad. It was getting very difficult to get good blank lacquers. We

were buying the best, but having reject rates of between 30% and 40% even then. The problem is that you have to cut the entire side before you know you have to junk it. The lacquers may have been all right for loud pop material but not for anything with a wide dynamic range. There was just too much background noise.'

PLATING 'N' PRESSING

Reynolds visibly shudders when he recalls the 'black art' chemistry of electro-plating LP stampers and the know-how involved in getting the pressure of the factory presses just right for the grade of hot vinyl used, and evenly balanced, never being able to predict how many pressings can be safely made from a stamper before quality falls off, or how many new stampers can be chemically grown from the original masters.

'Engineers would telephone each other and tell stories about problems that seemed to depend on which way the wind was blowing,' he recalls.

Apart from Nimbus, only Teldec in Germany and JVC in Japan really cracked all the plating and pressing problems, typically using vinyl developed for the ill-fated CD-4 program. Now the plants are long gone, the engineers retired and their skills left waiting to be inherited. But that's another story for another day. ☺



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Hi-Fi News - December 2009

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EDITOR'S
CHOICE



Audio Research DSi200 (£5106)

Valve specialist ARC unveils its first solid-state integrated amplifier, and like the SP-7 preamp, it's an all-tranny product that may inspire die-hards to forgo the glow
 Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Audio Research Corporation's image as a maker of valve electronics is so all-encompassing that many audiophiles are unaware that the company has been producing solid-state gear for over 30 years. Transistor products arrived in ARC's catalogue long before CD, custom installation and multichannel almost forced their presence. But valves have always dominated, so it's important to understand *why* the doyen of post-modern tube amps would even bother with transistors if one is to approach the DSi200 – the company's first-ever solid-state integrated amplifier – with an open mind.

No mystery here: Audio Research has *always* preferred tubes over trannies, and that hasn't changed. But the company is commercially savvy and pragmatic: why alienate the largest part of the market? Transistor amp sales are logarithmically greater than those of valve amps, yet the original inspiration for entry into the solid-state market was far more poignant: in the early 1970s, there was a distinct feeling that supplies of tubes might simply dry up.

With hindsight, we know that valves did survive, but back in 1974, when planning his company's future, Bill Johnson decided to add solid-state models to the range, beginning with the D-100 100W/ch stereo power amp, introduced in August 1976, followed by the 350W/ch D-350 in October 1977, and the 50W/ch D-52 in August 1978. Sales were brisk until the first reviews appeared, the audio magazines taking a 'horrified' purist stance.

Simply put, the hidebound hacks of the day attacked the units as much on principle as on actual performance. ARC's founder Bill Johnson described them to journalist Robert Harley, in an interview in *Stereophile* in 1994, as feeling 'betrayed by our sojourn into solid-state'. Audio Research eventually threw in the towel,

RIGHT: Not quite as repellent as the 'green monstrosity' on the Ref 5, the DSi200's panel seems slightly easier on the eyes. Note the polarity inversion and mono front panel buttons

re-focusing on tubes. Thirty years on, ARC manufactures all-valve, all-transistor and hybrid products without fear of reprisals.

ALL YOU COULD WANT

With the DSi200, ARC has a near-perfect package that balances all that a true audiophile wants in an integrated, with enough flash-bang-wallop to seduce those who can't deal with hair-shirt minimalism. Amusingly, the DSi200 *looks* like an exercise in audiophilic self-abnegation, due to a front panel bearing only two knobs for input and level (actually bi-directional twist-twist rather than conventionally rotating) and only four press buttons.

And they don't even address 'normal' functions. In addition to power on/off and mute, the other two buttons offer functions far less in demand nowadays: mono and polarity inversion. How important these are to you, instead of a more common tape monitor selector or perhaps a USB input, depends on your purism factor. Me? I test polarity inversion whenever a control unit allows me to, and at least a third of the

time, the disc requires its use. And mono? That depends on whether or not you listen to a lot of mono recordings, and whether or not you trust the source and the playback mechanism to be 'true' mono.

This product's simplicity and user-friendliness extends to every part of set-up. Compact but chunky, it's still a one-person job. And the clarity at the back is self-explanatory: mirror-image halves with two pairs of XLR balanced inputs, three pairs of single-ended RCA line level inputs and superb, no-nonsense binding posts for the speakers. Also fitted is the normal IEC mains input and a fuse holder.

Self-explanatory, too, is the remote which operates all functions on the front panel, as well as balance control and the welcomed display dimmer. I cannot reiterate enough how horrible ARC's displays are, despite the injection of Italian blood into the management. You'd have thought that a few Corneliani-clad execs would have looked at it in horror and ordered an OLED offering from Sony. Hell, at £5106, there's no need to scrimp on a





screen that's only an inch or so longer than my 45x110mm Nokia 6500!

During my time with the DSi200, I only experienced one quirk, discovered when switching inputs: the remote's source select buttons also change tracks on the Musical Fidelity CD player. This is merely an unfortunate coincidence. But owners of kW DM25s may need a re-think if the DSi200 appeals to them.

We're still at a point where Class A operation is regarded as the pinnacle of amplifier operation and Class D is a modern freak. But, with increasing regularity, Class D designs are blowing such discrimination, conditioning and prejudice out of the window. There is one overpowering facet of the DSi200's being that will – as this article's sub-heading come-on suggests – rattle not just the cages of Class A fans, it will shake religious fervour for valves. No, not enough, perhaps, to create apostates. But it made me less of an anti-transistor snob.

That first burst is always the most telling, provided you'd let the system warm up before the initial session. I do that as a matter of habit, switching on and then leaving the room for a cup of Newby's Earl Grey. And I'm glad I did, because later sessions showed that the DSi200 warms up to optimal sonic merit after a half-hour.

ARC GOES GREEN

Representing the polar opposite of inefficient valve amplifier topologies, ARC is headlining the 'green' credentials of its DSi200 – the first Audio Research amp to earn itself an Energy Star rating. Not just solid-state but green-blooded analogue Class D amplification is the name of the game here, even if ARC has coupled this to a conventional 'purist' linear power supply instead of going the whole hog and employing a lightweight switchmode supply. This is not ARC's first foray into Class D (or PWM amplification), its earlier 150M power amp incorporated up to seven of Tripath's 'Class T' modules in one chassis. Nevertheless, the DSi200 is its first home-grown Class D design, employing MOSFET power devices in the final, high speed output stage and achieving a full 83% efficiency at its rated 200W/8ohm output [see Lab Report]. PM

At least, that's how it sounded to my ears, during a freakishly cold December, in a room with a thermometer monitoring my exposure to the ARC. So, as long as your dealer has it switched on before you get to the shop, you can assume that what you'll hear is what you're gonna get.

NEVER FALTERS

How to characterise the sound? It's impossible to talk about the actual power, because ratings no longer mean anything, when there are 60W amplifiers that seem subjectively more robust than amps rated at double that. But whatever the numbers, the DSi200 dispatched the Wilson Sophias with ease, worked miraculously well with the MartinLogan Summit X, and even managed to squeeze the tush of the LS3/5A. At no point, from listening to the overly gentle new Carly Simon title, *Never Been Gone*, to live-and-raucous Black Crowes to Rick Derringer or ZZ Top at air-guitar-inspiring levels, did the amp falter.

So set aside entirely the power debate with this baby, though it has been pointed out that the speaker's impedance can

ABOVE: Nearly faultless, the front panel offers ideal ergonomics and a modern look, while remaining inimitably a recipient of 40 years' worth of ARC's signature aesthetics

effect its sonic nature. After trying three wildly differing speakers, however, it was possible to make observations that transcend component-to-component synergy. Not least is that this amp will – while casting doubts on your allegiance to valves – convince many that there's no need to court a separate preamp and power amp.

This amp is fast, widely dynamic, punchy and macho when needed. On the Move's remastered 'California Man', the roiling, churning guitars manifested

'This amp is fast, widely dynamic, punchy and macho when needed'

themselves as powerfully as HM axework some 40 years younger, augmented by demented sax playing from one Roy Wood. Under the mix, the piano kept its shape, the soundstage spread across the room. Involving? It begged one serious question: why didn't the British appreciate this most stellar, polished, inventive and – indeed – rocking of bands?

On to 'Brontosaurus', a bass-heavy exercise that sounded like it was recorded at 45rpm and played back at 33.3rpm. If ever a tune lived up to its Jurassic name, the Move's track had it covered, and the DSi200 reached down deep to create a ponderous, but rock-solid foundation. And yet it kept the fluidity and grunginess that on occasion can be heard as sounding too tight. So detailed was the reproduction that I delighted in playing it against the vinyl original, the DSi200 showing that the CD's engineers narrowed the gap here.

Inevitably, that led to the Beatles remasters, which I am now savouring off ☺

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER



ABOVE: Three unbalanced (RCA) and two balanced (XLR) inputs are joined by single sets of speaker binding posts (the 4mm sockets are sealed). Full remote control over inputs, options and volume is included

a 24-bit USB stick. I can't remember the last time I took my computer into my sound room, but, hey, it's unavoidable. Suffice it to say, the ARC integrated is so clean and open that confirming Ivor Tiefenbrun's promise that the 24-bit edition handily bested the CDs was a no-brainer. The DSi200 is exceptionally grain-free, transparent and super-quick, a perfect showcase for those who like to highlight Ringo Starr's prowess behind the drum kit.

RATING RINGO

Whether fed the boozy, drawling, almost bizarre percussion on 'Rain', with its massive cymbal crashes, the crisp slaps on 'Eight Days A Week', the gentle tambourine buried deep in the mix of 'We Can Work It Out' behind the harmonium, or – most majestically – the whole of *Abbey Road*, the DSi200 doesn't need to flatter his handiwork. As more than one musician attested during a recent BBC retrospective, ample evidence posits that Ringo Starr is the greatest drummer in rock history. With the new remasters and a high-resolution system through which to hear them, you'll need no more convincing.

Then you've got that sleek McCartney vocal, the liquid guitar leads of George Harrison. Sensation after sensation – the sweep of the vocals opening 'Nowhere Man', followed by the jingle-jangle guitar recalling the Byrds, the punctuation he provides for the elegiac 'In My Life'. And then there's the best-ever Buddy Holly homage, a twangy take of 'Words of Love' that would have left Holly spellbound.

It only occurred to me after hearing a dozen or so albums that I hadn't even thought to consider

three-dimensionality and soundstage. As a rule, I obsess over those. But it also occurred to me that the reason why I didn't think about them: because the DSi200 was doing such a sterling job of recreating a sense of space. It was not as cavernous, as *How-the-West-Was-Won* cinematic as its dearer siblings in the all-valve, cost-no-object Reference series; I spent some time in front of a friend's Ref 5/Ref 600/Wilson Grand SLAMM during my period with the DSi200, to provide a proper sense of proportion. But neither was it congested, never a case of 'Honey, I shrunk the soundstage'.

One other thing Bill Johnson said to Harley, back in '94, was 'Frankly, whether we like it or not, the tube is simply a better device for audio'. Far be it for me to argue with one of my heroes, especially when I agree completely and live by the tube. But as with Krell's, Ayre's or Levinson's finest moments, only a schmuck would say no to a glass of Solaia, just because he worships Lafite. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

My maths cannot conjure up the number of pre/power combinations available under £5k. Neither would I discount the psychological need some have for separates over integrations, nor would I deny my own lust for tubes. Brush away such distractions, though, and regard the DSi200 on its own terms, for what exactly it is, and you will be staggered by the satisfaction it can deliver on all levels.

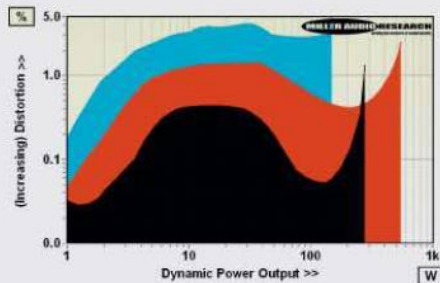
Sound Quality: 86%



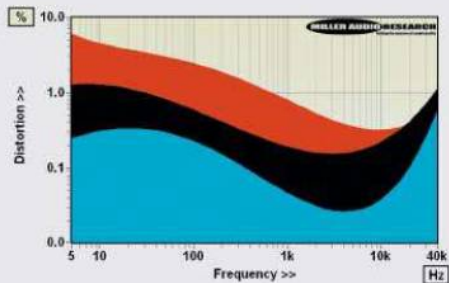
AUDIO RESEARCH DSi200 (£5106)

ARC's specification for the DSi200 is as interesting for what it does not contain as for what it does. Sure enough, the 200W/8ohm output is readily achieved at 2x230W/8ohm and a full 2x410W/4ohm with 270W/8ohm (<1% THD) and 450W/550W/4ohm (1%/2% THD) possible under dynamic conditions [see Graph 1, below]. Power output into lower impedances is compromised by high levels of distortion (from 3% at 10W/2ohm to 6.5% at 150W/2ohm). Claims for Class D efficiency are borne out with the DSi200 sustaining a 2x200W/8ohm output with just 480W drawn from the mains. As with some other Class D designs, the DSi200's frequency response varies with load impedance, rolling off to -0.2dB at 20Hz in the bass (-1.5dB at 5Hz) and -3dB at 58kHz following a broad ultrasonic treble peak reaching +2dB at 30kHz (all at 1W/8ohm). Into 4ohm, the response rolls directly away to -0.7dB/20kHz and into 2ohm falls to -4.0dB/20kHz. The tougher the load, the less 'brilliant' it will sound.

The real key to the DSi200's character lies in its unusual trend of distortion versus power output and frequency [see Graphs]. We can see that distortion is at a minimum in the upper midrange/treble from 1kHz to 10kHz but increases at lower frequencies, reaching 0.3% at 20Hz/1W [blue trace, Graph 2], 1% at 20Hz/100W [black trace] and a full 3.8% at 20Hz at an intermediate 10W [red trace]. This same increase in distortion at 5-50W output is also clearly illustrated by the dynamic output plots [Graph 1]. The DSi200 will doubtless sound 'different' depending on speaker sensitivity and load impedance, the volume played and spectral content of the musical genre! PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red) and 2ohm (blue)



ABOVE: Distortion versus extended frequency from 5Hz to 40kHz (blue trace = 1W/8ohm; red trace = 10W/8ohm; black trace = 100W/8ohm)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	230W 410W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	270W 550W (<2% THD)
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.012–3.1ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	-0.2dB to -14.6dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/200W)	65mV 942mV (balanced in)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/200W)	76.2dB 99.1dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, 1W/10W)	0.025–0.33% 0.32–3.7%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	35W/480W
Dimensions (WHD)	480x133x362mm



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QUAD II *Classic Integrated*

Roksan Radius 5.2 (£1399 inc arm)

Good-looking and affordable, Roksan's long-running 'entry level' Radius 5 turntable has become even more ambitious in its Mk II guise. Also available in black for 2010
 Review: **Steve Harris** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Arriving on the scene in 1985 with the Xerxes turntable, Roksan would outlast a whole gaggle of other would-be Linn-beaters. Designer Touraj Moghaddam's next product was the innovative Darius speaker, celebrated for having a tweeter mounted on suspension springs. But then he quickly came up with the Artemiz arm, Shiraz moving-coil cartridge and Artaxerxes phono stage.

By 1989, Roksan wanted to offer a cheaper record deck and launched the Radius, along with Tabriz arm and Corus moving-magnet cartridge. Simpler than the Xerxes, this original Radius still had a full-sized double-deck plinth system and metal platter. With small improvements it became the Radius 2, and finally the Radius 3. But by the mid-1990s, the package price had risen to around £1100 or so, taking it too close to the Xerxes. There were also production difficulties, and so it was discontinued.

By 2000 Roksan had introduced its mid-price Caspian and entry-level Kandy electronics. A completely new turntable was designed to complement these and to sell at under £1000. This was the Radius 5, of 2003. To keep costs down, the Radius 5 used an acrylic plinth and platter, while the matching Nima arm had a simple unipivot bearing and also used many acrylic parts.

The turntable still had a suspension system, with motor and arm fixed to a sub-plinth or subchassis which was in turn attached to the main plinth on three compliant mounts. A synchronous motor drove the platter via a long round-section belt, with speed changed manually by moving the belt.

The Radius 5 continued without major modifications until recently, when it was thoroughly revised to become the Radius 5.2 (or Mk II) reviewed here.

RIGHT: Mated to an aluminium arm tube, the Nima's acrylic rear housing contains the stainless-steel unipivot point bearing. Cartridge azimuth is set by rotating the counterweight

A new motor mounting and belt gives a faster start-up time and where once there had been a four-step motor pulley to cater for 33.3 and 45rpm at both 50 and 60Hz, now there's a two-step pulley, specific to the local mains frequency. Bearing tolerances are also improved.

But you may be surprised to discover that if you hold the platter edge, it can be rocked up and down slightly. This is deliberate. When placed over the spindle, the platter sits on a shoulder of around 20mm diameter, which fits closely in a recess in its underside.

This keeps the platter perfectly level, and it will not rock during play. However, rather than being a tight fit, the upper part of the hole through which the spindle passes is given a slight clearance so that, when disturbed by human hand, the perimeter can move vertically a little, rather than transmit force to the spindle and bearing.

Though the turntable still sits on three level-adjusting feet, these no longer have sharp points. Roksan noticed that many people placed their turntables on a glass shelf, and then had to use

shoes under the points. But, says Touraj, the changes to the motor mounting and the plinth suspension had reduced motor vibration breakthrough so there was no longer the same necessity for hard mechanical grounding. Hence the 5.2 has more user-friendly, rounded feet, which settle comfortably on any surface, and performance is said to be less affected by what the deck is sitting on.

THE NIMA UNIPIVOT

Updated with new wiring and a change to the pillar design, the £489 Nima is otherwise unaltered. Its unipivot bearing consists of a precision stainless-steel point and cup, visible through the acrylic housing. Tracking force is easily adjusted by pushing the counterweight backwards or forwards, but you also have to rotate the weight appropriately to maintain cartridge azimuth.

Given a cool head and a steady hand, setup is straightforward. There is a neat thread-and-weight bias device, less fiddly than most, the instructions are clear and straightforward, and the arm comes with a small stylus-force gauge, like the





ABOVE: Normally supplied only with Nima arm fitted, the updated Radius 5.2 comes with a black plinth as shown here, or in clear acrylic

plastic one supplied by Ortofon – accurate enough for anyone but the most obsessive tweaker.

Despite the arm's typical unipivot wobbliness, Roksan's well-designed cueing lever, armrest and headshell make it nice to use. In view of the hard un-matted acrylic platter, you should switch the motor off to change the record, but when switched on again the platter will be up to speed long before you've had time to get the stylus in the groove. If you do pluck a disc off the moving platter, your fingers may contact and dislodge the rather thick belt.

For this review, the player came with the current Corus Silver cartridge, made for Roksan by Goldring and fitted with a Gyger II stylus (£399 if purchased separately). Compared with the earlier Corus black, the Silver has been given a firmer suspension, for more stability when mounted in a unipivot arm.

GOOD AT RHYTHM

With Jennifer Warnes on 'Ballad Of The Runaway Horse' from Rob Wasserman's *Duets* [GRP 97 121], I felt the bass was a little over-weighty and rounded, but not sluggish. In fact the immediate impression was of generally good rhythm

and bass control. Although the sound was well detailed, the voice didn't hang so tangibly in space as you might like it to. The soundstage was quite good in terms of width and gave a fair impression of depth, but the spatial positioning was a little vague and, for example, the overdubbed backing vocals did not seem firmly locked into place.

Moving on to Clapton's great slide guitar period with 'Motherless Children' from *461 Ocean Boulevard* [RSO 2479 118], it seemed that the Roksan was capable of revealing the rhythmic excitement of the track in spite of a slightly papery effect overall. The drums seemed better served than the bass, which tended to become a little too amorphous.

'Sultans Of Swing' from *Dire Straits* [Vertigo 0102 021] came over very well, bouncing along, again helped perhaps by ear-catching drum sounds, the bass powerful and even, neither too dull nor

losing control. Knopfler's essential voice and guitar were well painted against the backdrop of rhythm guitars – in this case seemingly filled in with broad brushstrokes rather than exquisite pointillism. The soundstage had width but not much depth.

With *The King James Version* [Sheffield Lab LAB-3], the leader's trumpet barked out impressively enough. Staying with the album through to 'Cherokee',

though, Les DeMerle's drums came to life surprisingly well, with a convincing sense of space.

'I felt that the Corus Silver had acquitted itself very well, with very good detail'

STEPPING UP

I felt that the Corus

Silver had acquitted itself very well, with very good detail and dynamics, even if not quite offering the kind of tangible textures and spatial conviction associated with moving-coil cartridges. But now I wanted to see what results I could get from a familiar MC. I started with the now-discontinued Ortofon Kontrapunkt A.

On 'Ballad Of The Runaway Horse' the sound was now full and rich, Wasserman's bass big and authoritative and with real character; although perhaps a little too heavy and undeniably soft around the edges, Warnes' voice had warmth, intimacy and substance.

But inevitably, I soon turned to the new Ortofon Cadenza Blue cartridge [see page 32]. With this installed, I went through the same tracks again, starting with Jennifer Warnes on *Duets*. Here the sound had a crisp freshness that seemed to prove that the Radius could, ☺

GIVE A LITTLE WIGGLE

At least one Roksan design feature that raised eyebrows back in 1985 is still echoed in the current Radius 5.2. On the original Xerxes turntable, a spring mounting for the motor allowed it to rotate through a certain angle on its own axis. By allowing this freedom, it was claimed the belt tension could be kept constant. This mechanism was too costly to include in the Radius, so instead the motor has been given a compliant mount that allows it to move tangentially with respect to the platter, but not radially. A synchronous motor when starting zips up to its designed speed almost instantly, but the platter can't do the same because of inertia. When you switch on, the motor gives a couple of convulsions, but the platter gets up to a stable speed very quickly, especially in the case of the Radius 5.2 with its a repositioned motor and thicker neoprene belt.

TURNTABLE



ABOVE: Still using a synchronous motor, the Radius 5.2 deck provides a faster start-up time than its predecessor thanks to a new motor mounting and belt

and would, do justice to more expensive cartridges. Warnes' voice was clearly focused and beautifully textured, with the delicate ambience of real space around it.

On the Clapton number, there was a fine level of clarity, and the stabbing organ chords, for example, were rendered with some precision. Carl Radle's bass notes seemed to have real shape to them. Clapton's voice, processed as it is, was nicely intelligible here too.

ANALYTICAL POTENTIAL

With the Dire Straits anthem, the turntable now seemed to show that it could be truly analytical, almost dismantling the component effects that make up Knopfler's guitar sound rather than just flinging it out. Compared with the Kontrapunkt sound, the slighter and much more accurate bass of the Cadenza helped the music roll along less clumpily, with a good feeling of relaxed swing.

On the 1967 Barenboim/ECO recording of Mozart's Piano Concerto K467 [EMI ASD 2465], the sound had an admirable sense of space and a general lightness of touch. Double-basses were clear, anchoring rather than muddying the music. Woodwind sounds were nicely characterised, the strings bright and clear without becoming hard or steely. Above all, the piano had a definite sense of existing in real space, and had

much more sparkle to it, without becoming unduly splashy.

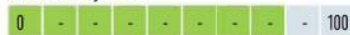
The combination was truly impressive on *Bob Marley And The Wailers Live* [Island ILPS 9376]. Here there was a genuinely electric live feel to the instruments, the drum kit shaking the stage, Marley putting over his vocals majestically while the judiciously-mixed audience sounds were set where they belonged.

It's clear that Roksan listens to customer comments, and some of the changes made to the Radius in 2008 were to improve its handling, rather than sonic characteristics. But there was also an intention to make this affordable player good enough to do justice to better cartridges and systems, and in this respect Roksan has succeeded. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

You might argue that the unipivot Nima can hardly be the ideal arm for thoroughbred moving coils, and I do feel that the Radius's sound, good though it is, cannot give the feeling of supreme underlying stability that always characterised the Xerxes. But it works well, with clean and communicative bass combined with clarity and an uncluttered quality throughout. So the Radius 5.2 represents good value.

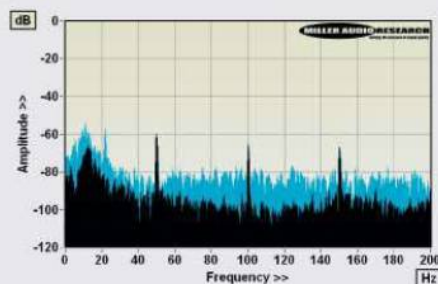
Sound Quality: 78%



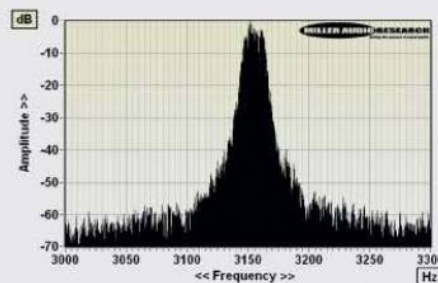
ROKSAN RADIUS 5.2 (£1399 inc arm)

Improvements notwithstanding, Roksan's platter remains relatively lightweight for the substantial neoprene drivebelt. On the one hand the motor has sufficient torque and the belt sufficient traction to ensure a rapid 1-2 second start-up and stop at 33.3rpm. On the other hand any low-rate (up to $\pm 10\text{Hz}$) speed variations or oscillation suffered by the motor and its compliant mounting are also more efficiently transmitted through to the rotating platter. In practice then, while Roksan's 24-pole synchronous motor delivers a very accurate absolute speed (the error was just $+0.073\%$ on this sample), the wow component of the W&F spectrum [see Graph 2, below] is evidently both broad and pervasive. It accounts for some 0.1% of the overall 0.12% weighted total – higher than the specified 0.04%. Whether this compromises subjective image or pitch stability will depend very much on the sensitivity of the listener, but readers may compare Graph 2 here with those from other recent turntable reviews published in *Hi-Fi News*.

More positively, the Radius 5.2 does offer a wide 'dynamic range', demonstrated in the very low -73dB DIN B-wtd rumble achieved through the steel ball, brass housing and stainless steel spindle of its uprated bearing assembly. The fact that in-groove noise is somewhat higher at -68.9dB also illustrates the efficacy of Roksan's loosely decoupled platter/bearing interface. The unweighted spectra are compared on Graph 1, below, where the main arm/cartriage resonance looks to occur at 11Hz. Readers may view a QC Suite report for the Roksan Radius 5.2/Nima arm by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Unweighted bearing rumble from DC-200Hz (black infill) versus silent LP groove (blue infill) re. 1kHz at 5cm/sec. Note arm/cart. modes at 11/22Hz



ABOVE: Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at 5cm/sec (plotted $\pm 150\text{Hz}$, 5Hz per minor division). Speed accuracy is better than its pitch stability

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.36rpm (+0.07%)
Time to audible stabilisation	2sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.10% / 0.02%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-68.9dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-73.0dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-59.7dB
Power Consumption	4W
Dimensions (WHD)	400x150x350mm

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TITAN

Ortofon Cadenza Blue (£1000)

Facing the hard task of replacing Ortofon's successful Kontrapunkt moving-coils are the new Cadenza models. The ruby-cantilevered Blue is the first out to bat
Review: **Steve Harris** Lab: **Paul Miller**

It's tough at the top. About 20 years ago, Ortofon started telling us that its aim was to survive by continuing to gain an increasing share of a fast-shrinking market, until the point would come when it would be the only cartridge-maker left standing.

This hasn't happened, of course. There was a period when the numbers could be kept up only by pandering to the needs of DJs, whose destructive tendencies (fortunately) tended to help sales once you'd gained their loyalty; but eventually the shrinking hi-fi market stabilised.

Cartridges would never again sell by the lorry-load as they had done in the 1970s, but eventually the shrinkage gave way to green shoots of growth. If not the 'last survivor', Ortofon could now claim to be the world's leading manufacturer.

Ortofon had launched its first moving-magnet cartridge in 1969 after 20 years of making only moving-coils. Today, those who want to mix and scratch can choose from 18 models in Ortofon's completely separate DJ range. For those who like to listen to music rather than the sound of their own voices, the nine current hi-fi MM



MORE INTEGRITY

In 1998 Ortofon marked its 80th anniversary with a new flagship moving-coil called the MC Jubilee. This introduced a strong metal body, based on an ideally-shaped moulded part rather than milled from solid. Naturally, the next step was to apply the same high-tech body to some less expensive cartridges. The Kontrapunkt A and B were launched in 2002 and followed quickly by the C and H models. For the Cadenza series there have been changes to the pole pieces and coil-winding process, while the body's integrity is further improved.

models still include the refined, but now Methusalem-like, OM series and a couple of P-mount versions alongside the newer, much punchier-sounding 2M models.

But if you are reading this, you really want a moving-coil. And if you're prepared to budget between £750 and £1500, you'll be looking at the new Cadenza series. In line with other Ortofon ranges, the Cadenzas are identified by colour. Gone are the Kontrapunkt's musical initials. But as before, the range caters for subtle differences in sonic taste as well as providing a sensible quality hierarchy.

Starting from the top, the Cadenza Black seems most closely related to the seminal MC Jubilee, as both use a nude Shibata stylus mounted on a boron cantilever, and both are currently listed at £1500. The £1250 Cadenza Bronze uses an Ortofon Replicant 100 stylus, with tip radii of 5 and 100µm and giving an extra long vertical line contact, while its coils are wound with Ortofon's Acurum wire, which is gold-plated '6-nines' copper.

In these aspects it resembles the high-end Windfeld, named as tribute to Ortofon's just-retired chief designer Per Windfeld, but has an aluminium cantilever instead of the Windfeld's boron rod. So, the Black and Bronze push upwards towards



ABOVE: The Cadenza body resembles the preceding Kontrapunkt type, but now all sections are of metal. Projections on top enforce a firm three-point headshell contact

the high end, rather than replacing the Kontrapunkt C or H. But the Cadenza Red is a direct replacement for the base model Kontrapunkt A, using a basic line-contact stylus with tip radii of 8 and 40µm on an aluminium cantilever, its specification virtually unchanged.

Similarly, the Cadenza Blue replaces the Kontrapunkt B, retaining that beautiful thin ruby cantilever. The stylus, though, is a Fritz Gyger FG70, with minor/major radii of 5 and 70µm, instead of the FG80 with its major radius of 80µm.

WARMTH AND DELICACY

But paper specifications don't reveal the effects of internal improvements in the new designs. I couldn't wait to hear how the Cadenza Blue would actually sound, and got things started with Rob Wasserman's *Duets* [GRP 97 121] and 'Ballad Of The Runaway Horse'.

Here Jennifer Warnes' voice had both depth and warmth, and great delicacy too, and this cartridge really seemed able to convey the endless subtleties of shading

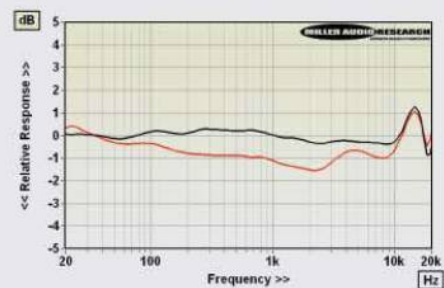


LAB REPORT

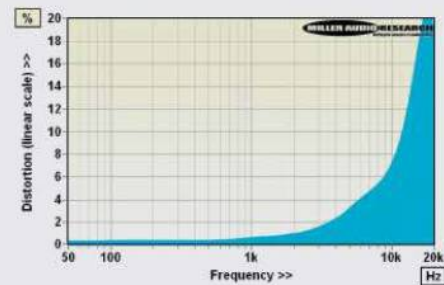
ORTOFON CADENZA BLUE (£1000)

This exquisitely-constructed cartridge offers the highest output of the five-strong Cadenza MC range at 499µV (left) and 469µV (right) into 50-200ohm. The channel imbalance of 0.5-1.0dB is just acceptable but this is no indication of response, just as distortion is no indicator of tracking performance, as we shall see. In practice, the Cadenza Blue meets its tight +2dB/-1dB response specification [see Graph 1, below] with a remarkably flat and extended output, coupled with a 25dB midband stereo separation. The Nude FG70 stylus is beautifully mounted onto Ortofon's vivid ruby cantilever, but the 20 degree tracking angle is closer to 28 degrees with a parallel armtube.

The weight of the aluminium-bodied cartridge is not inconsiderable at 10.7g and the tracking force higher than average at 25mN. Dynamic compliance amounts to 11cu/13.5cu (vertical/lateral) with a resonance around 10Hz in an 8g effective mass tonearm. The Cadenza's distortion trend is unusual, staying below 1% up to 2kHz (-8dB relative to 5cm/sec; equalised) but then increasing quite substantially with frequency [see Graph 2, below], hitting 8% at 10kHz and over 20% at 15kHz. This is not a poor generator, but a reflection of a hugely extended 50kHz bandwidth able to render 2nd/3rd harmonics of signals up to 15kHz. MCs with poorer HF response characteristics only *look* to have lower treble distortion. Finally, the Blue tracks like a trooper, making it past the +15dB/300Hz groove to trip-up at +18dB. This is as good as you'll get from a low compliance MC. Readers are invited to view a QC Suite test report for the Ortofon Cadenza Blue by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'Download' button. PM



ABOVE: Left (black) and right (red) freq. response, lateral groove modulation at -8dB re. 5cm/sec



ABOVE: Tracing and generator distortion (2nd-4th harmonics) versus frequency from 50Hz-20kHz (1kHz, -8dB re. 5cm/sec)

and nuance which the singer put into this performance.

Wasserman's bass seemed very well described, with the subtle feathery edges of the sound adding to its realism. The pizzicato effect, where he overdubs a second bass and makes it sound like a big mandolin, was arrestingly clear.

Moving on to Eric Clapton's 'Motherless Children', from *461 Ocean Boulevard* [RSO 2479 118], I appreciated the Blue's detail and precision. Rhythm guitars were twangy and sharp, while Radle's bass was tight and declamatory in its anchoring role, defining the changes as well as the rhythm.

Clapton's vocal sounded a little over-sibilant.

Although by now I was getting attuned to the Ortofon's abilities, the cartridge was

still able to spring a pleasant surprise when I put on *Dire Straits* [Vertigo 9102 021]. On 'Sultans Of Swing', the Cadenza Blue seemed suddenly to bring more ambience and space into the sound, and though the open arena here is an atmosphere created artificially by a brilliant producer, it really was like a breath of fresh air. And I felt the Cadenza's bass was particularly impressive on this track too, the bass guitar alive and springy, clean and strong.

TRULY BRASSY TOO

On a kind of music very different from Knopfler's, although his mythical 'Sultans of Swing' would have appreciated it, the story was much the same, with an immediate openness and life to the sound. Listening to *The King James Version* [Sheffield Lab LAB-3] I found that the brass was truly brassy, and with excellent detail that made it easy to pick out, for example, the trombone lines in the ensemble.

When drummer Les DeMerle really let rip on 'Cherokee', the effect was dynamic and realistic, with great transient attack and a great sense of speed, as if things really started and stopped properly, a real thud to the tom-toms and a thoroughly convincing, singing cymbal sound with real presence.

I tried to come up to date a bit, but got sidetracked by something that was quintessentially retro when it appeared in 1978, Blondie's *Parallel Lines* [Chrysalis CDL1192]. On 'Sunday Girl' for example, there was a great punch and clarity to the neatly interlocking guitar parts and you could only marvel at the tightness of the whole thing. Once again the well-shaped, accurate-sounding bass end, with a complete freedom from slurring, boom or overhang, helped make the music seem agile and full of energy.

After this I wanted to see what the appropriately-named Cadenza would do for classical music. With the 1967 Barenboim/ECO recording of Mozart's Piano Concerto K467 [EMI ASD2465], the Ortofon's clarity and precision

made for a very enjoyable listen. The strings were sweeping rather than scarifying and, at the risk of overdoing the alliteration, I can only say you felt you were hearing detail, rather than distortion, in the treble.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the clean and quick bass gave meaning to the sound of the double-basses and helped the recording sound rhythmically lightfooted, as I think it should. The piano had precision and subtlety, and seemed to exist in real space. All in all, the first movement whizzed by and I was wallowing in the 'Elvira Madigan' music before I knew it. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

On the evidence of this model, it looks as if Ortofon really has improved on its excellent Kontrapunkts. If you want something to make your system to sound more cuddly and rounded, the Blue is not for you. But if you want a cartridge to give you detail, space, integrity and vitality, and fresh insights into every old-favourite LP you put on, the Cadenza Blue will do just fine. It'll be hard to beat at the price.

Sound Quality: 87%



'The Blue seemed suddenly to bring more ambience and space into the sound'

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Generator type/weight	Moving-coil / 10.7g
Recommended tracking force	2.5g (2.2-2.7g)
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	480µV / 0.5dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	11cu / 13.5cu
Vertical tracking angle	28 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	64µm / 62µm
L/R Distortion (-8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.49-21% / 0.41-19%
Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.75dB to +1.4dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	30dB / 18dB

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Like all *HFN* group tests, this one has a theme. Here it's floorstanding loudspeakers claiming above-average sensitivity, which we've defined as 90dB or higher. The Monitor Audio RX8 just squeezes in by having a specified figure of exactly 90dB; the Acoustic Energy Radiance 3 and KEF IQ90 clear the hurdle more easily with a claimed 91dB; the Dali Ikon 7 qualifies yet more comfortably at a specified 92dB; and the Klipsch Heresy III, well, it sneers at our minimum with a claimed 99dB sensitivity, thanks to its use of horn-loaded midrange and treble drivers.

The point of high sensitivity is that it allows you to achieve a greater sound pressure level for a given amplifier output voltage. To which you might respond that your amplifier is able to drive your current, lower-sensitivity speakers quite loud enough, thank you. But average SPL is less the issue than having sufficient peak capability to accommodate the high crest factors of wide dynamic range music signals. Crest factor is a measure of a signal's peak-to-mean ratio and can be 35dB or more on some music – a

voltage ratio of 56:1, equivalent to a power ratio of almost 3200:1! This ability to reproduce short-term peaks is what gifts high-power amplifiers their effortless quality, and a similar effect can be had – at lower (valve) amplifier powers – by using high-sensitivity speakers. Plus, 'efficient' speakers have always had adherents who claim them to be more naturally dynamic and transparent in performance.

QUITE EASY LOADS

Of course, there are downsides too. One way of achieving higher sensitivity is to reduce impedance, which makes the speaker more difficult to drive. But actually that isn't a problem here: none of the speakers in this group presents an especially difficult amplifier load, as our lab tests reveal. Increased coloration is another potential problem, and a traditional accompaniment of high sensitivity. Four of the five manufacturers here look to have sailed as close to the wind as they dare in this respect, while in its use of horn-loaded drivers the Klipsch may be a step too far. We'll see.

As always, a wide range of music was used to compare these speakers but just four varied items were selected for the formal comparisons: Anton Webern's prickly, punchy *Rasch* from *Five Pieces for Violin and Piano*, written in 1910 [96/24 download from 2L]; Mozart's vivacious *March K189*, sparsely recorded on Linn Records [CKD 287, CD layer]; Ella Fitzgerald's understatedly powerful 'Reach For Tomorrow' from *The Intimate Ella* [Verve 839 838-2]; and the dynamic 'Annie's Yellow Bag' from Gwyneth Herbert's *All The Ghosts* [naimcd135].

TESTED SINGLE-WIRED

All five speakers have split crossovers and therefore allow the option of bi-wiring or bi-amping, but for this test they were used single-wired, driven by a Bryston 4B power amplifier. Source signals were played via computer to a Prism Sound Orpheus FireWire DAC and thence into a passive preamp based around a DACT stepped attenuator.

REVIEWS AND LAB TESTS
BY KEITH HOWARD

• CD PLAYERS • TURNTABLES • CARTRIDGES • **SPEAKERS** • AMPLIFIERS • HEADPHONES • INTERCONNECTS •

AE Radiance 3 (£1500)

Acoustic Energy's iconic AE1 played a significant part in the revival of metal-coned drive units back in the 1980s, rescuing us from the syrupy embrace of Bextrene and polypropylene. So all is as anticipated when you remove the Radiance 3's grille to find three aluminium-coned units, two of which are paralleled for bass duties while the third delivers the midrange. You might expect an aluminium dome tweeter too but a ring design is chosen instead, albeit within a shallow DXT acoustic lens which visually echoes the aluminium cones. This controls its directivity so that it closely matches that of the midrange driver at crossover.

Like KEF with its iQ90, Acoustic Energy eschews the conventional box cabinet in preference for one with curved side panels. With their higher inherent stiffness these should help curb 'cabinet talk', as well as eliminating one set of parallel surfaces internally and hence associated air resonances.

JUST A HUNCH

As a generalisation, I like the sound of metal-coned drive units. It's a hunch but I suspect that, because the cones lack the viscoelastic behaviour of many plastic alternatives, they are able to resolve subtle, low-level detail that actually has a large effect on the naturalness and resolution of the sound overall.

Of course, I sideline this notion when first listening to a speaker of new acquaintance but I soon found myself thinking these thoughts anew with the Radiance 3. Although it is balanced tonally slightly, I would say, on the 'safe' side – almost certainly due to its dished response between 1 and 4kHz – it gets away with it. Any impression that it is a little reticent, which objectively it is, recedes with prolonged listening because, once you adjust to the tonal balance, what you hope and expect to hear is all there.

On the Webern piece the initial impression was indeed of a slightly softened presentation but the violin

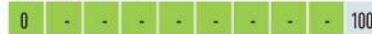
and piano both sounded clean and expressive, with the violin precisely located laterally and in depth within a spacious acoustic. Dynamics were very slightly muted but the plus side of this was that any tendency to harshness was suppressed.

SLIGHT RETICENCE

This characteristic was particularly welcome in the Mozart March, where the exuberant string sound can easily become a little too biting – something that the Radiance 3 resisted. Yes, that slight reticence was there again but the music was stirring and the image scale large. Dynamic snap also was a little reined back on 'Annie's Yellow Bag' but clean bass, tight control of all elements within the sound stage and no dragging of the tempo won the day.

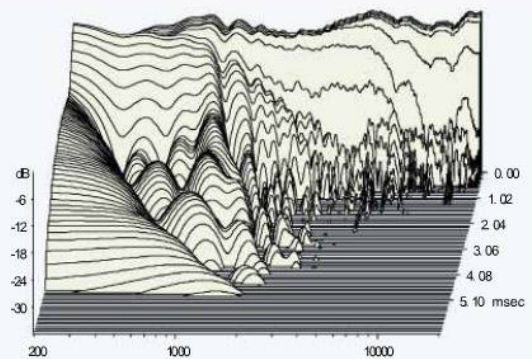
The Radiance 3 didn't sound fully expansive on the Ella Fitzgerald track, but it handled the piano accompaniment well and added little noticeable coloration to the great lady's voice.

Sound Quality: 83%



LAB REPORT

Although the Radiance 3's measured pink noise sensitivity fell a little short of the specified 90dB, it was only by 0.5dB. Overall the on-axis response trend is slightly uptilted towards high frequencies but with relatively mild ripples, hence the fine ± 2.7 dB and ± 2.8 dB errors. Pair matching is good too at just ± 0.8 dB. With a minimum impedance modulus of 3.4ohm the Radiance 3 should have a 4ohm nominal rating rather than 8ohm but this is not a tough speaker to drive by today's standards – modest phase angles mean that the minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) is a comfortable 2.4ohm. As payback for the less than group leading sensitivity, bass extension (-6 dB ref 200Hz) is the best here at 40Hz, and the elevated ultrasonic output reaches to above 40kHz. Evidence of cone breakup resonance is apparent in the cumulative spectral decay waterfall but at low level. KH



Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	90.3dB / 89.5dB / 89.4dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.4ohm @ 20kHz 16.1ohm @ 23Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	-39° @ 86Hz 23° @ 20Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	± 0.8 dB
LF/HF extension (-6 dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	40Hz / >40 kHz/ >40 kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.6% / 0.2% / 0.3%
Dimensions (HWD)	920x230x297mm

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Dali Ikon 7 (£1200)



The Ikon 7 is the only four-way speaker in this group but – as I've remarked with previous Dalis – a four-way with a difference, in that one crossover is at 14kHz, where the soft dome tweeter of the trademark treble module hands over to the 'ribbon' supertweeter.

The point of this is not, as you might suppose, to ensure well maintained output to ultrasonic frequencies – in fact the Ikon 7's on-axis output takes a dive beyond 20kHz. Instead the tweeter hand-over is there to ensure better-maintained off-axis in-band output – an essential feature given that Dali recommends aligning the Ikon 7s parallel to the side walls, so that they fire straight down the room rather than being angled in towards the listener. This ensures that the side wall reflection has a spectrum much closer to that of the direct sound, to the potential benefit of both dynamics and image quality.

This unusual feature aside, the Ikon 7 is par for the course, deploying twin paralleled, reflex-loaded bass units and a single midrange driver of the same diameter and appearance. Partly because it has to accommodate twin tweeters at around seated ear level, the cabinet is the tallest here and will look pretty imposing in rooms with low ceilings. Tall, narrow cabinets are not the most stable, so the '7 has metal outriggers which screw to the base and carry the spikes outboard of the side panels.

3D IMAGING

Firing a speaker straight down the room in the approved Ikon 7 fashion gives a unique character to the sound. The imaging is large and three-dimensional in a way that eludes toed-in speakers but it also tends to be a little more diffuse, less cardboard cut-out precise. It's a trade-off I'm prepared to accept but those who demand image specificity to the nearest minute of arc will not. Dynamics also change, taking on a weightiness that complements the larger image scale.

Both these qualities were in evidence on the Webern item, the extra clout of the big piano chords being particularly obvious within the wide, deep but slightly hazy image. I was also aware of some coloration on the violin that I'd ascribe to the midrange driver rather than to a side-effect of the speakers' alignment in the room.

A SEAT IN THE CHURCH

The Mozart classical piece was transformed, the long reverb time of the acoustic being more apparent than with any of the other speakers here. In my notes I wrote, 'It really sounds like a church!'

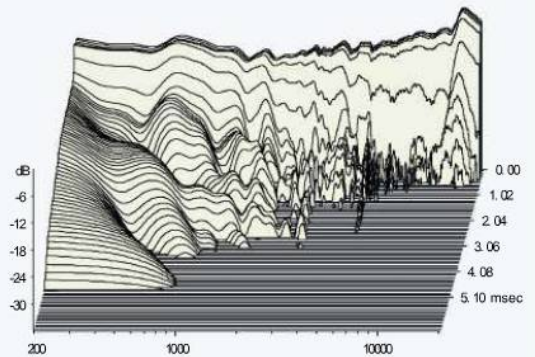
Only the Klipsch surpassed the openness of sound achieved by the Ikon 7 on the Ella track but there was a slight clouding of vocal nuances which just took the edge off the sense of realism. 'Annie's Yellow Bag' was slightly laidback, and again there was some coloration fuzzing the midband, but the simple, essential dynamism of this music was well captured.

Sound Quality: 83%



LAB REPORT

Like all Dalis, the Ikon 7 is designed to fire straight down the room rather than be toed-in towards the listener. Because of this, its on-axis response is characterised by an inexorable rise from 2kHz to above 15kHz – hence the measured ± 5.6 dB and ± 5.9 dB response errors – but this will be ameliorated when the listener is 30 degrees off-axis as intended. Effective sensitivity will reduce at the same time, though, from its pink noise figure of 90.5dB, already 1.5dB below Dali's specification. Pair matching is good at ± 1.1 dB and, in line with its optimistic sensitivity rating, the Ikon 7 presents the easiest amplifier load here with a 4.9ohm minimum impedance modulus and – because of modest phase angles – a 2.6ohm minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance). The CSD waterfall is pretty clean at HF and suggests good control of cabinet and cone resonances at lower frequencies. KH



Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	92.9dB / 90.5dB / 89.3dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	4.9ohm @ 261Hz 18.3ohm @ 73Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	-42° @ 90Hz 27° @ 20Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	± 1.1 dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	53Hz / 27.7kHz/28.9kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.1% / 0.2% / 0.2%
Dimensions (HWD)	1140x200x340mm



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KEF iQ90 (£1000)

KEF's iQ90 distinguishes itself from the rest as the only one to incorporate a coincident driver array, in the form of the UniQ midrange/tweeter unit whose upper edge protrudes just above the cabinet's top panel. The Maidstone company's dogged perseverance with this technology evinces a continued determination that its advantages – particularly its superior crossover integration and the improved off-axis performance that this delivers – outweigh the downsides of increased intermodulation between the two drivers and coloration caused by the tweeter being horn-loaded by the midrange cone.

In other respects the iQ90 mostly conforms with the group norm by being a three-way with twin paralleled, reflex-loaded drivers handling the bass in order to permit a relatively narrow front baffle. The iQ90 also incorporates a small detachable plinth, *à la mode*, albeit of moulded plastic on this occasion, which allows the carpet spikes to be carried slightly outboard of the speaker's base. But the iQ90 joins the Acoustic Energy Radiance 3 in using curved rather than flat panels to enhance structural stiffness and reduce the number of parallel surfaces within the enclosed air space. The vertical 'organ pipe' resonance to which tall, narrow cabinets are prone is suppressed by what KEF calls a 'labyrinth' internal damping system.

SOUNDING REAL

When I played the first item, the Webern, through the iQ90s, I'm not sure whether I grinned or my jaw dropped – because the KEF achieved the apparently impossible by combining a huge stereo image, wide and deep, with an enviable level of locational precision. The violin was there and, moreover, it was timbrally just right in addition to having thrilling dynamics, the plucked notes in particular sounding uncannily like the real thing.

The musical contrast to 'Annie's

Yellow Bag' could hardly be more complete but the same signs of greatness were manifest in the KEF's portrayal: a large but carefully metered soundstage allied to just the sort of dynamic heft that this track craves. Intriguingly, the bass was unusually well controlled, never hinting at boom, but didn't sound in the least undernourished.

PINPOINT LOCATION

On the Ella track it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish loudspeaker coloration from mic coloration, but on some speakers you somehow just know that the wispiess you're hearing is in the recording and not coming from the speaker. The iQ90 was like that and served up great warmth and spaciousness without ever giving the impression of being at all overblown.

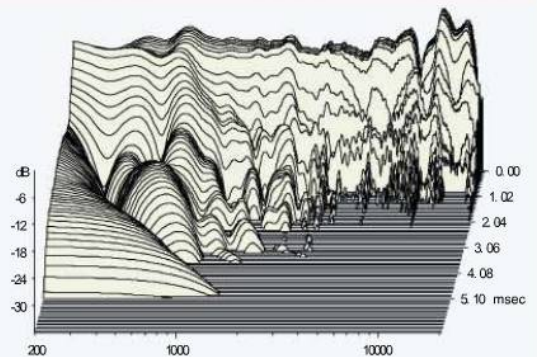
I was by now expecting great things of the Mozart, but I was still surprised by the KEF's ability to combine a cavernous soundstage with pinpoint image location, great clarity and stirring dynamics.

Sound Quality: 87%



LAB REPORT

KEF's specified 91dB sensitivity for the iQ90 is spot on, our measured pink noise figure falling a mere 0.2dB short. In common with other UniQ products we've measured, on-axis frequency response is well controlled until around 10kHz, above which large swings in response suggest reflections within the horn formed by the midrange cone – hence the large on-axis response errors of ± 10.2 dB and ± 10.8 dB. Slight misalignment of the HF ripples is also responsible for the high pair matching error of ± 2.6 dB but this reduces to a creditable ± 0.8 dB below 18kHz. With a minimum modulus of 3.5ohm, a nominal impedance of 4ohm would be more appropriate than the specified 8ohm but the minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) of 2.1ohm means that this is not an especially difficult speaker to drive. The relatively clean CSD waterfall suggests good control of cabinet and cone resonances. KH



Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	91.7dB / 90.8dB / 90.4dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.5ohm @ 12.9kHz 19.4ohm @ 20Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	-45° @ 2.9kHz 36° @ 927Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	± 2.6 dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	46Hz / >40kHz/20.8kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.5% / 1.2% / 0.3%
Dimensions (HWD)	942x220x327mm

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Klipsch Heresy (£1300)

Klipsch's Heresy III harks back to a bygone era, and not only because it has a horn-loaded midrange and treble drivers which together help gift it easily the highest sensitivity of this group. It is a floorstander but only 605mm high. So the cabinet is canted back to tilt the speaker's forward axis upwards towards the listener. When the original Heresy was launched in 1957, it was so named because it bucked the Paul Klipsch philosophy of full-range horn loading from bass to treble. Fifty years on its unorthodoxy appears even greater.

The olde-worlde ambience is further enhanced by the bass driver having a pleated, rather than roll, surround and by its use of a corrugated and dimpled paper cone, both of which features aid cone stiffness – and a good thing too given that this large driver has to reach beyond 850Hz, where it crosses over to the midrange horn. But the aura of throwback simplicity is diluted by the quite complex crossover that occupies two printed circuit boards attached piggy-back to the inward face of the plastic moulding which carries the two pairs of input terminals. In all the network comprises six inductors (one air-cored), nine film capacitors and four ceramic-bodied resistors.

CURATE'S EGG

Outmoded to the eye, the Heresy III is a curate's egg to the ear. It was most at home – appropriately given their respective ages – on the Ella Fitzgerald track where it conveyed a spaciousness and dynamic ease which eluded all the other speakers here. There was some coloration manifest in Ella's voice and the piano accompaniment, and a slight lack of high frequency 'air' (probably due to the narrowed directivity of the tweeter). But none of this mattered very much: the music flowed and Ella entranced.

Matters began to go pear-shaped with the Webern piece. The spacious recording acoustic was conveyed OK but it was obvious from its first

notes that the violin had a scratchy coloration and the piano sound was impure too. Dynamics were fine, impressive even – but that couldn't offset the pervading sense of timbral infidelity, or the fact the location of the instruments was blurred.

TOO HOMOGENISED

'Annie's Yellow Bag' didn't fare too well either. This track thrives on control-freak management of bass, dynamic and image location, and the Heresy III couldn't provide it. The bass was over-prominent, there wasn't quite the necessary drum crispness and there was an over-riding sense of a lack of tight control, of the sound being homogenised somewhat.

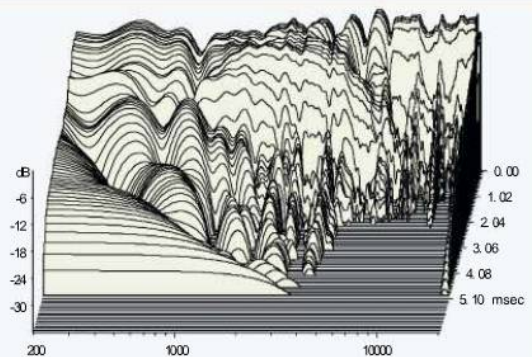
On the Mozart, the spaciousness of the church was well conveyed albeit without the HF air that would put the icing on the cake. As in the Webern, the challenging violin sound of this recording was coloured to the point of harshness on occasion, and again there was a underlying sense of blurring.

Sound Quality: 78%



LAB REPORT

Comfortably the most sensitive speaker of the group at 94.8dB on pink noise, the Heresy III nevertheless falls short of its claimed 99dB by a large margin. Nominal impedance is 8ohm but a 4ohm figure would be more appropriate given the minimum modulus of 4.4ohm. Phase angles are large, dropping the minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) to 2.3ohm, but this still represents a relatively easy load for most modern amplifiers. The on-axis frequency response rises gently between 1kHz and 10kHz but, at ± 4.5 dB and ± 4.2 dB, overall response errors are quite modest for a partially horn-loaded design, and though pair matching error is short of the highest standards at ± 1.5 dB it's not bad. As the high sensitivity would suggest, bass extension proved to be the poorest of the group while the cumulative spectral decay waterfall reveals multiple resonances in the two horn drivers. KH



Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	95.6dB / 94.8dB / 94.7dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	4.4ohm @ 127Hz 31.0ohm @ 70Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	-54° @ 85Hz 61° @ 914Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	± 1.5 dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	67Hz / >40kHz/>40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.7% / 0.1% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	605x394x337mm

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Monitor Audio RX8 (£1000)

I'm a sucker for a pretty face and the RX8, surely, is the looker of this line-up – the only speaker here where it would be a crime to leave the grille in place. Principal visual attractions are the aluminium diaphragms of the proprietary RST 150mm midrange and twin 150mm bass drivers, whose patterns of surface dimpling makes them look like inflated and mutated golf balls. Just like corrugation, dimpling has the effect of stiffening the thin metal sheet of which the diaphragms are formed – so this isn't just eye-candy.

ADD-ON PLINTH

In other respects the RX8 is pretty conventional, being a four-driver three-way with reflex loading of the paralleled bass units. But it's unusual in hiding its tweeter dome behind a protective grille. As the narrowest speaker here, like all the others it takes steps to improve its stability and make it less easy to knock over by moving its support spikes a little outboard of the cabinet, in this case with a shaped plinth which the user has to screw to the base.

If I liked the RX8's looks, I was less enamoured of its sound. It does generate plenty of bass – probably too much for a small room but foam port bungs are supplied to tame LF output should it prove excessive – and might appeal to listeners who prefer a recessed presentation rather than one that's upfront and in your face. But this is another way of saying that the RX8 doesn't channel to the heart of the action.

MISSING SPARK

The dynamic snap of bass and drums that begins 'Annie's Yellow Bag' was softened, robbing this track of the rhythmic punch that sustains it. The tempo dragged as a result, and the slightly recessed vocal and foreshortened image depth added to the feeling that a spark of vitality was missing.

On the Webern there was the same diminished sense of space and 'air'. Bass weight was good on the piano power chords but the

violin sound was just too polite, albeit sometimes a touch harsh. This is a quintessentially edgy and challenging piece, but via the RX8 its drama and tension are ratcheted back a notch or two. If you don't like Second Viennese School discordance then this may come as a relief, but it isn't true to the music's spirit.

This shortfall in vibrancy was also apparent on Ella's voice, which lost a little of its timbral subtlety and gained a slight nasal coloration. I was also, for some reason, more aware of the track's tape hiss than is normally the case.

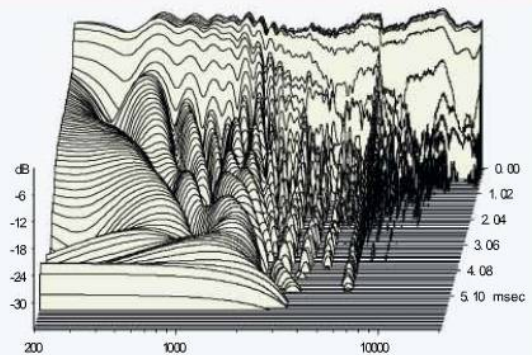
Producer Philip Hobbs' Mozart recording always sounds spacious because of the big, reverberant space in which it was recorded but there's an important difference between generalised spaciousness and the precise rendering of an acoustic that transports you to the recording venue. Via the RX8 the acoustic was a little indistinct, and, despite the slightly recessed presentation, the violin sound was occasionally harshened.

Sound Quality: 74%



LAB REPORT

According to our measurements the RX8 falls a little short of its specified 90dB sensitivity with a pink noise figure of 88.9dB. But as if to make up for that, the review pair recorded the lowest on-axis response errors of the group at just ± 2.5 dB and ± 2.6 dB respectively, and pair matching was also tight at ± 0.9 dB. The overall response trend is flat to 20kHz albeit with a slight presence band suckout. Realistically rated at 4ohm nominal impedance, the RX8 has a minimum modulus of 3.5ohm and although its EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) is lowest of the group at 2.0ohm, this is still a relatively easy speaker to drive. Bass extension is mid-pack at 49Hz (-6dB ref 200Hz). Although the classy-looking dimpled cones of the RST drivers suggest high stiffness, the CSD waterfall is arguably worse than that of the horn-loaded Klipsch, with multiple resonant ridges in evidence. KH



Sensitivity (SPL/1m)/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music	89.1dB / 88.9dB / 88.7dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.5ohm @ 165Hz 15.0ohm @ 27Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	-40° @ 90Hz 38° @ 20Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	± 0.9 dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	49Hz / >40kHz/>40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.7% / 0.1% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	900x185x330mm

GROUP TEST VERDICT

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Let's reflect for a moment on what fine value for money these products offer. Five drivers, a four-way crossover and large cabinet, all for £1200 in Dali's case. That may be the most conspicuous example, but all these speakers pack a lot of hardware for the price. As audio consumers increasingly favour floorstanding speakers, the major manufacturers have become locked in a battle to provide ever superior perceived value, and all five of these speakers put a lot in the shop window.

It's ironic, then, that the most eye-catching of them all – the Monitor Audio RX8, which is also one of the cheapest – disappointed me the most. Frankly, it's too bland. Yes, it offers the weightiest bass of the group, and its 'two paces back' presentation will appeal to those for whom the music listening experience must never be too intimate. But high fidelity is all about insight into both performance and recording, on which basis the RX8 misses the boat.

BREAKING THE MOULD

If most of the speakers in this line-up are exemplars of convergent evolution, there is at least one which breaks the mould – the Klipsch Heresy III. It would be easy to dismiss it as an anachronism, and indeed it will never satisfy those for whom low coloration is a must-have. But if you like your speakers characterful rather than anodyne – and if your musical tastes match its particular strengths – then the Klipsch may just win you over with its larger than life presentation.

I don't like all Dali's speakers by any means – the Helicon 400 Mk2, for instance, left me bemused – but the Ikon series, to judge from the

6 and now the 7, delivers great value, in sound as well as structure. Arranging for the side wall reflection to be spectrally similar to the direct sound has a distinct effect on sound quality – one which may not fully satisfy if you've been weaned on laser-cut imaging but will delight if you crave the image scale and dynamic authority that many speakers fail to deliver. I do, and so I enjoyed the Ikon 7.

As I did the Acoustic Energy Radiance 3, although I would never suggest that they sound alike – they

don't. The Radiance 3 is less expansive than the Ikon, both spatially and dynamically,

but it has a touch more precision to its sound despite a certain reticence.

A BIG SURPRISE

The big surprise for me was the KEF iQ90. It's one of the cheapest models here, coupled to which I have not consistently been a fan of KEF's UniQ driver technology. So, I admit, I was expecting it to be a mid-pack performer. How wrong I was became apparent within the first few seconds of playing music through it because there's something a bit magical about the

iQ90. Somehow it gels into a total musical experience that none of its competitors here can match. It serves up spaciousness of imaging and dynamic pizzazz on a par with the Ikon but adds a level of precision beyond even the Radiance 3. And these strands are pulled together into a believable whole that exceeds the sum of its parts. It's the only speaker here that had me consistently listening through to the end of my test tracks. ☺

'I admit, I was expecting it to be a mid-pack performer'

RIGHT: Acoustic Energy Radiance 3 and Dali Ikon 7 (shown) both Highly Commended with KEF's iQ90 achieving our Outstanding Product award



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Micromega CD-30/IA-180 (£3297)

More rapid-fire hits from the returning French squad: an integrated amplifier and matching CD player that British makers would be proud to claim as their own

Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Hi-fi rarely gives second chances, and yet here we have a once-moribund brand becoming a major force in the mid-price sector. Considering that, in the past, my relationship with Micromega was frosty at best, I'm taken aback by its plethora of new products and especially for the 'positive vibe' they seem to exude. No, I'm not bewildered because they're French – I willingly admit that my favourite cheese is Brillat-Savarin, and that I dream of Nathalie Baye – but because this company has come back like gangbusters.

From the upper-end of the catalogue is its best CD player, the CD-30, and the most powerful of three integrations, the IA-180. And yet the two manage to cost below £3300, despite being manufactured in Europe. In the current economic climate, that's not an inconsiderable amount, but it still represents incredibly good value.

What's so clever is how Micromega, in a most Gallic manner, has balanced performance, style, build quality and features in such intelligent proportions that the final melange pushes all the right buttons: modern appeal (iPod and headphone sockets on the front of the IA-180); retro appeal (rotary volume control, phono stage); audiophile appeal (preamp out, processor loop, digital output); and convenience (full remote control, assignable input names).

À LA FRANÇAISE

Returning to my befuddlement, there's a plethora of sockets on the back of the amp versus the dearth of output options on the CD player, the presence of a phono stage yet no earthing tag... I suppose that this quirkiness is merely French tradition, harking back to steak tartare or the brake pedals on old Citroens. And yet it all works.

Consider the only daunting element of the package: a system remote with 46

buttons, all black, all the same size and laid out in straight rows – bland and seemingly unintuitive for the techno-fearful. And yet, because 'standby' is red and four blue buttons switch the remote through the components it operates – CD, FM, AV and amp functions – after a few minutes' usage, there was little in the way of operational hindrance when compared to my equally cluttered All-In-One, which has illumination and buttons in different shapes and sizes.

Proof of this intuitive user-friendliness is demonstrated by a simple fact: from opening the two boxes to hearing music required all of six – yes, six – minutes. I took advantage of banana plugs on the YTER cables to connect quickly between the wonderful multi-way binding posts on the IA-180, into LS3/5As and Tannoy Autograph Minis, while a set of Atlas phono cables was all I needed between the units.

I didn't even look at the user manuals until the system had been playing for a couple of hours.

So far, I could be describing anything from Arcam to Musical Fidelity to Cambridge, to one of another 20 or more highly competent home-grown contenders.

But there has to be, beyond a deceptive remote control, pretty blue lights and ridiculously impressive build quality, an element to make one shout, 'Vive la difference!'. I hoped that I would find it in the sound. And, as I learned after a week or so, it is a case of steak tartare versus steak and kidney pudding – a matter of taste.

If there's a nationwide 'French sound', it's as impossible to pin down as any: with the exception of much of the gear from Germany and Japan, I find most of the major countries producing serious hardware to be too broad to define glibly. Just as we in the UK have everything from the classic BBC sound to the Linn/Naim alternative, French sonics range from the Toulouse-Lautrec-fat-bottom lushness of Jadis, to horns so strident that they make German alternatives sound like Quad ESLs. Micromega adds another wrinkle, and it is – to me at least – the distillation of ultra-modern detail and hygiene, tempered with overtones of classic opulence.

One supposes that is what Rolls-Royce and Bentley try to achieve with their current, state-of-the-art luxury vehicles, and it's a tough challenge: making a modern



RIGHT: Micromega's uniform fascias mean that the right-hand halves are nearly identical on the two components. Blue LCDs are easy to read and attractive: take note, Audio Research!



car that still offers the sumptuousness of a coach-built motor carriage of the 1930s. Simply shoving valves into a CD output stage, for example, isn't enough. When we reviewed Micromega's top pre/power combination last December (coincidentally costing exactly the same as this integrated amp-plus-CD player), I learned that Micromega's roots and reputation, though entirely based in digitalia, had been respected in the brand's reawakening. But the focus on digital has not been allowed to dominate.

And yet... however much one approaches this as a pair of carefully voiced and matched siblings, the CD player manages to overshadow the amplifier. We'll get to them as standalone products in a second, but keep that thought in mind, for it's all-pervasive. Alternating my listening with nice, comfortable vinyl sessions and a couple of bouts with other CD players such as my aged Marantz CD-12/DA-12 and Quad's 99 CDP-2, I kept returning to the synergy that is the CD-30/IA-180 *au naturelle*.

IT'S STEAK TARTARE THEN

As an ensemble, the two create a balance between the aforementioned modern-and-retro that will mean more to older listeners. By that, I refer to those who started with vinyl and witnessed CD's evolution from its launch in the 1980s through to its

maturing to something acceptable in the 1990s. (This is not the place to defend CD *per se* but, trust me, you *will* miss the maligned CD when compressed formats become the norm.) Digital versus analogue sonic differences may never be resolved, so any *détente* comes in the form of behaving realistically: by treating the two as merely dissimilar rather than as good versus evil.

Using the two with Red Book CDs creates an experience that asks, what is all the fuss about? I sat there and listened to all three discs in the new Charisma Label anthology *Refugees* without stirring except to change discs. Ladies and gentlemen: that statement is far more pregnant with revelatory import than identifying the system's ability to hold my attention for a couple of hours: amongst the tracks were offerings from artists I'd drive 100 miles to avoid, like Lindisfarne, Genesis and Van der Graaf Generator.

Indeed, the music is so utterly, mercilessly, putridly 'progressive' that I don't even know why I bought the set. I don't like Peter Hammill *that* much. And yet the music is also of the era before digital recording made audible artifice a permanent part of our lives, so I was captivated by textures and detail, spatial

ABOVE: Minimalism and clean styling endow the Micromegas with both high functionality and the kind of look that won't grow tiresome; a large rotary volume-control aptly dominates

trickery and studio gimmickry that reminded me why I was first blown away when life moved from mono to stereo (which is another can of worms not to be opened here).

Classicists will be gnashing their teeth, for the decade in question – 1969-78 – also represents the era, defined by those

with an ear for natural sound, as that when studios lost the plot, compared to the genius studio work of the 1950s. Either way, the Micromega system, with Charisma's music, possessed exactly the

seductive charms which keep us wedded to vinyl and valves and analogue in its most pure form. Voices, even if weirdly processed in the recording stages, sounded more real than those which pass for today's cutting-edge releases. The likes of Simon Cowell would do well to look back to their own early years if they're to salvage the sound of the swill spat forth by *X Factor*.

Keep in mind that I am discussing the way the pair behaved without any tweaking or cable chicanery or accessory indulgence. It simply works. Just listen to the kick-drum opening to the Black Crowes's 'Kept My Soul' on the sublime *Before The Frost*: the air, the resonances, the scale, all possess the sort of airiness and authenticity that keep sending us back to our turntables and moving-coils. Then the band kicks in, and the sheer mass reminds you that you are listening to a fast, crisp and powerful solid-state amplifier, its Class D technology forgotten in the musical bliss delivered.

Yes, there's a knee-jerk tendency that says a Class D amp has no right to sound this good after all the years the hard-core

'A coherent, top-to-bottom richness pervades the music'

132K UPSAMPLING

Look closely at the CD-30's slim fascia and you'll see a little badge declaring '132kHz Upsampling'. That's 132kHz, not the usual 192kHz. In its white paper, Micromega explains that the mathematics of asynchronous upsampling from CD's 44.1kHz to 192kHz are not straightforward, unlike upsampling from DVD's 48kHz to 192kHz, which is direct 4x multiplication requiring one single synchronous clock. Upsampling between two rates that are not multiples of one another requires two clocks, with the possibility of 'beating', jitter and inaccurate calculation. *HFN* has been saying the same thing for a few years [most recently Feb '10, p90]. Micromega has opted for the simple expedient of 3x upsampling from 44.1kHz to 132kHz followed by another 8x oversampling in the Analog Devices DAC that follows [see Lab Report, p50]. PM

CD PLAYER & AMPLIFIER



ABOVE: Simple unbalanced analogue and coaxial digital outputs on the CD player (top) are joined by four line inputs, a phono input and tape loop plus preamp output and a set of unswitched speaker outlets on the amp (below)

have decried such technology. No, it doesn't have the warmth of valves, nor the visceral presence of Class A tranny amps. Its lack of absolute transparency only becomes apparent when you feed the CD-30 into a different amplifier, as I found when playing it through the McIntosh C2200/MC2102 combination. But a slight graininess is not enough to condemn the amp, for it is so mild as to warrant no more concern than the shadings between consecutive grades of speaker cable from the same maker.

SPANNING THE ERAS

Am I suggesting, then, that the CD player 'lifts' the IA-180 up a notch? Perhaps it does, but then this is not the first time source/amp combinations have benefited from such synergy. Despite any inferences from my ordeal with three discs' worth of Charisma excess, the pair's prowess is neither music genre nor era-dependent.

The Black Crowes' cut, for example, is recent, grungy, live and loud. The same satisfying sound also applied to the CD of Peter Ustinov's utterly hilarious, 50-year-old *Grand Prix of Gibraltar* free with a recent issue of *Motorsport*, the new 4CD Hall & Oates box set covering 1966-2009, and the decidedly odd CD of Christmas classics issued by Bob Dylan. That's a span of *all* the decades: the Micromegas do not favour one over another.

While a coherent, top-to-bottom richness pervades the music – and this certainly enhances the acceptability of recordings made in the post-digital age, while complementing AAD discs – no too-fleshy elements are suffered that would, for example, soften or stifle transient attack. The rich, fat, yet fast bass is the first thing you'll hear if you go back to that Crowes track

or any of Hall & Oates' classics from their first two decades. Your spine will tingle when you hear the mix of hi-hat, bass and the wash of the synths that open 'She's Gone'.

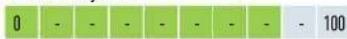
When the two voices float in, the Micromega CD and amplifier keep everything positioned across the soundstage, the parts forming a perfect whole. And that's down to the CD player, as this was a prime element of the performance when I plugged the CD-30 into another system. You can do it again with the electric piano in 'Rich Girl', waiting in anticipation for the rhythm section to add so much mass to the proceedings that even the smallest Tannoys will seem huge.

There's nothing particularly 'negative' about the IA-180 amplifier: it's as good as any solid-stater I can think of at around £1700, while I'm enamoured of its clean styling and terrific fit-and-finish. Ergonomically? All one truly needs. But the CD-30 reminds the listener of what made Micromega a contender in the first place, by minimising digital artefacts and delivering a silky, solid, of-a-whole sound that belies its price. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

As anticipated, given Micromega's history, the CD player is the marginally superior half of this pair; the percentage below is a combined figure for the two, but the breakdown would be 77% for the amp, and 83% for the disc-spinner – yup, it's that good, as satisfying as Marantz's delightful KI Pearl. But the amp is no slouch, and the units combine so well that they reaffirm Micromega's return to form as no fluke.

Sound Quality: 80%

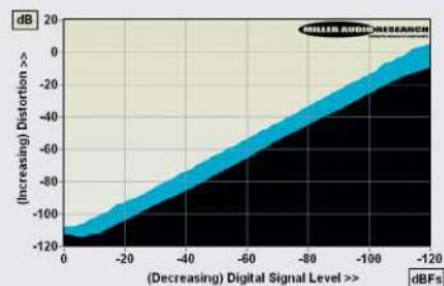


MICROMEGA CD-30/IA-180 (£1599/1698)

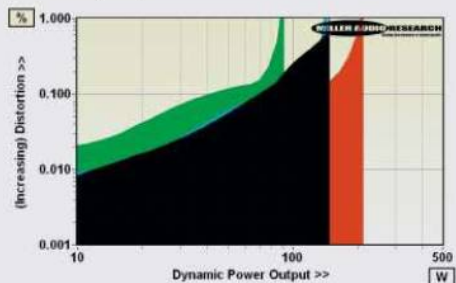
Micromega's CD-30 delivers a top-notch performance, offering a 108dB A-wtd S/N ratio from a 2.1V maximum output and with distortion almost unchanged at a fabulously low 0.0003-0.0004% across the 20Hz-20kHz audio range. Through bass and midrange, distortion is <0.01% over the top 45dB of its dynamic range [see Graph 1, below]. The combination of Crystal's CS8421 SRC for 3x upsampling followed by a pair of AD1853 DACs [see boxout, p49] yields an exceptional >125dB rejection of stopband images coupled with very low levels of ultrasonic noise and a mere 115psec of jitter (this is as low as we can measure with a 16-bit data pattern). The player's output impedance is just a little higher than I'd like to see at 600ohm but its response is only gently rolled away at -0.3dB/20kHz which will have no impact on its subjective brightness.

The partnering IA-180 amplifier has more 'character' with distortion that gradually climbs with power output from 0.0015% at 1W/8ohm to 0.25% at 90W/8ohm, but at least this trend is broadly consistent with frequency. While the Class D modules are rated at 180W/4ohm this is somewhat dependent on implementation, in this case reaching 120W/8ohm and 170W/4ohm. Under dynamic conditions it's possible to achieve 150W/8ohm and 212W/4ohm [see Graph 2, below], so it's beefy enough. The response rolls away to -0.7dB/20kHz and -7.5dB/100kHz from a low 0.023ohm impedance and only the 76.5dB S/N ratio (A-wtd, re. 0dBW) is mildly disappointing.

Readers are invited to view a full QC Suite report for the Micromega CD-30 and IA-180 amplifier by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Distortion versus digital signal level over a 120dB dynamic range using CD data at 1kHz (black) and 20kHz (blue)



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	120W / 170W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	150W / 212W / 145W / 90W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.023-0.11ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz, CD/amp)	+0.0 to -0.3dB/+0.0dB to -0.7dB
Digital jitter (CD, 16-bit/44.1kHz)	115psec
A-wtd S/N ratio (CD/amp)	108.1dB / 76.5dB (re. 0dBW)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, CD/amp)	0.0003-0.0004%/0.0006-0.011%
Power consumption (CD/amp)	12W / 22W/490W (Idle/Rated o/p)
Dimensions (WHD)	430x70x265/430x70x300mm

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Tony Bolton, Micromega CD-10 Review
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Electrocompaniet ECD1 (£1290)

Remember TIM? And the Norwegian company that coined the term in the '70s? We've been listening to its upsampling DAC and making some telling comparisons
 Review: **Keith Howard** Lab: **Paul Miller**

For audiophiles of a certain age the name Electrocompaniet will always conjure up recollections of the original Electro power amps, based on a design by Matti Ojala. Ojala, a Finn, had set the cat amongst the pigeons in the late 1970s by coining the term transient intermodulation distortion (abbreviated TIM or TID) for a feedback-related distortion mechanism that was supposed to be a new discovery but, said numerous old-school amplifier designers, was nothing of the sort. While that controversy raged – and Ojala went on to 'discover' interface intermodulation distortion (IID) too – Electrocompaniet, a Norwegian company, introduced an amplifier based on Ojala's TID-busting circuit design. It went on to achieve minor classic status, and in the process to establish its manufacturer's high-end credibility.

Electrocompaniet's ECD1 upsampling DAC is nothing like so old, of course, but it is nonetheless greying at the temples. Introduced as long ago as 2002, when banks would have queued up to loan you the money to buy one, it accepts 16- or 24-bit digital inputs with sampling frequencies from 32 to 96kHz and upsamples them to 192kHz at 24-bit resolution. There's nothing remarkable about that since Philips CD players were doing essentially the same, albeit at fixed input sampling rate and with lower-resolution DAC chips, fully 20 years earlier. But at the time of the ECD1's launch there was an audio industry buzz about the benefits of upsampling, and hi-fi hacks were getting their underwear in a bind contending that upsampling and oversampling are not the same thing.

Actually the ECD1 shows its age more internally than externally [see Lab Report] but there is one item missing on the back panel which we increasingly expect to see on modern DACs – a USB input to allow the

streaming of audio from a computer. Now it's true to say, in the ECD1's defence, that the USB input on many DACs does not give the best results, but if you intend to stream audio via USB then clearly the ECD1 is not for you. Which does not mean, of course, that it cannot be used with a computer. As it provides coaxial and Toslink S/PDIF inputs alongside its balanced AES/EBU inputs, it can be hooked up to any computer that has a coax or optical digital output.

A SMALL GRIPE

Operationally there's not much else to report: as with any DAC, you select the required digital input channel, connect a preamp (or whatever) to the output and away you go. The only front panel control on the ECD1, other than the central on/off switch, is a push button that toggles between the digital inputs, the selected one being indicated by an LED. Disappointingly, the indicators don't change colour or otherwise confirm when a digital source is connected and locked.

As many other DACs do nothing more it would be unfair to single this one out for criticism for not providing a display

of input sampling rate, but as this is something which annoys me I'll take this opportunity to make a general call for this feature to be more routinely included. It is very useful to know, for example, when you play a DVD-A (you remember them...) whether an 88.2 or 96kHz recording is emerging from the player's digital output unmolested or, on instruction from the disc, has been downsampled to 44.1 or 48kHz. It is no less useful, when playing audio from computer, to know whether the operating system (Vista, Windows 7, OS X) is downsampling the signal: either because the output device doesn't support the recording's native sampling rate or because the audio output format is specified incorrectly. All it takes is a few LEDs on the DAC to make this important information immediately available to the user. Audio industry at large, please take note!

I do most of my listening to music files stored on hard disk these days, via a latest version Mac mini running Windows XP. The Mac mini's compactness – which, allied to its quietness and un-computer-like styling, make it so suited to this role – is also its Achilles' Heel in that it has no room for

RIGHT: Blue LEDs show which of the four digital inputs is selected but don't indicate when a digital source is connected and locked. There is also no display of incoming sample rate





expansion cards, and no ExpressCard slot for adding a sound card as you would to a laptop. So apart from the built-in optical S/PDIF output, the only way of extracting digital audio from it is by using an external audio interface connected via USB or FireWire, the latter currently being the preferable option as it offers multichannel capability up to 24/192 (but watch this space: hi-res multichannel USB DACs are, apparently, on the way).

Of these options only the integral optical output is directly compatible with the ECD1 but both of the FireWire interfaces I use – RME Fireface 800 and Prism Sound Orpheus [HFN, Jan '10] – have S/PDIF outputs which, conveniently, should allow direct comparison between the ECD1 and their onboard DAC stages when playing both 44.1kHz material ripped from CD and 88.2/96kHz media ripped from DVD-V/DVD-A or obtained as a download.

I say 'should' because it didn't quite work out that way. For reasons I was unable to identify, when the Fireface 800 and ECD1 were combined there was a persistent low-level digital 'chirping' in the analogue output that made reliable comparisons impossible. No such problem arose with the Orpheus, so the comparison between its onboard DAC stages and the ECD1 went ahead as planned. More typically, of course, the ECD1 will be used with an optical disc player as the signal source so – reminding myself which way up a CD goes – I also used it with a Sony XA5400ES CD/SACD player. This has both coax and optical S/PDIF outputs but no AES/EBU output option, unfortunately, so the

ECD1's balanced digital input went untried. The comparison between the ECD1 and Orpheus proved to be a fascinating one, from which emerged no overall winner. Instead it became clear, after a lot of listening, that each DAC stage has its particular strengths – as a consequence of which my preference toggled between them according to the item being played.

ADDICTIVE SOUNDS

One particularly revealing track, favouring the ECD1, was Diana Krall's 'Narrow Daylight', from *Girl In The Other Room* [Verve 0602498620465, CD layer]. The Electro DAC has a particular affinity for female voice, the more so when the accompaniment is not overly complex and there is no driving rhythm. Then its ability to reproduce a natural sense of warmth, space and dynamic really shines through. Its sound was addictive on this track, the Orpheus onboard DAC sounding better organised but a little lacking in bloom, air and sheer listenability by comparison.

I have the 24/96 stereo version of this track too, ripped from the Dual Disc release [Verve 06024 98648247]. Intriguingly, I preferred this via the Orpheus which benefited more noticeably from the higher resolution, revealing – for example – breathing noises of which I had been much less aware on the 16/44.1 version. Set against this spruced-up, effortlessly detailed portrayal, the ECD1 sounded a

ABOVE: Electrocompaniet's aesthetic is minimalistic but with a hint of decadence afforded by the gold coloured buttons. These control on/off and toggle digital inputs

little contrived, a little embellished – still big and open-sounding on the vocal, but missing some of the telling detail that the Orpheus uncovered. In other words, it delivered less fully on the hi-res potential of 24/96.

Another insightful track was The Beatles' 'Come Together', from the remixed *Love* album [Parlophone 0946 3 80789 2 0]. About the only disappointment of this CD/DVD issue is that it provides no hi-res


stereo version: you have the choice of 16/44.1 stereo on the CD or 24/96 surround on the DVD-A, as if multichannel capability were the latter's only benefit. So I had to use the CD version in comparing

the ECD1 to the Orpheus, but it proved telling enough.

This track has a lot more going on in it, and it's driven forward by that insistent, almost awkward rhythm. Both these characteristics favoured the Orpheus, its better organisation keeping the whole track more intelligible while sustaining the relentlessness of its progress. By comparison the ECD1's undoubted exuberance sounded a little messier, a little lacking in transparency and control.

TOO BIG A FEAST

Over the Christmas holiday I found myself talking to a friend who is knowledgeable about classical music (but not hi-fi) about how I regard certain works as, effectively, unreproducible because of their sheer scale. The example I quoted was William Walton's oratorio *Belshazzar's Feast*, a piece which scintillates in the concert hall but is just too overwhelming for most, if not all, audio systems.

Because of this I rarely listen to the work at home, but my conversation encouraged me to revisit it when listening to the ECD1, specifically the DVD-A release of 

'The Electro-DAC has a particular affinity for the female voice'

UP AND OVER...

A lot of words have been spilt over the years trying to drive a wedge between oversampling and upsampling. Actually, it's a distinction that DSP theory doesn't make, since both are examples of what is more properly termed interpolation. The difference is that in oversampling – which is a synchronous process – the output sampling rate is an integer multiple of the input sampling rate (hence 4x, 8x, etc oversampling) whereas with (asynchronous) upsampling this need not be the case. Otherwise the purpose and key benefit are identical with either process: to increase the sampling rate sufficiently that low-cost, high-accuracy, stable digital reconstruction filtering can be used instead of an analogue network, with only a low-order analogue output filter required downstream of the DAC chip to remove the remaining image spectrum.

OUTBOARD DAC



ABOVE: Plenty of connections on offer with one optical and two coaxial S/PDIF digital inputs joined by an AES/EBU (XLR) option. There are coaxial and optical digital outputs as well as both single-ended (RCA) and balanced (XLR) analogue outputs

André Previn conducting the LSO and Chorus [EMI 7243 4 92402 9 2]. Quite why this is a 24/48 transfer when, presumably, a 24/96 or 24/192 transfer could have been made from the analogue master is something only EMI can explain, but it still throws the gauntlet down to any hi-fi system presumptuous enough to take it on.

I chose one of the easier passages for the comparison, namely the opening 'Thus Spake Isaiah', and – even though by now I had a good idea how the ECD1 and Orpheus squared up to each other – was surprised again at how different they sounded. It wasn't identifying these differences that was so difficult as reaching a conclusion as to which presentation was preferable. True to form, Prism Sounds' Orpheus delivered a drier sound with flatter imaging whereas the ECD1's soundstage had more depth and its overall sound was somehow more sweeping and lyrical.

But the Electro dealt more in generalisations while the Orpheus attended to the details. There was a greater sense with the Orpheus of the choir sound being an amalgamation of individual voices and there was also a tension to the orchestral playing that the Electro rather glossed over. I know which I'd want were I a recording engineer – the hear-through analysis offered by the Orpheus – but I can imagine some listeners preferring the Electro's world view for everyday use at home, particularly those who feel that digital audio often lacks in expressiveness.

NO CONTEST HERE

It was time to switch to the Sony source and two recent additions to my CD collection, yet to be transferred to hard disk: Quatuor Ebène's acclaimed performance of

the Debussy String Quartet [Virgin Classics 50999 519045 2 4] and Steve Reich's *Proverb*, conducted by Paul Hillier [Nonesuch 79430-2].

This time there was absolutely no question about which sound was superior. As I began playing the second movement of the Debussy for the very first time, via the Sony's onboard DAC, my spirits fell. Here was a lively performance let down by a hopelessly fuzzed recording with little spaciousness and sat-on dynamics. It occurred to me that I wouldn't bother to rip it to hard disk after all. But via the ECD1 there was a transformation: the plucked strings had power, suddenly there was a recording acoustic worthy of the name, and the sound acquired a sparkle to match the playing!

Proverb begins with one then two soprano voices at either side of the soundstage singing the same refrain in canon, generating some challenging discords as they do so. Via the ECD1 each voice had a distinct character and was placed in a large, reverberant acoustic, whereas via the Sony's DAC the voices' timbral qualities were fuzzed and the acoustic generalised. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Connected to many a middle-market CD player, the ECD1 will elevate its sound quality to a different class with improved clarity, spaciousness and *joie de vivre*. But this venerable DAC is beginning to show its age in some respects. It majors on the broad brush strokes of music reproduction but in the process misses out on some of the subtleties that more transparent DACs unearth.

Sound Quality: 79%



ELECTROCOMPANIET ECD1 (£1290)

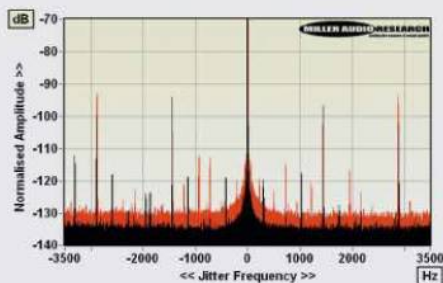
Launched in 2002, but utilising Crystal's CS8420 asynchronous upsampler and CS4397 24-bit/192kHz DAC (both of which are now more than ten years old), the ECD1 is necessarily a product of its age. The venerable upsampler may operate up to 192kHz but it will not accept 192kHz digital inputs, and so both 96kHz and 192kHz source material are reduced to a -1dB/45kHz bandwidth with a mild +0.1dB peak at 38kHz. Otherwise, 48kHz and 44.1kHz inputs are treated to a ruler-flat response, good to within one-hundredth of a dB from 20Hz-20kHz.

The ECD1 includes a fully discrete filter and analogue preamp stage with full-sized rather than surface-mount components. Compact circuit design is more typical these days, enabling better control of circuit impedances, resonances and interference. Perhaps as a result, the ECD1's 93dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 4.8V from the balanced outputs) is closer to 16-bit than 24-bit in performance. Distortion, mainly 2nd/3rd harmonic in nature, is also higher than usual at 0.004-0.008% across 20Hz-20kHz but, importantly, this is still not high while being admirably consistent with frequency [see Graph 1, below]. Partially reflected in the S/N results, the ECD1's noise floor is not especially 'clean' with numerous peaks dotting the spectrum [see Graphs online] and contributing to the untidy-looking jitter spectra [Graph 2, below]. Its >1000psec jitter with 48kHz data is readily bettered by more modern DAC implementations.

Readers are invited to view a full QC Suite report for the Electrocompaniet ECD1 DAC by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Distortion versus digital signal level over a 120dB dynamic range using 24-bit data at 1kHz (black) and 20kHz (blue)



ABOVE: High resolution jitter plots showing 48kHz/24-bit data (black spectrum) versus 96kHz/24-bit data (red spectrum).

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum Output Level/Impedance	4.78Vrms / 100ohm
A-wtd S/N Ratio	92.5dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.0041% / 0.0063%
Distortion (20kHz, 0dBFS)	0.0083%
Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.0dB to -0.01dB (48kHz Fs)
Digital jitter (24-bit; 48kHz/96kHz)	1095psec / 685psec
Resolution @ -100dB	±0.3dB
Power consumption	15W
Dimensions (WHD)	48.3x83x255mm

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Onkyo TX-NR5007 (£2400)

With every feature the AV enthusiast could want, this more than affordable amplifier throws out a challenge to its more expensive peers with a subtly alluring musicality
 Review: **Richard Stevenson** Lab: **Paul Miller**

If your idea of audio nirvana begins and ends with a crisp stereo recording of *Dark Side Of The Moon* on vinyl, then Onkyo's TX-NR5007 is going to hold all the appeal of a pork-chop at a bar mitzvah. This beast is festooned with AV technology, dripping with features and eschews many of the accepted 'purist' sonic virtues for high-tech digital signal processing. This includes such delights as room EQ, volume dependent dynamic range controls and extended surround sound modes. If something like NAD's classic 3020 integrated stereo amplifier was chalk, this Onkyo is the entire cheese counter at Sainsbury's – with cheese sauce on top of modern art.

Coming in at the very top of Onkyo's receiver range, the £2400 TX-NR5007 boasts no fewer than nine formidable channels of amplification, THX Ultra 2 Plus specification and decoding for almost every domestic audio format available. From low-bit MP3s to 96kHz/24-bit DTS-HD Master Audio and almost everything in between (including SACD's DSD), the TX-NR5007 sets out to be the only processing device you will need no matter how large or convoluted your home entertainment system gets.

The exhaustive feature count covers all the bases, including full Ethernet networking, no fewer than eight HDMI inputs, USB inputs, multi-room set-up, IR repeaters and 12V triggers for projectors and automatic screens. The on-board DSP offers two additional channels on-top of the *de facto* home cinema 7.1 setup [see boxout].

For audiophiles considering such a beast there is a Pure Audio mode that switches down redundant circuits to reveal underpinnings that sport some serious hi-fi pedigree. You get a chunky power supply with monster transformer

RIGHT: Front USB and HDMI inputs may seem odd but the next generation of camcorders, digital still cameras, gaming machines and even phones will use an HDMI (c-plug) AV output

(somewhat essential for its rated 150W per channel output!), separate supplies for audio/video/power amp circuitry, Burr-Brown DACs, custom transistors, gold-plated terminals and a brass bus plate for improved grounding.

To complement this hard-core audiophilia the '5007 offers Audyssey's full-spec MultEQ XT room EQ system, Dynamic Volume, and Dynamic Surround Expansion (DSX) processing, Dolby's ProLogic IIz height-channel extension and an array of DSP sound modes. The tweakery is no less impressive on the video side with its Silicon Optix Reon-VX video engine and the excellent Imaging Science Foundation calibration.

Clearly Onkyo has spent a lot of time and effort in making the TX-NR5007 as future-proof as possible. The core architecture is firmware updateable over the net, the RS232 port is fully compatible with trendy multi-room controllers from the likes of Crestron and AMX and it comes with a bespoke universal port. With suitable optional

extras from Onkyo this will allow an array of devices to be connected to the receiver with two-way comms and control. Currently on offer is the Onkyo UP-A1 standard iPod dock, the DS-A3 remote interactive (RI) iPod dock and the rather nifty UP-DT1 DAB+ tuner.

BUILD VERSUS COST

On the down-side it still doesn't feel as robust or as solidly built as its peers from the likes of Denon, Pioneer or Yamaha. The top case flexes alarmingly under the lightest pressure and the speaker terminals, despite their trendy clear plastic bodies to look like WBT's, are nothing more than basic terminals that flex away from the back panel when a heavy cable is connected. Even the supplied set-up mic is a lightweight plastic affair compared to the competition's metal-bodied equivalents. The remote is suitably lush in design but it doesn't have an LCD screen nor is a second remote for another zone supplied. The trade is done on price,





because at less than two and half grand this flagship is less than two-thirds the price of range-topping amps from any of the aforementioned peers.

It lacks absolutely nothing in usability either. The GUI is crisp, concise and leads you through set-up and operation completely intuitively. There are plenty of high-quality graphics showing you relative speaker positions and all the features and functions in the menu are accompanied by a short text explanation. While other manufacturers offer this feature, the Onkyo has the most concise and least ambiguous descriptors to date. Even from the remote, tweaking and settings changes are easily found and the whole ship can be sailed with confidence in next to no time. Of course the full Audyssey multi-point auto-set-up sequence takes eight months to complete in the first place. Well, OK half an hour – but it felt like eight months.

After initial set-up the default tweakery is set to 'on'. It takes a good exploration of the menus to remove the

Audyssey EQ, shut down the Dynamic Volume, disable the Dynamic EQ and bypass the tone controls to get a semblance of its sound *au naturel*. But it's eminently worth the effort. The Onkyo's sound is quite an advance on some of its budget receivers and holds its knobs high against more costly peers.

POWER IN RESERVE


Using a good analogue stereo feed and set to Pure Audio mode the TX-NR5007 was crisp and fast sounding with an even balance and very good instrumental separation. The top end was smooth and chocolatey, and while there wasn't the searing top-end extension of the Pioneer SC-LX90, for example, the sound remained remarkably unrestrained and spacious. Feature-rich AV receivers can suffer a rather shut-in dynamic where too many other circuits lay a heavy demand on the power supplies. But the Onkyo has bags

'Mrs S appeared at the music room door waving a yellow card'

M1, with all but the best amplification. The TX-NR5007 rises to the task with a delicate touch across Denny's vocal range. On 'Late November' her

vocal's rich body and swelling top-end is created with real weight and presence, and beautifully focused centre stage. The music is at once separate from the vocal but the song remains a cohesive whole, allowing you to fall deep into its charms.

In stereo the Onkyo exhibits much of the best qualities of larger power amplifiers, offering an effortless grace and smoothness at high volume that allows the music to soar without a hint of strain. I found myself singing along with the ancient lyrics of 'Tam Lin' and joining in with the chorus of 'Solo' with such vim and vigour that Mrs S appeared at the music room door waving a yellow card.

Of course, this is quintessentially a multichannel amp and let's not forget Blu-ray can support the highest resolution digital audio of any disc-based format to date. If you're still in the pork-chop camp 

NINE CHANNELS... ER, WHY?

Both Audyssey DSX processing and Dolby ProLogic IIz offer processing for additional front height channels to create a genuine three-dimensional soundstage from a non-planar loudspeaker array. Several amps have hit the market with these technologies but the TX-NR5007 is first to offer amplified channels to match. DSX also offers the ability to add width channels, wider than normal front left and right, to increase the soundstage. The Onkyo's amplifiers and speaker terminal array allows you to switch between height and width channels but there is no facility to run all eleven channels (7.1 + height + width): a trick missed in my opinion. Add to this the Onkyo's independent measurement and trim for two subwoofers, and those with an obsessive compulsive speaker buying habit can at least enjoy full 9.2 channel surround sound.

ABOVE: Gunning for the badge collectors medal this year, the TX-NR5007 leaves few bought-in technologies of their logos unaccounted for – a good job the drop-down flap is full width


of power in reserve in two-channel mode leading to a stereo soundstage with admirable height and width.

The *Best of Sandy Denny* CD (Island) is quite a task for any amplifier as the mixed quality of the early 1970s recordings can sound flatter than a hedgehog on the

M1, with all but the best amplification. The TX-NR5007 rises to the task with a delicate touch across Denny's vocal range. On 'Late November' her

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FULL HD AV AMPLIFIER



ABOVE: Comprehensive connectivity trumps the competition with eight HDMI's (one on the front) but far fewer analogue and S/PDIF inputs and outputs. The Universal port supports Onkyo accessories such as various iPod docks and a DAB+ module.

about multichannel receivers I urge you to take a listen to the Medici Arts Blu-ray recording of Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos* (Orchestra Mozart/Abbado). Recorded live in 2007 in native multichannel, the 5.1 LPCM audio is frankly a revelation in immersive recorded music. The mixing is a beautiful blend of front stage information with the centre used for enhancing orchestral positioning and the rears used purely for venue ambience.

Set in direct mode the Onkyo sounded fast and alive with this recording. Again the balance was right down the middle with very little character imposed on the recording. The dynamic range was suitably impressive and the top end felt articulate if not particularly extended. The violins were rendered with a rich, almost 'woody' quality that sat wonderfully well with the horns. As the strings played, the room simply filled with sound with each instrument virtually carved into the mix.

On the downside there was not quite the top end resolution and accuracy that some of Onkyo's peers manage. The leading edges of the violin notes were a little smeared and softer than the best and there was an homogenisation of bass that seemed to blur individual note definition down below about 100Hz. Interestingly, these facets often go hand-in-hand with a poor jitter figures over HDMI. When I tested the likes of Denon's AVC-A1HD and Pioneer' SC-LX90 they benefited from review with their matching Blu-ray source, with DenonLink

4 and PQLS jitter reduction respectively. Onkyo is perhaps on the back foot from the start by not incorporating a bespoke jitter circuit outside of the basic PLL system here [see Lab Report].

MULTICHANNEL SACD

That aside, the Onkyo continues to impress with multichannel music on SACD. Swapping between HDMI (DSD direct mode) and analogue multichannel inputs from my Denon DVD-A1UD, the analogue nudged ahead with a more even and lucid sound. 'It's A Miracle' from Roger Waters' *In The Flesh* (SACD) was deep, smooth and eminently moody, although there was a little of Waters' acerbic bite missing from the lyrics. This is an amplifier that lures you with its subtlety and musicality rather than surprises you with any particular ability or character: a mix that tends to be a good long-term bet. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

The Onkyo TX-NR5007 holds its own in the rarefied atmosphere of top-end receivers and does so at a distinctly down to earth price. It has every feature you could need for a comprehensive AV hub, is hugely entertaining with movies and offers a smooth and sophisticated if not highly detailed presentation with both stereo and multichannel music. It's fully featured, eminently enjoyable and near half the price of its rivals – what's not to like?

Sound Quality: 82%

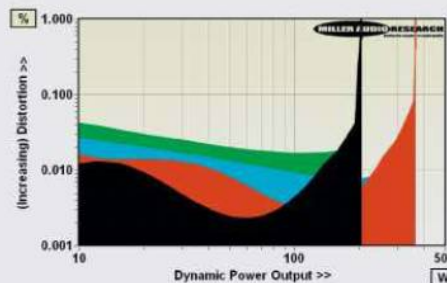


ONKYO TX-NR5007 (£2400)

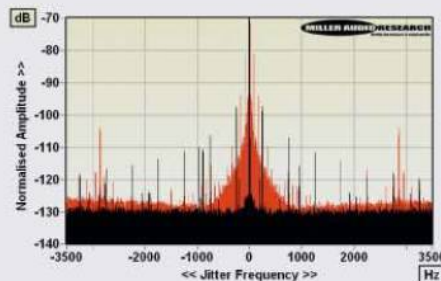
Nine channels notwithstanding, the basic power performance of Onkyo's TX-NR5007 is not dissimilar to that of Yamaha's DSP-Z7 [HFN Oct '09], the former rated at 150W per channel, the latter at 140W, and both achieving closer to 2x175W and 5x105W/8ohm in practice. Under dynamic conditions it's possible to squeeze 205W and 365W into 8 and 4ohm loads but the Onkyo has slightly more cautious protection, reducing its output into tougher 2ohm loads down to 360W. With sensitive multichannel speaker packages, the TX-NR5007 should fare perfectly well. There is some load sensitivity, however, with its -0.25dB/20kHz response into 8ohm drooping more obviously to -0.5dB/20kHz into 4ohm, an unusual shelving-off of HF that begins above a few kHz. Distortion increases with frequency, as expected, but also varies between channels from a uniform ~0.004% through the bass to anything from 0.0096% (centre channel) to 0.057% (left channel) at 20kHz.

'Digital' distortion is higher at peak inputs but at least the ~0.01% of 2nd/3rd harmonics is the same at all frequencies. Lowest distortion is achieved at -25dB below full digital scale. The spectral distribution of jitter over both S/PDIF and HDMI [a huge 4870psec – Graph 2 below] is almost identical to that for Onkyo's PR-SC886 processor [HFN, Mar '09] and TX-NR906 AV amp [HFN, Feb '09] albeit slightly higher in absolute value. As I said a year ago, Onkyo should really consider implementing one of the clock-synchronising regimes from Sony (HATS) or Pioneer (PQLS) if its HDMI performance is to remain competitive.

Readers are invited to view comprehensive QC Suite test reports for the Onkyo TX-NR5007's analogue, digital, Dolby and bass management performance by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads



ABOVE: High resolution jitter spectrum comparing 24-bit/48kHz data over S/PDIF (black) and HDMI (red)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	2x175W, 5x105W, 7x90W 2x285W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	205W 365W 360W 205W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.033–0.14ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	+0.0dB to -1.10dB (Analogue)
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, Analogue/Dig)	0.0024–0.049% / 0.012–0.013%
A-wtd S/N ratio (Analogue/Digital)	93.5dB / 104.9dB
Digital jitter (S/PDIF / HDMI)	790psec / 4870psec
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	134W/1.1kW (5x100W/8ohm)
Dimensions (WHD)	435x199x464mm

Pure Sound T10/P10 (£320/£600)

With its vacuum tube phono amplifier and moving-coil matching transformer Pure Sound offers a taste of high-end analogue bliss for those on a tight budget

Review: **John Bamford** Lab: **Paul Miller**

A aficionados of vinyl replay may recall Audio Innovations' highly regarded P2 phono amplifier of the late 1980s. Its design was largely the work of Guy Sergeant who worked for the Audio Innovations company for ten years until it was acquired by the Audio Partnership in 1996. Way back then the P2 cost the princely sum of £750, illustrating that while there are plenty of cheap 'n' cheerful separate phono amplifiers on the market, those employing valves have always cost a pretty penny.

Guy Sergeant subsequently went to work for JPW, prior to creating his own Pure Sound brand of valve electronics. Its range of amplifiers may not win awards for svelte styling, nevertheless they are designed with a sensitive ear for sound quality and tend to be keenly priced thanks to manufacture in China. Pure Sound's manufacturing partner is a specialist producer of transformers, based in Guangzhou, around 75 miles northwest of Hong Kong.

PART SOLID STATE

Designed to partner Pure Sound's line amplifiers, the P10 phono amplifier is a moderately compact affair for a tube

IN SEARCH OF PURITY

Pure Sound's valve amplifier designer Guy Sergeant is something of a connoisseur of transformers, having collected and auditioned a variety of vintage studio microphone transformers over the years from the likes of Altec, UTC, Dukane, McMartin, Pri-Tec and Tamura before specifying the design of his own transformers for the T10. 'Listening to them proved highly informative,' he says. 'Some of the older classic transformer designs have a beautiful way of reproducing tone and it was that sound quality which was being pursued.'



design, with a substantial anodised faceplate and rotary on/off switch with blue power-on status LED. Under the folded steel cover it employs two valve stages with a passive filter network between them to apply RIAA equalisation. The input valve is a high gain ECC83 while the second stage is a lower gain ECC88, the audio circuitry employing no negative feedback and being all point-to-point wired using close tolerance metal film resistors and polypropylene signal coupling capacitors.

Unlike that of the old P2, the power supply in the P10 is a compact solid state design to keep cost – and size – to sensible proportions. The supply uses two transformers, one for the valves' filaments and the other for the high voltage rails. The filaments are DC heated in order to keep hum levels to a minimum and, indeed, in use the P10 proved to be virtually silent even when my Levinson No383 integrated amplifier was wound all the way up to 11.

Of course, owners of high output cartridges might use the P10 on its own [see Lab Report], while step-up transformers are required for use

ABOVE: Pure Sound's standalone T10 transformer is unnecessary for very high output MMs. Styling is minimalist, the P10 just showing power on with a blue LED

with low output moving-coil pickups. Rather than trying to shoehorn a pair of transformers inside the case of the P10 – requiring substantial magnetic shielding, which Guy Sergeant claims can be detrimental to sound quality – instead he builds a standalone 'T10' transformer unit to accompany the P10. The T10 features two custom designed transformers wound on mu-metal cores, rear panel switches (one for each channel) allowing the cartridge to be presented with either a 36ohm or 144ohm load. These settings equate to 1:36 (31dB) or 1:18 (25dB) of gain which cover the requirements of most moving-coil cartridges.

AN IDEAL BALANCE

Think again if you imagine that a valve phono stage might typically sound warm, syrupy and euphonic. What was striking about the sound of the T10/

PURE SOUND T10/P10 (£320/£600)



ABOVE: Gold-plated RCA sockets are used throughout. The P10 features an earth lift switch to obviate hum loops should they occur, while the T10 offers a choice of 36 or 144ohm loading

P10 combination from the outset was the vibrant immediacy of the sonic picture it presented. With an Audio Technica 'OC9 moving-coil fitted to my Townsend Rock Reference/Excalibur turntable the sound of Joe Cocker's *Sheffield Steel* [Island ILPS 9700] was tremendously forthright, the bass and drums of Sly and Robbie's rhythm section sounding fast and crisp while Cocker's husky vocal was vivid and intensely textured.

In similar fashion Eric Clapton's classic performance of 'Double Trouble' from his 1979 *Just One Night* 2-LP live set [RSDX 2] sounded 'fresh' and brightly lit, with plenty of space and atmosphere combined with the type of raw bite you'd expect of a rock band. The closely miked toms of the drum kit and sizzling cymbals possessed believable resonance and texture with natural decay, the overall sound combining an ideal balance of tonal substance and fine detail.

LITTLE TO CHOOSE

Listening to David Torn's *Cloud About Mercury* LP [ECM 1322] revealed a correspondingly detailed and analytical presentation of the multiple layers of instrumental and electronic sounds. Mark Isham's trumpet playing leaped out of the soundstage with penetrating power, free of any sense of strain and with lifelike 'body' and dynamics. Leaving the album on the platter I compared the sound of the T10/P10 combo with RCM Audio's excellent Sensor Prelude phono amplifier: considerably more expensive at £1700 [see *HFN* Nov '09]. In

terms of information retrieval and imaging there was little to choose between them – a great result for the Pure Sound given its lower price tag – but where the RCM sounded 'thicker' and more meaty in the bass the Pure Sound came across as leaner and more agile. The tonality and energy of bass information was markedly different between the two – and which one you'd prefer would depend on the general balance of your hi-fi system.

So while there is plenty of colour and texture to instrumental timbres, with power and bass weight aplenty when demanded, Pure Sound's T10/P10 adds not an ounce of warmth or bloom. Rather it sounds nimble and explicit, managing to provide bags of detail – and thankfully without highlighting surface noise on less than perfect records. Whatever kind of music it is given to reproduce, it's an exciting and involving performer. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

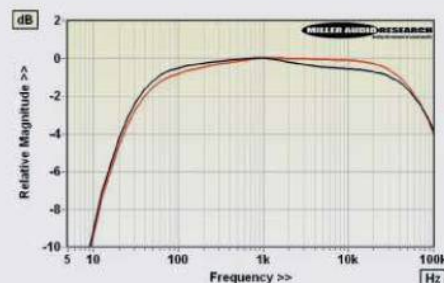
While not inexpensive, Pure Sound's T10/P10 combination is nevertheless competitively priced given the performance on offer. But remember to budget for good quality screened interconnects, keeping them as short as possible. With its quiet background noise and stark, explicit, hear-through quality it will have you perched on the edge of your seat as its eager and intense music making is, I feel, highly infectious.

Sound Quality: 80%

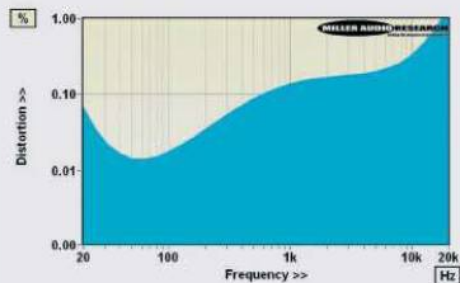


Compared to 'reference' solid-state phono amplifiers from the likes of Lehmann and PS Audio, this tube-based model from Pure Sound is both distinctive and characterful. Specified at x100 or 40dB, our P10 offered about half this gain at 34dB (x50), requiring a full 5mV from a high output MM to yield 250mV from the P10's outputs. The 88.5dB A-wtd S/N ratio is impressive, however, while the additional 26-31dB gain available from Pure Sound's T10 step-up transformer allows a 1V output from the P10 with MCs offering just 0.5-0.6mV. There's plenty of input margin too – in excess of 130mV before distortion exceeds 1%. That said, distortion is almost purely 2nd harmonic in nature but increases in line with output level, from 0.015% at 100mV to 0.098% at 1V and 0.5% at a full 5V output.

The combined gain of the ECC83/88 triode stages is far higher in order to accommodate the passive RIAA equalisation. This, and the lack of overall compensation, probably explains the swift increase in distortion at HF, reaching 1.5% at 20kHz for a 1V output [see Graph 2, below]. Neither is this gain precisely matched as our P10 had a channel balance error of 1.4-2.2dB, increasing at lower frequencies. Furthermore, and despite the use of close-tolerance passives, the response differed in 'shape' by about 0.5dB between channels, showing a slight loss of 'presence' [see Graph 1, below]. Unfortunately its excessive 3-4kohm output impedance, increasing to 21kohm at 20Hz, will only exaggerate the loss of bass when used with conventional amps. Readers are invited to view a QC Suite test report for Pure Sound's P10 phono amp by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'Download' button. PM



ABOVE: RIAA-corrected frequency response from 5Hz-100kHz. Bass roll-off will be obvious unless partnered with a high input impedance (typ. valve) amplifier



ABOVE: Distortion increases with frequency (MM sensitivity, 47kohm loading), at 1V output

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Input loading (P10/T10)	47kohm/100pF / 36-130ohm
Input sensitivity (re. 0dBV)	19.7mV
Input overload (P10)	130mV
Maximum output (re. 1% THD)	>5V
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 5mV in)	88.5dB
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-4.2dB to -0.7dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.017-1.47%
Power consumption	12W
Dimensions (WHD; T10/P10)	70x145x145mm/90x215x360mm

ATC CA2 Mk2/P1 (£1058/£1533)

Following on from its SIA2-150 integrated amplifier, ATC has revamped its CA2 preamplifier and built a partnering power amplifier to make a cost effective duo
Review: **John Bamford** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Since its reputation is for building loudspeakers, proving popular with sound studio professionals and home hi-fi enthusiasts alike, it is sometimes overlooked that in its Gloucestershire workshops ATC makes amplifiers too. All the electronics for its active speakers are made in-house, as are partnering preamplifiers for controlling them, such as its mid-sized CA2 and flagship SCA2 models – the latter with balanced inputs and outputs. Recently, ATC introduced its first integrated amplifier, the SIA2-150, a compact 150W unit priced at £2400, which has now led to this latest pre/power combination.

Metal casework comes from an external local supplier, but everything else is made by ATC's workforce the 'old-fashioned way': meticulous hand assembly and testing being the order of the day. Even the amplifiers' printed circuit boards are painstakingly populated with components by hand. As its pro-audio components might often be expected to operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week, building rugged products that are largely bomb-proof is par for the course at ATC. And the fact that the company ships its amplifiers with a six years parts and labour warranty tells you everything you need to know about the faith it puts in its build quality and reliability.

EVOLVING DESIGNS

Employing the Class A/B MOSFET power pack rated at 150W per channel found in the SIA2-150 integrated, ATC's new P1 power amplifier is a dual-mono design weighing a not inconsiderable 23kg – due to its two 300VA transformers feeding individual power supplies for each channel. The P1's output stage employs two pairs of MOSFET devices per channel together with the company's

'grounded source' topology designed to provide a 'rock solid' zero volt output ground plane. Meanwhile the CA2 Mk2 preamp is a full width 'fresh-up' of the company's smaller, older CA2, this new version including a balanced output pair on XLR sockets to partner the P1's pair of balanced inputs. ATC continues to eschew integrated circuits, the amplifiers being fully discrete in design.

ATC's electronics designer of long standing, Tim Isaac, aims to produce amplifiers which are inherently neutral-sounding with a flat frequency response, very wide bandwidth and low noise. As the company's senior engineer Ben Tilly told *HFN*, 'This latest CA2/P1 combination is evolutionary rather than revolutionary, Tim Isaac's basic amplifier design having remained largely unchanged for more than 20 years.

'As always, we don't make any attempt to "voice" our amplifiers, consequently any character you can hear is purely down to the type of design and the components used.'

This no-nonsense approach follows through to the CA2 Mk2/P1's conservative layout of function controls and the sensible suite of facilities offered. The inclusion of a proper tape monitor loop to provide 'confidence' monitoring is noteworthy, given that so many of today's amps fail to include them.

The CA2 Mk2 also includes a built-in MM/MC phono stage. Initially this was to be a £406 optional extra (the labelling of our sample showing 'AUX 2' on its rear panel), but, since shipping the first consignments to dealers, ATC is actually putting the phono stage into all new CA2s, having decided it is more cost-effective to include it than having to retrofit an additional module. Internal jumpers allow the input sensitivities to be set between 0.7mV and 10mV, with loading of 47kohm or 100ohm to suit MM or MC cartridges respectively.

Also included at the rear of the preamplifier is a second pair of line outputs labelled 'Sub', for convenient hook-up of left- and right-channel active



RIGHT: Machined brushed aluminium front panels are 12.7mm thick, giving the CA2/P1 combination a solid feel. Volume control on the preamp is via a motorised potentiometer



subwoofers if desired, while the P1 power amp includes 'Link Out' sockets for easy daisy-chaining of additional P1s for bi/tri-amping.

Only the lightweight plastic remote controller supplied is a letdown – but it's still a model of clarity with centralised, prominent volume up/down keys that control the motorised potentiometer with reasonable precision.

The brushed aluminium front panels look mighty handsome and the components' isolating feet are thoughtfully capped with rubberised bases to protect furniture surfaces. Regular users of headphones should note, however, that the CA2's quarter-inch headphone output jack is sited on the rear panel – maddening if your preamp is buried within a rack.

THE SOUND OF SILENCE

Whatever music was being enjoyed, the conspicuously silent background of the CA2/P1 pair allowed critical observation of details and musical subtleties

deep into each recording. Even when pushing the envelope with upfront and explicit digital recordings such as the 24-bit/96kHz 'almost unplugged' bonus tracks on Foreigner's DVD-Audio re-release of *Foreigner 4* [Atlantic/Rhino 8122743669] the bright appearance of the recording was delivered free of grain, and with more of everything else: an innate sense of space around individual sounds, fast and crisp leading edges and seemingly vast dynamic contrasts.

From the pumping bass lines of 'Juke Box Hero' to the more delicate, swirling, ethereal synthesiser treatments within the piece, the ATC combo sounded liquid and smooth while fine detail and the textures of sounds were markedly clear and unadorned. The staging of 'Waiting for a Girl Like You' was wide and deep, while tonally it simply seemed 'right'. Similarly, when maxing out my listening

'The textures of sounds were markedly clear and unadorned'


ABOVE: The power amp's on/off switch is on the rear panel. Thoughtfully, an IR Defeat button is provided to override the standby function should you mislay the remote handset

room's acoustic ceiling with a ludicrously loud rendition of 'Money for Nothing' from Dire Straits' 20th Anniversary edition of *Brothers In Arms* on DualDisc [Warner 49377-2] there was little evidence of the hard, brittle quality that

besets the majority of replay systems when playing this track at high sound pressure levels. The CA2/P1 combo sounded confident and intrinsically self-assured, while never

bolstering the presentation with a sense of 'over-excitement'.

The last point is important, I think, as the sound of this ATC combo is not particularly flattering of recordings. Nor does it seem to want to impress listeners with a Technicolor balance that's bold, punchy and thrilling. In fact as I listened through my Townshend Sir Galahad speakers I couldn't help but be reminded of the sound balance of ATC's SCM50A and '100A active loudspeakers (a sound that I'm very familiar with, as two close acquaintances own them).

Describing their 'character' isn't easy, as often-used hi-fi adjectives seem curiously inapplicable. I suppose one could describe their sound as rather sober and 'matter of fact', but that might imply they are boring – which they most certainly are not. Indeed, after a few 

FROM OZ TO GLOS

ATC stands for the Acoustic Transducer Company, founded by Australian acoustic engineer Billy Woodman whose gifted talent for playing jazz piano brought him to the UK in 1970 when he grasped the opportunity to be the house pianist on a cruise liner sailing to England. After working for Goodmans Industries as a young speaker designer he set up his own ATC business in 1974 in London, making 12in drivers for touring rock band PA rigs. Soon the company was making studio monitoring systems, including active crossovers and power amplifiers. After relocating to Gloucestershire in the 1980s it was ATC's SCM50A three-way speaker with on-board amplification and proprietary soft-dome midrange driver that first put the company on the high-end home audio map. See our *On Location* feature in *HFN* Dec '09 for an in-depth profile of the company.

PRE/POWER AMPLIFIER



ABOVE: ATC includes four line and one MM/MC input, a tape loop plus both single-ended and balanced outputs on the CA2 Mk2 pre (top) to match the inputs available on the P1 power amp (bottom). A single set of 4mm speaker connections is offered

minutes of acclimatisation to their broad absence of hi-fi boom and tizz they become entrancing to listen to, sounding controlled, 'solid' and highly detailed, with an earthy and warm midrange that is simply enchanting.

So it is with ATC's CA2 Mk2P1 amplifier pairing. Initially underwhelming, perhaps... then after just a few minutes of listening one finds oneself drawn into the musical performance of each and every recording played.

Rediscovering old gems I tried Neil Young's 1971 *Harvest* album [DVD-A, Reprise 9362-48100-9] where the acoustic guitars displayed rich body and shimmer yet avoided any edgy highlighting of the initial attack of plectrum on string. Instruments sounded as fast as they do in real life, but with no added illusion of speed of a kind that might initially grab attention only to become fatiguing over prolonged listening.

Such sober and understated fidelity also works magic with classical recordings recorded with a natural perspective. The ebb and flow of Antal Dorati and the London Symphony Orchestra's performance of Stravinsky's ballet score *The Firebird* [Mercury Living Presence SR 90226] proved utterly captivating as the grumbling of the basses and cellos was beautifully preserved, especially during quiet passages (where it is often difficult to hear such soft playing recorded in a big hall without increasing the gain – only to have to turn it down again as the sound swells).

Meanwhile, when you want to rock 'n' roll there's no shortage

of dynamic thunder on tap, as clearly demonstrated by Stevie Ray Vaughan's *Couldn't Stand the Weather* [Sony 4941302].

Again, the preservation of spatial cues help makes the lively performance highly believable alongside the bags of raw energy and verve delivered.

INTRICATE DETAILS

Neither is the preamplifier's phono stage something of an afterthought. Far from it, it delivered thunderous, subterranean bass and a massive soundstage from the classic cut of Grace Jones' *Slave to the Rhythm* [ZTT/Island Grace 1]. And against an eerily silent background it resolved intricate details buried within the mix of Kate Bush's *Never For Ever* [EMI, EMA 794] while it proved commendably kind to the surface imperfections of my well-worn LP copy that's fast approaching 30 years old. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

While it might not impress in a quick A/B demonstration, long term listening to the CA2 Mk2/P1 proves warmly satisfying. Considering that this new version of the CA2 includes an excellent MM/MC phono stage it offers tremendous value for enthusiasts looking for high-end performance without paying top prices. The partnership with the P1 power amp is hard to criticise given the delightful audio performance and exemplary build quality on offer.

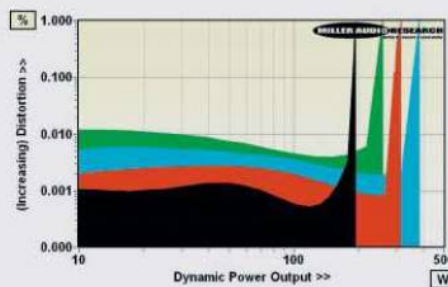
Sound Quality: 85%



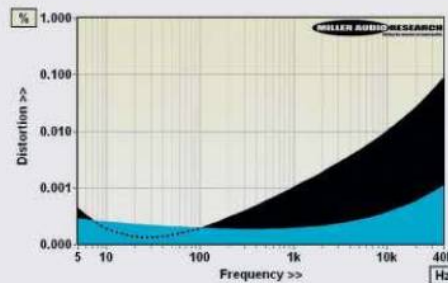
ATC CA2 Mk2/P1 (£1058/£1533)

Vanishingly low distortion, wide S/N ratios and flat, extended responses are the order of the day here with the CA2 Mk2 preamp offering a 101dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV) and 0.0002% bass/midrange distortion from a usefully low 10ohm balanced output impedance [see blue trace, Graph 2 below]. The response is flat to within +0.08dB up to 100kHz and separation is better than 100dB across the audioband. Input overload occurs at >6V but there's a step change in distortion with outputs beyond 1.5V (0.00018% at 1.3V to 0.0055% at 2.5V), regardless of volume position. The less sensitive the partnering power amp, the more obvious this might become.

Of course, ATC's own P1 is on tried-and-tested ground with its massive 91dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW) and vanishingly low distortion which starts from 0.0001% at 20Hz, 0.0008% at 1kHz before rising to 0.03% at 20kHz as ATC's negative feedback loses its grip. [See black trace for the extended trend on Graph 2, below.] The 0.04ohm output impedance is usefully low and the response is good to -0.05dB/20kHz and -1dB/100kHz into both 8/4ohm loads. And yet the 2x150W/8ohm specification is only achieved by the skin of its transistors – our sample delivering 2x153W/8ohm at 1% distortion with a 245.5V mains, increasing to 220W/4ohm and 194W, 315W and 385W into 8, 4 and 2ohm under dynamic conditions [see Graph 1, below]. So the P1 is powerful, but not excessively so against other '150W' behemoths. Readers are invited to view comprehensive QC Suite test reports for the ATC CA2 Mk2/P1 pre/power amps by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads



ABOVE: Distortion versus extended 5Hz-40kHz frequency, CA2 Mk2 (1V balanced out, blue trace) and P1 (10W/8ohm, black trace)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	153W 220W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	194W 316W 387W 260W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.04–0.065ohm (CA2; 9ohm)
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	-0.0 to +0.08dB/+0.0 to -0.7dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/150W)	147mV 1842mV (balanced in)
A-wtd S/N ratio (pre/power)	101.2dB (0dBV) 91.4dB (0dBW)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, pre/power)	0.0002–0.0006%/0.0001–0.03%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	54W/480W (CA2; 10W)
Dimensions (WHD, pre/power)	445x90x330/433x135x350mm

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BEHIND THE MUSIC WITH HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW

From '70s punk to supergroup funk... Paul Hawkins brings you his monthly round-up of what's new in the world of brand new vinyl re-issues and releases

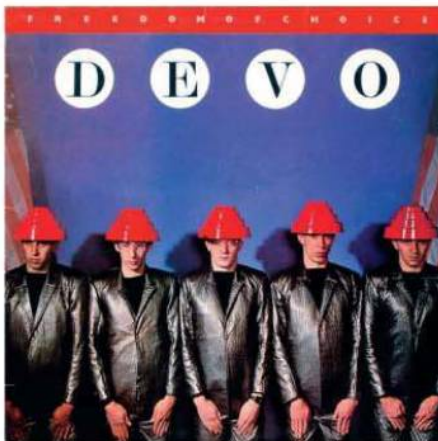
It's great to see labels picking up on something a bit different, especially when it's re-issues of popular albums of the late '70s and early '80s that the kids of the punk and new wave era hold in high regard to this day. It may be for nostalgic reasons, or simply that an album broke new ground at the time.

Devo's debut album *Q: Are We Not Men? A: We Are Devo!* is an album that happens to be a classic in the widest sense of the word. Taking the quirky off-kilter electro pop of Talking Heads and the simplicity of Kraftwerk, Devo's Jerry Casale and Mark Mothersbaugh embraced what was a revolution in synthesized music and used it as a vehicle for their own brand of satire.

MUTANT NEW WAVE

The name of the album was born from the concept that the human race was in fact 'devolving' rather than embracing the concept of personal development that had evolved in the 1960s. The band certainly had a high-profile following: legendary musician and producer Brian Eno was an admirer who's Midas touch was in full effect by 1978. Would the band have gained such credibility without Eno's involvement? Who knows, but the professional approach he brought to the studio honed the band's ideas to produce a synth-pop masterpiece.

The Television-esque 'Uncontrollable Urge' sets the album's pace, followed by a totally reconstructed version of Jagger and Richards' '(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction'. If you hadn't got the point by now, other



➔ Crossover act? Devo's third album gained them popular appeal

stand out tracks such as 'Mongoloid' and 'Jock Homo' with its quirky time signature made compelling listening. And they still do today on this brand new re-issue from Warner Music US.

Warner Music has chosen to couple this release with Devo's third album, *Freedom Of Choice*, choosing to miss out the rather directionless second effort *Duty Now For The Future*. The second album caught the band in a shift between styles that leaves it rather disjointed, although it hints at the direction the band were to take for their incredibly accomplished third release.

Freedom Of Choice saw the band attract as mainstream an audience as they were ever likely to. Off-beat love songs like 'Girl U Want' struck more of a chord with the record buying public of the day while the single 'Whip It' gained radio airplay.

Not that the band's political ideals were compromised. Tracks like 'Cold War' and 'Planet Earth' are self explanatory. But it's true to say that the band lost their way after *Freedom Of Choice*. Their legacy in these two albums however is not to be ignored.

MO-FI ELVIS

Mobile Fidelity has been producing superb audiophile re-issues since the late '70s and, under new ownership since 2001, continues to lead the market when it comes to unearthing classics from pop music's past. In 2010 things go full circle as the label re-issues key albums by an

PAUL HAWKINS

Paul Hawkins is co-owner of independent record store Diverse Music and the company's mail-order arm, Diverse Vinyl – now the UK's largest independent retailer of brand new LP titles. Paul also manages Diverse Records, overseeing the production of many audiophile vinyl LPs by an eclectic range of artists. See www.diverserecords.com for more.

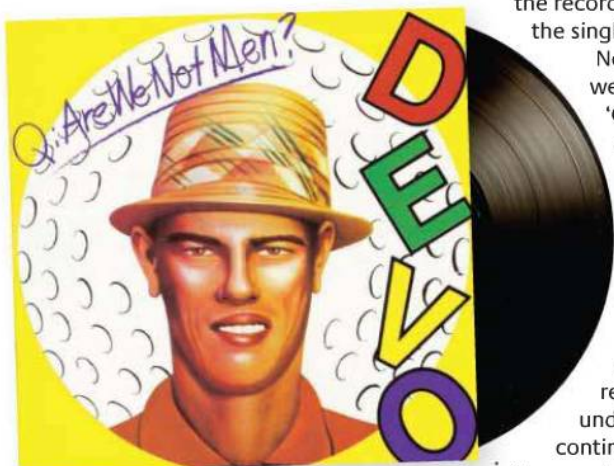


artist who started his career around the same time the label began.

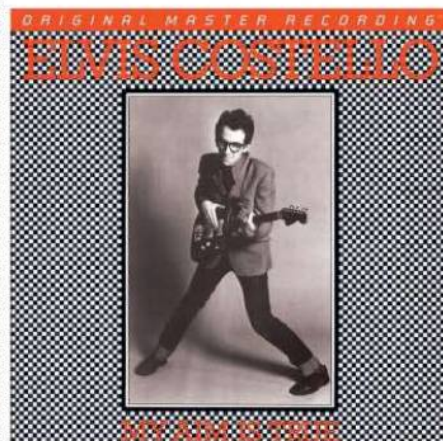
Elvis Costello originally released his first single on Stiff Records in 1977, a year after the label became affiliated with the punk movement forever with the release of 'New Rose' by The Damned. Many thought he'd missed the boat as a new wave artist, yet his radio-friendly melodies and catchy singalong choruses soon caught the nation's attention. That first single 'Less Than Zero' saw Elvis backed by a US West Coast rhythm section called Clover (who later became Huey Lewis's band The News) and the international potential was realised upon release of his groundbreaking first album, *My Aim Is True*.

Elvis's influences came from the heart of rock 'n' roll – the resemblance to Buddy Holly, plus the pilfering of The King's name for his stage moniker surely being no coincidence – although his quick witted lyrics and punk attitude kept his sound up to date. His amazing debut album produced a brace of hits – 'Alison' and 'Watching The Detectives' – cementing Elvis's place in music history.

For the follow up, *My Aim Is True*, Elvis takes things up a gear, and also introduces us to his new backing band The Attractions. Many of the songs were written and



➔ Compelling listening – Devo's debut LP is re-released by Warners US



➔ Elvis Costello's groundbreaking first album – new for 2010 from Mo-Fi

NIRVANA



➔ Bootlegs abound, but now Nirvana's historic 1992 Reading performance has been released as a double vinyl album

developed during the band's hectic touring schedule, and the result is the feel and frenetic pace of a live set with the opener 'No Action' and incendiary 'Pump It Up' proving the point. In fact the album barely breaks the 30-minute benchmark.

Wisely the band saw fit to take it down a peg or two for their third LP, *Armed Forces*. Clearly a talented songwriter, Elvis showcases a more varied style here, and while the album's most memorable moment, 'Oliver's Army', is as upbeat as ever, the likes of 'Accidents Will Happen' and 'Goon Squad' provide more thought provoking moments as they capture the mood of political unrest in late '70s Britain.

Fast forward to 2010 and we all know how varied and textured Elvis Costello's songwriting was to become, especially in the last few years as he nurtures his passion for American roots with *Momofuku*, and *Secret Profane & Sugarcane*, not to mention countless appearances with the cream of Americana (Alison Krauss, Rosanne Cash and Jenny Lewis to name but a few). However, those first three groundbreaking LPs stand the test of time, sounding as fresh today on Mobile Fidelity's fantastic audiophile reproductions as they did the first time around.

A STAR IS RE-BORN

The debut album *She Hangs Brightly* by Santa Monica indie band Mazzy Star is an undisputed, yet underrated classic. Mazzy Star, essentially the duo of David Roback (Rain Parade) and Hope Sandoval, formed in 1989 out of the ashes of Opal, Roback's previous band with former Dream Syndicate member Kendra Smith. *She Hangs Brightly* was originally released on Rough Trade in 1990.

Taking in the forlorn elements of the Jefferson Airplane, Velvet Underground and adding the sparse modern production

of Cowboy Junkies, *She Hangs Brightly* oozes atmosphere and sophistication, with Hope Sandoval's sublime vocals able to move the listener close to tears. It's a US indie album of its time, but one still heart-rending some 20 years after its original release. So hats off to Plain Recordings, which has just re-issued this masterpiece of modern music after it has been out of print for years.

NIRVANA LIVE

It was a moment that defined an era, a generation and, not least, a musical genre. Given the band's reputation for cancelling shows and festival appearances, the fact that with just days to go, Nirvana hadn't yet cancelled their Reading Festival appearance was being met with skepticism from all who had tickets. Even on the day itself the band were expected not to show. In short, anticipation was running high.

The fact that practically half the acts on the main stage that day were on the band's original label, Sub Pop, was the saving grace the audience needed. Surely Nirvana couldn't let their heroes The Melvins, friends Screaming Trees, Teenage Fanclub, L7 and touring buddies Mudhoney down?

The crowd swelled during Nick Cave's set, and it seemed appropriate that a former hard living punk pioneer should open for a band whose frontman was the new king of heroin-chic. With the scheduled stage time long gone, we were all just about to admit defeat (some undoubtedly ready to cause a riot) when from the side of the stage came music journalist Everett True, pushing a wheelchair in which sat one Kurt Cobain dressed in a wedding gown and wearing a blonde wig! Slowly Kurt pulled himself from his transport and took to his feet, faking the 'smacked out' demeanour his wife had recently been criticised for in the press, while attempting an a cappella version of Bette Midler's junkie anthem *The Rose* (the theme of her 1979 film loosely based on the tragic drug-

addled life of Janis Joplin), baiting the frenzied crowd even more.

After what seemed like an age, the singer finally strapped on his guitar. With the opening chords of 'Breed' bursting out of the PA (with Dave Grohl drumming like his life depended on it), Nirvana launched into what was to be one of the most mind-blowing performances by a rock band the world had seen since Jimi Hendrix left the stage at the Isle Of Wight Festival in 1970. In a tragic parallel to that 1970 set, it was to be Nirvana's last gig on UK soil. The critics were silenced for good.

Despite a dependency on Class A drugs,

which was to play a part in his demise, it was on that night in Reading in 1992 that Kurt proved his worth, his work representing an important chapter in the history of rock.

At long last this much bootlegged

historic set is officially released as a double LP on Geffen [UPC 602527212173].

'It was a moment that defined an era, a generation and, not least, a musical genre'

HAPPY BIRTHDAY BLOODSHOT

It's hard to believe that the Chicago-based Bloodshot label has been offering its 'insurgent country music' to the world for 15 years. During this time it has trail-blazed the alt.country scene, with releases by artists such as Neko Case, Sadies, Wayne Hancock, Jay Farrar, Justin Townes Earle, Deadstring Brothers, Bottle Rockets and ex-Mekon John Langford's many guises (Waco Brothers, Pine Valley Cosmonauts).

To celebrate this milestone, Bloodshot is presenting two of its favourite releases for the first time on vinyl. The first of these is *Wreck Your Life... And Then Some* by the Old 97s. Largely overlooked in the story of alternative country, the Old 97s have been

➔ Sublime – for Mazzy Star's debut see Plain Recordings



Vinyl Frontier

BEHIND THE MUSIC WITH HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW

producing solid, upbeat Americana since their debut in 1994. Their second album was to be released on the Bloodshot label in 1995, and is one of the band's best. Standout moments are tracks 'Doreen' and 'W-I-F-E', and listen out for a great cover of John Langford's 'Over The Cliff'.

The second vinyl release is Alejandro Escovedo's *A Man Under The Influence*. Another unsung hero of cowpunk, Tex Mex and roots rock, Escovedo has music in the blood. Brother Pete Escovedo was a percussionist with Santana while niece Sheila Escovedo cut her teeth as a drummer for Prince, before embarking on her own solo career under the name Sheila E.

Alejandro has been recording music since 1992, and released albums on Bloodshot in 1998, 1999 and 2001. The critics' favourite, *A Man Under The Influence* from 2001, now gets its first airing on vinyl and also included in the package is the preceding EP *Bourbonitis Blues*, making this a double vinyl treat.

Time to get funky...

GET THE FUNK OUT...

Ten years in, and funk supergroup Breakestra continue to produce innovative and fresh sounding LPs. They take their influences from the best – The Meters, The JB's, Jimmy Smith among them – mixing them up with modern funky hip-hop production. The group perform regularly to capacity crowds alongside luminaries such as Jurassic 5, Black Eyed Peas, Freestyle Fellowship, Nu-Mark and DJ Shadow. Meanwhile, main man Miles has transformed from a hip hop fan into a respected hip hop producer. His production credits include T-Love's acclaimed *Return Of The B-Girl* EP, tracks for Cut Chemist and Rakka of Dilated Peoples, songs for Macy Gray's debut LP and his now legendary



➔ Putting the fun into funk – the new LP from Breakestra is out now

BLOODSHOT RECORDS
New

WRECK YOUR LIFE
OLD 97s
AND THEN SOME

LIMITED EDITION vinyl releases from The Old 97s and Alejandro Escovedo

EXENE CERVENKA, 'Somewhere Good'
ROSIE FLORES & THE PINE VALLEY COSMOUNTS, 'Girl of the Century'

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THINK AGAIN! More festivals being planned now... Details coming soon we just up a bit!

➔ Bloodshot records celebrates 15 years in the business with releases from The Old 97s and Alejandro Escovedo

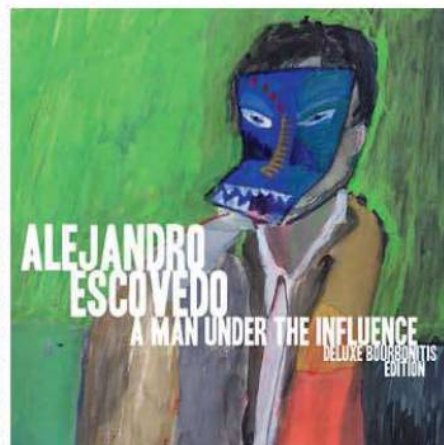
remake of Johnny Cash's 'Ring of Fire' on the Ubiquity Rewind Series.

The new album, *Dusk Till Dawn*, is a funk workout with all the atmosphere of James Brown's legendary Apollo performances, coupled with chunky bass lines and some superb MC work along the way (including a guest spot from J5's Charli 2na).

PURE GOLD

Musician-owned and run, the concept behind the label Daptone is simple: to 'channel the spirits of bygone powerhouses like Stax and Motown into gilded moments of movement and joy'. The label's name has become synonymous with both modern soul and funk.

Now Daptone has released a 23-track compilation album featuring rarities, classics and previously unreleased tracks from the likes of Sharon Jones & The Dap-Kings, The Budos Band, Binky Griptite, Lee Fields, Antibalas and more. The vinyl release of *Daptone Gold* is a double LP packaged in a deluxe gold-foil gatefold jacket with extensive liner notes, and will include a poster, sticker and MP3 download card. If you've yet to pick up on LPs by any of the above artists, then this fantastic compilation is a great place to start. 🎧



➔ For more on Alejandro Escovedo's acclaimed 2001 Bloodshot release visit www.bloodshotrecords.com

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➔ Funk newbies start here – Daptone's compilation LP of rarities 'n' classics is a great first buy for those wanting to explore the world of authentic soul



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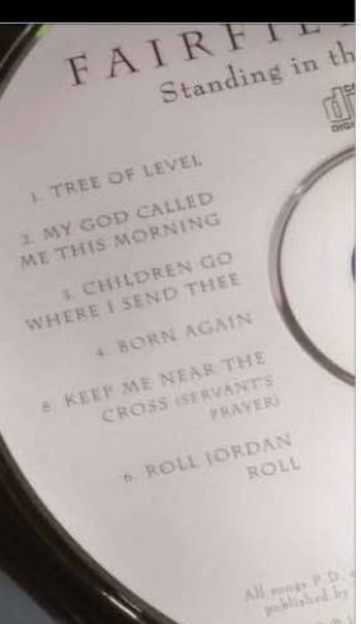
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Read the stunning review by Roy Gregory in Hi-Fi+ Issue 69



5 words for the wise...

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Vinyl Release

BEHIND THE MUSIC WITH HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW

Neil Young: *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere*

One of a number of Neil Young LPs recently released on 180g vinyl, *Everybody Knows...* was a defining moment in the singer's career. **Steve Sutherland** explains...

I don't wanna talk about it...' The man has a greying pony tail and a bald spot hidden deftly beneath a baseball cap. The cap, I should mention, is an ironic touch, the decal on the front boasting 'Woodstock '94' on which a cash-hungry culture has replaced the dove of peace. Oh, and something else: our subject is resolutely not playing ball.

'I don't wanna take advantage of saying anything about something like that for the interest of somebody else I've never met and selling myself in papers in the process. It's just... distasteful to me.'

Sat here on the decking of the Mountain View Restaurant, his local bar on the hushed, piney slopes of Skyline, some 20 miles south of San Francisco, the man I've come to meet is glaring at me from behind a pair of blue-tinted shades, and refusing to discuss his part in the death of a famously troubled rock star.

'I prefer not to be involved at all,' he continues. 'I respect the fact that he's a

guy who did what he had to do and I don't wanna get any...' He falters for a moment. 'I just don't know what to say. I'd rather you just left it out.'

The man in the lumberjack top, Buffalo Creek T-shirt and promotional Fishbone trackie bottoms is Neil Young and no amount of my journalistic wheedling is gonna get him to discuss the fact that, when Nirvana's Kurt Cobain finally got around to blowing his brains out, among the words he left in his suicide note were 'It's better to burn out than to fade away', a quote from a song called 'Hey Hey, My My (Out Of The Blue)'. Young had written it intending to salute the way punk rock was shaking up the old guard and returning rock 'n' roll to some sort of feral, antagonistic state of mind.

SINISTER IDEAS

But Kurt Cobain obviously had other, more sinister ideas about the meaning behind those nine fateful words. I wonder out loud if Young now wishes he'd never put pen to paper and composed them.

Our hero shifts uncomfortably in his chair and insists that, once a track's laid down, that's where his responsibility ends. He's always been an advocate of allowing the listener to discover his or her own individual path through his songs and, despite the tragic Cobain incident, he sees no reason why he should reassess his *modus operandi* after all these years.

'It's the machine and the fuel,' he says. 'It's over now. I'm not behind the wheel at all. It's gone. Obviously his interpretation should not be taken to mean there's only two ways to go and one of them is death'. He laughs a cold, dry laugh.

'Look, I really *don't* wanna talk about it. And that, as they say, is that.'

Now, the more observant reader will have noticed that, two paragraphs back, I used the term 'hero' when referring

STEVE SUTHERLAND

Steve edited *NME* from 1992-2000, the Britpop years, launching *NME.com* and reviving the NME Awards. Previously he was Assistant Editor on *Melody Maker*. Among his many adventures he has been physically threatened by Axl Rose, hung out awhile with Jerry Garcia and had a drink or two with Keith Richards...



to Neil Young. It's not a title we should bestow too loosely. It's a dangerous word, all wrapped up with influence, example, bravery and survival. And I realise, as I'm sitting here nursing a cold beer and testing Neil Young's patience, that one of the reasons I think of him as a hero is that he's still standing while so many have fallen all around him.

And I also realise, as we do-ci-do around the subject of Kurt's suicide, that this last-man-standing schtick is just so much crap as far as he's concerned.

Neil Young's not interested in being seen as some kind of grizzled survivor. In fact, he's not much interested in being seen as anything at all. It's not about him, you see, it's about the work and about keeping that work as real and honest as possible. The rules he obeys are his and his alone and have been since the day in 1969 that he stopped trying to be Neil Young and just kinda *became* him.

Up until that point, he admits, he'd been on the run, sometimes chasing

rainbows, more often than not legging it the hell out. He'd quit his native Canada to pursue stardom in California, he'd brawled his way out of his hit pop

'He's not interested in being seen as a grizzled survivor'

supergroup Buffalo Springfield and made a folksy first solo album that reacted against the hype machine rather than capturing the sounds that he heard in his head. He was also in denial over the epilepsy that saw him collapse and writhe dramatically on the sidewalk without any prior warning and he was paranoid of the narcs who were combing Los Angeles looking to bust the freak elite who were polluting the minds of America's vulnerable suburban youth.

And then, one day, he just stopped all his running and made his stand. The first thing that happened is he got a sound. It came in the shape of a guitar – a 1953 Gibson Les Paul affectionately named Old Black that was passed onto him by Jim



➔ Neil Young – he made one solo LP after Buffalo Springfield split. It was all change when he met The Rockets...



➔ Priced £14.69, the 2010 180g re-release of *Everybody Knows...* is available at www.diverseviny.com

Messina, a former bandmate in the Buffalo Springfield who found its sound too big and ugly – and a scraggy amp – a 1959 Fender Deluxe he'd picked up for 50 bucks a couple of years earlier. The result of plugging the Gibson into the Fender was, almost literally, dynamite.

'The entire room started to vibrate,' Young told an interviewer at the time. 'I went "Holy shit!"'

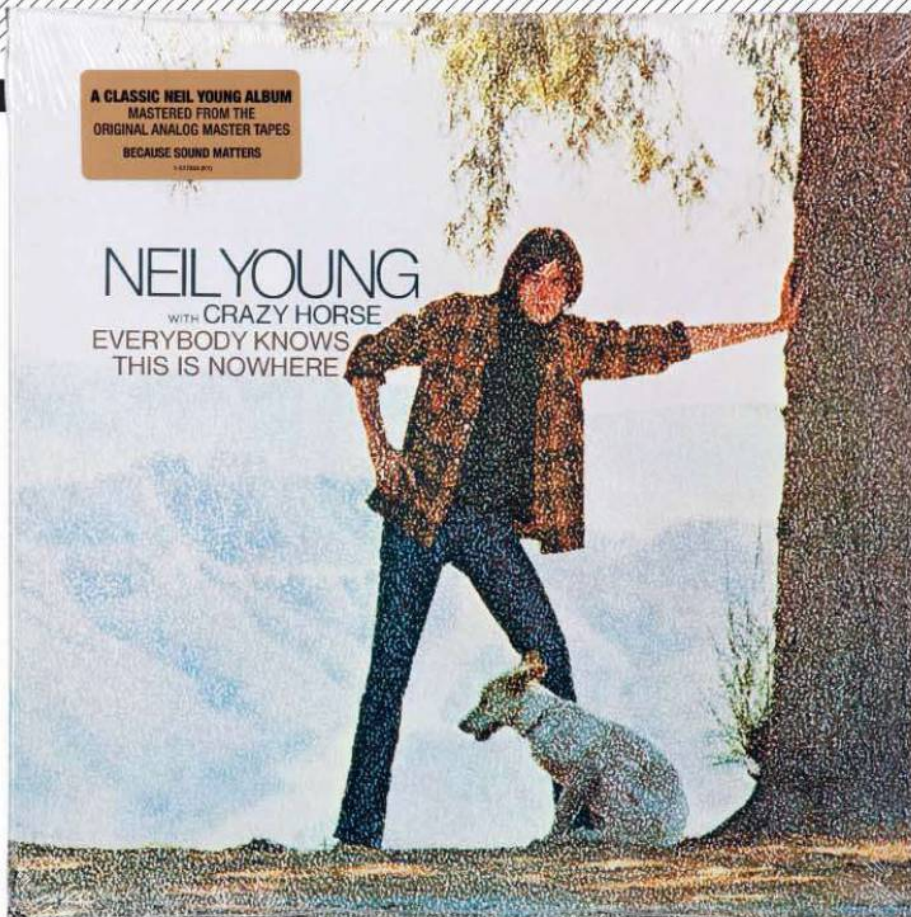
The next thing that happened was he got himself a band he could boss, a crew if you like – a bunch of uncouth strays who were performing to little acclaim around the LA clubs under the moniker The Rockets. Something about their workmanlike inability and honest sweat appealed to Young and, after sitting in and jamming, he hired guitarist Danny Whitten, bassist Billy Talbot and drummer Ralph Molina, christening the new outfit Crazy Horse after the legendary Oglala Teton Sioux who defeated Custer at Little Big Horn.

Crazy Horse would never allow himself to be photographed lest he surrender part of his soul and when he was assassinated by 'friendly' soldiers scared of his influence, he declared that his bones would turn to rock and his joints to flint.

It's said that in moments of extreme danger, Crazy Horse would dream himself into the 'real world', so evading the perils of this temporal one, and there are reports that he would ride closer than any other warrior to enemy lines and was never once grazed by bullet or pierced by arrow.

Neil Young discovered a similar 'real world' bashing out an album with his new band, recording as near live as dammit in Hollywood's Wally Heider studios.

'I start hyperventilating,' Young told me when I asked him about what it's like getting in the zone. 'My nose gets really cold and I feel this cool breeze blowing in my face... It's like you just get to that point where nothing else is there, it's



all just gone and you're taking off and everybody is way into it.'

Young was encouraged to sing straight to tape rather than going through the mixing process by another partner in this inspired madness, a maverick producer named David Briggs who, by sheer fate, had hit it off with Neil after picking him up as a hitch-hiker. This raw delivery was complimented – if that's the word – by the Horse's brutal rhythm section which kept it necessarily real while Young and Danny Whitten traded guitar licks like two boxers circling the ring, each goading the other to deliver ever better, cleaner blows.

HOLY TRINITY

There are three key songs on *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere* and they comprise the holy trinity in the Young canon. All were written in the throes of a 103° fever, their exact meaning as much a mystery to their author as they are to us. And if he'd shuffled off his own mortal coil after recording the nine minute murder epic 'Down By The River', the romantic drug blast 'Cinnamon Girl' and the ten minute mystical reverie 'Cowgirl In the Sand', Young would still go down in history as one of rock's most revolutionary guitarists, his physical, unfussy precision the sonic equivalent of the primitive painters.

The rest of the album is brilliant too. The title track in particular is a beauty, a

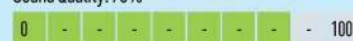
direct descendent of Hank William's spooky 'Lost Highway' but it didn't sell too well at the time, and the pair of albums that followed – 1970's more troubadour-ish *After The Goldrush* and 1972's polished *Harvest* – are way more famous.

But fame and Neil Young make uncomfortable bedfellows and it's to the template established in 1969 and by and large the crew that created *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere* that the maestro and his many disciples return when they feel the need to MOT their credibility and make peace once more with their souls. ☺

RE-RELEASE VERDICT

With spontaneity rather than polish the order of the day here, it is perhaps to miss the point to set off in search of treasures thrown to the surface in what is the first version of this LP to be cut directly from the master tapes. Rather, the precision of the mastering, presented on heavy vinyl, allows the hypnotically intense interplay between Young and his henchmen to come to life with a presence that escapes our original pressing, thanks to greater dynamics and clarity. Yes, it's grimy and it's grungy, but it's the real deal. **HFN**

Sound Quality: 78%





Deep Purple *Machine Head*

When Deep Purple decided that their sixth studio album should have a 'live' sound, little did they realise their attempts to translate the 'concert experience' to tape would see them undergo trial by fire and ice. Literally. And it all started with a distress flare...

Words: **Johnny Black**

To get the point of *Machine Head* you must first understand what it is not. It is not a masterpiece of high-fidelity recording, a breakthrough in audio technology or even, for that matter, a high water mark in the craft of songwriting. Yes, it features 'Smoke On The Water', a frequent contender for greatest rock riff ever, and at least one other Purple classic, 'Highway Star', but even these are not its primary qualifications for vinyl icon status. The reason to celebrate *Machine Head* is that it was the first hard rock album that actually sounded like a hard rock album.

DOWN 'N' DIRTY...

From the beginning of rock 'n' roll there had been a yawning chasm between the desire of young musicians to kick up one hell of an exciting racket and the equally understandable desire of audio technicians to record that racket as clean and sharp as a new pin. In a nutshell, sound engineers strove to eliminate distortion while rockers pulled out all the stops to maximise it. Indeed, some scholars maintain that the first rock 'n' roll

guitar solo happened on the 5th March 1951, when a guitar amp fell out the back of a van en route to a recording session in Memphis and damaged a valve. Unable to find a replacement, the guitarist, Willie Kizart, simply recorded with the amp's dirty, distorted sound. The session was for 'Rocket 88' by Jackie Brenston, often cited as the first rock 'n' roll record.

According to Deep Purple's bass player, Roger Glover, *Machine Head* was born in London's De Lane Lea studio while the band was recording its acclaimed predecessor, *Fireball*.

'Our drummer, Ian Paice, was walking around, carrying his snare drum and hitting it,' remembers Glover. 'As he walked from the studio into the corridor, he noticed the change in sound of his snare drum.'

The difference was so startling, from what Glover called a 'quiet



"toc" in the soundproofed acoustically dead studio to 'the resounding crash in the corridor, bringing out the full range of sound... the real sound, exciting and loud!'

The band decided that their next album would exploit the potential of recording in an acoustically live environment which, they hoped, would produce a vibrant sound akin to a concert experience, but without the distraction of audience noise.

They flew into Montreux, Switzerland on December the 3rd, 1971, planning to install themselves in Montreux Casino for three weeks. 'It

was a fair-sized hall,' recalls Purple's vocalist Ian Gillan, 'a beautiful old wooden building on the banks of Lake Geneva, and you could get a really excellent live sound in there.'

The night before they were scheduled to start recording, Frank Zappa played a concert in the Casino which Deep Purple attended. Two hours into Zappa's show, an unknown man walked into the auditorium and fired a distress flare,



Ritchie Blackmore (guitar), Ian Paice (drums), Roger Glover (bass), Ian Gillan (vocals) and Jon Lord (keyboards)

The band descend from *The Starship*, a Boeing 707 leased for their 1974 US tour

The casino at Montreux burns: see www.montreuxmusic.com

which lodged in a cornice near the ceiling. 'With the place being built of wood, the fire quickly started to take hold,' says Gillan, 'and the place was filling with smoke. Zappa was brilliant. He stopped the band, and started calmly directing everybody to leave the building.'

Fortunately, no-one was seriously injured but the Casino burned to the ground, leaving Deep Purple with no recording studio. 'Back in the hotel, we could still see the Casino burning from our windows,' remembers Gillan. 'We were watching the smoke roll out over Lake Geneva, and Roger wrote the words Smoke On The Water on a paper napkin right then. We didn't have a song at this point, it was just those words.' (Glover himself claims the title came to him in a dream several days later.)

'IT'S THE POLICE...'

Claude Nobs, organizer of the famed Montreux Jazz Festival, came to their rescue by arranging for them to record in the nearby Pavilion Theatre, where they laid down a blisteringly powerful backing track that would, in due course, become the album's centre piece, 'Smoke

With the place built of wood, the fire quickly started'



VINYL ICONS

PRODUCTION NOTES

The circumstances under which *Machine Head* was recorded were decidedly unusual for the time. To achieve their goal of creating a studio album with the visceral sonic attack of a live performance, they chose to perform the tracks live and with no overdubs using The Rolling Stones Mobile Studio [see below].

The Mobile was built for The Stones in 1970 by Helios Electronics, run by one of rock's most respected audio engineers, Dick Swettenham, and was the first fully fitted mobile multi-track studio. As well as being used by The Stones, it had been employed for both *Led Zeppelin III* and *IV* before Deep Purple trundled it out to Switzerland. The Purps' Roger Glover neatly summed it up as, 'a 16-track studio perched on the back of a lorry and painted with camouflage colours, for reasons best known to The Stones.'

Axemeister Ritchie Blackmore recently told *Guitar World*, "We had The Stones' mobile unit sitting outside in the snow, but to get there we had to run cable through two doors in the corridor into a room, through a bathroom and into another room, from which it went across a bed and out the veranda window, then along the balcony for about 100ft before it came back in through another bedroom window. It then went through that room's bathroom and into another corridor, then all the way down a marble staircase to the reception area of the hotel, out the front door, across the courtyard and up the steps into the back of the mobile unit. I think that set-up led to capturing some spontaneity, because once we got to the truck for a playback, even if we didn't think it was a perfect take, we'd go, "Yeah, that's good enough." Because we just couldn't stand going back again.'



On *The Water*'. As luck would have it, their tenure at The Pavilion was brief. 'We did it [the backing track] in about four takes, because we had to. The police were banging on the door,' explained guitarist Ritchie Blackmore some years later. 'We were waking up the neighbours about five miles away because the sound was echoing through the mountains. We had just finished it when the police burst in and said we had to stop.'

GRAND SLAM

Once more, Claude Nobs found them yet another new location, The Grand Hotel, which was closed for redecoration, and that's where most of the album was completed. The tracks were produced by the band, guided by highly acclaimed engineer Martin Birch (Iron Maiden, Black Sabbath, and early Fleetwood Mac). It didn't help that both Gillan and Glover were on the edge of quitting. Tales abound of band members surreptitiously fiddling with mixing desk controls to boost their personal contributions to the album, but despite these internal shenanigans, the results were spectacular. At the time of this album, Deep Purple songs tended to originate from jam sessions or, more often, from Ritchie presenting the band with a riff. 'Pictures Of Home', for example, was built on

a piece of music Blackmore had heard on Bulgarian Radio, and the closing track, 'Space Truckin', originated from a Blackmore finger exercise based on the familiar *Batman* TV show theme. These basic frameworks would then be fleshed out by keyboardist Jon Lord and drummer Ian Paice, and only then would Ian Gillan write a set of lyrics. By mutual agreement, publishing royalties were split five ways, ensuring that no individual member profited more than any other.

'Highway Star', often credited as being one of the first speed metal songs ever, was born quite spontaneously in 1971 on a tour bus en route to Portsmouth but, by the time they recorded it in Montreux, it had become a rather more sophisticated beast. Indeed, Blackmore's guitar solo, was meticulously crafted.

'I wrote that solo out note for note about a week before we recorded it,' he has said. 'I wanted it to sound like someone driving in a fast car, for it to be one of those songs you would listen to while speeding. And I wanted a very definite Bach sound, which is why I wrote it out – and why I played those very rigid arpeggios across that very familiar Bach progression: Dm, Gm, Cmaj, Amaj.'

Few would argue against the statement that 'Smoke On The

"Smoke On The Water" was just a throwaway, a filler track'

Shot of the band in 1969, after they'd recruited vocalist Ian Gillan from the little known UK group, Episode Six

Inside of gatefold sleeve of the original LP with scenes from the recording of the album, and shots of the casino fire

The Rolling Stones Mobile Studio – the front-facing console is a Helios Type-69 with Legendary Lustraphone Mic transformer while to the right of this sits a 3M Type-59 16-track recorder using Zin tape

It was when recording their previous LP, *Fireball*, that the idea for a more 'live'-sounding album first surfaced

The current line-up: Ian Paice, Roger Glover, Ian Gillan, Don Airey, Steve Morse



IAN PAICE

IAN GILLAN

ROGER GLOVER

JON LORD

RITCHIE BLACKMORE

1996 / 38668A

© EMI RECORDS LTD - PHOTOGRAPHER: DIETER ZILL

DEEP PURPLE FIREBALL 25TH ANNIVERSARY



Alternate Format Discography



'Water' is the album's single greatest achievement but, bizarrely, Deep Purple didn't immediately see its potential. 'Recording in The Grand went very well, and we got more or less to the end and we were very happy with songs like 'Highway Star' and 'Lazy' and the rest, but we realised we still could do with one more song for the album,' remembers Ian Gillan.

'That was when we decided to do something with Roger's "Smoke On The Water" idea. We were really approaching it as just a throwaway, a filler track to finish the album off.'

LIFE OF ITS OWN

Gillan goes further, admitting, 'When we'd finished it, we still didn't see it as anything special. Then some DJs on US radio stations started to pick up on it and play it, and it took off from there. Of course, it went on to become one of the most successful things we ever did, with all kinds of cover versions and parodies, so it really took on a life of its own.'

On December 21, 1971, Deep Purple walked out of the Grand Hotel, Montreux, blissfully unaware that they'd recorded an album which, in times to come, would routinely be cited as one of the Holy Trinity of hard rock, the other two being *Led Zeppelin IV* and Black Sabbath's *Paranoid*.

Released on April 13, 1972, it reached No1 in the UK on 6 May 1972, securing a US Gold Disc exactly six months later. ☺



Perhaps surprisingly for an album considered by aficionados to be a pioneering hard rock classic, there aren't too many different versions of *Machine Head*. Maybe that's because the hi-ness of its fi was never its primary selling point. The band elected to produce it themselves, so their priorities were less about creating a state-of-the-art album in straightforward audio terms than about ensuring that the music packed a truckload of wallop – which it undeniably does.

ORIGINAL GATEFOLD LP (1972)

Released in the UK [TPSA 7504] on April 13, 1972, *Machine Head* sported a laminated gatefold sleeve and included a lyric insert. Some of the US releases [BS 2607] also featured a freebie poster and, in Spain [Purple 11 064 93261], the back and front cover photos were transposed. At the time of release, *Melody Maker* noted that, 'On first hearing, it might seem that Purple are indeed a machine-like band who play rather obvious riffs without much soul. But probe a little deeper. The band actually play with more feel than many similar similar heavy rock outfits.'

QUADRAPHONIC MIX (1974)

Released first by Warner Brothers in America [BS4 2607], this also featured different guitar solos on 'Maybe I'm A Leo' and 'Lazy'. Judging by contemporary accounts, the combination of the album's original sound plus the mixing engineers' unfamiliarity with the still novel quad process meant that it wasn't widely regarded as a sonic breakthrough. It showed up in the UK in June [Purple Q4 TPSA 7504]. Deleted in 1978 it is moderately collectable, changing hands for £30.

8 TRACK CARTRIDGE (1973)

Of the myriad methods of listening to quadrophonic sound

that arrived in the early '70s, 8-track cartridges were the most commercially successful and probably the most convenient for the average consumer because they could be played at home or in the car. The website Wes Clark's Avocado Memories includes a delightful recollection of the joys and pitfalls not just of 8-track cartridges in general but of this specific cartridge [L9B-2607], and is well worth a visit at http://wesclark.com/am/8_track.html.

FRENCH PURPLE VINYL (1978)

The LP [Purple DC 12] was pressed in (what else?) purple vinyl as a limited edition and was emblazoned with a distinctive 'disque en couleur' sticker. Like the quad version, it's collectable, fetching about £30 on a good day.

PICTURE DISC (1985)

Record companies just love collectors. Having sold the original album in truckloads and suckered a few more Deep Purple completists with the coloured vinyl version, what was left but the inevitable picture disc [EJ 26 03450]? Not particularly attractive, decidedly inferior sonically but what the hey, it did come with a free 20in poster.



FIRST CD (1986)

This version [CDP 7 46242 2] was pretty much a straightforward transfer of the vinyl tracks to CD, simply to take advantage of those consumers keen to buy the new format. As Ian Gillan himself has said, 'When these things were originally transferred onto CD, the people responsible did not know what they were doing, and they sounded awful.'

25th ANNIVERSARY EDITION (1997)

Finally, this double CD edition [EMI DEEPP3] got the most out of *Machine Head*. The first CD



featured freshly re-mixed tracks, sometimes with alternative guitar, vocal or drum parts, plus a very presentable bonus track 'When A Blind Man Cries'. It was recorded during the *Machine Head* sessions but because Ritchie Blackmore didn't like it, the song was originally only available as the B-side of their 1972 single 'Never Before'.

The second CD – not only remixed but also re-mastered – was decidedly the best-sounding *Machine Head* produced up to that date. It also included two quad mixes, 'Lazy' and 'Maybe I'm A Leo', sounding better than before, providing an opportunity for those who weren't around in the early '70s to compare and contrast.

HYBRID MULTICHANNEL SACD (2003)

Another sonic leap forward, this edition [EMI 7243-538601-2] boasts the same track listing as CD2 of the 25th Anniversary Edition, except that the seven album tracks are 4.1 updates of the original 1972 quad mixes, remastered at Abbey Road. Surprisingly listenable but not up to contemporary 5-channel sound standards, these tracks are a little unsubtle in their rear channel instrument placement. The three extra tracks, however, are new 5-channel mixes.

'CLASSIC ALBUMS' DVD

Not strictly a 'version' of the album, but of interest to anyone who wants to know more about how it was made, this DVD is an extended version of a TV documentary.

Original engineer Martin Birch and The Purps' Roger Glover dissect the original multi-track tapes, while Ian Gillan and Ian Paice contribute their recollections and insights into this track-by-track look at the making of the album.

Ritchie Blackmore, Jon Lord and Roger Glover also demonstrate riffs and licks from the songs.

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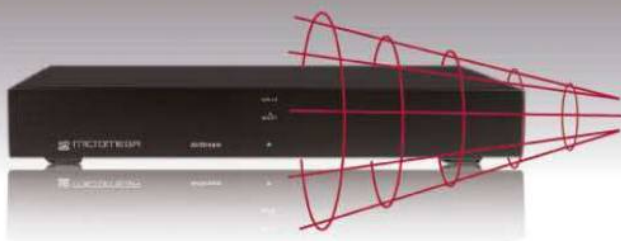
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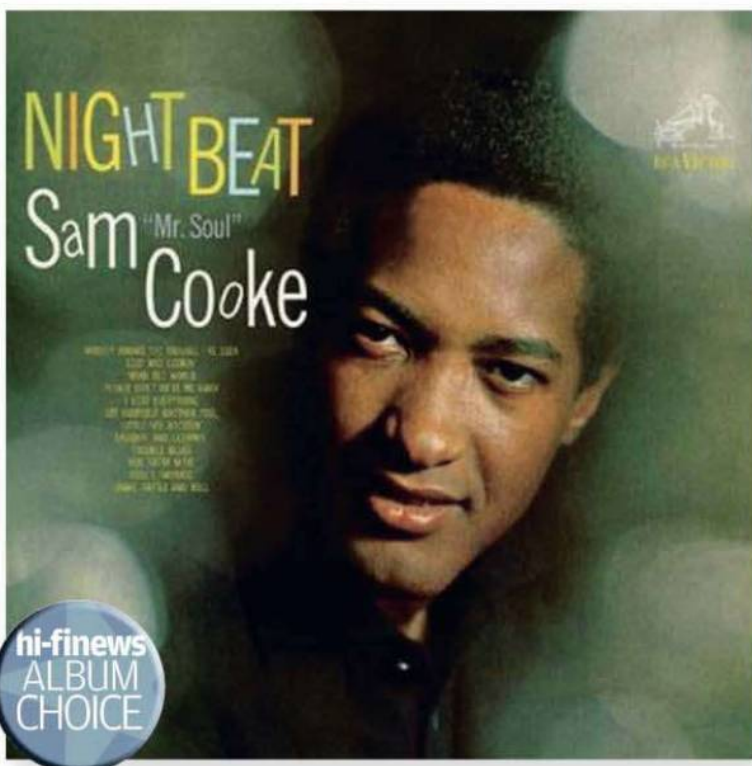
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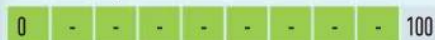
SAM COOKE

Night Beat

Analogue Productions AAPP 2709-45 (two 45rpm discs) 180g vinyl

Any list of the most important African-American singers of the 20th century places Sam Cooke firmly in the Top 10, for he bridges the gospel/blues/R&B of the 1950s and what became modern soul in the wake of his death in 1964. This set from 1963, with brilliant backing by Barney Kessel and Billy Preston, demonstrates not only the sheer magic of his voice but his mastery of genres for which he's less often remembered: late-night blues with an edge. The intimacy is down to his delivery and the size of the accompaniment; the material – 'Little Red Rooster', 'Nobody Knows The Trouble I've Seen' – should silence those who loathe 'Wonderful World' or 'Only Sixteen'. A genuine masterpiece. **KK**

Sound Quality: 90%



BECK

Sea Change

Mobile Fidelity MFSL 2-308 (two discs) 180g vinyl

A MoFi insider recently informed me that CD sales are plummeting in the audiophile sector, so this 2LP edition of a Beck high point might satisfy more of you than last year's gold CD. Analogue better suits what I called a set that's 'Moody and lush, and more unified than one might expect'. Though his career began in the post-LP era, Beck loves creating atmospheres that beg for a moving-coil tracing grooves. In this instance, he's enamoured of delicacy and detail. The LPs present the performance with more cohesion and a slightly less brittle texture than a digital medium. Side-by-side playings will sound like a battle cry from Michael Fremer. **KK**

Sound Quality: 88%



CANNED HEAT & JOHN LEE HOOKER

Hooker 'n Heat

Pure Pleasure/Liberty PPNAL LST35002 (two discs) 180g vinyl

Though beaten to the punch by British bands by a half-decade, in the act of putting white kids behind blues legends, this pairing of John Lee Hooker and upstarts Canned Heat remains one of the most important old/young collaborations the genre ever delivered. Sprawling across two discs and mixing showcase tracks for both artists, the emphasis remains with the elder statesman. Clearly, this was a synergy that even *The Healer*, his massive comeback some 18 years later, would only just match; many believe that Hooker never had a more sympathetic backing band. If not as showy as *Fleetwood Mac In Chicago*, it certainly possesses as much musical merit. **KK**

Sound Quality: 75%



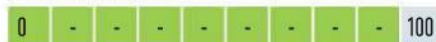
BETTY DAVIS

Is It Love Or Desire

Sundazed LP5313 180g vinyl

Part of a pack of soul songstresses coincidentally named Betty and enjoying belated acclaim (eg, Bettye LaVette, Betty Everett), Davis is a stand-out for a number of reasons – not least the adventurousness she exhibited during an era of formulaic funk. This particular album was recorded in 1976 and shelved for unknown reasons; we can only wonder what effect this soul/funk spectacular might have had, if the record label had issued it 34 years ago. To give you some idea of the unexpected thrills this LP holds, Betty was married to one Miles Davis for a year... And it was she who introduced him to the music of Jimi Hendrix. So, no, she's not your average soul goddess. **KK**

Sound Quality: 90%





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THE CARS

Shake It Up

Mobile Fidelity UDCD 788 Gold CD

When a debut LP almost creates a genre, the sequels are bound to be overshadowed. This – the band's fourth – presented no surprises, for the Cars were always studio creatures not averse to synthesizers and other electronic aids. The title track was a huge hit, the album contained the usual, quirky Ocasek compositions, the vocals were alien enough to be compelling and the hooks are plentiful; but the synths overwhelm so much that this album has dated far more than its predecessors. It's not like Flock of Seagulls or Gary Newman, but you'll guess the year right away. If Kraftwerk were human, melodic and witty, they could have been 'Die Autos'. *KK*

Sound Quality: 80%



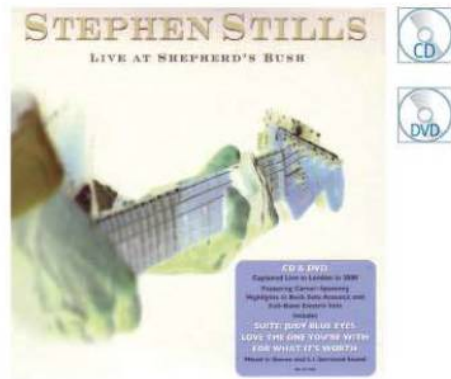
THE JAYHAWKS

Music From The North Country – Jayhawks Anthology

American 88697-47034-2 (two CDs, DVD)

Alt.country has been around so long that 'alt' no longer stands for 'alternative' so much as it stands for 'old' (in German). But for those who remember it with fondness, the Jayhawks stand proud. They never came across like third-rate Byrds, adding originality to a genre that could have easily slipped into parody. At last, the band has been afforded an anthology spanning their entire body of work, but it's this multi-disc set rather than the single CD package you should acquire: in addition to a second CD of demos, unreleased tracks and other hard-to-find rarities, it comes with a bonus 55-minute DVD containing seven music videos and a couple of live tracks. *KK*

Sound Quality: 85%



STEPHEN STILLS

Live At Shepherd's Bush

Eyeball/Atco/Rhino R2 521760 (CD+ DVD)

This digipack provides us with Stills' October 2008 show at Shepherd's Bush as both a red book music CD, and with a film of the entire gig on a bonus DVD – with a choice of PCM stereo or DTS. Though his vocals sound rough (hey, the guy's 65...), Stills knows how to deliver to an enraptured audience that must have followed him from the days of the Buffalo Springfield. With two distinct sets – I recall that he used the same technique with Manassas – Stills performed seven acoustic tracks and seven electric, and you cannot help but marvel at the breadth of his catalogue. From the Springfield to CSN(Y) to his solos, Left Coast magic, pure and simple. *KK*

Sound Quality: 82%



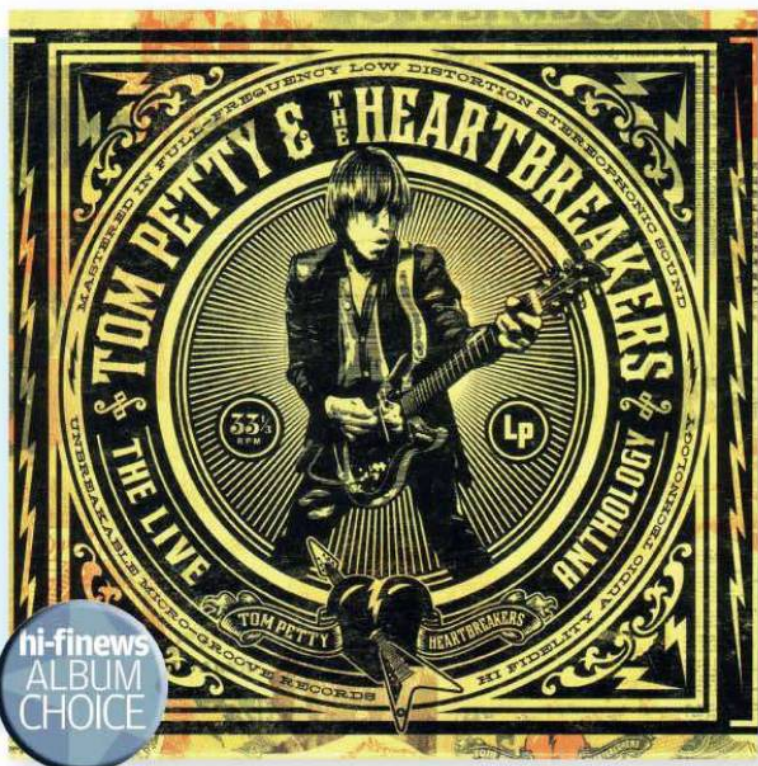
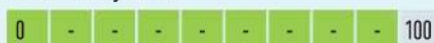
TOM PETTY

The Live Anthology

Reprise 517462-2 (five CDs, two DVDs, Blu-ray, LP)

Yes, nine discs covering four formats. This 12x12 box would seem an act of brazen conceit if it weren't so damned good – Petty fans will know what I mean. The man has the spirit of rock 'n' roll in every molecule of his body: he was the youngest Traveling Wilbury, yet never seemed to lack the stature of the legends he accompanied. The CDs cover 1978-2007, with the music-only Blu-ray offering the 62 tracks from the CDs in 96/24 PCM stereo and DTS, the two DVDs contain a 1978 concert and a documentary from the Wildflowers tour, while the LP is the 'official' live bootleg from 1976. The £95 package is amazing, filled with memorabilia; a four-CD box set with 48 tracks is also available for under £20. *KK*

Sound Quality: 88%



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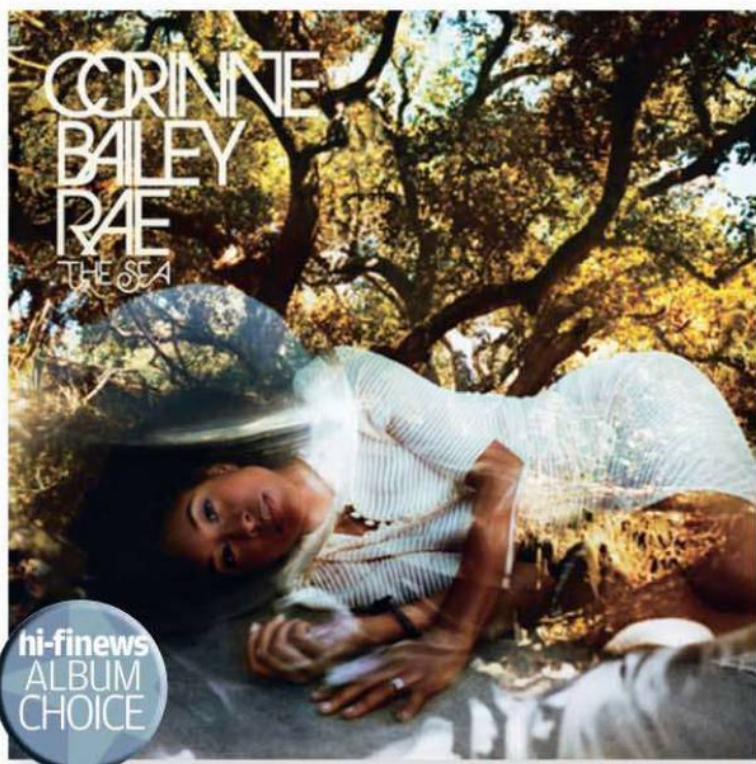
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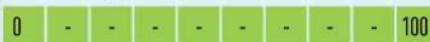
CORINNE BAILEY RAE

The Sea

Good Groove/Virgin Records tba

Delayed by the tragic death of her saxophonist husband Jason Rae in 2008, Corinne Bailey Rae's second album is a triumph of courage over despair. Inevitably, listeners will interpret these songs, especially the tortured 'I'd Do It All Again', as being about him, but those who can get past the grisly voyeuristic fascination with Bailey Rae as a tortured victim of life's injustice will find an imaginative and movingly beautiful album that stands head and shoulders above the pack on its own merits. The timbre and texture of her lovely voice, as well as her control of it, have improved since her debut, and she is now a mistress of understatement, as cool as Astrud Gilberto and as smooth as Sade but with rather more grit. *JB*

Sound Quality: 91%



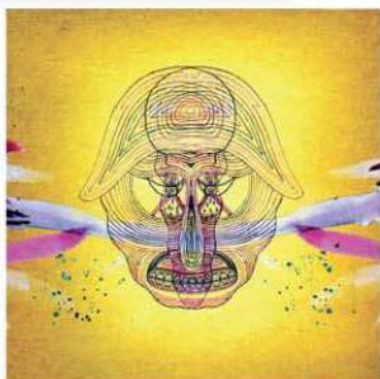
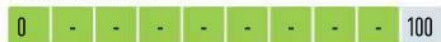
RIHANNA

Rated R

Def Jam 60252 7259901

Silly girl. She had a career in a million, but she's gone and let her upset over her ex-boyfriend de-rail her musical suss. This album, drenched in sado-masochistic sexuality and lacking good songs, gives the impression that she exists only to wreak audio revenge on Chris Brown. Maybe had she gone for Quincy Jones instead of LA Reid as a producer he could have salvaged some of these sub-standard Kanye West retro-electro-riffs but, as it stands, there's four decent tunes in the middle of the album and no decent lyrics anywhere. This woman has a fabulous voice and technique. Next time out let's hope she's got some material worth using it on. *JB*

Sound Quality: 83%



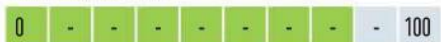
DEVENDRA BANHART

What Will We Be

Warner Bros 522411-2

I quite distinctly remember Mr Banhart irritating the bejeezus out of me with his twee twitterings years ago and nothing's changed. According to Wikipedia, Banhart's songs have been described as psych folk, avant folk and freak folk but not, oddly, as witlessly feeble impersonations of Marc Bolan in his Tyrannosaurus Rex days. This album would make a pleasant collection of quirky acoustic instrumentals but Devendra has to go and spoil it by singing about how his 'shadow lies wilting', and pronouncing the word smiling as 'smiolin' so he can make it rhyme with violin. It's intolerable. And that other word you're grasping for, Devendra is child, not 'chiold'. *JB*

Sound Quality: 80%



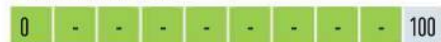
ist

Toothpick Bridge

Monkey Basket Records ISTCD01b

It's unfair of me to criticise Devendra Banhart for sounding like a young Marc Bolan and then lavish praise on this lot for sounding like a young Elvis Costello but the difference is that ist sound like they're fully engaged with the real world and their songs are irresistibly catchy. They're a tight little Leicestershire quartet led by Canadian Kenton Hall, which might explain the hint of Barenaked Ladies whimsy in some songs. They can switch effortlessly from angry pop to twitchy ska and swoop from a whisper to a scream in a nanosecond. And even when they pull out the occasional wailing bluesharp and the extended guitar solo it sounds absolutely spot on. *JB*

Sound Quality: 86%



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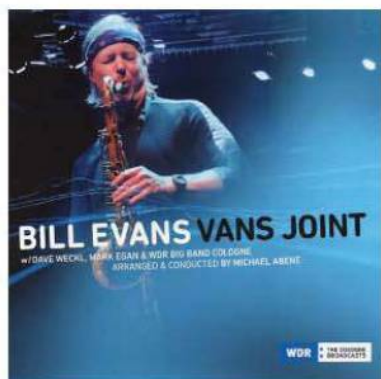
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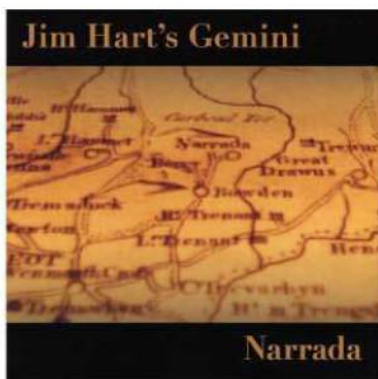
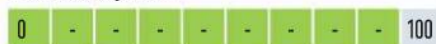
BILL EVANS

Vans Joint

BirdJam BHM 1038-2

Since his time with Miles in the early 1980s, the dynamic saxophonist has led groups that developed various fusion flavours, culminating perhaps in the *Soulgrass* project with Béla Fleck. You don't get any bluegrass this time, but when Evans kicks off with the title tune from that 2006 album, Cologne's WDR Big Band gives him a stomping backdrop. They're still at full throttle when the album closes on another *Soulgrass* tune, 'Snap Dragon': here with a wild trumpet solo by the WDR band's John Marshall. Sound is excellent, successfully balancing the big band against the powerhouse rhythm section of Mark Egan and Dave Weckl, and Evans himself. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%



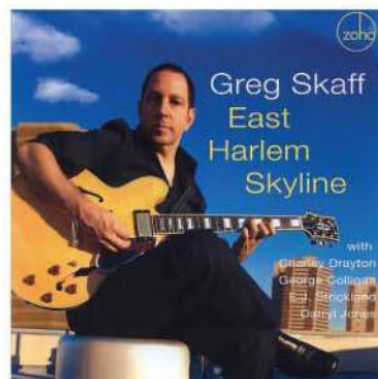
JIM HART'S GEMINI

Narrada

Loop Records LOOP1010

This must be one of the most talent-packed ensembles to emerge from the association of young London-based players called the Loop Collective, and it was Gemini's 2007 *Emergence* which launched the Loop record label. In his piano-less quartet, Hart's virtuoso vibes playing is completely unfettered, yet gels in never-flagging interplay with the subtle, creamy-toned and inventive alto sax of Ivo Neame. With subtle drummer Dave Smith now joined by Danish-born bass player Jasper Høiby, the four move in seamless rapport from written ensemble passages to free improvisation to groove sections, to haunting melody. Music of real substance and conviction. *SH*

Sound Quality: 85%



GREG SKAFF

East Harlem Skyline

Zoho ZM200902

Skaff's 2004 *Ellington Boulevard* album proved that the organ-trio genre can be stretched a little when there's a superior guitarist in charge. This time, as if grabbing audience attention, he opens with a rock guitar sound over funky bass and drums, while George Colligan can't help dispensing Hammond clichés. But with fine drummer E J Strickland taking over for the rest of the set, Skaff soon gets down to jazzier business with a Wes-like 'Contra to Popular Motion' and a wandering solo on Shorter's 'Angola'. After a pleasant trip to Brazil with 'Tropicalia' and a contemplative 'Lotus Blossom', you can forgive the return of the rock sound in a final workout. *SH*

Sound Quality: 85%



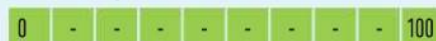
THE MANHATTAN TRANSFER

The Chick Corea Songbook

Four Quarters FQT-CD-1819

Credit for the album concept goes to producer Yusuf Gandhi of *Miles From India* fame, but apparently this was something the group had long wanted to do. Corea plays on the jolly, almost-singalong opener 'Free Samba', written specially for them. After that we hear a string of Corea classics mainly from the 1970s, starting with 'Spain', building to a fabulously virtuosic rework of 'Armando's Rhumba' with fine and serious lyrics. It's a sobering thought that in re-casting Corea's work, The Manhattan Transfer of today look back as far in time as their earlier incarnation did in the 1970s by reviving songs of the Swing era. But no-one could ever pin a 'nostalgia' tag on this polished yet fresh-sounding miracle of musicianship. *SH*

Sound Quality: 95%





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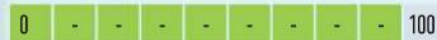
ALFRED BRENDEL

The Farewell Concerts
Alfred Brendel, VPO/Sir Charles Mackerras

Decca 478 2116 (two discs)

For his last Vienna performance Alfred Brendel chose Mozart's early 'Jeunehomme', K271, rather than one of the more grand concertos. Similarly, the Beethoven sonata in his Hannover recital here is the unassuming Op.27:1 – there's also Mozart's K533/494, Haydn's F minor Variations and Schubert's D960, together with three encores. There's a wistfulness to the Beethoven Bagatelle Op.33:4, which strikes me as his true, touching farewell, whilst the E flat Sonata finale confirms that Brendel's technique was undimmed. It would be invidious to criticise these concentrated (if ultimately cerebral) readings, although Brendel's own vocal accompaniments are disturbing. *CB*

Sound Quality: 85%



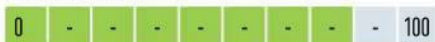
SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphonies 5 and 9
RLPO/Vasily Petrenko

Naxos 8.572167

The RLPO's young St Petersburg-born conductor shows the likes of Jansons or Rostropovich a clean pair of heels in the Fifth: often bluntly delivered but here with a spring in its step and given a hell-for-leather finale. This warhorse symphony, with its overt and concealed agendas, is in sharp contrast with the shorter Ninth, a mix of burlesque and the grave – light relief for Shostakovich and wedged between harrowingly profound neighbours, Nos.8 and 10. The relationship Petrenko has with his players means that every phrase comes alive, and he's able to spring little surprises – as in the coda of the scherzo to No.5. *CB*

Sound Quality: 80%



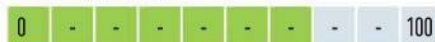
SZYMANOWSKI/DVOŘAK

Violin Concertos etc
Arabella Steinbacher, Berlin RSO/Marek Janowski

Pentatone PTC 5186 353

Arabella Steinbacher, Germany's outstanding young violinist, replaces the uninteresting – albeit best-selling – Julia Fischer on the Pentatone label. She has the ability to create a compelling narrative line (eg, her recent Berg Concerto on Orfeo: ideal for those seeking a way in to this difficult work) and with the Cremona Strad she has on loan, her sound is wonderful. Best here is the Szymanowski First Concerto – like a Polish Ravel with a twist of Bartók – whereas the efficient yet stolid Dvorak accompaniments (we have the Op.11 *Romance* too) hardly efface memories of the Suk/Ancerl Czech benchmark. *CB*

Sound Quality: 65%



TCHAIKOVSKY

Symphonies 1 and 6
LPO/Vladimir Jurowski

LPO LPO-0039 (two discs)

These late-2008 Festival Hall performances show the LPO is now in fine form under this at times inspirational conductor. He brings litheness and colour to the first Tchaikovsky symphony, 'Winter Daydreams', and whereas some reviewers have been less taken with the coupled *Pathétique* I find it extremely well conceived. Any suggestion of calculation stems surely from the work itself. Perhaps it hasn't the icy dramatic intensity of the finest Mravinsky readings; Markevitch would be the closer comparison. But just listen to the attack when the clarinet/bassoon *pppp* gives way to the first-movement development! *CB*

Sound Quality: 85%



SEVENoaks

SOUND & VISION

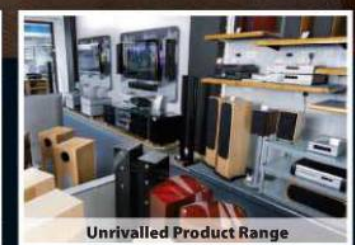
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NEW **Cyrus CD Xt SE+ | DAC X+ | DAC XP+**
 Cyrus' award-winning CD Xt SE and DAC X have been upgraded with a + suffix. The transport now features an additional transformer, said to make it equivalent to adding a PSX-R power supply, while the DAC has a dedicated power supply for the re-clocking system.
 The XP amplifiers are based on the circuitry of the top of the range DAC XP. The entry-level 6XP includes 6 line level inputs along with a zone 2 feature while the 8XP d combines the XP series pre-amplifier with a newly revised power amp, and contains an onboard DAC for digital sources.
 The Servo Evolution CD players, along with the 6XP and 8XP d amplifiers, continue to receive awards including the coveted What Hi-Fi? Product of the Year for the CD6 SE and 6XP.



Marantz

CD6003 CD PLAYER
PM6003 AMPLIFIER
 Replacing the highly-regarded 6002 series, the new PM6003 amplifier and CD6003 CD player, come housed in Marantz's stylish 'M1' casing. The CD player features a front mounted USB socket allowing improved performance from devices such as an iPod or MP3 player while the amplifier has five line-level inputs along with a MM phono stage and two sets of speaker terminals for ease of bi-wiring.



Leema
Antila II CD PLAYER
Tucana II AMPLIFIER
 With stunning sound quality and captivating good looks the new Antila II CD player features unique MD2 active differential multi-DAC converter technology to provide breathtaking realism.
 The dual mono designed Tucana II uses three heavy-duty toroidal power transformers, has a refined bi-polar output stage and is capable of swinging over forty five amps of current, ensuring a vice like grip and precise control of the speakers.



Michell Gyro SE TURNTABLE
 Based entirely on the GyroDec, but without the costly acrylic plinth and dustcover, the Gyro SE brings the same qualities in a more affordable and compact package. A Gyro SE can always be converted into a GyroDec by purchasing a plinth and dustcover.

Pro-Ject Genie MKIII TURNTABLE
 This MKIII version includes a new motor, more stable motor base and a new tone arm with traditional anti-skate. Supplied with an OM3e Ortofon cartridge fitted, the Genie MKIII is available in Standard Black with White, Piano Black and Red finish options available at extra cost.



Arcam FMJ
 Combining sleek design, flexible connectivity and a level of reproduction far beyond that of budget separates systems. Arcam's FMJ range includes two CD players, three integrated amplifiers, mono-bloc and stereo power amplifiers plus a DAB/FM/AM tuner. A range of home cinema components is also available.
 Available in silver or black.



Roksan Kandy K2 CD PLAYER | AMPLIFIER | SPEAKERS

The K2 amplifier sounds more accurate, more delicate and even more powerful than its award-winning predecessor, the Kandy LIII. The matching CD player is an impressive performer and is the ideal partner.
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Rotel has launched Special Edition versions of its 06 Series. The four new components include updated versions of the classic CD player and three stereo amplifiers.
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SOUND & VISION

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When Nick was given his first CD he didn't even have a player. He's come a long way since his first, 1960s set-up using his father's old Bush record player, and now has a true high-end sound system with a separate upstairs room for TV, with surround speakers and Blu-ray capability. Words: **Steve Harris**

Every visitor can appreciate the spacious, superbly-decorated lounge in Nick's substantial Edwardian house. Every visitor should also marvel at the way he's achieved a great high-end sound in such elegant surroundings.

'I was always interested in music from an early age,' says Nick, 'and I started in the late 1960s, using my father's Bush record player. Incidentally, I've still got it!'

By the mid-1970s Nick and his dad had progressed to separates with a Dual turntable, Rotel receiver and Wharfedale XP2 speakers.

'Then in 1980 I got married. Just down the road from my new home was a reasonable hi-fi shop. I'd been reading about the Rega turntable, which was in short supply at that time, but this shop actually had three in stock. I told them I'd like one, and they said, "You'll have to buy it now because we've got a waiting list".'

'So I bought a Rega Planar 2 and Sansui AU-217 amplifier. I hunted around and found a pair of Mordaunt-Short Festival speakers. I lived with that system for most of the 1980s. And I really liked it!

'Then, my mother bought me a compact disc for Christmas, but hadn't bothered to find out whether

I had a CD player. So I went out and bought a Rotel RCD-955. And I hated the sound of it through my system, absolutely hated it!

'I thought, hmm, my system's the best part of ten years old, everything's moved on, I'd better think about upgrading the amp, to make the most of the CD player.'

Nick couldn't afford the Audiolab 8000 he wanted, and so instead bought a Technics amp that had received a number of good reviews.

'It certainly improved the sound of CD, but it ruined the sound of my LPs, because the phono stage was rubbish! Then I had a problem with the Mordaunt-Shorts when a tweeter packed up. I got it repaired but it never sounded the same. So I went for the B&W CDM1.'

THE NEXT BIG UPGRADE

Nick moved on through Marantz and Sony CD players, then to a secondhand Arcam Delta transport/DAC combination.

'But it didn't really set me on fire. I was listening, thinking it was OK, but still actually longing for my original system of Rega, Sansui and Mordaunt-Shorts.

'Then, I was at the point of a career change, and had the opportunity of making myself redundant. I suddenly thought, if



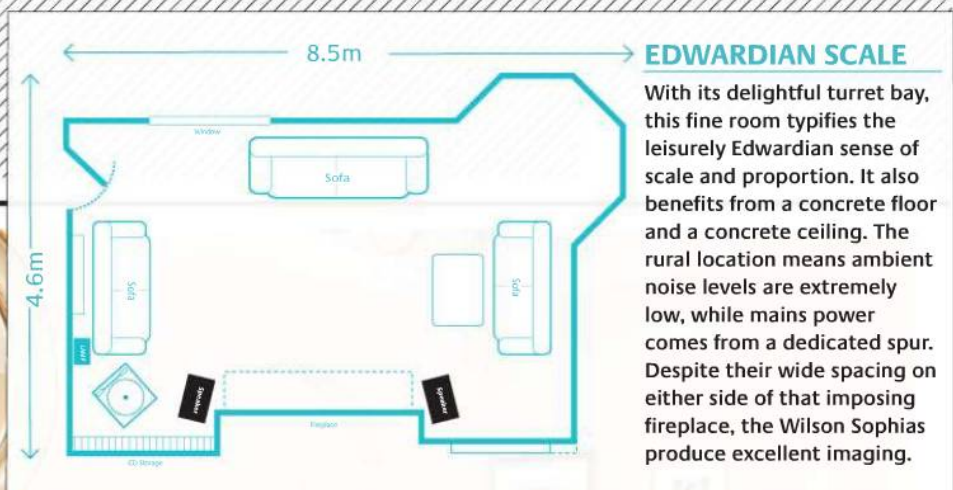
I get another job quickly I'll have some spare cash and I can go for the next big upgrade!

'By that time I'd had an inkling that I didn't really want mainstream systems, I wanted something that not everybody else had. Then I walked into this really run-down hi-fi shop on the South Coast. The owner had this Restek system, with Dynaudio speakers.

'It was the combination of the redundancy money and getting some insurance money from a car crash... The car crash paid for Dynaudio Contour 1.8 speakers. And then I had the Restek CD player, like no other you'd ever seen – it looked like a German Panzer tank to me – and a Restek integrated amplifier. I part-exchanged the transport and DAC and the CDM1s.



RIGHT: Some of the older kit Nick used to listen to, graduating from Bush to Dual then Rega record players; also seen are the Sony CDP-XE300 CD player and Sansui AU-217 amplifier



'Being a cheapskate, I thought I didn't actually need a preamplifier, because I had volume controls on the back of the amps'

'After a while I became convinced that monoblocks were the way forward. I found a pair of secondhand Restek monoblocks: the same as the ones I'd heard a few months earlier.

'Being a cheapskate, I thought I didn't actually need a preamp, because I had volume controls on the backs of the amps. So, I put the CD straight into the monoblocks... and it sounded awful! Just didn't work. But the same dealer had a secondhand Krell KRC-2 preamp for sale as well. So instead of saving a few pence, I ended up spending quite a lot on a Krell preamplifier. I

was starting to live with the sound of CDs by now. But in 1997 I did buy a secondhand Linn Sondek LP12, which was my all-time favourite record deck. I'd heard one year before and I couldn't believe that music could sound the way that it did through that player.'

A NEW HOME

Soon after these upgrades, Nick re-located, moving into a new-build house. 'It was plasterboard walls, whereas I had been living in a 1930s bungalow with nice solid construction, and now the system just didn't sound right. Though I

did start to get it sounding not too bad by changing to Chord Rumour speaker cable, so I was reasonably happy, provided I didn't have the volume up too high.

'Then, three years ago, we moved here. I put the system in the lounge and it really sounded OK! For the first time, I felt that it was a bit closer to what I'd had originally, and I started to think about improving the loudspeakers.

'But my Restek monoblocks were starting to play up a bit. I managed to get them overhauled, but they were secondhand anyway, and didn't seem to be working at a

ABOVE: Nick's is a very costly system but one where, happily, the results really do justify the expense. In different homes he's tried out equipment ranging from a Bush record player to dartzEel amplification. There's an upstairs room for home cinema too

hundred per cent. I thought maybe it was time to put a Krell power amp in, to go with the preamp, and bought a KAV-2250. But I was left with the feeling that it was a little bit too dry-sounding, and I was still frustrated that the system had, in my view, too much sibilance.

MY CREMONA

'Then I went for a pair of Sonus faber Cremonas, lovely-looking speakers which seemed to blend in aesthetically with the way the house was coming together. And I enjoyed them. I was hearing a lot of bass detail, a lot of tones in the bass that I'd never heard before, and I liked the midrange.

But again I still felt that there was perhaps a tad too much sibilance.

'Maybe I could have toned it out, which is probably why I then went the Audio Research route, thinking that this would warm things up a bit. By now I'd ditched the Restek player, Krell KRC preamp and Krell phono stage, and gone for the Audio Research REF 3 preamp and PH5 phono stage. The system was beginning to sound great!

'But I've got this wretched Queen CD, which is a killer. I must have listened to the track "Barcelona" a hundred times just trying to see whether, tonally, it was absolutely

what I wanted. Dynamically, I was certainly getting what I wanted, but at the end of the day, there was still just this touch of sibilance that I couldn't stand!

'I then thought, where do I go now? I tried a pair of Amatis, but I thought they were too big for the room, and I couldn't get them far enough from the back wall. They sounded perfect with classical music, but when I played rock and female vocal, I just didn't think they were what I wanted.

'So I thought, what can I do to get the electronics as good as possible, before I finally plump for a pair of speakers that I'm going to

live with for a considerable time? I thought that the Krell power amp was probably the weakest link.

'That's when Trevor at Guildford Audio suggested I try the Audio Research 110 and the new Krell Evolution power amp. And I said, "Oh, let me just try the DarTZeel power amp," because I'd just started to hear about that.

'So Trevor and his colleague Alan came up, put in the REF 110, and I thought, yes, it's better than the old Krell power amp. And they said, "Wait until you hear the Krell Evolution!". But having looked at the monstrous size of the REF 110, and

'I was hearing a lot of bass detail, a lot of tones that I'd never heard'



ABOVE: Audio Research CD7 CD player, darTZeel NHB-18NS preamplifier and NHB-108 power amp

the Krell, I said, "Can't we just try the DarTZeel first?"

'So we stuck the DarTZeel in and I heard bass and detail that I'd never heard before. And I put the DarTZeel in to the system.'

SASHA-YS IN

Nick's dreaded sibilance was finally banished by a change from Transparent to Crystal Ultra speaker cables and interconnects.

'Now that I'd got the signal path as good as I could get it, I said let's have another look at loudspeakers. I'd never ever heard Wilson Audio speakers, but I'd seen reviews about how good the WATT/Puppy 8 was, and then I came across a press release on the Sasha. I thought, if I don't ask, I'll never listen! So I asked Trevor, and he said "I've got the first pair in the country". He brought them up to the house.

'When I saw them, I nearly told him not to bother plugging them in, as I couldn't live with them. But I said, well, let's just see what they sound like. They weren't even run in. Trevor said I could keep them for a week or so.

'Then my wife said "I can't live with those! They look like wheelie bins." I left them on all day to run in while I was at work, and then finally I plucked up courage to go in the room and listen to them.

'I still remember it now, listening to Stevie Ray Vaughan's "Tin Pan Alley". I was just amazed at how fantastic it sounded. It sounded to me for the first time that I was actually hearing him play the



LEFT: Nick replaced his Linn LP 12 with an Oracle Delphi V turntable with SME IV tonearm and Koetsu Rosewood Signature MC cartridge

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Amp/CD shown in two-tone finish. Black/silver also available.

RIGHT: Nick finally settled on Crystal Cable's Ultra speaker cable as it was this which enabled him to rid his system of sibilance



BELOW RIGHT: One of Nick's latest upgrades is the Pioneer BDP-LX91 Blu-ray player



BELOW: Wilson Sophia speakers in Desert Silver finish



notes individually. It really was fabulous!

'I kept thinking, can I convince my wife that these are the ones to have? Then I'd look up and think, no!

'So I thought, if I keep these any longer I'm going to convince myself that I have to have them. I rang up and said "Trevor, you'll have to come up Saturday and pick them up. I can't live with them any longer".

'So he came, but he also brought the DarTZeel preamp to try. And the Sashas were right on song that day!'

After this, in desperation, Nick tried moving the whole system out of the lounge, intending to create a music room upstairs. This new room was big enough, but the acoustics were awful compared with the welcoming ambience of the lounge. The system came back downstairs.

SILVER SOPHIAS

'But I couldn't go back to the Cremonas. So I started to find out about the other speakers in the Wilson range, and saw the Sophias. My wife said, "I can just about bear these."' And so Sophias were ordered, in decor-friendly Desert Silver. By now, Nick also had a record player with maximum visual appeal, the Oracle Delphi V.

'I really liked the look of it, especially with the record clamp on

the top. Guildford Audio didn't sell Oracle new. But talk about luck! I just searched on the internet and a shop came up, with a secondhand one. I happened to have to go down the South Coast on business the next day, so I thought, I can go and look at this Oracle on the way.

'So I went into this little run-down place that purported to be a high-end hi-fi shop. Me being me, I'd already put the Linn Sondek in the back of the car, just in case I had an urge to buy the Oracle.

'Anyway, he gave me good deal on the Linn Sondek. I actually sold it for more than I'd bought it for ten years earlier. Great! A first!'

Nick fancied an SME arm but didn't want a black one, so went for the IV instead of the V, adding a Koetsu Rosewood cartridge.



LEFT: The attic space is now home to a big Pioneer PDP-LX608D plasma. Featuring an Onkyo TX-SR875 receiver, Dynaudio Contour 1.8 speakers (front L/R), B&W LCR centre channel speaker, KEF Q15 rear speakers and a Velodyne SPL-800 sub, Nick has kept this system up to date with a Sky HD box and Pioneer Blu-ray player



BELOW: Dynaudio's Contour 1.8 floorstander, seen here without grilles



So what about home cinema? Nick first experienced surround sound back in 1994, when he'd walked into a shop in search of speakers to replace his ailing Mordaunt-Shorts.

'I walked out with a Yamaha DSP processor, came home and said to my wife, "Fantastic! We can now have music and television through the one system!" She rolled her eyes. I moved the room around, put the TV between the speakers, connected up the processor. Then I had to run back and buy a pair of rear speakers.

'Having had one pair of speakers that she didn't really like, she now had the TV where she didn't want it, plus two extra speakers that she definitely didn't want! Then I came home with a big black ugly sub.

'When I moved up to the Restek hi-fi system, I kept my wife happy by saying I wouldn't have the surround system as well. But I had half an inkling that I'd go back to it. When we moved here, I finally had enough rooms to dedicate to things.'

ROOM AT THE TOP

'The guy who lived here before actually had a cine projector in a room at the top of the house. So I thought, this old "cinema room" is where I'll put the TV, and get the surround system out again.

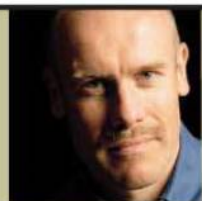
'And this was a good excuse to upgrade my Dynaudio speakers, because I could say they had to go into the surround system!'

Nick dusted off his old B&W centre channel speaker and a pair of KEF speakers for the rears. But he

updated the system with a Pioneer plasma and an Onkyo TX-SR875 receiver, Sky HD box and a cheap DVD player. More recently, he's changed to a Pioneer BDP-LX91 Blu-ray player, which he says gives much better sound on regular DVDs.

But the big lounge hi-fi is his real love, and it really is an exceptionally fine system. There is one more change in prospect, though, as Nick is contemplating a Wadia 871 CD player to replace the CD7. It won't be in decor-destroying black, as the casework is being sent over to DarTZeel, where it will be finished to match their gold pre- and power amps. 'Just as a laugh,' says Nick.

But he's serious too. And he's already proved that you really can have a house-beautiful that sounds beautiful too. ☺



Paul Miller
Editor

Technician and writer on all things audio for over 25 years, Paul Miller took over the editor's chair in 2006. He invented the QC Suite, used across the audio industry

Playing with numbers

No audiophile takes the idea of self-powered desktop speakers rated at '200W PMP' seriously, but we do expect high-end amplifiers to be conservative in their specification says **Paul Miller**

Scanning down the amplifier column of a hi-fi listings magazine, I was struck by the fact that some purchasers might actually use the quoted power output to filter their list of potential options. When all else is perceived to be equal (inputs, outputs and features) then surely the 100W amplifier offers better value than its 50 or 60W competition? At least it'll have a better chance of driving your speakers, right? In practice, and at the risk of invoking the wrath of Ira Gershwin, this ain't necessarily so.

The devil, as usual, is in the detail. For starters you've no guarantee that these listings are quoting power output under the same conditions, say at 1kHz into 8ohm. It's not uncommon to see power rated into 6ohm these days, allowing a manufacturer to spec its 75W amplifier at 100W instead. If you don't look at the small print, you'll never know.

REPRINTING THE BROCHURE

I'm often mulling over the usefulness, or otherwise, of manufacturer specifications. In extreme cases I'm left wondering what planet a product was tested on in order to achieve the results it claims. Then there are the magazines and websites that have a sidebar titled 'Technical Specs' or somesuch to accompany its reviews. The reader might justifiably expect these to be independently verified but no, these are just slavishly reprinted from the product literature. Why not cut out the middle



ABOVE: The Alpha 5 from 1994, capable of 60W/8ohm but rated by Arcam at just 40W



ABOVE: A huge hit from 1994 – Rotel's RA-930BX, rated at 30W but delivered 50W

man altogether and go straight to the manufacturer's website?

WHO TO BELIEVE?

I'm not simply having a pop at the red tops and their buying guides because, for a quick price check, they can be pretty useful. No, the real problem is the inconsistency between the manufacturers themselves. Regular readers will know that everything appearing in *Hi-Fi News* is independently lab tested to a degree that's simply not matched anywhere else. It's your guarantee that we understand the product inside and out, but it also demonstrates that some specifications are sailing very close to the wind. I'll give you an example.

Recently I was testing a series of heavyweight power amplifiers, including the ATC P1, reviewed on p62. Rated at 150W/8ohm the P1 met this value with just a few watts to spare. This, as far as the nice man from Trading Standards is concerned, is all it need do. Next on the bench was an XA60.5 monoblock from the pen of Nelson Pass. Rated, unsurprisingly, at 60W/8ohm it actually achieved closer to 125W/8ohm. Astonishing!

In reality then, this amplifier is actually twice as powerful as the listings and web junkies would have you believe. So if I was daft enough to discount the XA60.5 from the buyer's guide as insufficiently powerful (it's only a 60-watter, after

all...) then I might end up auditioning some 100-watters that were rather less capable in practice.

GENEROUS TO A FAULT

So why are some manufacturers more literal in their specification and others, well, more generous? In decades past when the market was awash with affordable 40W amplifiers, you'd find some that just scraped through with 41W/8ohm while others, from the likes of Arcam or Rotel and Pioneer would go the extra mile.

These manufacturers wanted to ensure their amplifiers would always

deliver at least 40W regardless of fluctuations in mains voltage. By offering up to 2dB of extra grunt, this would often be enough to ensure a beefier and more confident

'Using 6ohm instead of 8ohm allows a 75W amp to be rated at 100W instead'

performance when auditioned back-to-back through less-than-sympathetic loudspeakers.

Perhaps this hidden reserve was, and remains, all part of a cunning plan to wow the audiophile with unexpected turns of subjective power. On the other hand why not just tell us 'this amplifier is rated at 40W/8ohm, but will typically deliver 60W/8ohm'? It's what *Hi-Fi News* does, every month. ☺

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The colour's in the finish.....

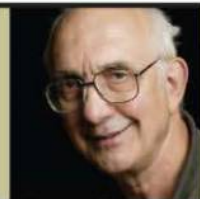


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Barry Fox Technology journalist

Barry Fox trained in electronics with the RAF and worked as a patent agent, but he gave that up to enter journalism. He is one of the world's top technology writers

Taking charge...

The lack of a common standard when it comes to phone, MP3 player and camera chargers means there's a real risk of destroying kit by using the wrong one. **Barry Fox** looks at a new solution

Strange but true. People who need 96kHz and 24-bits through valve amps and studio monitors at home, will cheerfully accept far lower fi for music on the move from battery portables. But no-one can be cheery about the insane lack of a standard for portable chargers.

Manufacturers build to different voltages, polarities and power drains. Often there is back-voltage sensing to prevent over-charging, because an over-cooked Lithium Ion battery can easily explode and burn fiercely. So the makers fit different connectors to stop people using the wrong chargers, or build intelligence into the charger so only approved batteries will work with it.

THE HEAVY BRIGADE

On a recent trip to the USA my bag of music, phone and camera chargers and leads weighed more than my clothes; and I still destroyed an expensive piece of kit because I tried to use the wrong charger. There is a move towards 5V



ABOVE: The author's music players, phones and cameras – and just as many chargers

as a *de facto* standard, because that's the voltage that feeds through a computer USB connection. Mains wall and car power units now often deliver 5V to a portable through a standard USB lead to either a Mini or a Micro USB connector. But small USB sockets are fragile and if you break one the whole device may be a write-off.

Some USB devices will refuse to work with some chargers. This may be simply because the charger is not delivering enough current or it may be because

the charger and the portable do an electrical handshake before charging starts. USB uses four wires,

two for the 5V supply and two for computer data. It is possible to short the USB data

wires to fool the intelligence, but there may then be a risk of damaging the portable.

If you believe a recent spate of publicity, the answer to our prayers lies in inductive charging. A pad with charging coils inside plugs into the mains to act as a transformer primary, and different portables sit on the mat behaving as transformer secondaries to pick up a wire-free charge.

'Lose the cords – unplug' promises UK/Israeli company Powermat in its advertising blitz. Rival products are on the way, for instance from Duracell. There is nothing new or magic about inductive charging. It's how electric toothbrushes work. But the brush is matched to the mat. Powermat promises to charge three different devices at a time, plus a fourth from a USB port on the mat.

If only it were that simple. The portable has to be fitted with a 'receiver'; for a Blackberry it's a new back, but for iPods and iPhones it has to be a slide-on sleeve. This increases the cost: £70 for the mat (£80 if the mat folds for travel) and its wall power unit, and £30-£35 for each receiver. Ran Poliakine, Chairman and CEO, told me:

'When the device is fully charged the mat goes into standby and stops drawing power, whereas ordinary wall chargers continue to waste power. And with three devices there is less power drawn than with three wall chargers.'

I used a digital power meter to compare drain when charging an iPod Touch with a Powermat against a simple USB wall charger (a Camelion, bought from Maplin). The supplied receiver sleeve would not fit my Touch because

my Touch is a first generation model and Powermat only sells sleeves for second generation Touch iPods, which are slimmer. Yes, Powermat's packaging is clearly marked "iPod

Touch 2nd generation" but customers with 1st and 3rd generation Touches need to know to check before buying.

I then tried charging the Touch from the USB socket on the mat. This would not work, because iPods need to do a data handshake with the charger – news to Powermat's UK technical support.

THE BIG 'IF'...

My power tests showed that charging a single device with the Powermat offers little or no power saving, or convenience benefit, over a wall charger that draws current only when charging. Charging two or three devices at the same time will clearly be more convenient and may save a little power – but all the adaptors needed will cost a packet.

Ran Poliakine admits: 'This is only the beginning. Our next step is to build the receiver into a replacement battery. By January 2010 we will have 15 batteries with built-in receivers.'

If this happens then inductive charging could certainly start to make sense. But I suspect it is a big if. ☹

'If you believe the publicity the answer to our prayers lies in inductive charging'

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Barry Willis

Journalist for top American audio-video publications

While his main interest is high-end audio, Barry Willis also writes about the culinary industry, visual art and theatre for a huge variety of US newspapers and magazines

Hi-fi heresy

Is the vinyl comeback here to stay? Sales are up, as are the number of re-issues and pre-digital issue 'vinyl specials' being offered. But **Barry Willis** thinks it's wise to dig a little deeper...

No one in the audio field could fail to recognise an uptick in sales of vinyl records and the equipment needed to play them. Our own Paul Miller noted this in his column in the *HFN 2009 Yearbook*, stating that he'd both gotten his old test records out of mothballs, and begun writing software to subject phono gear to the same sort of rigorous performance standards that he applies to amps, DACs, and CD players.

Frequent reviews of turntables and phonograph accessories – and scads of advertising for them – are proof that the old format isn't going away. Some pop artists are releasing new recordings first on 'collectible' limited-edition vinyl before the release of more plebian CDs and iTunes, and many others are re-issuing classic recordings.

US VINYL SALES DOUBLE

On November 5, 2009, the Recording Industry Association of America (www.riaa.org) reported that its 'annual music shipment report shows vinyl shipments more than doubling last year to \$57 million, the highest level since 1990.'

It's a heartening trend for old-school audiophiles, but the truth is that the widely heralded vinyl resurgence is statistically insignificant. The RIAA's year 2008 music shipment report concludes with total sales of almost \$8.5 billion for all formats combined – physical products of all varieties, plus legal downloads.

Despite the fondest wishes of recording industry executives, record pressing plants, and some audio writers, vinyl will always remain a niche format – or more specifically, a nostalgia format. There are only two groups of consumers who embrace it: kids who think it's cool because it's retro, and middle-aged adults who've never accepted that the world has moved on beyond 1959, or 1963, or 1974, or whatever arbitrary year it was when the turntable was the centre of their social and musical universe.

I relate well to the fascination with retro. I understand liking vinyl because of its warm sound and primitive

soulfulness. Or, liking it because its very inconvenience forces deep personal involvement in the playback process. It's cool the way an antique roadster is cool – idiosyncratic and riddled with glitches, but tons of fun.

But I'm dismayed by audiophiles who are forever on about the aesthetic superiority of vinyl – or who exalt the moral superiority of those for whom it is the only acceptable form of playback. There's some version of this sanctimonious drivil in almost every issue

'The cover art alone is all anyone needs to justify a vinyl habit'

of every American hi-fi journal in print. It's a matter of faith not open to rational inquiry. Ask any of its proponents about any of the vinyl format's undeniable flaws

– surface noise, clicks and pops, pre- and post-echo, inner-groove distortion, speed variations, warped discs, off-centre pressings – and they may reply, 'That doesn't bother me.'

ART OF THE MATTER

Good-natured vinylphiles will shrug off the criticism. Uncharitable snobs may feel insulted, as if the very mention of imperfection somehow sullies both the religion and its adherents. They'll only begrudgingly – if at all – acknowledge the great leaps forward that digital technology has brought to music lovers. To name just a few: the elimination of surface noise and use-induced artifacts, the reduction of speed variations to immeasurable levels, the provision of the potential for truly lifelike dynamic range.

Even so, there's one respect in which vinyl will always remain king. No other format will ever be accompanied by large, tactile visual art.

The cover art alone is all anyone needs to justify a vinyl habit. ☺



ABOVE: Modern record stores across the US are hoping to capitalise on the rebirth of vinyl



Jim Lesurf
Science journalist

Jim Lesurf has spent a lifetime in audio, both as an engineer at UK hi-fi company Armstrong and reader in Physics and Electronics at St Andrew's University

The Mains Chance

Can your choice of mains cable help reduce unwanted mains-born noise? **Jim Lesurf** decides to take a look using good old-fashioned engineering ideas. So what's all this about a camel?

One of life's biggest mysteries is why the makers of fridges and central heating systems invented their own special form of Karaoke. They may like the sound of rifle shots and explosions added to music, but the rest of us probably wish to prevent mains interference from having even subtle effects on what we hear. So can choosing one mains cable instead of another alter the sound by reducing such problems? OK, it's true that if the cable won't reach the wall socket you may have to listen to a portable radio instead. But is there more to it than that?

The traditional view amongst engineers is that the choice of mains cable isn't really going to affect RF interference. Yet others clearly believe that the right cable can

provide an audible improvement. So I decided to have an open-minded look at the topic using ye olde-fashioned engineering ideas.

NOT SO SIMPLE

The outcome does confirm that a mains cable can, indeed, act like a 'filter' to reduce RF interference. But despite this general conclusion, the examination also showed that things aren't that simple. I've put the technical details of the examination I did up on my website at www.audiomisc.co.uk/cables/mains/StringTheory.html.

The main snag arises from the same physics that allows a cable to behave as an RF filter. The cable can present a 'mismatched' RF impedance to your mains wall socket and at the mains input of your amplifier. In general, the larger these mismatches, the more strongly the wall-socket+cable+amp system will tend

to reject RF. But what is the value of the RF impedance of your mains socket? What RF impedance does the power input of your amplifier present to the cable? Chances are, no-one has any idea. And it seems likely that the values will vary from one wall-socket to another and that different audio amplifiers will behave differently.

As with the possible problems with the RF loads presented by loudspeakers which I looked at some years ago, the difficulty is that almost no-one bothers to check these things. So given a range of cables to choose from, one might reject the most interference in one house using one amp, but a different cable would reject more

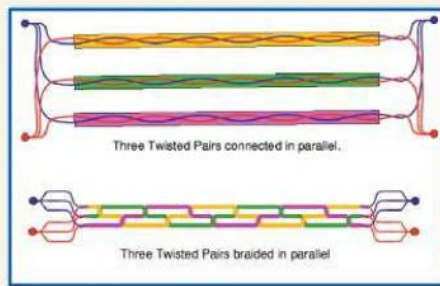
in another case. You can't tell just from the price, or from being told that for someone else a particular cable worked well. So knowing the general result isn't much help if you wanted

to choose a specific cable for a given wall socket and amplifier.

The good news is that this may not be worth losing much sleep about. My experience is that well designed kit is fairly immune to mains-conveyed RF interference unless it's at an extraordinarily high level.

When I designed amplifiers I tended to include RF capacitors in the power supply and designed the amp to inherently reject RF or clicks and bangs. If I hear about such problems I wonder if the amplifier involved and its internal power supply are good enough. Or if the set-up is poorly earthed or signal cabled and this is letting interference into the signal path. I might try to track down the offending fridge to deal with the problem at source. If that's impossible,

RIGHT: From Maplin – the Vichellio KU-2 mains lead, said to help banish RFI. Cost is £80



ABOVE: Running sets of wires in parallel like this can be expected to affect the RF transmission or rejection behaviour when used as a mains cable

I'd try a mains filter. You can buy various types of mains filter from companies such as Maplin, CPC, etc.

ONE LUMP OR TWO?

So my own view remains that – if I need the mains to be filtered – the best bet is a mains filter. Be it one using inductors and capacitors as a passive filter, or one using voltage dependent resistors, or ferrite materials, or some mix. If you need a horse, why buy a camel? Some reports may say how fast the camel can run. But you might be disappointed to discover later on that it was only faster than the horse when running over sand dunes. ☹





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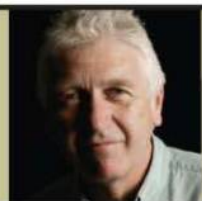
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Steve Harris
Contributing Editor

Steve Harris edited Hi-Fi News between 1986 and 2005. He loves jazz, blues music, vinyl and vintage hi-fi and anything that makes good music come to life

Wolfgang's Vault

Beginning last year with hundreds of live rock concerts for download in MP3 and FLAC, online site Wolfgang's Vault is now offering archive jazz recordings. **Steve Harris** can't get enough...

Many hi-fi companies have produced a few records when they felt like it, but Linn has established a truly world-class record label covering many music genres. Even so, one of Linn's biggest back-catalogue sellers is one of its earliest, the debut album recorded by jazz singer Carol Kidd in 1984. It's now available at several download quality levels as well as on CD and vinyl.

Around the time that Linn announced that it would cease making CD players to concentrate on digital stream products, the American download site Wolfgang's Vault (www.wolfgangsvault.com) unleashed some jazz archive recordings of more iconic status – its first tranche of previously-unissued music from the Newport Jazz Festival.

KEY TO THE VAULT

Wolfgang's Vault is named in tribute to the supreme rock concert promoter, Bill Graham (born Wolfgang Grajonca). Graham was the creator of the '60s Fillmore concerts, promoted the American tours of many superstar acts, and was the US promoter of Live Aid.

Graham died in 1991, and so could hardly have envisaged today's world of internet marketing. But he must have known that his carefully-preserved stocks

of posters, memorabilia, let alone his concert recordings, would one day have enormous value.

After Graham's death, his company Bill Graham Presents was sold first to SFX Productions and then to Clear Channel, which spun off the concert promotion business and set up Live Nation. The archive lay dormant.

Eventually, in 2003, Minnesota businessman William Sagan acquired all the material which made up the tangible legacy of Bill Graham Presents. He launched the Wolfgang's Vault website, offering original poster art, then vintage T-shirts, then art prints from Graham's collection of photographs, along with free streamed music from the concert archive.

A number of musicians took legal action to challenge Wolfgang's right to exploit their images and their music. Plaintiffs included the Grateful Dead, Santana and members of The Doors and Led Zeppelin, and Sony BMG. But last autumn, Sagan was able to announce that a veritable flood of material would now become available for download from the site's Concert Vault.

Quoted in *Billboard*, Sagan said this was 'the result of negotiating agreements with performers that not only acknowledge our ownership of this material but give us rights to exploit it.'

Wolfgang's Vault had acquired other important archives and an increasing proportion now became available as paid-for downloads, at prices ranging up to \$9.98 for MP3 or up to \$12.98 for FLAC. For an annual fee of \$48, Wolfgang's VIP membership gives you a discount on download prices and also faster streaming.

The Newport Jazz Festival and Newport Folk Festival archives were acquired from Festival Network LLC. So far, Wolfgang's Vault has made available 26 artists' sets



ABOVE: Dizzy Gillespie – his 45-minute set is priced according to sound quality

from the 1959 Jazz Festival, and this is just the beginning. Yet the *New York Times*, reporting on the 10th of November last year, seemed to hint at unresolved copyright issues. 'Enjoy it while you can,' the story ended.

PRINTS 'N' POSTERS

The Vault still holds many concerts, with artists ranging from Dylan to David Bowie, from Aerosmith to Van Zant, which can be streamed but can't be downloaded. The Doors and Led Zeppelin are conspicuously absent from the Concert

'VIP membership gives you a discount on prices and also faster streaming'

Vault listing, though there's plenty of memorabilia on sale.

Of the 118 Doors items offered, the priciest is an untrimmed printer's proof of the poster for the 1967 Fillmore concert, at \$6323. You can have a first-run printed poster for a mere \$1223. True, this is a stunning piece of artwork, more than can be said for a 1977 photo poster of Led Zeppelin's fearsome ex-wrestler manager, Peter Grant, offered at \$200. You might be more tempted by the music. ☺



ABOVE: Gene Kruper (centre, with Benny Goodman to his right); his Newport Jazz appearance is available in MP3 or FLAC



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B&W	683 in light oak	£679.00	Linn	Majik 109 in cherry	£750.00
B&W	684 in wenge	£525.00	Linn	Majik 140 in cherry	£1,250.00
B&W	686 in light oak and wenge	£219.00	Naim	HDX	£3,500.00
B&W	HTM4s in cherry	£700.00	Naim	Superline	£1,350.00
B&W	HTM61 in light oak	£299.00	Nordost	Frey 1m rca-rca	£call
B&W	ASW610 in light oak	£349.00	Nordost	Heimdall 1m rca-rca	£call
Chord	Signature 1m rca-rca	£299.00	Nordost	Red Dawn 1m rca-rca	£100.00
IsoTek	Orion 6 way	£250.00	Nordost	Red Dawn speaker cable 3m pair biwire	£395.00
IsoTek	Premium 1m (silver)	£40.00	Nordost	Red Dawn 1m balanced xlr-xlr	£150.00
IsoTek	Elite 1.5m (silver)	£70.00	Nordost	Blue Heaven speaker cable 3m pair biwire	£250.00
IsoTek	Supreme 1.5m	£150.00	Siltech	London 1m rca-rca	£60.00

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YOUR VIEWS

Sound Off!

Correspondents express their own opinions, not those of *Hi-Fi News*. We reserve the right to edit letters for publication. Correspondents using e-mail are asked to give their full postal address (which won't be published). Letters seeking advice will be answered in print on our Sound Off pages, but due to time constraints we regret we're unable to answer questions on buying items of hi-fi or any other hi-fi queries by telephone, post or via e-mail.

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BEATLES ON TAPE! OPEN-REEL RELEASES: THERE'S A DIFFERENCE

I have three points concerning your excellent behind-the-scenes feature on The Beatles re-mastered CD Box Set. Did the re-mastering team at Abbey Rd consider using a tube Studer/Revox tape machine for analogue playback? John Bamford notes they settled on a unit from 1972, which would have been solid state. I mean, if they really wanted to be authentic...

Meanwhile, Ken Kessler mentioned that he still has the US Beatles albums, even on reel-to-reel tape. Does he know there's a catalogue variation among these, too? Does he have the initial tapes Capitol manufactured itself on cheap, red acetate-base tape recorded at 3ips, or does he have the 1969/1970 re-issued versions under the Apple label and manufactured by Ampex on better polyester tape, recorded at 7ips? There is a difference!

The 1970 US-only compilation album KK refers to as *Hey Jude* is, I believe, called *The Beatles (Again)*. It is noteworthy for including the first stereo version of 'Can't Buy Me Love'.

James Hoover, New Jersey USA

Ken Kessler replies: Alas, my open-reel tapes are the early ones.



ABOVE: The Beatles Box Set 2009

As for the US compilation (which also leaked out in a rare UK-pressed export edition), Mr Hoover has opened up one of those cans of worms that keep Beatleologists awake at nights!

Beatles authority Bruce Spizer, in his definitive study of Apple releases, describes the LP as being officially entitled *Hey Jude*, but that it was originally to be called *The Beatles Again*, so Mr Hoover is partially correct. Released in February 1970, and known to collectors as *Hey Jude*, it consisted of ten songs taken from singles, although two of the tracks were also on the soundtrack of *A Hard Days Night*. The way Spizer defines it, the compilation contained ten tracks that had never appeared on Capitol albums in the USA; the soundtrack to *A Hard Days Night* was a United Artists release stateside.

My own copy of *Hey Jude*, purchased on the day of its release, says *Hey Jude* on the sleeve's spine, while the record labels – both A- and B-sides – say *The Beatles (Again)*. According to the November 2009 issue of US magazine *Sound & Vision*, Abbey Road recording engineer Guy Massey and project co-ordinator Allan Rouse, when asked about the vintage studio equipment that was also used, replied that 'a Studer A80 tape machine was the main piece of vintage gear and that the EQ was from an old EMI console. In addition, we tried out valves and yes, they provided that warmth. But ultimately, in terms of noise levels and other things, for the stereo remastering... you've got to remember: the recordings are now 40 years old.'

So, it is safe to assume that the team judiciously used vintage and modern where appropriate.

Peak practice

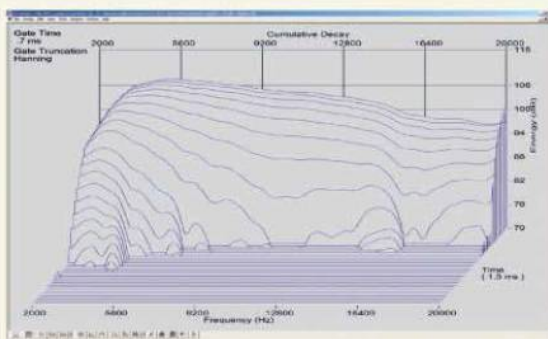
HELP ME FIND HIGH FREQUENCY SWEET-SPOT, PLEASE...

In your December 2009 issue I was interested to read your review of the Lumen White speakers as they incorporate the same drivers (Accuton) as my Jas Audio Plato speakers. I am particularly interested in the Lab comments where an increasing output is realised from 1kHz to 10kHz (+4dB) as I am finding exactly the same tendency, although from around 3kHz to 10kHz with my drivers – see ETF5 near-field tweeter measurement [pictured below] – and have been attempting to flatten this bright response, which can prove fatiguing.

To date I have tried various interconnects (some from your comprehensive interconnect review in the January 2010 issue) and together with a wide variety of speaker cables, adding an L-Pad attenuator to the HF circuit (range 0dB through to 15dB), a Modified X-Crossover (mid-to-HF crossover point, reducing and increasing), different sources, and various filter combinations using the TAG RoomEQ as tone control either to raise the LF/MR (low shelf filter) to match the HF levels or reduce the HF levels (high shelf filter). But, doing this has its own issues, one of which is continuing dependency on the TAG AV192, which I am looking to replace soon.

All these approaches make some measureable/audible differences, but I am yet to find the sweet-spot. Now my ideas are drying up. Please help!

Russel Cole, via e-mail



ABOVE: Graph shows increased output from 3kHz to 10kHz

Keith Howard replies: The best approach I can suggest is one that I mentioned in passing in the Silver Flame review – that you try toeing the speakers out a little, so that they don't fire directly at the listening seat. If you look at the spec sheet of a typical 25mm dome tweeter you'll see that it begins to become directional above about 4kHz, so a rising response above this frequency can be tamed – maybe not exactly, but to a useful degree – by listening a little off-axis. By 'a little' I mean perhaps 10 or 15°; more if the treble rise is particularly pronounced.

If you have measurement facilities then of course you can take some of the guesswork out of this but even then it's best to experiment to determine what speaker alignment gives the best subjective results. This is easier, cheaper and probably more effective than making any hardware changes to the system.

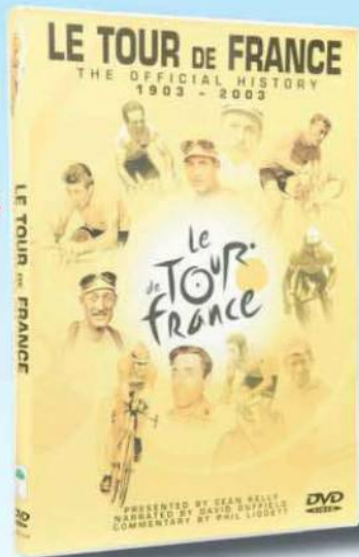
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Sound Off!

Keep a lid on it!

WHY NO REVIEWS OF DECKS WITH COVERS?

As a frequent reader of *Hi-Fi News & Record Review* (for about 40 years!) and owner of a large collection of LPs as well as CDs, I often come across reviews of turntables. A major problem with LPs, particularly in a dry climate, is static build-up and resultant attraction of dirt. A letter in the January 2010 issue talked of cleaning discs, but to my mind just as important is minimizing the dirt in the first place by *always* playing discs under a closed cover.

Thus, among the first requirements for a turntable ought to be that it comes with a case with a cover or that a suitable one should be offered as a standard accessory.

I am puzzled therefore that no review that I have noticed over many years discusses this. Am I alone in preferring clean LPs?

Kenneth Gundry, San Francisco

Hawkwind

DESERVING OF VINYL ICON STATUS?

I've been enjoying your 'Vinyl Icon' series immensely. It's not only that it gives me a fresh perspective on LPs I already own, but that I am discovering 'new' old releases too, like Cat Stevens' *Tea For The Tillerman*, which you covered in your February issue. Damn is that one fine-sounding LP!

So what about some Hawkwind? Yes, Hawkwind! Iconic albums and a cast of great characters: Lemmy, Stacia, Dave Brock... need I go on?

S Newman, via e-mail



ABOVE: Dave Brock plays space rock

Musical Fidelity

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT...

I enjoyed your fanciful article about Tim de Paravicini [see *HFN* Jan '10]. Unfortunately, Tim's memory seems to be failing him. As a matter of fact the Digilog DAC was designed by Martin Colloms (with Chris Bryant) and the whole was implemented by the Musical Fidelity design team.

Meanwhile, the original A1 design was by Kenneth Grange at Pentagram. Your article also implies that

Tim was responsible for my original product, The Preamp. This is not true.

*Antony Michaelson,
Musical Fidelity*

Tim de Paravicini replies: It appears that some of the article about me was reproduced from the website of ours. I have various people set up our website, of which I do take ultimate responsibility. An unreserved apology is offered by me. It is unfortunate that some parts were not

verified by me, I will instruct the items to be removed. I wish to withdraw all references to Musical Fidelity.

I was, however, paid by Anthony Michaelson for several years to develop various products for him. This fact cannot be altered. His accounts and my bank will have past records for this.

The A1 he refers to, was indeed visually designed by Pentagram but the product was electronically my development.



Lacking in comparison

GUSHING REVIEWS, BUT THEY'RE OF LITTLE USE TO ME!

Many of us who still use antique valve equipment (in my case Quad II originals and Leak 20s) are very interested in modern equivalents, which we hope may be better or at least more reliable.

We are not helped by reviews such as the one in your January 2010 issue which spends three pages telling us how good the product is and justifies what music was used to audition it, but says nothing about how it compares with other products from the Quad stable nor how it fares driving electrostatics. I am delighted to discover it can drive Wilsons – I just doubt any real life punters would even contemplate marrying the two.

What is becoming obvious in your magazine is that every product is treated to gushing reviews but any comparisons with similar, or even cheaper, equipment that received equally wonderful reviews is notably lacking.

If this is future editorial policy I really wonder if it is time to cancel my subscription. I can read how fantastic new products are on manufacturers' websites for free.

Stefan Herber, via e-mail

Paul Miller replies: We are all free to read about hi-fi products from the manufacturer's website or, indeed, from various on-line fanzines and vanity publishing exercises. *Hi-Fi*

News, by contrast, offers the transparency and accountability of a paper periodical – you know who we are and where we live!

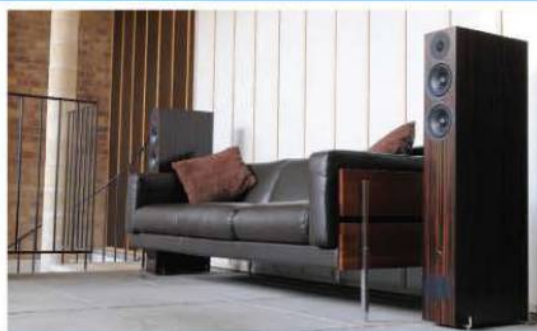
Moreover, our in-depth reviews are supported by detailed technical reports by way of independent qualification. Inevitably, some products fall by the wayside en route to page as I have no intention of publishing a 'how-to-fix-it' guide for the hapless manufacturer and waste our readers' time. As a result only the better products tend to make it through, and not all are guaranteed 'gushing praise' or *HFN* badges.

Finally, you'd be surprised how many tube-loving audiophiles (even triode enthusiasts) also favour Wilsons [see Show Blog, p14].

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ARCAM – see the new AVR500 HD Receiver. **BECHOCOLATE** – a new brand from Belgium, launching the Puroh all in one system. **CABASSE** – three new speaker launches, Ambrose 3, Bora and Santorin 30. **CHORD ELECTRONICS** – the Cyan Click and CPM 2800 digital amplifiers. **JVC** – reveal the XVIEW LT-32WX50 LCD Monitor only 7mm thick. **KEF** – The radical new Concept Blade is making its UK debut. **MONITOR AUDIO** – demonstrating the new Apex Series A10AV12 5.1 system. **NAIM** – the UK launch of the UnitiQute, compact, digital streaming, all-in-one audio player. **PMC** – the fact8 floorstander making its Show debut. **PROAC** – showing the new Studio 140 Mk2 loudspeaker. **REGA** – the first outing for the Isis and Osiris reference CD player and amplifier. Also, bring along your Rega turntable and get it serviced by Rega's trained staff, visit the website to book your turntable in! **REL** – New G1 (Gibraltar) Series sub woofers. **SENNHEISER** – see and hear more new models! **SIM2** – Mico 50 LED projector, C3X Lumis projector and much more... **VIENNA** – the new Klimt Series KISS speaker.

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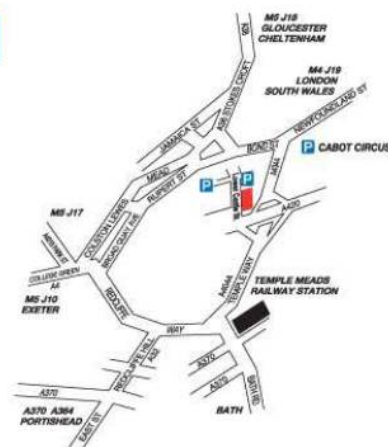
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Linn Records

An On Location with a difference this month as **John Bamford** takes you behind the scenes of virtual company Linn Records. With sister company Linn Products no longer making CD players, are we looking at the future of high-end digital audio?

When Linn Products' Majik DS graced the cover of the October 2008 edition of *Hi-Fi News* with accompanying headline 'Music's new wave', little could we have imagined that just over two years later the famous Glasgow firm would be announcing that it was to cease manufacturing CD players.

As reported in our news pages two months ago [see *HFN* Jan '10], Linn claims that during the past couple of years the number of sales worldwide of its DS (digital streaming) products has grown by 40% while sales of its CD players has declined by 40%. Indeed, such is the success of its range of DS components and integrated systems that they now account for some 30% of the company's total sales turnover.

'The British maker of stuff for audiophiles says digital streaming is the way forward for its music products', is how *The Guardian* reported Linn's announcement in its on-line technology blog subsequent to Linn's highly publicised press conference held in London at the end of 2009.

NO BIG DEAL

For music loving audiophiles whose passion is to hear every nuance of the recording engineer's art – those hi-fi enthusiasts who dream of hearing original master recordings unblemished by the vagaries of mass replication onto a 12in vinyl disc or a 5in polycarbonate one – the fact that a specialist hi-fi manufacturer in Glasgow has actually decided to cease making CD players could be considered by-the-by. After all, surely the makers of the iconic Sondek



LP12 record player never really liked CD anyway, suggesting the format was a lemon when it was introduced to the market back in 1982. Moreover, the majority of the world's giant consumer electronics manufacturers pretty much gave up manufacturing CD players over a decade ago once they realised they had a global hit on their hands with new-fangled DVD players that played consumers' existing CD collections free of charge.

No, the big news behind the headlines is the alleged success of the pioneering high resolution music download service provided by Linn's subsidiary record company,

ABOVE: Philip Hobbs, a Linn veteran of 30 years, designs Linn's speakers as well as recording and producing many award-winning albums. Here he sits at the mixing desk in London's AIR Studios

INSET: High resolution 24-bit/192kHz audio data is stored on Apple Mac Pro computers in AIR Studios' plant room

Linn Records. While the opportunity for us to have better-than-CD-quality digital audio recordings via DVD-Audio and SACD packaged media was largely missed by the hi-fi majority, in the modern age of networked homes and computer audio it appears that many progressive audiophiles are embracing the opportunity to pay a premium for 'Studio Master' hi-res 24-bit/96kHz and 24-bit/192kHz recordings available for download from Linn Records' website as DRM-free FLAC files. Has the future of a higher-end audio world finally arrived? Are we truly riding the crest of 'Music's new wave'?

Heading up Linn Records is producer and audio consultant Philip Hobbs, a Linn veteran of more than three decades who was there at the very beginning,



when the company first acquired a record cutting lathe to make experimental test LPs for assessing the quality of its turntables. He was instrumental in the creation of Linn's own record label which, at the time, was considered something of an indulgence for a company whose main business was the manufacturing of hi-fi turntables and loudspeakers.

To get the story behind Linn Records *HFN* caught up with Philip at London's prestigious AIR Studios complex in London where he has recently been using the studio's fabulous Lyndhurst Hall to record the Classical Opera Company performing Thomas Arne's *Artaxerxes*, scheduled for release on the Linn label later this summer in celebration of the 300th anniversary of the composer's birth.

STATE OF PLAY

'Like many music hardware manufacturers, from EMI onwards, it wasn't long after we started making turntables that we began dabbling in making records as well,' Philip recalls. 'What we found from making the LP12 was that the less play there was in the main bearing the better it sounded. It appeared, to us at least, that no-one making cutting lathes for mastering records had really considered this as a way

of improving the sound of LPs. So we bought an old Scully lathe and completely rebuilt not just the bearing but the drive system and all its associated electronics.

'The modifications we made to that old Scully lathe seemed to make a significant improvement, and some of the LPs we made on this system in the early 1980s still sound pretty good today,' Philip continues. 'Of course, being valiant for the truth in the way only hi-fi enthusiasts can be, we naturally refused to have anything to do with 'nasty' tools that commercial mastering engineers

dabbled with, such as limiters, compressors and the mono-ing of bass frequencies. We also had no varigroove, so we had to make manual changes to the groove width as the cutting progressed. The result was that cutting an LP of anything more difficult than 15 minutes of string quartet – and provided the cello was in the middle – was a long and difficult process.

'It soon became apparent that this was never going to be a commercial venture for Linn and

'We control the sound from start to end result'



ABOVE: (Clockwise from top left) Main recording hall at AIR Studios is prepared for the Classical Opera Company's performance of *Artaxerxes*; 24-bit/192kHz recording is made via Pro Tools; Linn Records' website offers downloads at Studio Master resolution

BELOW: The flagship Klimax DS network player from Linn Products for streaming hi-res audio files

over time the record cutting project was quietly abandoned...'

However in the process of building its lathe Linn needed to get hold of some master tapes to practice cutting with. Philip made contact with Scottish-based engineer Calum Malcolm, a friend with whom he'd studied astronomy at the University of St Andrews during the 1970s.

Calum had established his own recording studio, Castle Sound, situated in an old school house in Pencaitland, East Lothian.

'Calum sent us a couple of tapes that turned into two of the earliest Linn releases,' remembers Philip. 'The first of these was the 1983 debut album by Scottish jazz singer Carol Kidd. We sold the LP through hi-fi dealers and it did pretty well. The other tape Calum sent us was an early single from a Glasgow band called The Blue Nile and this was a completely different proposition. We really wanted to work with The Blue Nile but it presented huge challenges for a fledgling record



ON LOCATION

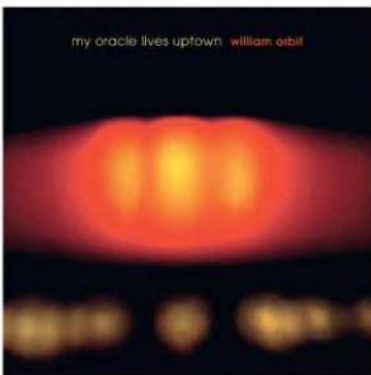
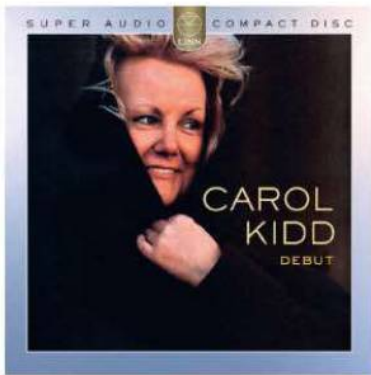
label such as ourselves, because not only were the recording costs huge but we had none of the distribution or marketing infrastructure in place to deal with the launch of a large scale pop/rock album.

'Still, we made the album *A Walk Across The Rooftops* and signed a production and distribution deal with Virgin. Critically the album was pretty well received, but sold only modestly by pop standards.

The band's follow-up album, 1989's *Hats*, was also recorded by Calum at Castle Sound and became a huge hit. Subsequently the band signed a major record deal and we parted company, having lost a huge amount of money and with little appetite left for the pop music industry', laments Philip.

JAZZ AND CLASSICAL

Having naturally focused its attentions on high quality vinyl releases, it wasn't until 1990 that Linn Records' growing catalogue of jazz and classical recordings started to be released on CD. A worldwide distribution network was established for Linn Records in 1992 as musicians such as jazz singer Claire Martin, renowned guitarist Martin Taylor and internationally recognised tenor saxophonist Tommy Smith had joined the roster



ABOVE & LEFT: Castle Sound studios in East Lothian was founded by Calum Malcolm. He recorded Linn Records' earliest releases including Carol Kidd and The Blue Nile

of artists whose recordings were being released on the Linn label.

Over the next decade or so Philip Hobbs and his team developed the classical and jazz repertoire of Linn Records, producing nearly 150 albums and building a reputation for quality and innovation that has led to a succession of prestigious music industry awards in recent years.

'With our recordings we strive to recreate the emotion and energy of a live performance,' enthuses Philip, 'to give the listener an unprecedented level of involvement in the music. Perhaps a unique aspect of our recordings is that we control the sound from the start of a recording to the end result. While Linn Products and Linn Records are independent limited companies, their stories are inextricably linked, as is my own role within them. I've spent my entire career with Linn and throughout this time have been lucky enough to be able to divide my time between working on speaker development and recording for the Linn label. Essentially if you hear a Linn recording through a Linn loudspeaker system and you think it sounds rubbish, then consider it entirely my fault!' Philip laughs.

While it chose to master and package its recordings as SACDs rather than DVD-Audio discs, Linn nevertheless grasped the opportunity to offer better fidelity than CD as long ago as 2001.

'We became actively involved in making SACDs from the beginning, and although we did *some* recording and editing in native DSD the studio

equipment available to us was cumbersome, often unreliable, and highly restrictive in what you could do with it,' explains Philip.

'Moreover, for any significant amount of post-production it remained necessary to convert DSD master recordings back to some form of PCM. So after a number of highly frustrating near-disasters, our preferred route for SACD production was to both record and edit in high sample rate PCM – as indeed most recording engineers have always been doing – and then to convert the hi-res PCM to DSD for loading onto the SACD layer of our hybrid SACD/CD releases. This meant that when we came to make the download section of our website, we had a good number of high resolution PCM files readily to hand.'

Since acquiring improved microphone amplifiers together with new A-to-D converters from Digital Audio Denmark capable of operating at 192kHz sampling rate and beyond (see www.digitalaudio.dk), an increasing number of Linn's recordings have become available for download as 24-bit/192kHz files. One of the label's first 24/192 releases was its recording of Beethoven piano concertos performed in The Perth Concert Hall in November 2008 by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra under Sir Charles Mackerras, with the Portuguese pianist Artur Pizarro.

BACK AT THE RANCH...

While Philip Hobbs has been having the time of his life, producing recordings and playing with 'big boys' toys' in recording studios, holding the fort in Glasgow as business manager for Linn Records for the past ten years has been Caroline Dooley. Recently she has been appointed Linn's marketing manager as future development of the two companies (software ☺

LEFT: Carol Kidd's *Debut* put Linn's record label on the map; William Orbit's *My Oracle Lives Uptown* is available as a Studio Master download and also on 180g vinyl for LP collectors

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COMPANY TIMELINE

1980
LP cutting lathe built as a research project

1983
Carol Kidd's first album and demo tracks of *The Blue Nile* are given to Linn to practise cutting albums

1984
Release of the first *The Blue Nile* album

1989
The Blue Nile's Hats is released

1990
Linn Records begins selling its albums on CD

1992
Worldwide distribution network is established for Linn classical and jazz catalogue

1996
First release of *The Complete Songs of Robert Burns* series

2001
Relaunch of www.linnrecords.com as a main point for selling CDs 'mail order'

2001
Begins selling selected titles on SACD

2005
Reintroduces vinyl to the catalogue

2007
Sells downloads via website

2009
Other labels offer Linn hi-res recordings for site

and hardware) has now become so inextricably intertwined.

Caroline remembers: 'We watched with considerable interest the birth of Napster, the rapid expansion of the internet and broadband availability, and the subsequent success of Apple's iTunes store. As a record company we were saying to ourselves and the music industry at large, "What are you doing? iTunes is taking over the industry..." We also observed what was happening in the USA with Music Giants and Chesky's HDtracks. Via our website we launched the selling of our music catalogue as downloadable files on January 1st 2007. Of course, from the launch we had a significant part of our catalogue available as high resolution 'Studio Masters', which we chose to make available as both WMA and FLAC files. Precisely three years on we now have 120 hi-res titles and are adding approximately six new titles a month.'

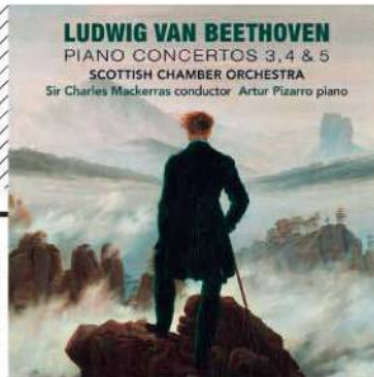
EVER GROWING

In support of Linn's pioneering spirit in selling high quality recordings on-line, an increasing number of artists and record labels have subsequently been requesting to have their music available for download via www.linnrecords.com. Click on the 'record labels' tab along the top of the home page and you'll find a growing catalogue of recordings from specialist audiophile labels now also available, from the likes of 441 Records of New York, Acousence



ABOVE: Cathy Jefferies, Caroline Dooley, Susan Duncan and Catherine Ward – the marketing team at Linn's Glasgow HQ

"We offer as future-proof a format as one can get"



ABOVE: The first of Linn's recordings made with 192kHz/24-bit sampling

of Germany, Aliud Records of The Netherlands and classic recordings on the Italian Fonè label to name just a few. Renowned London musician William Orbit is also a new addition to Linn's roster, the famous Madonna producer's most recent album *My Oracle Lives Uptown*, which he released on CD last summer, now available via Linn Records as a 24-bit Studio Master file and additionally as a deluxe 2-LP set on 180g vinyl.

Appreciative of the enduring popularity of vinyl with many music collectors, Linn began making selections of its catalogue available again on vinyl in 2005 and has its

recordings pressed at the famous Pallas plant in Germany.

'When we introduced our streaming players two-and-a-half years ago we thought they would be slow to

take off,' says Gilad Tiefenbrun, Linn's managing director and son of the company's founder, Ivor Tiefenbrun MBE who is today Linn's executive chairman. 'But we've experienced an unprecedented sales growth in our Digital Streaming products through specialist hi-fi dealers. Similarly, the sales ratio breakdown of recordings from our record label's website speaks for itself...'

Indeed, sales of physical discs have declined 17%, while downloads from Linn Records' website have grown by 24% over the same period with 70% of uncompressed downloads being hi-res Studio Master versions priced £18 per album in preference to the 16-bit/44.1kHz CD-quality files costing £10.

'We did have major arguments within our company concerning digital rights management,' confesses Gilad. 'While some of us were adamant that our downloads should be free of DRM – as once you've purchased a file it's perfectly natural to want to move it around between whatever playback devices

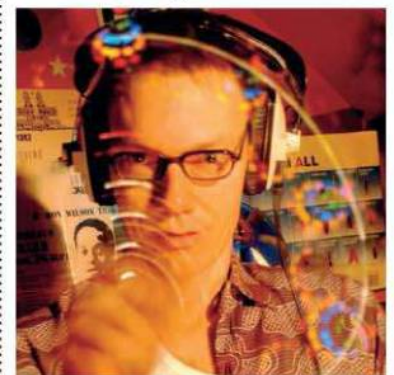


ABOVE: Gilad Tiefenbrun, son of founder Ivor, is Linn's managing director

one might choose to own – there remained a concern that we shouldn't be regarded by the music industry as some kind of anarchic, rabid freedom movement. Bold as our decision might have been at the time, it's now clear that we made the correct one...'

FUTURE PROOF

'What's all rather wonderful,' enthused Philip recently to an assembled audience at a meeting of the Audio Engineering Society in London, 'is that Linn Records' business has been transformed by selling high-resolution audio. And our parent company, Linn Products, is also being transformed by providing the hardware to get the best out of the hi-res audio files we now sell on-line. Hi-res downloads are giving music lovers a new format in which they can feel confident in investing, since it is as close to future proof as one can get. The sound quality of the file is that of the original studio recording while it's in a format that is independent of any specific technology to play it back. And having far better quality source material allows us all to get the best out of our hi-fi systems at home.'



ABOVE: Composer William Orbit – he wants better-than-CD sound quality

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[1]



[3]



[4]



[2]



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Leak Stereo 20

Few vintage amps are as popular and readily available secondhand as Leak's Stereo 20. But how does this classic late 1950s design measure up today? Time to find out...
 Review: **John Howes & Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

It was back in 1945 that Harold Leak unveiled the first of his 'Point One' series of amplifiers, so named because total harmonic distortion was 0.1% at rated output. Known as the Type 15, it produced 15W and went on to spawn numerous follow up models including the famous TL12.1, which was used by the BBC for monitoring purposes in its studios.

In 1957 the TL12 Plus amplifier was released using the newly developed Mullard EL84 output pentodes. Compared to KT66s they were physically much smaller, drew less heater current, needed less drive and were cheaper. When connected in an ultra linear configuration, a pair of EL84s would give the same output as the triode-connected KT66s used in the earlier TL12.1 circuit.

ENTER THE LEAK 20...

With the introduction of stereo LPs in 1958, Leak wasted no time in bringing stereo equipment to market. The first public demonstration of the Stereo 20 amp and matching preamp took place in April 1958 at the Audio fair in London. This must have been quite a coup for Leak because most rival manufacturers at the show were demonstrating mono equipment.

The price of the Stereo 20 was 29 Guineas with its partnering Point One



stereo preamp costing 20 Guineas. When you consider that a single TL12 Plus mono amplifier retailed at 18 Guineas, the stereo version was a bargain!

It would seem that manufacture was delayed because under the listing for the Stereo 20 in the 1958 *Hi-Fi Year Book* it states 'Available in Autumn 1958'.

With the advent of stereo reproduction, Harold Leak could see the huge potential of the worldwide export market. In America, Leak products were distributed by 'British Industries Incorporated' based in New York. A full two-page advert in the January 1959 edition of *Audio Engineering* promotes all Leak equipment with an unconditional five-year guarantee (excluding

ABOVE: Original brochure for the Stereo 20 where Leak claims to be the first to offer an amp with just 0.1% distortion [see Lab Report]

tubes). The prices advertised for the Stereo 20 were \$149 and \$109 for the stereo Point One preamp – the pound was worth more in those days!

Leak even supplied American airbases with a special multi-voltage version of the Stereo 20 which would operate between 115–240 volts, meaning that it could be used in either the USA or Europe.

GO FOR GOLD

The very first Stereo 20s manufactured came finished in Champagne Gold, which soon changed to a Gold Bronze. Later in 1964 the paintwork was changed to a dark metallic grey. The early Champagne Gold versions are few and far between; I have only seen three examples in over 40 years!

Circuit-wise, the Stereo 20 is similar to its earlier mono brother the TL12 Plus, having identical output stages. In the Stereo 20 the EF86 and ECC81 used in the earlier stages of the TL12 Plus were replaced by two ECC83 double triodes. The HT supply to both channels is fed



LEFT: Brochure for 'Point One' amplifiers, with the Stereo 50 shown right; styling is by Lonsdale-Hands, an English designer born in 1931



from a single GZ34 with simple resistor/capacitor smoothing. One safety feature incorporated is the use of a 100ohm/1W resistor that overheats and de-solders itself from the circuit board when overloaded. This is a simple, but effective, method of protecting the power supply when excessive current is drawn.

In 1961 the output transformer specifications were changed from having 49% to 25% ultra linear screen tapplings. Due to the age of these amplifiers today it is imperative to get them checked over and serviced by a competent engineer. The most common problem is faulty coupling capacitors, ageing of electrolytic capacitors in the power supply and

resistors that have changed value. One of the big bonuses of owning a Stereo 20 is the relatively affordable price of the EL84 output valves compared to KT66s, KT88s and 300Bs!

Over its lifetime, from 1958–1967, five different preamps were marketed to partner the Stereo 20. These were the Point One stereo, the Varislope stereo, the Varislope 2 stereo and the two export versions of the Point One and the Varislope. These export versions were very different from the UK models and look quite modern even by today's standards. A range of different colour knob inserts and selector switch escutcheons were supplied, so you could customise the look of these preamps.

BEST OF BRITISH

Like all the company's amps, the input sensitivity of the Stereo 20 is high at 125mV [see Lab Report]. When partnered with other manufacturers' preamps this can lead to high background noise at critical volume settings – though one easy solution is to have a service engineer fit resistor attenuator networks under the chassis near the phono sockets.

Believe me, once serviced these amplifiers punch above

LEFT: The popularity of Leak equipment soon saw third-party manufacturers offering cabinets in which to house it. Just one example was the Southdown from GKD

ABOVE: Three ECC83s in the line amp and a pair of EL84s in each output stage – our Stereo 20 also has new input phonos and 4mm outlets

their weight and make an ideal partner for reasonably efficient speakers. I have used one for many years to drive Quad ESL57s with great success. Not only does it work well across the musical spectrum but it boasts surprising bass extension.

I have always admired the Stereo 20.


Not only does it offer excellent sound quality and good value for money but it boasts great build quality, a superb layout and a neatness of wiring that never ceases to impress me. Add ease of

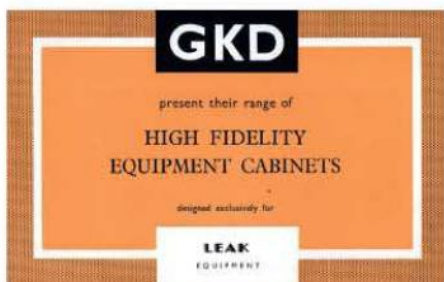
'A classic amp, the Stereo 20 is fairly easy to find secondhand'

servicing and this is British manufacturing at its best. It is an amp that has truly earned its classic status in vintage audio circles and, because of its popularity and high production numbers, the Stereo 20 is fairly easy to find secondhand.

KEN KESSLER LISTENS...

Sometimes you get lucky. Thirty years ago, when vintage kit was cheap and I'd buy anything that glowed in the dark, a Leak Stereo 20 and Point One preamp came my way. Then as now, my cheating heart belonged to Radford and Dynaco, but I was fascinated by Leaks, though not because of performance or reputation. I was spellbound by their almost funky, pity-generating hideousness. Plum-coloured faceplates: gimme a break.

A fellow ex-pat was dumping a 110V 'export' package at such a low price that 



LAB REPORT

LEAK STEREO 20 (Vintage)

Rather than tempt fate and test an original Stereo 20 with its paper-in-oil capacitors, 10% carbon resistors and potentially well-used valves, this report refers to John Howes' refurbished model. This chassis is complete with new polypropylene coupling caps and reservoir electrolytics, 5% resistors and new Mullard EL84 pentodes. Ticked-up to the max, the Stereo 20 readily exceeds its 10W+10W specification by delivering a full 2x14W/8ohm and 2x12W/4ohm from the 8ohm tap (<1% THD). There's little or no dynamic headroom, but it was possible to squeeze out 9W/2ohm and 5W/1ohm [see Graph 1, below].

In practice, it's as beefy as the Williamson [HFN Jan '10] but with a higher output impedance of 0.45-0.7ohm that renders the system response slightly more dependent on the speaker load trend. Into a non-reactive 8ohm load, the response stretches out to -0.55dB/20kHz and -5.4dB/100kHz and (up to 2W/8ohm) reaches down to -0.3dB at a subsonic 5Hz.

It's good to see that specmanship was alive and well back in 1945, but modern test equipment reveals Leak's claim for 0.1% THD to be true only at certain frequencies [see Graph 2, below] and power outputs. From 20Hz to 20kHz 2nd/3rd harmonic distortion holds true to between 0.05-0.75% (5W/8ohm), increasing gently with power output from 0.017% (0.5W) to 0.6% (13W) at 1kHz/8ohm. Below 40Hz, transformer core saturation causes THD to climb swiftly. Readers are invited to view a comprehensive QC Suite test report for this refurbished Leak Stereo 20 by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: The 4, 8 and 16ohm speaker taps are configured via a link at the top of each transformer, leaving a single set of binding posts at the rear (uprated in our sample)

I told him I'd take a look at it, expecting the usual grotesquery. His Point One bore a gorgeous solid brass fascia, with the finest pots I've ever swivelled, and the '20 wore the rare baseplate. I figured I'd have 'em even if only as cool-looking paperweights. They sat for years before I fired them up, after they were overhauled by legendary valve amp restorer Mike Poynter, who used to run a repair and service company called Station Sounds.

RIGHT IN EVERY WAY

Sometimes, too, you have to eat your words. Instead of the dull Britamp I was expecting, Leak's reputation having suffered since its demise, I heard the sort of performance that seduces you instantly, an effect like the first time you laid eyes on Halle Berry or tasted a glass of Solaia. Every one of

you knows what I mean, each of you having experienced a *gut* response to a component, an intuitive reaction that needed no verbiage, no justification, no explanation. It just sounded *right* in every way.

Although the preamp, like most vintage control units, shows its age with noise, the amplifier was and is quiet, clean, open and transparent. It is fast enough to keep up with lightning-quick banjo-picking behind Alison Krauss, smooth enough to de-burr even the screeching-est of fiddling. What's more, despite appearing during stereo's earliest days, it 'gets' 3D.

For my money, the Leak Stereo 20 is one of the 10 *best* amplifiers of the 1950s, with only its power rating allowing it to be bettered by some of its contemporaries, and its soft bass sounding alien to modern ears. Other than those two clues, no-one would ever guess in a blind test that it pre-dates this century. ☺

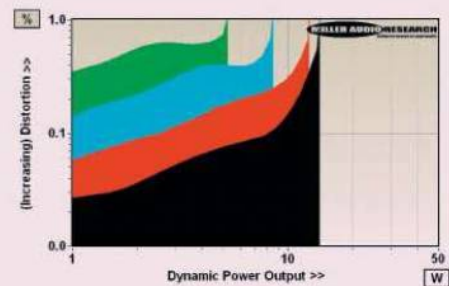
HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Few doubt Leak's rightful place in the quintet (or even the triumvirate) of great British amp manufacturers from the 'golden age' of the valve era. A session with the Leak Stereo 20 cannot fail to impress upon you that it is, perhaps unjustly, overshadowed by the less-commanding Quad II. It sings, it soars and it sounds – unlike the 'II' – decidedly 'modern'. It may have been born in 1958, but hot damn, it's still rocking in 2010.

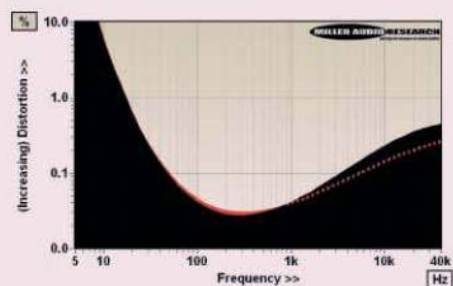
Sound Quality: 87%



ABOVE: American advert promoting Leak kit, with a five-year guarantee



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads



ABOVE: Distortion vs. extended frequency from 5Hz to 40kHz (3W/8ohm; black = left channel, red = right channel). Transformer core saturation causes distortion to rise steeply below 40Hz

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

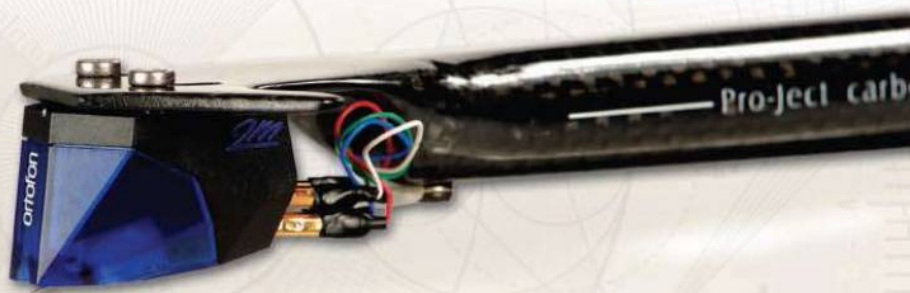
Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	14W / 12W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	14W / 12W / 8.6W / 5.3W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.45–0.68ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	–0.1dB to –5.4dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/10W)	35mV / 113mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/10W)	82.3dB / 100.8dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, 5W)	0.052–0.75%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	103W/108W
Dimensions (WHD)	270x175x333mm

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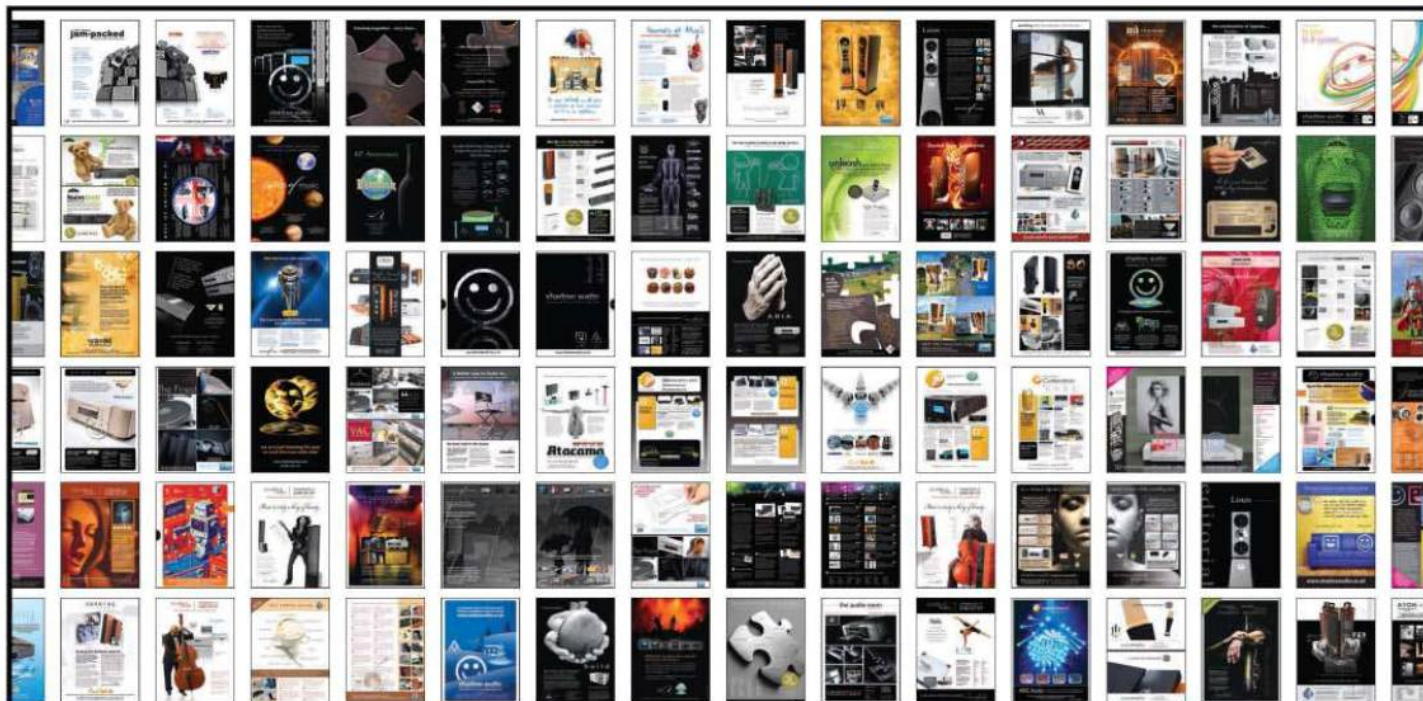


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iChoose quality?

Are widely accepted music formats undermining the quality of the music we listen to on a daily basis?

The Music Chain

Much is written about music and the musicians who entertain us, and we rightly exalt great musicians. But there is an interlinked chain of participants, two of which are I believe are crucial to our music scene in today's world. For centuries the music chain was a very short one – composers or songwriters, musicians and listeners, and the judgement on quality was immediate. Recording technologies have changed all this exponentially.

Today, we listen to most of our music from a recording and this gives recording engineers the opportunity to avoid poor acoustics, duff notes and off days. This, of course, means the chain has grown to include the recording engineers, the music distribution system (retailers or downloads), hi-fi manufacturers, hi-fi sellers and the hi-fi purchasers, the latter being the listeners. I should start by saying that hi-fi has become an adulterated term that no longer has its original meaning because it's applied to much equipment that certainly should not be termed high-fidelity.

It's said that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. However, I believe there are two particularly strong links that, if removed from the chain, would seriously damage the quality of recorded music. These are the audiophile, or hi-fi connoisseur, and the specialist hi-fi retailer, the latter in nearly all cases also being the former because it's their interest that has driven them into their particular business. These are the people who most appreciate how exciting and involving music can be and how it can deliver an emotional experience.

Hi-Fi Connoisseurs

So why is the hi-fi connoisseur so important to the music industry? By their nature, audiophiles are generally avid music lovers who enhance their enjoyment through listening to music at its very best quality level, which means playing great recordings through hi-end hi-fi to achieve the most outstanding results. Without the audiophile, the main driver for quality would probably be removed from the chain. Let's be honest, over recent years the majority of music listeners now settle for MP3 convenience and, therefore, mediocre sound quality. If the pendulum ever swings so far that all but a few listen to highly compressed formats such as MP3, music producers will not waste their resources on producing high quality recordings because it would be commercially unnecessary, even if their recording engineers wanted to achieve the best they could. After all, an MP3 or AAC file, the iTunes default format, downloaded at 128 kbps (the most popular download speed), is about one-eleventh the size of a full resolution CD track, 1411 kbps, so the quality is inevitably far inferior. Information is irretrievably lost and the full dynamic range is lacking. Using an iPod while jogging does not really raise a quality issue but playing low-resolution tracks through an iPod docking station that feeds into a decent hi-fi system, is a disaster area. It's rubbish quality made louder. Fortunately, there is still significant demand from audiophiles committed to sound quality to sustain the production of high quality recordings, but it would be a tragedy if there weren't. For example, most classical recordings downloaded as an MP3 or AAC file are a complete waste of time because there is so much information missing that they are reduced to just the essence of a tune.

Specialist Hi-Fi Retailers

Just as essential a link in the chain as the hi-fi connoisseur is the specialist hi-fi retailer and the two are rightly dependent on each other. Without the specialist retailer the hi-end hi-fi manufacturer would have to rely on the internet and hi-fi magazine reviewers to try and assess the relative merits of different brands for their potential customers – a notoriously unreliable decision making process. Specialist hi-fi retailers are constantly being offered new products for assessment and potential stocking and, as it is also their hobby as well as their livelihood, they are greatly interested in achieving the best performance and seeking out the most outstanding combinations. More than that though is their relationship with audiophiles for, if they are to stay in business, they must satisfy the most discerning customers in the industry. The reality is that audiophiles and specialist hi-fi retailers are essential to each other.



LISTED BELOW IS OUR SELECTION OF THE BEST HI-FI DEALERS IN THE UK.

They have been selected because they are known to do an excellent job in guiding customers towards hi-fi that will give years of musical enjoyment and total satisfaction.

Future of Recorded Music

What are the future prospects of maintaining high quality music recordings? We must hope that audiophiles, or hi-fi connoisseurs, or perhaps most accurately described, music lovers, will continue to drive the demand for quality. But another important reason for hope within the mass-market is that there is no longer any over-riding reason for MP3 and AAC to have such a following. These formats were designed to overcome very slow download speeds pre-broadband and small, expensive memory capacity but the trade-off has been quantity at the expense of quality. Download speeds and memory capacity are not significant factors for most people now and will be increasingly irrelevant with time. Full resolution, CD quality, downloads are already available and should become the norm as long as the general public can be made aware of the tremendous quality benefit. This has happened with HD TV so we know this awareness can grow rapidly. In the meantime, we must highly value hi-fi connoisseurs and specialist hi-fi retailers, of which the ones listed on this page represent the UK's finest. Specialist dealers know how to choose the products that combine as a superb system and how to get the best out of it by expert installation in the home. If there's a price premium over an internet purchase, it's probably a small one, but it's unquestionably worth the difference.

STAR QUALITIES

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VERDICT



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RAYLEIGH HI-FI
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TANNOY DUAL CONCENTRIC • TANNOY • UK

Dual Concentric



While the company was set-up in 1926, it was the introduction of its Dual Concentric loudspeaker some 20 years later that was to put the Tannoy name on the hi-fi map. **Ken Kessler** traces the development of the driver, and offers some buying tips too

While most radical or distinctive speaker topologies can be cul-de-sacs – how many manufacturers were inspired to produce plasma drivers? Heils? Walshes? – Tannoy's Dual Concentric made so much sense that it's a wonder it doesn't dominate speaker design. Take all of the benefits of cone-type drivers, of which there are many, eliminate the positioning problems of multiple drivers on a baffle while emulating a near-perfect point source, factor in intrinsic staggered signal arrival times that otherwise resulted in so many freaky, tilted enclosures, and you have a near-miracle of loudspeaker architecture.

Just look at the undeniable benefits inherent in a Dual Concentric. Whether using a small coaxial speaker, as tiny as the Tannoy Mini Autograph's 4in driver, or a 15in model, you need not provide baffle space for a mid/treble unit. (Tri-axials, of course, take this a stage further, but that's another saga.) Most two-ways now place one driver directly above the other; a few decades ago, some were off-set, necessitating the use of mirror-image baffles. Dual Concentrics



ABOVE: A 15in Dual Concentric Red, housed in one of the company's mighty Westminster cabinets

LEFT: Tannoy founder Guy R Fountain, who named the company by abbreviating 'tantalum alloy', which he had used in a solid-state rectifier he had invented

avoided that entirely. And with the right crossover – whether built into the co-axial driver or external to the driver but placed within a cabinet – one could even fashion a truly satisfying speaker with a square baffle, in a box not much larger than the driver itself.

Another benefit involved positioning in the room, as opposed to the locating of the drivers within a cabinet. Experience has shown me that Dual Concentrics seem more room-friendly than conventional two-ways (let alone three-ways, like my much missed Radford Tri-Stars...). No, it was all good when Tannoy released its first Dual Concentrics following World War II.

By 1947, not only was Tannoy one of the most widely-known audio manufacturers in the world, it was old enough at the age of 21 to be in receivership. The Dual Concentric drive unit, in effect, saved the company. It would become a mainstay of studios, where it still owns a goodly chunk of the business, and it is credited by some as the most admired speaker in Japan, home of audiophiles so fastidious that they redefine the term 'anally retentive'.

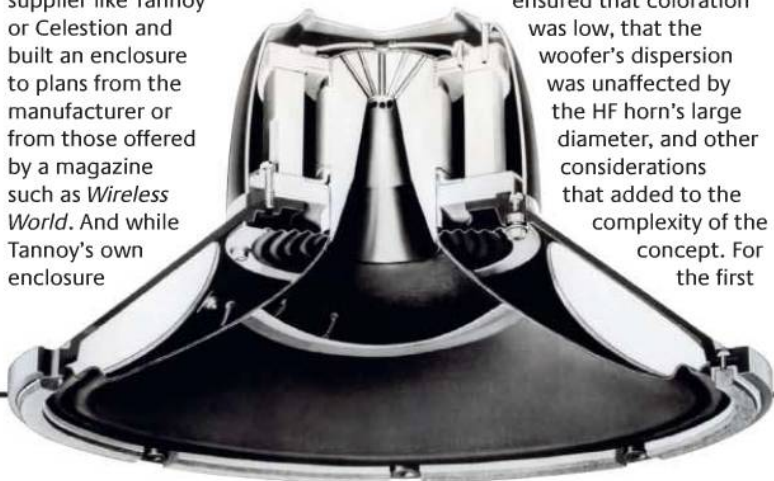
COMPANY FORMED

Founded by Guy R Fountain in 1926, Tannoy was named after an alloy of tantalum and lead used



in a solid-state rectifier he had invented. The company produced professional products, including a speaker system for a travelling circus, and the designs were very much 'of their time': as with Klipsch, Voight and others, Tannoy was bound by the low power available from the amplifiers of the day, so the sensitivity of horns made them the *de facto* choice for applications such as cinemas and other spaces requiring a public address system. Although Tannoy developed an estimable reputation for its horn-loaded enclosures, it was never to the extent of the Klipsch's, *et al*, because horn-loading was not its sole *modus operandi*.

With that in mind, it should be stated here that this feature is not about the *enclosures* Tannoy offered: it is strictly about the Dual Concentric drivers themselves. To appreciate this seeming inconsistency – no current manufacturers expect people to make their own speaker cabinets – back in the late 1940s, most enthusiasts bought drivers from a supplier like Tannoy or Celestion and built an enclosure to plans from the manufacturer or from those offered by a magazine such as *Wireless World*. And while Tannoy's own enclosure



designs ranged from what we would call small or mid-sized models, up to behemoths like GRF Corner Horns and Westminster, the milestone element is the driver itself.

RONNIE H RACKHAM

Credit for this genius move, of fitting a mid/tweeter coaxially within the woofer, goes to Tannoy's then-Chief Engineer, Ronnie H Rackham. He had long experience with high-sensitivity drivers for high-quality PA usage, and was no doubt inspired in part by Western Electric's reverse throat speaker. Rackham

positioned a high frequency compression horn drive unit concentrically within a conventional, 15in direct radiating bass driver. Thanks to his vast experience with wideband horn systems, he was able to combine the two in such a way that the flare of the woofer followed the flare rate of the tweeter, preventing a discontinuity between two separate transducers.

It wasn't simply a case of finding a way to suspend a tweeter within a woofer. Rackham's skills ensured that coloration was low, that the woofer's dispersion was unaffected by the HF horn's large diameter, and other considerations that added to the complexity of the concept. For the first

HOW THE DUAL CONCENTRIC WORKS

Special treatment of horn-loaded enclosures corrects coloration and gives smoother response.

Careful phase assembly may be required for good results. Plug and socket connection for crossover facilitates replacement, so the radio, double screening from stray magnetic fields. Plug, tube to terminal contacts.

Enclosure mounted front plate: incorporated fabric grille over high and low frequency drivers.

Which means your enclosure should also have similar sized tweeter housing and woofer if necessary.

Additional fabric covering device to show correct low-frequency alignment.

Directional radiation regions: material covers maximum low density.

Scale to correct horn drive unit enclosure gap alignment.

Maximum noise test conditions for integrated high-frequency response.

Construction 1/2" steel, the development of which is completed by the correct 1/2" steel.

Phase compensating variable phase conditions: smooth sound, not affected by high-frequency response.

Correct wiring, effects: correct light color high-frequency diagram.

15 INCH DUAL CONCENTRIC

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION			
A.F. VOICE COIL ASSEMBLY	2"	REPRODUCTION PRODUCTS	See also 25"
L.F. VOICE COIL ASSEMBLY	2"	WAVELENGTHS	18 c.m.
DIAPHRAGM TO CONTOUR NETWORK	14 mm	CONTOUR FREQUENCIES	1,000 c.p.s.
FLARE RADIATION L.F. CAP	15,000 p.p.m.	INTERNAL DIAMETER OF FRAME	15 1/2"
FLARE RADIATION H.F. CAP	18,000 p.p.m.	INTERNAL DIAMETER	16"
POWER HANDLING CAPACITY	10 watts	VOICE WINDING P.C.D.	1 1/2"
PHASE COMPENSATION FOR 40° INC. ANGLES	-400 to 10,000 c.p.s.	WAVELENGTH CONTOUR NETWORK IN 1/2" SPACED UNIT	

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models, the crossover point was 1kHz; according to Tannoy, this was almost a complete octave above the natural horn frequency's lower cut off point, leading to previously unheard of low levels of coloration.

Rackham's work evolved into what Tannoy calls the 'waveguide high frequency unit', which provides a 'smooth acoustic path through the centre of the low frequency unit without problems due to masking or diffraction.' What was crucial to the success of the Dual Concentric is the low frequency unit operating without any obstruction, and this is achieved by the cone piston apex being sufficiently distant from the high frequency unit. Everything from the phase plug to dust caps affects the sound of the various models, leading to a design

ABOVE: A page from an early brochure details the driver's selling points

ABOVE LEFT: Tannoy's roots were in professional systems, as this PA-equipped vehicle shows

BELOW LEFT: Cross section of a dual concentric

BELOW: Tannoy Mini Autograph with its 4in driver



AUDIO MILESTONES

more complex and costly to build that one might have imagined.

Rackham's earliest models used a cone woofer sourced from Celestion, a 12in driver with 2in voice coil. In keeping with the needs and norms of the era, it had a voice coil impedance of 15ohm; as with LS3/5As, this is the impedance the most hardcore of collectors favour. Power handling was 20W RMS, high for 1947, with sensitivity of 92dB/1W. Another crucial element of Rackham's design was the careful determination of the magnetic gap fluxes provided by the cast iron alloy magnet, set at 12,000 gauss for the low frequency voice coil and 18,000 gauss for the HF voice coil.

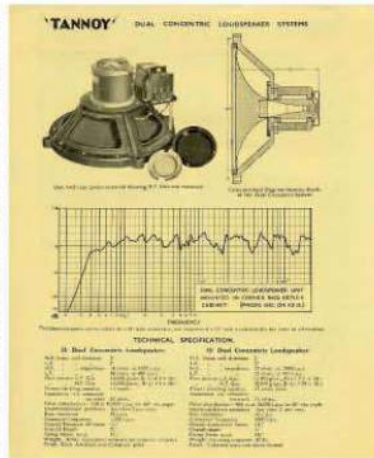
DECCA SAVES THE DAY

According to Julian Alderton's marvellous history, *The Tannoy Story* [Edward Gaskell Publishers, 2003], the troubled firm was saved from financial ruin when Decca placed a huge order of 1000 Dual Concentrics, to fit into Decola consoles.

Tannoy had placed early examples of the speaker with AKG and the BBC; in 1951, the future of the speaker as a globally-respected professional recording monitor was secured when Abbey Road Studios placed orders for them.

Power handling increased to 25W for 1953-4, while the free air resonance was lowered to 40Hz;

'Tannoy placed early examples of the speaker with the BBC'



ABOVE: Brochure shows specifications for both 12in and 15in Monitor Black

this endowed the 'Black' with better bass performance. And then the evolutionary changes that would keep collectors busy for the next 50-plus years commenced.

One major change was the replacement of the Black's cast chassis with a gravity cast model more

open at the back to minimise rear reflections. Such was the importance of the development that Tannoy applied a new colour, and in autumn 1953, the Monitor Silver was born. For the birth of the Silver, a complex new horn cabinet was devised, the now legendary Autograph 1.

Also important in the evolution of the Dual Concentric from

WHAT TO BUY

The Tannoy Dual Concentrics epitomise audiophile passion at its peak. The fanaticism is rivalled, in my experience, only by the obsessive behaviour exhibited by collectors of Marvel comics, LPs, Rolex watches and 100-year-old-plus wines. As a result, there is a pecking order in the desirability and market value of the various 'colours', determined in equal measure by rarity, snob value and actual performance, according to Tannoy specialists such as Nick Besley at the Emporium, and old friend and vintage hi-fi dealer, John Bell.

Both John and Nick agreed that the Tannoy Black fetches the most money, confirming a trade whisper of last year, when an individual in the UK sold a *single* mint Black, with no enclosure, to a Korean collector for north of £4000.

When pushed, however, Nick told me his personal favourite is the early, 15in Silver, with the simplest crossover and no dustcover. 15in Reds are much loved, too, while the more open-minded of Western collectors – and the cult for Tannoy is growing in the USA – admire Golds, but they need more power. Me? I'm a sucker for the 10in Red.

What's not an issue is cabinetry, for the sizes and styles vary too much to allow for definitive choices: you buy what fits. The massive professional Lockwood is highly coveted if you have room for it, while GRFs, GRF Autographs and Lancasters have their devoted fans. I even know a collector who swears by the rare Canterbury.

What all have in common, when on song, are superb imagery, fabulous dynamics and bass determined entirely by the size of the enclosure. Beyond that, they behave as near-perfect point sources. They look so retro cool as to seem like time machines. And for me, I keep telling myself that they were the speakers used by George Martin when he mastered the Beatles' recordings from 1963-1970. But one thing Tannoyists (and I've been avoiding describing them as 'tannoying') all seem to agree on is that 'bigger is better'.

And that's the reason why, for over five decades, the photos you've seen of Japanese collectors invariably include a majority taken in tiny homes, where Westminster have been shoehorned into rooms no larger than 3x4m.



ABOVE: A 10in dual concentric driver housed in a Tannoy Kensington cabinet; at the heart of the doped paper pulp bass driver sits a 2in round-wire wound voice coil



Silence Reigns

Enter the Sasha

In 1984 the legend was born. Dave Wilson, through his mastering of recording, knew he needed a portable and supremely accurate line monitor speaker. Enter the WATT, which became an immediate hit with audiophiles the world over and was soon joined by a dedicated woofer, the Puppy. Over 25 years we witnessed no less than seven generations of technological advances resulting in more than 15,000 sales!

In 2009 we herald the ascension, the proud Sasha. Returning to his first love, recording, David found inspiration after a visit to Vienna Concert Halls. He was immediately drawn to the rich alacrity of the orchestra, which was directly related to the reflection given by the concert halls' ambient signatures.

Capturing the earliest reflections had to be the key. Wilson Audio's task was set. Development of a new generation driver, capable of the speed and detail first dreamed of in Vienna, became a reality. The advances with the new drivers, quite rightly utilized in the Alexandria 2, passed in turn through to the Maxx 3 and now the Sasha. In addition, the Sasha benefits from increased volume in both the upper and lower modules with new cabinet and baffle materials. And the crossover is now housed separately in the lower module.

Although this new speaker retains a clear genealogy with its predecessors, in truth its ascension confirms its place beside the majestic Maxx 3 and Alexandria 2.

Let's enjoy the silence

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AUDIO MILESTONES



LEFT: Tannoy Stirling model from the 1990s sporting a 10in Tannoy Dual Concentric driver

RIGHT: Japanese advert and rear view of Monitor Gold, introduced in 1967. With transistor amps now widely available, sensitivity fell to 92dB, and impedance reduced to 8ohm



Black to Silver was a change to the Black's crossover network. The 15in Monitor Black's crossover was integral with the speaker, with a matching line transformer built into a square aluminium box mounted on the side of the chassis. Tannoy potted the components in wax to prevent resonance and damage from moisture. For the Silver, the crossover was removed from the speaker chassis to eliminate interference from the magnets.

As with bearing differences in Garrard 301s, crossovers are the source of much debate in Tannoy collecting circles. As expected, however, the dominant collectors prefer the older solution.

Cabinet choices started to increase as well, the 15in Silver appearing in the Corner GRF in 1955, while the smaller 12in Monitor Silver arrived in 1957 in a smaller enclosure that foreshadowed the now-coveted Little Red Monitor of 1979. The Silvers were the dominant models until the late 1950s, with myriad small changes making them a challenge for collectors. But that's part of the fun of anachrophilia.

NEW MODELS

As the success of the speaker increased, unit sales meant that newer incarnations would be more plentiful for collectors down the road. The 12in and 15in Monitor Reds from 1958 were joined by the room-friendly 10in version in 1961.

BELOW LEFT: Rear view of 15in Monitor Red and beneath it the 15in Monitor Silver. A major improvement on the Black, the Silver was first introduced in 1953



Power handling was raised, with the 15in able to cope with a useful 50W, while all three enjoyed high sensitivity of 94dB.

Still rated at 15ohm, the 12in and 15in Reds are much loved classics, warm-sounding if a bit unrefined in the midband compared to, say, Quad ESLs. Certainly, the aficionados consider these to be direct descendents of the Black.

Probably the most common of the classic Dual Concentrics – and in defining the era that arouses the most passion, we mean strictly up to 1974, before the HPD series represented a massive overhaul of the Dual Concentric – was the Gold, launched in 1967.

Power handling increased to 60W for the 15in, sensitivity fell to 92dB, and impedance changed to 8ohm – very much a product of the early post-transistor years. As you can see, with every iteration of its Dual Concentric driver, Tannoy responded to the status quo of the amplification of the era. ☺



OTHER DUAL CONCENTRIC TYPES

Naturally, Tannoy is regarded by many as the *only* source for co-axial drive units, and it is to Tannoy's credit that the company both perfected and popularized the concept, beyond the levels of any of its rivals. But that doesn't mean other companies haven't tried their hands at co-axials as well, especially for in-car or custom installation applications, where space is a major issue. Among the challengers are JBL, Altec, KEF, Pioneer, Thiel and Cabasse, and some of these make very fine speakers, indeed.

The same must be said, too, about Tannoy's post-1974 output: I'd love a decent example of the Little Red Monitor. But for the diehard Dual Concentric fan, it has to be an original Black, Silver, Red or Gold. And in that order.

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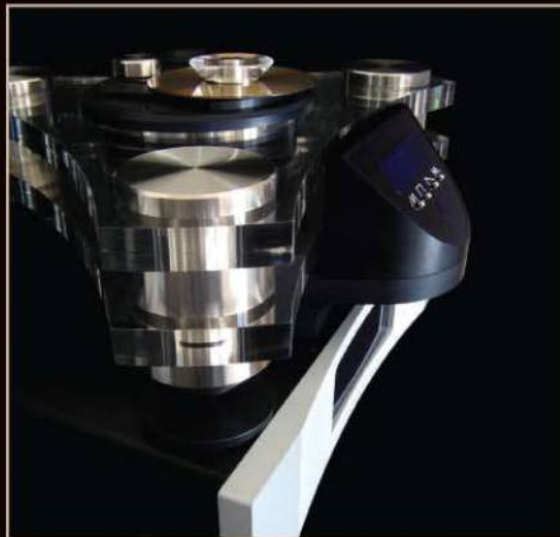
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Mythical.....

Metronome Technologie Kalista Integrated

Apart from being a masterpiece of audio sculpture it is singularly the most persuasive, most spiritually rewarding CD player we have ever heard. It was Alan Sircom who wrote last year "Turning off the music felt like you were insulting the performer, a bit like walking out of a concert" this is so true.

The Kalista literally draws out & sustains every single nuance of the music with a breathtaking delicacy & ease. It is so powerful yet so gentle. This 24 bit/192KHz player produces such vitality in dynamics, colour & spatial content that it leaves one feeling finally that whilst analogue may never leave our affections listening to this player does totally convince us that the future is with digital after all.

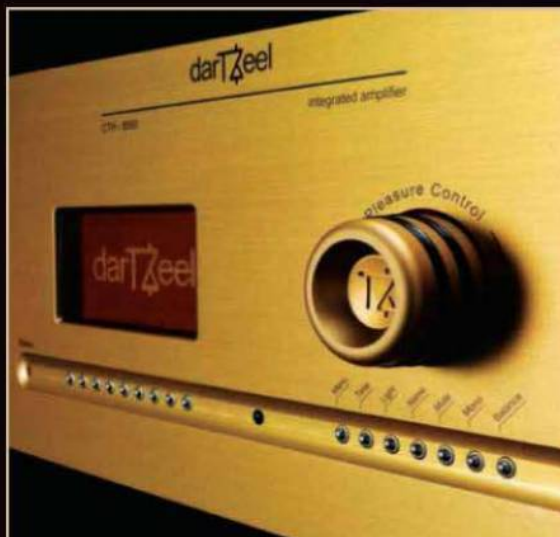


dartZeel CTH-8550

Herve Deletraz with the assistance of his partner Serge Roch have taken a simple computer added circuit design and slowly transformed it into the mythical Swiss brand adopted by discerning audiophiles around the world.

The introduction of the new CTH-8550 is quite frankly a sonic revelation. There is no amplifier on this planet that can deliver more honestly the complete performance. The sound is full bodied, synchronized and emotionally driven to the edge, whilst never allowing the music to drift out of control.

The CTH-8550 extends the design principles applied to the earlier NHB-108 power amplifier and partner pre the NHB-18NS. Amazingly, the front to back developments have literally turned things inside out..... a truly astonishing amplifier with no peers in sight!



Kj west one. We are fortunate to be given the opportunity to audition many new innovative high end products. The exceptional performance capabilities of the items we have featured above reminds us we must keep raising our own standards too. KJ are pleased to be working very closely with Pinewood Music now and in the future offering a superb consultancy partnership which is aimed @ benefiting our fellow music lovers both in our listening rooms as well as their homes.

Magical.....

Continuum Audio Labs. Criterion with Cobra

What truly lies within our vinyl record collections? With the plethora of exotic turntables and tonearms available today, surely there is nothing left to be unearthed from those tiny grooves? That's what we all thought until Continuum Audio Labs threw away the rule book, defied conventional wisdom and took the industry by storm with their extraordinary designs.

Take the Cobra tonearm. there is nothing like it. Its sensuous reptilian curves are a jolt to the eyes after decades of tubular arms. Coupled to the more affordable Criterion turntable one is in awe of every curve, every line. Every piece of material in this combination is the result of painstaking research into the elimination of all micro-resonances.

At last our choice of cartridge is able to deliver the deeply hidden delights from those tressured pressings.....

The outcome, the ultimate vinyl experience.



Magico V2

Curiously there appears no visual evidence of the magic that apparently underpins this latest revered brand! Just pure honesty. Although impeccably built and finished, there seems nothing remarkable about the prosaic cabinet, it certainly doesn't scream 'lifestyle'?

But this is a classic example of appearance being deceptive, for the musical qualities of this speaker are in a class of their own. This is not hi-fi as we know it-but it is music as it should be. And it comes as a shock.

Designer Alon Wolf has no time for trickery, no wish to indulge in black art, he applies nothing but the most rigorous scientific principles in the design of his loudspeakers. If your goal is to enjoy music with an honesty that has never been heard before, you need look no further....magical!



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Magnum Dynalab 106T. Superb tuner in pristine condition. 2 years old. Very light use.	£2500	£3800
Gotham Type 39 monos. 50 watts, class 'A', PPP 300 B. Made by Canary Audio for Western Electric. Like CA 309 / 339 but better o/p transformers and Kondo wire.		
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Dynaudio Contour S 3.4. Maple. 10 months old. As new.	£2000	£4500
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ono (£5700) Tel: Mike 01278 793886 email: growler.harris@btinternet.com (Somerset), prefer collection [CD]

ICON audio valve headphone amp £300 Tel: Vernon 07853 233005 [CD]

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AVI S2000MC Reference CD Player, late version, virtually unmarked, low use, natural 'vinyl' sound, with two non-Avi remote controls, £300 tracked/insured, PayPal 4%, enquiries/more information/photos email: klugheit.123@gmail.com [CD]

5. DACS

AUDIO Synthesis DAX, original model, 32/44/48kHz class-leading in its day, £300 email: djbillinge@gmail.com Tel: 023 9229 3646 [CD]

RUSS Andrews DAC-1USB, excellent condition, perfect working order, 1 co-axial, 1USB, 2 optical inputs, 192khz upsampling £375 inc p&p Tel: 0151 6082008 davidstuartbiggs@yahoo.co.uk [CD]

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Hi-Fi News magazine incorporates: Stereo, Tape & Tape Recorders,
 Audio News, Record News, Audio Record Review, The Gramophone Record,
 Which CD? and Music Business. Hi-Fi News is a
 member of the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC)
 and of EISA (www.eisa-awards.org)



Hi-Fi News is published on the first Friday of the
 month preceding the cover date by IPC Inspire, part of the IPC Media Group.
 It costs £4.00 per issue (€5.95 for 12 months) in the UK; €107.47 in
 Europe; \$144.63 in North America; £90.41 for the rest of the world. Rates
 are for annual delivery. See subscriptions order form on page 70 or call
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 Distributed by Marketforce (UK) Ltd, The Blue Fin Building, 110 Southbank
 Street, London SE1 1SU. Tel: 020 7633 3333. Typeset by CTE, London E17.
 Printed in England by Southprint, Unit 17-19, Upon Ind. Estate, Poole,
 Dorset BH16 5SN. ISSN 1472 2569.

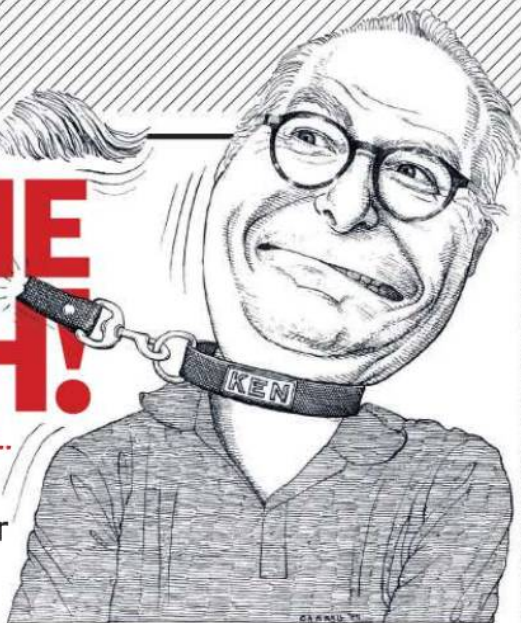
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OFF THE LEASH!

KEN KESSLER TELLS IT LIKE IT IS...

One for the money, two for the show. **Ken Kessler** lets rip at one 'audio' company's core values



I'm actually getting rid of my stereo.' With those seven words, one man did more to damage the audio industry, lowering the standards of sound reproduction and the expectations of consumers, than any individual I can name. They were uttered by one who defined himself as a former audiophile.

While touting his new 'boom box', this powerful, influential corporate giant – appropriately adding new meaning to the term 'Baby Boomer' – swept away all that we hold dear about the art and science of reproducing sound in the home, as closely as possibly to the original musical event.

TOTAL DEVOTION

Most of us know when a CEO is merely being a huckster. Sir Alan Sugar, for example, in the days when Amstrad made noisemakers, delighted in using terms like 'mug's eyeful' to describe tower systems that cost not much more than a meal in London. Conversely, others let their wilder antics hide the genuine quality of their products: only regular fliers know that Virgin Airlines is as professional and dependable as a commercial airline can be, despite Sir Richard Branson acting more like an ageing rock star than an airline boss.

But back to hi-fi's malaise. In addition to passing off a small, plasticky table-top, single-box unit as a substitute for what

we call 'high-end systems', he did this to an audience of slavish devotees – mainly young-ish, professional, influential and with high disposable income, precisely the people who can not only afford decent gear, but who would appreciate it. His hyperbole was treated not as hucksterism by his adoring fans, but as words delivered from on high. They shot around the globe in an instant, thanks to the on-line postings.

By doing so, by touting his little toy as a rival to serious hi-fi, this person was, in fact, merely supporting one of his earlier products – no more, no less. Look at what preceded the boom box and you realise that he was also responsible for doing more to spread the acceptance of audio compression than any other maker of sound-reproducing equipment.

'To some of us, he's merely the best salesman since Harold Hill'

And no sane individual can prefer compression to, well, real music.

Late last year, *Fortune* magazine named this huckster their 'CEO of the decade', citing over many pages his achievements in founding, leaving, returning to and saving a high tech company. The articles, despite attempting to humanise him, highlighted his image as a messianic force.

To some of us, he's merely the best salesman since Harold Hill.

His name is Steve Jobs. His company is Apple. The core software behind the brand was inspired by Hewlett-Packard, Xerox and

others, and there are lawsuits to prove it – though his acolytes seem to go into finger-in-the-ear-nananana-I'm-not-listening mode if you point this out to them. And to be scrupulously fair, his company did not invent compression, but merely perfected its usage in the hugely successful iPod. So, in effect, Apple did to GUIs and compression what Catholicism did for guilt: the Jews may have invented it, but the Vatican perfected and commercialised it.

Rather, let's look at Jobs' legacy not from *Fortune's* standpoint, but from audio's. As the global best-seller, the iPod takes the lion's share of credit for the (audio) world we now inhabit. Sales prove this. Leaving aside the music usage of mobile phones, the iPod's 'rivals', be it Sony's digital Walkman, Sandisk players or any of the rest of the also-rans are to the iPod what the rest of the EU is to the US and UK troops in Afghanistan.

Because the iPod became the greatest carrier of compression (carrier as in disease), it converted many hundreds of millions of listeners to headphone usage instead of loudspeakers, so we are now at a point where something else has been damaged irreversibly beyond sound quality itself. And while you cannot blame Smith & Wesson for a gun murder rather than the murderer himself, headphones are the weapon. In December, the EU announced that it is so fearful of the harm being done to the hearing of today's youth that it wishes to cap the maximum output of MP3 players to 85dB. It predicts an epidemic of deafness for this generation, before they become 50-year-olds – another fruit of Jobs' labours.

ONE CONSOLATION...

If there's any consolation in all of this, an Apple blogsite listed the 'iPod Hi Fi', the very device Jobs was hawking when he implied that big hi-fi systems were obsolete, as No 1 in a list of 'Steve Jobs' 5 Biggest Mistakes'. To add further insult to those who adore music, one might ponder how sad it is that he dubbed his creation Apple, after the company formed by the Beatles. And spent much time in court, defending his commandeering of the name.

It's not ironic. It's just sad: he couldn't even come up with an original name. ☹

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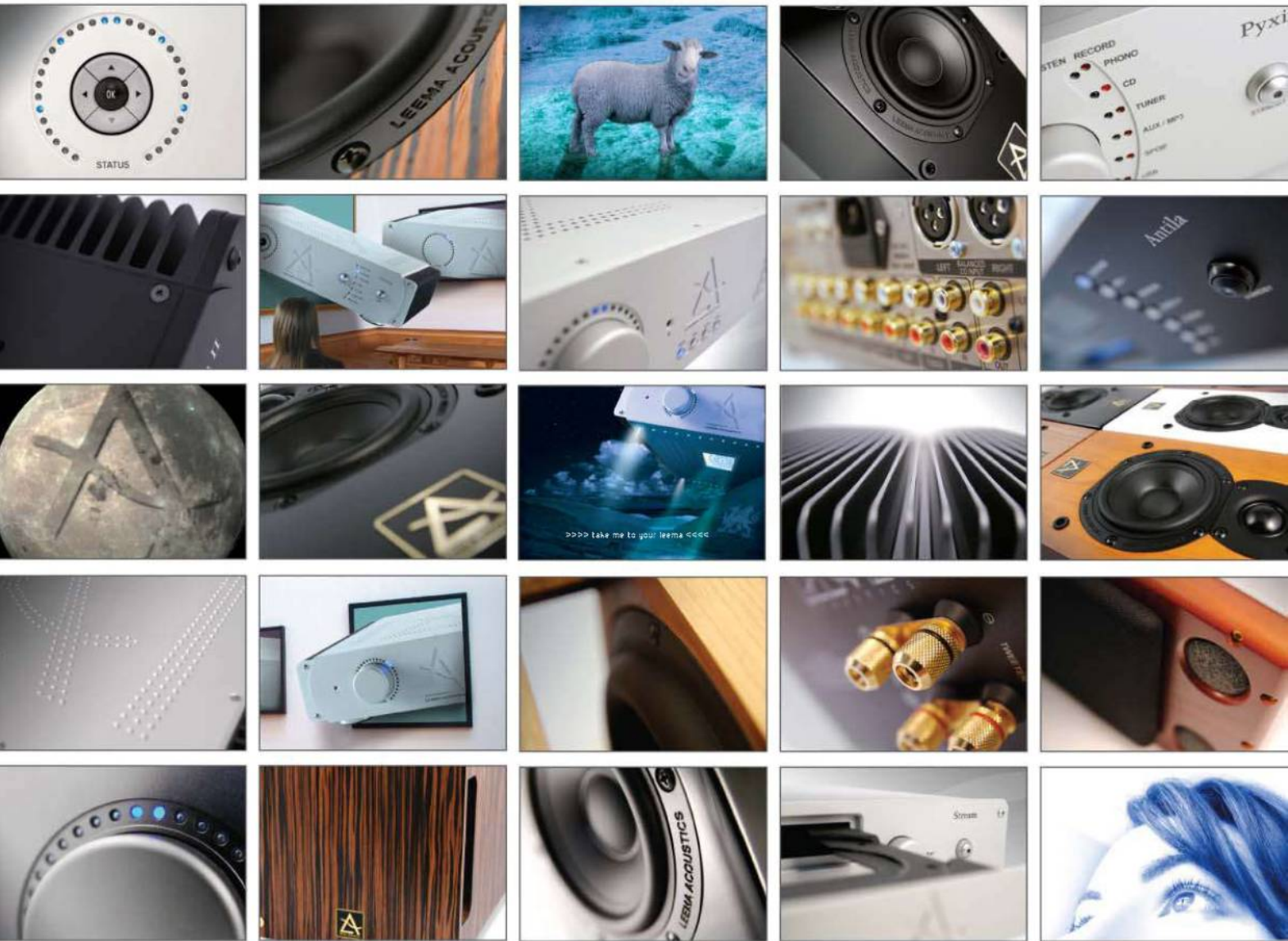
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