

# hi-fi news

THE HOME OF REAL HI-FI

& Record Review

## ORACLE REBORN

Exclusive: Iconic '80s turntable returns to spin vinyl in style



**'Less is more!'**

**Group Test: single-driver speakers**

**Avid Pulsare**

**Luxury phono stage**

**Big triodes!**

**NAT SE-1 monos**

**Vintage**

**Scott 200B amp**



**THE EAGLES**

**Check in at Hotel California**

**Horn speaker**

**JBL K2 S9900**

**Lavry DA11**

**New outboard DAC**

**Budget amp**

**NAD's C316BEE**



• **PLUS** 13 pages of music • **VINYL RE-RELEASE** Rolling Stones' *Exile on Main Street* LP  
• **AUDIO MILESTONES** Decca London pick-up • **INVESTIGATION** Gimell hi-res downloads  
• **CABLE REVIEWS** Atlas & van den Hul • **READERS' CLASSIFIEDS** Scores of hi-fi bargains

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# MUSICAL FIDELITY

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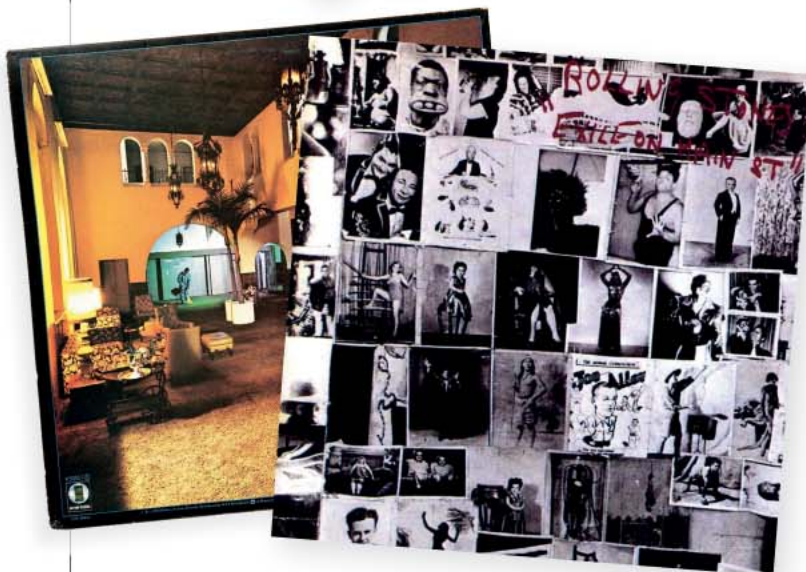




**ABOVE:** The great, great (etc) grandson of NAD's seminal 3020 integrated amplifier offers dynamic power to spare. See p36 for our exclusive review



**LEFT:** Clearaudio was famous for its MC pick-ups before its turntables, as this Stradivari V2 illustrates on p 50

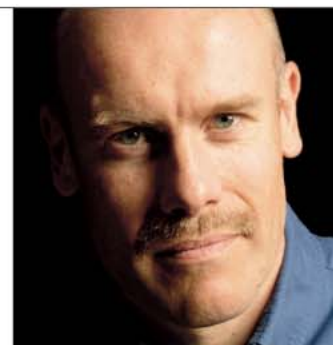


**VINYL:** The Eagles' *Hotel California* is our Vinyl Icon (p68) while we hear The Rolling Stones' re-released *Exile On Main Street* on p66

A word of thanks this month both to the small but dedicated team at *Hi-Fi News* towers and especially to you, our dear readers. For this August '10 issue represents the first anniversary of our 'new look', a combination of clear product photography, longer and more detailed reviews, behind-the-scenes music and vintage features and world-class lab reports that have seen our favourite magazine top the polls in the specialist hi-fi sector. Quite literally, we couldn't have done it without you!

Of course, our collective success may spawn some half-hearted imitation but the unmistakable yellow border remains a gentle reminder that only *Hi-Fi News* & *RR* has the 54-year heritage and transparent technical resource to deliver the *breadth* of in-depth content packed into each and every issue.

What do I mean by 'transparent'? Quite simply, while others can make various and bold claims about the rigour of their 'testing' only we actually publish all the background data employed to reinforce our decisions. Frankly, I'd view the 'you don't need to see our workings' approach with the scepticism reserved for those politicians still attempting to shield their expenses...



Above all, *Hi-Fi News* & *RR* is your magazine so don't hesitate to write – on paper or via the Interweb – and share the highs and lows of your audio experiences with fellow enthusiasts. No letter goes unread and all suggestions for your fave Vinyl Icon or vintage

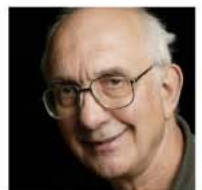
**'Our yellow border is a reminder of *Hi-Fi News* unique 54-year heritage'**

review are stirred into the melting pot for future issues.

This month, both choices find their inspiration from across the pond with the Eagles' multi-million selling *Hotel California* LP proving as iconic for one generation of audiophiles as H H Scott's 200B tube amp was for another (pages 68 and 110, respectively). And if you want to scrutinise the uniquely in-depth tests performed on that vintage Scott, simply direct your mouse to [www.hifinews.co.uk](http://www.hifinews.co.uk) and click on the red 'download' button.

**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**  
JB brings huge industry experience, a penchant for massive speakers and a love of hi-res audio in all its diverse guises



**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**  
Foremost collector and archivist of vintage hi-fi, famous for the UK's bi-annual Audio Jumble, John shares his experience with *HFN*



**STEVE SUTHERLAND**  
Worked on *Melody Maker* and then edited *NME* from 1992-2000, the Britpop years. Steve brings a unique slant to our Vinyl Release pages

# [audio physic]

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**RIGHT: 'Presence, solidity and drive' were Avid's goals when designing its first phono stage. Has it succeeded? See p56...**



# Leema's new 'star' amp

CONSTELLATION SERIES SEES POWER AMP UPGRADED WITH FLAGSHIP TECHNOLOGY

Leema has announced the availability of its Hydra II power amp. It brings technology refined during the development of its Reference Series Altair IV mono power amplifiers to a model that was itself based on the company's very first amp – the popular Tucana integrated.

Under the lid can be found two massive power transformers – one for each channel – with a third transformer dedicated to the control circuitry. Leema's Intelligent Protocol System (LIPS) allows the Hydra II to drive the surround channels in a multichannel system and perform as a slave amp to the Tucana II in a bi- or even tri-amp set-up. It can also be used in a pre/power combination with the Reference Series Pyxis preamplifier [pictured above the Hydra II, right]. Price is £3495.

**Leema Acoustics Ltd, 01938 811900**  
[www.leema-acoustics.com](http://www.leema-acoustics.com)



## HK's heart of glass

ULTIMATE COMPUTER SPEAKERS PROMISE AUDIOPHILE SOUND



If you fancy bringing some sparkle to your PC speaker set-up then Harman Kardon's GL-55A high-end 'desktop audio system' could be for you.

Billed as 'the first true audiophile-quality sound system for computers', each speaker measures 10.6in tall by 5.5in wide and weighs in at 1.2kg. Oh, and they're made of glass-like acrylic, the faceted finish said to increase the amount of light reflected back to the eye.

Each enclosure houses two drivers. The tweeter is a CMMD Lite design featuring a high

strength NdFeB magnet while the woofer is from Atlas. Each speaker boasts a separate amplifier, said to kick out 27W, while a port, which exits to the front of each hollow enclosure, aims to reinforce bass.

Other features include touch-sensitive volume controls and a subwoofer output.

The GL-55A system will set you back a cool £799 – probably more than the computer you plug into them.

**Harman Kardon**  
**01707 278100**  
[www.harmankardon.com](http://www.harmankardon.com)

## Yarland adds UK amp

PUSH-PULL INTEGRATED JOINS UK PRE AND POWER

Not to be confused with the 220V models made for the Chinese domestic market, Yarland's FV34BIIISA 'Euro' integrated amplifier gains ClarityCap SA capacitors, better quality RCA inputs, and specially wound 230V transformers for its UK release.

Power is a claimed 40W per channel from its four 'deep cryo-treated' Shuguang EL34B output pentodes while the

preamp section is based around twin 6N3s from the Beijing Nr1 Tube Factory. The rectifier valve is a Full Music 12AX7.

To the rear of this 17kg tube amp can be found three line inputs (CD, Aux and Line) plus separate 4 and 8ohm speaker taps. The price looks very reasonable at £499.

**Frozen Banana,**  
**0208 241 9826**  
[www.frozen-banana.co.uk](http://www.frozen-banana.co.uk)



# Total Eclipse

REVAMP FOR TD712Z SPEAKER FOLLOWING SIX YEARS OF R&D

As our group test this month explores [see p41], single-driver speakers that eschew a crossover in pursuit of the perfect sound have a long history. Released in 2004, the TD712z speaker from Eclipse is one such design and now, after six further years of R&D, the company unveils the revamped TD712zMK2 Black.

Improvements over the original model include a more powerful motor system for the drive unit using a new ultra-efficient high-power magnet structure, a redesigned damping system for the driver surround and the use of high-density zinc components inside. The method by which the driver couples to the integrated stand has also seen a redesign.

The Eclipse TD712zMK2s come in a choice of silver or black and cost £5300 a pair. **Eclipse, 020 7328 4499**  
[www.eclipse-td.net](http://www.eclipse-td.net)



## HI-FI NEWS' NUGGETS

### FRITZ SENHEISER

On May 17th, only a few days after his 98th birthday, Professor Fritz Sennheiser, audio pioneer and creator of open-backed headphones, passed away. He was born in Berlin on May 9th, 1912.

### SLATE RETURNS

Slate Audio, famous for its Garrard plinth systems and Glassmats, is back. Founder Peter Soper has handed over the reins to John Aistrup, who now takes on the role of Director, but will remain very much involved in the development of new vinyl accessories. For more, visit [www.slate-audio.co.uk](http://www.slate-audio.co.uk).

### LED ZEP IN PRINT

*Treasures Of Led Zeppelin* is a full colour, hardback marking 30 years since the band split. Published by Carlton Books at £25, it also boasts facsimiles of rare memorabilia.

## Pioneer comes 3D ready

AUGUST RELEASE FOR HIGH-END AV RECEIVER

One of eight new multichannel receivers from Pioneer, the high-end SC-LX83 replaces 2009's LX82 and offers wireless Bluetooth audio streaming from Bluetooth-enabled devices. In a similar vein, having Apple's 'Works with iPhone' certification means the unit can work seamlessly with both the iPhone and iPod touch player while Pioneer's iControlAV app – available as a free download from the Apple iTunes store – turns compatible iPhone and iPod touch devices into a fully functioning remote control for all the company's new 7.1 channel receivers.

Under the lid, the company's 'Direct Energy HD Amplifiers' exploit B&O's analogue ICEpower Class D technology while its latest PQLS system ensures jitter-free HDMI connection with all LPCM formats. Other features include built-in internet radio access, ProLogic IIz decoding and, thanks to the inclusion of HDMI version 1.4, the ability to support Blu-ray's 3D specification. Available in August, the SC-LX83 will be priced at £2000.

**Pioneer UK,**  
**0870 600 1539**  
[www.pioneer.co.uk](http://www.pioneer.co.uk)



## Paradigm's pint-sized sub

SEISMIC 110 SUBWOOFER PACKS A CLAIMED 1KW OF POWER



filled polypropylene. The exterior shell is a die-cast monocoque, finished in satin black. To the rear can be found a comprehensive range of inputs, including balanced XLR and a USB port. Also available, at extra cost, is the Paradigm Perfect Bass Kit

(PBK-1TM) – a room correction system that will analyse the Seismic's response in your room, and then compute the equalization parameters to obtain the best sound.

The sub itself costs £1250 while the perfect Bass Kit, which will work with all subs in the Paradigm collection, will set you back £299.

**Anthem AV Solutions Ltd,**  
**01825 750858**  
[www.anthemavs.co.uk](http://www.anthemavs.co.uk)

Aimed at those seeking fulsome bass in a small form factor, Paradigm's Seismic 110 subwoofer promises deep bass from an enclosure measuring no more than 30cm in any direction. At the heart of the sub is an 850W Class D amplifier (with a claimed 2.55kW peak output) coupled to a split-coil 10in driver with a huge 2in of travel. The cone is made from a ribbed, mineral-

# THE ULTIMATE DESKTOP SOUND

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## JBL Array

PRO-SOUND POWER FOR THE HOME

For those lusting after a taste of JBL's range-topping K2 series of Project speakers [see p32] comes the 1400 Array – a speaker billed as benefiting from much of the K2 technology, but at a fraction of the price.

A three-way floorstander, each cabinet measures 1181x394x483mm (hwd) and houses a 14in low-frequency driver, 3in mid/high-frequency compression driver and a 1in ultra high-frequency compression driver made of pure titanium.

The trapezoidal internal enclosure is constructed of 40mm MDF while a top cavity minimizes diffraction from the exposed high-frequency horn.

Priced at £8500/pair, the 1400 Array comes in a choice of black zebrawood or mahogany veneer. **CSE, 01423 359054**  
[www.csecustom.com](http://www.csecustom.com)



## More Eastern promise

UPMARKET TUBE DAC JOINS MINIMAX STABLE

Eastern Electric adds yet another product to its MiniMax range of valve separates in the form of the £895 Tube DAC. Despite its name, the unit boasts both tube and solid-state output stages, selectable via a button on the fascia. A 12AU7 valve is employed in the amplification stage while at the heart of the digital-to-analogue conversion process is a 32-bit ESS 9018 DAC.

At the back of the unit can be found AES/EBU (professional), BNC and RCA (consumer S/PDIF) and Toslink (optical) inputs alongside a USB input for connection to a PC. There is also a pair of unbalanced analogue outputs. All input sample rates from 32kHz to 192kHz are supported while a phase invert facility adds a further option to tweak the Tube DAC's sound.

**Audio Emotion, 01333 425999**  
[www.audioemotion.co.uk](http://www.audioemotion.co.uk)



## MBL drops entry price

LATEST OMNI-DIRECTIONAL MAKES RANGE MORE 'AFFORDABLE'



MBL has a new entry-level speaker, the 126, replacing the 121 and priced at £9150 in a bid to make its omni-directional line-up more affordable. Measuring 20.4x13.5x10in (hwd), the 126 sports two new radial drivers for the mid and upper frequency ranges along with a pair of 5in woofers operating in 'push-push' mode.

The 11 litre cabinet is sufficient for a bass extension of 44Hz and the 126 is supplied with a stand in either black or white finishes. **Audio Emotion, 01333 425999**  
[www.audioemotion.co.uk](http://www.audioemotion.co.uk)  
[www.mbl.de/en](http://www.mbl.de/en)



## HI-FI NEWS? JUST ASK...

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## Upcoming Events

IMPORTANT DATES FOR YOUR HI-FI DIARY

- 3-8 SEPT** IFA 2010, Berlin Messe, Germany  
[www.ifa-berlin.de](http://www.ifa-berlin.de)
- 25-26 SEPT** Audio Show 2010, Silverstone, [www.chestergroup.org](http://www.chestergroup.org)
- 10 OCT** Audiojumble, Angel Leisure Centre, Tonbridge, Kent  
[www.audiojumble.co.uk](http://www.audiojumble.co.uk)
- 16-17 OCT** Sound & Vision Manchester 2010  
[www.manchestershow.co.uk](http://www.manchestershow.co.uk)

# Munich Hi-Fi Show

Words and Pictures: Ken Kessler



So many throwbacks to events of yore ensured that Munich's High End Audio Show 2010 was as upbeat as, well, Milan 1990. It was crawling with foreign visitors – including Yanks who ended up being stuck there thanks to a certain volcano – while a handful of products created the kind of buzz that always marked great shows of the past.

*Hi-Fi News* takes some credit for the biggest buzz of them all: the Devialet amplifier was the talk of Munich, this magazine's world scoop

having given it a front cover and a full-blown test. This being Germany, there was no shortage of turntables, record cleaning machines, LP stalls, bizarrely-painted speakers and Italians. Eh? There were so many Italian brands that they even filled an area quickly dubbed 'Little Italy'.

And the British? UK brands like Naim, Tannoy, Chord, KEF and the rest had their own stands and rooms. Clearly, the mantle of 'Europe's Most Important High-End Show' has left the UK for its Teutonic counterpart.



Audiodata's Partout standmount employs a 175mm dual-concentric driver and twin ports, enabling it to be used vertically or horizontally. Impedance is rated at 8ohm, it's bi-wireable and dimensions are only 483x200x320mm. And this is but one of the wild finishes on display, though 'normal' wood is available. [www.audiodata-hifi.de](http://www.audiodata-hifi.de).



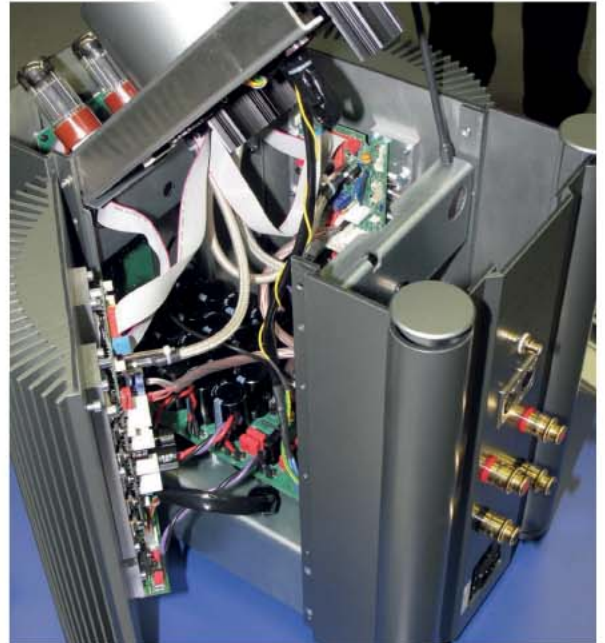
Producing wildly-coloured amps from Italy, Atelier Du Triode is partial to hard-wiring and 2A3 valves, in push-pull form, including both mono and stereo versions good for 16W/ch. The company also produces matching line-level preamplifiers. [www.atelierdutriode.it](http://www.atelierdutriode.it).



Opera's full range speaker in the shape of a dog (!) should probably be called a 'true woofer'. It's designed to take a feed from a portable player, like an iPod. Three guesses where they put the input socket. A clearly bemused Bartolomeo Nasta, son of Opera founder Gianni, holds up the latest pet to join the fold. [www.operaloudspeakers.com](http://www.operaloudspeakers.com).



There's no shortage of shiny metal turntables in Germany. MG-HIFI makes this flagship model, the Optimal MG-4 in fully loaded form, with special mat, three motors, thread drive and facilities for a brace of tonearms. Price is only €3500. [www.mg-hifi.de](http://www.mg-hifi.de).



This is T+A's first monoblock, but it's a hybrid. The 520mm-tall, balanced-input M10 contains a valve input section and solid-state output stage, for 550W at 8ohms and 40W in pure Class A. [www.ta-hifi.com](http://www.ta-hifi.com).



Creek's Wyndson phono preamp offers three stages of gain and equalisation, dual mono construction, and a feature that will make it a pleasure to own: the user can set parameters for a number of cartridge options, which can then be named and saved. [www.creekaudio.com](http://www.creekaudio.com)



As a rule, Mel Audio opts for the futuristic, but the Kana is pure retro. Shown in prototype form, this new integrated amp from Italy is dual mono and solid-state, yielding 2x50W and able to accept five sources. Phono is an option. [www.melaudio.it](http://www.melaudio.it).



Emme's Beta contains an 8in woofer in its tapered, sandwich construction enclosure. Sensitivity is 88dB. Also available is the similarly-shaped Gamma with 12in woofer. [www.emmespeakers.com](http://www.emmespeakers.com).



# HD Home Cinema



The Cambridge Audio 650R 7.1 receiver and 650BD Blu-ray universal player. Designed and engineered with passion in the UK

## The quest for the ultimate high definition home cinema system is finally over...

The scorching new 650R HDMI 7.1 receiver and 650BD Blu-ray universal player combine the latest video processing technology and purist audio design to reproduce your favourite movies and music with all the passion their creators intended.

The lightning-fast, easy to use 650BD features a twin-core 32-bit DSP chipset plus audiophile grade circuitry for the most vivid Blu-ray audio and video experience imaginable. Designed to enhance your existing DVDs thanks to the latest de-interlacing and upscaling technology, the 650BD also handles SACD, DVD-A and more.

Meanwhile the 650R AV receiver decodes and processes the very latest surround sound formats. Its immense video capability is coupled with

blistering audio performance making it the ideal powerhouse for the most demanding soundtracks and music of all genres.

With all this and more, the new HD 650 Series is guaranteed to take your home cinema experience to new heights.

**The benefits are far better experienced than explained. To locate your nearest Cambridge Audio specialist, read product reviews or watch the 650R and 650BD Instant Expert videos visit [www.cambridgeaudio.com](http://www.cambridgeaudio.com)**



Azur 650BD, June 2010



Azur 650BD, April 2010



Azur 650BD, June 2010



Azur 650BD, June 2010



Your movies + our passion

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Chord's Chordette GEM DAC has sired a range of mini components, including the SCAMP power amp, Tucan headphone amp and a control centre-cum-streamer that's virtually a PC in a tiny box. And you can be sure there are more modules on the way. [www.chordelectronics.com](http://www.chordelectronics.com).



Audio Exklusiv's P7 valve preamp was seen with a selection of beguiling front panel options. The unit is dual-mono, with short signal paths for four line level sources plus tape. An MM or MC phono board is an optional extra. [www.audioexklusiv.de](http://www.audioexklusiv.de).



Bellari's bargain-basement VP129 valve phono preamp has been replaced by the \$250 VP130 with a new switching power supply to accommodate 100-240V. That means we can order 'em from the USA without reservation! Tube is a 12AX7, and it'll drive headphones too. [www.musicchallaudio.com](http://www.musicchallaudio.com).



This handsome, minimalist deck, the Viella, comes from Roeschlau-Lorenzi, a German-made beauty also offered in black with wood trim, all black and other options including a choice of arms, to produce a range priced from €9480-€13,660. The chassis is 25mm-thick aluminium. [www.roeschlau-lorenzi.eu](http://www.roeschlau-lorenzi.eu).



All of BMC's models offer a fresh take on styling. This is the M1 monoblock, its innards dominated by a massive toroidal. Power is 200W into 8ohms, and the unit can be operated in balanced or single-ended mode. [www.bmc-audio.de](http://www.bmc-audio.de).



From Thrax, a fascinating line level tube design that accepts four unbalanced and two balanced sources. The amplification stage is a single indirectly heated triode while the case is fashioned from aircraft-grade aluminium. Price is €15,000. [www.thrax.bg](http://www.thrax.bg).



La Source, from AudioAero, is touted as one of the most advanced, complete silver disc spinners on the market, with preamp facility. It accommodates CD and SACD, plus five independent digital inputs (BNC, RCA, Toslink, AT&T, USB), balanced and single ended analogue inputs, three levels of fixed output if you don't want to use the preamp variable output, dual mono DACs, valve output and much more. [www.audioaero.com](http://www.audioaero.com).



Thoole is known for upgrade enclosures for Tivoli products. This cool isolation 'foot', the oddly-named 'Jobber', contains opposed magnets. Price is a ludicrously low €29 apiece. Each can support 6.5kg. [www.thoole.com](http://www.thoole.com).



Cambridge showed its NP30 network music player, promising 'better than' 24-bit/96kHz playback of WAV, PCM and FLAC, complemented by Cambridge's online music service, UuVol. [www.cambridgeaudio.com](http://www.cambridgeaudio.com).



SWspeakers of Sweden showed the Magic Flute, each of its four modules hand-finished in carbon fibre. Each speaker sports four drivers: a 25mm soft dome tweeter, twin 146mm midwoofers and a 220mm bass driver. The crossover design is said to follow the KIS principle (Keep It Simple). Standing 1550mm tall and weighing in at a relatively modest 40kg, the shapes of the individual speaker modules are designed to represent 'the infinite sphere', with 'no corners, no edges, no boxed-in sound.' Swede sounds indeed. [www.swspeakers.com](http://www.swspeakers.com).

Next  
month

HFN/RR reports from  
the enthusiast's hi-fi scene

# ESL

## A LEGEND IN ELECTROSTATIC LOUDSPEAKER DESIGN

The Quad ESL is a premiere music reproduction loudspeaker constructed from the finest materials with meticulous attention to detail. It reaches the pinnacle of high fidelity performance with an unparalleled ability to sonically 'disappear', and create convincing three-dimensional sound stages. Instruments and vocals occupy precise, accurately sized locations in space, giving an uncanny realism to reproduced sound.

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QUAD



# Taking you higher...

Andy Rye talks to a label at the cutting edge of hi-res downloads – Gimell

The Tallis Scholars marked the 30th anniversary of their first recording with the release of Spanish composer Victoria's *Lamentations Of Jeremiah* at the end of March this year. The Scholars perform unaccompanied renaissance choral works, the complex vocal harmonies sympathetically recorded in a natural acoustic. The group boasts some 50 recordings, all available as digital downloads from just one label – Gimell – a company whose success is inextricably linked with that of The Scholars themselves.

## FIRST INDEPENDENT

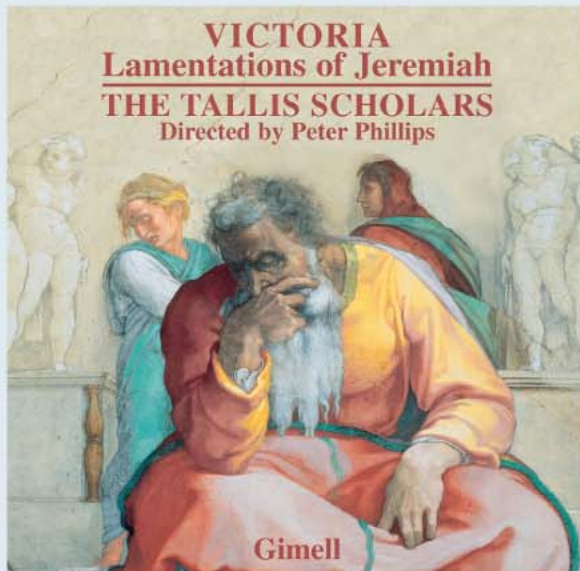
Producer and Gimell head Steve Smith reflected on 30 years of renaissance polyphony by recalling how the first recording, Allegri's *Miserere*, for Classics For Pleasure (CFP) almost didn't happen.

'The Tallis choir was due to record in Oxford, paid for by CFP. Just weeks before the sessions, EMI, who owned CFP, decided it didn't want its money spent recording this music or on The Tallis Scholars. A message came through saying the project was cancelled.'

'This was embarrassing for me because I had booked the singers and the recording venue. It was clear that with the internal politics between EMI and CFP, EMI could



**BELOW:** Released in March, Victoria's *Lamentations Of Jeremiah* marks the 30th anniversary of The Scholars' first recording. Tracks can be sampled and downloaded in a range of formats, from 24-bit/96kHz FLAC to standard MP3, from [www.gimell.com](http://www.gimell.com). At the time of going to press, the *First Lamentation For Maundy Thursday* could be downloaded free of charge



veto the payment of session fees. But it couldn't stop CFP licensing a recording from another company. So I took a huge risk and said, "Okay, I'll pay for it." Thankfully the record proved to be very successful; it was top of the classical chart for a couple of weeks – even though it was on CFP, which was very unusual.

'Nevertheless, with none of the big companies interested in letting us make more recordings, despite the success of this *Miserere*, it became apparent that The Tallis Scholars' future depended on the group having its own label.'

So it was that Gimell was born. Back then there were no independent classical record labels. But Smith was able to draw on his

experiences working in a radically different musical genre.

'When I had just left university and was struggling to make a living as a record producer and engineer, I ran an agency where punk bands sent me their master tapes with a payment and I would send back 1000 singles on their own label. As in all these things in pop music, it lasted about 18 months and fizzled out. Bizarrely the idea was there. You didn't have to be a big company, you could just make a recording and release it.'

## RECORDING TECHNOLOGY

I ask Steve about recording The Scholars and how his techniques have changed over the years.



**BELOW:** The Tallis Scholars outside Salle Church, Norfolk in the early 1990s. The group was formed in 1973 by their director Peter Phillips. This year they will be appearing at festivals and venues right across the UK



'The first time I heard The Tallis Scholars was in '76/'77. I was studying Music and Recording Technology at the University Of Surrey. The university had an old Luton van they encouraged us students to drive out to places to record concerts and sessions. We turned up at Merton Chapel in Oxford to record The Scholars. We knew we would just use one stereo microphone (because that's all we had on board) so we walked into the rehearsal, decided where to put our mic and that was it.

'We still use exactly the same spot in the chapel and the singers still stand in exactly the same position as they did for that concert. Nothing has changed. I find that



extraordinary, as we didn't know what we were doing as students. What's changed now is the quality of equipment we have to record the music. It was luck that we turned up at one of the best recording venues in the world for renaissance music. It's just a wonderful space. You only have to clap your hands and hear the way the echo dies away to appreciate its lovely sound.'

**MAKING THE DIFFERENCE**

That consistency is apparent in the way the early recordings compare with the most recent releases.

'When we put together compilations from older recordings,' continues Steve, 'it's always easy to do. Even if they are three-minute tracks, you don't feel uncomfortable with a change of acoustic or recording technique. If you take one of 20 years ago and put it alongside one of two years ago, if listening in CD quality you won't hear the difference.

'It's very important. We want people to understand the difference between Palestrina and Josquin or Victoria. It's the different notes the composers wrote that make the difference and not what we do.'

*'I ran an agency where punk bands sent me master tapes'*

The Gimell label has been at the leading edge of digital technology, being the first independent classical record label to release CDs and, more recently, pioneering high resolution downloads.

'To keep my interest, I want the next recording to be better than the last one. I've always been very keen to experiment with technology. Even in 1980, when we recorded the *Allegri*, we were hoping to have a digital machine. One of the top pop studios had a 3M machine. We arranged they would bring it to our session as they were fascinated to know how it would work with classical music. In the end a famous band who were using it in the week wanted to

do a remix and we couldn't get it. If the digital machine had turned up and we hadn't recorded in analogue it would have been a big mistake because the technology wasn't good enough at the time.

'There was no real progress in conversion technology for a long while. I went to all the professional equipment companies looking for better ways. Six months later a chap rang up and said "I've had a wee Scotsman see me with a box

**TOP:** Producer and Gimell head Steve Smith busy at work; the Gimell website (above left) offers free test files for each format and resolution so that any file type can be tested for playback before making a purchase. The label was also the first to offer 5.1 Surround Sound downloads in the FLAC format

**ABOVE RIGHT:** Steve Smith with The Tallis Scholars director Peter Phillips. Peter also works with the BBC Singers with whom he has broadcast live on BBC Radio Three

## INVESTIGATION

that looks like a washing machine and he says it's better than a Sony converter. Do you want to try it?" It was Philip Hobbs of Linn Records. They had spent a lot of money developing an analogue-to-digital converter that was better than anything else around. I invited Phil to turn up on our next session with his box. It did look like a washing machine with huge knobs on the front. We were one of first to use it and it was an improvement. After that Phil became our recording engineer and has worked with us ever since.'

### FREE FILES

Gimell offers high resolution digital downloads (up to 24-bit/96kHz) from its website. There are free test files for each format and resolution so that any file type can be tested for playback before a purchase is made.

'I had a conversation with Philip Hobbs where I maintained that if it's possible to download an MP3 then it's possible to download anything. An MP3 may download in a minute but the technology for downloading is the same whether it takes an hour or a day. A year later Phil said that Linn had developed a web site offering high quality downloads. I said, "We've got to have the same thing."

'Linn launched in December 2006. We struggled to get

them to agree that we could use the same technology. It took six months to agree and then six months to develop our site.

For someone yet to experience a 24-bit recording, what does higher resolution offer?

'There's a naturalness of sound, a clarity, and in recordings like ours



where the building contributes to the sound image you listen to, you hear that echo more clearly.

'No matter what we do to improve the recording, the more you get it right the more natural it sounds. However, it's not all about the recording quality. We put the music first, then we use technology to serve it as well as we can.'

When it comes to downloading high-resolution files, Steve has a few tips.

'You need to understand how to organise and use files on a

computer. If you don't know how to move a file from one folder on a computer to another then probably this isn't the technology for you. You certainly should think twice about accessing higher quality downloads and using more sophisticated media players. You can't knock iTunes. It's a closed environment that you don't

need to understand to download and play files successfully; it just all happens and it works very well.

'With different media players you need to know more. If you've bought music, you've got to protect it, which means you must know how to make a back-up copy of it and store this somewhere else.'

### ALWAYS IN STOCK

Today half of Gimell's revenue is derived from digital downloads and Smith has seen some surprising side benefits from this approach:

'We're selling music at times when we weren't able to before. BBC Radio 4 did a piece last year on Allegri's *Misere*. Peter Phillips was interviewed and they played our recordings. In the next couple of days we sold a few thousand downloads on iTunes. It sold in the shops too, but nothing like as well. In fact all the shops ran out of stock within a day. When you get something in the media that draws attention to your music, if it can be downloaded then you're not limited by stock problems.

'Since then a large number of people have gone back to iTunes and used the 'Complete My Album' feature to buy more tracks. They are sales we would never have got before. Digital downloads have become an increasingly important factor in the way people discover and then buy music.' ☺

**TOP:** Peter Phillips conducts The Tallis Scholars at a recording of Guerrero's *Missa Surge Propera*, September 2004

**ABOVE:** Peter in a more formal mood, pictured in 2007

**ABOVE LEFT:** The Gimell 'Download Manager' – a program that enables purchased tracks from the site to be downloaded in batches rather than individually, so saving time. Available for both PC and Mac, it also allows partial downloads to be resumed at a later date

**LEFT:** The Tallis Scholars pictured in 2009, with Peter Phillips third from right

**'It's not all about the recording quality. We put the music first'**



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# ALLNIC

# Oracle Delphi Mk VI (£9345)

When the first Oracle deck arrived in the UK at the beginning of the '80s its looks certainly turned heads. Thirty years on, this latest Delphi Mk VI is as stunning as ever  
 Review: **John Bamford** Lab: **Paul Miller**

**F**ew would argue that the Oracle Delphi looks drop dead gorgeous. With its sleek, futuristic lines and gleaming precision-turned parts there's something about its design that makes even disinterested passers-by pause to take a second look.

Did I say futuristic? What's remarkable about the design is that the first incarnation of the Oracle, looking not dissimilar to this latest Delphi Mk VI model, first went on sale in 1979 – the year that Thatcher arrived at Downing Street, The Village People topped the singles chart with 'YMCA' and the Christmas No 1 was Pink Floyd's 'Another Brick In The Wall'.

Hailing from Quebec in Canada, designer Marcel Riendeau's Oracle Audio Technologies created shock waves among the audio fraternity on the other side of the Atlantic with his ultramodern record player. Way back then audio commentators were calling it a work of art... and a work of art it remains to this day.

## TIME FOR AN UPGRADE

While there have been several incarnations of the Oracle Delphi during the intervening years, the outgoing Mk V has been on the market for nearly 14 years. For a product to remain unchanged for such a long time is rare indeed. But to be fair, Oracle has been busy building its brand. These days Oracle is not simply a quirky manufacturer of an 'out-there' turntable but is an electronics company too, with a portfolio of equally luxuriously priced CD players, CD transports and DACs and more besides. Moreover, in recent years it has also been preoccupied in negotiations regarding changes of company ownership. So, being rather long in the tooth, the Delphi Mk V was certainly overdue for a reappraisal and a performance upgrade to keep it 'up there', as well as out there.

Those familiar with Delphis will notice immediately when studying our

photographs what look like additional stubby pillars of aluminium beside each suspension turret. These are in fact hollow 'pots' of silicone fluid, Oracle having designed a damping system it calls its Micro Vibration Stabiliser System (MVSS) [see 'Damping the Vibes' boxout]. Turning the adjustment wheels to raise the Delrin plungers out of the silicone fluid and back again – immersing them in the damping fluid to precisely the same depth – is an easy process. Straight A/B demonstrations take but a minute, and the sharpening of image focus and improvement in bass resolution is clear for any audiophile to hear within a few bars of music.

Less obvious to observe from our photographs are the different supports beneath the acrylic base on which the deck sits. All audio components are sensitive to their environment, none more so than a turntable, as you will have experienced if you've ever experimented with putting your record player on varying types of support platforms and equipment racks. The Delphi has been a suspended subchassis design since its inception, with incremental

improvements through its various guises addressing issues concerning ease of set up (the earliest decks needed constant readjusting and were sensitive to external shock such as footfall on suspended floors) and improvements and modifications to the rigidity of the subchassis, arm mounting, bearing design and so on. Different to the Mk V, the convex feet on the new Mk VI are now formed of Delrin rather than aluminium. Oracle says it found Delrin feet minimised the difference in sound observed when placing the turntable variously on shelves made of wood, glass and concrete, believing that the new feet act as a mechanical filter that reduces high frequency energy entering the suspension system.

## BALANCING ACT

Look carefully and you'll observe that while the Delphi remains low-slung and sleek-looking, it does however appear a touch more 'butch'. This is because the aluminium subchassis is now thicker, especially in the front left portion where a further piece of aluminium secured on its



**RIGHT:** By each suspension tower a cup of silicone fluid and adjustable plunger (with locking ring) provides damping of the subchassis



underside acts as a more effective counter balance to the weight of the tonearm fitted on the opposite corner, obviating the need of the counterweight that was fitted on the underside of the platter of the Mk V.

Remove the platter of this Mk VI and you'll see that the centre portion of the subchassis is now considerably larger too, which in turn makes the three 'legs' of the subchassis that extend to the three towers containing the suspension springs shorter and commensurately stiffer. And the tonearm mounting ring support has been widened by approximately 35%, increasing the strength and rigidity of the entire arm mounting section.

The design of the main bearing has been tweaked too. When Oracle introduced the Delphi Mk V in 1996 it went over to using a 'dual-tripod' design, using six points instead of bushes for holding the centre spindle. At that time it used nylon screws and a tungsten carbide thrust plate inside the bearing. The stainless steel spindle had a tungsten carbide tip at the end to provide a rigid tungsten-to-tungsten interface.

In the Mk VI the screws are now formed of a Delrin/Teflon mixture, while the thrust plate is now made of a polyamide-imide (PAI) material called Torlon [see [www.solvayadvancedpolymers.com](http://www.solvayadvancedpolymers.com)]. In using this high-strength plastic Oracle believes it

has created a filter that prevents rotational noise from moving up the spindle and entering the platter, claiming 'much quieter background and allowing better access to fine inner details'. What hasn't changed in the transition from Mk V to Mk VI is the motor, despite it being a design dating back to the mid-'90s.

#### CHANGE AT THE TOP

I mentioned earlier Oracle's change of ownership. Founder Marcel Riendeau left the audio industry several years ago and emigrated to Germany. The President of the company today is Stephane Nadeau, whose association with Oracle started over a decade ago. It was his precision machine shop and skilful expertise that supplied all of Oracle's exquisitely crafted metalwork, resplendent in its polished lacquer finish. Marcel's brother Jacques worked at Oracle for 25 years, and it is he and Stephane who own the company today.

*HFN* had the opportunity to meet them both recently, to discuss the design details of their new labour of love, as they were visiting Oracle's UK distributor, Coherent Systems in Gloucestershire [see 'Welcome back Jacques' boxout on p24].

**ABOVE:** In addition to the Micro Vibration Stabiliser System, differences between the Mk V Delphi and the Mk VI include Delrin feet and improvements to the deck's bearing

'Each generation of turntable was always linked to the availability of the motor,' Jacques told us candidly. 'Remember, we were a startup company in 1979, so the first deck is one that we refer to today as the Delphi AC as it used an AC synchronous motor. Then we switched to a DC Hall-effect motor. When I think back to those early Mk I, II and III models, in each instance we were forced to introduce

a new design because the manufacturer of the motor we were using could no longer supply it. We were into the era of CD and the major corporations had ceased record player production. We had to

change motor with the Mk IV in 1990 too, that being the model where we returned to using an AC synchronous motor.

'At least we can be thankful that we haven't had to change the motor this time. We're using the same low-voltage AC synchronous motor we've been using since the introduction of the Mk V in 1996. It's proved wonderfully reliable and we have our own circuitry that we feed with a DC signal that generates the sine wave to give us the flexibility to fine-adjust the speed.'

*'For delicacy and poise the Delphi Mk VI is in a class of its own'*

#### DAMPING THE VIBES

Using silicone-filled dashpots to damp resonance has been used by tonearm manufacturers for decades. Moreover Jack Dinsdale, Professor of mechatronics at Cranfield Institute during the 1970s [see *Sound Off*, p103], famously patented the idea of a front-end damping trough first seen on the Cranfield Rock turntable in 1983 [see *HFN*, June '10] and used in Townshend Audio's Rock turntables to this day. While the methodology is far from revolutionary, Oracle Audio's implementation of dashpots to damp 'micro-vibrations' in its turntable's subchassis is most elegant. The three plunger stems below the subchassis are threaded, each turn of their adjustment wheels lowering them by a mere 1.27mm into their respective silicone-filled cups – so extremely fine adjustment is possible. Once set, locking wheels secure the plungers in position.

#### POWER SUPPLIES

Two grades of external power supply are available. Our review sample came with the more costly Turbo supply, a £750 option. With its standard power supply the price of the Delphi Mk VI is £8595.

A flat profile rubber belt goes around a rim on the underside of the platter, and because the motor/drive pulley at the rear is concealed underneath the platter, fitting the belt is certainly something of an

## TURNTABLE

acquired skill. But this is soon learned after a little practice.

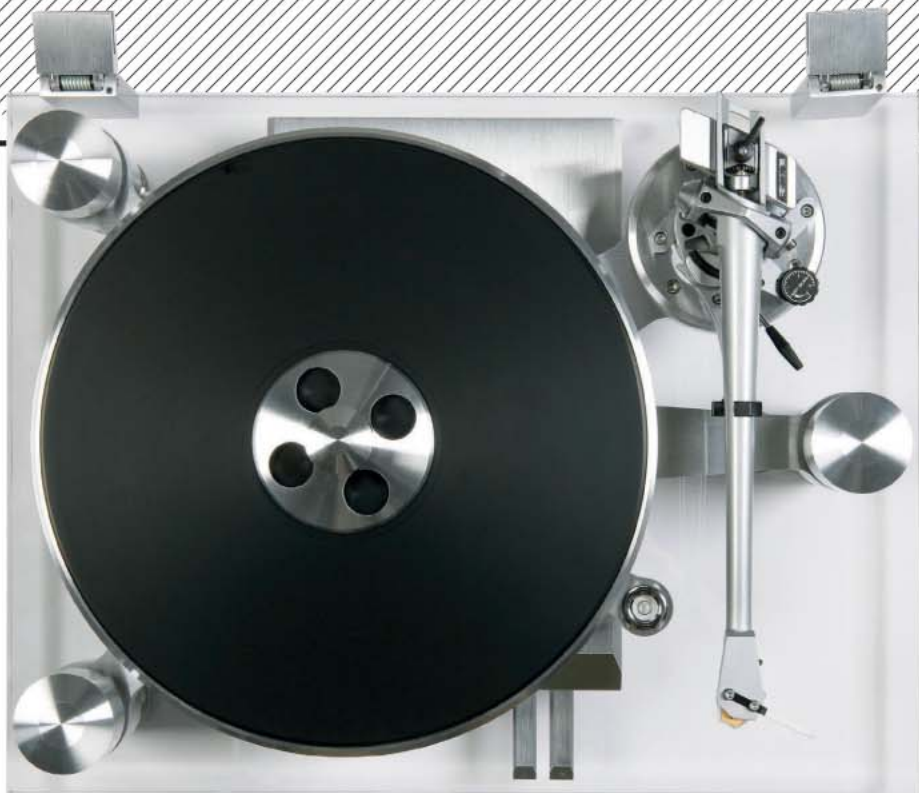
### PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

Using an accompanying SME Series IV tonearm in matching silver finish, listening was mostly with a £1000 Ortofon Cadenza Blue MC into an RCM Audio phono stage. I also had the opportunity to audition the Oracle/SME combination fitted with Clearaudio's new Stradivari V2 moving-coil, of which more later.

There is pleasure to be had simply from pressing one of the 'play' levers protruding at the front, whose 33 and 45 legends illuminate after the tactile 'click' of the switch activated by the gentle press. After a pregnant pause of around half a second, the aluminium platter spins into action and comes up to speed pretty rapidly.

When the turntable is in its sweet-spot and you're playing a recording that does it justice the result is a vivid stereo image extending way behind the plane of the loudspeakers. Thanks to its 'legendary' sense of air and space it worked wonders with 'Nil Sen La' from *Clannad In Concert* [reissue, Shanachie 79030]. With no tubbiness or overhang, the clean and tuneful double-bass was nicely focused, the acoustic percussion sounding pristine and hanging in space as if suspended on wires.

I soon discovered it can dig deeply into claustrophobic, muddy-sounding recordings too. Vintage classics such as Stevie Wonder's *Talking Book* LP [Tamla



Motown STMA 8007] may lack the HF sparkle of audiophile cuts but there's treasure in the groove, the Delphi Mk VI bringing out immense detail as the 'biscuit tin' drums and fulsome bass lines were kept under strict control.

Similarly, while the title track on Johnny Guitar Watson's *A Real Mother* LP from 1977 [DJM Records DJF 20505] can so often sound bloated, soft and ill-defined, the Delphi Mk VI did what Delphis have done through the ages: without smear or bloom it bounced through the infectious

**ABOVE:** Three towers, each containing an elaborate spring and Sorbothane damper assembly, provide suspension for the subchassis

riff, Watson's sublime guitar technique hovering high in the image while surrounded in studio reverb.

### GLOWING FOR GOLD

Like Oracle decks through the ages, this latest Delphi VI model is relaxing and pleasurable to live with, due to its sweet and unfatiguing upper midrange and high frequency character that rarely hardens other than when presented with the most strident of brass recordings. Miles Davis' searing trumpet and the challenging electronic 'treatments' on his 1986 *Tutu* album [Warner 925 490-1] were portrayed with a pleasing golden glow rather than sounding clinical and steely. Curiously the Oracle sounds 'snappy' and light on its feet while appearing simultaneously smooth, refined and gentle on the ear. I never heard it sounded etched or sterile.

Regardless of recording quality the Oracle handles everything with equanimity. Lovers of solid uber-decks with massive platters might most likely be unimpressed as the Delphi does not deliver massive bass slam. Bill Bruford's metronomic percussion on 'Heartbeat' from King Crimson's *Beat* [EG Records, EGLP 51] was razor sharp, Robert Fripp's swirling guitar and 'Frippertronics' creating illusions of fairground hysteria behind the lead vocal. But Tony Levin's pumping bass seemed to pump at a lower pressure, the low notes lacking the gravitas that many rock fans desire. If it's sonic fireworks you're after you'll be better pleased elsewhere. ☺

## WELCOME BACK, JACQUES...

After a four year sabbatical from Oracle, Jacques Riendeau – brother of Marcel who designed the first turntable – has returned to the company as co-owner and head of the design team.

'We've always had two objectives. One was to make a piece of art; the other was making sure that our beautiful looking object was in the Formula One division,' Jacques told us. 'So we questioned every element that could possibly affect the purity of the sound, looking for any potential weaknesses in the design.'

'We always believed that our suspension

system was the factor in making our turntables sound the way they do, giving them their light, open and airy sound. But rather like that comedy movie *Honey I Shrunk The Kids*, we visualised ourselves standing in the record groove. As we "walked along the groove" we concluded that although the suspension system was very efficient there were micro vibrations that could enter the platter and be picked up by the stylus in the groove.

'For years we thought our suspension was as good as it could be, but that micro movement of the subchassis was

having an impact on the sound. Certainly the new Delrin feet and bearing modifications improve the consistency of performance somewhat. However, I believe our Micro Vibration Stabiliser System to be the most significant improvement to the sound of the Delphi in its 30 year history.'





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## TURNTABLE



**ABOVE:** Rear view shows motor housing and DIN socket for connecting the Delphi's external power supply. Trim pots provide fine speed adjustment

Having spent several days enjoying the Mk VI's serene music making, it was time for a little experimentation. Changing to the new Clearaudio Stradivari V2 moving-coil [see p50] brought about an even more polished sound, with delicate highs but at the expense of some warmth and bass weight.

As the cartridge began running in (it was brand new) it started to gain a little bass power, however the global character of the Delphi's presentation was still evident – it's relaxed demeanour and control – notwithstanding the change in tonal colour. For delicacy and poise it's arguably in a class of its own. No wonder Oracle owners adore the deck, while many are those who can't afford one and spend a lifetime dreaming of owning one.

### EXTRAS AND UPGRADES

Oh yes, while the sophistication of the design and the fit and finish have improved considerably from model to model – and the setting up of the deck's suspension to level the subchassis is now child's play – so too has the price crept up over the years. An Oracle Delphi was always a big ticket item, almost twice the price of a Linn Sondek in the early 1980s I recall. Moreover, the prices quoted in this review do not include the Delphi's acrylic lid. Along with the spring-loaded aluminium hinges, which are, naturally, beautifully made as well, that'll be an additional £570 to you sir. Ouch!

And even though I wouldn't dream of owning this finely-tuned masterpiece without having the cover to protect it from dust, the design of the lid is arguably the least satisfying element of the design. Tension in the hinges at the rear holds the lid hovering in space

once you've lowered it to a position parallel with the platter. Meanwhile, the front and sides of the lid don't meet with the acrylic base to close fully like a clamshell.

Oracle has always understood that one of its turntables is a major investment for any vinyl lover. Consequently it has always served its customers well by maintaining a policy of upgradeability from one version of the Delphi to the next. Even though the changes to the subchassis and the addition of the Micro Vibration Stabiliser System are pretty major in terms of re-working decks, owners of Mk Vs need not feel disenfranchised whatsoever. Upgrade packages are already being planned and priced for those who want their decks brought up to 2010 specifications.

Even owners of earlier Delphis that featured an aluminium/composite sandwich subchassis will be accommodated eventually, although Jacques confessed it may take a little while longer to work out how to handle the upgrade process through its distributors worldwide. ☺

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Beautiful to behold, the Delphi Mk VI is also deliciously tactile in use. Pride of ownership is a given while it's reassuring to learn that Oracle is maintaining its upgrade policy. 'Bass heads' who thrive on moving lots of air might prefer a high mass, solid plinth turntable design but if you value image specificity, refinement and a relaxed balance with air and space, this deck should be at the top of your lust list.

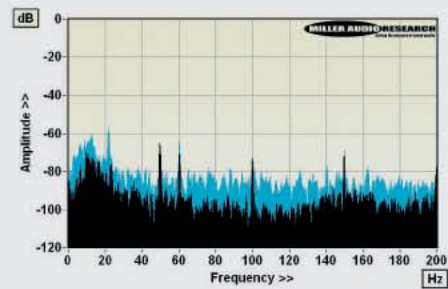
Sound Quality: 84%



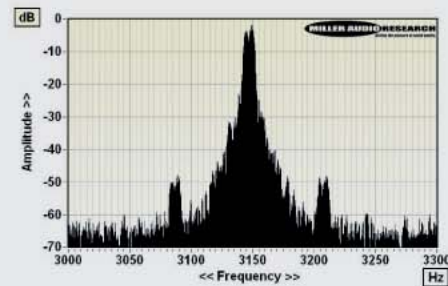
## ORACLE DELPHI Mk VI (£9345)

When, on occasion, we have the opportunity to lever a genuine audio icon into the laboratory it pays to be prepared for the unexpected, or at least the unusual. So it is here with the 'characterful' Oracle Delphi Mk VI. The basics are all here – a usefully swift start-up time of around 4 seconds and a very low hum and noise of –64dB (re. cartridge output at 5cm/sec). With or without the clamp, through-groove rumble amounts to –69.0dB which is close enough to the average vinyl noise floor although, unusually, this figure deteriorates by about 2dB when we measure rumble directly from the six-point bearing. In both cases the spectrum [see Graph 1, below] reveals not only the usual sub-20Hz structural noise and minor hum components but also a 60Hz peak almost certainly associated with the AC synchronous motor.

In practice this is of academic interest because any subjective impact is uncertain. Nevertheless that 60Hz drone turns up yet again as a pair of sidebands on the wow and flutter spectrum [see Graph 2, below], albeit at a sufficiently low level to add a mere 0.03% to the weighted total. Note that the sidebands take the same appearance as the main peak, itself a 'doublet' caused by a ±2Hz wow. While the latter is sufficiently low in frequency to bypass both the liquid 'MVSS' and mechanical sprung suspension, I cannot help but wonder if there's sufficient short-circuiting of the (low viscosity) silicone oil at 60Hz to 'couple' the motor to the subchassis. Readers are invited to view a full QC Suite report for the Oracle Delphi Mk VI turntable by navigating to [www.hifinews.co.uk](http://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 60Hz motor breakthrough



**ABOVE:** Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at 5cm/sec (plotted ±150Hz, 5Hz per minor division). Speed accuracy is good but note 60Hz flutter sidebands

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.29rpm (–0.13%)
Time to audible stabilisation	4sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.05% / 0.03%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	–69.0dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	–67.0dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	–64.1dB
Power Consumption	3W
Dimensions (WHD)	475x150x363mm



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# NAT Se1 MkII (£6762)

No, this isn't Japanese exotica – it's a world-class, single-ended triode powerhouse from Serbia! If you've had your fill of 300Bs, then here's a real he-man's amp  
Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

**C**onfession time: Serbia is not on my list of 'Top Countries That Produce High-End Equipment'. Before the arrival of the NAT Se1 MkII, I wouldn't have even used the words 'Serbia' and 'high end' in the same sentence, unless it was, 'I doubt that there's much high-end kit in Serbia.'

Stupid, arrogant me: NAT's Se1 MkII monoblock is nothing short of glorious, so it was my loss, not theirs.

But even before waxing lyrical about the sound quality, the fit and finish, the fast warm-up, the delicious details, I have to mention the single most important aspect of the Se1 MkII as far as my own audio prejudices are concerned. Because it features a 211 triode, I was automatically predisposed toward it, much in the same way that the presence of black olives add a point to the score of any dish I might eat. But the Se1s arrived not with reproduction 211s: they came with 211s packed in their original, circa-1945, military-issue boxes. NAT swears by new-old stock (NOS) tubes whenever possible.

## A GLASS ACT

Why do I get stupid whenever I see a 211? Maybe I'm in a minority, but for me it's one of only a cluster of valves – 845s also come to mind – that realises, or even exceeds the full bull hype ascribed to 300Bs but rarely achieved. They are liquid, warm, involving, magical *and* able to deliver enough power to drive something other than a frikkin' horn. And while I'm not going stake my life on NAT's 35W rating for a monoblock with a single 211, I have always found them to be embarrassingly more robust, powerful and palpable than any 300B.

As the images show, the direct-heated 211 enjoys pride of place on the Se1 MkII. The suffix indicates that this version improves on its predecessor with a power increase thanks to a 'special driver, super

tube', a military-grade 6N30P-DR; the third valve in the Se1 is a 6N2P-EV. The layout is very much in the current fashion, with a long chassis but a narrow frontal aspect – not a problem for a monoblock which only has two controls on its 10mm-thick aluminium fascia: on/off and a rotary to select impedance and zero or low feedback. Directly behind the tubes are the output transformer and the power supply. All that's left are the sockets on the rear panel, including IEC mains input, fuse sockets, paralleled XLR and RCA phono inputs and WBT speaker terminals.

NAT designed the Se1 with a short signal path free of passive components. In NAT practice, that describes a circuit with no coupling capacitors, nor inter-stage transformers. Their transformers are hand-wound, proprietary designs, to which NAT attributes improved frequency bandwidth. Indeed, they boldly state that the frequency response is 9Hz-60kHz.

Operation is pure Class A, with zero feedback, but you can also dial in a small amount of feedback from the front panel

rotary, for certain speakers or conditions, if you so desire. The bass tightens up with a low feedback setting, at the cost of some transparency or air. It's purely a matter of taste, as it's subtle rather than coarse.

Given the rarity of NOS 211s, you want to know that the tube in your amp is being cosseted. NAT has fitted the Se1 with an automatic bias circuit, so the user needs not worry about adjustments. According to NAT, 'sound quality is totally independent against power supply instability, because all stages in the amplifier have stabilisation.'

The impedance/feedback knob addresses only 4 or 8ohm speakers; I used the latter with 15ohm LS3/5As. They do, however, recommend speakers of over 90dB (at 8ohms) sensitivity, which I found possible to ignore: the amps worked perfectly in my 12x18ft room with Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor Elipsa and Wilson Sophia 2 as well as LS3/5As. Indeed, they positively adored the latter.

Although hefty and chunky at 25kg apiece, and needing floor space of 300x520mm – they're also relatively tall



**RIGHT:** The heart of the amp – a direct-heated 211 triode tube from General Electric and 'packaged under the direction of the Chicago Signal Depot' on April 30th, 1945



**LEFT:** The lone rotary helps fine-tune the sound for matching feedback to a specific speaker; minor benefits also occur from disc-to-disc

digging out some Cajun material to hear if my suspicions were correct: the NAT Se1 MkIIIs are almost embarrassingly free of extreme treble issues. Indeed, you'll wonder how they manage to remove so much of the sibilance from bright recordings without robbing the music of other high-frequency information.

### BLINDING BOLDNESS

Is the treble rolled off? If so, it certainly doesn't sound that way. With the pedal steel on the new Poco live album, recorded for a small audience at CBS studios back in 1971, the metallic chime that distinguishes that instrument from all other string-driven-things rang through with blinding boldness and clarity. Utterly absent was any tube haze, despite the 211s in use being made around the same time the Second World War was ending.

Poco, too, possessed a percussionist in George Grantham with imagination and power. His apt use of woodblock came through with exactly the sound I remember as a kid, standing mere yards away from my brother as he practiced. It had the right attack, the correct, authentic overtones.

Anyone who attributes lifelike sound to SETs, especially if a short, uncluttered signal path is part of the recipe, will glow just like the 211 doing all the hard work. This amp sings in the truest sense.

Not only my preference, but also one of SETs' greatest virtues, is the female voice. I rarely listen to Rickie Lee Jones because her music makes my skin crawl, but I have to admit her voice is interesting, a mix of textures as far removed from Linda Ronstadt as one could get, while not emulating the soul diva raunchability available from Aretha to Alicia to Dusty to Bonnie. Feeling masochistic, I dug out 'Easy Money', that most egregious of audiophile clichés, only to discover that the NAT rendered it involving on a number of unexpected levels.

It juggled richness and detail in equal measure, the iconoclastic percussive touches (tambourine?) enjoying the same in-the-room clarity and chiming as Poco's pedal steel. Her voice slithered – maybe it's her reptilian vocals that suggest she could be a cast member of *V* – with the flow ➔

at 260mm – the Se1 MkIIIs were up and running in record time after completing the brief 'soft start' procedure to prevent thumps – and I mean record time. It was as if they needed no warm-up time to reach their optimal performance. The company states that every unit enjoys a 100-hour burn-in at the factory, which also accounted for the speed at which I felt the amps were ready for assessment.

YTER cables were used throughout. Marantz's CD12/DA12 CD player fed the Audio Research Ref 5 preamplifier, the latter driving the NATs with XLR cables even though the amps are not balanced: the XLRs are there in what the company calls 'pseudo-balanced.'

### READY, SET, GO...

Aaah, SETs! My greatest love-hate in all of audio, though horns come close. Anyone can hear why 300B single-ended triodes

seduce so many listeners: they're the comfort food, the guilty pleasure of high-end audio, like an occasional Big Mac. But *haute cuisine* they ain't, for they are far too flawed to be taken seriously: power issues, soft frequency extremes, bass sorely in need of audio Viagra. On the upside, they caress vocals, they can on occasion image like a David Lean production, they rarely induce listener fatigue (they merely put you to sleep) and they allow their owners to be insufferably smug.

What the NATs encourage you to listen to is not far removed from what appeals to SET users in general. They love strings, never delivering a violin screech unless that's what the musician played. There's a silkiness to the top end that had me

'Those who attribute lifelike sound to SETs, will glow like the 211'

### NAT'S TUBE FIRSTS

However crass this sounds, the NAT is a shocker because it comes from Serbia. With all due respect to any Serbs reading this, it's not like the country has an impressive track-record for high-end valve amps. Which makes the Se1 MkII deceptive: its fit and finish are the antithesis of the other newbies, the still-learning Chinese. If anything, the workmanship approaches that of the Japanese.

NAT's focus is on valve pre- and power amps, the company preferring triodes, short signal paths, zero or low feedback, NOS tubes and the single-ended topology. And it's not slavish copiers of existing circuits. It claims a number of tube firsts, including a direct-coupled, zero-feedback line-stage; a battery-powered, zero-feedback phono stage; a 160W, direct-heated triode, anode-coupled, zero-feedback, single-ended power amp, etc. I stand corrected.

## VALVE AMPLIFIER

## LAB REPORT

### NAT Se1 MkII (£6762)

Sixty-five years since this direct-heated 211 triode left the General Electric depot it is realising a new and surprisingly impressive lease of life in this (genuinely Class A) single-ended power amp from NAT. Tested in 'low feedback' in preference to 'zero feedback' mode, the Se1 MkII fully stabilises within just one minute of switch-on. There's no protracted warm-up period as the Se1 MkII achieves 0.096% distortion at 1kHz/5W/8ohm in under 60 seconds, a figure maintained to within 0.001% over the subsequent two hour lab test period.

Power output is not the 35W claimed by NAT (with no reference to frequency, load or distortion I might add) but rather closer to 23W/8ohm at 1% THD and 27W/8ohm at 2% THD. Via the 4ohm tap it achieves 18W/4ohm at 2% THD while under dynamic conditions it's possible to realise 27W, 22W (3% THD), 12.5W (4% THD) and 7W (5% THD) into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads [see Graph 1, below]. Sensitive, easy-to-drive speakers are a must even if the very linear 1.3ohm output impedance is quite low by valve standards. The A-wtd S/N ratio of 87.9dB (re. 0dBW) is respectable just as the response is sufficiently flat and extended (-0.2dB at 20Hz to -0.8dB at 20kHz). The latter will vary somewhat with speaker load impedance, however.

Distortion increases gently with output (0.056% at 1W to 0.55% at 20W) and at very low bass frequencies (1.7%/20Hz to 65%/5Hz at 5W/8ohm) while the limited feedback also pushes it up at the top end (4.5%/20kHz - see Graph 2, below). Readers are invited to view a comprehensive QC Suite test report for the NAT Se1 MkII monoblock power amps by navigating to [www.hifinews.co.uk](http://www.hifinews.co.uk) and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



**ABOVE:** Both RCA and XLR inputs are single-ended while the single 4mm speaker output posts are coupled to both 8ohm and 4ohm transformer taps via a front switch

that also renders bass either fluid (good) or static (bad). This is one lush, liquid-sounding amplifier, without giving the impression that it's also lacking control.

### GET THE FUNK OUT

As a rule, I try not to waste my time nor yours when reviewing SETs by feeding them funk. From my experience 300B-equipped SETs are categorically the least capable amplifiers I can imagine for addressing classic era Temptations, early Hall & Oates, any Sam & Dave. There's no better track for embarrassing 2W amplifiers than Mel & Tim's 'Too Much Wheeling And Dealing', which has rolling Stax bass, sassy southern horns and duelling vocals. Oh, the punch! The attack! Damn, is this amp fast and tight and controlled. And yet, there's never any transistor-like over-etching, no glassiness, no harshness. They climb without unnecessary drama, stop when the note ends, or fade with the requisite decay. They make even old CDs aurally palatable.

It almost goes without saying that the spatial concerns are dispatched almost with insouciance. Using the Toshiba-EMI 1983 CD of the Beatles' *Abbey Road*, the imaging was to-the-millimetre precise, the layering of the more

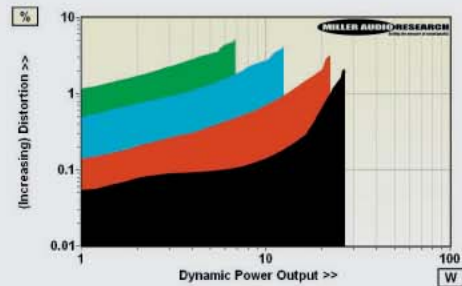
dense tracks delineated so that you could ascribe front-to-back depth to what you know were recordings built up in the studio. And that bass on 'I Want You (She's So Heavy)' - it slithered across the floor like the fog in a grindhouse horror flick: palpable yet elusive, enveloping yet opaque.

But then you experience this amplifier's majesty: 'She Came In Through The Bathroom Window' taunts any system to rise to the occasion. Power, grandeur, clarity, all in a musical fragment. The NAT delivers it to the listener on a plate. Meissen, set in front of you by a white-gloved waiter. ☺

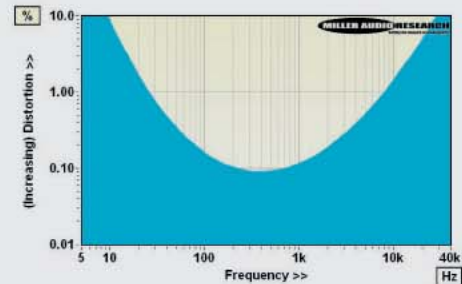
### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

For me, a no-brainer: the 211 has long been my fave tube: it's one of the few that, when used as a single-ended triode, possesses real guts. It is the 300B's sexy, classy, funky evil twin, Angelina Jolie instead of Barbara Cartland. But the best surprise - and this sounds terrible if you're politically correct - is that such a staggering amplifier comes from a country with no tradition for high-end gear. I love it.

Sound Quality: 88%



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



**ABOVE:** Distortion vs. frequency from 5Hz to 40kHz (5W/8ohm). Distortion still increases at the frequency extremes in 'low feedback' mode

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<2% THD, 8/4ohm)	27W / 18W
Dynamic power (<5% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	27W / 22W / 12.5W / 7W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	1.30-1.01ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)	-0.2dB to -14.2dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/20W)	253mV / 1130mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/20W)	87.9dB / 100.9dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz re. 5W)	0.087-4.5%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	195W/195W (each)
Dimensions (WHD)	150x260x520mm (each)

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Ken Kessler Review – Hi-Fi News, March 2009

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# JBL Project K2 S9900 (£28,000)

They might look like a throwback to the 1960s, but JBL's latest Project K2s reach new peaks in resolution and can claim to be among the finest speakers money can buy  
 Review: **John Bamford** Lab: **Keith Howard**

**W**hen informed I had a pair of horn-loaded JBL floorstanders coming my way for auditioning I confess I wasn't particularly enthralled. And I was quietly cursing as several of us groaned under the 73kg weight of each enclosure, man-handling them down the stairs into my basement listening den.

Then I heard them. It was mid-afternoon when they were first fired up, powered by my resident Mark Levinson No.383 amplifier. Before I knew where I was it was well after midnight... and by the time I powered down and reluctantly went to bed I suspected I was falling in love with a very special transducer indeed.

OK, I'd an inkling that JBL's Project K2s should be pretty tasty inasmuch as I know a couple of people in the UK who heard the previous K2 S9800s (nearly a decade ago) and said they were tremendous. Given the K2's astronomical price I should hope so too. But they never said they were utterly fabulous. From a casual glance this fresh-up design dubbed K2 S9900 is similar in appearance and specification to the outgoing K2 although there are numerous detail changes. It was launched in the US and Japan last year, but only now is it available in the UK. *HFN* managed to purloin the first pair to land in the country.

Why so expensive? JBL's 'Project' speakers, as with Levinson high-end electronics,

come from parent company Harman International's high-performance AV (HPAV) division that showcases cutting-edge technology in specialised products [see boxout]. So while a mass-market JBL speaker might be manufactured in quantities of tens of thousands for worldwide distribution, a JBL Project speaker is carefully hand-assembled more likely in batches of tens.

And if the cosmetic design of this latest K2 doesn't exactly scream 'modern hi-tech', close inspection reveals a complex cabinet structure with meticulous attention to detail and immaculate finish.

## MAGNETS AND MDF

The enclosure's 25mm-thick curved panels are formed using two decoupled layers of MDF, grooved to allow flexure and then locked into the desired radius with a backing material, the voids between the grooves filled with a foam and glue.

The curved baffle provides the sidewalls for the main horn, with top and bottom horn 'lips' formed of moulded Sonoglas. The cabinet's bracing is a shaped form over which the curved panels are applied, while the interlocking woofer baffle module is a separate shell. This has additional bracing and an extra layer of MDF to make it 45mm thick.

Omnipresent is the company's 1500AL-1 woofer featuring an Alnico magnet and 380mm (15in) layered paper pulp matrix cone with Aquaplas



**RIGHT:** Crossover at 900Hz blends the 15in bass driver with a horn-loaded 4in magnesium alloy compression driver. A beryllium supertweeter is brought in at 15kHz to cover two octaves of ultrasonics



## CLIMBING THE PEAKS

JBL's flagship designs – its 'Project' loudspeakers – have a lineage dating back to the Lansing Hartsfield of 1954. Designed to out-gun Klipschorns of the era by utilising better drivers and a more substantial cabinet, the corner horn Hartsfield was followed in 1957 by the Paragon stereo speaker that resembled a large dining room sideboard. Today's Project designs are the K2 and Everest, this new K2 S9900 being something of a scaled down version of the latest £44,000 Everest DD66000 that sports two 15in drivers side by side. K2s and Everests are used as the main stereo pair in JBL's Synthesis high-end home theatre systems.



damping and foamed rubber surround. Similar to the 1500AL driver used in the 'S9800, its voice coil length has been increased to 25.4mm (from 20.3mm) while improvements to the design provide greater cooling and a 25% increase in power handling. The motor structure alone weighs 16kg, and is supported on a cast aluminium frame.

Meanwhile the speaker's '476Mg' 100mm (4in) diameter high-frequency compression driver is a third larger than the beryllium unit that is used in the 'S9800, employing a newly designed magnesium alloy diaphragm with diecast zinc phase plug, edge-wound aluminium voice coil and neodymium magnet assembly.

The speaker's primary crossover point is low at 900Hz (24dB/octave), the compression driver/horn working up to a claimed 22kHz. JBL calls the K2 an 'augmented 2-way' as an ultra high frequency compression driver is 'turned on' at 15kHz to cover a further two octaves. Mounted to a separate Sonoglas horn this '045Be-1' unit uses a 25mm beryllium diaphragm just 0.04mm thick, its aluminum ribbon voice coil wound without a former and attached directly to the diaphragm.

The supertweeter's tiny phasing plug assembly is made using stereo lithography techniques, while small changes to the surround shape and clamping have yielded a claimed 5dB of increased output above 30kHz compared with the '045Be' driver used in the previous K2.

The K2's enclosure has a 100mm diameter flared port with a tuning frequency of 34Hz that vents at the rear. While it's an imposing speaker to be sure, its shallow (front-to-back) footprint coupled with the dispersion characteristics of the horn-loaded drivers makes it surprisingly living room friendly. The enclosure rests on four stainless steel foot/spike assemblies, with stainless steel coasters provided to protect wood and tile floors from damage from the spikes.

### TOTALLY FRESH


My very first impressions, which were of tremendous detail resolution throughout the frequency range, were not misguided. Nor was my initial sensation of love-at-first-hearing. By the time I'd lived with them for a week I was besotted with these speakers.

What grabbed me from the minute they were first playing music in my room was their extraordinary transparency to source recordings. This is going to sound clichéd I know, but time after time I found myself observing hidden details that I simply

'After a week  
I was simply  
besotted with  
these speakers'

never knew were there, despite my privileged position of having played host to countless high-end audio components over the years.

Familiar tracks such as Deep Purple's 'Highway Star' from 1972's classic *Machine Head* [Warner/Rhino R2 75622] that I've been listening to since barely out of short trousers – and have owned for a decade even in its short-lived hi-res DVD-A reissue – sounded totally fresh. What was usually a wall of dense sound was nothing of the sort, the separation between Blackmore's rabid guitar chops and Jon Lord's dirty, grunge-laden Hammond organ proving a revelation. Never before have I been able to hear so clearly exactly what the band members were playing and so precisely how they were playing it.

Likewise on Frank Zappa's *Joe's Garage Act One* [EMI CDS 7 90087 2], the first 'Central Scrutinizer' track that opens the piece with Zappa's heavily treated vocals has always proved difficult to decipher with so many backing tracks muddying the mix. Not so with the 'S9900s; individual strands of the dense production were delightfully separated and the vocal lines clear as crystal glass. It was as if someone had allowed me to plug headphones straight into the studio's mixing desk... 

## JBL PROJECT K2 S9900 (£28,000)

Our measured sensitivity of 91.5dB on pink noise falls a little short of JBL's claimed 93dB. This might seem a little on the low side for a speaker of this size featuring horn-loaded mid and treble drivers but it's achieved without recourse to low, amplifier-straining load impedance. Minimum modulus is 4.8ohms at 20kHz although phase angles here are quite high, giving rise to a minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) of 1.9ohms at 18.9kHz. Lower down the frequency range, where low EPDR is more significant, other dips to 3.6ohms at 79Hz and 3.1ohms at 6.2kHz indicate that this is an easy loudspeaker to drive.

The on-axis amplitude response [Graph 1, below] measured on the axis of the midrange horn (this is closest to typical ear height for a seated listener) has a slight downward trend to 10kHz, followed by a rollercoaster last octave typical of horn-loaded tweeters. The latter undulations give rise to large frequency response errors for a speaker of this price of  $\pm 5.9\text{dB}$  (same value, both speakers), 300-20kHz, but these figures are significantly reduced below 10kHz. Even with the large extreme treble undulations, pair matching is tight at  $\pm 0.9\text{dB}$  over the same frequency range. Bass extension is a little disappointing at 42Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz, diffraction-corrected near-field measurement) but boundary effects will improve this in-room. Again typically of horn-loaded speakers, the cumulative spectral decay waterfall [Graph 2, below] is 'grassy' but without any prominent resonant ridge. The initial plateau is caused by the 'double spike' nature of the impulse response. An equipment failure precluded measurement of harmonic distortion. KH



**ABOVE:** Bi-wire/amp input terminals, plus HF and Presence controls for fine tuning. Cover plate above hides a switch to disable the crossover for active drive

but with a subwoofer strapped to my backside to give the listening experience some visceral 'oomph'.

Then there was the title track from Steely Dan's 1974 *Pretzel Logic* album [MCA MCD11917]. The thick-sounding bass and drums couldn't disguise the recording's vintage however the clarity of the boogie-woogie keyboards and layered harmony vocals was again a revelation, and the electric guitar leaped out of the mix with striking brilliance as if it had been recorded only last month.

### PANEL BEATER?

This has been happening time and time again during the weeks that the K2s have been in residence. Recordings I thought I knew intimately have been openly exposed, revealing previously unobserved details of production techniques applied to instruments. Indeed, these K2s provide a level of transparency through the midrange and treble one might normally associate with a sweet-sounding electrostatic panel. What they do is illuminate a recording's individual constituents, exposing the subtlest of details such as reverberation tails disappearing all the way down to silence. Stereo imaging and the recreation of image depth is fantastic, doubtless due to the dispersion characteristics of the horns causing me to hear more direct sound from the transducers

and less reflected sound from the side walls than I'm accustomed to in my listening room.

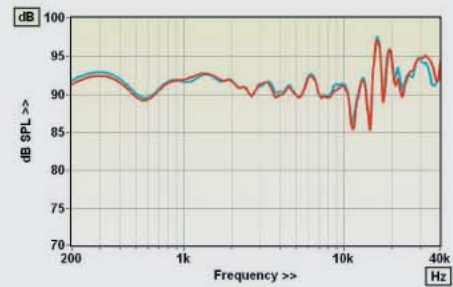
Meanwhile the brilliance of the K2's high frequencies makes the sound of a wooden stick striking a cymbal or drum skin uncannily realistic. The sound is brightly lit, yet this K2 pulls off a neat trick of also being forgiving of harsh recordings and never 'shouting'. I wouldn't have thought it possible for a speaker to be so analytical while being so thoroughly musical and easy-on-the-ear in equal measure.

And while lovers of infrasonic bass such as me might hanker after deeper bass, there's no denying that 15in woofer packs a might punch, with a dynamic realism that can make you wince. ☺

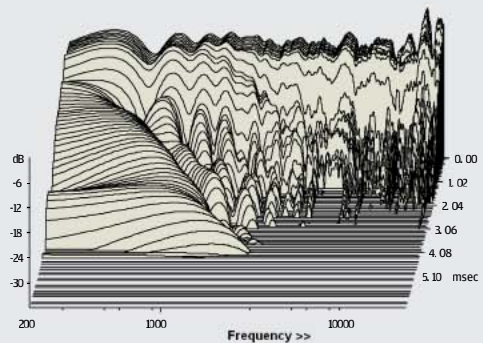
### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

While you won't require an enormous listening room to enjoy them thanks to their shallow cabinets, you'll certainly need deep pockets to afford them. The sound the K2 S9900s produce is quite remarkable, combining revelatory analytical detail with a surprisingly forgiving nature. So while brightly-lit they remain easy on the ear, producing mellifluous and addictive music making. To hear them is to want them.

Sound Quality: 89%



**ABOVE:** The peaks and dips above 10kHz are typical of horn tweeters but have limited subjective impact



**ABOVE:** Waterfall shows a freedom from major cabinet or driver resonances but also illustrates its peaky HF

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms - Mean/IEC/Music)	92.0dB/91.5dB/91.2dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	4.8ohm @ 20kHz 48.6ohm @ 58Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	-57° @ 66Hz 40° @ 49Hz
Pair matching (200Hz-20kHz)	$\pm 0.9\text{dB}$
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	42Hz / >40kHz/>40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	N/A (see above)
Dimensions (HWD)	1200x560x350mm

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# NAD C316BEE (£260)

The latest incarnation of NAD's 3020 integrated amp promises improved power efficiency, greener credentials plus an input for an iPod. Is it still an icon, or a bygone?  
 Review: **Richard Stevenson** Lab: **Paul Miller**

**N**ostalgia is a wonderful drug. It affects the memory mostly, turning any period or situation in one's misspent past into 'the good old days'. Back in the early 1980s, I had a NAD 3020 integrated amp and a Thorens turntable. I had just discovered music of the '60s and '70s, and playing The Stones under the influence of fine beverages was about as simple and perfect as life has ever been. Actually I was a penniless student in cheap digs, drinking home-brewed beer that tasted like Dettol and wearing sandals in mid-winter because my last pair of trainers had fallen apart. I remember coming in from college of an evening and using the NAD integrated as a foot warmer.

## COOL RUNNING

Sitting here with both feet perched on NAD's new C316BEE integrated, I am drowning in nostalgia. The first thing of note in the near 30-year evolution of NAD's budget hi-fi amplifier offering is that the latest incarnation, the C316, definitely doesn't run as scorching hot as my old 3020. I do not appear to be in danger of waffle-toasting my soles so clearly; like the Nikes beside the leather sofa and the glass of Philip Shaw No 17 Merlot in my hand, things have moved on. And, if I can waft away the misty memories of those good old days for a moment, mostly for the better too.

Essentially the C316 has the same organic NAD DNA as its ancestor but owes more of its design to its direct predecessor, the C315EE (see *HFN*, Nov '07). Like the original barnstorming 3020 the C316 promises bags of power, stripped-down simplicity and audiophile quality sound on a tight budget. It certainly offers a similar level of cosmetic

charm, the dull grey casework and black buttons offering all the visual excitement of a bowl of cold porridge.

The blue LED power and source lamps are a subtle addition to the fascia and nail the C316 as a child of the 21st Century. Gone are the red LEDs of the old 3020. They indicated the power output of both channels combined as a cheap substitute for Technics' sexy analogue VU meters of the day. The C316 is perhaps even more innocuous looking on the shelf. It is not as tall and the fascia plate's rounded corners both soften the lines and should avoid all those forearm scrapes of old when you reached over to fiddle with the connections.

It's no featherweight for your £250 either, weighing in at a respectable 5.5kg. The case is a good few microns thicker than a lot of budget AV receivers on the market today and through the case vents you can see the beefy transformer and polished heatsink. To aid cooling, the bottom of the heatsink protrudes through the base metalwork to become an integral part of the floorpan. OK, the fascia is plastic and the volume knob feels like the lid from a can of deodorant, but at least the buttons

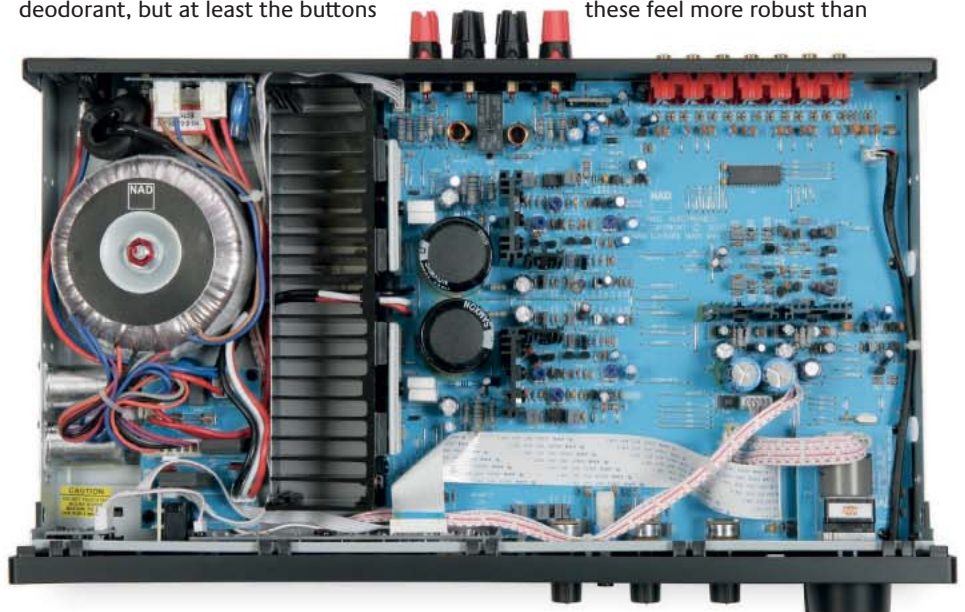
don't appear to want to wobble and spontaneously come adrift like they did on the 3020. In fact the buttons feel very positive in use, and the main power and tone defeat buttons are nicely weighted

Like audiophiles of the late '70s and '80s, hi-fi enthusiast C316 owners will no doubt sneer at the tone controls on offer and refuse to use them. Just as well, because they have clearly been lubricated with sand.

## SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Connectivity has come on a very long way, not least of which is the inclusion of a front-mounted audio input for an iPod or other music player device. Gold plating that connection is a slightly ironic touch, while gold plating the headphone socket and all the RCA inputs around the back is a very welcome upgrade.

There's no shortage of actual connections either, with seven stereo inputs and a single tape loop out. Unfortunately, there is no phono input or on-board phono stage which, like the iPod connection, is rather a sign of the times. You only get a single set of speaker binding posts, but as these feel more robust than



**RIGHT:** Below the transformer you'll see two quartz halogen bulbs (in metal cans) connected in series with the high voltage PSU rail, allowing momentary peaks in output to be delivered way in excess of the amp's notional 40W rating



those adorning some of the £1000 AV receivers that have passed my way recently, they can only be saluted.

Under the lid the C316 is about as solid and as honest as the budget integrated amplifier breed gets. It is a thoroughly analogue amplifier design, complete with chunky power supply, big capacitors and a neat layout. The specification sheet eye-candy promises wideband amplification, a solid 40W per channel and NAD's proprietary PowerDrive circuit. This claims to offer high current drive and the ability to handle tricky loads with gay abandon (he said, summarising NAD's marketing hyperbole somewhat). The cynical hack in me must also poke some derision at the company's claim to green credentials by using lead-free solder. It's actually a legal requirement.

The compact remote control is a very welcome addition, particularly as it will also control NAD's matching CD player. It works a treat, the amp answering to commands swiftly and the motorised volume knob rotating at a reasonable pace. There is the inevitable thump through the speakers every time you swap between inputs, which I half suspect has been engineered in to remind one of this amp's heritage. While such a remote control would have been so very useful on the 3020 while I was at college, it would have only ended up at the bottom of a pint of Dettol. Mind you, if it was built like the 3020 it may well have survived it – my old unit had regular beer baths and was once used to

chuck a wheel of an Austin Mini to stop it rolling down a hill when the handbrake failed. I would say, still wistfully and in soft focus, they don't make 'em like that any more. Looking at the C316, I think they probably still do.

### MIGHT IS RIGHT

I really wasn't expecting to be much impressed by the C316BEE. After all, my ears and my sense of hi-fi reality has been somewhat tainted by the long procession of high-end amplifiers that I have been lucky enough to review since those heady times back in the '80s. When the most recent list of exotica to pass my way includes models like Musical Fidelity's £20,000 Titan and even NAD's own incredible £5000 M2 integrated, one can only brace oneself for the twang of budget wine, surely.

Ah, how wrong I was. The C316 is an absolute barnstormer of an amplifier, mixing surprising might with a rich and easy flowing sound that is impossible not to like. This amp rocks, and as the bongo introduction to 'Sympathy For The Devil' (from *Beggars Banquet* on SACD) kicked in, the C316 simply begged you to give it a handful of volume, put on a leotard and strut around the room shouting 'ooh-hooo, ooh-hooo' to the track's backing vocals. In short, the swelling volume and scale wholly defies this amp's budget roots.

**ABOVE:** Not as feature frugal as you might expect – remote control, six inputs and a front mounted iPod/MP connection

Admittedly, reviewing a lot of AV amps, I am much more familiar with makers claiming a cart load of beans for what is actually a small bag of peas where power is concerned. I suspect (not having seen the test results at time of writing) that the C316 produces a fair bit more than 40W in real terms. Perhaps

NAD should make a bigger fuss of its capabilities and contrast it with the 3020 which, on paper at least, was underpowered compared to rivals of the day.


'The NAD C316 is an absolute barnstormer of an integrated amp'

Even driving my sizeable Tannoy Dimension TD12s, with their horribly complex load that dips below 2ohms in places, the NAD gets a firm grip and just rocks. A wave of goose-bumps ran up and down my spine in anticipation of Jagger's epic opening line. As the drums and howling guitars joined the mix you couldn't help but appreciate this amp's fundamental grasp of musicality. The lead vocal was crisp and unmistakable, and clearly imaged correctly just left of centre. The top edge of Jagger's voice had plenty of its natural rawness and, while the top end found a few of the really high details, it's clearly never going to sear your ears with an acerbic edge or serious sibilance.

## NAD'S 3020 LEGACY

There are products in hi-fi's history that define their time, and a whole generation of products follow in their wake – none more so than NAD's 3020. Launched at the tail end of 1978, NAD's 3020 was the first major hi-fi component to benefit from a combination of British design expertise and the low cost of Far Eastern manufacturing. It came to market as a cheap low-powered and under-featured amp, but behind the stunningly dour cosmetics beat the heart of a true audiophile design. Offering performance to match UK amps of up to ten times the asking price, the 3020 became an instant hit. It was warm and inviting-sounding and while its imagery and rather soft top end got a hard time from the Linn/Naim obsessed UK hi-fi press of the day, it became the budget amp of choice. Suddenly minimalism became the norm in hi-fi amplifier design. Overseas manufacturing later became essential at the budget end of the market and the 3020, over 30 years on, has evolved into the latest NAD C316EE.

## TOP TIMING TOO...

Usually I find amps with such a smooth top end rather like a pair of old slippers, comfortable and inviting but never likely to double as dancing shoes. Not so the NAD, which seems to find plenty of energy and foot-tapping get up and go, even though its HF presentation is on the safer side of neutral. The rhythmic and infectious bass is every bit the hero of the presentation, sacrificing analytical detailing and fastidious tonal definition for something organically right with excellent timing. Its bass is far from 'one-note' and the depths it plumbs set the standard at the price, but it's not 

## INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER



**ABOVE:** Plenty of stereo inputs, but no phono stage and only a single tape loop, and speaker binding posts with high-end feel and solidity. The remote control handset is compact and responsive

the sort of amp you would want if you're an aficionado of classical upright bass. It just can't resolve LF detail to that extent.

That's not its only rough edge either. The upper midrange is a little on the hard side, lending solidly struck piano notes a slightly glassy edge. The piano on 'Promise Me' from Beverley Craven's eponymous first album on CD is very much out there in the mix. Each note is played with authority and it is this that leads the track. If you are listening critically for the naturalness of the instrument, the NAD makes the piano sound a little too stressed, a little too forced. I suspect a different choice of speaker (one without the Tannoy's horn-loaded tweeter, for example) might allow the NAD to sound a whole lot more relaxed through this region.

Either way it's not a big enough issue. Firstly because at £250 that is a seriously minor gripe, and secondly because this amp is incredibly good at hiding its own shortcomings behind its fabulously fluid overall presentation.

### ROCKER'S DREAM

By the time Craven's voice joins the party, its sultry charms washing over you like honey on a summer's day, any rougher edges of the diamond are lost to the overall sparkle. It is relaxed, rhythmic and inviting and a sound that you can listen to for hours and hours without tiring of it. I know, I did. It's not an amp that will have you searching through your Chesky discs or your 24-bit reference masters in pursuit of high-brow audiophile lucidity, but it will have you picking out beloved tracks, old favourites and '70s rock anthems one after the other. The infectious combination of a well rounded bottom end, midband coherence and a silky

smooth but articulate top end is an old rocker's dream.

I found myself digging out songs that I hadn't listen to in, well, decades. 'Assault and Battery/The Golden Void' from Hawkwind's epic *Warrior At The Edge Of Time* was a track that defined my university years and, damn, I had forgotten how good it was. The C316 neatly smoothed the splashily recorded hi-hat that permeates the track, underpinned the bass with real weight and allowed the guitars and keyboards to soar out of the speakers.

This is an amp that opens the door and lets you into the music like no other budget amp I have heard. You just fall into the track as the lyrics say, 'lose my body, lose my mind, blow like wind, flow like wine'.

The C316 is a long way from being perfect, but its real magic is in not allowing any of its own shortcomings get in the way of producing a thoroughly enjoyable and musical experience. Thinking back, that is probably exactly how I would have described the the NAD 3020 and exactly why it became the amp that shaped the hi-fi heydays of the 1980s. ☺

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

NAD's C316EE is not going to outperform any high-end reference amp but it offers a refreshing dose of honest musicality that makes it ideal for a second system. Yes, it's a little laidback at the top and the bass is rather fulsome and simplified, but its smooth, rhythmic and utterly infectious presentation glosses over these minor shortcomings with ease. Like the 3020 before it, this integrated is sonic gold.

Sound Quality: 71%

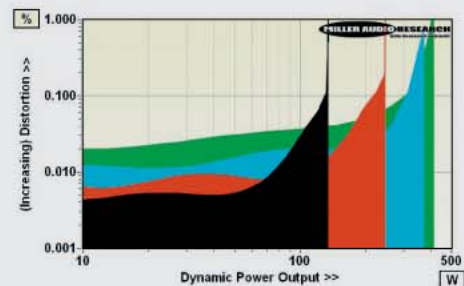


### NAD C316BEE (£260)

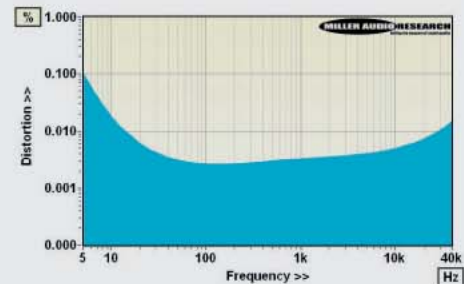
One thing we've all come to expect from NAD's amplifiers – big and small – is the ability to deliver a dynamic power output that's hugely out of proportion with their typically modest specification. And so it is here, for while the unassuming C316BEE is rated at a mere 40W/8ohm, it goes on to produce 2x50W/8ohm and 2x75W/4ohm on the bench, a foretaste of the massive headroom available under dynamic conditions. With my standard 10msec power test, uniquely plotted against distortion [see Graph 1, below], the C316BEE delivers 135W, 250W, 375W and 410W into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm, an incredible result that represents a dynamic headroom of +4.3dB into 8ohm loads and a maximum current of 20.2A. Not bad for a 40W amp (!) and an indication that the C316BEE will drive speakers that are ostensibly way out of its price bracket.

This is also a very widebandwidth amp whose response stretches from 20Hz (-0.1dB) out to 100kHz (-0.3dB) from a usefully low output impedance of 0.04ohm. Noise is very low too, extending its A-wtd S/N ratio to 95dB (re. 0dBW). This figure is around 10dB higher than average and represents a very wide 'window', for good or ill. Distortion is both low and consistent with power output at ~0.004% from 1W-40W/8ohm through the midrange, increasing to 0.001% at 20kHz and 0.007% at 20Hz. Distortion rises quickly at subsonic bass frequencies, however, reaching 0.1% at 10W/5Hz [see Graph 2. below]. All in all, this little amp packs a big punch.

Readers are invited to view a comprehensive QC Suite test report for NAD's C316BEE amplifier by navigating to [www.hifinews.co.uk](http://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 frequency from 5Hz to 40kHz (10W/8ohm). Distortion climbs at subsonic bass, rather than high treble frequencies

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	50W / 75W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	135W / 248W / 376W / 410W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.039-0.081ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)	-0.1 to -0.3dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/40W)	30mV / 198mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (for 0dBW/40W)	94.8dB / 110.8dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.0016-0.0115%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	20W / 195W (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD)	435x80x287mm

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HI-FI PLUS. ISSUE 68,



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# hi-finews GROUP TEST

There's nothing simpler, or potentially more elegant, than a single-driver speaker. We reveal the pros and cons of avoiding a crossover network in the quest for the perfect sound

## 'SINGLE-DRIVER' LOUDSPEAKERS £1500-£5000

### TESTED THIS MONTH

AUROUSAL VS	£1650
CURVI MODEL 1 v2	£4995
HAIGNER RHO	£2600
JOHN BLUE JB8B	£1554
ZU ESSENCE	£4160



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

As Albert Einstein famously observed, 'Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.' So just how simple should a hi-fi loudspeaker be? All the products in this group test implicitly ask that question, and all concur that the conventional design approach of using multiple drive units with a crossover to slice up the audible spectrum between them is an elaboration too far.

In fact all the speakers here want, at heart, to be single-driver models, and two actually are (the Curvi Model 1 v2 and John Blue JB8B). The other three (Aurousal VS, Haigner Rho and Zu Essence) are almost single-driver designs but incorporate tweeters to fill in the very top of the audible range.

Let's face it, this makes them all a little quirky. In the grand scheme of things, these speakers espouse a minority design philosophy that some in the mainstream majority would go further and call misguided. But the quest for simplicity has a long and honourable history in audio and – as the renewed appetite for valve amplifiers and vinyl replay

shows – is enjoying something of a resurgence in popularity.

### AN HONEST SOUND

So exactly what are the pros and cons of the single-driver approach? Aficionados of full-range drivers talk of their honesty, clarity and integrity of sound – where might these qualities originate, and what price do you pay to achieve them?

On the credit side, the absence of a crossover means, first, no issues with capacitor sound. Although this is still a controversial area for some, the plain fact is that no speaker manufacturer who aspires to the best performance can choose to ignore it. B&W's latest literature explains the benefits of the new capacitor type fitted to its 805 Diamond, for example. But if there's one thing better than a really good capacitor, it's no capacitor at all.

The absence of a crossover is good news in other ways too. All passive crossovers of higher than first order introduce phase distortion and, contrary to what you will read or hear in some quarters, that phase distortion is audible. At crossover to the tweeter there is

also typically a significant change in directivity due to the difference in diaphragm size between the midrange driver and tweeter, and there can be further off-axis perturbations caused by their physical separation. As this crossover is generally placed at around 3kHz, a frequency at which the human ear is close to its most sensitive, these effects are difficult, some would say impossible, to disguise. A full-range driver sidesteps them.

But there are significant downsides too. Full-range drivers suffer coloration because of cone breakup effects, they typically have a drooping treble output that is traditionally propped up using a resonant 'whizzer' cone, they beam what treble output they have which results in a lack of 'air' in their sound and – to maximise sensitivity – some have very small excursion capability, resulting in high levels of low frequency distortion.

Read on to discover how these merits and demerits balance out for the five varied designs in this group.

REVIEWS AND LAB TESTS  
BY KEITH HOWARD

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



# Aurousal VS (£1650)

**A**urousal is best known to date for its smaller, stand-mount A1 Mk2. With its single Jordan JX92S driver, it inevitably has some downsides in respect of sensitivity, output capability and high frequency beaming – all of which the larger, more elaborate VS addresses.

It uses two paralleled Jordan drivers per cabinet – thereby doubling sensitivity and output capability, albeit at the cost of halving the impedance – and supplements them with a 25mm soft dome tweeter, the contribution of which can be varied via an ‘ambient brightness’ control alongside its single pair of input terminals. Moreover, Martin King’s ‘reflex-loaded transmission line’ bass loading is adopted to enhance low frequency performance.

The benefit of the tweeter is that it props up the VS’s off-axis output at high frequencies, thereby obviating the closed-in, airless treble to which full-range drivers are prone. But there is no low-pass filter to the main drivers, only a high-pass capacitor to the tweeter. This tweeter boosts the Jordan unit’s already slightly prominent on-axis treble, demanding that the VS be toed away from the listening seat.

Acoustic Insight’s favoured solution is to toe them in such that their axes cross in front of the listening position; the alternative, which I preferred, is to fire them almost straight down the room, which ensures least spectral disparity between the direct sound and side wall reflection. Whichever you adopt, speaker alignment and tweeter level have to be juggled to achieve optimum results.

## UNFORCED POWER

And what fine results those are. The doubled-up Jordan drivers deliver a natural tonal balance and fine clarity but cheat their familiar treble limitations thanks to the influence of the tweeter. The result is an enviable amalgam: wide, deep imaging, great seamlessness of sound and unforced powers of analysis that inform as

well as entertain. On the 24/96 download of Jimmy Cobb’s ‘I Had the Craziest Dream’ the sound was everything you could wish – warm and spacious but with no loss of rasp on the trumpet or harshness when it was blown hard. Bass was clean, tuneful and, for the size of cabinet, unusually well extended.

The remixed version of ‘Come Together’ from the *Love* album reaffirmed the bass qualities and overall balance of the sound, the VS delivering the tight rhythmical grasp this track demands while effortlessly separating all the musical strands. It might seem strange to claim that the same qualities were apparent in a Haydn piano trio from an early AIX Records DVD but this piece too requires rhythmical dexterity and natural tonal textures.

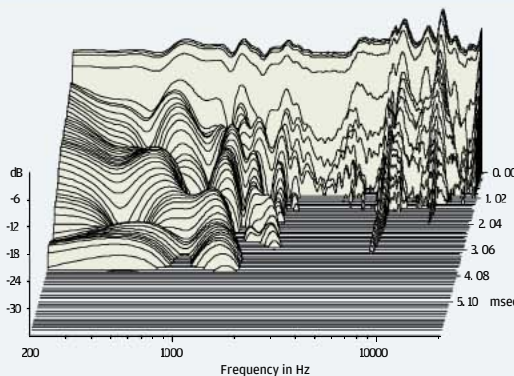
In Sara K’s understated take on Don McLean’s ‘Vincent’ the VS captured the singer’s unique vocal timbres while doing full justice to Chesky’s spacious and natural-sounding recording. Inspirational.

Sound Quality: 85%



## LAB REPORT

Acoustic Insight claims 89dB sensitivity for the VS but our measurements put the figure a little higher at 89.8dB on pink noise. This is achieved without incurring a punishing load, the minimum modulus being 3.3ohm at 34Hz and the minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) 2.1ohm at 47Hz. Although on-axis frequency responses errors (tweeter off) are a little on the high side at  $\pm 4.4$ dB and  $\pm 3.9$ dB respectively, much of this is due to the peaks above 7kHz caused by cone breakup in the Jordan driver. These will be suppressed off-axis. The largest pair matching errors occur here too, the matching below 7kHz being commendably tight. Bass extension is good at 37Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz) but there appears to be a strong line resonance at about 160Hz. The CSD waterfall [see Graph] is not as clean below 7kHz as the Curvi’s, suggesting that the ridges between 600Hz and 2.5kHz are cabinet related. KH



<b>Sensitivity</b> (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	91.0dB / 89.8dB / 89.5dB
<b>Impedance modulus min/max</b> (20Hz–20kHz)	3.3ohm @ 34Hz 10.4ohm @ 71Hz
<b>Impedance phase min/max</b> (20Hz–20kHz)	-30° @ 90Hz 32° @ 57Hz
<b>Pair matching</b> (200Hz–20kHz)	$\pm 1.6$ dB
<b>LF/HF extension</b> (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	37Hz / 24.4kHz/23.7kHz
<b>Dimensions</b> (HWD)	1075x215x268mm

# Curvi Model 1 v2 (£4995)

If Moore or Hepworth had been speaker designers, they might well have come up with something like the sinuous, aptly named Curvi. When I reviewed this distinctive transmission line design in its original form (*HFN*, Dec '08) I concluded that, while it showed promise, it was too tonally inaccurate to justify recommendation at its high price, since increased to almost £5000.

To his credit, designer Chris Liauw took my criticisms on the chin, hired a consultant to refine the design and came up with this revised version. Its eye-catching cabinet, meticulously constructed from layers of CNC-machined plywood, remains the same, as does the single Jordan JX92S aluminium-coned full-range drive unit. But internally there have been changes both to the baffle step compensation network – a parallel combination of inductor and resistor in series with the driver – and to the damping of the transmission line.

Also changed is the base arrangement: the original, rather spindly plywood legs have given way to a substantial slate plinth. The previous ineffectual spikes have also been replaced by long, slender cone feet that are sharp enough to penetrate carpet.

What hasn't changed, inevitably, is that this is a low sensitivity design with limited output capability, particularly at low frequencies. Unlike many single-driver designs it is not well suited to use with low-power amplifiers, and its natural habitat is small to medium sized rooms, not baronial halls. As expected, the sensitivity was too low to make my Quicksilver SETs a viable match – this is one single-driver loudspeaker where the classic pairing with a low-power valve amp isn't really on the agenda.

## GETTING BETTER

It's a long time since I heard the original Curvis but even at this remove it's very obvious that their major tonal imbalance has been banished in the v2. It delivers a tonally warmer, altogether more

natural sound than its predecessor. But problems remain, principally with the Jordan's high treble performance which lacks 'air' because of its constrained off-axis output, and has a slight comb and tissue paper quality to its sound, probably because of the prominent breakup modes above 8kHz.

Partnered with my Exposure amps, it gave the best account of itself on the Sara K track which sounded open and spacious and conveyed the characteristic timbre of her voice to good effect. It did less well on the Jimmy Cobb jazz piece, even though the trumpet sound was good, mostly because the percussion sounds didn't, quite literally, ring true.

While this was less of a problem on the messier cymbal sound of 'Come Together', this track didn't quite have the drive I expect of it. While the transmission line loading achieves fair bass extension, the Curvi doesn't sound quite as punchy and agile as I'm used to hearing.

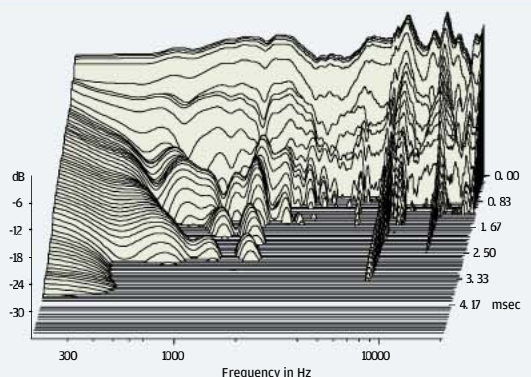
Sound Quality: 75%



## LAB REPORT

The Jordan JX92S driver has quite low specified sensitivity (85dB) so it's no surprise to find that the Curvi has by far the lowest sensitivity of this group at 84.1dB on pink noise. On-axis frequency response is, of course, similar to that of the Arousal VS (without tweeter), showing the same resonant peaks in the high treble but reduced ripples between 600Hz and 2kHz. On-axis response errors are a little larger at  $\pm 5.4$ dB and  $\pm 4.9$ dB, and so too is matching error at  $\pm 2.0$ dB but the largest disparities are again at high frequencies.

A minimum impedance modulus of 6.1ohm and minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) of 3.6ohm make this an easy load to drive. Bass extension is fair at 53Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz) but the near-field measurement indicates multiple line resonances. At higher frequencies, as the CSD waterfall shows [see Graph], resonances are well controlled below driver breakup. KH



<b>Sensitivity</b> (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	85.4dB / 84.1dB / 84.2dB
<b>Impedance modulus min/max</b> (20Hz–20kHz)	6.1ohm @ 27Hz 19.1ohm @ 20kHz
<b>Impedance phase min/max</b> (20Hz–20kHz)	-24° @ 72Hz 35° @ 48Hz
<b>Pair matching</b> (200Hz–20kHz)	$\pm 2.0$ dB
<b>LF/HF extension</b> (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	53Hz / 24.9kHz/22.9kHz
<b>Dimensions</b> (HWD)	1000x230x450mm

# Haigner Rho (£2600)

**H**aigner is an Austrian company, founded and led by David Haigner – a man who has an idiosyncratic but closely argued approach to loudspeaker design. The Rho actually rates as the most ‘normal’ of the company’s four-model range, its key ingredient being a wideband main driver with whizzer cone that is horn-loaded at the rear and tilted backwards on the sloping front baffle to point its axis at seated ears. This unit works up to around 3.5kHz where it is slowly crossed over to a dome tweeter that bolsters the main driver’s treble output. Unusually this is placed well towards the back of the top panel of the cabinet, in a small cylindrical housing.

Unlike the two ‘tweeter-assisted’ models here, then, the Rho really does have a crossover – that is, a network with low-pass filtering for the main driver as well as high-pass filtering for the tweeter. But the ‘very gentle crossover slopes’ (sub-first-order) and set-back tweeter are intended to create the impression of listening to a single, full-range driver. Strictly a two-way design, the Rho nonetheless remains true to the core philosophy of channelling the bulk of the audible frequency range through one drive unit.

Although it may appear to shout high sensitivity, the Rho is specified at 90dB, a figure increasingly matched by modern conventional designs. But while many of those resort to lowered impedance to achieve that figure, the Rho – which incorporates impedance compensation within its crossover – presents a virtually constant 7ohm impedance from 100Hz up. This minimises the changes in frequency response that would otherwise occur when a power amplifier of high output impedance, like a typical SET design, is used.

## LAIDBACK DELIVERY

The Rhos’ strength is that they produce a large, deep, box-free image and have a relaxed tonal balance that guarantees smooth, glare-free sound. But the latter is

also a weakness in that the laid-back delivery suits some types of music – and listeners – better than others.

On Jimmy Cobb’s ‘I Had the Craziest Dream’ it was at its best, serving up this relaxed swing jazz with oodles of space, sheen and charm. There was no hint of edge on trumpet and the double bass was tuneful, although a mild lack of presence and slightly ‘dirty’ cymbal sound were noticeable.

The big, silken sound was initially attractive on Sara K’s ‘Vincent’ but the longer the track played the more obvious it became that the Rhos were not fully expressing this singer’s distinctive vocal character, and that they didn’t have the presence or precision to let Chesky’s purist recording really shine.

On the Haydn piano trio the result was just too laidback to be convincing. There was a lack of bite to the strings and the piano sound was a little bloated and coloured. All told, the infectious energy of the piece was diminished.

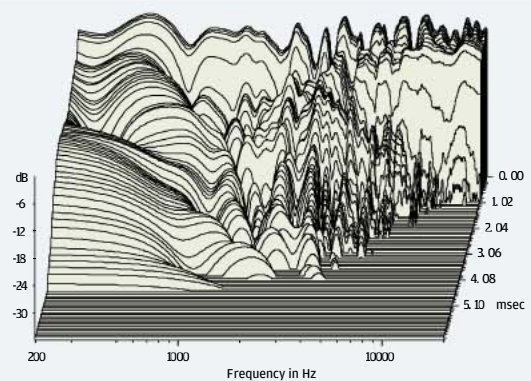
Sound Quality: 80%



## LAB REPORT

Haigner’s claim of 90dB sensitivity is only mildly optimistic according to our measurements, our pink noise figure being 89.3dB. On-axis frequency response errors are high at  $\pm 5.9$ dB and  $\pm 7.4$ dB, principally because of large switchback ripples between 2kHz and 10kHz which appear to be in part due to low crossover rates coupled with the 0.6msec time misalignment of the tweeter.

Pair matching errors are high at  $\pm 6.0$ dB but the worst disparities occur over narrow frequency ranges, suggesting that breakup modes in the main driver diaphragm play a large part in the response unevenness too. A minimum modulus of 5.5ohm at 8.8kHz and minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) of 3.2ohm at 17.3kHz mean that this is an easy speaker to drive. Bass extension is fair at 49Hz ( $-6$ dB re. 200Hz) but the CSD waterfall [see Graph] indicates multiple resonances between 2kHz and 10kHz. KH



<b>Sensitivity</b> (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	89.2dB / 89.3dB / 88.8dB
<b>Impedance modulus min/max</b> (20Hz–20kHz)	5.5ohm @ 8.8kHz 29.0ohm @ 65Hz
<b>Impedance phase min/max</b> (20Hz–20kHz)	$-44^\circ$ @ 79Hz $35^\circ$ @ 20kHz
<b>Pair matching</b> (200Hz–20kHz)	$\pm 6.0$ dB
<b>LF/HF extension</b> ( $-6$ dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	49Hz / 23.4kHz/23.8kHz
<b>Dimensions</b> (HWD)	810x280x510mm

# John Blue JB8B (£1554)

**M**ade in China by John Blue Audio, the JB8B is one of the two true single-driver speakers in this test. At first glance you might mistake its paper-coned full-range driver for a Lowther – it's the right colour, has a whizzer cone and sports a Voigt-like bulbous phase plug at its centre – but in fact it's John Blue's own. Let's just say that it borrows from its famous forebear.

John Blue's website, perhaps because of the language barrier, is unforthcoming about most aspects of the JB8B's design. What I can tell you about it, officially, is that its chunky cabinet is formed of 24mm-thick, high-pressure bonded MDF which is finished in a fine cherry veneer with a satin rather than gloss finish. Inside a proprietary damping material and divided internal volume act to suppress standing waves within the enclosed air. Internal wiring is solid silver. According to its meagre specification this is the second-most sensitive speaker here at a quoted 93dB and it achieves this apparently without recourse to low impedance, the nominal value being 8ohm [see Lab Report].

Off the record, four adhesive pads are placed symmetrically on the rear face of the whizzer cone, presumably to control its vibrational behaviour in an ideal manner. And although the JB8B is reflex loaded, it doesn't have today's ubiquitous flared circular port tube. Instead the reflex port is a thin, wide slot at the bottom of the front baffle which, BBC-like, is attached to the rest of the cabinet by cross-head screws.

## **FULL OF PROMISE**

John Blue promises extended highs, detail in the critical midrange and a solid bottom end, but I felt the JB8B delivered little of this agenda. Within seconds of playing the first notes you know that it is upper-midrange/lower-treble prominent, with a lack of high treble and lower mid. Because of this and manifest cone resonances it is coloured to a degree that few who know the sounds of real instruments will find acceptable.

It was at its best, no question, on simple, small-scale material like the Chesky-recorded Sara K track, where it avoided any bass heaviness on the acoustic guitar but added an obvious sibilant emphasis to her ordinarily expressive vocal. On the Schubert solo piano piece there was little warmth or weight to the instrument, particularly on fortes, and there was obvious coloration, to the extent that it sounded nothing like a fine concert grand in the hands of a master.

Chamber music fared no better, the Haydn trio again lacking warmth and weight on the piano and adding to it a scratchy, coloured violin sound. On 'Come Together' from the re-mixed *Love* album, the missing bass weight robbed the track of its impetus while the cymbal sound was tizzy and the vocals unnatural – even in the context of a track like this. Even Jimmy Cobb's mellifluous jazz failed to shine, evincing more tizzy treble, an edgy trumpet sound and marked lack of tonal warmth.

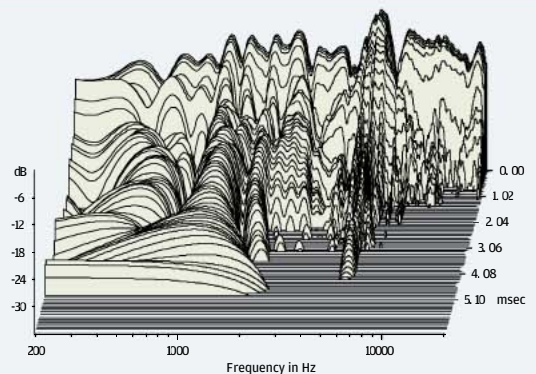
Sound Quality: 55%



## LAB REPORT

John Blue claims 93dB sensitivity for the JB8B but that is a significant underestimate, our measurements showing 96.5dB on pink noise. This is achieved without resort to low impedance, the minimum modulus of 6.4ohm at 37Hz and minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) of 3.5ohm at 62Hz confirming this is an easy load to drive.

Large on-axis response errors of  $\pm 8.0$ dB and  $\pm 7.6$ dB are due to its highly uneven output with a convex trend in which upper midrange and lower treble frequencies are favoured relative to lower midrange and high treble, with a particularly large peak around 6kHz. Given this, the pair matching error of  $\pm 2.5$ dB seems almost a good result. Modest bass extension of 60Hz ( $-6$ dB re. 200Hz) reflects both the high sensitivity and response shape. Ridges in the CSD waterfall [see Graph] indicate strong resonances between 800Hz and 2kHz and at the  $\sim 6$ kHz response peak. KH



<b>Sensitivity</b> (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	97.3dB / 96.5dB / 97.5dB
<b>Impedance modulus min/max</b> (20Hz–20kHz)	6.4ohm @ 37Hz 45.5ohm @ 90Hz
<b>Impedance phase min/max</b> (20Hz–20kHz)	$-52^\circ$ @ 99Hz $50^\circ$ @ 79Hz
<b>Pair matching</b> (200Hz–20kHz)	$\pm 2.5$ dB
<b>LF/HF extension</b> ( $-6$ dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	60Hz / 21.8kHz/21.5kHz
<b>Dimensions</b> (HWD)	450x280x350mm

# Zu Essence (£4160)

Essence is a not inappropriate name for this speaker from Zu Audio in the US because it aims to capture the magic of single-driver operation while obviating the issues of poor treble performance by adding a ribbon tweeter. This is genuine ribbon, not a leaf tweeter, which contributes 'sparkle and resolution' to the last octave of the audible range and extends the ultrasonic response beyond 40kHz. The 260mm main driver, of Zu's own design and manufacture, has a secondary cone (whizzer) to help it reach up that far and is subject to no low-pass crossover, making this what – for want of a better term – I describe as a 'tweeter assisted' design, like the Aurousal VS.

This is easily the largest speaker in the group and the age-old knuckle-rap test suggests it doesn't have the most rigid or well damped of cabinets. Bass loading is novel in that the internal volume connects to the outside via the narrow gap between the two plates of the plinth, between which can be seen the lower end of a foam plastic wedge which projects into the cabinet. Zu calls this 'ZuRG loading' but it appears to function much like a conventional reflex enclosure.

Connection is via an unusual clamp arrangement best suited to spade or bare-wire connections and not very friendly to 4mm plugs. Note that the Essence – which is sold direct to customers in its homeland but via a nascent distributor network in Europe – is priced in US dollars, so cost fluctuates with exchange rate.

## TOE IN, TOE OUT

It was suggested to me by the importer that the Zus often sound their best if you listen slightly off the forward axis, with the speakers toed in a little more than required to point them at the listening position. I concur although, perversely, I marginally preferred them a little toed out from the listening position rather than toed in. Clearly this is an area for experimentation, the outcome probably depending on

both taste and room. Playing Jimmy Cobb's cool 'I Had The Craziest Dream' through the Zus put an immediate smile of recognition and relief on my face – this was a sound I recognised, one which combined the essential ease of a high-quality 24/96 recording with effortless insight into both the playing and the recording. The trumpet sound was particularly fine: raspy when required but never harsh. The narrow, deep notch in the presence band does occasionally result in the treble sounding a little detached but this is a speaker which hides its technical shortcomings surprisingly well, principally because it sounds so together, so right.

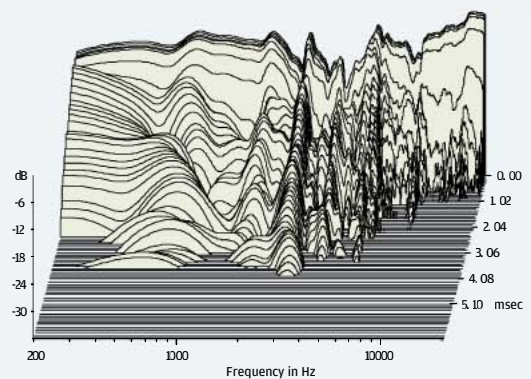
It shone on all the other test items too, making the most of the Quicksilver amps' liquid midrange on the Schubert and Sara K items but preferring the bass grip and drive of the Exposures on 'Come Together'. This is a sound I could live with, one that truly delivers on the single-driver promise.

Sound Quality: 85%



## LAB REPORT

Zu claims 97dB 'efficiency' for the Essence but our figures indicate a sensitivity of 92.2dB on pink noise. A minimum impedance modulus of 4.3ohm at 20kHz and a minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) of 2.2ohm at 10.9kHz both indicate that this is an easy speaker to drive, if not as easy as suggested by Zu's specified minimum modulus of 9ohm, which applies up to about 7kHz. High on-axis response errors of  $\pm 10.8$ dB and  $\pm 11.6$ dB are due to a deep, narrow notch in output between 4 to 5kHz, after which the response recovers and then rises towards 20kHz. Pair matching error is high too at  $\pm 2.6$ dB but the largest disparities occur around the notch and above. For the size of cabinet, bass extension of 55Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz) is a little disappointing. Multiple ridges in the CSD waterfall between 1.5kHz and 7kHz [see Graph] indicate breakup resonances of the main driver diaphragm. KH



<b>Sensitivity</b> (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/JEC/Music)	94.1dB / 92.2dB / 91.2dB
<b>Impedance modulus min/max</b> (20Hz–20kHz)	4.3ohm @ 20kHz 34.9ohm @ 70Hz
<b>Impedance phase min/max</b> (20Hz–20kHz)	-57° @ 5.7kHz 40° @ 56Hz
<b>Pair matching</b> (200Hz–20kHz)	$\pm 2.6$ dB
<b>LF/HF extension</b> (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	55Hz / >40kHz / >40kHz
<b>Dimensions</b> (HWD)	1250x305x305mm

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*"The opening acoustic guitar had sparkle and good presence – plectrum, strings and body all having commendable realism whilst the delicate percussion behind the intro was resolved well"*

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# GROUP TEST VERDICT

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**A**ny notion that single-driver (or almost-single-driver) speakers deserve to be lumped into one category is dispelled by the five examples assembled here. They are diverse in design approach, sufficiently diverse in sensitivity that not all are suitable for partnering with low-powered valve amplifiers, and very diverse in their sound quality. In fact this is the most disparate sounding line-up of loudspeakers we've ever assembled for a *Hi-Fi News* group test.

Off the shortlist goes John Blue's JB8B which sounds as uninspiring as the grim-looking measurements suggest. It has a limited bandwidth at both frequency extremes and is as coloured as a kaleidoscope. In my opinion it doesn't rate as high fidelity.

I admire the freshness of the Curvi Model 1 v2, the painstaking cabinet construction and unique visual statement it makes, leaving the competing speakers here looking staid by comparison. I also admire its designer's determination to fix the v1's tonal balance problem. I just wish I enjoyed its sound more. It's light years ahead of the John Blue JB8B, certainly, and if your diet is principally small-scale music then you may even prefer it to the Haigner. But it can't escape the inherent limitations of its single Jordan driver, any more than I can escape the fact that there are many more complete performers available for less than its £5k asking price.

## MUSICAL PRESCRIPTION

Some audiophiles, I'm sure, will consider the Haigner Rho just what the doctor ordered. If you find many modern speakers to be overly clinical and too 'in your face', the big, smooth sound of the Rhos

may be just what you're craving. I found they worked better with the Quicksilver valve amps than the solid-state Exposures, although maximum output capability is then limited and bass control suffers. But they measure less than wonderfully, particularly in the lower treble, and their inaccuracies can be heard.

And so to what are comfortably my favourite two speakers of this test: the Arousal VS and Zu Essence. They are the two 'tweeter

of eliminating a conventional mid-treble crossover remain.

Money no object it would be a tough choice between the Zu's ease and scale and the VS's greater precision. But any assessment has to take account of the fact that the VS costs about 40% of the Zu's asking price in the UK, a difference that buys a lot of amplifier or music. On that basis the winner of this test, offering outstanding value for money, is the Arousal VS. ⏻

*'The tweeter-assisted models win comfortably'*

is surely no coincidence. Both deliver the essential honesty and integrity of sound that single-driver enthusiasts

relish but without the lacklustre extreme treble that comes of struggling whizzer cones and narrowed directivity.

## IT'S AMAZING

It's amazing, in fact, how the tweeters in these two speakers deflect attention from the shortcomings of the main driver. This was particularly obvious in the Arousal VS because the Curvi provided a reminder of what the Jordan sounds like without a tweeter's support. Get the tweeter level setting and the toe-in of the VS just right and the Jordan's lack of 'air' and slightly tizzy quality disappear but the benefits

**RIGHT:** Zu's Essence is Highly Commended while the (relatively) affordable VS from Arousal wins our Outstanding Product award



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

# Clearaudio Stradivari V2 (£2390)

Now updated in 'V2' form, Clearaudio's esoteric Stradivari cartridge employs tiny coils wound of 24-carat gold wire and a wooden body hand-crafted entirely in-house  
 Review: **John Bamford** Lab: **Paul Miller**

It's not just their multi-fingered top plates that make Clearaudio's esoteric moving-coil cartridges so unusual but also the fact that they are hand-crafted entirely in-house by this German maven of analogue replay. Unlike many turntable manufacturers that have pick-ups made for them and 'branded' by OEM suppliers (often from the Far East, although UK's Goldring and Denmark's Ortofon also have substantial OEM manufacturing sides to their businesses) Clearaudio's highly-skilled workforce painstakingly winds the miniature coils that comprise each cartridge's generator assembly.

## LOVE OVER GOLD

As with the majority of its more costly MC pick-ups, the coils in the Stradivari are wound using 24-carat gold wire. Now in 'V2' form [see boxout, right] the core design remains largely unchanged employing what Clearaudio calls its 'symmetrical generator assembly'.

You can see in our photograph that the boron cantilever is exposed, so the utmost care is required when handling the

## MODIFIED GEMS

Like Clearaudio's £1700 Concerto cartridge (see *HFN* Sept '06), the Stradivari's body is made of wood – aged ebony in this case rather than the Concerto's satiné wood – and the generator and stylus are claimed to be of finer tolerance. One by one all of Clearaudio's MC cartridges have been updated during the past year or so to 'V2' status. Modifications include 12-finger metal damping blocks on their top plates designed to further reduce resonance and coloration. The latest V2 designs also employ lower mass coils, with coil impedance reduced from 50 to a claimed 30ohm.



**ABOVE:** Described as a hybrid parabolic with very low tip mass, Clearaudio's tiny Micro HD stylus is mounted on a highly exposed boron cantilever. Generator coils are 24 carat gold

cartridge during installation. The design of the generator obviates the requirement for a traditional cantilever suspension as the pivot point is at the centre, with two coils mounted behind and two in front to carefully balance the system. Eight magnets are arranged equidistant from the coils to form a uniform field within which the coils move.

The distinctive 12-fingered shape of the cartridge body is designed specifically to control resonance characteristics, says Clearaudio. It now sports an additional metal top plate where it mates to a tonearm's headshell. Thankfully, the mounting holes are threaded, which aids installation when handling such a delicate and precious transducer.

Common to all its moving-coils is Clearaudio's tiny Micro HD stylus, the polished part measuring 0.08x0.14mm. The company says it weighs a mere 0.00016g and the overall height, including the shank that beds into the cantilever, measures just 0.4mm.

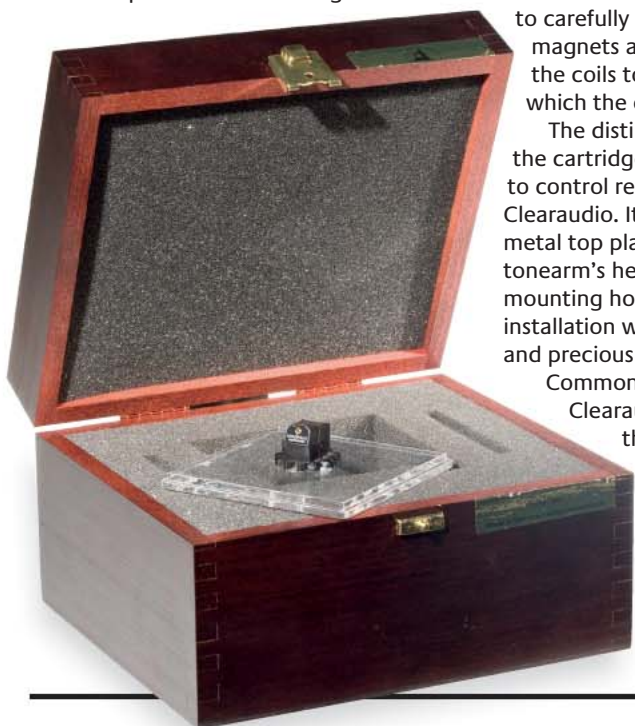
Output is just high enough to drive some MM

phono inputs in very quiet systems [see Lab Report]. I used my resident Sensor Prelude MM/MC phono amplifier made by RCM Audio that features comprehensive loading options available via dip switches and can confirm that the Stradivari proved largely insensitive to loading. Recommended tracking force is unusually high at 2.8g.

## A DIFFERENT BEAT

Initially the Stradivari V2 was installed in an SME Series IV tonearm fitted to Oracle's latest Mk VI version of the Delphi turntable [see p22]. I'd been warned by Clearaudio's importer that the cartridge would need considerable 'running in' before giving of its best so I was not particularly concerned when initial impressions were of a somewhat 'sat on' character.

Listening to King Crimson's 'Neal And Jack And Me' from the album *Beat* [EG Records EGLP 51] the sound was commendably smooth and easygoing. With its metronomic percussive details mixed





# LAB REPORT

## CLEARAUDIO STRADIVARI V2 (£2390)

to the fore, combined with Adrian Belew's nasal vocal character and Robert Fripp's staccato guitar in-fills, the sound of *Beat* can all too often appear strident and 'cold'. Not so here, the Stradivari delivering an easy-on-the-ear tonality with sweet treble detailing. What appeared missing was the potency of Tony Levin's bass, which seemed to lack energy and power.

### IDEAL BALANCE

After a few days' use the character of the cartridge did indeed change noticeably, delivering far more 'get-up-and-go'. The title track on Jan Garbarek's *I Took Up The Runes* LP [ECM 1419] was redolent in texture and space, this 1990 digital recording so typical of ECM Records' productions sounding deliciously ambient and atmospheric.

Again, where Garbarek's distinctive soprano saxophone can prove quite a challenge with its piercing tone the sound struck an ideal balance of smoothness and detail, ameliorating the recording's digital 'edge' that can prove problematic in many replay systems. Meanwhile the familiar low-end grunt of Eberhard Weber's bass added gravitas to the rousing composition.

Returning to King Crimson's *Beat* LP the sound had clearly increased in subjective bass power and energy after the cartridge had seen a few days' use. Nevertheless, the formidable 'wallop' I'm accustomed to from my Townshend speakers was still somewhat lacking.

Fitting the cartridge in my Rock Reference/Excalibur tonearm combination changed the sound entirely. Well, no, not entirely, inasmuch as there was still the same smoothness and refinement to treble detail, but now bass muscle was considerably increased.

Perhaps the Stradivari V2 is not best matched to the suspended-subchassis Oracle that does itself have a delicate and sweet demeanour, as in the Rock turntable the cartridge displayed considerably more brawn and vigour. Now Tony Levin's Chapman bass stick had real slam in the King Crimson

recording. And the drums and bass on Jan Garbarek's album were now delivered with tremendous clout.

Indeed, prolonged listening to the Stradivari V2 in the vintage Rock Reference/Excalibur revealed that its robust bass character is what makes listening to music with his transducer particularly compelling. The sharply-focused recording of the London Philharmonic that I often use as a 'reference', *Arnold Overtures* [Reference Recordings RR-48] sounded free-flowing and enthralling. While the glaring brass and intense percussion were not as dazzling as often observed when listening to this fabulous LP – the cartridge appearing rather lush in

'The choir's haunting 'chant' was nothing short of magical'

this respect – the power and weight of the orchestra was strongly evident and this made for a gripping musical performance.

Revisiting Pink

Floyd's *Atom Heart Mother* album engineered by Alan Parsons and Peter Bown at Abbey Road studios in 1970 (a treasured Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab 'supercut') [MFSL 1-202], the smoothness of the Stradivari V2 made the haunting 'chanting' of the backing choir nothing short of magical. Providing a direct vein into the music, the earthy-sounding Hammond organ and punchy bass during 'Funky Dung' was rich and authoritative. There was tremendous energy here, bringing this vintage recording truly alive. Did the hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention? You bet they did. ☺

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Clearaudio's reputation for making cartridges that sound engaging is deserved. The Stradivari V2 allows extended fatigue-free listening – appealing when listening to modern rock recordings that can all-too-often sound strident. It's kind to surface noise too, with a smooth balance that's delightful on massed strings combined with 'punch' in the bass that adds drama to orchestral works.

Sound Quality: 82%

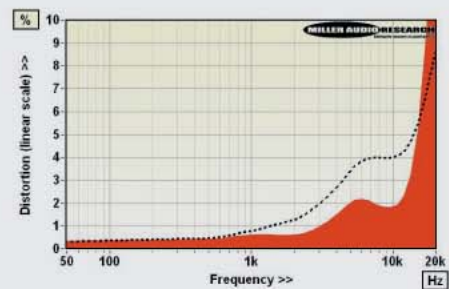


Tested into Clearaudio's recommended 300ohm load impedance, its latest Stradivari V2 pick-up delivered some 675uV which is just slightly shy of its rated 0.8mV at 5cm/sec but comfortably ahead of many competing 'low output' MCs. Clearaudio attributes this healthy output to the combination of eight high intensity magnets and the balanced array of all its 'V2' MCs. Nevertheless it's still not quite in the 'high output MC' category suitable for use with standard MM inputs. The channel balance was acceptable at 0.4dB and distortion low at <1% up to 3kHz, on the right channel at least [see Graph 2, below]. Interestingly, this sample's tracking was slightly superior on the left, holding firm on the 300Hz torture tracks right up to the highest +18dB modulation (just 0.75% distortion). At this point the right channel had let loose, generating some 11% THD. At the lower +15dB groove modulation, both channels held to <0.5% distortion which, at a 2.8g downforce, should ensure secure tracking with 99.9% of all LPs.

The Stradivari V2 offers a usefully flat response that's essentially true to ±1dB right up to 15kHz [see Graph 1, below] where it drops swiftly away. This is partially a function of design and of the high 30 degree VTA but it's sufficient to ameliorate the very highest frequency hiss. Of course, it's possible to tweak the rake of the micro HD stylus by adjusting the rear arm height. Readers are invited to view a QC Suite test report for the Clearaudio Stradivari V2 pick-up by navigating to [www.hifinews.co.uk](http://www.hifinews.co.uk) and clicking on the red 'Download' button. PM



ABOVE: Left (black) and right (red) frequency responses, lateral groove modulation at -8dB re. 5cm/sec. Flat to within ±1dB up to 15kHz



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

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Generator type/weight	Moving-coil / 7.0g
Recommended tracking force	2.7-2.9mN
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	675µV / 0.42dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	15cu / 12cu
Vertical tracking angle	30 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	80µm / 75µm
L/R Distortion (-8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.48-8.6% / 0.41-14.7%
Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.75dB to -5.2dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	27dB / 22dB

# LavryBlack DA11 (£1234)

Among a plethora of studio-grade headphone DAC/amps, here's one with a feature for headphone devotees who want it out of the head: 'Playback Image Control'!

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

Of late, we in the domestic audio sector have been discovering truly clever devices that studio denizens take for granted, including a product not commonly offered by makers of high-end audio gear: combination headphone amp/DAC/preamps. US audiophiles' discovery of the Benchmark started the ball rolling outside of studios. Now, they're everywhere.

Lavry Engineering produces A-to-D converters, computer audio and surround processors, mixers and the like, but the one that plays right into our hands is the DA11. To show you how it creates mild schizophrenia, even among listeners with a common goal, while some users are fascinated by it as a DAC, I'm more excited by its role as a headphone amp. That it does both so well is a perfect endorsement of its suitability in a high-end audio system, especially where space is a concern: this is a single-box solution for two functions, that happens to be as small as a 'netbook', at mere 'half-rack' size, or only 9.5in across.

## 21ST CENTURY TREATS

A true child of the modern era, it allows professional users to access everything a studio needs if it is to function with all of the latest tools on offer. That means seamless integration with computers, so its 'connectability' is universal. If you're an open-minded audiophile rather than a hair-shirt purist, and (like me) are eager to get the most out of high-res downloads, high-def sources and other 21st century treats, the DA11 offers four inputs at the back – XLR, Optical, USB and RCA – with the USB operating up to 24-bit/96kHz. No driver is needed for it to work with Windows or Mac operating systems. It even has a 'Remote ready' mode for use with any universal remote control.

Thanks to studio origins, the front panel enables quick access to something

**RIGHT:** Fed from a compact switchmode power supply, Lavry's digital and analogue stages make extensive use of surface-mount components. SRC and DACs are all from Analogue Devices

not really of much use in domestic audio: selection of balanced, unbalanced, Pin 2 hot or unbalanced Pin 3 hot, sparing engineers any need to open the chassis and move jumpers. Also offered are signal inversion, display dimming, Output On/Off (for 'real panel output signals', with the headphones remaining on), and a number of user settings including last setting stored in memory for future power ups and 'Loud click elimination' to protect both the headphone and rear panel analogue output during power up and power down.

All functions are accessible via tiny bi-directional toggle switches. They include setting and exiting selections in sub-menus, as well as separate left-and-right toggles for choosing the degree of stereo widening, more of which in a moment. Volume is also via a toggle, and digitally controlled, where I would prefer a funky, ol' analogue rotary. A single set of headphones is accommodated by a 1/4in socket. Displays include source, which pins are chosen on the XLR, degree of stereo widening, and digital display of playback level, which reverts to the letters 'LE' after 10 seconds, the numbers stored in memory.

As far as its DAC usage is concerned, the DA11 uses an advanced version of the 'Crystal mode' introduced in the company's DA10, the main changes being the addition of USB, Playback Image Control and remote control. When it senses a digital signal, the DA11 automatically checks the incoming sample frequency, to select 44.1, 48, 88.2 or 96kHz if the signal is close to one of those values, with Crystal mode and its enhanced jitter rejection.

For all other input frequencies, the DA11 selects a PLL mode, locking input signals between 32 and 200kHz.

Its range of digital audio inputs allowed me to feed it from the Marantz CD12 transport, the Quad CDP 99 II, an iPod dock, a Zoom H4 recorder, and a Windows computer. In no time at all, I was hearing recent FLAC downloads with better resolution than I anticipated, especially via WinAmp Pro on my PC, even via Toslink optical! But great DACs are not something in short supply, and I was more intrigued by the DA11's Playback Image Control, (Pic).

Lavry's concern for this aspect of monitoring is summed up by part of its mission statement: 'A whole industry





optimises the stereo image based on assumptions. The mastering engineer works hard to provide great stereo, but the outcome can be less than optimal when listeners' home setup does not emulate the mastering studio setup.'

Them's fightin' words, especially when read by audiophiles who think that most recording engineers (especially of commercial, rather than purist motive) seem decidedly ill-qualified to talk about realistic stereo. It's not a can of worms I wish to open here, my own attitude having always been that the recording stands as it is, and we can only deal with it in playback terms. Be that as it may, it also means that I am in agreement with Lavry's sentiments: we end-users have to optimise our playback systems to match *their* recordings, not the other way around.

More trenchant is another of the company's observations: 'Many people do not (or cannot) follow such ideal guidelines for speaker placement. And of course, anyone who wants to listen through headphones may get a very different stereo image than the one intended by the mastering engineer.' In other words, headphones ain't speakers, and speakers ain't headphones. Which is why hardcore audiophile headphone addicts adore Stax Electrostatics, as they are able to take the sound out of the head.

## TAKE YOUR PiC

**Lavry isn't forthcoming about the actual process employed by Playback Image Control, which may be playing with L-R leakage, but it differs from stereo widening systems of yore in that it operates in the digital domain. Older readers may recall certain preamplifiers in the early days of stereo with similar controls – eg Dynaco's PAS3 – which enabled enthusiasts to acclimatise themselves to, and experiment with, stage width. Though too many recordings of the day better what we hear now in terms of L-R realism, the controls proved particularly effective if used with primitive stereo recordings that were too 'left-right' and ping-pong-y, the antithesis of the in-the-head effect of headphones which PiC helps to alleviate. Dynaco offered Mono, L+R and three levels of stereo width... Lavry, a half-century later, doubles the control.**

Lavry's PiC deals with this particular dilemma: with speakers, the left and right signals reach both ears, but with headphones, the left signal reaches only the left ear and the right signal only the right. PiC is intended to provide correction for headphones, with the added bonus of acting like a sophisticated balance control when dealing with asymmetrical or too-widely-spaced speaker location. Or, as Lavry pitches it, 'the user gets to correct the image at the listening space, *after* the music has been prepared. It is only the end-user that can make the final adjustment for their specific case.'

## PiC-TURE THIS...

Putting this into practice proved challenging, because PiC's behaviour varied from headphone-to-headphone (I used open backed Sennheiser HD414s and Grado RS1, and closed-back Sennheiser PXC350s), speaker-to-speaker with Wilson Sophia IIs, Rogers LS35As and Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor Elipsas, and – crucially – recording-to-recording. But it was here that the settings began to make sense. While I am not able, due to space considerations, to condense the 18-page owner's manual,

*'The Lavry's PiC allows you to emulate the feel of a concert hall'*

**ABOVE:** The DA1's fascia offers push-push, spring-loaded toggles for accessing various inputs, functions and the levels of 'widening'. Reading the 18-page manual is mandatory!

which users *must* read cover-to-cover, I will reproduce here the settings of the PiC control range, which is separated for left and right channels, rather than operating globally over both. The colours correspond to the LEDs on the panel: +2 – widest (red), +1 – wide (red), 0 – normal image (green), -1 – narrow (yellow), -2 – narrower (yellow), -3 – narrowest (yellow).

Note that the PiC settings – and I wish we knew exactly what was being processed – do not attempt to 'artificially force a sense of "space" into music recoding that lacks space.' It is remarkably free from added distortion or compression, and I swear I was hearing just the stage widen or narrow according to the settings. But differ they do, as mentioned above, which explains why one might like to use this with remote control.

Playing the superb Louis Armstrong FLAC download, a super-wide soundstage recording made at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1960, the sound extended beyond the headphones' cups even without PiC in play. Each setting – wider or narrower – audibly altered the width without impacting on the sound quality. And the DA11 showed its prowess as an incredible-value-for-money DAC with this 44.1kHz/16-bit session, especially conveying the sense of atmosphere at a wide-open festival gig. Brass was deliciously sharp, the bottom rich and flowing, and Satchmo's voice oozed texture and rasp.

To amuse myself, I moved onto some mono recordings, including WAV files of Louis Prima. Lavry lists mono as one of two occasions – the other being impaired

## OUTBOARD DAC



**ABOVE:** Don't panic: Lavry supplies XLR-to-RCA adaptors for driving preamplifiers or power amps without balanced inputs. The four inputs are digital-only

hearing in one ear – that will not markedly reveal any changes. While narrowing the image made no difference at all, widening seemed to fatten the mono image slightly. No problem, as it remained coherent mono, but it was somehow 'fuller' and, if you can believe this, wider.

But back to stereo. Regardless of the source – CD, MP3 files, the aforementioned FLAC downloads – the DA11 was free, in the modern fashion, of blatant digital nasties. Sibillance, which can be a real buzz-kill in headphones, was silkier than anticipated, if not quite analogue in texture. With the uncluttered James Taylor performances at the Fillmore, downloaded from Wolfgang's Vault, you could almost guess the age of the sessions, because you could sense analogue tape origins.

The feel was as warm as you'd expect of this troubadour, while fiddling with the PiC allowed you to emulate the feel of a concert hall even when using headphones. And it was with live recordings that PiC proved most advantageous.

### CLUB TO STUDIO

With assorted Fillmore gigs, performances seemed to snap into focus (headphones-wise, that is) with the width at +1. Modern clubs benefited from +1, as well; Jeff Beck at Ronnie Scott's, for example, worked well with both the median '0' and +1 settings. What I was hard-pressed to find were any that required narrowing.

Turning to Lavry for guidance, the company suggests that speakers set too far apart may benefit from narrowing. What I couldn't replicate out of Lavry's examples, even with wide studio recordings, were headphone sessions that needed narrowing. I even indulged in CDs of a few 1950s 'stereo spectaculars' and still preferred them at +1 or +2 with headphones and '0' for speakers. Studio recordings, on the other hand, tested both one's taste and one's biases. Raucous studio

material, like the Black Crowes' style of boogie, much metal and powerhouse rock like Creedence Clearwater Revival's 'Travelin' Band', could veer from a need for slight narrowing to full width depending on speaker model (not just placement) and headphone type. Some settings opened the sound to allow the listener a closer experience, savouring, perhaps, greater detail, while others might open it a bit too much, causing the centre image to recede. But this was fun, not torment, and the fundamental sound quality remained constant. It really was a case of playing with the lateral dimensions, while leaving all else alone.

On a more personal level, I could pander to my love for vocals over instruments by spreading the sound around centrally-located singers. Linda Ronstadt, showcased on recent MoFi CDs, took centre stage with widening on tracks like 'Tumbling Dice', yet a hint of narrowing improved the more sultry 'Blue Bayou'. But I must repeat: it's fun, it's fine-tuning of the most useful sort, not 'cheating'.

Above all, the Lavry gets away with it because the DAC element is so unobtrusive and clean. In other words, even if you hardly ever use PiC, the DA11 is still a bargain. ☺

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Without a Benchmark handy for side-by-side comparisons, one can wriggle out of a shoot-out mentality because the Benchmark offers an analogue input and is a substitute for a preamp in a system with both analogue and digital sources, while the Lavry has PiC. They're close in size, close in price, close in functionality, but *not* mutually exclusive. And if headphones are your priority, PiC may prove irresistible.

Sound Quality: 84%

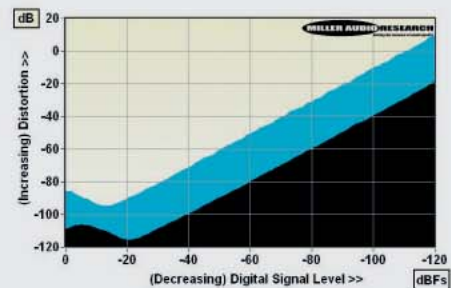


### LAVRYBLACK DA11 (£1234)

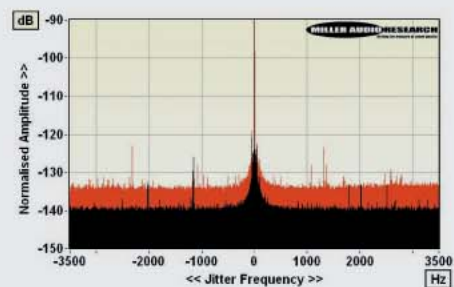
This latest DAC in the LavryBlack series was tested with its volume set to '50' which, according to Lavry, represents a commonly encountered maximum input level of +18dBu for various Pro equipment. In practice this amounts to a balanced output of 6V from a usefully low 73ohm source impedance, albeit with a slightly disappointing channel imbalance of some 0.65dB from what is essentially an analogue control. The overall A-wtd S/N ratio is very impressive, however, at >114dB which will make good use of 20-bit recordings. Lavry also indicates that sample rates 'between 30kHz and 200kHz' are accepted – which they are – even if the highest rates are subsequently downsampled to yield an effective analogue frequency response bandwidth of ~30kHz.

Noise, ultrasonic noise and spurious idle patterns are all very well suppressed (which usually augers well for a grit-free sound) while Lavry's claims for excellent jitter rejection (a function of the input sample rate conversion) are entirely borne out in practice [see Graph 2, below]. Figures <50psec were recorded for 24-bit data at all sample rates. Distortion is typically very low at <0.001% over the top 40dB of its dynamic range through bass and midrange [see black infill, Graph 1 below] and even falls to 0.00016% at -20dBfs. The blue infill [Graph 1] is more apparent because 2nd harmonic (analogue) distortions increase through the treble, reaching 0.006% at 20kHz.

Readers are invited to view a full QC Suite report for the LavryBlack DA11 DAC by navigating to [www.hifinews.co.uk](http://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 comparing 48kHz/24-bit data (black spectrum) with 96kHz/24-bit data (red spectrum)

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum Output Level/Impedance	5.96Vrms / 73ohm
A-wtd S/N Ratio	114.4dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0007% / 0.0004%
Distortion (20kHz, 0dBfs)	0.0059%
Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.01dB to +0.02dB (48kHz Fs)
Digital jitter (24-bit; 48kHz/96kHz)	44psec / 27psec
Resolution @ -100dB	±0.1dB
Power consumption	7W
Dimensions (WHD)	440x50x290mm



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# Avid Pulsare Phono (£3000)

With a string of top flight turntables to its name, maybe it was only a matter of time before Avid branched into electronics, and this new phono stage sets a high standard  
Review: **Steve Harris** Lab: **Paul Miller**

When someone as determined and perfectionist as Conrad Mas of Avid decides to enter a new product area, the result is likely to be something special. With the Pulsare Phono, the aim was to produce a phono stage that could do the same things for music that an Avid turntable did. It had to have 'that certain something that makes the music sound and feel real.' Even a first glance tells you that this an overkill design in specification, construction and features. Avid, which now has design and engineering facilities almost unrivalled in specialist audio, has already delved into electronics with its advanced power supplies, and from there a phono stage was a logical next step.

## POWER MOVES

Many designers have echoed the truism that in reality an amplifier doesn't actually take small signals in at the input and make them bigger at its output. In reality, the amplifier produces that larger output by modulating what's coming from the power supply in accordance with the input signal.

You can apply a rather similar argument to turntables, where the finest motor is only really as good as the power it receives. Avid has always believed in using a very high-torque motor to really control the platter, and then using a high-grade power supply to control the motor. Even its standard Acutus PSU is in reality a big two-channel amplifier, providing power at a fixed frequency separately and with the appropriate phase angle to the two 'phases' of the synchronous motor.

But in 2006, Avid went further than this with the Acutus Reference Power Supply. Here the already beefy 80VA mains transformer at the input was replaced by a huge custom-built

transformer rated at 1000VA. This might seem like real over-engineering, but it gave a sonic benefit.

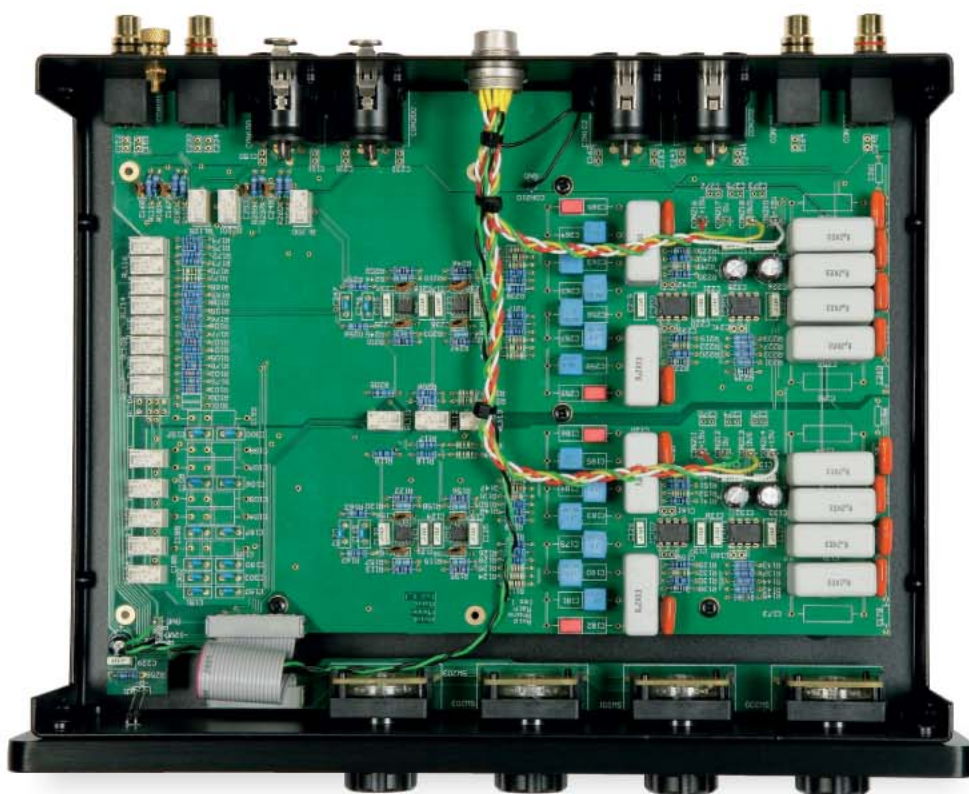
With this background, it's no surprise that the new Pulsare Phono is provided with a massive separate power supply. Rated at 300VA, this comes in the same elegant casework as the Acutus Reference unit. But if the power supply box looks imposing, Avid has outdone itself with the Pulsare Phono itself.

There can't be many phono stages with such complete front-panel facilities, and there probably aren't any where the controls are executed with such style. The Pulsare's solid fascia, its discreetly business-like silk screened legends and above all its four classic, top-grade rotary control knobs have all the solid quality and seriousness of a 1950s communications receiver. And rather like one of those wonderful all-band radios,

the Pulsare is intended to cope with any input you throw at it. So long as it comes from a phono cartridge, of course.

Starting from the left, the first control is an input selector, provided because the Pulsare is designed with balanced circuitry throughout and offers balanced inputs on XLR sockets as well as the standard phono inputs. Few tonearms are equipped with true balanced signal wiring and XLR connectors, although it's generally accepted that there can be major sonic benefits, so this could be a worthwhile upgrade for many systems.

The other switch positions select the phono input sockets, giving a 'balanced' option as well. Which of these you choose depends on the wiring of your turntable and arm. If the turntable grounds one of cartridge signal wires, there is likely to be more mains hum with the switch set to balanced. There



**RIGHT:** View of the Avid with cover removed shows 'dual mono' circuit layout and array of loading capacitors for each channel





**LEFT:** While there's no subsonic filter option, the Pulsare is equipped with a huge range of input loading and gain settings to accommodate almost any choice of pick-up

of you. Also, you were made aware of the sheer craft and sophistication of the guitar accompaniment. You weren't just hearing chord changes, you could hear the way the instrument provided bass patterns, harmony and a counter melody too. And the Avid seemed capable of uncovering yet further nuances even in such familiar material.

Next up was the great Harry James band direct cut, *The King James Version* [Sheffield Lab LAB-3]. From the opening of 'Corner Pocket', the double bass sounded plump and firm, rich yet still with a springy quality, the ride cymbal realistically insistent. In the leader's trumpet solo here, you could just feel the way he was shaping every note so expressively, and the same went for his beautifully relaxed playing on 'Lara's Theme' and 'More Splutie Please'. Here the brass really did sound brassy, yet without the sense of strain so often heard on big-band records.

On 'Cherokee', Le DeMerle's drums sounded great, and at the same time you could feel that the rest of the band was really steaming with him.

Moving on to Eric Clapton and

'Motherless Children' from *461 Ocean Boulevard* [RSO 2479 118], once again I felt that the bass was outstanding, with Carl Radle's deceptively simple playing heard clearly as the indispensable foundation of the track, playing off a rock-solid drum sound. While the bottleneck sound zoomed over them, the rhythm guitars snarled and snapped emphatically, in a background that never became messy or incoherent.

Yet the Avid was even more impressive on the next track, the contrasting 'Give Me Strength', where the atmospheric organ, guitar and rhythm section seemed to fill a huge space with a sound that could only be called sumptuous.

With the Lehmann phono stage, playing 'Easy Money' from *Rickie Lee Jones* [Warner Bros K56628], the singer had sounded sweet and slightly recessed, with the string bass full and in some danger of becoming overpowering. ☞

is a ground lift switch on the rear panel, and this may be useful if the system displays an obstinate hum problem.

Next along on the front comes the gain control, to be set to best match the cartridge being used. Most phono stages provide gain switching for MM and MC cartridges, the gain settings usually being 40 and 60dB respectively. Avid goes one or two better than this, with gain settings of 40, 50, 60 and 70dB provided by the next rotary control.

These last three are named for the gain rather than the cartridge output level and so are labelled MC (low), MC (med) and MC (high), intended to cater for MCs with nominal outputs of around 600µV-3mV, 250-750µV and 100-300µV respectively. This means you should easily be able to find the right gain setting for almost any cartridge, used with any sensible main amplifier.

Still more comprehensive is Avid's nine-position load impedance selector. As well as the standard moving-magnet load setting of 47kohms, this give options of 10, 30, 100, 500, 1k, 5k and 10kohms. Again, trial and error should give you the ideal setting for just about any moving-coil cartridge.

Lastly, the right-most rotary control allows you to add capacitance loading

for MM cartridges, typically used to tame the treble output. Once more there is maximum choice: as well as the usual 100, 200 and 500pF, you get the more extreme options of 1.5, 10 and 20nF.

### OUT OF THE BLUE

Armed with a small collection of cartridges and a large collection of records, and with the excellent Lehmann Black Cube Decade phono stage as a reference, I started listening.

I put on Joni Mitchell's *Blue* [Reprise K 44128] and, as so many times before, wondered how this 39-year-old piece of vinyl managed to seem so fresh and communicative. With the Lehmann, the performance was delightfully well balanced and informative, and in isolation I think there would have seemed little or nothing to criticise. Yet there was more.

Changing to the Avid Pulsare, on the opening track 'All I Want', there was suddenly a fuller awareness of the guitars and voice and even of the discreet percussion as individual sonic entities. It was as if you could now hear round them, so to speak, just as you would if a real instrument was playing in front

'Music had a sound that could only be called sumptuous'

## AVID FOR ENGINEERING

It was only around 15 years ago that Conrad Mas started assembling the first Avid turntables in his garage, but today his company is one of the success stories of British hi-fi. As a youngster, Conrad's fascination with audio began when he built a better-sounding plinth for his first turntable, a Connoisseur BD1. He soon graduated to Thorens decks, which he tweaked obsessively, and by the late 1970s was developing his own turntable. He worked in hi-fi retail and later in the glazing industry, but by 1995 he was ready to start his own business, and founded Avid. At first, precision parts were sourced through a partnership with a local engineering firm, but in 2004, Avid invested substantially to complete its own engineering workshop. Today, Avid not only makes all the metal parts for its own products in-house but also supplies precision parts for industry clients.

## PHONO STAGE

## LAB REPORT

### AVID PULSARE PHONO (£3000)

With mechanical engineering resource to spare and new electronics designers on tap, Avid's first foray into high-end audio electronics is nothing if not impressive. The Pulsare Phono offers a huge range of input loading options with (essentially) four gain ranges of +40.6dB, +49.5dB, +60.5dB and +69.7dB spread between MM and MC (low, medium and high) inputs. There's every opportunity to mix 'n match your pick-up loading and gain regardless of the notional MM or MC setting, catering for cartridge outputs from as low as 330µV up to 9.3mV for a 1V output from its balanced XLRs. Input overload margins are equally generous, spanning 6.5mV-185mV. The Pulsare has a decently low 20ohm output impedance (increasing to 150ohm between 100-20kHz) and a massive 19.5V maximum output, so it'll drive any partering amp you choose.

Despite the flexible loading options, Avid has not included a subsonic roll-off mode in the Pulsare so its response remains flat to 5Hz, which is fine if you have perfectly flat records, a well managed arm/cartridge resonance behaviour and, ideally, non reflex-loaded speakers. The response does show a pronounced rise at ultrasonic frequencies [see Graph 1, below] but a +6.3dB peak at 100kHz should be invisible to the limited bandwidth of most pick-ups and LPs. More importantly, the Pulsare offers vanishingly low levels of distortion [see Graph 2, below] that reach 0.00045% through the midrange plus a very impressive A-wtd S/N ratio of 78dB via the medium MC input. Readers are invited to view a QC Suite test report for Avid's flagship Pulsare phono amp by navigating to [www.hifinews.co.uk](http://www.hifinews.co.uk) and clicking on the red 'Download' button. PM



**ABOVE:** Single-ended RCA inputs and outputs are joined by balanced inputs and outputs. There's a ground lift option on the PSU if you encounter a hum loop

Moving to the Avid, there seemed to be a subtly different balance of forces, Rickie Lee sounded a little more forceful and forward, her voice distinctly set in its own acoustic space with her breathing clearly heard, while the bass sounded powerful and actually still quite dominant but somehow firmer as if under tighter control.

Turning to the classical old faithful, *English String Music* with the Sinfonia of London under Barbirolli [EMI ASD 521], the Avid seemed able to reveal the scale and depth of the venue while giving a feeling of clear precision in the sounds of the strings themselves. In staccato passages, it conveyed the sharp attack of the bowing in a very lifelike way and, in the sweeping legato themes, there was a winning combination of clarity and ambience. The recording could sound atmospheric, but never hazy, as the Avid just seemed to recover detail and ambient clues quite effortlessly.

### NOW HEAR THIS...

Next I changed cartridges, installing the Koetsu Black in place of the Ortofon. With the Koetsu, the Harry James band's bass player made a slightly fluffier, softer sound, but still bounced the band along well. And the drums sounded coherent, tight and punchy too. Subjectively, I felt that the Avid was really exceptionally

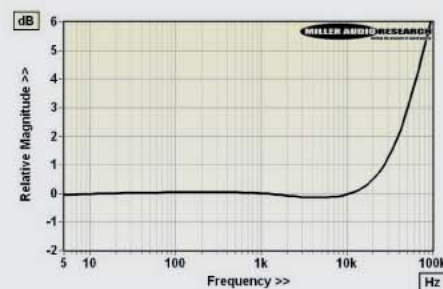
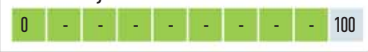
transparent to the virtues of the Koetsu, which as so often happens, gave a cohesive and open-heartedly appealing result overall, even if you could nitpick over certain aspects.

Moving again to Barbirolli's *English String Music*, and listening to the Elgar *Introduction And Allegro*, the Koetsu gave a warm, resinous, deep-staged view of the performance, as if the venue was now panelled in dark wood. It lacked the Ortofon's hear-through impression of detail and the bass lacked the clarity and elasticity of the Ortofon, which had revealed Elgar's great double bass lines so clearly. Again, I felt that the Avid phono stage was very, very capably revealing the different character of the cartridges. 🎧

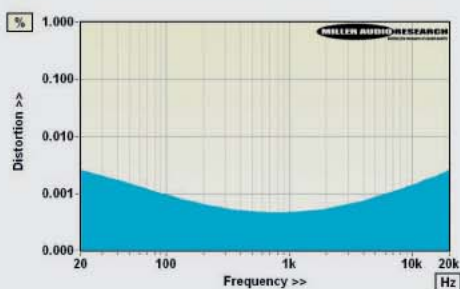
### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Scoring on build quality and facilities as well as excellent sonic performance, this is clearly one product that will outlast many other changes in a system. You may not intend to go balanced just yet, you may not need all those cartridge matching options this minute, but it is great to have such flexibility now and for the future, with no need for fiddly DIP switches or jumpers. This is an impressive product indeed.

Sound Quality: 89%



**ABOVE:** RIAA corrected frequency response from 5Hz-100kHz. The response is flat to +0.4dB within the audioband – there's nothing coming off an LP at 100kHz!



**ABOVE:** Distortion versus frequency is extremely low (MM sensitivity, 47kohm loading), at 1V output

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Input loading (MM & MC)	10ohm-47kohm / 100pF-1.5nF
Input sensitivity (MM/MC re. 0dBV)	9.3mV / 0.33-3.35mV
Input overload (MM/MC High)	185mV / 6.5mV
Maximum output (re. 1% THD)	19.5V
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 5mV/500µV in)	83.8dB / 78.2dB
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.0dB to +0.46dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.00045-0.0026%
Power consumption	6W
Dimensions (WHD each)	290x100x240 (230)mm (PSU)



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# van den Hul & Atlas (£7950/m & £99/3m)

Whether it's the best bang for your buck when it comes to speaker cable or the finest interconnect money can buy, we've two contenders that deserve to top your wishlist  
 Review: **John Bamford** Lab: **Paul Miller**

**A** couple of interesting cables arrived recently. Talk about from the sublime to the ridiculous: one was Atlas Cables' affordable Equator 2.0 MkII speaker cable, priced £99 for a 3m pair. More on this later.

The other cable was a 'statement' interconnect from van den Hul. Called The Platinum Hybrid it costs – wait for it – £7950 for a 1m stereo set.

### PRECIOUS METAL

Like TEO Audio's megabucks 'liquid metal' cables that push the boundaries of audio esoterica [see *HFV*, Dec '09] The Platinum Hybrid is designed to 'disappear' sonically. According to van den Hul's MD, Maarten Binnendijk: 'The platinum is purified to the max and has close to zero non-platinum constituents in it, which is the reason for the cost'.

Construction of The Platinum is balanced with two 0.3mm solid core platinum signal conductors insulated with polyethylene, each surrounded by a braided screen of silver-plated copper. A polyester yarn is used as filler, then two

further braid screens surround the whole caboodle with a binder of polyester between them.

The cable is sheathed in vdH's familiar Hulliflex jacket while termination is either XLR (balanced) or RCA phono (single-ended) using rhodium-plated plugs.

At the other end of the price scale we have the Atlas. It's finished handsomely in a pearl white PVC sheath, while inside it has

2x2.0mm<sup>2</sup> multi-strand conductors of 99.9997% OFC, laid in a weave and bedded in cotton yarn, with high density foamed polypropylene used for the dielectric.

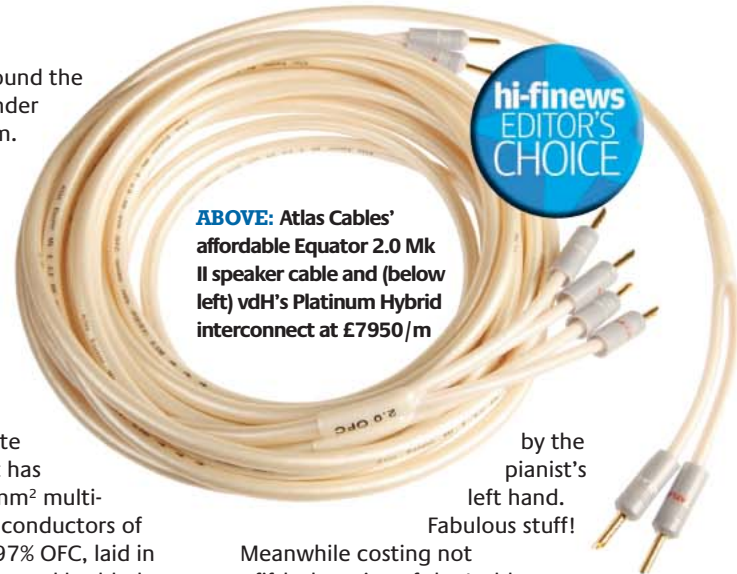
Even a 5m pair costs just £133, the prices including cold-weld termination with Atlas's proprietary Z-Plugs – hollowed-out 4mm plugs that double as both 'bananas' and BFA connectors.

'The vdH allowed effortless analysis of notes. Fabulous stuff!'

### MUSICAL MOMENTS

To use the most pure source at my disposal when listening to The Platinum Hybrid I dug out some treasured high-speed DAT recordings made by Tony Faulker back when recording at 96kHz was cutting-edge. These include live takes of the RPO in Walthamstow Town Hall and studio feeds of the late jazz singer Joe Williams.

The Platinum displayed the relaxed and smooth sonic character that is common to many vdH cables, but in this instance with an uncommonly 'dark' character that allows you hear way down into a recording's noise floor. The texture of Joe Williams' voice was rich and creamy while the piano accompaniment sounded exceptionally clean and stark. Bass was 'dry' and controlled, allowing effortless analysis of individual notes – especially those delivered



**ABOVE:** Atlas Cables' affordable Equator 2.0 Mk II speaker cable and (below left) vdH's Platinum Hybrid interconnect at £7950/m

by the pianist's left hand. Fabulous stuff!

Meanwhile costing not one-fifth the price of the Isolda cables that hook up the Levinson amp to my Townshend speakers, the Atlas Equator 2.0 sounds great for the money. It provides deep, taut bass and a vibrancy that's difficult not to admire. The treble is not quite as refined as the company's slightly more expensive Hyper cable (that uses 6N OFC conductors in a PTFE dielectric) but there's little in it. As ever, you'll cut your cloth to suit your pocket. ☺

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

The Platinum interconnect is up there with the best. Audition it alongside esoteric offerings from Nordost, TEO and MIT to name but three. Alternatively, if you're seeking the best sound-per-pound speaker cable, you won't go far wrong with Atlas's great-value Equator.

Sound Quality: 89% / 75% (vdH/Atlas)



### HFV SPECIFICATIONS

Series Inductance (vdH)	1.21µH/1m loop
Parallel Capacitance (vdH)	110pF/m
Resistance (vdH)	3.05ohm (3050mohm)
Leakage (DC, 1m)	>100Mohm
Price (1.5m pair)	£7950



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# Vinyl Frontier

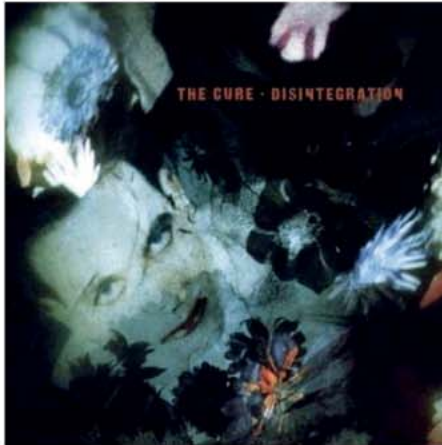
BEHIND THE MUSIC WITH HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW

This month **Chris Heard**'s vinyl choices range from Scarlett Johansson's tribute album via Krautrock, Neu! and The Cure, to Frank Sinatra and classic Jazz re-issues

One of the many memorable scenes in *Spinal Tap* involves the band's chauffeur declaring that Sammy Davis Jr's book *Yes I Can* would have been better served by the title, 'Yes I Can, If Frank Sinatra Says It's OK' – a gag in part about Ol' Blue Eyes' iron rule as the Rat Pack's notoriously ruthless Chairman Of The Board. Most Sinatra watchers tend to focus, understandably, on the Capitol years of the 1950s, when the thrusting Francis Albert recorded his most timeless works under such great band leaders as Billy May, Gordon Jenkins and, most notable of all, Nelson Riddle. This period has been well served by a string of recent analogue reissues, among them *Come Fly With Me* and *In The Wee Small Hours*. But many of Sinatra's most satisfying albums were birthed in the mid to late 1960s on his own Reprise label, the singer already well into middle-age and beginning to reflect on the September of his years.

A bit of weary cynicism suited Sinatra well artistically, and his 'school of hard knocks' persona resonated with a public which scented human frailty behind the multi-millionaire playboy lifestyle. The peak of this period is represented by *Sinatra At The Sands* [Mobile Fidelity], The Voice's first ever live album, recorded with the Count Basie Orchestra, conducted and arranged by Quincy Jones at the Copa Room of the Sands Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas in January and February 1966.

It features top-drawer performances of 'Come Fly With Me', 'I've Got You Under My Skin', 'One For My Baby', 'Fly Me To The



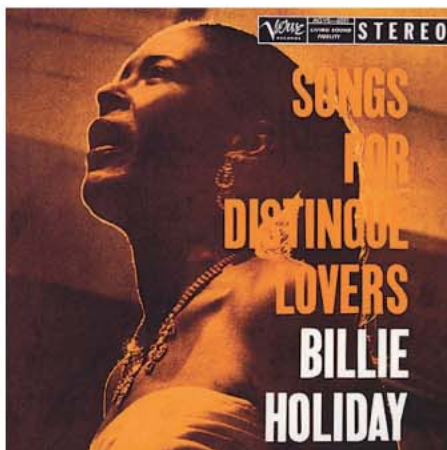
➔ Ideal for miserabilists – The Cure's *Disintegration* now on 180g vinyl,

Moon', 'My Kind Of Town' and other Frank songbook staples. Smoother than Dean Martin's bourbon and polished as a Vegas dancer's pedicure, *Live At The Sands* is the sound of a man at the height of his powers: swaggeringly confident; unnervingly cool and sophisticated; relaxed and joking between numbers (occasionally pushing his luck); yet bruised and bloodied by life and love all the same – Frank's appeal distilled inside 77 minutes across four sides of heavy-duty vinyl. It reeks of skinny ties and sharp suits, crap games in the desert, dry Martinis and willing broads: a romantic document of the old, gone Las Vegas, ours to enjoy forever. Half-speed mastered from the analogue masters; limited; numbered.

## VERVE – AT A PRICE

Audiophile jazz is something of a premium among discerning vinyl customers, and the software doesn't come much higher-end than the Analogue Productions imprint, a series of double LPs pressed at 45rpm at Kevin Gray's legendary AcousTech Mastering studio near Los Angeles. Retailing at around the £50 mark, they had better be very good – and so they are. The engineering, manufacturing quality and collectability of these items is well established, so at this price point, we need to ask how much do I like/want/need this record?

Analogue Productions is releasing a raft of Verve jazz reissues, including some mouth-watering Nat King Cole and Ella Fitzgerald titles, but here is our personal



➔ Mouthwatering Verve jazz re-issue titles remastered at 45rpm

## CHRIS HEARD

Chris Heard is co-owner of Classic LPs, one of the UK's biggest in-stock retailers of vinyl re-issues and new releases. With his wife Rachel, he also runs Three Black Feathers Records, the UK's newest audiophile vinyl label. See [www.classiclp.co.uk](http://www.classiclp.co.uk) and [www.threeblackfeathers.co.uk](http://www.threeblackfeathers.co.uk) for more information on the online store and the label.



pick of the latest crop, pinpointing some of the artists' most accomplished works: *Coleman Hawkins Encounters Ben Webster*; *Ben Webster Meets Oscar Peterson*; Billie Holiday, *Songs For Distingue Lovers*; Stan Getz and Joao Gilberto, *Getz and Gilberto*; Shelly Manne and Bill Evans, *Empathy*.

## MEET THE ÜBERLORDS

Krautrock seems almost more popular now than it was even in its heyday, a phenomenon probably explained by the ageless nature of many of the genre's most durable recordings by giants of the scene such as Can, Neu! and Faust. If you're new to the delights of electronic minimalism and modal jams, and fancy dipping your toe into Kraut waters, a pairing of double-LP compilations on the excellent Soul Jazz label comes highly recommended: namely, *Deutsche Elektronische Musik Volumes One and Two* [SJRLP213]. These samplers follow the experimental scene from its peak period in the early 1970s through to its death throes a decade or so later.

Along the way we encounter a dizzying confluence of prog, jazz and folk meanderings; pastoral mini-symphonies centred often on the humble flute (though not necessarily in the Jethro Tull sense); some frankly batty time signatures; and of course lots of Moog synthesisers. A fine introduction to Kraut überlords such as Popol Vuh, Ash Ra Tempel, Harmonia, La Dusseldorf, Roedelius, Amon Duul II and early Tangerine Dream. Incidentally, don't be misled by the Soul Jazz label moniker: its brief extends beyond the many joys of black and Latin music to encompass anything leftfield, industrial or interesting.

## NEU! FUTURISTS

If Krautrock's ongoing resurgence is down to the music sounding so damn refreshing, then Dusseldorf's Neu! were the scene's equivalent of a pint of dry cider poured over ice. Their three hugely influential studio albums – *Neu!*, *Neu! 2* and the mighty *Neu! '75* – are celebrated in some style and luxury with the release





Two volumes of German Electronic music: 'a dizzying confluence...'

of a limited edition box set [Grönland, LPGRONV, 300-only in the UK] overseen by founder member Michael Rother.

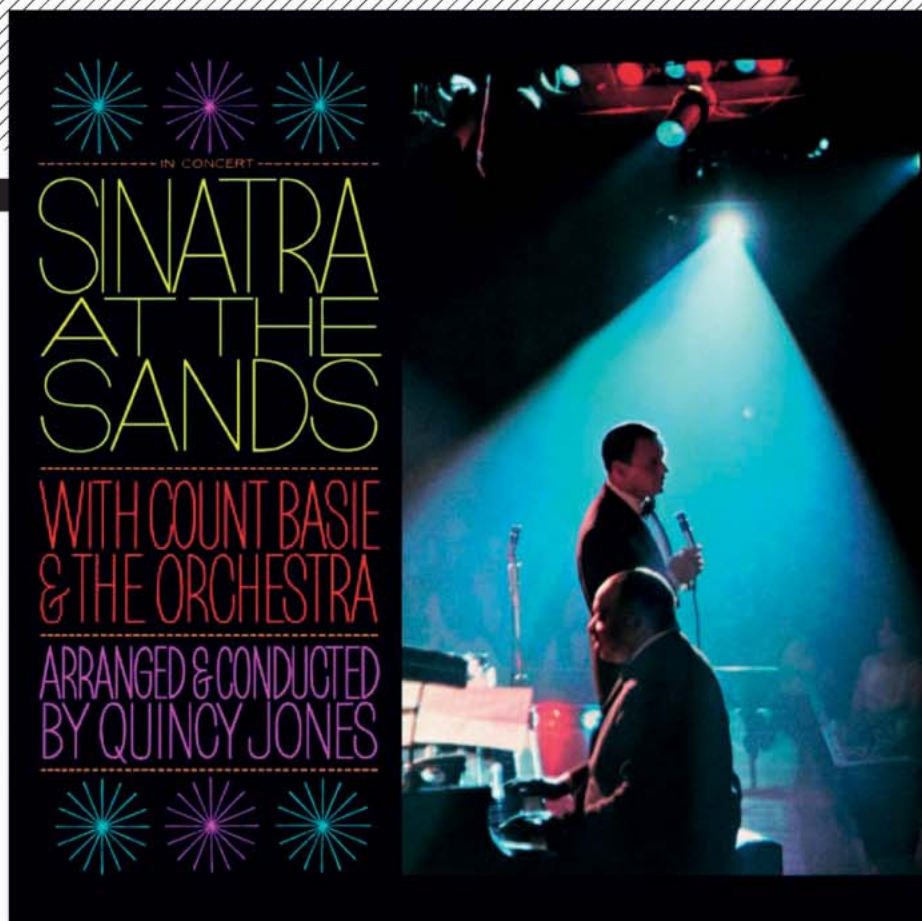
An offshoot of Kraftwerk formed in 1971, Neu! pioneered the Motorik style, deconstructing traditional rock's verse-chorus-verse format and replacing it with drummer Klaus Dinger's repeated minimalist 4-4 beat throughout the entire track to create a mildly hypnotic effect. Rother's harmonic drones, layered with overdubs, replaced well-trod chord styles, putting the emphasis on timbral changes and 'spatialisation' – effectively, the precursor to ambient music as we know and love it. Neu! sound futuristic even now, nearly four decades after Hawkwind, Bowie and Eno lapped up their otherworldly posturings; the fallout has been seismic across post-punk Britain.

### CANTERBURY TAKES

While we're praising all things influential, experimental and jazz-related, it seems entirely apposite to reference The Soft Machine, who leapt out of England's late '60s Canterbury scene with a singularly visionary take on the era's counter-culture. Now their celebrated self-titled debut album from 1968 and its 1969 follow-up, *Volume Two*, are being issued on high-definition vinyl by Sundazed in the US [Sundazed 5341, 5342].



Scarlett Johansson's Tom Waits tribute LP, *Anywhere I Lay My Head*



*Sinatra At The Sands* – his first live album (Las Vegas, 1966), with Count Basie's Orchestra under Quincy Jones

Ho, ho, ho, you might say, shut up and pass the Leonard Cohen CD. But, like laughing Len, there is joy to be had in its very sorrowfulness: an uplifting, transcendental quality that Mogwai's Stuart Braithwaite sums up as being 'unrelentingly beautiful and achingly sad'. To call it 'one of the greatest records of all time', as Braithwaite contends, is surely to overstate its charms, but the album undeniably

occupies a special place in the hearts of many hardcore Robert Smith fans. *Disintegration* is remastered on 180g vinyl via Universal [UMC 5324563].

### HEAD'S DOWN

Finally, Scarlett Johansson does Tom Waits. 'What?', I hear you cry, the fulsome Hollywood A-lister crooning old gnarled's sub-blue collar tales of dwarves and deviants? It shouldn't work and yet somehow it does, so much so that despite some iffy early reviews, Johansson's tribute LP *Anywhere I Lay My Head* [Rhino 8122 799348] has been issued on vinyl for a second time. Of the tracks written or co-written by Waits, standout interpretations include 'Falling Down', 'Fannin Street' (featuring David Bowie) and 'Town With No Cheer'. Next month: Meryl Streep sings the Nick Cave songbook... It could happen. ☺

Cutting their teeth alongside Pink Floyd and Tomorrow at underground London psych haunts such as the UFO and Middle Earth, The Soft Machine (various incarnations of Kevin Ayers, Robert Wyatt, Mike Ratledge and Hugh Hopper) were in the vanguard of the emerging prog and jazz-rock scenes, throwing their considerable musical abilities into complex improvised pieces which were nurtured in a live setting and sometimes spilled over into the recording studio. Their first album, cut in New York as they supported Jimi Hendrix, was a disciplined record of short, direct songs, in contrast to an instinctive fondness for extended workouts. The second LP pays more explicit homage to their love of jazz, focusing on instrumental pieces and delighting in a lyrically whimsical sense of humour inspired by Frank Zappa.

### THE FUN OF FALLING APART

Humour is not always the first word that springs to mind when you think of The Cure, although the fun and levity is there to be found, if you scratch beneath the ghostly make-up and mascara. *Disintegration* from 1989 – the band's eighth album – is no barrel of laughs, as its title confirms. In fact, it can lay as much claim as any other to being the quintessentially miserabilist Cure long-player: a study in disconnection, claustrophobia, isolation and quiet despair.

'The fallout has been seismic across post-punk Britain'

# Vinyl Release

BEHIND THE MUSIC WITH HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW

## Rolling Stones: *Exile On Main Street*

The most Stonsey of Stones albums is now out as a deluxe 180g double vinyl package. **Steve Sutherland** talks to one of the LP's biggest fans – Keith Richards

The second thing he does is check the clock. He saunters in, pours himself a quarter pint of vodka, splashes in a can of Tango and adds a couple of ice cubes – the first of four such concoctions he will pour himself over the next hour. Then he turns and checks the clock. He studies it for the briefest of moments and grins.

'G'd mornin',' he says, cackling deliberately as he hits on a ciggie. It is half past five. In the afternoon.

We are in a specially prepared interview suite in the very posh Four Seasons Hotel in Paris, France. Bowls full of rose petals. Lamps hung with exotic lace. Candlelight. And Keef. Black blouse unbuttoned to his skinny belly. Jewellery that rattles as he clinks the ice around his glass. That lined and leathery face of his, like a *Spitting Image* puppet of himself. And an extremely filthy laugh that we will later tell him reminds us of the late, great Sid James. An observation to which he will reply, 'What a f\*\*\*\*\*g compliment, man.'

It is June 2003 and Keef is 59 years young. He has yet to fall out of a palm

tree onto his head, yet to make a cameo appearance as Jack Sparrow's dad in the third instalment of the Disney movie franchise *The Pirates Of The Caribbean*, and yet to claim, deny, then finally admit that he snorted his dad's ashes.

What he has done up until this point though, is the stuff of legend and it's that stuff that we are here to discuss.

Stuff like the time he was so smacked out, he had to have his blood changed in a Swiss clinic. 'Not true, man,' he says. 'I wouldn't change this blood for anything. I might get somebody else's and not be the same. Hurhurhur.'

Well, what about the story he once stayed up for nine days with no sleep?

'Yeah man, nine days. It wasn't an attempt or anything.

It just happened. It was only afterwards I realised how long I'd been going. I kind of gave up counting. Y'know, four, five... nine! Hurhurhur. It was all just so *interesting*. I had some good shit... Hurhurhur. And

### 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...



after three days, you see – and this is what's interesting – you're kind of looking down from the ceiling at yourself. You can get in the car and drive and be perfectly functional but, at the same time, you know that you're not quite there. It's fascinating. Hurhurhur.

'How it ended was, I was making a copy of a cassette for someone, I pushed down record and play, turned round and... bang! I caught my head on the edge of a speaker. Must have been asleep for a third of a second. There was claret everywhere. It was then that my friends said, "Keith, you'd better go to bed." Hurhurhur.'

### 'The recording sessions were the stuff of fable...'

What about the time at the Altamont Festival that Sonny Barger, leader of the Hells Angels, was supposed to have pulled a gun on you?

'Hmmm.' He thinks about it for a moment. 'He might have done. But he didn't pull the trigger did he! Hurhurhur.'

### NICE WORK...

The reason we're recounting all this stuff right now is because *Exile On Main Street*, an album Keef made with The Stones under fairly extraordinary circumstances in 1972, is hanging around at the top of the album charts having just been 'enhanced' and re-released to much critical hoo-ha.

The album, the Stones' tenth studio offering, was a double when it first came out, recorded at Olympic Studios in South London and Mick Jagger's country pile Stargroves before the band fled the taxman to continue with their mobile recording unit at Nellcote, a villa Keef had rented in Villefranche-sur-Mer, near Nice in France.

The sessions were the stuff of fable – Keef was working on a serious heroin addiction, there were loads of famous hangers-on tumbling in and out of the place and eventually a couple of incidents with the cops led to a further enforced mass evacuation to LA where the record was finished at Sunset Sound studios.



➔ Keith Richards on stage in Brazil in 1995; today he's 'enjoying the fruits of the labours he was almost too smashed to complete 38 long years ago'



➔ Priced £18.99, the 180g re-release of *Exile On Main Street* is available mail order from [www.classicips.co.uk](http://www.classicips.co.uk)

The strange thing about *Exile...* suddenly becoming so fêted is that, up until its re-release, it had been the Stones album to name drop by the aficionado rather than the one most beloved of the hundreds of thousands of fans who now flock to see them whenever they haul their juggernaut around the world jus' one mo' time.

It features some pretty cool numbers – 'Rip This Joint' is the Stones a'rockin', 'Tumbling Dice' is the Stones a'rollin', 'Sweet Virginia' is faux honky tonkin', 'Sweet Black Angel' is about as pretend Mississippi black as middle class English white boys dare to creep before crossing the line into questionable parody. 'Shine A Light' is non-believers unabashedly takin' it to church and 'Happy' is devil-may-care swagger up there quite near their best.

But what must be said is that it's a reasonably safe collection, a snapshot of a band running through tried-and-true styles, not really a coherent album. It's something Mick acknowledged pretty much as soon as the LP came out, complaining that it was 'too rock 'n' roll' for his taste, too slapdash.

'I'm very bored with rock 'n' roll,' he said. '... Everybody knows what their roots are, but you've got to explore everywhere. You've got to explore the sky too.'

Later he qualified his thoughts, crediting the album with having a 'particular feeling', but criticising the sound as 'lousy', claiming he was not sure 'how great the songs are' and bemoaning the album's lack of 'concerted effort or attention.'

For Mick, *Exile...* is a collection of fragments shambolically recorded by 'junkies and drunks' that he rescued as best he could once they'd got to Los Angeles, his sidekick, keyboard player Billy Preston, helping to dub a layer of gospel and soul over the ragged sketches.

For Keith, though, *Exile* was an instinctive reconnection to the motherlode as an antidote to writers' block and an alternative to faddish stuff like *Her Satanic*



*Majesties Request*, when Mick, obsessed with trying to match The Beatles, had taken the reins and misdirected the band towards foppish psychedelia. With Keith it was never about keeping up with the Lennons. It was just about doing decent, proper, real stuff and sod the time, place and consequences.

### FREE SPIRIT

And that's why we're still fascinated by *Exile...* all these years down the line. It may not be the best Stones album in terms of songs – that's *Let It Bleed* – and it may not be packed with any of the fabulous hits that populate compilations like *40 Licks*. But, in the way that Keith let rip and then Mick tidied up, it really is the most Stonesy Stones album, the dividend of their very different sensibilities working, if not in unison, then at least in a manner that artistically complimented one another.

And it speaks volumes that, while Keith has always been unapologetically enamoured of *Exile's* sloppiness and lack of focus as an indication of its true free spirit, Mick is still fussing over it, polishing up some of the vocals on the re-released album, trying to add an acceptable sheen.

Of course, beyond all of this, we reserve our deepest fascination for the simple fact that, by any reasonable logic, Keef really shouldn't be here now, enjoying the fruits of the labours he was almost too smashed to complete 38 long years ago. Most of his contemporaries who got up to comparable pharmaceutical mischief are long dead and gone. How come Keef's still with us?

'Well, I'm just a bloke,' he replies. 'But I do come from good stock and although I push it here and there, I don't do it so much anymore.'

'The show's enough, y'know. They used to be 20-minutes long. Now they're two hours. It was easy then. Now we sweat a lot and it's a lot of action, especially if you're carrying a guitar round your neck for two hours and you've gotta move.'

'People ask me, "Do you work out?" And I say, "Yeah, I play with the Stones". Hurhurhur.'

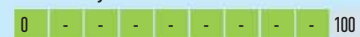
There must be more to it than that. Maybe, when the fateful day arrives, he should leave his body to medical science.

'I would,' he says, 'but I'm afraid they'll turn it down.' ☺

### RE-RELEASE VERDICT

Coming with the original gatefold sleeve, inners, reproductions of the much sought after postcards, and no fewer than ten previously unheard tracks, this 180g vinyl double LP release is something to be treasured. While the majority of tracks remain as originally recorded, the set sounds fresher than ever, the re-mastering being overseen by both Jagger and Richards. Having now sold over 30,000 units – mostly on CD of course – *Exile...* has become the first studio album in the UK to return to No 1 as a re-issue. **HFN**

Sound Quality: 87%





# The Eagles *Hotel California*

With some 16 million copies sold since its first release in 1976, chances are that you too have a copy of The Eagles' fifth album on vinyl. So why not pull it from the shelf, dust it down and join us as we rediscover those sublime '70s studio sounds...

Words: **Chris Heard**

Sixteen million buyers cannot be wrong – if any single album can lay claim to encapsulating the golden age of classic rock, The Eagles' *Hotel California* is surely it.

The band's fifth studio album, released in December 1976, came to define a style of free-and-easy, radio-friendly AOR that saw the group fill stadiums and cement their status as denim-clad demi-gods of the FM airwaves.

The Eagles had become something of a metaphor – a cliché even – for all that was deemed to be great about rock 'n' roll and, by extension, America – personal freedom, the open road, sunshine, the promised land.

### WALKING THE LINE

At the same time *Hotel California*'s unprecedented impact – alongside that other soft-rock behemoth, Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* – represented a divide between the old and the new. Its success came at a turning point as a wave of punk nihilists proclaimed Year Zero and derided the album as a symbol of the tired old '70s music scene and all that entailed – classy production, finely-honed musicianship, long hair and perceived decadence.

Indeed, for all the Eagles' millions of fans, to many they were an easy target for attack – not raw enough for the hard-rockers and too mediocre for the hip West Coast country-rock scene that had spawned them, they fell between many stools. But the mainstream



➔ Henley, Walsh, Meisner, Frey and Felder; the band today and (right) drummer Henley who sang the title track

➔ View of the hotel interior on rear of gatefold

lapped them up, and *Hotel California* was the ultimate expression of their art.

They had formed in Los Angeles six years earlier, out of the ashes of the late-'60s Laurel Canyon scene centred on country and folk-tinged rock, which had bred like-minded acts such as Poco and the Flying Burrito Brothers.

In 1971 Don Henley and Glen Frey were working with Linda Rondstadt's backing band when they teamed up with Bernie Leadon and Randy Meisner to found the fledgling Eagles. They signed to David Geffen's Asylum Records and had instant success with their very first single 'Take It Easy', a post-hippy mission statement of sorts that declared their hedonistic tendencies from the start.

More hits followed over the next few years and by the middle of the decade The Eagles had become an easy-listening phenomenon; their 1975 singles compilation notched

up eye-watering sales of 25 million. By the time they came to record *Hotel California* the band had settled on a more rock-centred line-up, bringing in Don Felder on guitar and recruiting Joe Walsh to replace the departing Leadon.

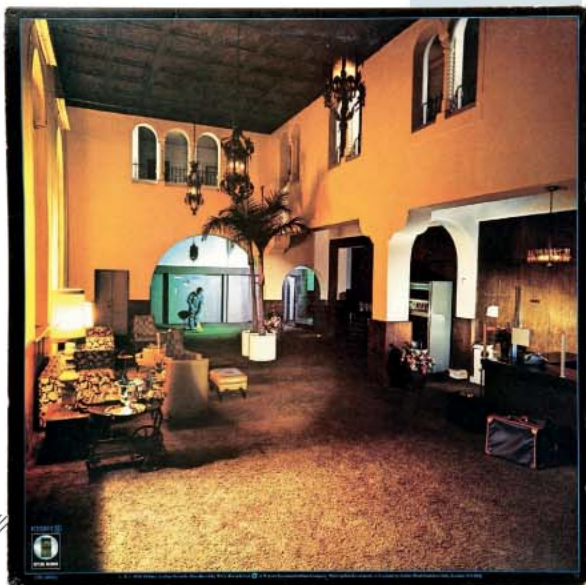
It had been a conscious decision to position themselves further away from their country-oriented sound, working with producer Bill Szymczyk, who had brought guitar gunslinger Walsh into the fold for a more muscular texture.

'The band had become more rock-centred'

### DARK DESERT HIGHWAY

The album opens up with the near-mythical title track, a Felder/Henley/Frey composition that is broadly recognised as being Henley's singular meditation on the darker side of southern California and the American dream.

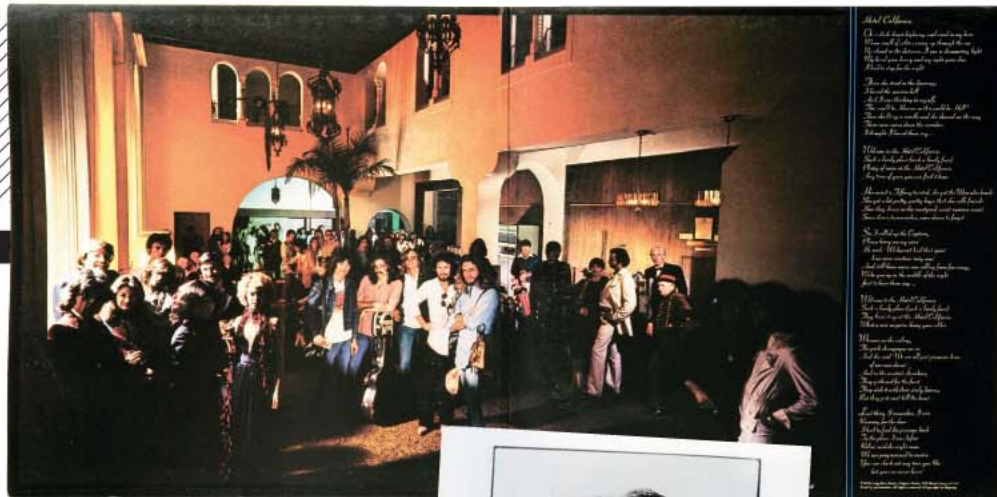
'Some of the wilder interpretations of that song have ➔



## PRODUCTION NOTES

In our post-download world it seems almost unthinkable, but such were the heady days of 1976 that The Eagles spent two-thirds of their year in the studio polishing take after take. They were in search of what Don Henley called 'a note-perfect song.' 'We just locked ourselves in,' said Henley. 'We had a refrigerator, a ping pong table, roller skates and a couple [of] cots. We would go in and stay for two or three days at a time.' Eighteen months of 'writing and reflecting' were followed by a further eight months of studio time at Miami's Criteria Studios and the Record Plant in Los Angeles; recording sessions that ran from March to October 1976.

The producer was Bill Szymczyk [pictured below, centre], who had worked with the band on their previous two studio albums in an effort to move them towards a harder, more 'classic' rock sound. Szymczyk also co-engineered the project and spent further time mixing down the final cuts for mastering at New York City's Sterling Sound plant. The strings adorning classic tracks such as the bittersweet 'Wasted Time' were arranged and conducted by Jim Ed Norman, a Henley co-conspirator from the 1960s LA gig circuit who had played piano on Eagles favourites including 'Lynin' Eyes' and 'Take It To The Limit'. The opening chords of 'Hotel California' came from Don Felder, who recalled: 'I had just leased this house out on the beach at Malibu, I guess it was '74 or '75. I remember sitting in the living room, with all the doors wide open on a spectacular July day. I had this acoustic 12-string and I started tinkling around with it, and [those chords] just kind of oozed out. Every once in a while it seems like the cosmos parts and something great just plops in your lap.'



➔ The inner gatefold, picturing the band, friends and employees, and shot at the Lido Hotel in Hollywood. The sleeve reputedly cost \$60,000 to photograph

been amazing,' said Henley. 'It was really about the excesses of American culture and certain girls we knew. But it was also about the uneasy balance between art and commerce... We were all middle-class kids from the Midwest. "Hotel California" was our interpretation of the high life in Los Angeles.'

## KEY DECISIONS

The opening chord progression, soon to become a staple of every aspiring guitarist's tutorials, was Felder's work, with Walsh writing and arranging the guitar parts for Henley and Frey's words. The tune, featuring the layered sound of Walsh and Felder's guitar solos, was recorded at three separate sessions before Henley found the right key to suit his vocals. The track, with its 'warm smell of colitas' and its 'Mercedes bends', became a radio and stadium anthem and arguably served to outshadow the rest of the album from the moment the stylus was dropped. Whether it would have benefited from being sequenced further into the body of the record remains a matter of debate.

Similar themes run throughout the album, which touches on death, loss (of love and of innocence), drugs, divorce, temptation, materialism and the shallow nature of fame. *Guys And Dolls* it ain't. 'Life In The Fast Lane' sums up the cocaine-fuelled excesses of LA life in the late 1970s; while 'Wasted Time' is a genuinely touching reflection on lost love and the regrets and uncertainties of moving on. The album's cinematic closer 'The Last Resort', which is about the demise of society, features stinging

observations on the state of the nation: 'Some rich men came and raped the land/Nobody caught 'em/Put up a bunch of ugly boxes, and Jesus/People bought 'em/And they called it paradise/The place to be/They watched the hazy sun, sinking in the sea.'

## A PROPHECY?

So just how prophetic was the record, and did it have something significant to say about what some

would foresee as being America's economic and moral decline?

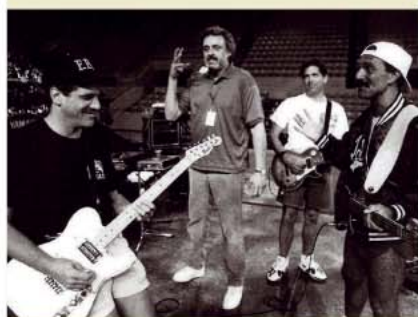
Shortly before its release, Henley said: 'This is a concept album, there's no way to hide it, but it's not set in the old West, the cowboy thing, you know. It's more urban this time.'

'It's our bicentennial year, you know, the country is 200 years old, so we figured since we are

'The album went platinum inside a week'

➔ Clockwise (l-r) bass player Randy Meisner, who also added guitar to 'Desperado', 'On The Border', and 'Hotel California', guitarist and keyboard player Glenn Frey, who co-wrote many of the songs, and guitarist Don Felder, also credited as a major co-writer on the album

➔ Hotel California producer, Bill Szymczyk



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# Alternate Format Discography

The Eagles and the eagle is our national symbol, that we were obliged to make some sort of a little bicentennial statement using California as a microcosm of the whole of the United States, or for the whole world, if you will, and to try to wake people up and say, "we've been OK so far, for 200 years, but we're gonna have to change if we're gonna continue to be around".'

Glen Frey, talking about 'The Last Resort' said: 'It was the first time Don took it upon himself to write an epic story and we were already starting to worry about the environment...'

'We're constantly screwing up paradise and that was the point of the song and that at some point there is going to be no more new frontiers. I mean we're putting junk, er garbage, into space now.'

## KEEPING THE FLAME

The band spent most of 1976 in the studio perfecting the songs, giving the album its polished sheen. Such a leisurely excursion gave ammunition to those for whom The Eagles epitomised the worst of rock-star excess, but the sonic results were little short of spectacular.

For the band it represented a stylistic departure and something of a watershed: the first album without Leadon, the first to feature Walsh and the last on which bassist/singer Meisner would work before quitting in 1977 at the end of a world tour.

The LP's sunset-kissed cover shot features the Beverly Hills Hotel in Los Angeles, aka the Pink Palace, a hangout and discreet watering hole for Hollywood A-listers. The picture was taken by David Alexander and John Kosh, who sat in a cherry-picker 60ft above Sunset Boulevard to the capture the atmospheric scene amid some reputedly hair-raising rush-hour moments.

*Hotel California* was a monster, going platinum inside a week. As the founder members approach their sixth decades on earth, and The Eagles go on selling out huge arenas, it is still the chiming guitars of the LP's opening track that bring out the cigarette lighters and set the hairs on end like no other. To quote the song: 'Some dance to remember, some dance to forget.'



As one of the best selling albums by any music act, *Hotel California* has seen its share of re-issues, with each evolving technology aiming to enhance the quality of sound on offer. The quest for listening perfection continues to this day, with re-mastered CDs and LPs hitting the market more than 30 years after the album first scaled the heights of the charts.

## ORIGINAL LP (1976)

First pressings featured picture labels with a blue *Hotel California* logo on a yellow background. The run-out grooves contained two inscriptions: 'Is It 6 O'Clock Yet?' - possibly a reference to the lengthy days spent in the studio; and "VOL Is Five-Piece Live" - confirmation that *Victim Of Love* was a five-part live recording with no overdubs.

*Hotel California* was released in December 1976 on the Asylum imprint, a Warner Bros offshoot founded by impresario David Geffen in 1971 to record folk-rock and singer-songwriter acts emanating from the 'Canyon' scene that included Neil Young and Joni Mitchell. The label's first release was Jackson Browne's self-titled debut in 1972, and it briefly signed Bob Dylan for two releases in the mid-1970s. Asylum was the 'A' part of WEA - Warner and Elektra made up the other bits.

## LP VARIATIONS (1976)

Early UK pressings had gatefold sleeves with a photo of hotel guests at play in the lobby, printed lyrics to the title song and a black-and-white poster of the band. A green vinyl pressing of the record also surfaced. The Spanish version was released via the Hispavox company. In Italy it came out from WEA Italiana SpA; and in France through Filipacchi Music, the Paris-based division of WEA in the 1970s. One notable variation was the Israeli pressing,

which emerged on the famous orange Elektra label (manufactured and distributed by CBS in Tel Aviv). The US gatefold version is believed to have been a later issue. In all, at least 18 different pressings were made across various territories.

## ORIGINAL CD (1984)

The CD of *Hotel California* was unleashed in the US and Europe in 1984, to the thrill of fans eager to hear it on this exciting new format. As one of the biggest selling studio albums of all time, it is safe to assume that Asylum and Warner Bros made a killing all over again when the digital revolution took hold. Remember, at the height of this repackaging of rock classics, some CDs were retailing for as much as £16 in the high street for a disc that reputedly cost as little as 20p a unit to replicate. Small wonder so few tears were shed in some quarters for the subsequent demise of the major labels as illegal downloads took hold.



## AUDIOPHILE CD (1994)

The first CDs featured few frills and were often little more than the original analogue recordings transferred straight to disc. It was frequently some years down the line before re-mastered versions were produced to do justice to those listeners who preferred the 'cleaner' sound afforded by digital.

In 1994 DCC Compact Classics in the US produced an audiophile-quality 24k gold-plated disc derived from the original master tapes [cat no: GZs-1024], revealing greater clarity than the more compressed versions available previously.

## PICTURE DISC LP (1996)

This attractive collectable is believed to have originated in Mexico - an apparent source of several picture discs, some of which are of - shall we say - varying

degrees of authenticity. This does state it was a release on Asylum Records, although the origins of some of these items are not always easy to verify.

One thing most people agree on is that the sonic quality of picture discs is often (although not always) inferior to standard black vinyl. After all, the emphasis tends to be on aesthetics at the expense of a recording's fidelity. This probably explains the propensity by some enterprising individuals in the 1980s and beyond to market these discs as wall-mounted clocks - hey, it sounds rough but looks great in the kitchen!

## MULTICHANNEL DVD (2001)

The millennium ushered in a brave new world of audio-visual technology, with 5.1 surround sound allowing viewers to enjoy live concerts and movies with a cinema-standard aural definition unthinkable in the grainy days of VHS. Along with some other classic albums, *Hotel California* was re-mixed and re-mastered for multichannel audio (96kHz/24-bit), and delivered in glorious Advanced Resolution Dolby Digital 5.1 Surround. The 5.1 mix was mastered by Ted Jensen Jensen at Sterling Sound in Manhattan, and the remix completed by original producer Bill Szymczyk, with help from Eliot Scheiner.



## 180 GRAM LP (2008)

I first came across a re-mastered 180g vinyl pressing via Warner's US catalogue specialist Rhino two years ago [see [www.rhino.com](http://www.rhino.com)], and a darn fine-sounding thing it was, too. Other subtle variations, notably Warner's Back To Vinyl (EU) series, have appeared in the subsequent months since audiophile record-buying became a growing minority sport, but to these modest ears none has improved on this 2008 high-grade re-issue.



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THE FOUR TOPS

Reach Out

Speaker's Corner/Motown 660 (180g vinyl)

It simply doesn't get any better than this if you're a Motown addict. This LP from '67 contains a half-dozen gems, eg, 'Bernadette', that are forever associated with the 'Tops, plus a couple of covers they made their own: 'Walk Away Renee' and 'If I Were A Carpenter'. With 20/20 hindsight, considering that The Monkees have been reassessed and found *not* to be the *infra dig* swill that snobs once deemed them to be, we learn here just how appealing was the material they chose: the 'Tops cover two of their hits, turning 'Last Train To Clarksville' and 'I'm A Believer' into almost-credible Motown stompers. *Reach Out* is the quintessence of the group's and the label's sound. Sheer bliss... KK

Sound Quality: 95%



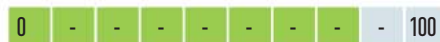
FEVER TREE

Fever Tree

Sundazed LP5318 (180g vinyl)

There's no end to the astonishingly good albums that the psychedelic era produced, which were overshadowed by the genre's giants. Although Fever Tree's origins are Texan, the group sounds like it could have been part of Boston's 'Bosstown' sound or from New York's artier element, with its heavy orchestration and baroque touches. And while their eponymous debut from '68 features fascinating originals, like the hit 'San Francisco Girls (Return of the Native)', what's more intriguing are interpretations of the Beatles' 'Day Tripper/We can Work it Out' and Neil Young's 'Nowadays Clancy Can't Even Sing'. Another great find for hard-up collectors from Sundazed. KK

Sound Quality: 80%



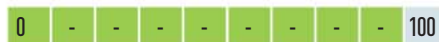
HUMBLE PIE

Smokin'

Analogue Productions/A&M APP4342 (180g vinyl)

Humble Pie embodies a genre yet to find a name, the division of 'stadium rock' that seemed to consist entirely of ex-pat British bands who did better in the USA than they ever could back home. Amusingly, as *Smokin'* – their biggest-seller – shows, they were simply feeding back to America what Yanks rockers invented: southern-fried HM boogie, only now with an Essex twang. But when the line-up included ex-Small Faces frontman Steve Marriott, one of the best hard-rock vocalists ever, the results were miles away from the pedestrian. Marriott's mod roots are evident, with covers of 'Road Runner' and 'C'mon Everybody', but elevated to a tougher, harder level. KK

Sound Quality: 87%



PEGGY LEE

I Like Men!

Pure Pleasure/Capitol T1131 (180g vinyl)

If you're bemused by the current obsession with 'the American Songbook' – even the BBC got in on the act with a week of specials devoted to it – this is an ideal time to hear one of the finest practitioners of the genre, *before* it became retro-cool. Ms Lee, arguably one of the half-dozen or so finest female popular music vocalists of the 20th Century, sexily slides through a dozen lesser-known gems, including her politically-incorrect composition which provides this LP with its utterly non-contemporary title. But stuff that: this is an album to play after you've run out of *Mad Men* DVDs, when you long for a time when men were men and women didn't mind it. KK

Sound Quality: 85%





COMPACT DISC



SUPERAUDIO



DVD



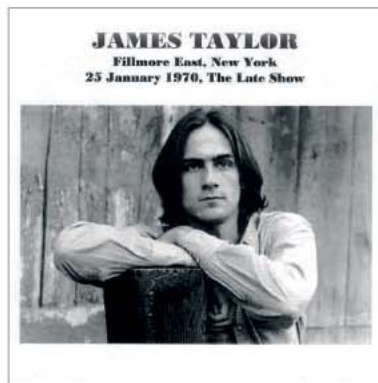
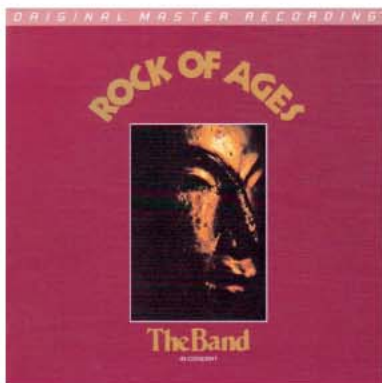
BLU-RAY



VINYL



DOWNLOAD



### THE BAND

#### Rock Of Ages

Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2046 (stereo SACD)

For some purists, especially those blessed enough to have seen The Band in concert, this live album, recorded on New Year's Eve 1971-2, exposes more of the group's heart and soul than any of their studio albums. Although consisting of material culled from their four studio efforts, the live experience (and a horn section with arrangements courtesy of New Orleans R&B hero Allen Toussaint) reveals an outfit so perfectly hewn by the road, and with such a deep love for rock 'n' roll and R&B, that it seems to contradict their almost po-faced, scholarly image. January '72 must've been a helluva month in NYC, with James Taylor's gig recorded there three weeks later! *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%



### BEAT KAESTLI

#### Invitation

Chesky Records SACD348 (multi-channel SACD)

As has been *de rigueur* of late, Swiss-born Beat Kaestli has joined Tony Bennett, Rod Stewart, Michael Bubl  and others releasing 'American Songbook' sessions. Kaestli, though, has resisted the more obvious A-list songs and opted for 'slightly-less-covered' masterworks, including 'My Romance', 'Day In Day Out' and other tunes that are familiar rather than done to death. Backed by a superb quintet and recorded at St Peter's Episcopal Church, NY, with David Chesky at the controls, it's a perfect showcase for SACD surround, which seems to be enjoying a renaissance. Kaestli's emphasis is jazzier than the norm, a refreshing break from Sinatra wannabees. *KK*

Sound Quality: 83%



### JAMES TAYLOR

#### Live At The Fillmore East 25/1/1970

Wolfgang's Vault Download (FLAC)

Since I saw JT on this particular tour, maybe I'm prejudiced, but, *damn!* this performance is a textbook example of how to charm an audience. Despite the size of the venue, and the clearly stoned crowd, it could have been an intimate coffee shop gig. The sound is clear as a bell, and every one of the 14 tracks is so familiar (to elder baby boomers) that they're bound to bring tear to eye. Taylor remains the pinnacle of singer-songwriter bliss, particularly for those who favour the unplugged, not-entirely-maudlin sort, as far removed from Leonard Cohen or Nick Drake as the range of human emotions allows. This just may be the best six bucks I've spent this year. *KK*

Sound Quality: 88%



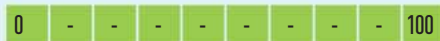
### LINDA RONSTADT

#### Simple Dreams

Mobile Fidelity UDCCD785 (Gold CD)

If not quite as monumental a milestone in her career as *Heart Like A Wheel*, this album from 1977 stands almost as proud for its portrayal of Ronstadt as a far more versatile singer than her previous country-rock leanings suggested – a genre she helped to fashion. Here she ranges from straight rock 'n' roll to ballads to pure C&W, if not quite intimating that a few years later she would become one of the first of the rock generation to cover the standards of the 1940s/50s. True to form, this set also emphasises her immaculate, prescient taste: among the tracks she commandeers as her own are Roy Orbison's 'Blue Bayou', the Rolling Stones' 'Tumbling Dice', and a hardly-known Warren Zevon's 'Poor Poor Pitiful Me'. *KK*

Sound Quality: 92%



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Laurent Thorin on the new Nagra MSA amplifier – Haute Fidélité, January 2010  
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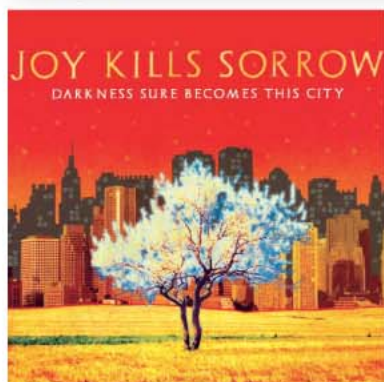
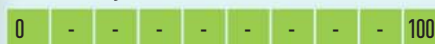
### MEAT LOAF

Hang Cool Teddy Bear

Mercury 6 02527 34097 5

If only for his relentless persistence in the face of all the evidence that the world doesn't need this sort of thing anymore, it's hard not to harbour a sneaking affection, maybe even admiration, for Meat Loaf. A huge drum beat leads into a portentously cacophonous orchestral intro, after which it's business as usual – double-scoops of the Jim Steinman patented blend of bar-room boogie mixed with gothic operatic bombast, decorated with tongue-in-cheek lyrics like, 'Next time you stab me in the back you better do it to my face'. Steinman, however, isn't involved so the whole thing's just a knowing pastiche. Still, as a wiser man than me once said, this is the sort of thing you'll like if you like this sort of thing. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 93%



### JOY KILLS SORROW

Darkness Sure Becomes This City

Signature Sounds Recording SIG2027

Now this is very special indeed. Joy Kills Sorrow are a contemporary folk-bluegrass Boston quintet and this, their debut album, is unutterably superb. Not only is the banjo and mandolin playing astonishing, but the singing (both in terms of soloists and harmonies) is gorgeous, and the songs themselves are true earworms – they get in there and lodge themselves firmly, demanding that you take the CD to the car and play it out there as well. Making bluegrass sound new, fresh and exciting is certainly a challenge these days, but Joy Kills Sorrow do it with ease. Happy, sad, zippy, danceable – this is the soundtrack to your next hoedown. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%



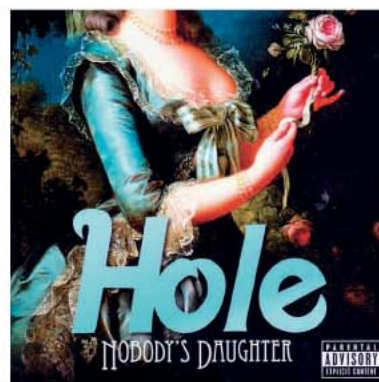
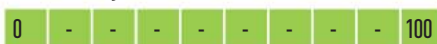
### RENÉE FLEMING

Dark Hope

Mercury 2739699

Everything about *Dark Hope* was screaming 'No!' at me. Opera singer covering rock songs? No, it never works, never ever. Well, I reckoned without the good taste of Fleming and producer/arranger David Kahne. They've re-interpreted fabulous contemporary songs by Band Of Horses, Muse, Death Cab For Cutie plus a sprinkling of classics from Jefferson Airplane, Peter Gabriel and Leonard Cohen. The acid test is, of course, can they bring anything new to Cohen's chestnut 'Hallelujah'? Yes they can, in spades. This one re-writes the crossover textbook and confirms that modern songwriting is as good as, if not better than it was in the so-called good old days. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 93%



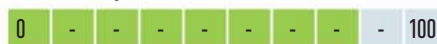
### HOLE

Nobody's Daughter

Mercury/Cherry Forever 6 02527 37043 9

Courtney Love's return, says the press release, has been 'feverishly anticipated'. I feel I have the right to ask, 'Who by?' Certainly not me. This album is as cheap and premeditated as anyone with more than half a brain would expect it to be. Courtney snarls and drawls like Marianne Faithfull on Ritalin through a mess of bitchy faux-grunge pop ditties, most of them knocked up by song doctor Linda Perry, probably on a afternoon when she wasn't writing hits for Pink, Gwen Stefani or Christina Aguilera. Smashing Pumpkin Billy Corgan also lends a hand but it makes no difference. A sow's ear is still a sow's ear, even one once married to Kurt Cobain. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 78%





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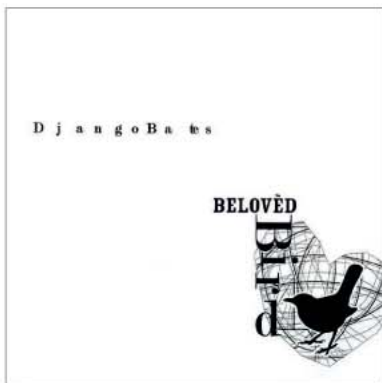
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### DJANGO BATES

Beloved Bird

Lost Marble LM 004

Composer, pianist, leader and educator Django Bates has done just about everything, but in his 50th year he's filled a gap by offering this tribute to his earliest inspiration, Charlie Parker. The idea, though, dates back to 2005, the 50th anniversary of Parker's death, when Bates arranged tunes associated with Bird for a celebration event in Copenhagen. On this trio album he doesn't play a bop style but lets loose his own piano pyrotechnics in 'Scrapple From The Apple' and other be-bop anthems. A final piece of contemplative musing creates its own space from a fragment of 'Ah-Leu-Cha', and if this is the least frenetic track, it's also one of the most successful. *SH*

Sound Quality: 80%



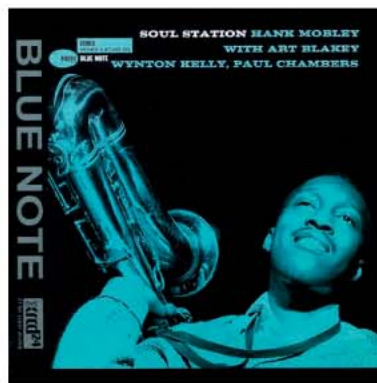
### NEIL COWLEY TRIO

Radio Silence

Naim NAIMCD147

After a brilliant start as a boy classical pianist, the teenage Cowley played in a Blues Brothers tribute band, then plunged into electronic pop with the Brand New Heavies and Zero 7 and his own group Fragile State. Returning to the piano, he formed the trio which recorded *Displaced* in 2006 and *Loud Louder Stop* in 2008. For their third album the trio are still together, or to be more accurate, more together than ever. They play as one. Richard Saddler's bass seems like an extension of the piano, while drummer Evan Jenkins highlights Cowley's power, precision and breath-catching dynamic contrasts, all of which are captured stunningly on this recording. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%



### HANK MOBLEY

Soul Station

Audio Wave AWMXR-0001 (Blue Note ST-84031)

No matter how deeply it's been mined before, the Blue Note vault is still a rich source of reissue gold. In what amounts to a relaunch of the XRCD audiophile format, Audio Wave has begun with a clutch of soul jazz classics. *Soul Station* has Mobley's old Jazz Messengers boss Art Blakey on drums, with Paul Chambers on bass and bluesy pianist Wynton Kelly. This seemingly carefree album marked a turning-point for the light-toned tenor player, as 1961 would see him briefly and not very happily joining Miles Davis. Also in the first Audio Wave are Sonny Clark's *Cool Struttin'* (1958), Tina Brooks' *True Blue* and Horace Parlan's *Speakin' My Piece* (1960). *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%



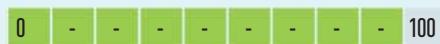
### MONICA MANCINI

I've Loved These Days

Concord Records 7230745

Revisiting favourite old songs, the late great composer's singer daughter has the luxury of Phil Ramone as producer, as well as some special guest stars. Stevie Wonder does a fabulous harmonica obbligato on 'Blame It On The Sun', while Brian Wilson and Take 6 vocalise amazingly behind her on 'God Only Knows'. One of the best realisations, if not a jazzy one, is the opener 'These Days', with the unmistakable liquid voice and soft guitar of composer Jackson Browne. This isn't to be confused with the title track, the Billy Joel song, more wistful than ironic in Mancini's hands. She is great on 'I'll Follow The Sun', in a relatively spare setting that slyly hints at 'Blackbird' too. Classy and memorable. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%







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**SHOSTAKOVICH**

Preludes & Fugues Op.87  
Alexander Melnikov

Harmonia Mundi HMC 902019 (three discs)

The Bach playing of Tatiana Nikoleyeva was the inspiration in 1950 for Shostakovich's 24 Preludes and Fugues, and her two recordings inevitably are seen as definitive. (Nikoleyeva endeared herself to London audiences late in life; she also made several Hyperion discs.) The young Moscow pianist provides a booklet overview of exceptional thoroughness, although the accompanying 23m DVD interview with a stubbly Andreas Staier gets us practically nowhere. Melnikov's pianistic range, though, is something else. He's profoundly sensitive to the introspection but contrasts these with extreme alacrity (No.2/P) or iron strength (No.14/P). An outstanding set. **CB**

Sound Quality: 95%



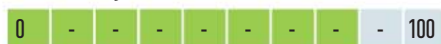
**CHOPIN**

Nocturnes  
Yundi (Li)

EMI 6 08391 2 (two discs)

Rebranding himself simply as Yundi, the Chinese pianist moves to EMI with the promise of a complete Chopin series. Produced by his former DG team (Christopher Alder/Klaus Hiemann), these *Nocturne* recordings were completed in a Zurich church during January. The sound is resonant but clean, wide in dynamic range – and preferable to that in last month's Freire/Decca set. The two pianists are most divergent in the Lisztian Op.48:1 (Yundi taking the honours). Generalising, one would admire the consistent elegance of Yundi's playing, his sensitivity to sound, yet Freire offers greater expressive variety. **CB**

Sound Quality: 78%



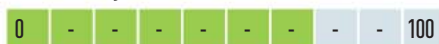
**MAHLER**

Symphony 2 'Resurrection'  
Bamberg SO & Ch/Jonathan Nott

Tudor 7158 (SACD hybrid, two discs)

Founded by Czech refugee musicians in 1946, the Bamberg Orchestra has been working with its English conductor for a decade now, and they are part-way through a Mahler cycle. More akin to Bruno Walter's than Georg Solti's, Jonathan Notts' 'Resurrection' proves more than the sum of its parts and is fascinatingly detailed. Climaxes sound huge, although the recording perhaps exaggerates the rawness of brass and the tenor voices. Lioba Braun's 'Urlicht' suffices, but that's all. There are recent concert releases with CSO/Haitink and LPO/Tennstedt, yet this Bamberg Second (also live) exerts a certain grip. **CB**

Sound Quality: 70%



**R STRAUSS**

Eine Alpensinfonie  
LSO/Bernard Haitink

LSO Live LSO0689 (SACD hybrid)

Anyone present at either of the June 2008 Barbican performances edited here will not hesitate, yet a certain paradox might present itself to the disinterested listener. Haitink's fastidious control and self-effacement, coupled with excellent orchestral playing, make for a fine presentation – of symphonic seriousness. But somehow it exposes Strauss's lazy reliance on his motifs, the inherent *schmalz*, the 'effects' such as the water droplets: better placed in his *Don Quixote* capsized boat Variation. Somehow the Karajan Berlin or Dresden Luisi recordings mask the less attractive Straussian traits. **CB**

Sound Quality: 74%





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Q ACOUSTICS	2000 CINEMA PACK (Graphite)	£499
YAMAHA	YSP-4100	£ SSAV.COM
YAMAHA	YHT-5400	£ SSAV.COM
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ARCAM	SOLO MUSIC FM (FM Only - No DAB)	£699
DENON	D-M38DAB	£ SSAV.COM
MARANTZ	M-CR502	£349
MARANTZ	CD6003/PM6003 CLAIM £200 Off Speakers RRP	£598
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SHEFFIELD 0114 255 5861  
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Once Rod had decided he would have nothing but the best, he progressed to this impressive, refined but powerful high-end system, based on exotic Nagra and Spectral electronics. It's guaranteed to bring a smile to the face of any old rocker who's still young at heart, says **Steve Harris**

**L**ike many enthusiasts, Rod has been at it a long time. He first got the hi-fi bug 40 years ago, and he's loved live music since he first saw The Who at the now-legendary Railway Hotel in Wealdstone, north-west London. But it all goes even further back than that.

'My dad worked for Goodmans loudspeakers at Wembley. As children, we used to go there for the company Christmas parties. My dad was a development engineer, a toolmaker. There was a special magnesium chassis, and he was involved with making that. You had to be careful with magnesium, because if you didn't keep it cool, the swarf would catch fire. There was a huge anechoic chamber there, lined with egg-boxes, where they tested the speakers.

'So I grew up with my dad working on speakers. At home, before there was stereo, he made his own cabinet and built this huge corner speaker. It always sounded great to me!

'I'd always loved music, but that's how I got fascinated with the kit. I still am really. After all these years, I still look at my system, and all the

bits of wire and I just think "How does that sound so good?" It still fascinates me how these clever people actually develop the stuff, and get it to sound so great.'

#### HOT VALVES

Rod's first record player was a Dansette. But the first piece of audio equipment he owned was a Telefunken open-reel tape recorder.

'I still remember the smell of the hot valves! It was a lot of money in the late 1950s, about 20-odd quid. I was doing a paper round and doing the marking-up, working Friday nights in the bakehouse with my friend who was a Polish guy, looking after the ovens and greasing the pans, and Saturday at the greengrocers. My dad said to me, if you can save up half the money, I'll stand as guarantor. So we went into the electrical shop in Wembley and bought the Telefunken. It was the dog's tadders!

'And that was the first thing I owned. When we got the Dansette, with my friend Lenny, we had the microphone on the Telefunken and we were singing along to things like "Don't Be Cruel" by Elvis. It was like cats in pain! Later my sisters got



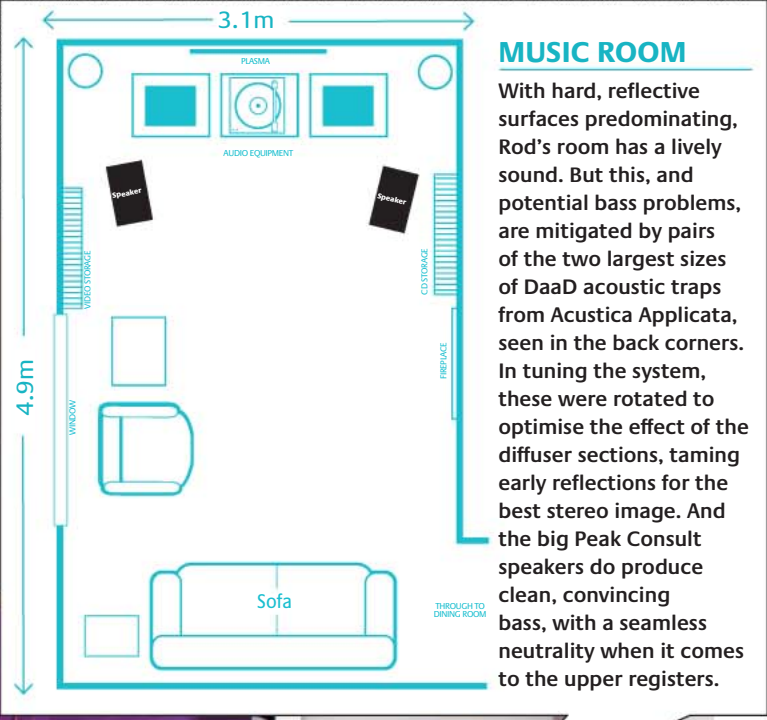
hold of the tape and wiped over it, talking on it. Lenny went ballistic.

'We lived down in Kenton, so the Railway Hotel was just a bus ride away. It wasn't just The Who, it was all the bands, Unit 4 Plus 2, Cliff Bennett and the Rebel Rousers, all doing the rounds. We also used to go to the Oldfield Hotel in Greenford, which was where The Who evidently got together, when Keith Moon turned up and said "I'm a better drummer than him!"

'Of course in those days, things were completely different. You could get in and see all these bands for not very much money. They weren't superstars then, they were just getting started. You could go and see Gerry And The Pacemakers, you could see The Shadows. I'm still a big Shadows fan. It was great and, even better, it was affordable.



**RIGHT:** Custom-built cabinets in the adjacent dining-room area neatly house Rod's vinyl collection, including both original issues and recent audiophile reissues



**MUSIC ROOM**

With hard, reflective surfaces predominating, Rod's room has a lively sound. But this, and potential bass problems, are mitigated by pairs of the two largest sizes of DaaD acoustic traps from Acustica Applicata, seen in the back corners. In tuning the system, these were rotated to optimise the effect of the diffuser sections, taming early reflections for the best stereo image. And the big Peak Consult speakers do produce clean, convincing bass, with a seamless neutrality when it comes to the upper registers.



'After all these years, I still look at my system, and all the bits of wire and I just think "How does that sound so good?" It still fascinates me'

'And then I got married, so I didn't buy anything else for a while. But in the late 1960s, I was doing mini-cabbing and met a chap called Mark who owned an off licence in New Southgate. He had a pair of Quad electrostatics with Quad valve amplification. And he played *To Our Children's Children's Children* by the Moody Blues, and I was bowled over. And I thought "That's what I want!"

'I wasn't in a position to get it then. Slowly but surely, I went through things like Yamaha amps and a lot of other bits and bobs, and it was only in the 1970s that I got the Quad amp, the 33 with the 303

and then changed that to a 405, with a Pioneer PL-12D turntable.'

**MERIDIAN WINS**

But he never did get the Quad electrostatic speakers.

'No, I didn't. They were too big to fit in the flat where I was living. I was a bit of a gipsy between marriages! It was when I'd settled down in the late 1970s that I started to really listen to stuff. I went to the Brighton audio show, which they used to have in those days. There I heard the Meridian 100 series and the Celestion SL6 speakers, and I fell in love with the sound.'

'I stayed with Meridian for quite some time. I had the 101, the 105s, the 104 tuner. Of course the Linn Sondek was the flavour of the day. But I had a Fons CQ30 with a Syrinx arm and a Decca Gold cartridge. I liked the sound of the combination.'

He tried a Hadcock arm but soon went back to the Syrinx.

'But the Linn beckoned, so I got the LP12 and used it with the Syrinx arm. But that didn't work very well so I went for the Grace arm and the Supex cartridge. It was all very nice, but to me it lost the excitement I'd had with the Fons, the Syrinx and the Decca. It was a bit too smooth.'

**ABOVE:** Rod's Peak Consult Empress speakers are driven by a top-of-the-range Spectral DMC-30SS preamp and DMA-250 power amp. Source components are a Nagra CD player running through a Nagra DAC, and a Kuzma turntable

He moved on from the Grace to an Ittok, still keeping the Supex at first, then going on to a van den Hul-modified Asak. But he still missed the dynamic, upfront sound of the Decca.

'That's what reminded me of listening to The Who and all the bands in the 1960s. When you saw them, it was really in your face!'

**THRILLED TO THE CORE**

Rod's earlier purchases came from London's Subjective Audio. Later, he gravitated to Audio T in West Hampstead. Indeed, he spent so much time hanging around in there that they even offered him a job.

'I said, "What's the salary?" They told me, and I said "I'd love to but I can't afford to! My wife'd kill me!'

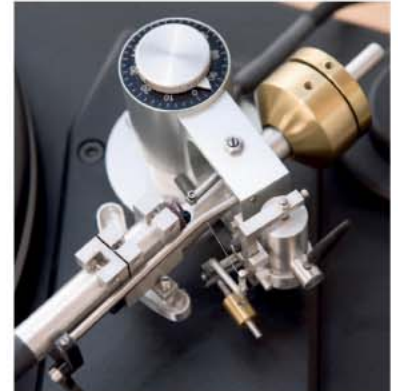
'But I remember one revelation from Audio T, with Audio Technica headshell wires. There was a Canadian chap there, a really nice guy. He said, "Try these. If you're not convinced, bring them back." They were solid silver, and cost about £18, which in the early '80s seemed a lot. I put them in and they made a huge difference. That was when I started to realise about cabling!'

'I moved up to the Celestion SL6S. I was tempted by the SL600,

**ABOVE:** The Kuzma Reference deck that replaced Rod's SME 20

**RIGHT:** Tri-Planar arm is an eye-catcher

**BELOW:** The jewel-like Nagra CD player is used as a transport with the DAC above, while below is the Spectral pre and Nagra VPS phono stage. HRS damping plates top all



but my wife at the time said enough is enough! I think they were a love-them or hate-them loudspeaker. I really rated them.'

He gave up with the Linn and switched to a Michell GyroDec. Then, through the later 1980s, when Rod was married again, the hi-fi didn't change much.

But in 1993, Rod's whole life changed, in a terrible way. Always a keen biker, Rod was test-riding a new BMW when he lost control and crashed after hitting a huge unsuspected pothole. His injuries left him in a wheelchair.

'It was only when I came out of hospital that I started again. I started getting my Meridian stuff together. But then I went to an Audiolab 8000Q pre- and 8000P power amp. This was from Audio T again. Because I was in a wheelchair, they used to bring things out to my car and I'd take them home and try them out, which was really nice!'

'I liked the Audiolab, I thought it was quite a good sound. I got some Danish speakers, the Jamo Concert 11, and I had replaced the Michell GyroDec with an Orbe and an SME IV arm.'

It was after this that Rod first met Stephen Harper of Audio Consultants. He'd been interested

in an arm cable upgrade for the SME and had an unhelpful response from the first London dealer he tried.

'But I phoned Audio Consultants and left a message, and Stephen rang me back the next day. He said he had a choice of cables for the SME but the one he'd like me to try was the Cardas, and he said I should come and hear it. I told him I was in wheelchair, and straight away he said that he'd come to me.'

'Anyway, he came along, and it was an improvement on the standard SME. And it went from there! Now, I didn't have any money then. He let me have the little Benz phono stage and said I could pay when I was able to. I changed a few bits. But finally, the court came up with the settlement from my accident.'

*'I was lying dying in the road with a motorbike on top of me'*

**ONE-HIT WONDER**

So Rod was able to take the plunge with Conrad-Johnson and Avalon. He bought it all in one hit.

'Yes. Because I'd heard the system at Stephen's home before. I knew the Premier 12s were up for grabs. And so I just told him I was in a position to buy them. And I asked him if the Avalon Opuses were up for grabs as well! He said "You realise what you're going to spend?" and ☞





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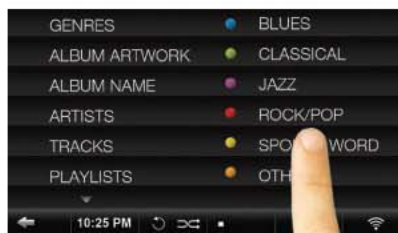


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I said "I don't care, a few years ago I was lying dying in the road with a motorbike on top of me!" It was what I wanted to do.'

Along with the Premier 12 mono power amplifiers, Rod had the Premier 16LS line preamplifier and a Wadia CD player. He traded in his Michell Orbe and SME IV for an SME Model 20/II turntable with SME V arm and added a CJ Premier 15 II phono stage.

That's how things stood when I first met Rod back in 2003. He was enjoying a system that most people could only dream about, and it did sound very good. But our host was not about to stop there.

#### ALL CHANGE

Seven years on, and, as Rod says, nothing remains of that system now except a pair of Finite Elemente Pagode racks.

Everything else has changed. He's also moved home, leaving north London for a spacious bungalow in a country village.

'This might sound crazy,' he says, 'but I never really liked the aesthetics of the SME, with the rubber bands! Stephen had the Kuzma Reference and the Triplanar arm, and he was playing it with the Benz Micro LP. I really liked the sound of that, so I went for it.'

Rod alternates the Benz with a rare Shun Mook cartridge. But he also continued to invest in CD.

'I had the smaller Wadia, the 301, with the Pioneer transport where

you put the disc in upside down, but then I went to the 861. I sold the other one to my chum Ray and he's still got it. I kept the 861 up until about three years ago. I just heard about the Nagra and asked Stephen if he could bring it over. And it was so much better.

'When I had the Wadia, I played it a lot, but I played vinyl more. As soon as I had the Nagra, I played a lot more CDs. It's the nearest thing I've heard to analogue. And having the separate DAC has made it even better. It's superb.'

Meanwhile, the Conrad-Johnsons gave way to an Ayre K-1x pre and V-1xe power amplifier. 'I had the

Ayre system for about two years. I really liked the combination, though I think the preamp was the star.

'Then these Peak Consult

speakers came up. I was coming back from Bristol with my friend Ray and we popped in to Stephen's for supper. He was playing the smaller model, the Princess, and we thought they sounded amazing.

'Then we were looking at the secondhand stuff in his studio, and I saw the Empress speakers. He told me that no-one wanted the rosewood finish. "Really?" I said, "I think they're lovely!"

'I asked him what sort of money, and when he told me I just said "I'll have them!" Without hearing them! I'd heard the bigger model, with the double bass unit, and I'd heard the

**ABOVE LEFT:** Pioneer DVD and media box. TV sound comes via the plasma's own speakers only

**ABOVE RIGHT:** Two sizes of DaaD acoustic traps help with the room sound

**BELOW:** Peak Consult Empress speaker in rosewood

smaller ones as I said, but I actually hadn't heard these. I ended up selling the Avalons to the same guy who'd bought the CJ stuff.

#### ONE MORE THING...

'I stayed with the Ayre for a while. Then I happened to be in the studio when Stephen mentioned Spectral. I hadn't thought about buying anything. But I said "Can I have a listen?" He started off with the cheapest model, and went up through the range. You could hear huge improvements at every stage. He ended up playing the DMC-30SS and the DMA-250. It was just, wow.

'In the meantime, though, with my Ayre amp, I'd bought the Peak Consults. My mate Ray said, "Those speakers are doing the system justice now." He'd never been convinced about the Opuses; they were, nice but not crisp enough.

'So I asked Stephen to come over. Conrad-Johnson had brought out a big solid-state amp and he brought that over, but it was a dreadful sound. He didn't have the full Spectral kit, but he played me the next one down, and as soon as he plugged it in I said, "I'm going to bite the bullet and go for the Spectral 30SS and the DMA-250." And that was it!

Rod is happy with the system now, and he's got everything he needs to enjoy music, especially the music of 1960s and 1970s. But there is one more thing.

'I'd have to get rid of the sideboard to fit it in,' he says. 'But you know, I'd really love to have a big old Wurlitzer jukebox!' 🎵

'When I had the Wadia, I played it a lot, but I played vinyl more...'





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**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

# The politics of popular music

Can the UK music industry continue to treat the Eurovision Song Contest like a bad joke or is it time to get serious and address both the content and politics of the event asks **Paul Miller**

**H**ands up those of you who mustered sufficient stamina to endure the 'National Cringe' that is, or has at least become, the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC). Not many, I'll wager. Once again there were some 'technical' issues that beset the UK entry as Josh Dubovie's sterling effort was at least partially overwhelmed by an over-miked backing chorus. And yet, despite coming flat last, at least our plucky performer was spared the indignity of 'nil points'.

This year's entry had the kudos of '80s pop producer Pete Waterman behind the scenes but our continental cousins still punished us for failing to treat the event with sufficient seriousness. The fact that Waterman himself began backtracking from the entry with only days to go hardly helped. Then there's BBC host Graham Norton, compared to whom the great Wogan remains a model of sobriety and gravitas.

## DANCING ON THIN ICE

Hmm, on second thoughts those on the mainland are probably right: we just don't take this tuneless pantomime seriously enough. Why? Frankly, because the UK music scene doesn't need to – English remains the 'international' language of distributed music (and literature, science...) and the UK remains a hotbed of new talent with or without the approval of 'Johnny Foreigner'. This, at least, is the perceived wisdom.

Elsewhere in the great continental community there are performers that must cling to the ESC with grim determination, certain in the knowledge that this represents the one and only lifeboat from which to escape musical obscurity. There's a limit to what can

'We just don't take this tuneless pantomime seriously enough in the UK'



**ABOVE:** With a song in his heart... plucky Josh Dubovie maintains the UK's tradition for propping up the lower echelons of the Eurovision Song Contest with his entry 'That Sounds Good To Me'

be achieved by viral marketing, even with YouTube, so entries including 'Run Away' from Moldova or 'Apricot Stone' from Armenia must treat the ESC as its one-and-only, once-in-a-lifetime spotlight.

The six million Euro question remains, however, can we really afford to pay this international showboat such short shrift indefinitely? If the Great British hi-fi industry is any guide then the answer is 'probably not'. When The Beatles were strutting their stuff across Europe in 1962 and then the world from 1964-66 this coincided with a massive boost to the hi-fi industry, and the UK hi-fi industry in particular. For the likes of Rogers, SME and KEF, these were formative years.

Similarly, established brands including Quad, Tannoy, Celestion, Leak and Garrard

were propelled to another level by the rock revolution that exploded in the mid-'60s as bands including The Stones and The Who joined the fray. This scene kick-started a passion for music reproduction among a younger generation, a generation that would grow into the high end hi-fi consumers of later decades.

## POP AND POLITICS

You don't need me to tell you that British hi-fi no longer rules the waves. A look through the pages of *Hi-Fi News* every month reveals many a luxurious and deserving alternative from every corner of Europe. But think on this: if there's a peak in flat panel TV sales coinciding with major sporting events involving 'Team GB' then there's just a glimmer of a chance that a truly serious attempt at Eurovision might garner some slight reinforcement in hi-fi sales. All that's needed is some powerful musical muscle behind the wheel and a determination to tackle the internecine politics of voting. ☺

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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

# The Real deal and you...

Software to rip copy protected DVDs to a PC has landed one company heavy fines. So is Imerge risking the same fate with a new range of servers that rips music from Blu-ray discs, asks **Barry Fox**

If you use a home server to store high quality audio, spare a thought for a recent court case in the USA. The Hollywood studios have won a \$4.5 million punishment payment from RealNetworks – the US company behind RealAudio compression – for selling \$30 software called RealDVD that rips copy-protected optical discs to hard disk.

Don't think this doesn't matter to you because you don't want to rip video. Blu-ray is a very high quality music disc, but its AACs anti-rip system and regional coding lock sound and vision far tighter than DVD or CD. As we saw when Nelson Riddle's classic score for the 1966 *Batman* movie was released as an audio-only 'extra' on a Blu-ray disc only in the USA, regional coding for video can tie up audio content as well.

**QUESTION OF LEGALITY**

Imerge pretty much invented the hard drive music store product category.

'We developed the first audio server in the 1990s... We have now sold over 25,000 units,' said CEO Cameron Wade recently when Imerge launched its new servers and XiVa online music store, in partnership with 7Digital.

Owners of Imerge server boxes use a computer to access a web page, sign up for the XiVa download service and enter credit card details. They can then use the server's remote

control to make click purchases from over eight million music titles. Prices range from between 70 and 90p per track and from £5 to £11 per album.

There is no DRM. Once purchased and downloaded to the server, music can be copied freely to other devices. Users can also download the same tracks three times. The hard drive uses a back-up

'The option to rip your own purchased discs to the Imerge server is vital'



**ABOVE:** The new Imerge servers will read content from Blu-ray discs and store it. But not out of the box – for legal reasons the software to do this must be installed by the purchaser alone

system called RAID to prevent content loss and if the whole server is stolen the owner can cancel its credit authorisation and download the purchased tracks again.

But the music is MP3 at 320kbps (or below), which means it's 'CD quality' or below. So the option to rip your own purchased discs to the server is vital.

'The key difference,' said Imerge about the server, 'is the new Blu-ray drive, which also allows users to

store and playback content from Blu-ray discs... the integral drive reads content from CDs, DVDs and Blu-ray discs to store on hard drives for convenient access.'

Is this legal though?

'We ship the product without the ability to record, as the manufacturer cannot be seen to be actively advocating third-party software that can be construed as

contentious. We run a comprehensive certification program for our dealers and partners worldwide which runs through the setup and installation of the product. Part of that installation training walks the dealer through adding third-party software on behalf of the end user... Once this is complete, the unit is then ready to rip DVDs from the slot loading drive, and also Blu-ray discs.'

**'CLEAN' AS SOLD**

Imerge reckons that Real came unstuck because it took a CSS licence and the ripped copy was still protected. Because the Imerge server does not come with pre-installed rip software, it is legally 'clean' as sold. Although dealers and custom installers may advise customers on the installation of ripping software, the final installation step is always done by owners who press the install-confirm button in the privacy of their own homes.

Time will tell what the music and movie companies think about this. ⏻

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## Workshop Notes 14: Reference class Phono Stages at real world prices....

Compared to turntable, arm & cartridge the phono stage can end up as the Cinderella of vinyl replay - something that might be upgraded later. The danger is a phono stage that is degrading the signal not cherishing it - adding graininess, distorting instrumental timbre and reducing the glorious vinyality that we crave. Two new phono stages that certainly do not do this are the **Esoteric E-03** (left above) and the two box **Avid Pulsare**. The Esoteric is part of their Master Sound Works and is on par with the gloriously organic C-03 preamplifier. At an RRP of £4495 it offers a vibrant and lifelike dimensionality that is unmatched by any other phono stage. The Pulsare with an RRP of £2999 is just as fast, transparent and neutral as the Esoteric, but with a subtly different presentation. Both have two inputs, excellent front panel adjustability and allow cartridge matching on the fly. One of these two exceptionally fine phono stages is going to raise your vinyl replay by a huge margin - to find out which one call me, Julian Musgrave, and start hearing the true potential of your vinyl.

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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

# Why hard-wired is still king

The promise of high-definition programming streaming wirelessly throughout the home has real appeal. But current technology has yet to match the hype – as **Barry Willis** discovers to his cost

Once in a while, volunteering to help a friend can be surprisingly instructive. My neighbour Ashook, with plenty of free advice from me, has step-by-step bought a big flat-panel HDTV, upgraded his speakers and amplification, and now, his Blu-ray player. What really intrigued him as we stood in the electronics department of our local CostCo was the potential for wirelessly streaming Netflix content, Netflix being a company that offers access to an unlimited number of movies on your PC for a fixed monthly fee.

Only one player in the store featured onboard Wi-Fi. Others required an external adapter. So out the door we went with a Sony BDP-BX57, approximately \$250 including sales tax.

### DAZED AND CONFUSED

Our assumption that we'd perform a simple hookup and soon be watching any one of hundreds of movies in Blu-ray quality became an hours-long experiment, an exercise in frustration, and an acknowledgement of the limits of current technology.

Dazed by the large-print hype of the player's features and benefits, we hadn't paid close attention to the small-print disclaimer – such as its preference for the 802.11n Wi-Fi protocol, or the need for a consistent minimum 10Mbps data rate for viewing HD material.



**ABOVE:** The in-store 'bin-tag' accompanying the Sony; don't forget the small print



**ABOVE:** Players like Sony's BDP-BX57 promise the streaming of HD movies to your HDTV via onboard Wi-Fi, but make sure your home network is up to snuff or you may be disappointed

Ashook had to register with both the Sony and Netflix sites before logging on to the streaming service at Netflix central. His wireless router was in his office upstairs from his entertainment system, and although the Sony recognised the router, connecting to both sites proved tedious.

Nevertheless, once properly registered, we had access to the Netflix online film library. As one who's been enormously disappointed with the quality of on-demand programming, and its less-than-elegant delivery, I was eager to see if Netflix would make good on its promise of Blu-ray quality. We picked a French film called *L'Heure d'Été* (Hour Of Summer) and stared at the screen for what seemed like forever while a bar graph filled up.

Eventually the graph disappeared and the film began: beautiful imagery, great sound. But it stopped within two minutes as the player rebuffered, and did so every 90 seconds for the next 10 minutes. Clearly, not the way to enjoy a film.

I suggested that the router might be too far away. We moved it downstairs to within inches of the player and tried again.

Same result. I then hit on the obvious solution of connecting the player to the router with an Ethernet cable. Voila! The buffering stopped, and we were able to watch the entire film without another glitch. We didn't have a Blu-ray disc of the same title for comparison.

### THE HARD WAY

In my primary entertainment system is an old notebook computer for streaming satellite radio. Wirelessly – the router's less than 20 feet away – it's prone to

dropouts, glitches and lost contact with my Sirius XM server. Hooked up via Ethernet cable, it works flawlessly for as long as I care to listen. And here's why: connection speed

is consistently 100Mbps hard-wired, but anything from 1Mbps to 54Mbps with Wi-Fi, depending on the position of the router, the phase of the moon, and the relative humidity on Easter Island. Hence the Sony's constant rebuffering.

Wi-Fi technology is perfectly adequate for email, but for HD programming, the hard-wired connection is still king. ☺

'We stared at the TV for what seemed like forever, watching a bar graph fill up'



**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

# Just for the record

There was a time when recording discs and radio programmes for personal use meant using a tape deck. Later it was a CD-RW recorder, while today it's the PC. **Jim Lesurf** has an alternative...

**F**ifty years ago almost every self-respecting hi-fi fan owned a tape recorder. Indeed, at one time it even looked as if stereo would arrive in the home mainly in the form of reel-to-reel magnetic tapes rather than LPs. I bought my first tape recorder before I had a stereo tuner. And I used it mainly to record from the radio so I could play my favourite programmes more than once during the week.

**WHISTLE WHILE YOU WORK**

At first the recordings tended to be accompanied by 8-9kHz whistling noises due to interference because my 'tuner' was a 1940s AM valve radio. Later I upgraded to a stereo FM tuner and bought a Tandberg 4000 series reel-to-reel recorder. Like many others I really lusted after something better, like a Revox, but I couldn't afford one. Fortunately the Tandberg was pretty good. I also used a cassette recorder for many years. While audio enthusiasts tended to sneer at most cassette decks I found that they could give quite decent results, and were much more convenient to use than reel-to-reel.

These days dedicated sound recorders seem to have almost vanished from the audiophile radar. Yet I still want to

record items. Often this is for analysis or measurement. But I also want to do things like make convenience copies of my old analogue material onto CDR.

For around ten years I've used a pair of Pioneer Audio CD-RW recorders. I know that many people these days tend to use a computer, sometimes with a cheap adaptor. But I've never been entirely happy with feeding analogue signals directly into a home computer.

Perhaps it's the engineer in me that makes me aware of what a minefield of noise and interference a computer can be! Or perhaps it's my wariness of the 'churning' of the general computer market, which sees people pushed into having to 'upgrade' all the time. True, to a large extent I can avoid that situation by using Linux and RiscOS, rather than the Windows operating system or a Mac. But I remain cautious of using a home computer for recording.

**BIT OF A LIMITATION**

Having said that, I've increasingly become aware of the limitations of using a CD-RW recorder. The 44.1kHz/16-bit format and inability to record more than about 80 minutes without a break can be restrictive. So I recently decided to

switch to a more modern method. Rather than buy a fancy soundcard I chose, instead, a Tascam HD-P2 portable 'high resolution' recorder.

**STATE OF PLAY**

The Tascam records onto solid state (SD) memory cards. It has both line (RCA/Phono) and microphone (XLR) analogue inputs plus various 'professional' features.

It can record and playback all the standard sample rates and sample sizes up to 192kHz/24-bit. In addition, it has S/PDIF inputs and outputs so you can make digital recordings and then

play them out via a good external DAC like the Cambridge Audio DACMagic.

Having done some tests on the HD-P2 (to see detailed results go to [www.audiomisc.co.uk/recording/TascamHDP2.html](http://www.audiomisc.co.uk/recording/TascamHDP2.html)) I have since routinely used it for recordings and it works very nicely. The recordings are in the Broadcast Wave Format, which is an extension of the common LPCM Wave file. But, as usual, I ended up writing my own software to process the files.

I suppose I have a fairly old-fashioned 'DIY' sort of approach to such matters and I like to understand how things work. Maybe this is why I prefer to approach recording this way, and not simply to rely on 'Plug and Pray' and a 'Nanny knows best' computer system. Nevertheless, I must admit that I do miss being able to watch a couple of large reels whirring around during recording and replay. Maybe I'd be happier using a computer as a recorder if the screen showed this happening while copying!

'When it comes to recording, a computer can be a minefield of noise'



**LEFT:** Able to record up to 192kHz/24-bit resolution, Tascam's HD-P2 costs around £1000



# Roksan

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Effective 1st November 2009, all Roksan electronics and turntables supplied via authorised dealers are to be covered by a 5 year parts and labour warranty.\* As a gesture to existing customers, this will also be extended to all current owners of K2 products.

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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

# ‘A wide open window...’

A cliché it may be, but this expression still describes how a good system ought to sound. What’s more, it’s an idea that’s been around longer than the term ‘hi-fi’ itself, as **Steve Harris** discovers...

How often do hi-fi enthusiasts come out glibly with a well-worn phrase, without thinking about the meaning, or where it came from? I got caught out not so long ago. While visiting David, whose system in Norwood, along with the John Crabbe built-in concrete bass horns, was featured in the July issue, we were chatting and, to be honest, reminiscing nostalgically. If there is an auditory equivalent of rose-tinted glasses, I was wearing them. I started waffling about how Quad had first given us the feeling of ‘a window on the concert hall’.

David pulled me up immediately, reminding me that this idea and expression had originated with the great audio pioneer Paul Voigt.

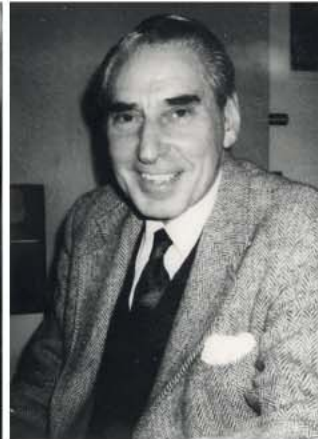
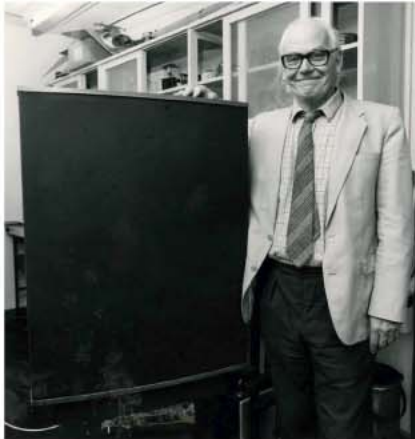
In fact, when David corresponded with Voigt, by then living in retirement in Canada, Voigt had recalled in one letter the way that, listening to a BBC dance band broadcast in the late 1920s, his big horn loudspeaker had been like a ‘window on the studio’.

### SPLIT LOYALTIES

From talking to enthusiasts who got into hi-fi in the 1960s or earlier, I’ve learned that they haven’t all worshipped at the shrine of the electrostatic quite as I’d imagined they would. Sometimes it was not Quad but Lowther horn-loaded speakers, derived from Voigt’s work, that kindled the flame for them.

When I first heard a pair of Lowthers myself in the late 1980s, my first reaction, which I politely kept to myself, was, ‘How can anybody listen to this?’ I’d been brought up on Bextrene cones and dome tweeters, in an era when speaker designers endeavoured to smooth out every bump and pimple in their frequency responses.

So the Lowthers seemed outrageously coloured. But after a while my ears and brain attuned themselves, and I began to hear music and enjoy it.



**LEFT:** Quad’s Peter Walker with the ESL-63 and **(right)** Donald Chave, who took over the Lowther company and in the 1950s marketed speaker designs based in part on the work of Paul Voigt

But I still wondered at the way that the Quad ESL, which I’d thought must have swept everything before it, had actually divided opinion. Could it just be practical considerations, the ESL’s high price and low efficiency? Or could it just be the impressive horn bass? I think there was more to it than that. In a horn-loaded speaker, the ‘point source’ of a single drive unit could produce something like a curved or ‘spherical’ wave front at the mouth of the horn. Subjectively, this could bring the sound of the performance into the room in an immediate and believable way.

The Quad’s nearly-flat panels did not do this. But with its intrinsically low-distortion sound, the Quad could appear unbeatably ‘transparent’, and this is where the window analogy comes in.

Writing in the 1957 *Hi-Fi Yearbook*, Ralph West said: ‘The general listening impression is that the speaker seems to be a wide open window through which the sound is heard.’ Yet for some enthusiasts the Quad sound may have just seemed less tangible, less exciting than their horn speakers.

Later, in 1982, Quad came up with an electrostatic speaker that actually did

behave like a point source. Peter Walker held that the ideal speaker should behave like a pulsating sphere, and his ESL-63 design simulated this with a panel divided into concentric ring sections, receiving their signals with a delay that increased progressively towards the outer ring. So the speaker produced a ‘spherical’ wave front, just as if the sound were coming from a single point behind the panel.

### BEST OF BOTH WORLDS?

Listening to David’s ESL-63s, with the final touch of uncoloured low bass added

by the Crabbe horns, his system really did offer a window on to a Radio 3 lunchtime concert. Was this the best of both worlds? It was certainly a thoroughly

believable illusion. But if you itch to compare live music with some of the best hi-fi, you can do so at Unilever’s XPO event on Saturday, 10 July. In the courtyard of the New Malden store, blues/rock/folk band the Spikedrivers will be alternating with recorded music via PMC speakers.

And whatever you think of the sound, they’ll still give you a free hamburger. ☺

‘If there’s an auditory equivalent of rose-tinted glasses, I was wearing them’

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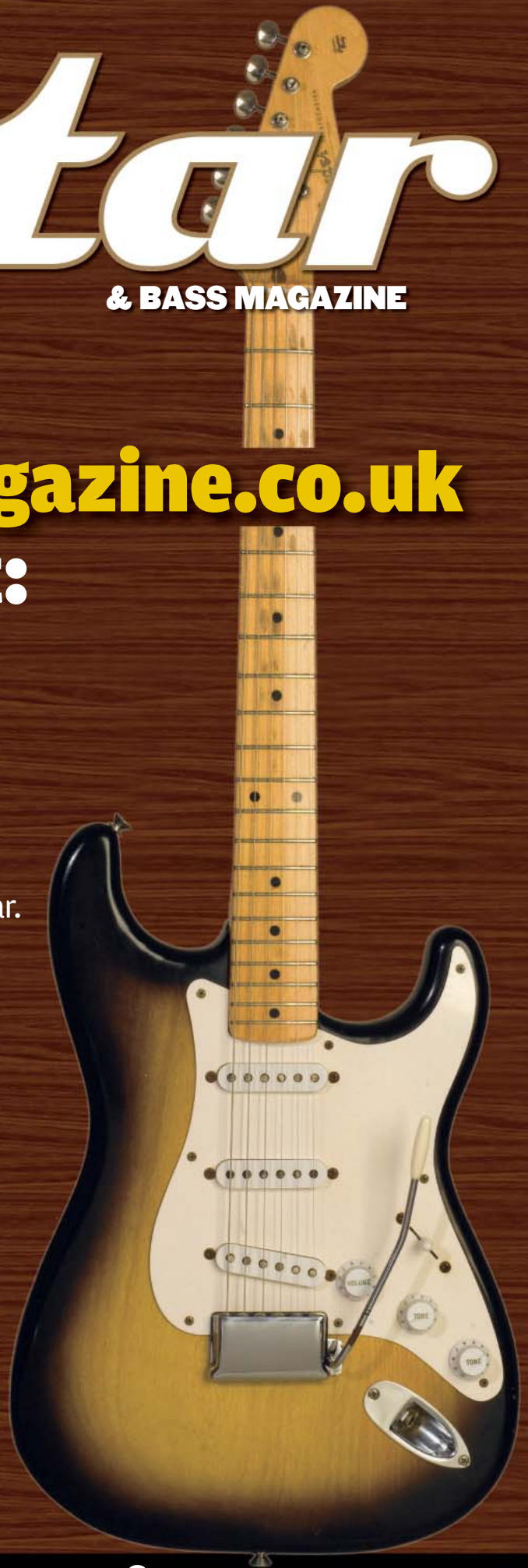
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## YOUR VIEWS

# Sound Off!

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## GRIN AND BEAR IT DOMESTIC HARMONY – A READER'S SOLUTION

I often receive instructions from 'she who must be obeyed' to modify the volume level when listening to my system. It is on these occasions that I turn to Crispin, 'bearer' of my AKG 1000 ear speakers. Crispin [pictured below] was discovered in an antique shop in deepest Dorset where he was languishing in solitude. We now have a satisfactory symbiotic relationship that enables me to enjoy Blind Faith, Keith Jarrett *et al* at full tilt with no upset to the missus. I hope this letter may be a guide to other readers who have a similar problem with 'her indoors'.

*Brian Street, via e-mail*



## DIY speaker: another view

ONLINE SPARES MAKE '70S SPEAKERS AN ATTRACTIVE BUY AFTER ALL

I'd like to make a couple of comments regarding Robert Park's letter in the June 'Sound Off' pages on the 'State of The Art' DIY loudspeaker design plans, originally printed in the April 1976 issue of *HFN*.

Having built a speaker from the design in the late 1970s myself, I can attest to the quality of the sound. Indeed I have only recently upgraded from these speakers to a pair of PMC EB1s, having found little to approach the full and well-rounded sound of the DIY pair.

Apart from an internal rewire, my speakers have remained intact and have provided enjoyable service with daily use until last year. They now continue to be used as the rear pair, complimenting the PMCs' presentation beautifully.

I agree with Keith Howard who, when advising Robert on whether it would be a good decision or not to buy a pair secondhand today, points out that spares could be a problem. However there are a number of dealers on eBay who seem to be in the business of providing most speaker units secondhand. My view is that if the price is right, go for it.

*Colin J Usher, via e-mail*

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## Tonearms: a Rock and a hard place

THROWING A DAMPER ON SONIC IDEALS

In your piece 'Enthusiasts' Call To Arms' (*HFN* June '10) you provide some valuable and telling data illustrating how tonearms can affect sound reproduction from vinyl discs. Clearly these effects, caused both by flexing and twisting of the arm itself and by further unwanted artefacts transmitted through the arm from the bearings, motor board, *etc.* could be eliminated if the pick-up cartridge body itself were connected to mechanical ground.

This connection to ground is closely achieved by the 'front-end damping' provided on Townshend Audio 'Rock' players by the curved oil-filled trough and the paddle attached to the front of the tonearm. The link to mechanical ground should ideally be of zero impedance to eliminate all effects of the tonearm. Sadly, this ideal cannot quite be achieved: the stylus must still be free to track the groove and the pick-up cartridge must respond to both horizontal and vertical movement of the record, as allowed by the oil in the trough, but experiments with a wide selection of tonearms have shown that front-end damping can reduce the effects of unwanted tonearm artefacts by several orders.

*Jack Dinsdale, via e-mail*

Paul Miller replies: Jack makes an interesting if necessarily partisan observation, for the Cranfield/Rock trough technique has certainly been shown to provide a very useful attenuation of arm/cartridge resonances. The higher the resonant frequency the greater the system approaches its ideal of a 'mechanical ground' although at this point the tonearm will behave rather less like a pipe clamped at one end. In practice the bending and twisting modes can be modelled from a pipe clamped at *both* ends which, as only the paddle itself is fully terminated, may still provide a spectrum of micro-vibrations to influence the pick-up's generator.



ABOVE: Townshend Rock 7E with paddle in trough of silicone to provide damping of arm/cartridge resonance

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## MARANTZ KI PEARL



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The Pearl integrated amplifier is just as stunning as its combining SACD player - its 90 watts per channel into 8 ohms or 140 watts into 4 ohms means it can keep even the most demanding of loudspeakers under total control. While its two-stage circuit construction guarantees a breathtaking signal to noise ratio and spectacular stereo imaging.



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## Memories of JC's horns

HI-FI@HOME STRIKES A CHORD STATESIDE



ABOVE: John Crabbe's built-in concrete horn speakers as seen in *HFN* June 2010

I love audio nostalgia and the article in the June issue about a reader buying John Crabbe's home along with his horn speakers brought the memories flooding back. I began subscribing to *Hi-Fi News* in the early '70s. As I recall, a year's subscription, including shipping to the USA, cost me all of \$5.00, although the international money order I had to get from a bank to pay the bill more than doubled the cost. Needless to say, it was more than worth the money.

I still recall John's article on adding the IMF midrange and tweeter configuration to his bass horns. I was in awe of the system. I was friends with Bud Fried, who was very proud that John used the IMF design to finish his speakers.

But what really stands out in my mind was John describing how the concrete construction he used for his horns, which in those days seemed way over the top, turned out to be insufficient and how he had to reinforce them further with concrete blocks. That particularly resonated with me; I recall meeting Percy Wilson of *Gramophone* magazine about that time and he told me that you can't make a proper bass horn out of wood as it was too resonant.

*Allen Edelstein, USA*

## First steps with Armstrong amp

VINTAGE REVIEW HAS READER REMINISCING OVER A LIFETIME'S ENJOYMENT OF HI-FI

I was very interested to read your review in the June issue of the Armstrong 222 amp [pictured below]. This was the first stereo amplifier I purchased as a new and young hi-fi enthusiast. At the time I had also recently purchased the Garrard AT6 turntable and had just upgraded it with a Decca Deram ceramic cartridge. The Armstrong cost me around £24, which was over a month's wages, so it took some time (and courage) to save up enough money and take the plunge.

I remember it well with affection and it lifted my previous mono only experience to new heights of pleasure. My speakers at that time were home-made atrocities – but they worked – though I eventually bought the first Goodmans Maxim bookshelf loudspeakers. One at a time: I couldn't afford two at once! They made a vast difference. I also bought the matching Armstrong mono FM tuner, which I later upgraded with the internal transistor stereo multiplex decoder, and heard the first Radio 3 stereo broadcast – Bach – though regrettably, the decoder was very hit and miss, and only worked occasionally and kept switching between mono and stereo.

The Armstrong amp was a faithful companion for several years, until the company introduced its first transistor amplifier, the 521 series, in a wooden sleeve, with black/silver front. I purchased that some years later, but the sound was cold and grainy, made worse by the unit's susceptibility to RF breakthrough. I live very close to the BBC Sutton Coldfield transmitter, which at the time transmitted Radio 2, 3 and 4 on FM, but also BBC 1 TV. The amp was plagued with constant background noise from the 405 vision signal and also the sound channel – a buzz almost as loud as the music I was trying to enjoy! I fitted various filters, including screening the loudspeaker cables, and even sent it back to Armstrong, but nothing I tried made much difference. There were occasions when I came close to throwing it out of the window!

In utter frustration I sold the Armstrong amp (to someone outside this

area) and bought a Sansui AU555 as a replacement. This proved to be an excellent performer, well built too, and hardly susceptible to RF breakthrough.

My most recent upgrade was to the Chord CPM3300 integrated, which is amazing, though due to a change in my financial circumstance I do not anticipate any further upgrades in my remaining years! It has been a fascinating journey, and one I would not have missed for the world. I have so valued the advice, reviews and comments from the *Hi-Fi News* writers over the years. As others have written in recent issues, it seems a great shame that teenagers only seem to want to listen to poor quality audio (and ghastly hip-hop 'music') from iPods and mobile phones, and have no idea of what real music sounds like at all. I noticed this in America on extended stays over recent years; there are few, if any, hi-fi stores at all. Rather, it's all AV and TVs, with no electrical stores carrying decent stereo systems. It's very sad.

Over the last few years my hearing has deteriorated somewhat – as it does for most of us with increasing maturity. When listening to music on my system or at a live concert in Birmingham Symphony Hall, I suffer with a grating harsh distortion on high frequencies, especially from massed violins. This is quite distressing and detracts from my enjoyment. It seems strange I never get this from solo violin or piano, and often worry that it's my equipment, not my ears!

However, this would never stop me from enjoying my one passion – good music. So thanks to the hi-fi world in all its various wonders and quirks. And even though I can no longer afford to buy the stuff I would dearly love to – it's good to read about it and dream!

*John Winterbottom, Sutton Coldfield*



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## Two-channel overload?

READERS ASK FOR MORE AV – WHAT'S YOUR VIEW?

You have not devoted much space to home cinema products in recent issues. Fair enough: it's your magazine and you have to heed the diehards who want *Hi-Fi News* to remain strictly a two-channel audio journal.

Nevertheless, if you review the Cambridge Audio 650BD Blu-ray player [*HFN*, June '10], you should at least in passing comment on its video capabilities. Your audio-only review was slightly eccentric!

*Robin Moss, via e-mail*

I have noticed (with dismay) that your magazine appears to be

slowly moving away from reviewing AV products, save for two or three reviews of high-end AV receivers and universal players. You now have a 'Vinyl Frontier' section in the magazine. Is this marking a shift away from reviewing AV products (especially of the budget variety) altogether?

*Constantine, South Africa*

Paul Miller replies: We always appreciate feedback because, in practice, *Hi-Fi News* is your magazine, not ours! Sure enough we are all diehard audio enthusiasts here (I'd expect you to be very suspicious of an editorial team that was not) but our experience is both broad and deep. So, we are as

enthusiastic about the potential of valve amplifiers and high-end LP spinners as we are about high resolution digital downloads, outboard DACs and digital amplifiers. If it can make great music, both stereo and multichannel, then our aim is to have it featured in *Hi-Fi News*.

Our re-design, launched exactly one year ago, was driven by your desire to read about the two-channel core of our audio world. You asked for slightly longer reviews, more

straightforward 'show it like it is' photography and more in-depth music features – the genesis of our popular Vinyl Icon series.

Nevertheless, if there's now a genuine appetite to read about AV products, including receivers, processors and BD players then we'd be delighted to slake your thirst for some genuinely in-depth hardware reviews. We have the technology, after all, so let's see where your opinion takes us.



ABOVE: Cambridge Audio's Azur 650BD 'Universal' BD player

## Caught out by bass mis-management

DOES THE CAMBRIDGE 650BD PLAYER HAVE AN EXTENDED BASS OR NOT?

I was just in the market for a new Blu-ray and music disc player so I enjoyed reading your review of the Cambridge 650BD [pictured above], but I have two questions. Firstly, are you planning to review the matching AV receiver and, secondly, I was puzzled by two alternative reviews of this player.

Both other reviews, published elsewhere, criticised the Cambridge 650BD for having a thin-sounding bass and one even printed a graph showing this lack of low bass. So who should I believe?

*Charles Green, via e-mail*

Paul Miller replies: Glad you liked our in-depth review of the 650's audio performance and, yes, the partnering Azur 650R AV receiver will appear in *Hi-Fi News* later this year.

Your second question raises the issue of proper set-up. Many BD and DVD

players, when fresh from the box, will default to a 'small' speaker configuration which has the low bass (typically below 80Hz) directed away from the main front, centre and surround channels and routed, instead, onto the subwoofer channel. The assumption is that most (budget) AV systems will comprise small rather than full-sized, floorstanding speakers and so this default bass management option is often 'built in' to avoid over-burdening less capable 5.1 channel speaker packages.

Of course if the player is hastily auditioned as a conventional two-channel CD spinner in this mode then I'd not be surprised to discover it sounded rather light in the bass! Still, I find it hard to imagine any experienced hi-fi pundit making this sort of mistake.

Owners of the 650BD should return to the 'Audio Processing > Speaker Configuration' section of Cambridge's setup menu and ensure the speakers are set to 'Large', 'Small' or even 'Off' depending on their particular system requirements.

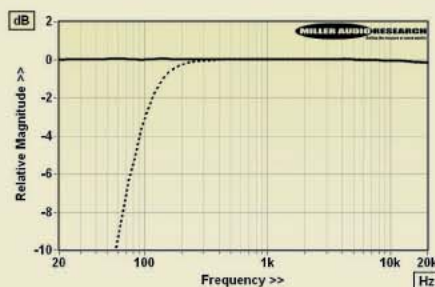
I returned to the data collected during our review of the '650BD (*HFN*, June '10) to create the graph seen below. This clearly shows the impact of setting (or leaving) any main channel in the 'Small' configuration. Indeed,

Cambridge's bass roll-off occurs rather earlier than many players with an audible loss of bass as high as 100Hz.

This mode was probably envisaged for use with small satellite speakers as there's no provision to shift the crossover point to lower frequencies. If this looks like the graph you saw, then you'll know what happen...

Regular readers will know that at *Hi-Fi News* we lab test everything that comes into the office before it goes out for review. This not only ensures that all products are functioning correctly (we don't want to review faulty gear after all) but also guarantees we set-up every component, and especially BD/DVD players and AV receivers, in a consistent fashion.

This includes bass management, which is the first thing to be switched off in our efforts to extract the best possible sound quality from players and processors alike!



ABOVE: Main channel frequency response for Cambridge Audio's 650BD player showing effect of 'small' channel bass configuration (dotted trace)

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# Scott 200B amplifier

Rather expensive, American and – from the early 1960s – sold over here, can the smallest of H H Scott’s legendary integrated amplifiers still cut the mustard today?  
 Review: **Haden Boardman** Lab: **Paul Miller**

**A**merican Hermon Hosmer Scott was born on March the 28th, 1909, in Somerville, Massachusetts. He received both BSc and MSc degrees from the Massachusetts Institute Of Technology, and earned a doctorate from the Lowell Technological Institute. He is not a particularly well-known name among British audiophiles, yet the company bearing his name produced some of the finest sounding audio equipment from the golden era of 1946 to 1966. In the year 2000 he was listed as one of the top 50 audio innovators by the American CES organisation. Sadly, H H Scott passed away in 1975, aged just 66.

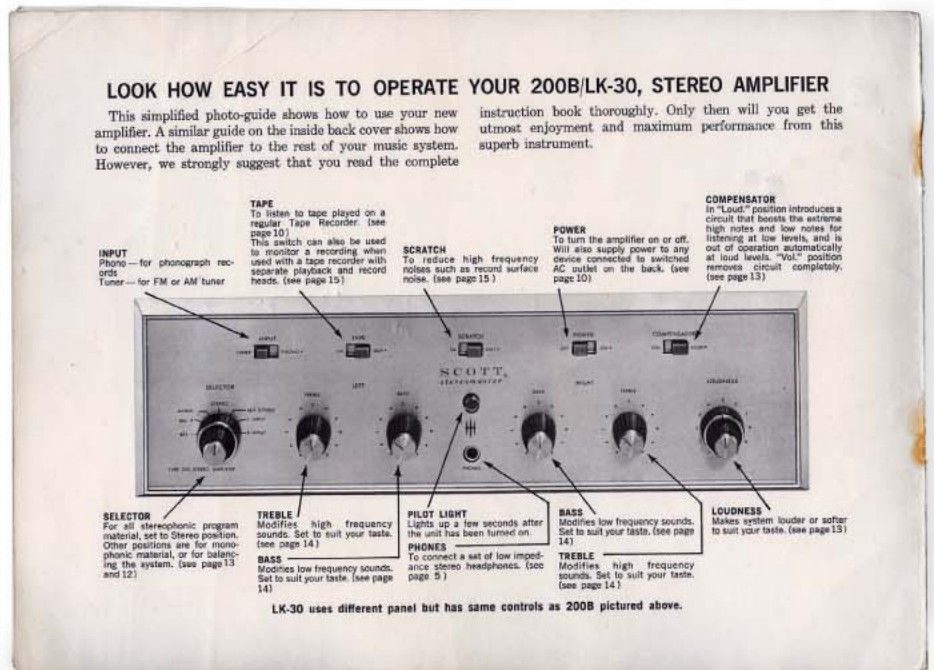
## FIRST INTEGRATED AMP

The company’s superbly constructed FM tuner sets already have a following among UK tube fans while the late mono preamps appeal to fans of early LP records and late 78s, due to their low noise and highly flexible record equalisation. Yet the integrated amplifiers appear to have been totally overlooked. Back in 1952 Scott introduced what must be considered the first true integrated high-fidelity amplifier, the model 99A. Priced at \$99, this unit combined phono preamp, full controls, power supply and a 10W power amp. Based around the 6V6 output tetrode valve, it used ECC82 and ECC83 driver valves. Later variants (suffix B, C, and D) offered a jump in power to 22W with its use of the larger 6L6 valve.

Moving on a decade, the ‘baby’ budget model of the 1960s range is the little 200 (also sold in kit form as the LK30). Unveiled in 1962, this neat integrated features an output stage based on 6GW8 tubes (ECL86 valves in Euro speak – familiar to any Rogers Cadet III owner).

Scott drove these little valves hard, producing a claimed 12W RMS in fixed bias (negative control grid voltage). Nevertheless, the amp featured here has

*‘By British standards, the Scott was a highly luxurious design’*



been running with the same set of 6GW8s for over ten years and even survived the Ed’s test bench [see Lab Report, p114]. The ECL86 is a tough little valve indeed!

The entire amplifier was based on the more popular and more expensive model 299 (priced \$200 in the States as compared to the 200’s \$140 price tag). The 299 employed 12AX7s (ECC83s) and 6BQ5s (EL84s) in place of the ECL86 valves. Both amps have a pair of ECC83s in common –

used for the phono preamp – with another ECC83 used for the tone controls. A GZ34 rectifier valve was used for the main high tension circuit.

The 200 has a simpler circuit than the 299, the advantages being less heat and stress on the chassis. The transformers are over-sized, while the internal layout is strikingly neat and tidy. Good quality components are used throughout – especially compared to those found in British components of the era.

**ABOVE:** In case you are not convinced just how easy it is to operate this amplifier – here’s an original instruction manual for the Scott 200B

The output drive circuit itself can be traced back through the ‘classic’ British 1940s Theo Williamson circuit to Cocking’s original ‘Quality Amplifier’. The same circuit, with mild variations, was used by the majority of non esoteric American designs throughout the golden era. The Williamson effect was quite massive. It was simple, straightforward, and it worked!

The ECL86 is a very underrated valve. It was one of the last power valves to be developed before the all conquering transistor took over. Two valves in one glass tube, it features what is effectively one half of an ECC83 triode valve and one of the most linear power pentodes produced. As configured by Scott, just two glass tubes can make a high quality push pull power amplifier.

## ENTER THE 200B...

The 200B appeared in 1964 before being discontinued in 1966. The changes



between this amp and the 200 were mostly cosmetic, though a centre channel output was added. By British standards, it was a highly luxurious design, offering dual concentric volume and separate tone controls for both channels, comprehensive stereo mode switch, 1/4in headphone socket, switchable loudness contour, three inputs (with tape monitor), plus 4, 8 and 16ohm loudspeaker terminals. And it was expensive! In the UK it cost £86 2s. A complete Quad II stereo control unit and power amp set could be yours for under £70 while the recently introduced Rogers Cadet III cost £31. You can begin to see why the 200B is rare to find in the UK.

**SCOTT VERSUS QUAD**

The comparison with the Quad II is an interesting one. Technically both offer 12W per channel, with the Quad circuit based on a pair of EF86 pentodes driving the pre-war KT66 tetrode valves across a distributed load output transformer. This is where both the anodes and cathodes of the output valves are connected to the output transformer.

I get the impression the original Walker Quality Unit Amplifier Domestic had been designed just pre World War II, the original

version using EF37 pentodes, the later, much more famous Mark II using EF86s.

The Scott uses a much simpler arrangement of drive valve and split load phase splitter, but the same amount of active components, to drive the output pentodes via a 'normal' connected transformer load. In short, it's a very simple 'plain Jane' circuit in comparison to the Quad. What is of interest is the Scott's larger output transformer and, frankly, the better quality components used.

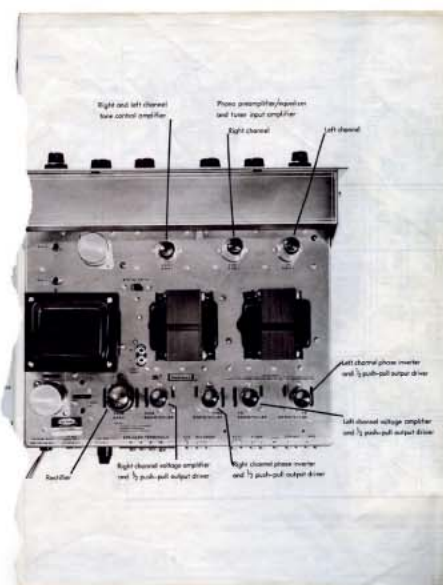
The American amplifier has a much better preamp section, technically in a different league from the fairly 'antique' Quad II/22 circuit. The only British amplifiers that managed to rival the Scott on technical grounds at the time were the models in the Lowther range.

For LP record reproduction, without exception, most British preamps used a variant of a single EF86 pentode, with at very best 7mV sensitivity (more like 10mV in most designs), and levels of hum and noise that would be unacceptable by modern standards. The Scott, on the other hand, offers a sensitivity of around 3.5mV. At the time, ceramic and crystal pick-ups dominated in the UK, their 'line-level' output not requiring such high gain,

and mechanically provided most of the RIAA equalisation themselves.

Fit and finish are superb. I love the Quad 22 styling, but the anodised aluminium, chrome trim, and even the aluminium chassis of the Scott, leave the Quad looking somewhat more

**ABOVE:** Luxury fascia thanks to the superb anodising and well organised ergonomics  
**BELOW:** Every feature detailed – yet more luxury compared to the standards of UK manuals



industrial in comparison. Even the literature supplied with the Scott seems designed to appeal to the home user more and puts an emphasis on user friendliness. Where the Quad instructions are very matter of fact, those from the American company take time to explain the smallest of details about your new high-fidelity purchase, from a very basic level, to how to set the output valve bias.

**HADEN LISTENS IN**

For auditioning purposes a number of different loudspeakers were used: B&W 686s, Jim Rogers JR149s, and Klipsch Heresy. That's designs from 2010, the '70s and the '60s! For the source, 'a light plinth' Garrard 401/SME 3012II/Ortofon 2M Bronze combination was chosen, while various digital sources were fed through a Marantz Project D1 multi-bit DAC. And of course, lots of FM radio was listened to during the reviewing process. All cables were from the Chord Company range.



**LEFT:** Top layout of the chassis – three ECC83s, four ECL86s, and a single GZ34 valve compliment

## VINTAGE HI-FI

From the moment the little Scott began playing music, it was clear I was experiencing something quite special. There was an instantly wide and very modern presentation to the overall sound that belied this vintage amp's low power rating. 'Weighty' was not the right word; but for such a 'baby' it really did kick out!

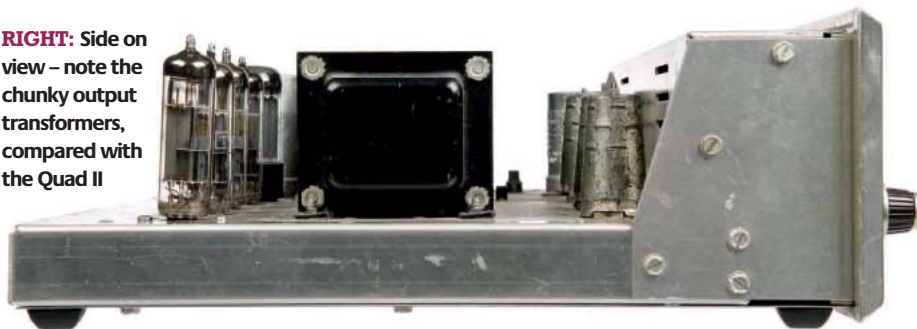
Of note was the almost panoramic stereo image, backing up the substantial weight. The very familiar drum beat on the introduction to 'The Chain' from Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* seemed to have the wee Scott motoring. Crisp and clean, the advantage of large transformers and smooth pentodes in fixed bias operation was clearly shown through a very good performance in the mid to low bass. As the vocals and bass guitar kicked in yet more delights the Scott held the track together regardless of the speakers used. And this is a recording that some much more modern and far more powerful amplifiers can go incredibly screechy on.

Switching to a little light Verdi revealed a stunning midband performance. Again the channel balance and presentation of the stereo image was quite remarkable, the amp disappearing well. Clearly the short signal paths and hard wired build was paying huge dividends.

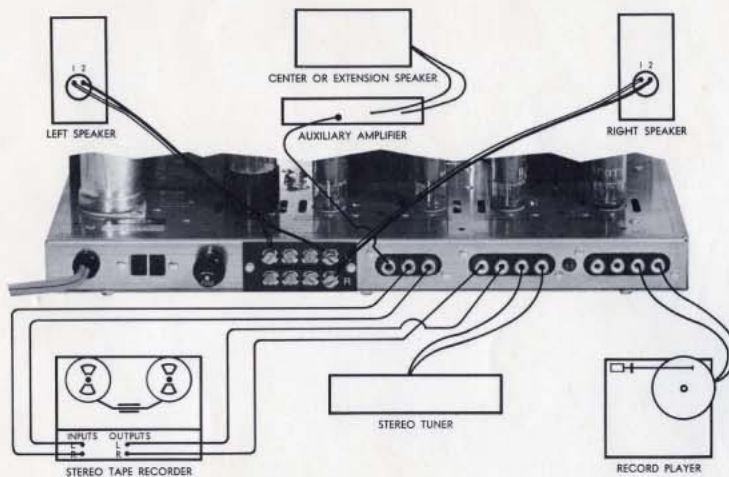
### SWINGING SIXTIES

Partnered with the very efficient '60s Klipsch, this amp really sang. With 97dB/W available from this loudspeaker, 12W per channel was now ear-splittingly loud. Going back to some classic vinyl, with Jimmy Smith playing Hammond, the 'Organ Grinders Swing' did just that! This was an incredibly dynamic combination and, of course, represented a system that was true to its time. Both components (and the record!) were available in the early '60s. All the small hidden details in the recording were clearly evident and rendered in superb detail. 'Basin Street Blues', also from Smith, proved equally as gripping. As a combination, the Scott and Klipsch had a

**RIGHT:** Side on view – note the chunky output transformers, compared with the Quad II



LOOK HOW EASY IT IS TO CONNECT YOUR STEREO AMPLIFIER



**ABOVE:** How to set up your Scott, step-by-step advice from the manual again showing how this US manufacturer put the user experience first

amplifier had not enough grip to control such a speaker.

The next speaker up was the JR149, less sensitive than the B&W, but clearly an easier load for the amp. This proved to be another winning combination. All the Scott's virtues of weighty dynamics, clean sound, and that wide panoramic soundstage, came bounding through. In direct comparison to a stock Quad 22/II set-up, admittedly straight 'out of the box', the Scott was the better amp. Neither was a happy match with the choice of more modern loudspeakers, although on pure subjective grounds it was interesting to note that the Quad worked better with the small B&Ws.

Meanwhile, the phono stage is superb. A classic two-stage device with the RIAA equalisation applied actively, the same basic circuit can be found in many so-called

'new' phono stages today. High quality components and DC heaters provide low noise and sufficient gain to run happily with most modern MM cartridges. Using the amp with a MC cartridge may be pushing your luck a bit, despite the DC heater chain, which is powered from the cathodes of the output pentodes.

### SPARES AND REPAIRS

When it comes to reliability, the Scott has proved to be a hardy little amp. The GZ34 rectifier valves can fail, and with the wrong mains fuse fitted could possibly damage the mains transformer. The output stage operates in fixed bias, and a periodic check of the bias settings are needed. Scott even simplifies this procedure by the use of two test phono sockets, fitted to the

power and synergy that made for a 'full on' sound – if not one for the faint hearted.

This combo handled several tracks from Dinah Washington with similar gusto. Details was not masked either; some vintage valve amps can be a touch softening, even cloudy, in their presentation. Not this little amplifier; it delivered incredible refinement. A bit of 12in Drum 'n Bass courtesy of K & D sessions only revealed this amplifier's prowess further.

Switching to the newer B&Ws showed just how dependant modern speakers can be on a high damping factor/ high current amp. This small speaker sounded superb in the mid and treble, but this was not a winning combination. The bass end lost the plot somewhat, and the whole sound became a tad disjointed. The pairing sounded good, but I felt the

**'The Scott and the Klipsch proved to be a truly dynamic combination'**



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## VINTAGE HI-FI

## LAB REPORT

### SCOTT 200B (Vintage)

In many respects the performance of this vintage Scott 200B mirrors that of the Rogers Cadet and Armstrong 221/222 [HFN, June '10], not least because all three utilise ECL86 tubes in a push-pull configuration. The raw 12W specification is met in practice if we open up the THD limit to 2%, a performance maintained into 8 and 4ohm loads via the respective 8 and 4ohm taps. Under dynamic conditions, the little 200B holds up well into loads as low as 2ohm but there's no real well of current to achieve decent SPLs with anything other than very sensitive speakers [see Graph 1, below].

The output impedance holds true to around 1.4ohm right up to a few kHz before increasing to 4.5ohm at 35kHz, so speakers with a reduced impedance trend at HF will deliver a smoother, more rolled-off sound from the 200B. Into a flat, non-reactive 8ohm load the 200B offers a reasonably even response with a mild +0.75dB bass lift around 100Hz before rolling off to -1.6dB/20Hz and -6.7dB/10Hz. Crosstalk is consistent but a little poor at 45dB across the audioband, but more than sufficient for the phono-driven systems of its day. Noise is usefully low - amounting to an A-wtd S/N ratio of 80dB (re. 0dBV). Distortion is lowest up to 3W output before settling at ~0.5% from 3-10W and increasing to 1-1.5% at the frequency extremes [see Graph 2, below]. Warm-up time is decently quick, with the 200B reaching offering its optimum distortion and noise some five minutes after switch on. Readers are invited to view a comprehensive QC Suite test report for this original Scott 200B amplifier by navigating to [www.hifinews.co.uk](http://www.hifinews.co.uk) and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



**ABOVE:** The rear of the Scott (l-r) - supply voltage switch; removable fuse; set of multi-tapped 4, 8 and 16ohm speaker outputs; centre channel output, left and right outputs; tape in and tuner in; ground terminal; inputs for ceramic cartridge and MM

top of the chassis. A phono lead is connected from these to the tape or radio inputs and the test switch activated. If any noise or pop is heard when activating the switch, this indicates an imbalance. The bias control presets should be adjusted so there's no such noise or 'pop' when the switch is thrown from one position to the other. If an output valve fails, it will unbias the rest of the output stage, on both channels, with the result that the common cathode resistor may die. Usually just replacing the output valves with fresh ones cures most problems.

Other than noisy switches and loose valve sockets, these amps seem pretty bomb proof. However, they are beginning to push towards the 50-year-old mark and, in common with any other vintage product, capacitors and resistors can fail. All capacitors on the reviewed model are original, with just a couple of resistors having been changed over the years.

### MAKING BETTER...

Finding new old stock valves can be hard. ECL86 output valves have not been made for nearly 30 years, and as stocks dwindle so prices are rising. They can be found at cheaper prices in the US as it was a much less popular tube Stateside. Tubes like the ECC83 and GZ34 are still in production. Clearly a kit LK30 version of the amp could have suffered in the hands of an over-enthusiastic DIYer (aka 'bodger'), but a factory built 200B will have no such problems.

In common with all vintage amplifiers, phono connections are fairly small, of poor quality and a little crammed together by today's

standards. The ones on our review sample are in good condition and have no corrosion, but even then they simply do not fit the vast majority of modern high-end cables. It is not an impossible job to retrofit higher quality connections, but something 'slim' is required.

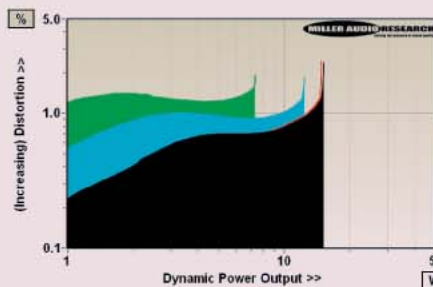
The speaker terminals are the standard screw type. Small spades could be fitted, but as a rule I prefer to wire direct, removing any unnecessary dry connection. If you want to replace the captive (usually a very basic singly insulated two core) mains cable you should really engage the services of an engineer.

When it comes to buying secondhand, the few amps I have seen for sale in the UK have been priced between £100 and £350. An American 115V model can be picked up Stateside via the net for around \$200. Shipping will cost you around \$100 and duty and VAT is payable on top. Then there's £30 for a step-down transformer. Still, that's pin money for an amp of this calibre. ⚡

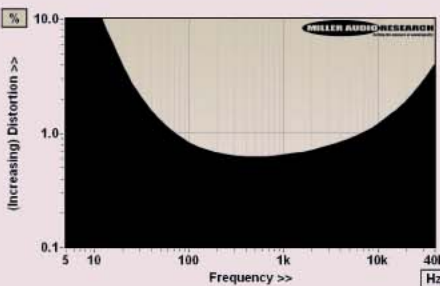
### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

It's hard not to like the sound offered by the Scott 200B. What's more, it's well built, modern and very useable, even today. With few reliability issues and decent performance, this amplifier can be heartily recommended. Available for much less money than a Rogers Cadet III and for a fraction of the cost of a set of Quad IIs, it makes an excellent buy for those seeking a vintage valve amp bargain.

Sound Quality: 87%



**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 (5W/8ohm). Transformer core saturation causes distortion to rise steeply below 50Hz

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<2% THD, 8/4ohm)	12W / 12W
Dynamic power (<2% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	15W / 14W / 13W / 8W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	1.4-3.5ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)	-1.6dB to -38.9dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/12W)	125mV / 500mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/12W)	80.2dB / 90.8dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 5W)	0.61-1.6%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	70W/110W
Dimensions (WHD)	380x111x330mm



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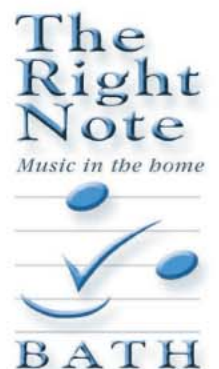
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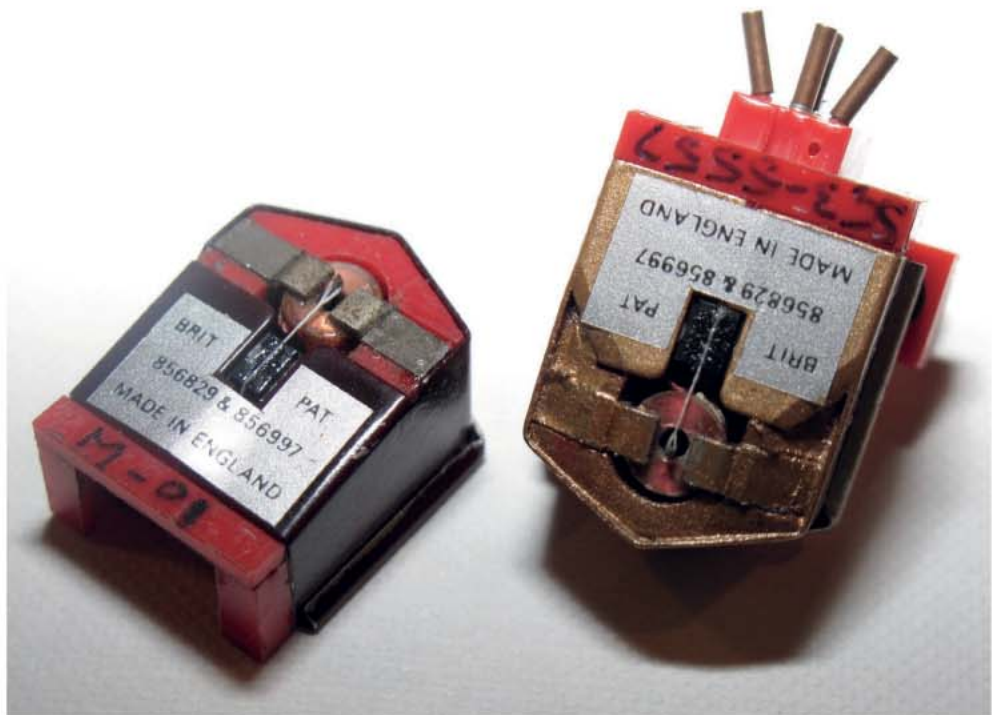


# Decca London

Faced with a market embracing stereo records and rivals offering cartridges to suit, Decca decided to come up with its own design. The result was The London – a model neither MC nor MM and which had no cantilever to boot. **Ken Kessler** on an icon...

While cartridge choices today fall neatly into two primary categories – moving-magnet and moving-coil – back in the pre-digital era, the selection was much wider. Among the more adventurous alternatives to MM and MC designs were Grado's moving-iron types, Glanz's moving flux, a handful of lingering ceramic cartridges from the previous era, Tannoy's Variluctance, Micro-Acoustics' electret designs and plenty of others. Even today, we have Soundsmith's strain gauge, but the bulk of phono cartridges remain MM or MC.

Among the more radical rivals to MMs and MCs, and the closest to what we would call a 'high-end' brand, was Decca's London cartridge. Although it came from a brand that was a division of a major record label, the London was a high-end product. Decca wasn't like



**ABOVE:** Double Decca – London Maroon and Gold cartridges, both first manufactured in 1976

**Two World Leaders.**

The London Cartridge    The Deram Cartridge

Just three examples of international critical acclaim for the London Cartridge.

**The Washington Post** — "I listened very carefully to the new Decca (London Cartridge). It cannot be faulted on any count. Indeed it strikes me as one of the very best phono pickups I have ever heard."

**High Fidelity Magazine** — "There is a sense of utterly hair-trigger transient response... The Mark 5 merits serious attention by anyone interested in discovering how great records really can sound."

**Canadian Stereo Guide** — "If you can get your hands on one you owe yourself a listening thrill... you'll discover your records all over again..."

For full details, write to: Decca Special Products, (H.F. 74), Ingate Place, Queenstown Road, London SW8 2NT.

**LEFT:** Advert for The London with the 'Decca Special Projects' logo bottom right. This division was closed in 1989 when the company was taken over by Racal. The cartridges were then made under license by Decca engineer John Wright

other record labels that produced hardware: with geniuses like Stan Kelly providing the company with ribbons and horns, we're talking true audiophile credibility light years removed from, say, Pye's Black Box.

**MARKET FORCES**

Given that vinyl had successfully replaced the shellac 78, and that newfound economic freedom created the transition from the austere 1950s to the prosperous glory days of the 1960s, it's easy to see why the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s rank as the most fecund decades in audio's history. Decca had entered this period with ceramic cartridges, but these low compliance devices, with tracking forces typically in the 3g-plus area, could no longer satisfy consumers

who – by the early 1970s – had fully embraced stereo. After all, their precious LPs would wear out at an alarming rate if played back with such hefty transducers.

More importantly, the rather cavalier attitude toward tracking forces had been replaced by an obsession with negligible playing weights, rather like the 'Who has the lowest distortion?' wars amongst the amplifier manufacturers: a marketing measure of superiority. Eventually, it would lead to the silliness of the quest for sub-1g tracking forces before reality checks determined that 1.5g-2g playing weights work best.

Whether necessary or not, Decca had to come up with something that could rival the fleet-footed behaviour of the ADCs and Shures

and Ortofons and Grados of the period, while working in a selection of tonearms.

Unlike the 1950s, when Deccas were fitted to Decca arms with unique, dedicated mounting hardware, the 1960s saw the popularising of the universal half-inch-spaced mounting holes that enabled just about any cartridge to be used with any tonearm. Decca could not afford to miss out on that market. Add to that the aforementioned tracking force wars and the universality of 47kohm, RIAA phono stages rather than preamps with myriad individual record label EQ settings, and it was time for Decca to join the world at large.

### FROM THE GROUND UP

To satisfy the need for lightweight cartridges with superlative tracking abilities at lower stylus pressures, Decca decided to create its own design. The company was never a 'Me, Too' brand, and it was large enough and powerful enough to perform R&D on a level much higher than that of most pure audio manufacturers. Equally, it had been around for decades, and historic precedents endowed it with both experience and credibility that made

### STILL A BARGAIN

Back in 1973, when Decca launched the first of its London models, moving-magnet cartridges ruled the specialist sector, with some ceramic types including Decca's own Deram *ffss* still lingering for entry-level purchasers. Moving-coils were only just starting to make their comeback.

The first Decca Blues sold for £23.27 plus purchase tax of £3.37. Using the combined, averaged total of five economic determinants, eg retail price index, average earnings, GDP and

other scales, that price equals approximately £400 in today's money.

To put the Decca London's debut into context, Ortofon's then-current moving-coil, the SL15/E, cost £29.01 (inc purchase tax), or roughly £450. Conversely, most of the popular moving magnets of the day sold for typically half that, while Shure's flagship V15 II sold for the princely sum of £44.69 (inc PT).

Considering that a brand-new Maroon retails for £449 in 2010, the

current manufacturers have done a sterling job in keeping the price down. And as some pundits have noted, new London cartridges are better built and certainly quieter sounding than their Decca-made ancestors.

'Decca' a household name with more than mere commercial worth: it had audiophile gravitas. Any new Decca cartridge would cause a stir.

Because it actually manufactured records, and had, indeed, been a player in the evolution of the LP – if not its inventor – Decca often turned to its own past when creating new hardware. After all, hadn't the legendary Arthur Haddy developed the *ffrr* (full frequency range recording) system during WWII for spying on German submarines? *ffrr* provided Decca with the ability to produce recordings with a frequency response of a then-astonishing and still pretty darned good 80Hz-15kHz with a S/N ratio in excess of 60dB ... from 78s! In 1944, Decca produced the first of its *ffrr* music discs.

After Columbia in the USA invented the LP in 1948, using vinyl

instead of shellac, *ffrr* immediately benefited, because the new format was better able to exploit the technology's frequency response and low noise. Decca started working with the LP in 1949, enjoying a lead over its UK rivals, who would stay with 78s through most of the 1950s. But as early as 1951, Decca released its first mono LP. When stereo arrived, Decca was quick off the mark again, commencing with two-channel recordings in 1954.

Another acronym joined Decca's alphabet soup, this time: *ffss* for 'Full Frequency Stereophonic Sound'. As

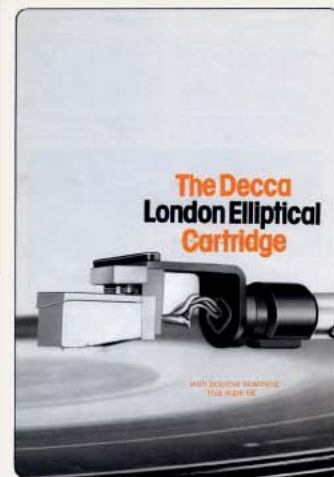
far as a pedigree was concerned, Decca, had few rivals.

When stereo LPs became commercially viable in 1958, Decca engineers Bayliff and Cowie designed the Decca *ffss* tonearm and playback stylus in 1965 and soon after the International tonearm.

For its low-mass, lower tracking force, stereo-era London, Decca created

what it called 'Positive Scanning', the design working on the sum-and-difference principle first developed by Haddy 70 years ago. To transfer this ability to a device designed to trace an LP's groove, Decca eschewed conventional cantilevers as we know them. The result was an immediately recognisable design with a layout that shared little if anything with other cartridges beyond the need to transform a stylus' movement into an electrical signal. Decca wanted theirs to exhibit accuracy and precision not available elsewhere. The result would be a cartridge that remains both the most controversial of them all, as well as the most inimitable.

Instead of a cantilever in the form of a rod or tube exiting the cartridge body at an angle, Decca fitted an upside-down 'L'-shaped cantilever that stands almost entirely vertical, relative to the LP surface. It peeps ↪



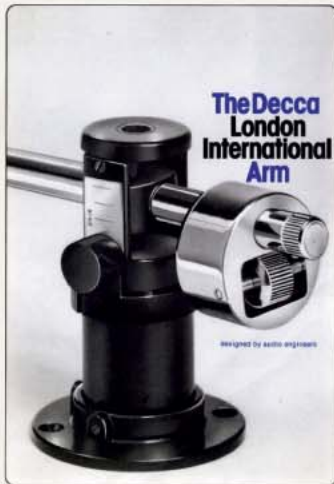
**ABOVE:** Cover of Decca Gold owner's manual; 'Positive Scanning' – a Decca technology designed for the low-mass, lower-tracking force stereo era – resulted in the upside-down 'L'-shaped cantilever that characterises the London

'The London first appeared in 1974, as the 'Blue' and 'Grey'



**LEFT:** A Decca London mounted in an SME 3 arm; Alastair Robertson-Aikman would not have approved!

# AUDIO MILESTONES



The Decca London International Arm

Designed by audio engineers

**Decca London International Arm**  
The Decca London International tone arm retains all the characteristics which made the previous International arm famous throughout the world. It incorporates certain other features which further enhance the reputation of the arm, about which one critic said 'it makes any cartridge sound better than in any other tone arm'.  
What then are the features which place it ahead of its rivals. Every facet was considered in the design of the arm with the first aim: that of producing the best sound. A single element illustrates the point. Many people considered that the curved arm which introduces the correct offset angle of the head is better looking than the design chosen in all of Decca's pickup designs for many years. In fact, the ideal design is one in which it is possible to draw a line down the entire length of the arm from the counterweight throughout its length, and that line should be intersected by the stylus point. This ensures that the balance of the arm is as near perfect as possible, but it does mean, in some people's opinion, that the design is not as 'sexy' as some. It does however clearly illustrate the point that the arm was designed from first principles with performance paramount.  
In the search towards perfection every detail has to be taken into account no matter how trivial. Friction is another case in point, and the unipivot based on a jewel to give the lowest possible friction plus the magnetic bias which avoids even the friction of a nylon thread, anticipated the search for lower playing weights. The basic design features of the London International arm, many of which are unique, and place it in the forefront of modern pickup tone arm design, are as follows:

**Inverted Jewelled Unipivot**  
The friction in the arm as seen by the stylus has been reduced to a point where it cannot easily be measured, even under laboratory conditions. This reduction has been achieved

by a remarkable bearing design, the inverted jewelled unipivot. The only bearing surface in the arm consists of a tiny highly polished stainless steel pivot resting in a jewelled cup. The pivot enables the arm to move both laterally and vertically with infinitesimal resistance to motion, and allows cartridges to be used at the playing weight for which they were designed, without the need for excess weight to overcome bearing friction.

**Optional Lateral and Vertical Damping**

The tone arm is supplied with a small container of damping fluid, and the user has the option of using the arm with or without damping, effective in both the vertical and lateral directions. To achieve the advantages of this lateral and vertical damping, the pivot is inserted in the hole provided at the top of the arm and the fluid slowly trickles into a small chamber below. In the chamber is the flat blade section of the unipivot, which then becomes entirely surrounded by the fluid, damping both the vertical and lateral movements of the arm.

**Magnetic Anti-Skating**

A unique and patented method of opposing magnetic forces provides an anti-skating force to the arm, and since there is no contact there can be no friction. Two magnets repel the motion of a third rotating magnet and accurate adjustment of the magnetic forces gives complete compensation for all playing weights.

**Magnetic Floating Action**

Another ingenious use for magnetism is in the method of support for the pickup arm assembly. Inside the pickup barrel are two

cylindrical magnet systems, one above the other, arranged to repel each other. The arm and unipivot rest on the top magnet, while the other magnet is attached to the base of the barrel. The pickup literally floats on a cushion of magnetism and is almost completely isolated from the motor board. In this way both vertical rumble, and shocks to the arm assembly, are dramatically reduced.

**Additional Features in the London International Arm**

All these features were incorporated in the previous design and are retained in the new design. However, new magnetic materials (rare earth magnets) have made it possible for Decca audio engineers to reduce the size of the magnets used for the floating action. The height, as a result, is dramatically reduced, and much shallower plinths than was previously possible can now be used.

The counterweight of the previous arm was designed to allow the arm to be balanced both laterally and vertically, but could be criticized in that it was sometimes difficult to get the correct playing weight and lateral balance simultaneously. A feature of the improved arm is a new device for simple lateral balancing, while a micrometer-type adjustment is provided to obtain accurate adjustment of playing weight. This is done by balancing the arm noting the position of the knurled micrometer adjustment (a black line is provided for this purpose), and then applying the desired stylus pressure or playing weight. Five complete turns of the knurled part gives one gram change in playing weight.

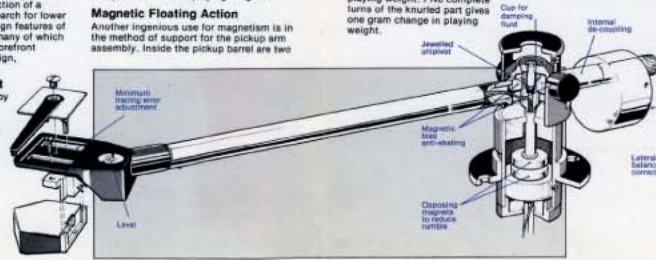
As with previous design a spirit level is provided, but is now incorporated in the head shell thus giving a more accurate alignment of the cartridge itself.

Since the anticipated universal standard for the relationship of the stylus tip to the fixing screw position has not yet materialized, provision has been made in the head shell to accommodate various stylus settings. A protractor is also supplied with each arm to facilitate minimum tracking error for any cartridge.

On the protractor is drawn an outline of the stylus protection cover for the London cartridge so that when this cartridge is used setting up procedure is further simplified with no risk to the stylus.

The range of cartridge weights which can be accommodated is from 5-12 grams, thus accommodating most cartridges in current production.

Since the London International arm was first introduced, there have been some dramatic improvements in ways of maintaining record groove cleanliness. With the ability to reach right down into the groove searching out really fine dust, as well as draining the static away without the use of liquids, Decca Record Brushes and Decca Record Cleaners enable the use of the London elliptical without the problem previously found in other lightweight cartridges 'Snap, Crackle and Pop'.



though a doughnut-shaped magnet, and it is held in place by a looped string. Its supporters attribute to it the reason why the Deccas give such an 'immediate read', emulating the stance of a record cutter.

Equally, though, this has been the cause of much amusement for its numerous detractors.

One of my most ignominious moments of (audio) shame was facing my hero, SME's Alastair Robertson-Aikman, after he deftly undermined my adoration for Deccas, arguing like so many that the lack of anything remotely resembling conventional compliance would surely destroy one's LPs. To the analytical AR-A, there couldn't be a cartridge that was more 'wrong', also arguing that it was the best way 'to clean an LP, while stripping away the upper frequencies.' Because Alastair was the consummate gentleman, he forgave my trespass, and we avoided the subject for a decade-and-a-half. Unless he felt the need to rib me.

It is impossible to avoid this aspect of the Decca (and the way

it will die immediately by snapping, if you back-cue any Decca other than the recent Professional model). Many - like AR-A - were and are convinced that, yes, it does, indeed, act more like a record cutting head than a retrieval device, but not in a good way: the active word is 'cutting'. But Brian Smith of Presence Audio [[www.presenceaudio.co.uk](http://www.presenceaudio.co.uk)], the current distributor who works closely with the manufacturer,

states, 'that hasn't been an issue since around 1980.

In all my years as the world-wide distributor, I've never had a customer come back to me with damaged records.'

**LIVE AND DIRECT**

That controversy aside - and I have played my most cherished LPs with Deccas - what the technology does provide is the desirable low moving mass that Decca was seeking, and what is arguably the most direct route from record groove to signal output. Regarding the latter, many observers noted the similarity between Deccas and the first of the Dynavectors with ultra-short cantilevers. The latter MCs certainly acquired a sparkle similar to a Decca's signature sound.

Another benefit, mandatory in a quest for universality, was a high output of 5mV, enabling it to work well into any MM input, although the loading it prefers is a higher 68kohm or so. The first London cartridges appeared in 1974, as the 'Blue' and a specially selected export version called the 'Grey', both with spherical styli. On the upside was easy set-up thanks to the flat top surface, which should be set as parallel to the LP.

On the downside was a flimsy bracket which ran counter to the rigid mounting requirements of audiophiles. Oh, and being truly English, the Decca's body was made of highly-resonant folded tin, which positively encouraged microphony, while the wiring was a bizarre three-pin set-up that confounded anyone trying to eliminate earthing issues in nervous systems.

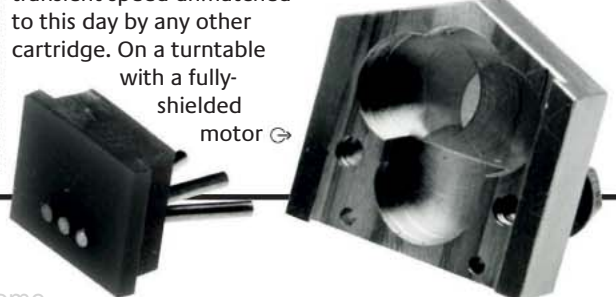
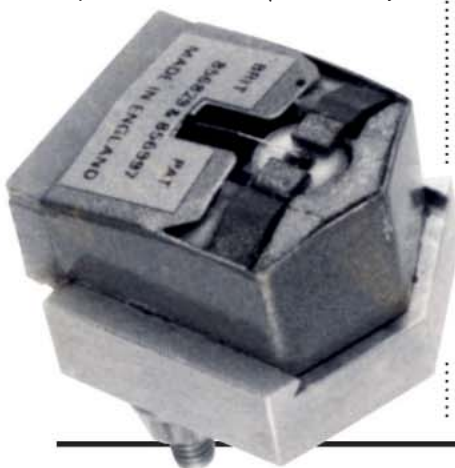
None of this mattered, though, because the sound was revelatory: bright in a good way, sparkling, with transient speed unmatched to this day by any other cartridge. On a turntable with a fully-shielded motor

*'The sound was revelatory, with transient speed still unmatched'*

**ABOVE:** Instruction manual for Decca London International arm, an under-rated fluid-damped unipivot

**BELOW LEFT:** Shot of a Decca mounted in a cartridge block, designed to improve rigidity over plastic mount

**BELOW:** Detail of rigid block, and modified plastic pin piece, cut to fit cartridge using an aftermarket mount



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# AUDIO MILESTONES

## DECCA TIMELINE

**The Decca London Elliptical Cartridge**  
with positive scanning  
175x mark 42



**London** When the London Cartridge was introduced with its spherical or round stylus Decca recognised that some records would perform better if played with an elliptical stylus. In theory, all records should sound better when reproduced with an elliptical stylus since this shape is more like the recording stylus and will, therefore, more accurately follow the wavelength of the groove, particularly at the steeper (high frequency) end. This theory assumes three essential requirements:

1. That the stylus has been correctly mounted in the armature by the manufacturer and that the stylus assembly is also correctly mounted in its cartridge.
2. That the cartridge has been correctly mounted in the headshell.
3. That the arm has no tracking error, that is to say, it follows the same path tangentially across the record, like the original recording machine.

If there is to be any improvement in reproduction from using the elliptical shape, any errors in these three areas must be minimised.

Among the sophisticated methods of manufacture of the London elliptical, Decca start with a square of naked diamond ensuring that the ellipse is accurately formed by the latinary, and that the square is set accurately in the box section of the armature.

The position of the armature is then accurately set under laboratory conditions by highly skilled operators.

When the cartridge is mounted into the headshell, it is essential that it is set squarely and in the correct position longitudinally, preferably using a protractor to maintain minimum tracing error in the grooves nearest the centre of the record. Most arms describe an arc across the record introducing a slight tracking error of 1 or 2 degrees. If this error is avoided in the area of the record when wavelengths are shortest, then the elliptical stylus will give the greatest advantage.



Decca elliptical sets new standards by which other cartridges will be judged.

With an elliptical stylus, the area of impact with the groove is smaller than a spherical stylus. Because of the smaller contact area, the playing weight of an elliptical cartridge must be lower than that of a similar cartridge equipped with a spherical stylus, in order to maintain minimum record wear. A simple illustration of this would be to compare balancing a billiard cue on the tip of a finger with a similar balancing feat using a sword of the same weight, sharp end downwards on the finger.

Another consequence of substituting an elliptical stylus for a spherical is usually a reduction in frequency response, since both the area of contact and the tip mass are important factors in determining the upper frequency resonance point. Since we wished to maintain the wide frequency response of the London Cartridge, Decca have reduced the metal thickness of the armatures to a little over one thousandth of an inch. This reduction in both thickness and tip mass, combined with raising the upper frequency limits, automatically increases the compliance of the cartridge and extends the bass response for a given tone arm. With other sensitive changes in damping and adjustments in the magnetic structure of the cartridge, the Decca London elliptical cartridge sets new standards by which other cartridges will be judged.

Since the London Cartridge was first introduced, there have been some dramatic improvements in ways of maintaining record groove cleanliness. With the ability to reach right down into the groove searching out really fine dust, as well as draining the static away without the use of liquids, Decca Record Brushes and Decca Record Cleaners enable the use of the London elliptical without the problem previously found in other lightweight cartridges 'Snap, Crackle and Pop'.

and a tonearm with adjustable fluid damping, like Decca's own, or most SMEs (sorry, Alastair), the sound you'd hear would deliver 'presence' in a way denied most systems.

Every individual for whom I've played a Decca has been captivated by the sound, the above qualities enhanced by sublime 3D spatial presentation, despite the rumours of erratic behaviour.

In 1976, the Maroon (also known as the 'Plum') and the definitive Gold with elliptical stylus, arrived with mounting brackets for 1/2in centre mounting holes, thus ensuring a measure of universality for use with other arms. The last new model under Decca's aegis was the 1985 Super Gold, featuring a slightly modified body shape and a van den Hul I stylus; a vdH II was also offered as an option.

### THE WRIGHT STUFF

In 1989, Decca's then-owners, Racal, decided to close Decca Radio & TV and its Special Products division. Thankfully, they granted a license to Decca engineer John Wright, enabling his company J. Wright Audio Services to continue manufacturing the products under the London brand name. (In typically

British, sell-the-family-silver fashion, the Decca name was given to Tatung.) Worldwide distribution and repair co-ordination went to Brian Smith of Presence Audio.

### POST 1989?

I've been addicted to Deccas since 1979, having owned and loved every standard model, as well as hot-rodged rarities from the late, lamented Garrott Brothers. The post-1989 London models? I will unashamedly proclaim them to be more consistent and less temperamental than the Decca originals. To Wright's credit, every tweak or accessory he's devised has made life better for Deccaphiles, from the solid Decapod mounts and the four-pin connectors to the new models: Super Gold, Jubilee, Reference, pro models, mono versions.

But which model to buy? Londons now range in price from £449 to £2450. Yet the standout remains the true classic of the line, the standard Gold. At £549, I can't name a single audio purchase you'll make that will warrant with greater authority the use of the following adjective: thrilling.

Just don't forget the damping. ⚡

**ABOVE: Original brochure for the Decca Gold – the first model with an elliptical stylus. The turntable in the shot is kitted out with two Decca accessories, the carbon fibre LP cleaner and brush for use during play**

- 1973/4 Introduction of 'Decca London' cartridges, starting with Blue and selected export version, the 'Grey'. 'International' arm also introduced, along with adaptor to enable the new model to be fitted to earlier Decca arms having slide-on capability. Range runs parallel to Deram ceramic 'ffss' models
- 1976 Improved version, the Maroon, with a spherical stylus
- 1976 Gold, with an elliptical stylus
- 1985 Super Gold, with modified London body/mounting, van den Hul stylus (note: serial number prefixes indicate the original stylus type, eg sg1=vdh1, sg2=vdh2)
- 1989 Decca owners Racal close Decca Radio & TV and its Special Products division. Decca name is sold to Tatung, while the rights to manufacture the cartridges and accessories under the 'London' name are granted to John Wright and Brian Smith
- 1991 Decapod, solid aluminium mounting as an option to plastic bracket
- 1992 Jubilee, two-piece body plus extended line contact stylus
- 1995 Super-Gold, vdH stylus replaced with Jubilee's extended line contact stylus; serial numbers are prefixed sg3 to differentiate them from vdH models
- 2003 Reference Cartridge featuring an all-new two-piece body plus fine-line stylus
- 2007 Reference Tonearm, a parallel tracking, air-bearing device by Len Gregory





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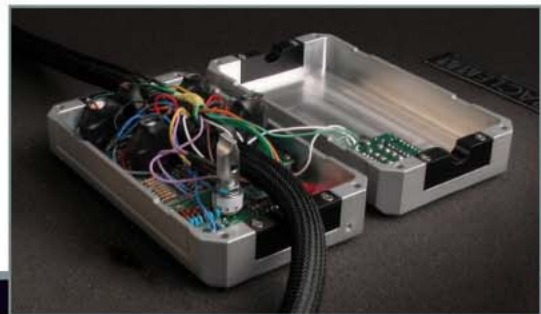
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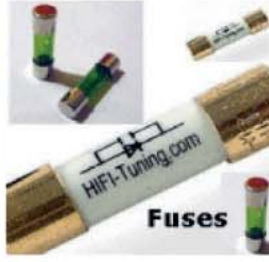
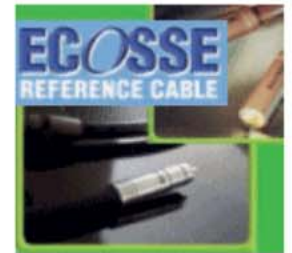
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Esoteric X-05 CD player. Black. 18 months old. Boxed. Immaculate.	£3000	--
Quad II 40 monos 3 yrs old. Boxed. Immaculate.	£2000	£4200
Quad QC Twenty Four Preamplifier. 2 yrs old. Boxed. Immaculate.	£500	£1100
Quad QC- 24 P Phono amplifier. Sealed box.	£650	£1400
VPI SSM turntable (3 yrs) inc: JMW9 tone arm, SDS electronic PSU, HRX pneumatic feet, Extra counter weight, High grade record clamp & LFD silver ref arm lead. Very tidy package, all boxed.	£2900	£5910
Brinkman Integrated amplifier. Vollverstarker. Box. Remote control. Very tidy.	£2800	--
47 Labs Flatfish MK II CD player with Dumpty power supply. Tidy.	£2400	--
47 Labs Progression DAC with Dumpty power supply. Tidy.	£2300	--
Wilson Benesch Circle. Boxed.	£575	£920
Wilson Benesch .5 Carbon fibre unipivot arm.	£550	£925
SME Model 20/12 turntable. 12 months.	£6300	£9725
Quad II Eighty mono power amplifiers. Boxed.	£3500	£6000
Origin Live Sovereign MKII. 2 YR old. SPOTLESS.	£2500	£4500
Origin Live Conqueror MKIII. Current spec'. Kondo silver internal wire.		
Ultraline external arm wire. Shiny & spotless. Howard Hughes clean.	£1650	£3250
Rega RB300 with Kondo silver internal wire.	£450	--
Revolver Turntable. c.1985 c/w OEM tonearm minus counterweight.	£150	--
Living Voice MC 20/80 ohm step up transformer in smart wooden plinth. Excellent.	£400	£800
EAR 859 power amplifier (from kit). Functional looking single-ended power amplifier. No box.	£750	--
Kondo 5-way active x-over. Made by Mr Kondo for in-house horn speaker development. Very rare, maybe unique. Invaluable asset for a man with too many amps and a 5-way horn.	£5000	--
Fidelity Research MC201 cartridge. Fully rebuilt by V.den Hul. New cantilever and tip.	£500	--
CEC DA 1N. DAC with BNC Superlink, USB, AES/EBU inputs. Balanced / SE outputs. Sept.'09.	£2000	£4200
CEC Tube 53. Very cute and super-neat 5881 integrated. 16 watts. Sweet, refined and detailed sound.	£1500	£2350
Sugden Masterclass Stereo Power Amplifier. Titanium fascia. c.5 years old. Good condition.	£1750	£3675
Electrofluidics 20/20 speaker cable. 5 metre single set. New, unused. Very fine sound.	£300	£500
Living Voice flat copper ribbon speaker cable. 5 metre set. Excellent sound.	£500	£1000
Jelco 9" tonearm. '09. Great sounding budget arm. Detachable headshell. Retro 'S' shape. Black.	£290	£450
PM Components VP-110S. EL34 integrated - rare unit. Very tidy condition.	£400	--
Vitavox RH330 4-cell mid range horn.	£400 pair	--
Velodyne 1812 active subwoofer with parametric EQ and 5 microphone set-up kit. Silver/ black. Ultimate home cinema sub'. Ex-dem, just about run-in.	£5000	£13500
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## 1. ACCESSORIES

**ISTOTEK** Titan mains power condition (silver) £1100, Titan six-way multiway including wall bracket £325, both as new Tel: 01962 711800(Eve) 01252 620644 (day) [GH]

## 2. AMPS

**EXPOSURE** XX, excellent condition £280 Tel: 07879 460935 [GH]

**MUSICAL** Fidelity F15 Class A valve hybrid £900, F25 pre £395, original P270 complete rebuild lower rail higher current A370 output stage Philips comp grade caps £895, Naim 250 late £725, all excellent condition Tel: 01452 770007 [GH]

**ARCAM** Alpha 7R, black, boxed £150 Tel: 01206 510392/07765 264381 [GH]

**SUGDEN** A21-A integrated amplifier, silver fronted with inbuilt MM phono stage, in superb condition with original box. £645 ono Tel: 07747 168224 (Manchester) [GH]

**SANSUI** amp, AU-X510 £85 Tel: 020 8950 0658/email: michael.stewart5@ntlworld.com (S. Herts) [GH]

**LUXMAN** L550A Class A amplifier, 20 watts of pure Class A sound, as new, boxed with remote, *Hi-Fi+* magazine rated, only £1500 (£2800 new) Tel: Pete on 07801 917291 [GH]

**AUDIO** Research LS-1 preamp, mint condition £495 Tel: 02380 224003 (Southampton) [GH]

**LFD** LS1 Preamplifier excellent upgraded example, new, mint condition, offers invited Tel: Stuart on 07870 912963 [GH]

**WILSON** Benesch Torus infrasonic generator and Torus amplifier, mint condition, boxes and all leads £2750 Tel: 02380 470107 / email: leslietubbs@tiscali.co.uk [GH]

**AYRE** KX-R preamplifier in unmarked condition still under warranty with boxes and manual, £7950 (£12000 plus new) Ayre MX-R monoblock amplifiers in unmarked condition still under warranty with boxes and manual, £7950 (£12000 plus new) Tel: 01797 253073 or e-mail: majba13@yahoo.co.uk [GH]

**NAIM** 32-5, Hi-Cap, 250 – a classic combination, boxed and complete with all leads and MM, MC and variable level boards for the 32-5, fully serviced by Naim Audio in Dec 2007 (bills to prove), £850 Tel: 07976 407863 or email: w.phelps@ntlworld.com (Beckenham) [GH]

**ROTEL** RA-06 amplifier, boxed as new in silver £250 (3500) Tel: Lee on 01384 412234/email: lee2009@hotmail.co.uk [GH]

**ANATEK** A50R class A integrated amplifier, very musical sound is fluid and transparent, still under warranty, can demonstrate, I live in London, RRP (£1600), bargain at £550 Tel: 07790 441862 [GH]

**QUAD** QC 24 valve preamp, 2 x Quad 11 40 valve monoblocks, superb condition boxed with instruction books, £2500 total Tel: 01202 481386 (Dorset) [GH]

**EASTERN** Electric M520 valve amplifier with remote and original packing, well reviewed amp with four inputs and tape loop, superb valve sound, can demonstrate £650 Tel: 01392 420316 [HJ]

**TUBE** Technology Unisis valve amplifier, still in all its visual glory, integrated but needs main board replaced, offers Tel: Roberts 01923 822581/email: clifflove.roberts@btinternet.com (N.W.London) (Northwood) [HJ]

**NAIM** 42 preamp & 110 power amp updated to 140 recently by Naim £400 Tel: 01179 502100 (Bristol) [HJ]

**PA** Audio power plant premier, award winning AC mains generator, converts poor incoming AC to pure 230v AC, upgraded model, remote, boxed as new, long warranty, cost £2000 new, ask £1100 no offers Tel: 07859 388167 [HJ]

## 3. CABLES

**KIMBER** D-60 digital interconnect, 0.5 metre, Hyper-pure silver, Ultralate phonos, superb cable that ensures a clean and clear, sweet and natural sound, boxed as new in hardcase, cost £240, sell £120 ono Tel: Darran 07876 705266 [GH]

**CHORD** Indigo interconnects 1m, unused, boxed £495, Signature interconnects 1m, mint, boxed £295, Champagne silver + interconnects 0.5m, mint, boxed £59, Odyssey 2 speaker cables 4m, factory terminated £75 Tel: 01984 640588 [GH]

**KIMBER** Select 1030 1m RCA interconnect, deep cryo-treated black pearl silver conductors + flight case, list price £1844, accept £500 ono Tel: 01294 829323 after 5pm [X]

**JPS** GPA-2 power cords with watt gate x 5 (£165) £90, Audio source six-way conditioning block (£350) £220, Spectral-MIT interconnects M1330 1.5m £300 x2

handmade equipment support in oak, offers, all mint, all ono Tel: 01159 126424 (Notts) [GH]

**VAN** den Hul the Source, 1 metre phono pair Tel: 07879 460935 [GH]

**TRANSPARENT** Audio: MusicWave Plus speaker cables & MusicLink interconnect cables, SME 4 tonearm cable (internal & external) VDH 501 interconnects, all new/mint condition, offers invited Tel: Stuart on 07870 912963 [GH]

**CHORD** crimson interconnect 0.5m £20, boxed as new Tel: Lee on 01384 412234/email: lee2009@hotmail.co.uk [GH]

**IXOS** interconnects scart to scart 0.75 metres, digital coaxial 1.0 metres WBJ RCA plugs both 5 star awards, mint condition £25 each ono Tel: 01772 745553 [HJ]

**CHORD** Cobra 2 Interconnects, One metre pair, Tested but not used £33 inc UK post Tel: 01305 766427 (pm eves) (Weymouth) [GH]

## 4. CD/DVD PLAYERS

**MARANTZ** SA KI Pearl, months old, as new, complete with anniversary book, SACD & certificate £1900 Tel: 07809 383556 or email: neilmacmillian36@hotmail.com [GH]

**PRIMARE** CD31 one owner, boxed as new £895, Avondale Arcam Alpha 5 £350 Tel: 01452 770007 [GH]

**ARCAM** DV79 CD/DVD player, HDMI, superb audio and video £200, both mint, boxed, manuals Tel: 02380 611519 email: rmurchie@yahoo.co.uk (Hampshire) [GH]

**TEAC** VRD210, black £399 ono, Yamaha CDX-750E, black, remote £99, Pioneer DV350 £50 Tel: 01206 510392/07765 264381 [GH]

**ARCAM** Alpha 8 CD player + R/C £55 Tel: 020 8950 0658/email: michael.stewart5@ntlworld.com (S. Herts) [GH]

**NAIM** CD5, immaculate condition, light use only, boxed and complete with all leads £450 Tel: 07976 407863/email: w.phelps@ntlworld.com (Beckenham) [GH]

## 5. DACS

**MUSICAL** Fidelity Tri-Vista 21 DAC, new Nov 2004, MF serviced Jan 2008, perfect condition, email: effbee584@me.com for photos etc, offers over £600 plus courier costs [GH]

## 7. SPEAKERS

**KINGSOUND** Queens electro static speakers, six months old, as new condition, fantastic open sound (£2000) £750 Tel: 02380 224003 [GH]

**WILMSLOW** Audio hand-built large floor standing classique loudspeakers, 910mm tall x 260mm wide x

300mm deep, to large after all my efforts for my room, as new £600, buyer will have to collect, 40kgs in weight Tel: Vic on 01372 456196 anytime [X]

**PROAC** Response 215 floorstanding speakers in cherry, superb Proac sound, see online reviews, excellent condition with original boxes £1345 email: norchris@sky.com [GH]

**SYSTEM** 9315 speakers £150 Tel: 01344 776445 (Berks) [GH]

**SPENDOR** S5e in black ash, excellent condition, boxed with all original packing, floor spikes, instructions etc. £700 or close offer contact Mike on 01424 753641 or email matthews.mike@btinternet.com for further information (East Sussex) [GH]

**SANSUI** TA300 receiver, excellent condition, Wharfedale Diamond 8.1 speakers, excellent condition, Philips Bitstream CD player, open to offers for these items Tel: 07810 103908 [GH]

**MERIDIAN** MI interactive speakers (black ash) £495, little used, excellent condition, carefully stored away for past 12yrs Tel: 01962 71180(eve) 01252 620644 (day) [GH]

**RUARK** Rhapsody floor speakers, mahogany, excellent condition, Audiomaster MLS1 bookshelf speakers rosewood, vgc, offers for both Tel: 01923 773497 (Herts) [GH]

**TANNOY** 15in monitor gold loudspeakers, LSU-HF-8, rare opportunity, four pairs available, units mint to slightly marked, all in Shabby 'Lancaster' cabinets, inviting offers, one pair or lot Tel: 01253 875194 (Blackpool, Lancs) [GH]

**TOTEM** Forest loudspeakers in maple veneer, mint condition and boxed, ideal for medium to larger rooms, sophisticated appearance and sound £1600 Tel: 01509 265679 (Loughborough) or stuart44@gmail.com [GH]

**EPOS** ES11s, good condition with stands £120 Tel: 07879 460935 [GH]

**QUAD** ESL989 electrostatic loudspeakers, black, excellent condition, with all accessories, one owner from new in 2002, checked by Quad in 2009 £1895 Tel: 07729 626598 [GH]

**ATC** SCM7 black with Atacama 1m high speaker stand £350 Tel: 01452 770007 [GH]

**AVI** NuNeutron IV in cherry, superb condition £425 ono Tel: 07747 168224 (Manchester) [GH]

**PAIR** of AV1 Active speakers in cherry, pristine condition, no amplifier required, includes 2 x 2mtr Russ Andrews, shielded phono cable for use with the speakers, cost new £1800, accept £600 Tel: Alan on 017683 51226 for details, also pictures can be sent by email [GH]

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**PROAC** Studio 125 speakers £375  
Tel: 020 8950 0658 or email: michael.stewart5@ntlworld.com (S. Herts) [GH]

**WILSON** Watt Puppy 5.1 speakers, excellent condition, piano black finish, £4150 ono Tel: 07843 367338 [GH]

**MERIDIAN** M1 Active speakers, immaculate condition £495 Tel: 02380 224003 (Southampton) [GH]

**ACOUSTIC** Energy Evo 3s, black floorstanders £199, Wharfedale Diamond IIIs £60 Tel: 01206 510392/07765 264381 [GH]

**THIEL** CS 2.4 loudspeakers, 14 months old, natural cherry wood veneer, immaculate condition, incredibly dynamic and very neutral with great bass, easy to position, www.thiel.com for outstanding reviews, new £3900, asking £2100 Tel: 01296 437314, email: jez35@btinternet.com (Aylesbury, Bucks) [GH]

**REL** Storm III, black, 250mm drive unit, 150 watt amp, excellent condition, with box, very heavy, collection only £400 (£800) Tel: 0114 2363657 or email: skahler@live.co.uk (Sheffield) [GH]

**RUARK** Crusader II floorstanders, dark walnut, good condition, rare, beautiful spacious sound but too big for my current room £500 Tel: 07976 407863 email: w.phelps@ntlworld.com (Beckenham) [GH]

**BOLZANO** Villettri BV 3003 Piazzetta floorstanding equipolar speakers and BV Subwoofer, excellent condition, audiophile 360 soundstage, robust flight cases included, worth \$10,000, selling for £2000 Tel: 07724 746984 email: oliver.duprez@hotmail.co.uk (Watford, Herts) [HJ]

**KUDOS** C20 premium oak veneer £250, 30mm granite plinths £140, eight months old mint boxed latest fronts cost

£3500, sell £2550 have moved to smaller house and require smaller speakers, the C20s are excellent, can demonstrate Tel: 01913 869471 (Durham) [HJ]

**EPOS** ES14 black speakers plus stands £300 Tel: 01179 502100 (Bristol) [HJ]

**8. TUNERS**  
**AUDIOLAB** 8000T tuner, mint condition, £195 Tel: 07843 367338 [GH]

**ARCAM** AVR250 7x70w receiver, easy to biamp, excellent sound £200 Tel: 02380 611519 email: rmurchie@yahoo.co.uk (Hampshire) [GH]

**9. TURNTABLES**  
**SME** V, 12in arm, only months old, save £100 at £2230 Tel: 01424 203192 [GH]

**MICHELL** Gyro SE, mint condition, very little usage, purchased July 2009 and still under guarantee, box, Techno arm mounting, genuine reason for sale, sell £725 ono Tel: 07896 206056 (Sussex) [GH]

**SME** 10 turntable without arm, one careful owner, 10 years old with box £1350ono.Tel: 01444 417911 (eve's) [GH]

**TRIO** 1033 + arm + cartridge £50 Tel: 01206 510392/07765 264381 [GH]

**SME** 3009 Series II improved pick up arm with Shure VN15HE cartridge mounted on Fons CQ30 three speed turntable £225 Tel: 01604 787650 [GH]

**PRO-JECT** RPM 9X turntable with carbon tonearm, clear acrylic chassis complete with Speedbox SE Electronic speed control, brass record clamp, spare belt, excellent condition 3650 Tel: 01423 509943 email: atter9@nildram.co.uk [HJ]

**11. COMPLETE SYSTEMS**

**PRO-JECT** record deck + Pro-Ject phono amp/ Music Fidelity XA-1 Preamp/ Arcam Alpha 9 CD player/Arcam P60 power amp/Rogers Studio 5 Speakers, includes all power cords (Russ Andrews) and cables/speak stands and equipment stand, value £ 3700, sell £1800 ono, must be heard, contact Steven on 00353 876376623 [X]

**SONY** stacking system consisting of F242 amplifier, CDP-311 CD player, TC-W435 twin cassette, ST-5211 tuner speakers available together or separately, no reasonable offer refused contact David on 07774 860799 [GH]

**MERIDIAN** system 596 DVD/CD 5 stars + Meridian M30, black, 140 watt Active speakers £1600 ono, boxed Tel: 01206 510392/07765 264381 [GH]

**ARCAM** 7SE CD / Arcam 7R amp, excellent condition, manuals, remotes, £125 each or both for £200. Includes free Chord crimson interconnect Tel: Lee on 01384 412234 (West Midlands) email: leet2009@hotmail.co.uk [GH]

**ARCAM** player, CD17, Tuner T32, Amp A18, rejected within one week so as new, £450 each or £1300 for all three, add postage Tel: 01305 766427(pm evs) (Weymouth) [GH]

**12. MISCELLANEOUS**

**REVOX** B77 stereo open-reel tape recorder, in mint condition and has just been fully serviced, detailed photos available or can demonstrate £495 ono Tel: 07813 960156/e-mail: ob.mm@virgin.net [CH]

**CLASSICS** for Pleasure, vinyl LPs from the popular budget label, 540 LPs in good condition, almost the complete issued catalogue, sleeve notes give

excellent insights into the music, CFP LP list available, offers to 01256 816801 [GH]

**SONY** video cassette recorder/player SLV16 (black) £250, Pro 4 Head Nicam Stereo, little used, excellent condition, stored carefully away for past 12 years, Tel: 01962 711800 (eve)/01252 620644 (day) [GH]

**SORBOTHANE** equipment supports £20 per set Tel: 07879 460935 [GH]

**ATACAMA** Equinox AV1 3 glass shelves, sea green £150 ono, buyer collects as unfortunately no packing Tel: 01721 723946 (home), 0131 3179977 (work) [FG]

**VINYL** collection for sale, many good titles in classical, jazz, rock and blues, some 180G and two boxed sets, 55 discs in total, offers around £150, also Rega RB300 arm, offers, contact G.Walker on 0208 292 3509 or 07963 163529 (Tottenham, North London) [GH]

**REL** Q200E black £499 ono, Aiwa ADF450, black cassette deck £45 Tel: 01206 510392/07765 264381 [GH]

**50** new/sealed vinyl LPs of various genre's at 50% of new cost, 25 s/h albums available cheaply, will separate, no timewasters please, Tel: Roy for list on 01453 544354 [HJ]

**REVOX** F36 open-reel tape recorder with 25, 21 and 17.5 cm reels, speeds 3¼ and 7½ ips separate record and replay heads, buyer collects from Southampton, offers over £50 Tel: 023 80511869 [HJ]

**WANTED**  
**ICON** Audio MP3 headphone amplifier and Foster or full range bookshelf speakers Tel: 07810 103908 [GH]

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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 (€51.35 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 airmail delivery. See subscriptions order form on page 70 or call 0845 676 7778 for the latest special offers.

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## LAST WORD

# OFF THE LEASH!

KEN KESSLER TELLS IT LIKE IT IS...

Don't pre-judge surround sound when it comes to music, says **Ken Kessler**, you're simply missing out



Where 'our world' stands at present on the topic of surround sound for music isn't clear. It's been contentious since the days of quadrophony, which was ensured a pitifully brief life: arguably from 1970 until Dolby Surround arrived in the 1980s. That failure was guaranteed was due to the electronics industry's incurable habit of launching competing formats. Yet now we have access to faultless, discrete multichannel sources.

Why the revulsion?

It's a pity: aside from those of you who do enjoy surround sound for live concert DVDs, I'm willing to wager that most of you simply would not entertain the

idea of a speaker in each corner. And yet, at the risk of sounding like I'm mired in 1972 by using the same argument as Sony, JVC *et al* presented back then: music reaches us not only from the front, but from the sides and off the back wall of a venue.

### THE DAMAGE DONE

So much damage was inflicted by a fiasco that included SQ, CD-4, EV/Stereo-4, QS and a half-dozen others that the public stayed away in droves. By the time widespread use of digital source components made truly discrete surround sound viable, the harm was done. So heinous was music-only surround sound's reputation (as opposed to

surround sound for film soundtracks), that most audiophiles still pre-judge it.

What a shame... as is well known, a number of ostensibly two-channel CDs were taken from master tapes that actually contained, for example, SQ mixes. By sheer accident, many who played CDs through a multichannel AV receiver or home cinema processor, via the CD player's digital output, would on occasion see the system default to Dolby Surround, not realising

beforehand that what they thought was a true stereo CD actually had proper surround sound content. Amusingly, it was invariably of a consistently far higher quality level than might ever have been retrieved

**'Most of you wouldn't entertain a speaker in each corner of the room'**

through an LP-based system back in the 1970s, because setting up four-channel cartridges was almost impossible. I speak from experience, having lived with a true quadraphonic system in the early 1970s, while at university.

Of late, sporadically re-issued surround-sound titles have caused a blip in the audio community, fed – like most lost causes – by the internet. I knew something was afoot when Rhino Handmade announced last year a limited edition 'Quadraphonic' DVD reissue of Chicago's debut LP, *Chicago Transit Authority*. Further research opened a vast can of worms, the little squiggles creeping in from all four corners.

Music maven Tony Rees told me there are now hundreds of (possibly unkosher) downloads from the quadrophonic era. They've come of age because burning them to CDs results in superior playback through current home cinemas – light years ahead of the best that quadrophony could offer 40 years ago, discrete 4-track open-reel tape notwithstanding. Despite the format's abject failure, I'd forgotten how many albums were mastered and released in quad back in the day, from The Supremes, John Lennon, Carly Simon, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Aretha Franklin – even Paul Revere & the Raiders.

### SNEAKY SURROUND

To understand what we've overlooked due to snobbery, a recent, accidental discovery led me to firing up the home cinema for music, not movies. While countless SACDs and DVD-As present us with immaculate mixes of both new and vintage surround recordings, they are first-and-foremost aimed at multichannel users. The beauties that caught me unawares sneaked through not for highly-publicised spatial potential, but solely for the music.

I've worshipped Michael Nesmith since the first time I heard Linda Ronstadt warbling 'Different Drum', not realising it was written by a Monkee. So I couldn't resist buying the recent, remastered CDs from Edsel that included *Tropical Campfires* [EDSS1008], *The Garden* [EDSX3003] and *Live At The Britt Festival* [EDSS1009]. It was only after listening to them in stereo that I read the sleeves and saw the small Dolby Surround logo in the corner.

Listening to them through a surround system I was dazzled: the studio albums exploited multichannel sound with true inventiveness, while the live disc sounded, well, spookily live. No nasty artefacts distracted me. There was absolutely no reason *not* to listen to them with a truly three-dimensional presentation.

This summer, SHM-CD was joined by SHM-SACD. Aimed at purists, they're SACD-only, not CD hybrids. The first 20 are all 'vintage'. Will they include surround sound mixes? I'm hoping the answer is a resounding 'Yes'. ☺

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