

# hi-fi news

THE HOME OF REAL HI-FI

& Record Review

# HIGH FIVE!

156 pages

**Exclusive KEF Reference 5**

**Marantz 8005 series**  
New disc player/DAC & amp is a steal!

**KR Audio VA880**  
Charismatic compact tube amp

**GamuT RS3**  
First test of the 'Superior' standmount



**Krell Duo 300 power amp**  
Class A without the heat? See p34



**AWARDS**  
EISA 2014-2015  
This year's best hi-fi

**Gato Audio PRD-3**  
Stylish USB DAC/preamp  
**VPI Scout 1.1**  
Classic turntable reborn



• **PLUS** 18 pages of music reviews & features • **VINYL RE-RELEASE** J&MC's *Psychocandy* on 180g LP  
• **OPINION** 11 pages of letters and comment • **VINTAGE REVIEW** Ferrograph's F307 Mk2 amplifier  
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OCTOBER 14

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Special introductory offer!  
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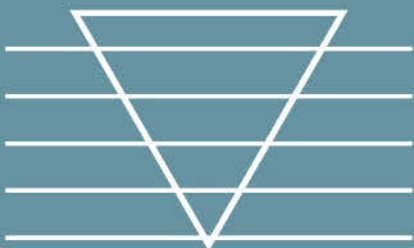


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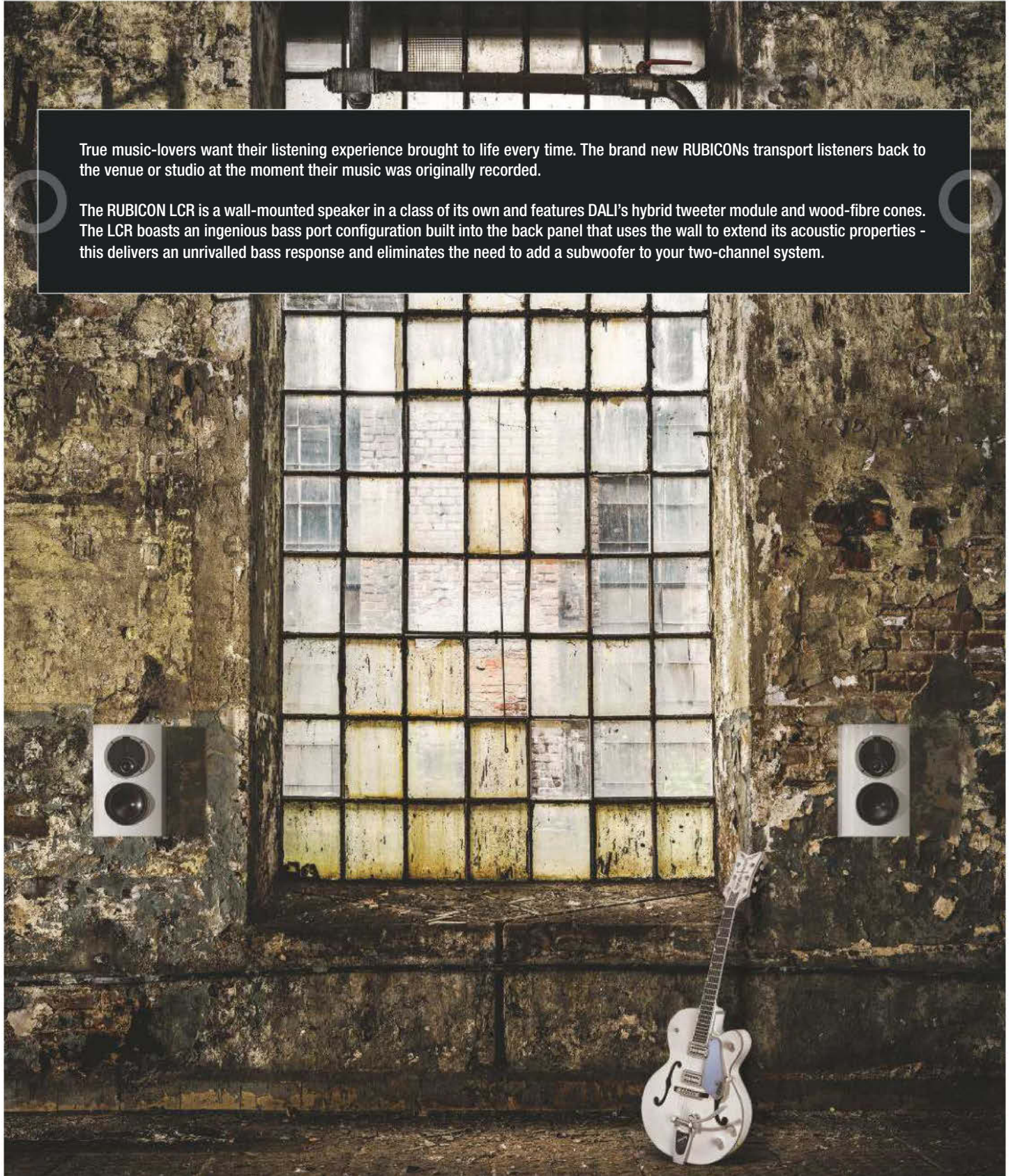
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The Xtension 9 SuperPack from Pro-Ject Audio Systems represents one of the finest high-end turntable packages available today. Drawing inspiration from Pro-Ject's first ever 'money-no-option' turntable, the Xtension 12, this streamlined version boasts advanced technologies and phenomenal value for money.

The high-gloss plinth (available in Red or White) is an MDF construction filled with metal granulate, making it high-mass and non-resonant just like the platter, which is made from a special alloy lined with Thermo-Plastic Elastomers and topped with recycled vinyl records. The whole turntable is magnetically decoupled from a rack by three specially designed feet.

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- the-ear.net, June '14



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- HiFi News, June '14

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July 2014

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August 2014

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karma-av.co.uk

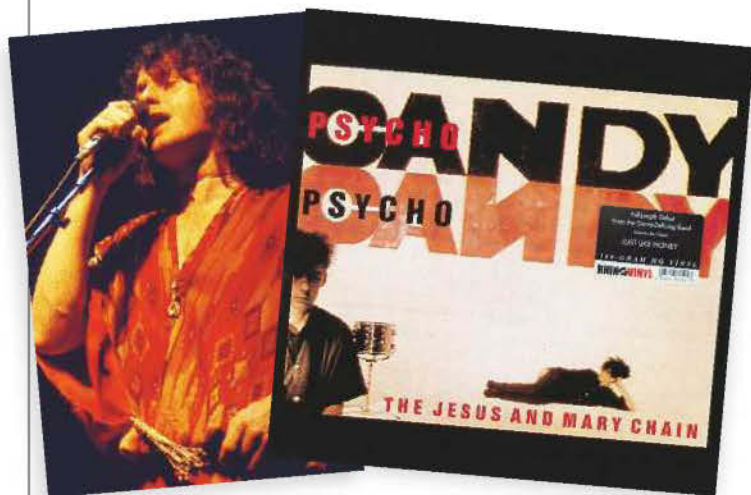
For more information please visit [primare.net](http://primare.net).



**RIGHT:** Shure's SRH1840 headphones eschew the bloated bass response that's *de rigueur* these days. See p62 for the inside story



**ABOVE:** VPI's best-selling Scout turntable has received a revamp, p42



**VINYL:** 'Epic, operatic, experimental...' *Close To The Edge* by Yes is this month's Vinyl Icon (p92), while Steve Sutherland enjoys the feedback as Jesus & Mary Chain's *Psychocandy* is on 180g LP (p90)

**RIGHT:** *Hi-Fi News & RR* is the exclusive UK representative of EISA's Hi-Fi Expert Group and editor Paul Miller is EISA's Hi-Fi Expert Group Manager



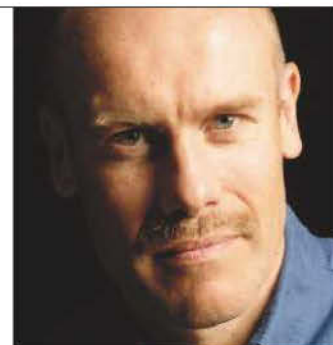
Beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, but value – and certainly the value of much high-end hi-fi – evidently lies in the wallet. Much is made of the prohibitive cost of some flagship audio products as manufacturers pursue ever more esoteric ambitions. But when money really is no object in the quest for ultimate sound quality, don't be surprised to discover that its interpretation becomes more subjective than ever.

We have two speakers that nudge over five-figures this month, but rather than coalesce

towards a shared realisation of musical transparency, the new Reference 5 from KEF (p28) and 'Revised Superior' RS3 from GamuT (p46) couldn't look or sound any more different.

The former is a statuesque floorstander with no fewer than six drivers while the GamuT is a relatively compact but surprisingly dense two-way standmount. They both sound pretty special but, auditioned blind, you'd never mistake one for the other. Truly, the richness of hi-fi lies in its diversity.

*Hi-Fi News*, as exclusive UK representative on all things Audio within EISA, has also been managing the diversity of opinion among its European colleagues – you can read about the best hi-fi separates and systems, voted for by the top



Eurozone magazines, from p73 in this special 156-page issue.

At a time when other UK hi-fi magazines are steadily shrinking south of 100 pages, with no commensurate reduction in cover price, *Hi-Fi News* continues to offer the enthusiast

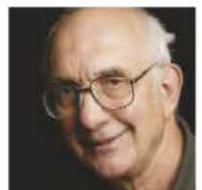
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**PAUL MILLER** EDITOR

**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



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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



# Devialet Ensemble



## PLUG 'N PLAY SYSTEM FROM DEVIALET

New developments have been emerging thick and fast from Paris-based innovators Devialet this year. Following the announcement of SAM [Speaker Active Matching – see *HFN* Jun '14] and the performance upgrade of all its ADH amplifier series, the company has released its first bespoke hi-fi system. The Devialet Ensemble comprises the new Devialet 120 amplifier, with built-in AIR high-definition Wi-Fi technology, together with a special-edition set of Atohm two-way GT1 standmount/bookshelf loudspeakers. A 3.5m length of Atohm speaker cable (with connectors) is also included from Devialet's partnering French company.

Naturally, every Devialet Ensemble package is preconfigured with SAM data for the Atohm GT1 speakers, ensuring optimum performance straight from the box. The system price is £6,290 (the Devialet 120 costs £4,490 if purchased on its own).

**Devialet, 0208 971 3909;**  
**<http://en.devialet.com>,**  
**[www.absolutesounds.com](http://www.absolutesounds.com)**

## Demanding Better

### FI-INSPIRED KEVLAR SPEAKERS

DBA (Demand Better Audio) has partnered with MCT Ltd, a leading composite materials specialist, to access the carbon fibre, aluminium, Kevlar, adhesives and anti-vibration membranes found in F1 cars. This technology is employed in DBA's Envy range of spherical loudspeaker cabinets – one-piece, carbon fibre monocoques designed for maximum rigidity and minimum diffraction.

Bass and midrange drivers employ woven-carbon cones while the RT1C-A tweeter is an isodynamic driver sourced from HiVi in the US. Prices for the Envy 1, 2 and 3 loudspeakers (shown) start from £649.

**Demand Better Audio,**  
**01327 704033;**  
**[www.demandbetteraudio.co.uk](http://www.demandbetteraudio.co.uk)**



## HI-FI NEWS' NUGGETS

### NEW LINN STRATEGY

According to Linn, since 2007 sales of its DRM-free 'Studio Master' music downloads have grown 25-fold. The company has been in the vanguard of this market which has rapidly expanded with many new web-based delivery services coming online in the last two or three years. During its time, Linn has provided around 100 other labels with the means to reach a rapidly increasing audience for Studio Masters via [linnrecords.com](http://linnrecords.com) but, from 25th August 2014, it will return to being a focused portal for its own artists and will cease to sell music from other record labels.  
[www.linnrecords.co.uk](http://www.linnrecords.co.uk)

### ADL EARPHONES

ADL's new £175 EH-008 earphones feature an Alpha-treated (a cryogenic and ring demagnetization process) 8mm mid/bass driver and 5.8mm HF driver for high frequencies, with a titanium-film trembler for 'high resolution sound reproduction'.  
[www.adl-av.com](http://www.adl-av.com)

## Simaudio Neo 430

### HIGH-END BALANCED HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER

Designed to drive any 'phone with ease, the high-end Moon Nêo 430HA headphone amplifier from Simaudio features a fully balanced output stage based around a discrete transconductance circuit topology. It includes selectable 14 or 20dB gain, an oversized power supply and defeatable analogue crossfeed circuit. As an option, Simaudio also offers a plug-in asynchronous USB DAC which supports DSD up to DSD256 and 32-bit LPCM from 44.1kHz to 384kHz.

Outputs include a pair of 3-pin XLRs and one 4-pin XLR located on the front panel behind a sliding window [see picture, below], a ¼in socket, as well as both fixed and variable line-level single-ended RCAs. The headphone output power rating is 667mW/600ohm up to an astonishing 8W/5ohm. Full review in *HFN* soon!

**Simaudio Ltd, 0131 555 3922;**  
**[www.simaudio.com](http://www.simaudio.com)**



## Another Qute Chord

QUTEHD DAC UPGRADED TO DOUBLE-SPEED QUTEEX

Chord Electronics is refreshing its bijou Chordette range, replacing its popular QuteHD DAC [*HFN* Sept '12] with the £1195 QuteEX, offering compatibility with 384kHz PCM and DSD5.6 music files. The QuteEX's FPGA core includes S/PDIF and Isochronous USB, WTA interpolation filtering, DSD over USB support and the proprietary Pulse Array DAC. Existing owners may have their QuteHD upgraded to QuteEX performance for £200 (plus shipping).

**Chord Electronics, 01622 721444; www.chordelectronics.co.uk**



## Miyajima moving-coils

ARTISAN PICK-UPS, HANDCRAFTED IN FUKUOKA, JAPAN

Distributed in the UK via Timestep, Miyajima's handcrafted MC pick-ups are individually precision-milled from rare and exotic tonewoods including ebony, rosewood and African blackwood. The generator has a patented cross-ring in which the cantilever fulcrum and coils are exactly positioned in the centre of the magnetic field. Prices start at £1295.

**Miyajima, 01803 833 366; www.miyajima-lab.co.uk**



## New Valve Order

ULTRA-LOW-NOISE MM/MC PHONO PRE FROM CYPRUS

Inspired by the iconic valve amps of the past, NVO (New Valve Order) has developed its own MM/MC preamp employing no fewer than 22 tubes. Ultra-low-noise 6C45P Russian triodes are used in the headamp with combined active/passive RIAA eq. Price for the NVO Spa II is £4950, available in the UK via Emporium Hi-Fi.

**Nvoaudio, 01508 518542; http://nvoaudio.blogspot.co.uk**



## Pro-Ject boxes clever

PRO-JECT AND THE HEART OF A LOW-COST LP-PLAYING SYSTEM



The Stereo Box Phono from Pro-Ject Audio Systems combines two of the company's most popular 'Box Design' products – the Stereo Box S and Phono Box. The former, a Class D amplifier rated at 30W/4ohm, includes three line inputs to which is added the Phono Box's MM stage to create a compact

solution for vinyl fans on a budget. Price is just £200 and includes Pro-Ject's system IR remote control.

**Pro-Ject Audio Systems, 011235 511 166; www.project-audio.com, www.henleydesigns.co.uk**

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## Upcoming Events

IMPORTANT DATES FOR YOUR HI-FI DIARY

- 05-10 SEP** IFA Berlin, The International Funkausstellung, Germany  
<http://b2c.ifa-berlin.de>
- 05 OCT** Audiojumble, Tonbridge; [www.audiojumble.co.uk](http://www.audiojumble.co.uk)
- 17-19 OCT** High End Swiss 2014, Hotel Moevenpick Zuerich Regensdorf, Switzerland; [www.highendsociety.de/](http://www.highendsociety.de/)
- 01-02 NOV** The Hi-Fi Show Live 2014, Beaumont Estate, Windsor; [www.hifinews.co.uk/show](http://www.hifinews.co.uk/show)
- 08-09 NOV** Hi-Files Show, Holiday Inn, Belgrade, Serbia



# ortofon

accuracy in sound



# Q uintet

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

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

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



Distributed by Henley Designs Ltd.

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# Hi-Fi Show preview



THE 'WHO'S WHO' OF PREMIUM AUDIO SET TO EXHIBIT AT THE UK'S ONLY HIGH-END HI-FI SHOW



Advance tickets are on sale for the UK's premier high-end audio event – *The Hi-Fi Show* at the Beaumont Estate, Old Windsor on Saturday 1st and Sunday 2nd November 2014. We have a fixed visitor allocation for this event so please call 0844 848 8822 now to avoid disappointment. Tickets cost £20, or £15 for subscribers. Full-priced tickets are also available via [www.eventbrite.co.uk](http://www.eventbrite.co.uk); and please return regularly to [www.hifinews.co.uk/show](http://www.hifinews.co.uk/show) for more details.

Now in its second year, with more rooms, competitions, events and accessible local parking, the UK's only high-end audio show is gathering momentum with the 'who's who' of international hi-fi planning a series of exclusive presentations, listening demonstrations and Q&As.

The 20 Windsor, Wessex and Buckingham suites will be given over to these exciting closed-door demonstrations with individual opening times staggered throughout the day so that visitors can plan their own schedule of experiences. The biggest decision will be knowing where to begin!

The Sandringham and Osborne suites will play host to open-door demos where you can get to grips with the latest specialty audio, cables and power supply conditioning and sample for yourself the sounds of the very best electrostatic, isodynamic and moving-coil headphones on the market.

## UK Firsts

### EXCLUSIVE SHOW AUDITIONS

News of the growing host of UK-firsts being debuted at the Show is gathering pace. In addition to the raft of high-end marques launching in the Absolute Sounds' rooms [see opposite], Symmetry will demonstrate Ayre's new KX-R Twenty, incorporating the brand's 'Variable Gain Transimpedance' volume circuit, new Diamond output stage and AyreLock PSU. The Trilogy 925 integrated will also be demo'd so you can savour its hybrid balanced 6H6T tube input stage and MOSFET/bipolar output amplifier.

Karma-AV is offering Hi-Fi Show visitors the opportunity to experience the incredible JBL Everest DD67000 loudspeakers driven by a Levinson No52 preamp and No53 monoblocks alongside the 585 integrated. Rarely has a greater concentration of high-end audio luxury been assembled in one location. Our website has more teasers!

## Absolute Sounds debuts

### A SPECTACULAR SERIES OF PREMIERES ANTICIPATED

Few would argue that Absolute Sounds has done more to grow the high-end audio market in the UK than any other and this is reflected in the dazzling array of products slated to appear in its three Windsor Suites. These class-leading products,

many unveiled by key company representatives, include the Sonus faber Liliium and Crystal Cable Arabesque Minissimo speakers [right], the TechDAS Air Force Two turntable, the D'Agostino Momentum integrated [bottom left], the darTZeel LHC-208 streaming DAC/amp; GSPre, GS150 and GS175 G-series amps from Audio Research, Wilson Audio's Sasha 2 and the full Constellation Audio Inspiration Series. What an audiophile opportunity!





# Hi-Fi & High-End, Moscow

Words & pictures: Mikhail Borzenkov



Held between the 10th and the 13th of April, this year's annual Moscow show saw the organisers revert to the event's original name – the Hi-Fi & High-End Show. It's been called the Premium Hi-Fi Show in recent years.

No fewer than 682 companies took part, with 900 brands exhibiting, attracting some 130,000 visitors over the three days. From small Chinese manufacturers selling mini bluetooth speakers to established

brands like Bryston, Cabasse and Naim, which premiered its priciest amp ever, there were surprises around every corner and no shortage of fine sounds.

The event took place at the Aquarium Hotel, part of the Crocus Expo exhibition centre. Built in 2008, the hotel's rooms are similar in size and acoustics to many a usual listening room. Larger systems, meanwhile, were exhibited in a hall on the sixth floor of the exhibition centre.

The Audio Research VSi 75 integrated amplifier is a hybrid design with a twist. While its input stages are solid-state the output is built around valves – 6H30 and KT120s to be exact. Featuring technology first seen in the company's REF 75 power amp, the VSi 75 is rated at 75W per channel, unsurprisingly. [www.audioresearch.com](http://www.audioresearch.com)



Alongside its 2013-2014 EISA Award-winning MP 3000 HV media player and PA 3000 HV integrated amp (centre), T+A showed the latest additions to its HV series: the P3000 preamp, A3000 power amp and PS3000 power supply, with analogue V-meters on the front. [www.taelektroakustik.de](http://www.taelektroakustik.de)



French company Cabasse has been virtually absent from the Russian market for a couple of years – until now. Its new distributor, A&T trade, brought the all-new Cabasse Baltic speaker system to the show. Sphere-like speaker cabinets, coaxial drivers and a sub with built-in room-correction completed a set-up whose looks drew as much admiration from visitors as its sound. A Marantz media player was used as the source. [www.cabasse.com](http://www.cabasse.com)



Vinyl enthusiasts weren't forgotten. The new 12in version of the classic Tri-Planar tonearm was on show with its adjustable azimuth and VTA and hallmark vertical bearing, which sits in the same plane as that of the record surface. The arm first came to market in 1981. [www.triplanar.com](http://www.triplanar.com)



One of the best sounding systems of the show was from Audio Note. On the top of the rack can be seen a top-loading Level 3 CD transport with its modified Philips CD Pro2LF CD mechanism and three-transformer power supply. Below this sits a DAC 3.1x balanced converter, M9 preamp with built-in phono stage and on the bottom of the rack a pair of Quest monoblocks – single-ended Class A designs producing a claimed 9W each. Speakers are the AN-E/Spe Signature Alnico with blue hemp drivers! [www.audionote.co.uk](http://www.audionote.co.uk)



Bowers & Wilkins set up an innovative and eye-catching stand in the exhibition area of the complex to promote its range of headphones. A live band playing electric-jazz was on hand throughout each day, with visitors only able to hear the group's music via the company's headphones. What better way to compare the sound of the P5 and P7 models than with an 'ultimate' (live) sound source? [www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk](http://www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk)

Audiolab's M-NET streamer is part of the UK company's compact LAB series. Inside the crisply-styled aluminium case can be found an ESS Sabre32 9018 DAC with 192kHz/24-bit music files able to be played via the unit's coaxial input and 96kHz/24-bit files processed through its optical and USB inputs. Dimensions are 59x250x252mm (hwd). [www.audiolab.co.uk](http://www.audiolab.co.uk)



Alexey Slonov, owner of Slonov Sound Design, builds active speakers with no internal damping but focuses on the cabinets. Made of birch plywood they are optimised in size and shape for the drivers used. Here, an outboard digital crossover and Tascam high-res media-player feed six discrete amps separately. The system is sold as a whole. [www.slonovsound.com](http://www.slonovsound.com)



This is the Spiral Groove SG2 turntable with Spiral Groove Centroid SG Integrated tonearm and an Ortofon Cadenza Black cartridge. A round section belt drives the periphery of the oversized ring at the base of the platter. As for the phono cables used here, they're from Texas-based Purist Audio Design and are so thick and heavy that an extra supporting stand (off-camera) had to be found to brace them. [www.spiral-groove.com](http://www.spiral-groove.com)



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## SHOWBLOG Sights and sounds from around the globe



A rare beast... yep, it's a new component from Sugden. Pictured here beneath the company's Sapphire DAP 800 preamp with integrated DAC is the Sapphire FBA 800 power amplifier. Operating in Class A, as is the Sugden tradition, the amp is said to produce 40W per channel. By the way, the neat rack is from French company K-rak. [www.sugdenaudio.com](http://www.sugdenaudio.com)



Here a HiFiMAN HM-901 portable digital player acts as a source in a dedicated docking station hooked up to a HiFiMAN EF-6 headphone amp. In order that a HiFiMAN portable can become the heart of a high class desktop system, the EF-6 can also act as a preamp thanks to two line-ins and a pre-out on the rear. [www.hifiman.com](http://www.hifiman.com)



Always a marquee to leave its mark, McIntosh wowed visitors with a grand cinema system built using a matrix of loudspeakers that included its mighty XCS1K centre speaker. The mid and high frequency sounds were produced by an array of small, titanium-coned drivers. At 2000W, the total power of the system was a new record for the show. [www.mcintoshlabs.com](http://www.mcintoshlabs.com)

The ultra-mini CD player sat atop the 501-series TEAC headphone amp is the TEAC PD-H01. It sports a slot-loading transport mechanism, Burr-Brown PCM5102 DAC and is said to incur a mere 4W power consumption. [www.teac-audio.eu](http://www.teac-audio.eu)



Gryphon rocked up with not one but two products new to the Russian market. The first is the ultra high-end Trident II – a three-way loudspeaker with adjustable on-board bass amplifier said to be good for 500W. The second is the Kalliope DAC, a dual-mono design supporting DSD via USB (DoP) up to 5.6MHz and 6.1MHz. [www.gryphon-audio.dk](http://www.gryphon-audio.dk)



The Bryston BUC-1 USB Converter is said to provide 'a high resolution, ultra low jitter, digital audio signal interface' between your USB source and audio device while allowing native 24-bit resolution at sampling rates up to 192kHz. It measures 57x143x203mm (hwd), digital outputs include AES/EBU, BNC and Coax and it comes with a silver or black faceplate. [www.bryston.co.uk](http://www.bryston.co.uk)





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Spain – AV Premium  
Sweden – Hifi & Musik  
Ukraine – Stereo & Video

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA SUPPORTERS OF THE HI-FI SHOW 2014







Naim's Statement amp was the main attraction of the Hi-Fi Show. Costing 200,000 Euros, the three-piece system comprises a standalone preamp and two mono power sections. It is rated on paper at exactly one horse power: 746W into an 8ohm load. Paired at the event with Dynaudio Evidence speakers, the Statement clearly demonstrated it has the ability to drive the most esoteric of loudspeakers, without even breaking into a sweat. [www.naimaudio.com](http://www.naimaudio.com)



These small, vintage-styled desktop speakers from Polk Audio are simply called Hampden. The cabinets house a 4.5in mid-woofer and 1in tweeter, each driven by its own dedicated 30W amplifier. You can feed them an analogue signal from the headphone output of your laptop using a mini-jack or opt for a digital stream taken from your PC's USB port. [www.polkaudio.com](http://www.polkaudio.com)



Another long anticipated premiere in Moscow was this Sonus faber/Audio Research system. Both brands came back to the market after several years' absence. The Italian company's Aida speakers, with their adjustable Sound Field Shaper system, really came on song paired with the Audio Research Reference 750 power amps. [www.sonusfaber.com](http://www.sonusfaber.com)



Rotel revealed a number of home cinema amps, the flagship being the RMB-1585 shown here. Operating in Class AB mode and said to kick out 200W, the amp is aimed not just at those who relish the full thunder of a Hollywood blockbuster in their home but music fans who enjoy the nuances of stereo, too. [www.rotel.com](http://www.rotel.com)

Klaudio claims its KD-CLN-LP200 ultrasonic record cleaner has the edge over traditional rivals in that no physical scrubbers are involved, detergent is not needed and drying is taken care of safely with blowers. Ultrasonic transducers placed both sides of the disc are said to give maximum cleaning. Just top up with distilled water and you're ready to go. [www.klaudio.com](http://www.klaudio.com)



Next  
month  
Hi-Fi News reports from  
the Hong Kong Hi-Fi Show

# KEF Reference 5

This new flagship claims a 40-year heritage and includes all KEF's latest innovations. So does it set new standards?

Review: **Steve Harris** Lab: **Keith Howard**

In 1971, ten successful years after he'd founded KEF, Raymond Cooke took the momentous decision to invest in a huge, expensive and cumbersome Hewlett-Packard computer system, along with the latest audio analysers, to capture test results and provide data for new design work.

The first new loudspeaker to result from KEF's pioneering venture into CAD, the Model 104 of 1973, was also the first to be designated 'KEF Reference'. It was followed in 1977 by the now-iconic Model 105, and then by many more [we revisited the Reference 105.2 as part of our Vintage Review series in *HFN* Mar '12].

Forty years on, the computer-based science of loudspeaker design has advanced almost unimaginably.

The statuesque KEF Reference 5 reviewed here embodies an overwhelming amount of research and development. It employs various techniques that are really quite new, but puts together many more that have emerged from earlier design work.

In KEF's nomenclature, while the exotic Muon, Blade and the LS50 are 'Flagship Hi-Fi Speakers', 'The Reference' heads the list of ranges under 'Hi-Fi Speakers'. Since the previous Reference models date back some years, many recent innovations have already trickled down to the lesser 'R' and 'C' ranges. Nonetheless, the new Reference series is the most complete synthesis of all KEF's latest technical developments.

Conventionally enough, the line-up covers all the bases for two-channel and multichannel users. Alongside the Reference 5, there's a smaller Reference 3 floorstander and the standmount Reference 1, with a centre and sub to follow. All, except the subwoofer, are based on KEF's Uni-Q point-source driver system [see boxout].

Standard finishes are Piano Black or Satin American Walnut (£10,500/pr) and Gloss Rosewood (£11,500), although the sub will come only in Piano Black. For the floorstanders, there are also two special Kent Engineering and Foundry Edition finishes,

one an all-white cabinet with a blue-tinted Uni-Q unit and the other all black with the Uni-Q in copper (both £11,500).

## DOMES TECHNOLOGY

Uni-Q has been a feature of the Reference Series since 1994. But there have been many iterations of the technology since then, and the 125mm/25mm driver developed specifically for this new Reference range is in fact the 11th generation. It builds on the one used in the Blade speaker, but with some further refinements.

Back in the mid-2000s, KEF had researched the ideal tweeter dome shape, to match the shallow waveguide and cone that would surround it. But the dome shape that was ideal from an acoustic point of view, a section of a sphere, was not so in terms of stiffness. KEF's solution was to add a second part between dome and voice coil, to achieve the best acoustic performance combined with the best mechanical behaviour too.

This stiffened dome technology first appeared in the Austin concept speaker, which led on to the Muon, and it was then used in the now-replaced Reference range, headed by the Model 207/2, combining a 25mm two-piece titanium dome with a 165mm cone.

'That's kind of where we were at the start of our Concept Blade development,' says KEF's Jack Oclew-Brown. 'Having got to the point where the tweeter wasn't holding us back, we've then been really focused on getting the midrange to perform just as well, and to refine the whole design.'

For example, Uni-Q drivers had always used plastic bass/mid cones, but the next move was to use aluminium alloy instead. This would not break up within the

'So KEF used a resilient link between cone and voice coil'

**RIGHT:** This big and tall speaker has really been made as slim as possible, with its array of four 165mm aluminium-coned bass drive units flanking a new 125mm version of KEF's famous Uni-Q combined midrange and treble unit







## KEF'S UNI-Q

With its Uni-Q combination driver, first seen in 1988, KEF has aimed to overcome a fundamental disadvantage of conventional multi-way speaker systems, by ensuring that sound over the whole frequency range can emanate from the same point in space. KEF was not the first company to combine a tweeter with a bass unit, as Tannoy's Dual Concentric concept dates back to 1947. But KEF was able to take advantage of the new magnet material, neodymium-iron, to create a miniaturised tweeter that would fit into the centre of the bass/mid unit at the front, so that the two centres of radiation were truly coincident. Later generations of Uni-Q drive units have refined overall performance almost out of all recognition, by perfecting the integration of the two elements. These efforts have culminated in the current combination of two-part metal tweeter dome and metal midrange cone.

mid-frequency band, but it would at higher frequencies, producing a response spike at around 5kHz to 7kHz.

To overcome this, KEF used 'cone neck control', a resilient damping link between cone and voice-coil. Within the driver's passband, the force from the voice coil is fully transferred, but at higher frequencies the resilient link begins to flex and damps the cone motion.

### SINGLE SOURCE

With the Concept Blade prototype and the production Blade, the point-source idea of Uni-Q was cleverly extended to the complete system. Four bass units were placed on the cabinet sides in positions such that their combined acoustic centre exactly coincided with the acoustic centre of the Uni-Q driver on the front. So KEF was able to describe the Blade as the world's 'first Single Apparent Source loudspeaker'.

This approach isn't followed in the Reference 5, but the 6.5 inch bass units are placed as close as possible to the Uni-Q midrange/treble unit to minimise lobing and interference dips at the crossover point. With bass units above and below the Uni-Q, this resembles a D'Appolito array, but not with the usual arrangement of two bass/mid units crossing over to a single tweeter. In this case, because the relevant (bass to mid) crossover frequency is much lower, the wavelength at crossover is very much longer than the spacing of the drivers, so any interference dips in the response will be well off any possible listening axis.

Also, KEF points out, the apparent acoustic source does not shift away from the position of the Uni-Q driver at any point in the frequency range.

Rather than a conventional cone, the bass diaphragm is a shallow aluminium disc, which gives the driver a lower profile and ensures a minimal

effect on the frequency response of the midrange and tweeter. Connecting the back of this diaphragm to the very large-diameter voice coil is a vented coupler, an innovation first developed for the Blade. Air can move very freely away from the back of the diaphragm, between the 'spokes' of the coupler and right out to the back of the magnet assembly through the large venting hole.

As you'd expect, the Reference 5 speakers are massively constructed, and they come with heavy steel platforms which provide outrigger mountings for the spiked feet. Internally, the cabinet is comprehensively braced but makes use of a technology that originated from the development of the small, EISA Award-winning LS50 [HFN Jul '12] – KEF's Uni-Q-based answer to the BBC LS3/5A.

For the Reference 5, the drivers are braced by the internal structure but connected to it via a lossy damping material. Similarly, the front baffle is in aluminium laminated with resin, connected resiliently to the high-density wood cabinet using high-loss pads.

Both the Reference 3 and 5 are bass-reflex loaded by two rear ports, but KEF provides a choice between two different bass tunings. Two sets of foam port liners are provided, one long and one short. While the long ports give a smooth and gentle bass roll-off, the short port gives a more extended bass response, albeit at the expense of some loss of accuracy in transient response.

It's suggested that the long ports are likely to be preferred with the speaker near walls, and the short one when it is further out in the room.

Finally, while the array of rear-panel connectors might look like something you'd find in an upmarket bathroom centre, it does make the loudspeaker very easy to wire up. Four heavy-duty chromed terminals provide for bi-wiring, while the

# oppo



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# LOUDSPEAKER

## JACK OCLEE-BROWN

Leading the design team for the Reference series is KEF's Head of Acoustics, Jack Oclee-Brown, who served as an intern at KEF during his degree course before joining permanently in 2004. He emphasises the way KEF applies its technical advances to all its speaker ranges.

'There's been a lot of research into loudspeaker performance in the past 30 or 40 years, to the point where you can write down a list of the most important things that a speaker has to try and do for it to work well in most people's rooms and to give an exceptional level of performance. We really try to stick to achieving those aims, across all the ranges.

'A good frequency response is one of the most obvious. But whether we're making a Reference, or an Egg, for example, we're trying to achieve the same basic things.

'Where we've come up with really neat solutions – for example our two-part stiffened tweeter dome – you'll find that very same technology shared between Q Series, R Series and Reference Series.

'It's quite an interesting place to be now, because I think we've filled the whole range of speakers that we make with our latest-generation technologies. For me, the Reference Series has been mainly an exercise in really making sure that all the bits of appropriate technology we have are in there, and making sure that nothing is holding the performance back. Where we go from now, that'll be interesting as well!'



two smaller 'taps' in between are turned to make or break the internal links that allow for single wiring.

### DISAPPEARING ACT

If daunted by the size and weight of the packing boxes I must say that, once set up, the Reference 5s had a pleasing and thoroughly harmonious look: their slim frontal aspect means that they don't unduly dominate the room.

You might find it hard to believe that a speaker of this size can 'disappear', sonically. But it does, creating a soundstage effortlessly disengaged from the boxes that are producing it.

This was obvious from the first disc that I played, which was Mitsuko Uchida with Debussy's *12 Études* [Philips 422 412-2]. Here the bottom-end sound of the Reference 5 gave a striking and realistic weight to the lower registers of the piano. It seemed you could hear not just the strings vibrating, but the whole frame of the piano. This substantial instrument just had a very palpable and lifelike presence.

Beyond that, though, the KEF Reference 5s also passed the acid test of this demanding recording by being totally unfazed by the effect of the reverberant acoustic when the music gets fast, high and loud. For once there was really no sense of unpleasant confusion.

On vocal tracks too, the Reference 5s seemed to get of the way completely and let the singer's performance become as intimate and heartrending as you could wish. With Katia Guerreiro and *Fado* [Milan 399 269-2], the distinctive ringing sounds of the Portuguese guitar also became something special, with a wonderfully springy and immediate quality. And again, a recording that can often sound too bright and hard became simply inviting, very well detailed, with plenty of attack and life, but free of hard edges.

It didn't take long to tune in to the difference between KEF's two alternative bass ports in my particular room

**ABOVE:** Latest Uni-Q driver. Along with the tweeter surround and the mid cone itself, the segmented 'tangerine' in front of the tweeter forms a sophisticated waveguide system

conditions, with the speakers around 0.8m from the back wall. First I listened to the double-bass intro on 'Easy Money' from *Rickie Lee Jones* [Warner 256 628]. With the long port lining as supplied, the bass was very good, even and uncoloured and in good proportion. But switching to the shorter port brought a real benefit in some

ways, with the double-bass sound now feeling richer and warmer, with a seemingly more free or open quality.

With Adele's 'Rolling In The Deep' [21, XLCD 520], switching to the shorter ports made the

big bass-drum sound really come to life – truly gut-wrenching. Finally, when I put on the great Eddy Louiss track 'Blues For Klook' from *Sang Mele* [Nocturne NTC 101], using the short ports the subterranean keyboard bass was a killer, sounding big, warm and hypnotic.

### OPEN MIDRANGE

On other tracks, with either port tuning, I couldn't help but be impressed by the combination of clarity and power at the bottom end, but it was ultimately the very pure and open sound in the midrange that kept me listening. I put on *Boz Scaggs' Greatest Hits Live* [Gray Cat GCD 4001] and soon found myself grooving as Scaggs' big-sounding band got going on tracks like 'Lido Shuffle'.

Here, the Reference 5 really brought out the way every band member contributes to the arrangement as Scaggs gave out on his most successful song, 'We're All Alone'. His unique vocal style came over even more poignantly on the regretful, bluesy 'Somebody Loan Me a Dime'. On this recording, which is almost too carefully crafted to be thought of as live, the KEF speakers once again did their disappearing act, and left behind a great big soundstage that welcomed you into the music. ➔

'The soundstage was disengaged from the boxes producing it'



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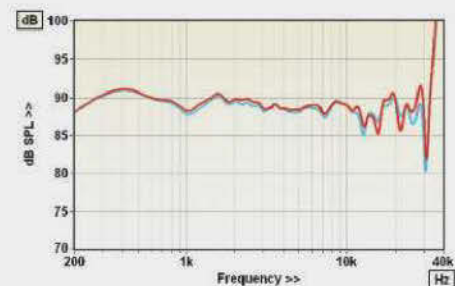
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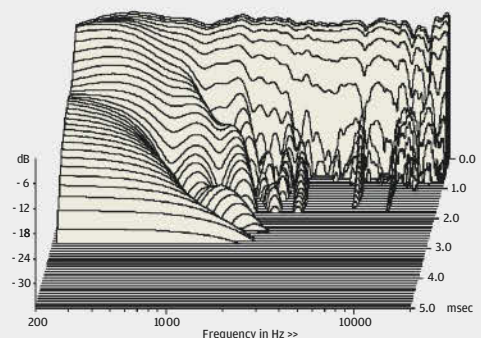
## KEF REFERENCE 5

KEF claims 90dB sensitivity for the Reference 5, slightly higher than our measured pink noise figure of 89.1dB, averaged for the pair. The sensitivity might have been higher had KEF chosen to impart lower impedance on the Reference 5 but, sensibly, it has exercised restraint. While a nominal impedance of 4ohm would be more in keeping with the specified minimum of 3.2ohm (we measured a dip to 3.1ohm at 33Hz), good control of impedance phase angles has prevented the EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) dipping below 2.0ohm. The minimum of 2.1ohm at 30Hz was accompanied by further dips to 2.3ohm at 200Hz and 900Hz, suggesting that the Reference 5 presents no more difficult an amplifier load than many modern floorstanders of lesser ambition.

The forward frequency response measured on the tweeter axis [see Graph 1, below] evinces slightly declining output with rising frequency but the response deviation was well controlled at  $\pm 2.9$ dB (400Hz-20kHz). Pair matching over the same frequency range was less impressive at  $\pm 1.5$ dB but the largest disparities occurred in the final audible octave above 10kHz. Below 11kHz the matching was remarkably tight at  $\pm 0.4$ dB. Bass extension of 55Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz) may seem disappointing for a speaker of this size but the bass roll-off is gentle from about 90Hz before becoming steeper below 30Hz, which suggests clean transient performance and good room integration. Ultrasonic output is dominated by the very high-Q dome resonance at about 39kHz while the cumulative spectral decay waterfall [Graph 2, below] evinces fast energy decay and well controlled treble resonances. KH



ABOVE: Response trend shows a slightly declining presence/treble but in-room bass looks impressive



ABOVE: Cumulative decay waterfall suggests excellent control of cabinet resonances and HF driver modes

**LEFT:** Port rim mouldings can be removed to change between long and short port liners, to match bass response to room conditions. 'Tap' switches allow for bi- or single-wiring

Turning to the natural vocal sound of Luke Pritchard on 'Seaside,' from The Kooks' *Inside In/Inside Out* [Virgin 0094635072426] the Reference 5 delivered a really up-close-and-personal view, portraying his breath noises so vividly that you could almost see his facial expression. After this, 'Eddie's Gun' was even more of a shock than usual, as its post-Punk guitar was really ear-shredding.

### SHIMMERING SOUNDS

By way of contrast, I put on some Archiv recordings of Bach violin concertos, with Trevor Pinnock's *The English Concert* [463 725-2]. Here the KEFs put forth the lively sound of the disc, giving a realistic impression of the hall ambience along with impeccable clarity and singing string tones. The attack of the violins sounded just right, with lower strings full-bodied and woody.

Returning to the more processed sounds of pop, the Reference 5 could give you a bright, upfront sound that shimmered between the speakers, but never got too sharp or edgy. Picking tracks off KEF's own 50th anniversary compilation CD, I lighted on The Cranberries' 'Dreams' from 1992, which the KEF's turned into an admirable confection of plinging guitars, throbbing bass and bass drum, with Dolores O'Riordan's vocal like a slightly tangy topping. It was sweet. ☺

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

This impressive design lives up to its brief, and its carefully specified directivity and bass alignment should provide excellent results in all but the most intractable rooms. It allows a wide listening area with a large, convincing and inviting soundstage, while a superbly clean, uncoloured bass connects seamlessly to the higher ranges. With much to enjoy and little to criticise, this is clearly an outstanding product.

Sound Quality: 86%



To give the KEFs something to bite on, I played Florence And The Machine's 'Dog Days Are Over' [Lungs, Island/Moshi Moshi 2709059], and loved the way everything stayed intelligible right through to the climactic ending. With track 2, 'Rabbit', it seemed the sheer transparency of the KEFs was excellent at revealing the producer's musical intentions and yet at the same time it also clearly told you about the grunginess of the electronics in the recording chain!

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

|  |                                   |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms - Mean/IEC/Music) | 88.7dB/89.1dB/89.1dB              |
| Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz-20kHz)         | 3.1ohm @ 33Hz<br>13.3ohm @ 2.4kHz |
| Impedance phase min/max (20Hz-20kHz)           | -31° @ 4.4kHz<br>37° @ 1.3kHz     |
| Pair matching (400Hz-20kHz)                    | $\pm 1.5$ dB                      |
| LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 150Hz/10kHz)         | 55Hz   >40kHz/>40kHz              |
| THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)         | 0.3% / 0.1% / 0.1%                |
| Dimensions (HWD)                               | 1350x205x470mm                    |

# Krell Duo 300

In a green era, where the internet rules, Krell's new family of iBias amplifiers attempts to marry the Class-A sound of yore with modern touches; we sample the Duo 300  
 Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

**B**ill McKiegan, president of Krell Industries, prefaces the introduction of iBias technology saying: 'Class A amplifiers have always been the preferred choice of audiophiles, and they've been a hallmark of Krell engineering for decades ... [they] are the most musically accurate circuit topology available.' It couldn't be more plain: the company is returning to its roots [see PM's boxout].

The new iBias range alleges to be more efficient, or less power-hungry than Class A. Editor Paul Miller suggests that iBias is a modern take on the popular sliding bias circuits of the 1980s. So what is the motivation for iBias?

Statements from the company suggest that Krell is doing its part to modernise the high-end, to increase its appeal to 'normal' human beings who are not as comfortable with bulky intrusions into their living spaces in the manner acceptable to old-school audiophiles. And yet, nothing differentiates this physically from hundreds of other ball-buster amps.

Look at it dispassionately: it stands 443x177x531mm (whd) and weighs 32kg. That could be the recipe for any brute of an amp since the dawn of the looney tunes powerhouses in the late 1960s/early 1970s. It's a big, metal-cased block, with the usual back panel fittings.

Yes, the styling is tasteful, but then there's only so much you can do with an amplifier's looks (unless you're Italian). This is not to complain, but to point out that the only hint of a 'brave new world' that I've witnessed of late in high-end audio comes from Devialet, however much it torments me to praise the Gauls. This is a Krell by any name and any measure. Which is as it should be.

Krell's iBias power amps cover seven configurations from monoblocks and stereo units to multichannel models for home

cinemas, with five or seven channels. Krell has named each with model numbers to indicate the factory power rating of watts per channel into an 8ohm load. Power outputs span 175W/ch to 575W mono, with prices spanning £7500 to £23,000 for a pair of the top monoblocks, so it deals with a wide range of user needs.

## WEB PAGE MONITORING

What does differentiate the Duo 300 and its siblings from the mainstream – though I'm sure other companies are fitting web links, too – is the Ethernet connection, so each amplifier can be accessed on its own web page through any device that can run a browser, *eg*, an iPad. The user can view heatsink temperature, fan speed and other information. This will also provide alerts for conditions like overheating, fan failure and shorting of the output terminals.

We chose the Duo 300, the more powerful of the two stereo units, for this review because it's likely to be the most popular model: two channels, single chassis, ample power.

I suppose its spiritual antecedent would be one of the original KSAs, if one were to adhere strictly to the exhortation that iBias is Class A for the 21st century, but as I was recently reminded by a fellow enthusiast, 'If it ain't too hot too touch, then it ain't Class A.' I was also told the qualifier: 'And even if it *is* too hot to touch, it ain't necessarily Class A either.' (Just so you'll know, this little exchange took place because I was whining again about the scalding hot surface of the Geek Out portable headphone amp/DAC [HFN Sep '14] which apparently is Class A.)

Just to clear the air before it fills with those *Beano*-style icons for swearing,



**RIGHT:** A dual-mono amp in a single chassis with two separately screened power supplies and no fewer than eight pairs of Motorola PowerBase 100W output transistors per side





this preamble about Class A wasn't my idea: Krell has thrown down the gauntlet, though I'm hard-pressed to find an analogy for a company which was founded on one set of principles (true Class A), altered them (sliding bias, CAST, etc), and then tried to emulate the original *cause célèbre*.

I don't have a problem with 'Class' distinction, because most of the best amps I've heard are Class A/B. Equally, I've adored Class A since I first heard a Sugden, and I lived with first-gen Krells for a decade. But like everyone, I'd also love Class A without the pain: less heat, lower running costs. Which is what iBias promises.

### **KRELL'S BLISSFUL ATTACK**

That aside, it's business as usual. From the time of slicing open the box to hearing music? A mere four minutes. It was hooked up to the Audio Research Reference 5SE preamplifier to drive Wilson Alexias. Cables were Transparent Reference, while sources included a venerable Denon DVD-2900

### **COOL RUNNING KRELL**

Time was when 'Class A' automatically meant 'Krell' and now, some 34 years after those original power amps hit the high-end, the company has returned to its roots, albeit with a twist. Claiming to combine the 'musicality of Class A operation with vastly improved energy efficiency' its new iBias amplifiers continuously monitor the power through their output transistors, instantly adjusting the standing current (or bias) to suit demands. Quite how this sliding bias technology differs from Technics' 'New Class A' and JVC's 'Super-A' regimes promoted through the 1980s is unclear, but the essential premise of eliminating NPN/PNP transistor crossover distortion while minimising waste heat is broadly the same. The proprietorial nature of iBias resides in Krell's monitoring of dynamic signals and the load-sharing of its multiple Motorola 'PowerBase' output transistors. **PM**

universal player (which can make an amazing secondhand buy if you ever see one) and an SME 30/12 turntable/arm with a Kiseki Blue MC cartridge feeding an EAT E-Glo phono stage.

Finding something suitable to play through the Krell for the crucial, initial impression, I chose vinyl in the form of The Band's eponymous second LP on MoFi [Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-419]. In part, it's because of the astonishing bass and that incredible drum sound, but primarily because I love the album, period!

The Krell showed blissful attack with authentic decay, and just the right amount of dryness with the percussion that opens 'Up On Cripple Creek.' It just may be the most 'real' sounding drumming you can find on a recording, and

*'The Krell showed blissful attack and just the right amount of dryness'*



**ABOVE:** Feed an Ethernet cable into the Duo 300 and any device with a web browser and you have access to heatsink temperature, fan speed and other data, as well as alerts

it begs the question why it isn't the most sampled ever. With Jew's harp, honky-tonk piano, majestic Hammond organ and sublime guitar-work, it's a smorgasbord of sounds that's sparse enough to allow the listener to isolate each player, if so inspired. And yet it paints a picture as sepia as the sleeve art. The Krell picked up the snap of the percussion, the kick-drum air movement, with true 'feel'. Yeah, this is a Krell, alright.

It was the same with the SACD version [Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2129], which I'm assuming came from the same tapes, and which provides sad cases like me with an opportunity to A/B formats.

The Duo 300 is detailed enough in its presentation to let you know precisely how SACD and LP differ – and, no, neither 'slaughters' the other. It's a matter of texture, at least for this album, and I can easily appreciate how some would prefer the slightly cleaner sound of the SACD release. With the Krell amp, the transparency ensures that such differences are audible without strain. ➔

# geek out

By LH LABS

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*"The Geek Out delivered its majesty and power in a way that one would assume was the sole preserve of full-sized components of uncompromised complexity".*

**Ken Kessler, Hi-Fi News September 2014**  
*on the Geek Out 1000 Sound quality 88/100*

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Geek Out 1000 (red): 1 Watt output, powerful enough for esoteric audiophile headphones - **£299\***

\* Available to purchase now on Amazon.co.uk. Also available from selected specialist retailers.







**ABOVE:** In addition to a choice of balanced or single-ended inputs, multi-way binding posts and 12V trigger, the Duo 300 is also Ethernet-equipped for system monitoring

'Rag, Mama, Rag' is a slightly more cluttered event, but this Krell wasn't flummoxed. Then again, I've yet to hear it on any system where it doesn't sound like things are about to fall apart. It's the kind of track where the 'PRAT' (Pace, Rhythm And Timing) brigade has a field day, because it's so perfectly played while seeming sloppy, as rhythmically complex and disconcerting as deep reggae.

### THE KODO DRUMMERS TEST

More dynamics were needed, though, to attest to any semblance of Class A era Krell's legendary way with contrasts in levels. Yup: *Heartbeat: Drummers Of Japan* [Sheffield Lab CD-KODO] provided the slams needed to see if the Duo 300 could power the Wilsons to 'commanding' levels. You've probably heard Kodo at a hi-fi show. It's all about mass, moving copious amounts of air and bass extension.

The current reference for all this in my listening room is the D'Agostino Momentum Stereo [HFN Aug '12], with a factory power rating a third lower than the Duo 300's. Now there's a reason I don't use my Audio Research REF 75 with the Alexias. Yes, it's fabulous with medium levels and no savagery, but the '75 is not the match for that speaker; I really need a REF 150 for those babies. The Momentum eats 'em for breakfast.

Not so the Duo 300. It could turn a bit harsh if driven hard, surprisingly picking up a rasp with Bob Dylan's *Blonde On Blonde* [Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2097]. It reproduced in-the-room drum sound but noticeably sizzled on The Wonders' 2CD single 'That Thing You Do' [Play-Tone Records 664055]. On the rockier numbers, a trace of sibilance on various Badfinger tracks via the *Timeless... The Musical*

*Legacy* collection [Apple CDSAPCOR 31]. Salvation came from Lou Rawls' *At Last* [Blue Note CDP 7 91937 2], a bit of recording perfection. It was suitably silky, with only a tiny touch of brittleness affecting piano. Rawls' vocals were languorous perfection, while Dianne Reeves sang as clear as a wine glass from Zalto.

If I seem to lack a little enthusiasm, it's only because the last Krell product I reviewed blew me away: the astonishing S550i integrated [HFN Jul '13], which I'll buy just to drive my venerable Scintillas. The Duo 300 is a good amp, but exposure to assorted Constellation masterpieces and six months with a Momentum Stereo – all much more expensive than a Duo 300 – have altered my expectations of modern solid-state amplification, regardless of the Class of operation, price or any other respects.

Consider, too, that the Duo 300 is an easy product to live with in many ways, not least the cool running (at least, *chez Kessler*) and easy set-up. Moreover, there is a bonus for those with insecurities about massive high-end power amps, thanks to its on-line nanny. ☺

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

One wag has posited that £9995 is a 'bargain' for 300W of 'KrellPower', and this is a dandy amp for the money. Most assuredly solid-state in its demeanour, Duo 300 doesn't, for a moment, suggest the (sonic) warmth of a true Class A amplifier likes its ancestors. That may, er, be music to the ears of those who can't abide 'valveness'. A touch more refinement wouldn't go amiss, but then: this is for rockers.

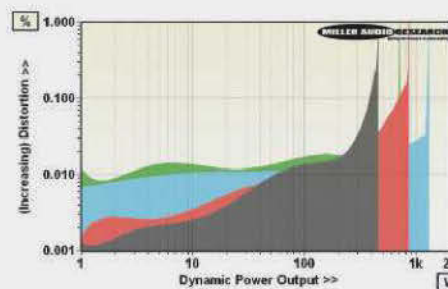
Sound Quality: 80%



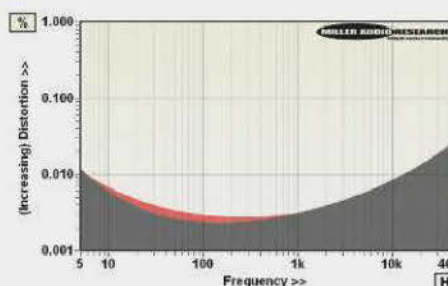
### KRELL DUO 300

Rated by Krell at 300W/8ohm, its Duo 300 amplifier achieves a higher output in practice – 2x350W/8ohm and 2x570W/4ohm with sufficient headroom to accommodate peaks of 455W, 860W and 1320W into 8, 4 and 2ohm loads under dynamic conditions (all <1% THD). A tight 26.9A current limit restricts the output to 725W into 1ohm [see Graph 1, below] so while the Duo 300 is mightily powerful it's not a match for Krell's previous-generation, and costlier, Evolution 302e amplifier. Furthermore, even with its iBias technology in tow [see boxout, p35] the Duo 300's idle power consumption is still considerable at 140W, reaching 1.6kW at the rated 2x300W (standby is 3W).

Both the Duo and older Evolution amplifiers feature the same multiple-output current mirror power stage design. However the distortion profile for the Duo is markedly different from Krell's Evolution series, the former enjoying its lowest THD at lower outputs (0.0017% at 1W/8ohm) increasing uniformly thereafter to 0.004%/10W, 0.013%/100W and 0.033%/300W [see black trace, Graph 1]. Versus frequency, distortion increases gently at the bass/treble extremes from 0.0023% (1kHz/10W) to 0.012%/5Hz and 0.013%/20kHz [see Graph 2, below]. The frequency response has a slightly 'mild' treble of -0.13dB/20kHz falling to -2.6dB/100kHz while the 0.017-0.025ohm output impedance ensures little variation with speaker load over the 20Hz-20kHz audio range. The S/N is only fractionally above average at 88dB (re. 0dBW) but this is still creditable bearing in mind the size and proximity of the two internal PSUs. Readers may view an in-depth QC Suite report for Krell's Duo 300 power amplifier by navigating to [www.hifinews.co.uk](http://www.hifinews.co.uk) and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



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



**ABOVE:** Distortion vs. frequency from 5Hz-40kHz at 10W/8ohm (left = black; right = red)

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

|                                      |                              |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)       | 350W / 570W                  |
| Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)  | 455W / 860W / 1.32kW / 725W  |
| Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)        | 0.017-0.025ohm               |
| Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)     | +0.02dB to -2.65dB           |
| Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/300W)    | 139mV / 2420mV (Balanced in) |
| A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/300W)      | 87.8dB / 112.6dB             |
| Distortion (20Hz-20kHz re. 10W/8ohm) | 0.0023-0.014%                |
| Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)   | 140W/1.58kW (3W standby)     |
| Dimensions (WHD) / Weight            | 433x177x531mm / 32kg         |

# Gato Audio PRD-3

Scandinavian design flair and deliciously seductive sound combine in Gato Audio's ultra-stylish preamplifier, which looks divine and has a built-in 192kHz/24-bit USB DAC  
 Review: **John Bamford** Lab: **Paul Miller**

**W**ith digital entertainment sources ubiquitous in today's living rooms, many modern DACs include a variable output, obviating the necessity for a preamplifier if you don't own a turntable, FM tuner or legacy tape deck. But Gato Audio's strikingly handsome-looking PRD-3 is a *proper* system preamplifier, not simply a DAC with a volume control. It includes three line-level analogue inputs alongside its three digital inputs. If it sounds anything like as good as it looks, then it promises to be fine value at £2190!

## FABULOUS FIT AND FINISH

Hailing from Denmark, Gato Audio is a relatively young brand [see boxout], the company's product portfolio only recently becoming available in the UK. We tested Gato's CDD-1 top-loading CD player/DAC together with the MOSFET powered AMP-150 integrated amplifier last autumn [*HFN* Oct '13]. Priced £5290 each, they looked a million dollars and Steve Harris described them as delivering a harmonious listening experience, thanks to their relaxed and rather beautiful sound quality.

Gato Audio makes a couple of less expensive Class D integrated amplifiers which we've yet to audition, the DIA-400 (£3890) and DIA-250 (£2990) that similarly look fabulous in their distinctive casework. Unlike the AMP-150 they feature built-in 192kHz/24-bit USB DACs as well. The company hasn't yet announced a power amplifier dressed in its luxurious livery but I suspect it's only a matter of time, as this PRD-3 preamplifier really does deserve a matching sibling on a shelf in a system rack.

As well as being distinctively formed, Gato's components really are fabulously well put together. The fit and finish is first-class; their 10mm-thick aluminium fronts

exude high quality; and the feel of their controls is equal to some of the finest high-end gear money can buy.

This PRD-3 is also blessed with a lovely white-legend LED matrix display that's large enough to be read from a distance of several metres. Output level setting is displayed from 0-99 to the left of the rotary electronic volume control knob – the numbers rotating vertically in the fashion of a tumbler in a slot machine – while the selected input is indicated on the right.

When using a digital input, incoming sampling frequency can be shown (for four seconds) by pressing that input's direct selector button on the supplied IR handset. Alternatively the display can be switched via a small push button on the preamp's rear panel to continuously show sampling frequency – and only indicate input selection when actually changing inputs.

The display can also be turned on/off via the remote handset.

At the rear there's a balanced (XLR) and two single-ended (RCA) line inputs all on gold-plated sockets, two S/PDIF inputs (one RCA, one Toslink) and an asynchronous USB connection for computer audio playback. Of course, the latter can also be used to feed digital data from an iPad, if you hook it up using one of Apple's £25 Camera Connection Kit adapters.

## DEDICATED POWER

Using the PRD-3 in a bi-amped system would present no difficulties: there are two sets of output XLRs as well as a pair of single-ended RCA outputs.

The built-in D-to-A converter, which is driven by a dedicated power supply separated from the preamp's analogue circuitry, uses a balanced dual-differential



**RIGHT:** With a Xilinx FPGA handling all digital input processing and housekeeping, Gato Audio also specifies a legacy 24-bit / 192kHz DAC and sample rate converter from Burr-Brown. Note the local input/output relay switching (orange)





Burr-Brown PCM1794 DAC and sample rate converter, Gato's designers describing the PRD-3 as featuring 'an optimized high-bandwidth I/V converter, very clean internal clock generator for ultra-low jitter in the digital domain, and an analogue stage with low-Q low pass filters'. Digital inputs are upsampled to 192kHz/24-bit prior to analogue conversion.

The supplied handset is no thing of beauty [see p41], its 13 rubberised buttons all identically-sized. Nevertheless it's been thoughtfully designed, with unambiguous labelling that makes it easy to use. Four buttons in a diamond cluster at the centre control volume up/down and input scrolling, while two rows of three buttons provide direct selection of the preamp's analogue and digital inputs respectively. A separate row of three buttons along the top of the controller governs standby, display on/off and mute.

While it's usually going to form the control hub of an audiophile's two-channel music replay system, the PRD-3's volume control *can* be bypassed for integrating

with surround sound home cinema set-ups. Activating (analogue) input No1 and subsequently pressing and holding down the input selector button on the front panel for four seconds switches the unit into Direct mode, the number on the left of the display indicating volume level changing to read 'HT' (home theatre). Holding down the button again reverts the PRD-3 to normal operation.

### A SILKY SMOOTHNESS

I began listening to the PRD-3 by using it as a standalone USB DAC for computer audio playback, presenting it with a barrage of 44.1kHz/16-bit CD rips and high resolution file downloads. First impressions were extremely positive as I welcomed its evident silky smoothness and finesse, the Gato DAC dispensing a rich and creamy sound balance full of beauty and charm. I'm tempted to describe it as 'valve-like' – especially as it conjured up memories of the seductively inviting Rogue Audio Cronus Magnum integrated amp that recently graced my system [HFN Sep

'The PRD-3 worked wonders with chill-step electronica'

## MARQUE OF DISTINCTION

Situated in Herlev, a 15 minute drive from Copenhagen, Gato Audio was founded seven years ago by engineer Frederik Johansen and designer Kresten Dinesen who first met in the 1990s while working together at Holfi. Johansen subsequently worked at Thule and GamuT before collaborating with Dinesen to create a new Danish marque that exudes contemporary Scandinavian style – Dinesen's flair for striking industrial design resulting in products that look distinctively 'retro-modern'. Another senior partner in what might best be described as a 'collective of audiophiles' is industry veteran Poul Rossing who imported brands such as Audio Research, Luxman and B&W to Denmark in the '70s before founding the Avance speaker company, whose cabinets were crafted of fibre-impregnated concrete. More recently, Rossing owned GamuT [see p46] before selling up – supposedly to retire. But what to do when your life has revolved around audio? The firm also runs a mail order business, Sidekick Audio, catering for Danish DIY audio hobbyists, selling components such as Clarity Caps and Neutrik connectors [www.gato-shop.com].

**ABOVE:** Standby and input selector buttons sit below the large LED matrix display which flanks the aluminium rotary volume control. Display of input/sampling rate can be customised


'14]. But this might give a false impression as the PRD-3 also appears ballsy and robust thanks to its fulsome bass character.

It's certainly a more opulent and full-flavoured Malbec than a fresh 'n' crisp Pinot; a luxurious limousine rather than a seat-of-the-pants sports car. Consequently it worked wonders with chill-step electronica, the angelic voice of Soundmouse in Phaeleh's 'Here Comes The Sun' from *Tides* [Afterlo AFTRCD1004] sounding deliciously sweet as it floated within the ethereal soundscape.

The song's synthesized bass line was gratifyingly deep and wholesome, the Gato's low frequency delivery possessing tangible weight and power so that the bottom octaves provided a strong foundation for the musical structure.

Chris Jones' 'God Moves On The Water' from his album *Roadhouses And Automobiles* [Stockfisch SFR 357 6027 2] opens with a strong figure on a bass guitar before harmonics from the six-string leap out from the image – and the PRD-3 reproduced the bass introduction with tremendous wallop. Similarly 'No Sanctuary Here' was delivered with colossal muscle and authority.

All the while the Gato DAC had been hooked up to T+A's three-box P/A/PS3000HV pre/power combo with its additional behemoth power supply unit [HFN Sept '14], driving my towering Townshend Sir Galahad monitors. The Gato's uncommon civility and lack of aggression was highly appreciated with 'hot' and forceful rock and pop recordings, especially when increasing the system's volume to remind my neighbours they too need a good hi-fi system to enrich their leisure time.

If the PRD-3's rich bass was proving a little 'thick' for my system, it would be 



KOG AUDIO

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## TRANSCENDENT

*"This is an open window into the control room, yes, but more importantly it's endlessly satisfying with it."*

Alan Sircom, Hifi+



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VTL

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Designed by Neil Patel for Avalon Acoustics

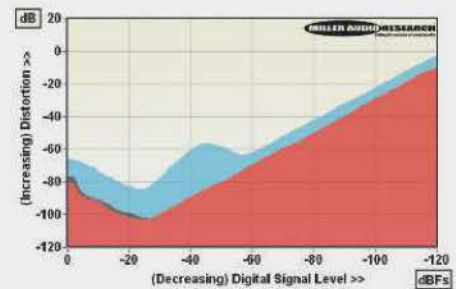


## GATO AUDIO PRD-3

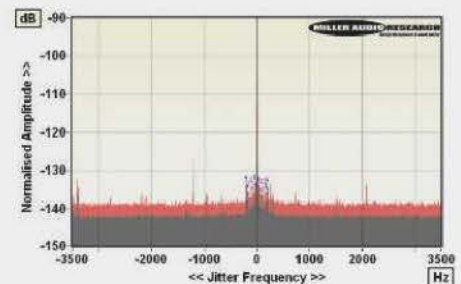
This preamp offers an extremely robust output, reaching 18.1V (balanced in/out) at 1% THD or 13.5V at the maximum volume position with a 0dBFS *digital* input. Distortion is 0.003%/1kHz at this level, falling to a minimum of 0.0002% at 1V/1kHz output. Distortion increases at both low bass (0.006%/5Hz) and high treble (0.0026%/20kHz) frequencies at 1V output but both the 73ohm source impedance and frequency response are flat and uniformly extended – the latter with -0.5dB points at 10Hz and 100kHz. The response with digital inputs is necessarily limited by the incoming sample rate and bespoke filtering, yielding spans of -0.04dB/20kHz (44.1/48kHz media), -0.8dB/45kHz (96kHz media) and -2.4dB/90kHz (192kHz media).

The trend of distortion versus level is determined by quantisation accuracy in the case of digital inputs, Gato's implementation of the PCM1794 DAC delivering a 'bump' in distortion of 0.16% at -45dBFS/20kHz [see blue trace, Graph 1 below]. While this is largely of academic interest, Gato's *analogue* inputs follow a more uniform trend with distortion varying between 0.005-0.0005% over a 100mV-10V range. Analogue (preamp) noise influences the A-wtd S/N ratio of all inputs, with S/PDIF and USB sources enjoying a maximum 108dB. The preamp S/N is 89.7dB (re. 0dBV) – some 15dB behind the 'quietest' designs on the market. Back in the digital domain, jitter is impressively low at <20psec for all sample rates via S/PDIF and USB [see Graph 2].

Readers may view comprehensive QC Suite test reports for the Gato Audio PRD-3's preamp stage plus S/PDIF and USB DAC stages by navigating to [www.hifinews.co.uk](http://www.hifinews.co.uk) and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Distortion vs. 24-bit/48kHz digital signal level over a 120dB dynamic range. S/PDIF input (1kHz, red) and USB input (1kHz, black; 20kHz, blue)



ABOVE: High resolution jitter plots with 24-bit/48kHz data (S/PDIF, black; USB, red). Low-rate jitter marked

## HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

|                                      |                                 |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Maximum output level (Balanced)      | 18.1Vrms at 73ohm               |
| A-wtd S/N ratio (pre / S/PDIF / USB) | 89.7dB / 107.7dB / 107.7dB      |
| Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)     | 0.0027% / 0.0002%               |
| Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS) | 0.035% / 0.012%                 |
| Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz) | -0.1dB to -0.04dB/-0.8dB/-2.4dB |
| Digital jitter (48kHz/96kHz/USB)     | 20psec / 13psec / 20psec        |
| Resolution @ -100dB (S/PDIF / USB)   | ±0.2dB / ±0.2dB                 |
| Power consumption                    | 12W (1W Standby)                |
| Dimensions (WHD) / Weight            | 325x105x420mm / 7kg             |



ABOVE: One XLR and two RCA line inputs are joined by two S/PDIF inputs and a Type B USB connection. There are three outputs and a 12V trigger is provided too

churlish to fault how deep it actually digs. The rollicking timpani during the opening passage of Britten's *Young Person's Guide*, with the Kansas City Symphony [Reference Recordings RR-120], rolled out like not-so-distant thunder, with a low and long reverberation that not so much decayed as disappeared into subsonic regions. Image scale and solidity were fabulous.

### IN USE AS A PREAMP

T+A's 'faster' and more incisive-sounding £1990 DAC 8 converter [HFN Oct '12] has remained in my system for the past couple of years as a reference marker against which I judge other DACs. It's frankly better suited to my system than Gato's PRD-3, although not everyone will prefer its sharper sound.

Indeed, the Gato's lack of aggression will undoubtedly be appreciated by countless music lovers whose systems need taming. Anyway, I next hooked up the T+A DAC 8's balanced outputs to the PRD-3's XLR input and used the Gato solely as a preamplifier to drive T+A's P3000HV power amp.

And guess what? I was greeted with a sound much the same as when using the Gato as a standalone DAC, the preamplifier's disposition similarly smooth and calm, confirming that it was the honeyed tonality of the Gato's analogue stages which were determining its overall sonic character.

It wasn't only with 'challenging' modern rock that the Gato sounded delicious. Its richly-textured personality also brought many vintage recordings to life. One such was Dusty Springfield's 'Son Of A Preacher Man' from *Dusty In Memphis* [Rhino Deluxe Edition, R2 75580], the full-bodied delivery

of the PRD-3 helping to flesh out a thin and rather distant brass section accompaniment.

Dusty's delectably sultry voice sounded simply wonderful, hovering in the image of the characteristically 1960s-style 'ping-pong' stereo presentation, while the bass and lead guitars were clearly defined in their respective recording spaces. Again, the Gato's smooth high frequencies tamed the splashiness from the drum kit's cymbals. *In Memphis* of course sounds its age, but it sure did seem lovely...

Gato's PRD-3 delivers sonic finesse rather than whip-cracking dynamics, with good soundstaging that's capable of extending way beyond the plane of your loudspeakers when enjoying fine music productions in which instruments and voices have been panned 'believably' amid the spatial field.

Meanwhile, there's little masking of fine detail via the PRD-3, even if it does lack a degree of incisiveness and sparkling true-to-life-realism when reproducing today's finest high-resolution recordings.

But when you consider its stylish good looks, the immaculate finish of its casework and its seductively balanced sound quality, it really is a honey for the money. ☺

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Sumptuously designed and engineered, Gato's PRD-3 reminds you what a fascinating place the high-end audio scene is. It's blessed with an engaging blend of strengths in its sophisticated sound quality, which proved increasingly addictive the longer I listened. It's wickedly seductive – and is bound to impress many music lovers searching for sonic finesse. You could certainly pay much more for considerably less.

Sound Quality: 84%



# VPI Scout 1.1

After a decade in production, VPI updates its venerable Scout package with a wealth of improvements. Do these changes signal a new direction for the company?

Review: **Andrew Simpson** Lab: **Paul Miller**

**W**hen VPI launched its original Aries Scout over ten years ago, it flew in the face of turntable fashions of the times, which dictated that the majority of decks north of £1k should offer bouncy suspension and a low-noise DC motor to be up to vinyl's latest standards.

VPI's approach to its entry level Scout [HFN Nov '09] was decidedly different, and based on solid engineering that offered a well thought out user experience for longterm ownership. The Scout looked deceptively simple, while promising lots of easy adjustment for the deck and the supplied in-house tonearm that came as part of the package – boasting an easy to remove arm wand, to facilitate rapid cartridge swapping.

VPI was clearly on to something, with the original Scout going on to sell thousands of units worldwide and gaining an enviable reputation in the process. Building on this success, VPI has recently extended its entry level range with two new models sitting below the Scout. There's the £795 Nomad and the £1650 Traveler, both using plinth-mounted motors and in-house tonearms to keep costs down, the former also managing to include an onboard phono stage, headphone amp and Ortofon 2M Red cartridge at its price.

## **FREESTANDING MOTOR UNIT**

The Scout 1.1 offers more refinement for your money, and is the cheapest VPI turntable to use a freestanding motor unit housed in its own steel case, which tucks into a dedicated cutout in the deck's plinth. Compared to the original Scout, the 1.1 brings in a number of changes.

Out goes the white frosted acrylic platter, which is replaced with a more traditional looking 1.38in-thick 6061 grade alloy platter, which VPI says can be machined to tighter tolerances. Thanks to

**RIGHT:** Freestanding AC motor nestles within a cutout in the plinth to drive the alloy platter via a rubber belt around its periphery. Stepped pulley aids manual speed change

a solid steel plate bonded to its underside, the 1.1's platter tips the scales at 5.8kg; and if you want even more metal under your mat, an extra £375 buys you the Scout 2, which is basically a re-badged 1.1 with a 2in thick platter.

VPI has upgraded the Scout's main bearing to a Thompson Engineering 60 Rockwell case-hardened spindle, formed into a #2 Jacob's taper at its tip, to ensure a firm coupling with the platter. A chrome-hardened ball-bearing is pressed into the spindle's base which turns against a PEEK thrust disc within an oil bath, while the bearing sleeve is made from graphite impregnated brass bushings.

The Scout's 30mm MDF plinth is carried over from the old model, sporting the same steel plate bracing its underside and it comes finished in a black-only paint job. So too are the threaded conical feet, although their new rubber tips will bring welcome relief to your precious hi-fi furniture.

The Scout's AC synchronous motor has also been tweaked for UK-bound models,

and while both US and UK versions use Hurst motors, the UK version's 500rpm/4W unit has improved low resonance power supply components specifically selected for our 50Hz mains frequency.

## **UPDATED UNIPIVOT ARM**

Completing the package is the latest 9in version of VPI's JMW Scout stainless/alloy unipivot tonearm, which is brought up to date with an anodised black and polished silver two-tone finish.

The arm essentially comes in two sections, comprising the armboard and lower 'bearing' assembly that's fixed to the plinth, and the upper housing and arm wand. Being a unipivot, the bearing is actually a fiendishly sharp tungsten-carbide point which sticks up like a rocket on a launch pad from the lower section, onto which you balance the upper section via a machined cup within the chunky black bearing housing.

The JMW arm still relies on VPI's trademark anti-skate method that uses the







tension in the exposed twisted arm wires looping from the arm to the RCA junction box; and for those who find this a little too disconcerting, VPI has now added a nylon thread and rotational weight that provides added force.

Adjustment wise, the tonearm is a reviewer's dream. There's a threaded ring at its base for setting arm height and a weighted collar that rotates around the upper bearing to ensure it's correctly balanced while setting azimuth. Downforce is adjusted via a more conventional sliding counterweight, which has an off-centre hole to keep its centre of mass low.

Getting the deck up and running is made easy thanks to the deck's design and VPI's supplied tools, which help ensure all adjustments are spot on. Simply site the motor unit with its captive mains lead trailing from its rear, then position the main chassis around it and level it up via the adjustable feet.

Now add the platter and thread the rubber belt around its periphery and on to the upper section of the motor pulley for 33.3rpm or lower for 45 (each section

of the motor pulley also has three steps for fine tuning speed). Using the supplied pressed-steel cartridge alignment jig between the arm pillar and the platter's centre spindle allows for setting stylus alignment and overhang.

Finally, remember to place the supplied rubber washer under your LPs to raise their centre, which helps the Scout's threaded clamp's outer edge to press the record flat to the platter. All that's left to do is a final level check on the platter before switching the deck on via the on/off button on the motor housing.



#### WARM-HEARTED REPLAY

With my stalwart Benz Micro ACE high output MC cartridge [*HFN* Sept '11] fitted to the VPI's tonearm and the deck's RCAs connected to my Primare R32 phono stage [*HFN* Jan '12] via a pair of Crystal Cable interconnects, I'm up and running. But using The Beatles' track 'For No One' from their *Revolver* LP [Parlophone PCS 7009] to check all connections are wired correctly, I'm surprised to hear Paul McCartney's clavichord coming through the left

'There's more than just a box-ticking striving for accuracy'

**ABOVE:** Threaded conical alloy feet make levelling easy and have furniture-friendly rubber tips in place of the old model's ball bearings. Unipivot tonearm has lots of adjustment

channel, instead of the right channel where it should be found. After checking that all the connections I've made are correct and that the colour-coded arm wires correctly match their adjoining cartridge pins, I continue to the next set of connections in the replay chain.

Swapping my Crystal interconnects around at the deck's RCA outputs shifts the clavichord to its rightful place in the right channel, so somewhere along the way within the tonearm, connections between the cartridge tags and RCA outputs the channels had been switched!

With that sorted out, listening could begin in earnest. The VPI is actually a very warm-hearted musical performer. Stephen Fretwell's 'Bumper Cars' track from his *Man On The Roof* LP [Fiction Records 1743212] has plenty of romance and warmth in the midrange, which sounds rich without being overly pronounced – although it's a tad more forward than the most neutral vinyl spinners in this price range.

Because of this, the Scout manages to present Fretwell's restrained and melancholic vocals with real clarity, while ensuring his voice stays suitably subdued, which brings degrees of convincing honesty to his performance. This sonic trait is equally so with the strings in the track, which gently emanate from the back of the soundstage to envelop the music, without sounding forced in any way.

Instead, the Scout is much more subtle in its approach to extracting the music from an LP's grooves, and the resulting sounds it serves up are more than just a box-ticking exercise in striving for accuracy, so the music conveys genuine feeling. And while the VPI package's treble is not

### A FAMILY AFFAIR

Founded in 1978 by Sheila and Harry Weisfeld, VPI Industries' first major product was the HW-16 record cleaning machine (1981), which sold 500 units in its first month and is still available in HW16.5 guise. This was quickly followed by the HW-19 turntable which, like many decks of the era, had a sprung sub-chassis. In recent years with the Weisfelds' son Mathew at the helm as President of VPI Industries, the company has set out to convince new audiences of vinyl's merits via its latest lower-cost plug-and-play turntables. With its in-built headphone amp, phono stage and factory fitted cartridge, the new Nomad deck embodies this ethos the most, as Mathew explained to Bloomberg TV – see <http://bloom.bg/1rV4wgu>. New tech has been applied to VPI's flagship products: VPI's Classic 3D Arm is perhaps the first tonearm to be made from epoxy in a 3D printer.



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## VPI SCOUT 1.1

Tested with the latest 9in JMW Scout unipivot tonearm, the VPI Scout 1.1 turntable bears an obvious technical resemblance to its older sibling, the Aries Scout II [HFN Nov '09]. Start-up time is fractionally slower at ~5 secs with the heavier 1.38in-thick alloy platter (replacing the older acrylic platter) but the deck still runs a little fast, as illustrated by the shift to higher frequencies of the wow and flutter test tone [see Graph 1, below]. A 0.64% pitch shift is unlikely to be audible, however, as a semitone represents a change of 6%. Also, as motors tend to run slower over time, it's not uncommon to find them running slightly fast fresh out of the box. Peak wow is slightly higher too at 0.06%, the combined peak W&F now touching 0.1%. However, the improved bearing with its PEEK thrust pad, machined graphite/brass bushings and case-hardened shaft realises a 1dB reduction in through-groove rumble (-69.6dB re. 1kHz/5cm/sec) with a superb -73.9dB (DIN-B weighted) through-bearing rumble.

The Scout unipivot's alloy armtube is extremely rigid with its main bending mode at a high 300Hz (albeit with a 247Hz shoulder) and very low levels of 'bearing' friction in either plane. The arm is a little more 'energetic' in the midrange, with high-Q resonances at 1.09kHz and 1.3kHz [see Graph 2, below] while the 9.5g effective mass suggests it's probably better suited to medium compliance MMs and MCs than heavyweight, low compliance MCs. Note that in our sample the left and right channels were transposed. Readers may view full QC Suite reports for VPI's Scout 1.1 turntable and the partnering JMW Scout tonearm by navigating to [www.hifinews.co.uk](http://www.hifinews.co.uk) and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



**ABOVE:** Loop of twisted arm wires helps set anti-skate, and unplugs from the junction box so the arm wand can be removed in seconds. RCA sockets are top quality

ultimately as revealing or focused as with some at and beyond this price point, what you do hear is very organically presented, which shifts your attention away from analysing the music to simply enjoying it.

The higher notes of Fretwell's plucked acoustic guitar strings, for example, capture my attention every time, as they escape the tweeters with a natural twang before disappearing back into the mix. The way the VPI blends the treble with the upper midrange certainly plays to my Dynaudio Focus 260 loudspeaker's strengths, by sounding bold and substantial across the soundstage – which brings lots of dynamism to the track.

### BASS CONTROL

Having recently lived with a few German behemoth type decks blessed with the ability to extract exceptionally low frequencies from even the most flimsy of LPs, it's fascinating to compare and contrast how deep the VPI can dig in the bass regions. While the Scout ultimately might not go as low as some of these more costly heavyweights, the bass it does present is still ample and, arguably, even more controlled.

The bass guitar in Morrissey's 'I'm Not Sorry' [Attack Records ATKLP 001] can catch even the most authoritative vinyl-spinner out, resulting in muddled bass that degenerates into boom, which quickly blurs the soundstage and compromises instrument separation further up the frequency band.

Thankfully the Scout casts aside the presumed shortcomings typically associated with unipivot tonearm designs and their lack of bass authority, by confronting the track's bottom-end head-on and determinedly keeping everything in check. The resulting bass notes

go convincingly low while sounding taut and free of unnatural overhang, which adds to the track's sense of power and pace.

With Devon Sproule's 'The Unmarked Animals' from her *I Love You, Go Easy* [Tin Angel Records TAR024LP], the Scout shows no hesitation in strutting its funky stuff. Timing sounds well governed – on the side of sprightly rather than lethargic. This seems to complement the track by giving its rhythms a sense of joy and buoyancy.

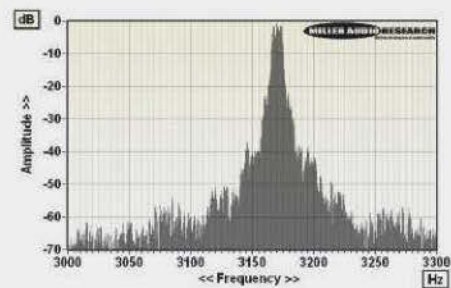
The soundstage set out by the Scout is expansive and open, allowing it to be highly accessible. And while the VPI's imaging isn't as pinpoint sharp as the more analytical decks I've heard, when fitted with my Benz pick-up, the VPI ensures instruments sound convincingly full-bodied and presents them in a manner that shows the Scout package certainly isn't lacking in confidence.

The VPI's combined strengths reveal this machine to be a well balanced all-rounder that approaches everything that's placed on its platter with equal passion. ☺

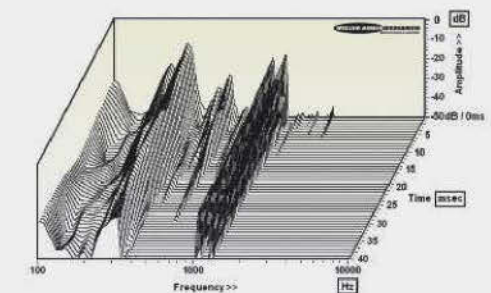
### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

The original Scout was something of a game-changer for those wanting a more user-friendly approach to high-end vinyl replay, and thanks to the well thought out improvements here, this new model promises even greater long-term enjoyment. The improved platter, PSU and superbly engineered tonearm make it excellent value, with a sound that's packed full of musical confidence and detail.

Sound Quality: 82%



**ABOVE:** Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at 5cm/sec (plotted ±150Hz, 5Hz per minor division). Note the +0.6% increase in speed/pitch



**ABOVE:** Cumulative tonearm resonant decay spectrum, illustrating various bearing, pillar and 'tube' vibration modes spanning 100Hz-10kHz over 40msec

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

|                                      |                   |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm    | 33.54rpm (+0.63%) |
| Time to audible stabilisation        | 5sec              |
| Peak Wow/Flutter                     | 0.06% / 0.04%     |
| Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)    | -69.6dB           |
| Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)  | -73.9dB           |
| Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec) | -57.1dB           |
| Power Consumption                    | 5W                |
| Dimensions (WHD)                     | 483x102x330mm     |

# GamuT RS3

It's the baby in the restructured company's new flagship range, with optional stand – how does it sound?

Review: **John Bamford** Lab: **Keith Howard**

The start of 2014 marked the beginning of a new era for Denmark's GamuT audio. For the last few years the firm has been a wholly owned subsidiary of Kvist Industries, a global supplier of wooden components for high quality furniture, but following a management buyout at the end of last year it is now an independent company. Says GamuT: 'Kvist Industries is still the biggest single stockholder. But now also the employees as well as a group of investors own their part of GamuT A/S.'

Since the company's restructuring its first product introduction is a new flagship range of loudspeakers, the 'RS' (Revised Superior) series. Nothing that GamuT designs and manufacturers falls into the budget-priced sector: its electronics and loudspeakers are all decidedly 'high-end' both in performance and when it comes to price.

Last year we tested the £8500 M5 floorstander [*HFN* Apr '13] from its middle-range M'inenT series. Meanwhile the company's Superior models – the 'El Superiores' first introduced in 2007 – are cost-no-object designs which GamuT's engineering team has now further refined with improved enclosures and revised internal networks. The RS3 is the baby in the series. Priced at £11,823 it's a compact two-way bass reflex 'bookshelf' speaker. Moving up the range are the RS5 and RS7 floorstanders at £23,100 and £29,050 respectively. The series is topped off by the £74,000 RS9 flagship standing nearly 1.7m tall and weighing 185kg.

As with all models in GamuT's Revised Superior range, the RS3's curved enclosure – which tapers to the rear – is formed of pressed solid wood panels (five layers, each 2mm thick) over multi-layered Finnish birch plywood. This is finished in a choice of white oiled ash or black coloured ash.

Says GamuT: 'Form pressing minimises the need for panel damping by leaving an inherent force in the structure that in itself causes faster decay of unwanted vibration.'

Air pressure within the enclosure is controlled and guided by a fan-shaped reinforcement structure running the full height of the cabinet, which aims to time align the coupling to the port opening. The port which vents at the rear is made of 5mm-thick aluminium.

Below the port are two sets of seriously chunky input terminals for bi-wiring/amping: a proprietary design featuring a pressure insert for clamping bare wire – GamuT's preferred termination for minimizing contact resistance. Naturally the terminals are compatible with spade connectors and 4mm banana plugs as well.

## RESONANCE CONTROLS

As in the M'inenT M5, which Adam Smith auditioned last year, the RS3 employs

Scan-Speak Revelator drive units which GamuT tweaks in-house. The bass/midrange driver is a 7in unit with a compliant rubber surround and paper cone, featuring radial 'slices' filled with damping glue. This is

claimed to reduce the diaphragm's breakup modes in the critical midband region and reduce distortion.

It hands over at 2.15kHz to the Revelator tweeter, a 1.5in double ring radiator design rather than a true dome, to which GamuT adds its own stainless steel waveguide, shaped to aid dispersion and clamp the centre of the dome. This aims to reduce cancellation effects and smooth the overall output, as well as extending bandwidth to something approaching 60kHz.

GamuT describes its crossover as a Non Resonant Linked Impulse network, designed to align the drivers in the time domain and optimise their resonant behaviour – and that of the circuit itself.

**RIGHT:** Scan-Speak Revelator drivers are modified and treated by GamuT in-house. The 7in 'sliced cone' bass/mid unit crosses over at 2.15kHz to a double ring radiator tweeter with stainless steel waveguide

'The RS3 captured the sax's honk and echo-laden guitar with perfect attack'







## THE WHOLE GAMUT

Denmark is famous for its passion for sound and boasts a long history of audio engineering excellence. GamuT is a central player, becoming renowned for its high-end audio electronics before branching out into loudspeaker design and manufacturing in 2005. Its chief designer is Lars Goller, who started out in the Technical University of Denmark's audio engineering programme. Over the years he has worked on design projects for several of Denmark's most respected specialist firms such as Dali and drive unit manufacturers Vifa and Scan-Speak. GamuT's flagship system – comprising its D3i preamp, two M250i monoblock power amps and RS9 floostanders, driven by the CD3 CD player – costs £103,000 before you add interconnect and speaker cables! Says GamuT: 'Of course we measure everything we can. But it's always the human ear that has the last word.'

Resonance control is clearly a major factor in every aspect of the speaker's design. GamuT has its own range of precision-made cables called WormHoles which are pretty serious: a 3m pair of WormHoles Signature speaker cables cost £3536 (add £605 per stereo metre). It comprises individually insulated conductors surrounded by a woven insulation, all inside a second cover containing copper threads within it. The company says its design helps optimise impulse behaviour and effectively terminates unwanted stored energy. It's this cable that's used for internal wiring throughout both its M'inenT and Revised Superior ranges.

GamuT's 660mm-tall column stand adds substantially to the price of owning the RS3 – at £3536 it costs as much as many a good speaker – but you wouldn't want to be without it. Again, it's made of multilayered birch plywood with a lamination of form-pressed wood to complement the RS3 perfectly, with a recess at the rear of the pillar in which to channel cables. Short aluminium outriggers extend from each corner of the base to increase stability, through which inverted cone spikes are threaded, adjustable from above with an Allen key.

The quality of the metalwork is exquisite, right down to the little 'coasters' for siting the stands on hard floors. They feature rubber o-rings inserted into a groove on the underside to damp resonance and prevent scuffing.



## BEYOND BOUNDARIES

Site a pair of RS3s in free space and they can throw up a sound image extending way beyond the confines of their cabinets. My room is approximately 16x25ft yet the RS3 'drove' it surprisingly satisfactorily, serving up a subjectively powerful and deep bass which belied its compact dimensions. There's a hint of

boxiness, a tubby upper-bass bloom that I couldn't quite dial out; nevertheless the RS3 is an easy-going speaker to listen to for hours on end. High frequencies appear exceptionally relaxed and extended, combining vivid crispness with an unforced naturalness that's open and airy.

There's nothing hectoring or aggressive in the RS3's musical presentation. In fact some listeners might consider it rather laid-back in personality. Images appear created across and behind, rather than forward of, the loudspeakers' plane, which helps create an appealingly deep soundstage. The RS3 is also a fine communicator of rhythm and pitch, allowing effortless observation of dense musical adventures such as Aufgang's 'Channel 7' and 'Channel 8' from the French experimental band's eponymously titled album of 2009 [Infiné iF1006].

## DETAIL LOUD AND CLEAR

Separating clearly the percussive elements of piano and myriad electronic keyboards in these grand operatic-sounding pieces, in which classical themes blend with prog-rock and drum 'n' bass-style rhythmic complexity, the GamuT appeared unflustered by the density and allowed details such as the sound of the compositions' bells and percussion to ring out loud and clear.

By the time I'd allowed the Aufgang album to play on to the baroque-feeling 'Barock' I became particularly appreciative of the speaker's HF civility, the jangling piano lines of composer Francesco Tristano which underpin the music were clearly delineated throughout the piece.

Aufgang's recording isn't hi-fi show demonstration quality in the manner of, say, Wesseltoft & Schwartz's *Duo*, however the RS3's innate clarity through the frequency range revealed the natural timbre of the piano most vividly. The speaker proved so wonderfully



Lars & Ivan

# THA-8



## Headphone Amplifier with Vacuum Tube

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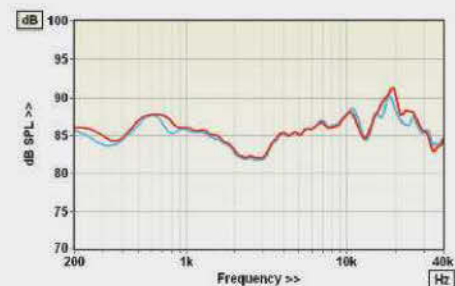
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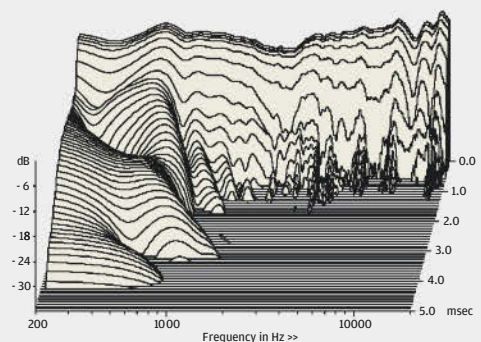
## GAMUT RS3

Gamut claims 87.5dB sensitivity for the RS3 which is close to what we obtained by simply averaging our FFT response data (87.2dB) but exceeds our pink noise figure of 85.9dB, which suggests that 86dB is actually a more representative figure. The upside of this modest sensitivity is that the RS3 presents a relatively benign load to its amplifier. The 5ohm nominal impedance chimes well with our minimum measured modulus of 3.9ohm (Gamut claims 4.0ohm), and impedance phase angles are sufficiently well controlled that the EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance, which takes into account the effect of both modulus and phase) dips to a low of 1.9ohm at 102Hz – higher than typical of modern floorstanding competitors.

Measured at tweeter height, the 1m forward response [Graph 1, below] has quite a marked suckout between 2kHz and 3kHz and a gently rising trend thereafter, as a result of which the response errors are a little on the high side at  $\pm 4.6$ dB and  $\pm 4.3$ dB respectively for the pair, 200Hz-20kHz, although listening a little off-axis will tame the treble. Over the same frequency range the pair matching error was also mildly disappointing at  $\pm 1.6$ dB but the largest errors occur in the octave above 10kHz, below which the figure is a more typical  $\pm 1.0$ dB. In another payback for the modest sensitivity, its 49Hz bass extension ( $-6$ dB re. 200Hz) is a good result but the diffraction-corrected near-field measurement shows a peak of about 3dB at 90Hz and there is a severe resonance within the port output at around 700Hz. By contrast the cumulative spectral decay waterfall [Graph 2, below] evinces fast initial energy decay and well controlled treble resonances. KH



ABOVE: Upper mid suckout is evident on the forward response along with a 'brighter' presence and treble



ABOVE: Cabinet resonances are very well controlled as are those associated with the bass and treble drivers

**LEFT: 5mm-thick aluminium reflex ports at the rear of the cabinet. The substantial bi-wire/amp terminals are GamuT's own, designed to minimise contact resistance**

low frequencies, the speaker kept the music's bass lines firmly in check. Not that the album is particularly demanding, it turned out. But it will sound like a relentless cacophony on less-than-civilised-sounding playback systems, so it's challenging in that respect. The RS3 told it like it was, punching out staccato rhythms and capturing the sax's honk and echo-laden guitar with perfect attack.

### ARTICULATE GRIP

It sounded sublime when reproducing the velvety vocal cords of baritone Gregory Porter whose 'No Love Dying' from *Liquid Spirit* [Blue Note 0602537410538] was delivered with commendable articulation. The RS3 held everything in place, only that slight honk in the upper bass belying its diminutive stature. The rumbustious title track was taken in its stride, however, the compact GamuT remaining composed as the parping contributions of the accompanying brass and reed ensemble augmented the track's dynamic hand claps and percussive honky-tonk piano.

Hear the RS3 playing tonally rich and sweetly-balanced recordings such as 'Thanks To You' from Boz Scaggs' *Dig* [Virgin 10645 2 1] or James Taylor's 'Line 'Em Up' from *Hourglass* [SACD issue, Columbia CS 67912] and you might just be seduced by the RS3's conspicuous wow factor. ☺

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

GamuT's 'El Superiores' are undeniably expensive, even this smallest standmount in the RS model range costs as much as many manufacturers' statuesque floorstanders. However it's beautifully built and sounds extremely refined, its gentle sound balance and innate musicality encouraging prolonged listening. The RS3 is a tremendous compact monitor for a small room if the price isn't a barrier.

Sound Quality: 75%



descriptive of the textures and timbres of acoustic and electronic sounds that it was never anything other than wholly captivating.

Almost for a laugh I challenged the baby 'El Superiore' to entertain me with Dub Syndicate's *The Pounding System (Ambience In Dub)* [On-U Sound ON-U CD 0018]. It wasn't that the speaker couldn't pound: the RS3 made a fine stab at delivering the reggae bass line in 'Hi-Fi Gets A Pounding Parts 1 & 2' and, later in the album, 'Hi-Fi Gets A Pounding Part 3'. Again, because it doesn't try *too* hard and maintains a firm sense of control of

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Sensitivity (SPL/1m)/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music) | 87.2dB/85.9dB/85.3dB                    |
| Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)          | 3.9ohm @ 160Hz<br>20.3ohm @ 74Hz        |
| Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)            | $-53^\circ$ @ 85Hz<br>$31^\circ$ @ 64Hz |
| Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)                     | $\pm 1.6$ dB                            |
| LF/HF extension ( $-6$ dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)      | 49Hz   $>40$ kHz/ $>40$ kHz             |
| THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)          | 0.8% / 0.2% / 0.4%                      |
| Dimensions (HWD)                                | 400x226x456mm                           |

# Marantz SA8005/PM8005

The mid-price separates market is hi-fi's most competitive, so Marantz's latest SACD player and integrated amp must be special to ensure the company's future success  
 Review: **Nick Tate** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Some might say Marantz has achieved the impossible, pulling off the unusual feat of being a mass-market manufacturer while consistently making quirky and interesting products. As this SA8005 CD player and PM8005 amplifier combo shows, the brand is able to offer something just a little bit different from its mainstream £1000 rivals.

Not only does it sound quite distinctive, it also features two-channel SACD playback – which is all well and good of course, but any modern self-respecting digital source and amplifier duo has to have DAC functionality these days. With this Marantz pair it comes via the SA8005 player rather than being offered on the amplifier; the PM8005 provides six line inputs with a nice MM phono stage thrown in.

## DSD CAPABILITY

These days it seems the only kind of digital input that matters is USB; this lets you play your PCM computer music files at up to 192kHz/24-bit resolution. The SA8005 has a twist though; like many of the latest crop of machines it also plays Direct Stream Digital (DSD), which is of course the native coding system for SACD.

Some folk think that DSD sounds better than PCM; SACD fans certainly do, and now we're seeing some action from its creator Sony with the advent of DSD5.6. Effectively this runs at twice the data rate, giving (theoretically) superior sound. The SA8005 is one of the few machines currently on sale that is built for this, so one fine day, when enough music goes on sale in this format, this machine will be chomping at the bit ('scuse the pun) to play it. Until then, if we're honest, then its performance on CD, SACD and at 96kHz/24-bit is what *really* counts, as this is where the vast majority of digital music can be found.

The player is pretty well made for a one thousand pound design. For example,

the chassis is strengthened with an extra metal plate to cut case resonance, making for an 8kg machine which feels sturdier than price rivals such as the £1250 Roksan Kandy K2. The USB DAC circuit also sports a special (galvanic) ground/signal isolation system designed to remove computer-borne noise, Marantz says.

As per all rivals these days, the SA8005 works in asynchronous mode, clocking the computer's audio stream for lower jitter. Mac users needn't bother, but PC owners will have to install a driver to enjoy music from their computers. Inside, a Crystal Semiconductors CS4398 digital filter, noise shaper and DAC chip does the number crunching, and it feeds an analogue output stage using Marantz's proprietary HDAM op-amp modules.

Every good £1000 digital source needs an integrated amplifier to live happily ever after with, and to this end Marantz has come up with the new PM8005. It's the more conservative of the two products,

offering a claimed 70W per channel into 8ohm, but no fancy DAC functionality. Oddly though, it does have three tone controls instead of the usual two.

## MIDBAND TONE CONTROL TOO

Yes, this integrated gets a *midband* level control, which isn't likely to be top of most people's shopping lists for a thousand pound amplifier I'd suggest – not least because at this level customers tend to like to switch the tone controls out altogether. Inside, there's a large double-shielded toroidal power transformer that sits on a triple layer bottom plate, investing this amplifier with real sturdiness and weight.

Marantz has paid attention to individual component selection with Schottky diodes and other componentry; the company's proprietary second and third generation HDAM amplifier modules are used, and there's a discrete input buffer circuit.

As a pair, this Marantz combo is very pleasing to use. The brushed metal finish



**RIGHT:** Three main PCBs (left to right) carry a switchmode PSU (for CD transport); S/PDIF and USB digital input reception; analogue PSU, DAC and preamp stage (black chassis version shown)





is excellent, the action of the controls slick and the overall feel is of a high-end package. It has just the right amount of features to keep most users happy, without cluttering up the facias to the extent that they'd look gauche. The main omission is a Bluetooth input; many purchasers won't see this as a problem but rivals like Roksan's £1220 Kandy K2 BT could steal some sales here. There is, however, discrete headphone amplifier circuitry.

### **BOUNCY AND ENJOYABLE**

First, taken in isolation, both machines present a very fine face to their respective rivals. The SA8005 is a big, confident-sounding silver-disc player, which gives a slightly warm and rose-tinted view of the world. No matter what disc you feed it, you can be sure that it will deliver the music in

a bouncy, enjoyable way. The soundstage is curtailed slightly in absolute terms, the Marantz pulling in things from far left and far right to make a stronger, bigger – almost larger than life – central image between the speakers. You could almost say it's like a classic tube amplifier.

Tonally the SA8005 is slightly dull, albeit in a *nice* way. The upper bass of Thomas Dolby's 'Airwaves', from *The Golden Age of Wireless* [EMI CDP 7 46009 2], is more fulsome than it should be, but at the same time the lower bass is a little softer and lighter. Moving up into the midband, the player sounds warm and smooth, and further still, treble is sweet

*'With its endless reserves, the amp seemingly had a smile on its face'*

**ABOVE:** Grooved, rounded facias look distinguished, not too radical. Generous facilities aren't allowed to spoil the clean lines. Blue display and backlighting feels contemporary too

but a little lacking in sparkle and extension. The overall effect is of a disc player that seeks to sugar the pill somewhat – it's not dramatic, but certainly errs on the side of euphony rather than absolute neutrality.

Given the typical buyer of a £1000 machine, this won't be wholly unwelcome: for at this price point it's all about giving a nice, impressive sound

rather than performing a CSI-style forensic study of the scene of the recording.

Interestingly, you'd have thought the PM8005 would be just a touch more neutral, given the warming tendencies of its partnering player, but it is not. Dub Pistols' 'Gangsters', from *Speakers And Tweeters* [SBESTCD 16], showed it to have a strong and deep bass by the standards of its price rivals – although it isn't as taut and well damped as the similarly priced Creek Evolution 50A, for example. It certainly sounds bigger and more impressive, but again is less accurate, yet proves in some ways more fun.

The PM8005 has less upper bass warmth than the SA8005, but is fractionally fuller down in the bottom octave; it gives a very confident sound, apparently untroubled by any lack of power, and again makes ☞

## THE 8000 SERIES

Marantz is a brand with a long and illustrious history. Founded by Saul B Marantz in 1953, it started off as a manufacturer of high-end American esoterica that only the well heeled could afford – its first tube amplifiers are now legendary. Then, as the ownership changed it moved into the mass market with Japanese manufactured products in the '60s and '70s. Next it was bought by European consumer electronics giant Philips, and became synonymous with very capable budget CD players. Now owned by D+M [see p69], it has had plenty of time to put down roots, and makes a wide range of products. While its cheaper designs are worthy, the 8000 series is where the Marantz range starts to get interesting. This price point is just high enough to be able to fit better quality passive componentry and sturdier casings, as well as to begin to introduce key functionality such as SACD playback: a cornerstone of the Marantz brand. Think of the 8000-series as a BMW 3-series in hi-fi terms, a scaled-down premium quality package able to deliver a taste of what's possible higher up the range.

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## MARANTZ SA8005/PM8005

Model numbers may change but the underlying performance of Marantz's PM8005 amplifier is almost indistinguishable from the earlier PM8004 and PM8003 models [see *HFN* Nov '10]. Rated at 70W/100W into 8/4ohm, the PM8005 still delivers a robust 100W/155W with 122W/222W available under dynamic conditions into 8/4ohm. Protection still limits output to 227W/58W into 2/1ohm loads [see Graph 2, below] so keep your choice of loudspeaker 'sane'. The A-wtd S/N ratio remains essentially unchanged at 91.5dB (re. 0dBW) just as distortion falls as low as 0.00047% through midrange frequencies, increasing to 0.017% at 20kHz and 0.023% at 40kHz (all re. 10W/8ohm). Distortion is reasonably steady with level, from 0.0009% at 1W to 0.002% at the rated 70W. The response still stretches out to 100kHz (-0.8dB) but, in the most obvious change, the PM8005's output impedance has been halved to 0.046ohm. The PM8005 is a tried-and-tested solution!

Marantz's partnering SA8005 player is necessarily more evolved than the SA8003 as it now includes a USB DAC function. Crucially, the revised CS4398 DAC-based analogue output offers a slightly improved 109dB A-wtd S/N ratio, far lower jitter (textbook 118psec via CD and a low 85psec via S/PDIF) and now invokes a 'slow roll-off' minimum phase digital filter. The response extends to -1.9dB/45kHz (96kHz media) and -10.9dB/90kHz (192kHz media) and is now also far flatter via SACD (-7.7dB/80kHz versus -28dB/80kHz). Readers may view comprehensive QC Suite test reports for Marantz's SA8005 and PM8005 by navigating to [www.hifinews.co.uk](http://www.hifinews.co.uk) and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



**ABOVE:** The player has USB, optical and coaxial digital ins, plus optical and coaxial digital outs; RCA line outs and remote bus sockets too. The amp has pre-out and power amp direct sockets, plus RCA inputs and binding posts for two pairs of speakers

the rhythm zip along and everything flows beautifully. Move up to the midband and the PM8005 pulls back a little – it's not as direct as some, nor is it as transparent. This isn't to say it is opaque, it's just that it's been given quite a 'stylised' sound.

The upper mid and low treble is shiny and well defined, but a little lower down there's less intensity to the sound. This is great with reggae, for example – Gregory Isaacs' 'Night Nurse', from *Night Nurse* [Island 314 586 768-2], was consummate fun, the Marantz amp seemingly having a big smile on its face!

Again, the PM8005 just got into the groove, preferring not to focus too much on soundstaging, image location, depth perspective and the like, and just serving a big, punchy, sound with a good deal of sparkle to snare drums and hi-hats. It presents like a quintessential big Japanese transistor amp – all thunder and lightning – but is far more musical than many.

### PUTTING THEM TOGETHER

So what of the two together? Unsurprisingly they do gel rather well. That slightly laid-back upper mid and treble of the SA8005 seems to be brought forward a bit with the PM8005's more lively higher octaves, while the bass seems to work better than expected: the amp adds a bit of heft right down low as the source component warms the upper regions of the bass.

The result is a very big sound – it's enormous compared to some, and has a wonderfully confident and naturally musical attitude. Whatever you feed it, whether it's Wings' *Band On The Run* in 24-bit/96kHz FLAC via an Apple MacBook Pro running Audirvana, Alex de Grassi's *The*

*Water Garden* via DSD [Blue Coast Records] or the Human League's 'Seconds' on SACD, from *Dare* [Virgin SACDV 2364], this dynamic duo really takes control of the situation and boogies.

It's only when you sit down and dissect the sound or do direct A-B comparisons with more expensive references, like the Marantz Premium range which inspired these 8005 products [see *HFN* Feb '13], that you begin to realise what it's not doing quite so well.

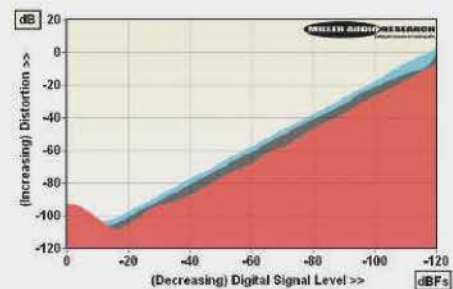
Its weakness is a tendency to muddy things across the midband, smearing the bass slightly and lopping off some upper treble energy and finesse. While it's very good at the little musical inflections that make things sound so satisfying, it does also sit on major dynamic peaks just a *touch* too much.

Finally, there's a slight reduction of soundstage depth – but overall the Marantz SA8005/PM8005 pair proves a pretty hard act to beat at the price. Some might wonder how £2k could be better spent. ☺

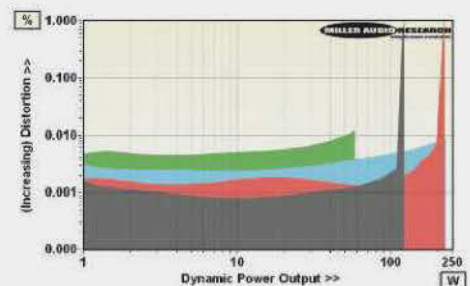
### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Taken in isolation, both the SA8005 and PM8005 are fine products, and when you put both components together, the result is greater than the sum of the parts – they've been skilfully voiced to work together. They mask one another's respective weaknesses and augment their strengths, making for a powerful, expansive sound that is great fun, something any prospective purchaser should sample.

Sound Quality: 80%



**ABOVE:** Distortion versus decreasing 24-bit digital level at via S/PDIF and USB (1kHz, red) and 16-bit CD (1kHz, black and 20kHz, blue)



**ABOVE:** Dynamic output vs. THD into 8ohm (black), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) loads

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

|                                      |                                   |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)       | 100W / 155W                       |
| Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)  | 122W / 222W / 227W / 58W          |
| Output imp. (20Hz–20kHz, CD/Amp)     | 117ohm / 0.046–0.063ohm           |
| Freq. resp. (20Hz–20kHz, CD/Amp)     | -0.0 to +0.08dB / +0.0 to -0.04dB |
| A-wtd S/N ratio (CD/Amp)             | 109.2dB (0dBfs) / 91.5dB (0dBW)   |
| Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, CD/Amp)      | 0.0008–0.002% / 0.0005–0.017%     |
| Digital jitter (CD/SACD/USB/ S/PDIF) | 118psec/25psec/55psec/85psec      |
| Power consumption (CD/Amp)           | 10W/268W (31W idle)               |
| Dimensions (WHD, CD/Amp)             | 440x106x341mm/440x128x379mm       |

"The P10 will have an effect ranging from positive to positively startling".

**Hi-Fi News**



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# KR Audio VA880

For those unable to accommodate the mighty Kronzilla valve amplifier, KR Audio offers something more domestically acceptable in the form of the KT88-equipped VA880  
 Review: **Adam Smith** Lab: **Paul Miller**

**W**hile the resurgence of vinyl is becoming a more and more familiar story, there is another area of the audio industry that's equally buoyant: the rebirth of the valve amplifier. There is ample choice for the prospective buyer at all price levels, and the KR Audio VA880 sits perfectly in the middle ground – not too small and feature-limited, but equally not too big, exotic or priced permanently out of reach.

KR Audio will be a familiar name to readers thanks to John Bamford's review of the jaw-dropping Kronzilla SXi [*HFN* Aug '13]. This unit is a real labour of love, featuring unique valves designed by the company itself, but its size and price will restrict it to a lucky few. The VA880 is, however, an altogether more practical proposition, as it's based around the well-proven, and popular, KT88 valve.

Interestingly, KR Audio doesn't actually manufacture these valves; those fitted to the review amplifier were Genalex Gold Lion types from Russia.

The £5150 UK price tag sported by the VA880 pitches it somewhat above the price of many well-known valve models by the likes of Ming Da, Icon Audio and Prima Luna, but it does have some competition, including models boasting 211, 300B and 845 valves from Melody, plus the KT120-equipped Jadis I35.

The amplifier itself is a neat design and, while not abounding with stylistic flourishes or undue bling (thank goodness!), it is a beautifully made unit and the matt finish of most of the metalwork lends it an undeniable 'brutalist' charm.

Front panel controls are limited to four unlabelled source selection switches that relate to the corresponding range of inputs on the rear panel. At the right-hand end is a fascia standby switch that operates in conjunction with the main power switch on the rear panel. The remote control

window and centrally placed volume control complete the picture.

## INVERTED TOPOLOGY

At the rear, things are a little more crowded, with inputs via three pairs of phono inputs and one pair of balanced XLR sockets – all analogue. Input selection is achieved using reed relays and the signal is subsequently fed into a Class A MOSFET driver section and on to the variable-bias tube output stage.

The topology of the amplifier is the opposite to the common idea of a hybrid design, which usually involves a thermionic preamplifier driving a solid-state power amplifier. However, as is so often the

case in audio, it's less a matter of how it's done, but more *how well* it's done, and so the apparently topsy-turvy layout of the VA880 should in principle offer no issues, especially coming as it does from a company that knows its power valves.

On the output side of things, settings for 4ohm and 8ohm loudspeakers are offered, but rather than simply fitting different binding posts for each, KR Audio has chosen to equip the VA880 with a single set of posts per channel. So it is necessary to remove a small panel on the amplifier's rear and redistribute four small screws underneath according to the guide on the underside of this panel. While this is not a problem in itself, my one small concern



**RIGHT:** With the power and output coupling transformers encased in a steel box above, KR Audio's logic-controlled inputs, PSU smoothing, FET driver amp and volume are housed beneath





was that the 4ohm setting uses four screws, but the 8ohm setting only requires two. I'm sure I am not the only person that can foresee those two extra screws having disappeared the very day one purchases a new pair of loudspeakers and finds a need for them!

A small, nicely made remote control handset is supplied with the amp, and this is a boon as the metal volume knob on the fascia is right under the output valves and becomes quite hot after some hours' use.

### **A SENSE OF PURPOSE**

Operation of the VA880 is simplicity itself – once switched on at the rear, the front standby switch is pressed and its associated LED lights up. The unit enters its warm-up phase and, when the LED in the volume control comes on a minute or so later, the amplifier – as the manual puts it – 'will be ready for your listening enjoyment'.

### **A WAY WITH VALVES**

KR Audio was set up in 1992 by electronics engineer Dr Ricardo Kron to make valves. He grew up in Italy and developed a strong interest in the mechanics of amplifier design and sound reproduction, aided in no small part by helping his engineering professor to install a Leak amplifier at the house of none other than the Italian conductor, Arturo Toscanini. The questions he asked himself regarding the ways of improving reproducing recorded sound lay dormant during his career in an Italian radio and television company, only to resurface many years later, following a chance meeting with a fellow valve enthusiast. His long-intended project was duly reborn and a brand new 300B valve was the result. Today, the company makes more mainstream valves, such as 300Bs, 2A3s, 211s and 845s, as well as the T-1610 that powers the Kronzilla. Dr Kron sadly passed away in 2002; but the company remains focused on his goals under the leadership of his widow, Dr Eunice Kron, at its base in Prague.

With the KR Audio VA880 thoroughly warmed up and run in over a period of a week or so, I commenced *my* listening enjoyment using the Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra's recording of Ravel's *Bolero* [TACET L207] conducted by Carlo Rizzi. This LP is cut in reverse so that it plays from the inside to the outside of the disc and, as a result, the dynamics at the end are better accommodated.

The VA880 absolutely lapped this up and its abilities with regard to instrument tonality and placement within the soundstage were really first-class. Each orchestral element had real form and a sense of purpose to its performance, with the trombone in particular an absolute delight. The KR Audio's fine insights

**ABOVE:** Casework is finished in matte black while fascia features a central volume knob and four unlabelled source selection switches corresponding to the inputs on the rear panel

combined with the one or two extra 'cheeky' notes added by the player meant that the whole spectacle raised a virtually continuous smile.

*'The VA880 is taut at the top end, but with a creamy smoothness'*

The piece was rounded off by the impressively dynamic timpani ringing out through my listening room with weight and solidity, albeit slightly lacking the last ounce

of impact and tautness that I am used to with my resident Naim Supernait amplifier.

Where the VA880 really does score, however, is when it comes to the whole combination of midband delicacy, insight and expansiveness. All too often, with some of the cheaper and less capable valve amplifiers that sit below the KR Audio, there is usually a trade-off between these.

Yes, you can have that lovely sense of spaciousness but maybe you have to forgo insight: not so with the VA880. It has a thoroughly captivating way of pushing the main detail elements of a piece of music right to the fore, but at the same time making sure that everything else around it is just where it should be. It has an inherent 'rightness' to its presentation.

The good feeling with regard to detail led me to load up my CD player with Vanessa Rubin's *New Horizons* CD [RCA 07863 67445-2]. Ms Rubin has an

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**Vibration** right up into the ultrasonics is a problem that’s poorly understood and too often ignored. Key sources are power supplies and loudspeakers. Transmission throughout the system is courtesy of the expensive cables, metal being an excellent mechanical conductor.

Vibration’s victims are circuit boards and components such as capacitors that generate spurious signals when vibrated. These signals react with the music and build with the music’s volume and complexity, creating ‘shouty’ distortions.

Both RFI from radio transmissions (TV, mobiles etc) and EMI from electrical devices (fluorescent lights, switch mode supplies in TVs and computers, fridges, motors) pollute the mains and again interact harmfully with the signal, producing an aggressive, edgy sound.

### Yet more vibration

At the other end of the system loudspeakers are by far the biggest vibration source and the energy travels through the speaker cables, into the amplifier and thence round the system.

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Source components – CD players, DACs, phono stages and preamps – suffer huge damage to the minute signals passing through. **LeadingEdge** platforms drain energy into the internal labyrinth, isolate them from external vibration and offer shielding from RFI/EMI contamination, all from a piece of fine furniture.

### New at the show

The **HiRez Balanced Taga** offers some features of the high-end Aletheia PSU, supplying 300W of balanced power for source items and two filtered sockets for amplifiers. DC on the mains causes transformers to buzz and can saturate the core. Vertex’s **Aneto** blocks DC, filters the mains and also absorbs vibration and RFI – of course!

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

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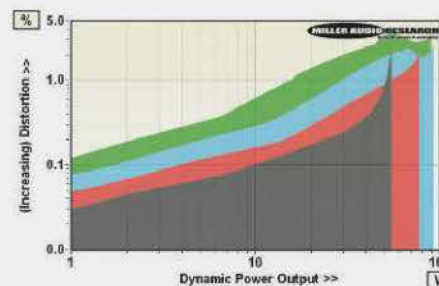




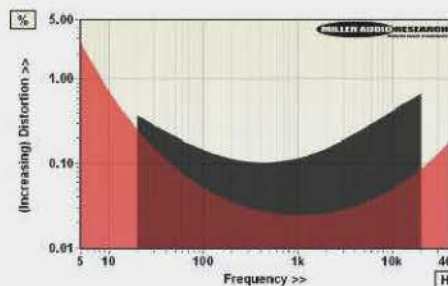
## KR AUDIO VA880

This diminutive hybrid tube amp may live in the shadow of the awesome Kronzilla [HFN Aug '13] but it more than holds its own, surpassing the output of that massive single-ended triode amp thanks to its more conventional push-pull pair of KT88s. Both amplifiers feature a solid-state driver stage (claimed to run in Class A) but the VA880's pair of tetrodes muster a full 2x50W/8ohm via its 8ohm tap (35W/4ohm), rising to 75W and 80W into 4ohm and 2ohm under dynamic conditions [see Graph 1, below]. There's no 'hard' clip point so the maximum output is rather dependent on the acceptable level of distortion, from 0.03% at 1W to 0.12% at 10W and 1% at 50Wohm to 2.5% at 55W/8ohm. As expected, distortion also increases at the frequency extremes from 0.25%/20Hz at 1W to 0.4%/20Hz at 10W [see Graph 2, below].

The amplifier has a very carefully engineered frequency response with -3dB points at 4Hz-32kHz, rolling gently away through the high treble to meet -0.35dB/20kHz and dipping to -14dB/48kHz just prior to a mild transformer resonance at ~80kHz. The 1.95-2.35ohm output impedance (default 8ohm tap) is fairly uniform but may still cause a variation in the system response in sympathy with the impedance trend of the attached loudspeaker. Speakers with an elevated HF impedance trend will sound brighter than those with a tougher HF load, for example. Meanwhile, the unweighted hum is low-ish at -74dBV but the spread of 50/100Hz noise through bass and midrange does impact on the 82dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW). A figure of 85dB is 'average'. Readers may view an in-depth QC Suite report for KR Audio's VA880 amplifier by navigating to [www.hifinews.co.uk](http://www.hifinews.co.uk) and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (cyan) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Maximum current is 8.9A



ABOVE: Distortion versus frequency at 10W/8ohm (20Hz-20kHz, black) and 1W/8ohm (5Hz-40kHz, red)

## HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

|                                      |                          |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)       | 50W / 35W                |
| Dynamic power (<2% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)  | 52W / 75W / 90W / 80W    |
| Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)        | 1.94-2.35ohm             |
| Freq. response (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)   | -0.18dB to -0.35dB/-12dB |
| Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/50W)     | 113mV / 800mV (balanced) |
| A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/50W)       | 82.1dB / 99.1dB          |
| Distortion (20Hz-20kHz re. 10W/8ohm) | 0.10-0.66%               |
| Power consumption (Idle/Max. o/p)    | 206W / 300W              |
| Dimensions (WHD) / Weight            | 385x245x415mm / 20kg     |



ABOVE: Four line-level inputs are offered, three unbalanced and one balanced. The cover between the speaker terminals hides loudspeaker impedance adjustments

absolutely glorious voice: soulful and passionate with copious emotional depth. The VA880 showcased this perfectly on the track 'If My Heart Could Speak'. Not only were the vocals sublime but the backing acoustic bass seemed to be coming right from the corner of my room, so lifelike was the rendition. More heartening was that its less frenetic performance gave the KR Audio time to really pick up on its inherent *sonic* character, and present it superbly without any bloat or uncertainty.

### NO FLUFF UP TOP

At the top end, the VA880 is taut and detailed but with a consistent underlying sense of creamy smoothness. A common misconception regarding valve amplifiers is that they're a bit mushy and fluffy in the treble department but the KR Audio amplifier dispels this notion in a heartbeat.

It has a clarity that would shame many supposedly 'crisp' transistor designs but without any of the associated hardness and spit that some can suffer. This was showcased perfectly by London Grammar's *If You Wait* album [Metal and Dust MADART 1LP] where Hannah Reid's glorious vocals positively soared, yet the backing drum machine effects on tracks such as 'Strong' were vivid and well positioned within the mix.

The more I played the VA880, the word that simply would not leave my mind as I listened was 'sophisticated'. It is more than possible to enjoy cheaper valve amplifiers for the things they do well but, occasionally, a piece of music comes along and spotlights their

shortcomings rather blatantly. This never came even close to happening with the VA880, which has an inherent sense of competence and assuredness that meant it virtually never put a foot wrong. Instead, it approached music-making with a quiet confidence and endowed everything I fed it with poise, emotion and breathtaking clarity.

Of course, delicacy and mellifluousness are all very well, but sometimes fare that's a little grittier is called for. For me, it was the 12in single of Killing Joke's 'Love Like Blood' [EG Records EGOX 20] and there were no obvious issues here either. Geordie Walker's chunky guitar chords that underpin the song were thick and menacing, and the backing drums offered genuine impact and punch.

I did occasionally feel that the VA880 was tripping over itself ever so slightly in order to keep up with the bass line, but my PMC loudspeakers are particularly ruthless in this respect - which may not have helped. Importantly, the performance of this amplifier was always pithy and always engaging. ↻

## HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

The KR Audio VA880 is a highly capable amplifier, showcasing the very best aspects of the KT88 valves' abilities, with virtually none of the associated downsides. What's more, it is a compact, neatly styled and very well made unit that operates in a quiet and fuss-free manner. The sound that it offers easily identifies it as a superbly well-sorted design and it is likely to work well in many different kinds of set-ups.

Sound Quality: 82%



# Rega Apheta

This hand-built moving-coil was developed to match Rega's upmarket turntables and now partners its latest top models. Does it do them justice?

Review: **Steve Harris** Lab: **Paul Miller**

**R**ega first started work on a moving-coil when its overseas distributors asked for a higher-performance cartridge, priced to match the more expensive turntables.

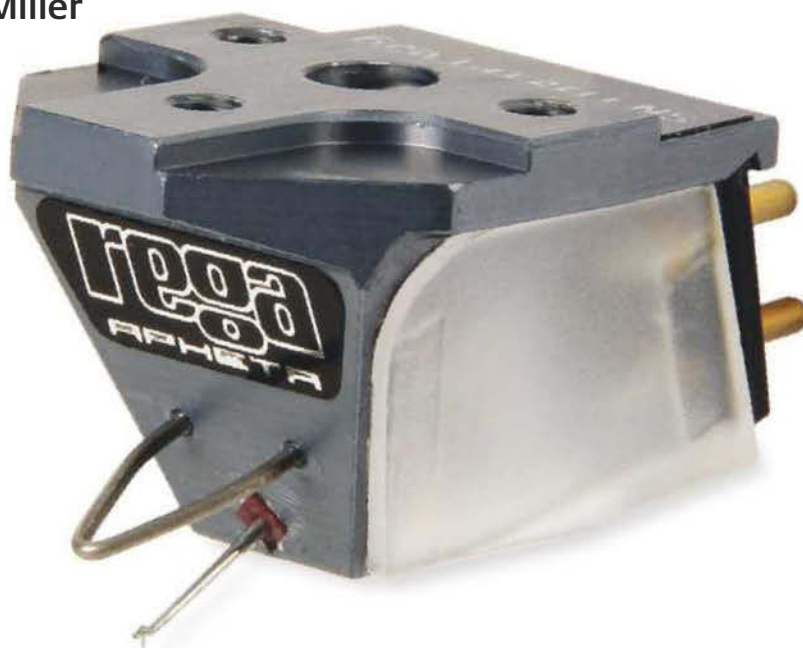
It began by building a 20-times scale model of a moving-coil generator in wood. Different coil and pivot-pad arrangements could then be tried, using a loudspeaker voice-coil to excite the model at various musical frequencies.

The final design departed radically from the usual MC structure, where the coils are attached to the cantilever just ahead of the compliant pivot or suspension block. It also did away with the usual steel tie-wire that holds the assembly in position, and has to be critically tensioned and damped.

Instead, Rega has the tapered aluminium cantilever passing through a compliant elastomer grommet, set in the front plate of the cartridge frame and forms the pivot. Behind this, on the back end of the cantilever, are the coils. So the basic layout of cantilever, pivot and sensing elements is more like that of a typical MM.

Rega says that the conventional moving-coil's tie wire creates an unacceptable resonance so is usually damped by a rudimentary piece of foam rubber. By contrast, it asserts, 'Apheta's natural high frequency resonance is subtle and low in amplitude therefore eliminating the need for insensitive damping designs.'

Even so, the Rega los phono stage [*HFN* Aug '08], designed to partner the Apheta



when it first appeared, included a notch filter 'designed to enhance the Apheta cartridge by reducing unwanted high frequency energy present' and said to be useful for older records with higher surface noise. Apparently, though, the feedback from the market was that this wasn't really necessary and the cartridge response has since been tamed [see Lab Report].

Like Rega's top moving-magnet, the Exact, the Apheta features the well-proven Vital stylus. It looks rather exposed with that long projecting cantilever, but gets some protection from the little V-shaped

**ABOVE:** Built into a strong aluminium frame, the cartridge provides for a third mounting bolt, when used with a Rega tonearm

metal loop above. A plastic stylus guard can be fitted when not in use.

As well as the usual two threaded mounting holes at half-inch centres, the machined aluminium body has a third hole that allows a three-point fixing in a Rega arm. A label gives the unit's serial number plus the recommended tracking force – determined for each cartridge individually during production.

## NEW INSIGHTS

Listening to the Apheta, it immediately seems to meet the great criteria for hi-fi success, by making you lend a fresh ear to recordings you thought you knew well. With Eric Clapton's *Slowhand* [RSO 2479 201], the atmosphere of what usually seems to be a muddy production could now better be described as 'foggy', all founded on the cushion of a strong but never-dragging bass. And it was as if the Apheta could pick out the instruments quite sharply, like car headlights looming suddenly out of a pea-souper. In 'Cocaine',

## HANDBUILT IN ESSEX

Only after long experience with moving-magnet cartridges did Rega produce its Apheta moving-coil. Building an MC pick-up involves winding the coils by hand under a microscope, from wire that is almost too fine to see with the naked eye. It has two coils for each channel, each of 40 turns, and the varnish-insulated wire is just 0.018mm in diameter – far thinner than a human hair. The coils have to be wound with precise tensioning, but it would be impossible to use a mechanical device for this. So the correct tension is maintained by finger touch on a pad just behind the nozzle that feeds the wire. If it breaks, the operator has to start all over again. The cantilever with coils mounted then has to be assembled into its position relative to the magnet yoke. At this stage, it is possible to adjust the output and channel balance by minute movements of the magnet assembly.



## REGA APHETA

First released in 2006, Rega's Apheta MC has inevitably evolved, albeit subtly, in execution if not design. The user-adjustable notch (maximum -6dB cut at 8.5kHz) provided on the partnering los phono stage [HFN Aug '08] may now be viewed (or heard) as largely redundant but a glance at the Apheta's frequency response clearly illustrates why Rega's engineers thought it necessary. In practice, the Apheta still has a +4.5dB peak at 9kHz (measured -8dB re. 1kHz/5cm/sec) but while this is at the right frequency to emphasise vinyl surface noise and provide a real 'zing' to treble detail, the symmetry of this peak between left/right channels and with lateral/vertical cuts is very impressive indeed [see Graph 1, below]. So while the Apheta will probably sound rather 'hot', at least the balance between central performers and peripheral backing instruments will be perfectly maintained.

The 1.75g downforce is low by MC standards but the Apheta still tracks like trooper, right through the 80µm groove test and offering just 1.2% distortion at +18dB/300Hz. This 'MM-like' behaviour is at least partially explained by its high 30-35cu dynamic compliance, far higher than that of the average 0.4mV output MC and suggests the Apheta, despite its low 5.9g bodyweight, might actually be better suited to lower effective mass arms than Rega's own. Distortion is low too – just 4-5% through the presence/treble (-8dB re. 5cm/sec) – and also very well matched between lateral and vertical cuts. Readers may view a comprehensive QC Suite test report for the Rega Apheta MC pick-up by navigating to [www.hifinews.co.uk](http://www.hifinews.co.uk) and clicking on the red 'Download' button. PM

for example, it was great to hear the two entwined lead guitars vividly presented with real purpose.

Perhaps I should credit the RP8 turntable used [HFN May '14] rather than the cartridge for the tremendous, hypnotic beat the combination generated on 'Lay Down Sally', but at the same time, the Apheta cartridge did seem to get to the heart of Clapton's vocals, revealing the real person behind the deliberately veiled production sound.

### WON'T SUIT ALL MATERIAL

On other recordings too, the Apheta could sometimes project the sound of instruments in a new and interesting way. If, like me, you have sometimes wondered how any band, even the Grateful Dead, could possibly need two drummers, you would be impressed by the way that the Apheta, with a bottom end that was clean and explicit, could make such good rhythmic sense of the thundering toms of Bill Kreutzman and Mickey Hart on *Dead Set* [Arista DARTY 11].

At the other end of the spectrum, the Apheta emphasised the zing of their cymbals, and it gave Jerry Garcia's guitar a commanding and incisive presence, slicing through the ambience of the packed stadium.

And yet, although the Apheta could be impressive on so many recordings, there were times when it did seem just too bright. One example was Joan Armatrading's *Whatever's For Us* [Cube Records HIFLY 12], where the Apheta's presentation was far too clangorous.

Given an open-sounding recording without too much treble emphasis, the Apheta could excel. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, it did so on Rega's own recording of Christine Collister, *Love* [Rega ENS002], with an ear-catching sharpness and clarity to the strings.



**ABOVE:** Seen through the Apheta's frosted acrylic wrap, the tiny moving-coil assembly with its lead-out wires is (just) visible in front of the magnet

With classical music, again, the Apheta could become overpowering with a bright-sounding recording. Yet it had me absorbed in the Fauré *Requiem* with the choir of King's College, Cambridge and the NPO conducted by David Willcocks [EMI ASD 2358] – a recording old enough to have featured Bob Chilcott as the boy treble.

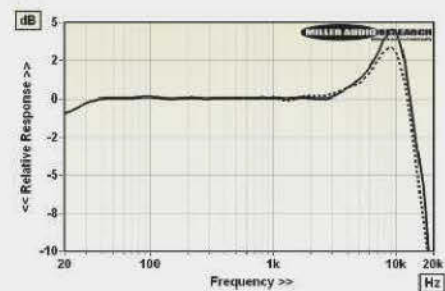
Here there was an almost tremulous lucidity to the voices, a spacious and easy sound to the orchestra, and underneath it all, the organ bass notes breathed out strikingly. For me, this was the Apheta at its best. ☺

*'The Apheta made good sense of the thundering toms on Dead Set'*

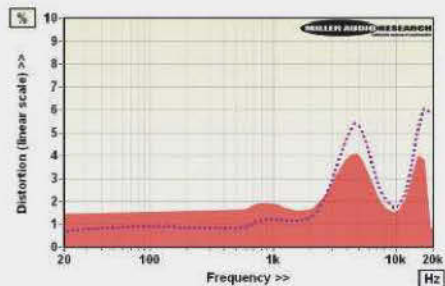
### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Sounding distinctly different from other moving-coils, the Apheta can often give a fresh perspective on music you know well. On some recordings, though, it may sound simply too forward and bright, comparing unfavourably with other designs that give a more consistently listenable balance. Yet with suitable material, it offers a spacious and involving sound, founded on an open and free-sounding bottom end.

Sound Quality: 78%



**ABOVE:** Frequency response curves (-8dB re. 5cm/sec) lateral (L+R, solid) versus vertical (L-R, dashed)



**ABOVE:** Lateral (L+R, solid) and vertical (L-R, dashed) tracing and generator distortion (2nd-4th harmonics) vs. frequency from 20Hz-20kHz (-8dB re. 5cm/sec)

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

|                                   |                                  |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Generator type/weight             | Moving coil / 5.9g               |
| Recommended tracking force        | 1.7-1.8mN (1.75mN)               |
| Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec) | 405µV / 0.56dB                   |
| Compliance (vertical/lateral)     | 35cu / 30cu                      |
| Vertical tracking angle           | 26 degrees                       |
| L/R Tracking ability              | 80µm / 80µm                      |
| L/R Distortion (-8dB, 20Hz-20kHz) | 0.89-6.6% / 1.1-6.0%             |
| L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)  | -11.2 to +4.5dB / -8.2 to +4.6dB |
| Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)  | 25dB / 21dB                      |

# Shure SRH1840

The one-time doyen of pick-up cartridge manufacturers is back in the audiophile mainstream with a range of headphones. Does this new model rekindle past glories?  
 Review & Lab: **Keith Howard**

**A**s more and more headphones are released which have non-neutral tonal balances, so it follows that encountering a headphone that's meticulous in its neutrality becomes rarer and rarer. Which is why, having measured and briefly listened to the £467 Shure SRH1840 for a group test in *HFN's* sister publication *Hi-Fi Choice*, I nominated it for appearance here ASAP.

In recent months there have been two separate 'assaults' on headphone tonal neutrality, although in deploying that pejorative description it's only right that I acknowledge that others view them more positively. The first is the increasing application of bass lift that varies from the obvious but bearable to the manifestly ludicrous: egged on to some degree by research conducted at Harman International in Los Angeles and the National Research Council in Canada which has concluded that – contrary to what I perceive – a degree of bass lift actually sounds more natural to most listeners.

## RENAISSANCE MAN

The second development has been the renaissance of the isodynamic *aka* planar magnetic headphone drive unit. Headphones thus equipped don't, so far in my experience, mimic the elevated bass of the former group but they do evince a suppressed treble output that endows them with a warm-toned, smooth sound that some listeners clearly relish but which I find lacking in natural detail and sparkle.

In what I take to be a rejection of both these camps, Shure's top-of-the-range, moving-coil, open-back SRH1840 embraces instead the 'old' ideal – old in years but not beyond its sell-by date – of a flat diffuse-field corrected frequency response. (Look at the DF-corrected response in the accompanying Lab Report and compare it with those of headphones I've reviewed in recent months to see what I mean.)

Alternatively, don the SRH1840 and listen to some music and it soon becomes apparent that fat bass and/or a reticent presence band are not part of its offer.

This is a product that Shure describes as 'a professional open-back headphone ... ideally suited to professional recording, mastering and audiophile listening', and in this instance the reference to professional usage – and its implication of strict tonal neutrality – isn't so much hot air.

One of the first things you notice when taking the SRH1840 from its hard-shell zip-up case is that it is light at a little over 300g including cable with ¼in jack plug adapter fitted, but gives the impression of being sturdy in an understated sort of way. Partly as a result of its modest weight, but also because of its low head clamping force, large and soft velour earpads (spare pair supplied) and padded headband, it is also comfortable to wear.

Although the removal of the sleeve adapter allows the SRH1840 to be

**RIGHT: The SRH1840 is light in weight but claimed to be rugged enough for professional use. Stainless steel and aircraft-grade aluminium feature in the materials manifest**



'There's quite enough clean, deep bass to keep me happy'

connected to a mini-jack output, little suggests that Shure considers this headphone appropriate for use on the hoof. The capsules don't rotate flat or fold up into the headband, and you'd need the voluminous pockets of a poacher's coat to accommodate that large carrying case. The unspoken injunction is: 'use indoors'.

Principal design features, as listed by Shure, are: 40mm diameter drive units with a neodymium magnet, steel frame and vented pole piece; a fine stainless steel mesh immediately behind each driver (visible through the black-painted capsule grilles) which presumably provides acoustic resistance; 'aircraft-grade' aluminium capsule yokes; OFC cable with a Kevlar-reinforced sleeve for durability; and high density, slow recovery earpad foam to enhance comfort.

A spare lead is included along with the spare earpads (the cables connect via colour-coded gold-plated plugs to sockets in the bottom of each capsule), providing reassurance that the SRH1840 is indeed intended to deliver long service. Resisting the temptation to wax lyrical about sound quality, all that Shure claims is that its top model delivers 'smooth, extended highs and accurate bass' – preferable, if you ask me, to gushing descriptions of supposed sonic nirvana.

## A CLEAN DEEP BASS

If the first impression of the SRH1840 is its comfort, the second, when playing music over it, is that it is not as sensitive as you might expect. In part that's due to its nominal 65ohm impedance, which is somewhat higher than that of many competitors, but even so, Shure's flagship falls towards the lower end of the sensitivity spectrum for modern high-quality headphones. Having said that, any headphone amplifier worthy of being partnered with it should be capable of driving it to very high peak SPLs with ease, and (as noted in the Lab





**LEFT:** Comfort levels are high not just due to the low mass but with important contributions from low head clamping force and generously proportioned, soft earpads

delivers it very nicely, in contrast to the hiked-bass brigade which inevitably invoke varying degrees of blanketing stodge.

No question, the result was toe-tapping as it should be but the Shure didn't quite serve up the crispness and treble sparkle that I was hoping for. In fact cymbals sounded suppressed – not the result you'd expect given the measured performance but something in the SRH1840's makeup removed a little pizzazz, a little *joie de vivre* from this quintessentially, breathlessly fun piece of music.

#### A MILD CLOUDING

The next track I chose was Gretchen Peters' 'Hello Cruel World' [Proper Records PRPCD094], where she bemoans being damaged goods but gives the clear impression of being steely enough, beneath that harsh self-assessment, to do damage herself. This is nothing like as good a recording as the *Stockfisch*, becoming rather congested in the choruses, but that only made more apparent the overlaying sense of mild clouding which the SRH1840 'phones imposed.

Again the cymbals could have been crisper, and Peters' sibilants were dialled back a little. As before there was no sense of manifest departures from a pretty even tonal balance, but neither was there the crystalline transparency that ought by rights to accompany it.

If anything, this impression of compromised resolution was even greater when I turned to classical programme and one of my favourite old recordings: Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, narrated by Sir Ralph Richardson and conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent (ripped from Decca 458 595-2). This is a recording of ↻

Report) it is highly resistant to significant changes in frequency response incurred by headphone sources that have a high output impedance.

Additionally, when you first listen to the SRH1840, as I suggested at the outset of this review, there's an absence of tonal hocus-pocus. There's no boom and tizz (no boom *sans* tizz, come to that) and no undernourished presence band either. Instead the tonal balance is uncontrived, convincing, natural.

This characteristic alone separates Shure's finest from the herd, and a very welcome separation I find it. Bass freaks may claim that the SRH1840 has premature LF roll-off but, as someone who always prefers a slightly leaner, faster bass delivery to fatter, slower one, I don't agree. This headphone delivers quite enough clean, deep bass to keep me happy.

Those are the upsides. The downside is that the SRH1840, for all its neutrality, can sound a little on the bland side. A track that encapsulated the character of the SRH1840 for me was 'Fender Bender' from the *Stockfisch* CD *Roadhouses &*

*Automobiles* [SFR 357.6027.2] by the late Chris Jones. It's a piece that I imagine CJ and the band played with grins on their faces, perhaps diluted by concentration, because it's a romp, mostly comprising relentless runs on Jones' acoustic guitar matched by Grischka Zepf's 'anything you can do' electric bass.

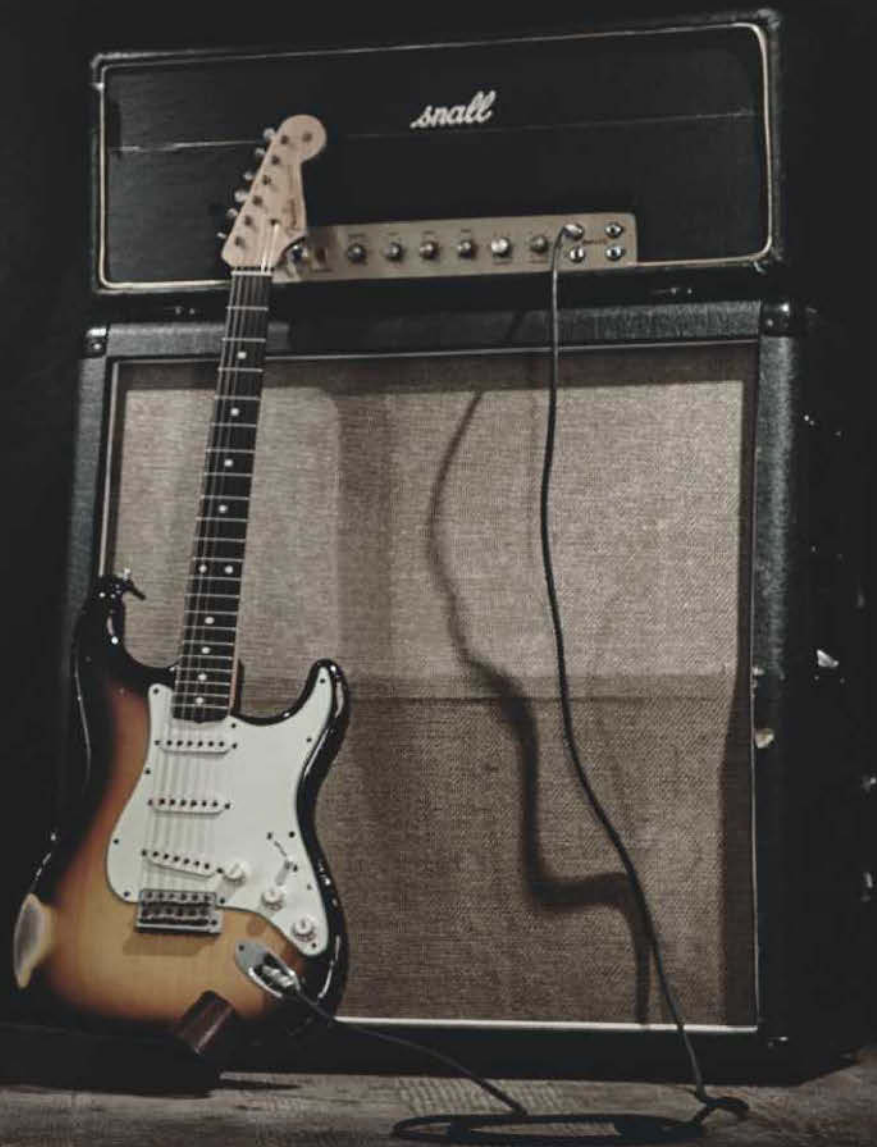
A well balanced, tuneful, articulate bass register is essential for the latter – and thereby the entire track – and the SRH1840

#### 90 NEXT YEAR...

To audiophiles of a certain age the name Shure will always be associated with pick-up cartridges, particularly its V15 series which through the late '60s-early '70s featured high on many wish lists, often in partnership with the iconic SME 3009 arm. When Shure introduced the original V15 the company was already 39 years old – it began in 1925 selling radio parts, then in 1932 introduced its first microphone. None of this brought Shure to the attention of audiophiles, but the company's move into manufacturing pick-up cartridges in 1958 and its championing of what it called 'trackability' made it probably the best known of all high quality cartridge makers until the hi-fi world turned upside down in the latter-1970s and high-compliance fixed coil cartridges, like the V15, were ousted in many audiophiles' affections by low-compliance MC alternatives. Shure began making earphones and then headphones just a decade ago.

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## SHURE SRH1840

Shure claims a sensitivity of 96dB SPL for 1mW input, which into the SRH1840's nominal impedance of 65ohm is equivalent to 107.9dB SPL for 1V. This is very close to the voltage sensitivity we obtained on the artificial head, the capsule average being 108.6dB at 1kHz. Given that the SRH1840 has a higher impedance than many competitors whose nominal value is around 40ohm, lower sensitivity is to be expected – but even taking that into account Shure's top-of-the-range model clearly doesn't place an emphasis on achieving high sound levels for minimal input.

In other respects the SRH1840 mostly measures very well. We recorded an impedance range of 62.0-73.2ohm (20Hz-20kHz), a small enough variation to make it unlikely that the source impedance of any headphone amplifier will have a significant effect on frequency response. In fact it would take a source resistance as high as 152.4ohm to result in a frequency response alteration of just 1dB. As the uncorrected frequency responses show [see Graph 1, below], the SRH1840 has not joined the burgeoning ranks of headphones with a shelved-up bass response, nor does it shy away from having a fully developed peak in output at around 3kHz.

As a result the diffuse-field-corrected response [green trace, Graph 2] is the flattest we've recorded in quite a while, indicating that the SRH1840 should deliver a pretty neutral tonal balance, without bass excess. In fact its output declines at low frequencies to 32Hz (uncorrected, -6dB re. 200Hz) while avoiding the presence band reticence that's endemic to planar magnetic designs. Capsule matching was also unusually good at ±4.2dB (40Hz-10kHz), indicating that the SRH1840 is relatively insensitive to the natural variability in ear shape. Also, no headband resonances were evident when performing the impedance test [see Investigation, *HFN* Jun '14]. KH



**ABOVE:** Y-cable plugs separately into each capsule. A spare is provided, together with replacement earpads

contrasts in which the odd-sounding narration, very clearly made in a much smaller space, jars with the wonderfully wide and deep image of the orchestra, and where cross-fades from one to the other are only made more obvious by low frequency background noise in Kingsway Hall which ebbs and flows with adjustment of the sliders.

In the good bits – the orchestral passages – the recording is one to make the uninitiated wonder at the sound quality that could be achieved all those decades ago but the SRH1840 didn't provide the best advertisement for this, again due to its sense of veiling. This was nowhere more evident than on Peter's familiar theme in the strings, which didn't evince the lushly vibrant sound that I know Decca captured.

### MISSING MAGIC DUST

The same effect was also heard, albeit less obviously, in the opening bars of Vaughan Williams' Oboe Concerto played by the RLPO under Vernon Handley, with Jonathan Small as soloist [EMI Eminence 5753112].

I'd heard an excellent performance of this piece in our local church by Michal Rogalski and Red Note Ensemble a fortnight before and still had the trademark VW string harmonies and hauntingly beautiful solo part fresh in my mind. No mere recording could be expected to compete with that, of

course, but it was again notable that while the SRH1840 sounded smooth, clean and unexaggerated it couldn't quite convey the luminous string sound and clarity in the upper register of the oboe of which I know this recording to be capable.

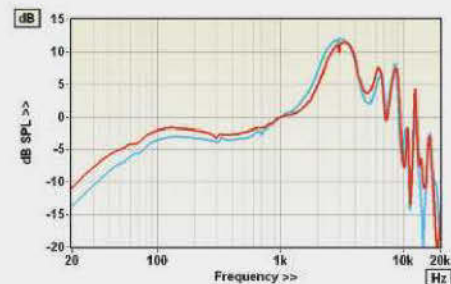
So while the result was unquestionably listenable and enjoyable, it lacked that final sprinkling of magic.

By the time I called up the Oscar Peterson Trio's 'You Look Good to Me' (24/88.2 conversion from a rip of the Verve SACD) I pretty well knew what to expect. Ray Brown's bowed and plucked double-bass was kept strictly in proportion and never allowed to overwhelm proceedings, but overtones were suppressed in the bowed string sound and Ed Thigpen's bells and cymbals didn't ring out with full-bandwidth authority. ☹

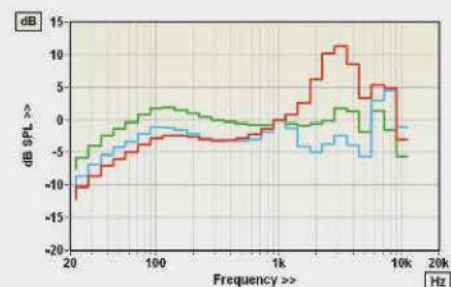
### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

There's a lot to like about Shure's top-of-the-range headphone. The 1840 is light, comfortable, promises years of reliable service and comes as welcome relief from a recent review diet of bloated bass and/or denuded presence band. Shure's determination to shun fashion and deliver a neutral tonal balance is admirable. In fact it would be an unblemished success story, but for the shortfall in transparency.

Sound Quality: 80%



**ABOVE:** Gently rolled-off bass and well developed presence/treble peak yields an impressively flat DF-corrected response (see green trace, below)



**ABOVE:** Third-octave freq. resp. (red = uncorrected; cyan = FF corrected; green = DF corrected)

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

|  |                                   |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Sensitivity</b> (SPL at 1kHz for 1Vrms input) | 108.6dB                           |
| <b>Impedance modulus min/max</b> (20Hz-20kHz)    | 62.0ohm @ 20Hz<br>73.2ohm @ 20kHz |
| <b>Capsule matching</b> (40Hz-10kHz)             | ±4.2dB                            |
| <b>LF extension</b> (-6dB ref. 200Hz)            | 32Hz                              |
| <b>Distortion 100Hz/1kHz</b> (for 90dB SPL)      | 4.0% / <0.1%                      |
| <b>Weight</b> (inc cable and 0.25in connector)   | 318g                              |

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# Townshend F1 Fractal-Wire

From a pioneer of cryogenically-treated audio cable comes this next-generation interconnect, dubbed Fractal-Wire. Review: **Paul Miller**



**C**ryogenic-cooling is not an unfamiliar concept to the audiophile world but Townshend Audio was certainly in its vanguard when it applied the technique to its Isolda-branded interconnects back in 2000. These flat-conductor cables have formed an integral part of my audio system ever since, so I was intrigued by the company's launch of a 'next-gen' EDCT (Enhanced Deep Cryogenic Treatment) interconnect, dubbed 'F1 Fractal-Wire', that employs an alternative geometry.

Like its DCT interconnects there's plenty of air – the ideal dielectric – surrounding the copper conductors inside their loose-fitting PTFE sheaths and outer, clear PVC jacket [see illustration, below]. But instead of two thin copper strips, the Fractal interconnect has a fine enamel-coated signal strand loosely hand-wound around a thicker, central return conductor. Both benefit from EDCT and Townshend's proprietary and undisclosed 'Fractal-Wire treatment'.

## SAFETY IN NUMBERS

To permit independent verification, Townshend Audio supplied me with two 18m lengths of 0.16mm enamel-coated wire. The untreated batch offered a 15.47ohm impedance at 1kHz while the 'Fractal' version offered 13.75ohm, a reduction of about 10%!

**My other measurements suggest that its F1 Fractal interconnect has a lower**



**ABOVE:** Simplicity itself – a fine, enamel-coated signal strand coiled around a thicker return/ground copper core



**ABOVE:** The F1 Fractal interconnect is terminated with Neutrik Profi phono plugs with retractable ground collars

capacitance (37pF/m) but slightly higher series inductance (0.68µH/m) than suggested, although the 0.94ohm/m loop resistance is much lower than the rated 2.2ohm. Our figure makes more sense bearing in mind the 13.8ohm/18m resistance of the 0.16mm signal conductor equates to 0.76ohm for a 1m interconnect (with 175mohm for the thicker return core). This is still higher than average though, so I wouldn't be tempted to use it in very long runs. Price is £699/RCA-terminated 1m, £899/2m, £1199/3m, etc.

## FUN WITH FRACTALS

Laced between my Oppo BDP-105D player/DAC and Krell S-1500 amp, these new Fractal interconnects encouraged a genuinely smooth, detailed and liquid-sounding performance. The synthesiser and guitar from Pink Floyd's 'Marooned' [*The Division Bell*; 96kHz/24-bit FLAC, Warner Music Group 29326 – see p108] soared into the room, the percussion illuminating a vivid musical picture, free of grit or grain. Like the older DCT-300 interconnects, the F1 Fractal has a 'dark' quality that lets you hear into the soundstage, walk around the

musicians and oh-so-easily tease apart the threads of their mix. Bass sounds robust and extended, treble pin-sharp and sparkling but never too hot or fierce. And, yes, the balanced, XLR-equipped F1 Fractal (with two fine signal cores and a £50 premium) sounds even more transparent and finely-etched. ☺

## HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

This is a cracking set of cables – Townshend may be rather coy about the Fractal process itself but the benefits of cryogenic cooling are already well established just as the elegant solid-core conductor and air/PTFE methodology ticks all the right boxes. The cable sounds deliciously smooth and detailed, promoting the kind of easy-listening, inky-black backgrounds typically associated with the best audio systems. Go on, treat yourself!

Sound Quality: 85%



# Denon DA-300USB

The market for stunning, affordable DACs heats up further with an offering from Denon, one of digital audio's true pioneers: the DA-300USB DAC/headphone amp  
Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Shoot-outs mean one victor and a bunch of losers. I never liked 'em, any more than I would want to pick one wine from my cellar and ditch the rest. Life is not that simple. But consumers always demand a last-man-standing approach to hi-fi. And it would appear that Denon's rather tasty DA-300USB DAC/headphone amp has an obvious and inescapable rival in the NAD D 1050 we've reviewed [*HFN* Jan '14].

There is no way to avoid this confrontation. Side-by-side, they even seem to fill identical volumes, whether used vertically or horizontally, and is a much welcomed development. The Denon is slightly smaller, but there's not a lot in it.

## SO WHICH TO CHOOSE?

Layouts are similar, too, with each having front panel headphone sockets and volume controls. Both have 'back-lit' indicators instead of screens *per se*, with soft-touch source selectors. My only gripe with the NAD is its soft-touch on/off, which is temperamental; the Denon uses a proper button. Oddly, neither of them has a front-panel USB input for easy, occasional access.

As for headphone usage, read into this what you will if you're a headphone junkie: Denon places a 1/4in (6.35mm) socket at what could be either the top or bottom (in vertical mode), while NAD's 3.5mm socket is located at what would be the bottom. So is the Denon more 'audiophile' by opting for the 'real man's' type of plug? Not sure: the NAD has a better-sounding, more powerful headphone amplifier section.

To create further imbalance, with the Denon retailing for £329 and the NAD selling for £399, the pricing alone might seem to be the game-changer. This is an essential part of our 'Budget Esoterica' ethos: every pound counts in these reviews. It's all about context, and £70 is massive at this level, whereas it wouldn't even

pay for the shipping of, say, a D'Agostino Momentum amp.

In this equation, value-for-money isn't merely paramount: it's absolutely critical. Your extra money for the NAD D 1050 buys XLR-type balanced outputs and one more coaxial digital input, so only you can decide if, sound aside, that's worth the additional £70. Same goes for the better headphone amp, if headphones are an essential part of your system criteria.

But to turn this into a Denon/NAD two-hander is to ignore an arena full of combatants: DacMagic models from Cambridge, a plethora of USB DACs designed for road warriors (eg, the Geek Out, Audioquest's DragonFly) but which also work in the home, the V90 from

Musical Fidelity, *ad infinitum*. And that's not to forget TEAC, which also has a £399 DAC/preamp which – like the Denon – can handle DSD5.6.

There are now so many DACs, headphone amps and combination

units on the market that I'm surprised an enterprising publisher hasn't produced *What Headphone Amp and DAC?*. These are, after all, 'the future of audio'.

What you must also consider, though, if

you're in the market for a USB DAC, is what you need for facilities: stripped-down, single input-only models start at a mere £99. Of course, designs like the Denon and the NAD are actually multi-source preamplifiers lacking only a volume control for the main output – though it wouldn't

'Those old C&W recordings were reproduced with snap and verve'



**RIGHT:** Denon's proprietary 'Advanced AL32 processing' upsamples all inputs to 192kHz/32-bit before addressing a PCM1795 DAC and separate line out and headphone amplifiers



**RIGHT:** Like an external hard-drive, the Denon comes with feet and a stand, so you can use it flat, or vertically. Source select is soft-touch; standby uses a button, while volume is via a rotary control

have killed them to find a way to make the headphone volume rotary serve the main output. You can still use the Denon as a preamp even if your source, *ie*, your computer, allows you to control output level – as do iTunes, Fidelia and the like.

### PALATABLE DIGITAL

In keeping with the framework of 'Budget Esoterica', I went nowhere near my high-end reference system when playing with the Denon. This is not about using £300 DACs with £10,000 preamps, and I am a slave to context; it's about a balanced distribution of funds – the only way to put together a budget system.

My only 'cheat' as regards price was using the Astell & Kern AK120 digital player, which hardly qualifies as a budget esoterica candidate at £700 or so. But the iPod is a sonic nightmare, and I hadn't the heart to hamstring the Denon with a naff source, so all listening was undertaken with the A&K, a MacBook Air and an iMac, using Fidelia as well as iTunes.

All the components in my desktop system are obsolete: in addition to a NAD 315BEE integrated amp feeding Spendor LS3/5As (early 11ohm version), I also used a Quad 99 preamp and Quad 909 power amp. While these are not budget esoterica either, a canny shopper might find them at a price which wouldn't court bankruptcy

### D+M GROUP

Japanese-owned D&M Holdings – now re-branded as the D+M Group – is one of the few companies in hi-fi, post-Harman International, that understands 'strength in numbers'. Just as the automotive world has corporations with multiple brands and the bulk of the watch kingdom has been divided among four pan-global conglomerates, it has been a long time coming for this industry. Harman set the pace years ago with JBL, Harman Kardon, Mark Levinson and others, while Asian holdings such as IAG have acquired many British brands that might otherwise not have survived. Created in 2002 from the merger of Denon and Marantz, D+M also owns Boston Acoustics, a pro division, and it also purchased McIntosh in 2003, which it sold to Fine Sounds in 2012; Fine Sounds appears to be following the model created by D+M. At the time of writing, D+M is undergoing changes to ensure its role in the forthcoming era of streaming and downloading – hence the cyberspace-friendly DA-300USB.



– second-hand is certainly a part of the budget esoterica mind-set!

Headphones included Sennheiser HD414s, Focal Classics and B&W P5s, but I didn't spend a lot of time with the cans: the headphone amp is, as I've suggested, not the Denon's strong suit. It's short on power, and the bass was soft. Detail was excellent, the treble sweet, but it's not the reason I would buy the Denon: its greatest

virtue is making digital signals palatable.

One tense moment occurred when I couldn't get a peep out of the Denon. The two frightening notices (this DAC's equivalent of a Microsoft Windows 'blue screen') are 'Unlock' and 'Unsupported'. Simply put, this unit, which upsamples to 192kHz, resolutely ignores anything above that.

I couldn't figure out why it was recognising the Astell & Kern's optical digital output but neither of the Macs: I had inadvertently set Fidelia on both my computers to a 384kHz ceiling. The audio gods smiled, and something told me to go into Fidelia's settings to reduce it to 192kHz. Presto!


### IRRESISTIBLE THOMPSON

One other thing: please forgive the absence of catalogue numbers after the songs. Nearly all my material used during the listening sessions came via hard-drive, and neither Fidelia nor iTunes shows these numbers. Suffice it to say, they're all recordings you can easily find on [amazon.co.uk](http://amazon.co.uk).

Sue Thompson's nauseatingly infectious 'Norman' from 1961 is the kind of teeth-jarringly cute song that either has you in poptastic rapture or drives you from the room. It sounds like it was arranged by a guy who conducted circus bands back in the days when the act of antagonising elephants and tigers was an acceptable form of family entertainment.

You get jangly guitar stage-right and fart-y trombone stage left, underscored by the most monotonous drumming ever laid down on tape. And Thompson's voice? Country warbler, tweaked by helium. I love it, in the way I can't resist cherry cola, caramel corn and the entire ABBA canon.

Denon treated it like a parent dealing with a wilful child: the sugar content remained, but a layer of rather 'un-digital' silkiness somehow rendered it more palatable ... or perhaps 'less unpalatable.' Quite a trick, but I wouldn't play this song for the sort of people who still pierce effigies of Joe Dolce.

Denon's magic – love the song or hate it – is in rendering the instruments as real-sounding. OK, so the original is pure 



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## DENON DA-300USB



**ABOVE:** Self-evident sockets, so no need for the owner's manual: RCA phono line-out, one coax, one USB and two optical digital inputs, with DC power via a wall-wart

analogue, recorded for the Nashville-based Hickory Records back in the days when stereo was wide, Country & Western was undiluted redneck fodder, and digits was another word for 'fingers'. Those old C&W recordings are fabulous. For a 52-year-old recording, the sound is vivid, and the DA-300USB reproduced it with snap and verve.

Same with The Sensations' 'Let Me In', a mono extravaganza from '62, with similarly repetitious, all-snare drumming, but with doo-wop backing vocals adding sublime depth. Again, a song as irresistible as a Mexican Wave in a stadium, with a sax break in the middle that leaps from one's speakers.

### ALL HELD TOGETHER

It was uncanny playing this through headphones: while the Denon's headphone amp isn't the most powerful I've heard – it got nothing from Sennheiser HD414s but worked reasonably well with Focal's Classic and B&W's P5 – the bulk of the music occupied a single point, with an impression of the sax somehow being in front. Frontal lobe, perhaps. Consistency? Perfect, no elements overpowering any others.

For detail, from the same era, I used 'Palisades Park', replete with calliope-like keyboards and the sound of a rollercoaster. Freddy Cannon didn't so much sing this as snarl it, but it is impossible not to move along with it. Also mono, it's a smorgasbord of little effects, which makes one beg for a stereo version if detail retrieval is a priority. But I heard myriad little touches amidst the raucous mayhem, including subtle traces of echo, screaming revellers and other contributors to a fairground atmosphere.

Because the recording is state-of-the-art, I used Tom Jones' 'Delilah' [*The Golden Hits* 1969 compendium – Deram] repeatedly to assess both the differing inputs and varying sampling rates at source. Let's cut to

the chase: there's nothing in it. You can connect this with aplomb to any of the inputs, perhaps determining the choice not by the Denon, but by the quality of the source. Using identical material, from a MacBook Air and an iMac, the former sounded better than the latter, more convincing and marginally richer.

That was not the Denon's doing, but the computers' behaviour. PM's Lab Report points out that the Denon's responses are content-sensitive, but we can do nothing about that, because the recording is the recording, period.

With 'Delilah', there's a massive orchestra behind an equally massive voice, sweeping background vocals and sufficient strings to excite upper frequency irritation – to call it 'overwhelming' is understatement. But the Denon held it all together, and the sound earns my favourite accolade, 'impressive'.

This is a superlative DAC, period. OK, I was underwhelmed by the headphone section, but that is not a terminal issue, just because it may have spurned the HD414s, whereas the B&Ws were a delicious match. Far more importantly, it processed The Beatles' catalogue transferred from the legendary 24-bit 'Apple USB' with utter elegance. ☺

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

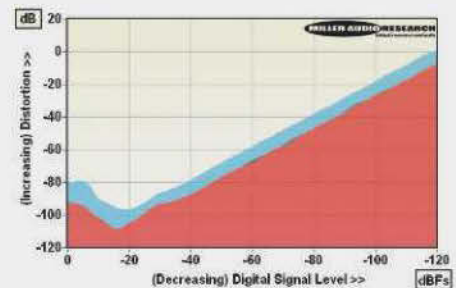
Clear-cut though you'd like this to be, Denon versus NAD is not an issue easy to resolve. The almost identically sized NAD is £70 dearer, but you get balanced outputs and one more input. The Denon is better-looking, nicer to use and just as clever. Am I copping out? Maybe: I have a NAD on my desk, but will sorely miss the Denon. I'm just glad I don't have to choose between 'em. It's as close as Coke and Pepsi.

Sound Quality: 84%

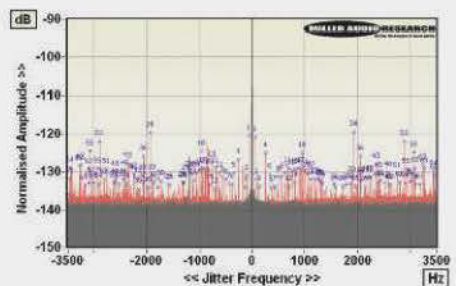


While Denon's DA-300USB shares a similar form-factor to competing USB DACs from NAD and Cambridge Audio [*HFN* Jan '14 and Jun '12], its implementation is distinctive. Output is single-ended only at 2.4V from a moderate 250ohm source impedance while THD increases over the top 15dB of this range from a low minimum of 0.0004% to 0.0025% through the midrange [see Graph 1]. There are few differences in the performance of its USB and S/PDIF inputs – the former with a 1dB advantage in A-wtd S/N ratio (and fractionally better low-level resolution at  $\pm 0.2$ dB over a 100dB range) and a markedly cleaner jitter spectrum where a mere  $\sim 10$ psec compares very favourably with 145-210psec (48-192kHz media) via S/PDIF [see black spectrum, Graph 2]. The wide 126dB channel separation and 0.17dB channel balance are also unaffected by input.

USB and S/PDIF responses are identical but are also content-sensitive. Tested with time-invariant signals (sweep or multitone) they give a flat response with a steep cut-off, amounting to  $-1.5$ dB/20kHz with CD and  $-0.25$ dB/20kHz with 48kHz media (stretching out to  $-2.6$ dB/45kHz with 96kHz files and  $-10.4$ dB/90kHz with 192kHz files). However, its *impulse* response is free of pre/post ringing and yields a magnitude response with a very slow roll-off amounting to  $-0.75$ dB/10kHz and  $-3.1$ dB/20kHz [almost identical to the 'Optimal Transient' filter in Audiolab's M-DAC. See *HFN* Sept '12]. Readers may download full QC Suite test reports for the S/PDIF and USB inputs of Denon's DA-300USB 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 range; 24-bit/48kHz S/PDIF (1kHz, red) versus asynchronous USB (1kHz, black and 20kHz, blue)



**ABOVE:** High resolution jitter plot using 24-bit/48kHz data via S/PDIF (red, 65 patterns marked) versus USB (black, single pattern at  $\pm 2050$ Hz)

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

|                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Maximum output level (Balanced)       | 2.40Vrms at 295ohm                         |
| A-wtd S/N ratio (S/PDIF / USB)        | 109.1dB / 110.2dB                          |
| Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)      | 0.0025% / 0.0015%                          |
| Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)  | 0.0085% / 0.0020%                          |
| Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)  | +0.0dB to $-0.3$ dB/ $-2.6$ dB/ $-10.4$ dB |
| Digital jitter (48kHz/96kHz/USB)      | 145psec / 180psec / 11psec                 |
| Resolution @ $-100$ dB (S/PDIF / USB) | $\pm 0.3$ dB / $\pm 0.2$ dB                |
| Power consumption                     | 8W (1W standby)                            |
| Dimensions (WHD)                      | 170x57x182mm                               |



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The best sound, most advanced technology and desirable features, the ultimate expression of design and, of course, the greatest value for money. Every year the EISA Awards applaud those products that stand above the rest. So read on...

**W**elcome to the EISA Awards for 2014-2015. The European Imaging and Sound Association is the world's largest independent awards panel and one that reflects the collective opinion of the 50 most respected specialist magazines centred on, but not exclusively based within, the European community [see p118].

While disagreements within the Euro Zone continue to dominate headlines in the UK, the collaboration of EISA's member magazines has continued

apace and with renewed purpose as the aspirations of our fellow hi-fi and music enthusiasts rise above the political turmoil of the day. From the EISA Convention held in May to the final General Meeting in June [see pictures, below], member magazines pool their combined experience to arrive at a consensus of the very best in sound and vision products available across the wider European continent.

With every magazine having reviewed a broad swathe of specialist products, these Awards are typically agreed upon

with amicable efficiency. The process is undoubtedly assisted by the increasingly fluid movement of equipment across the continent, blurring national stereotypes. Enthusiasts, it seems, are only interested in achieving the very best sound quality, regardless of nationality.

Every issue of *Hi-Fi News* reflects the 'borderless' reality of our hobby with truly state-of-the-art products now available in the UK from both established and new specialists across Europe. This year, EISA Award-winning products including those from KEF, Pro-Ject, Marantz, Sony and Oppo, have all been premiered within the pages of *Hi-Fi News*.

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** The EISA Awards ceremony is held in Berlin, coinciding with IFA; from the Convention, Kim Kristiansen (Director of Innovation) introduces a new Dali loudspeaker; Heinz Lichtenegger (Pro-Ject's founder) talks up the vinyl revival; the Harman team wield a hefty JBL L16 compact system; Holger Fromme (CEO) and Armin Krauss from Avantgarde



THE EISA AWARDS 2014-2015

## European High-End Audio 2014-2015 KEF Reference 5

For over 40 years KEF's flagship range has been distinguished by the name 'Reference' – an exercise in high quality engineering brought bang up-to-date for 2014 with the launch of five new Reference class loudspeakers. Available in Piano Black, Satin American Walnut and Luxury Gloss Rosewood finishes, the 1.35m tall Reference 5 stands proud as the flagship of the range. The combination of four newly-designed 6.5-inch bass drivers, with gently contoured aluminium cones designed to complement the Uni-Q point source array, delivers a deeply impressive and realistic sound. This, plus its above-average sensitivity, excellent bass extension and handsome appearance earns the Reference 5 EISA's High-End Audio accolade.





**European Stereo System 2014-2015**  
**Marantz SA8005/PM8005**

Proving that stereo separates can still pack a host of functionality into a single chassis, Marantz's SA8005 SACD player is so much more than a simple 'disc spinner'. Not only does it breathe new life into plain vanilla CD but its full complement of digital inputs, including DSD-compatible USB, ensures the SA8005 can form the hub of a cutting-edge computer-based music system. This player/DAC is ideally partnered by the PM8005 integrated amplifier, rated at 70W/8ohm and fitted with a MM phono input to further increase the versatility of the system as a whole. The slick and richly-detailed sound of this combination is more than reminiscent of Marantz's costlier Premium series – it's an impressive blend of performance and value.



## European Analogue Source 2014-2015 Pro-Ject Xtension 9 Evolution Superpack

Pro-ject kicked off its Xtension line-up back in 2009 with the Xtension 12, a relatively large deck designed to take 12in tonearms. This Superpack sees the company's more rack-friendly Xtension 9 Evolution turntable pre-fitted with the latest version of its one-piece carbon fibre 9CC Evolution tonearm plus the range-topping Black moving-coil cartridge from Ortofon's Quintet series. The result is a turntable that sounds smooth and assured, yet is certainly no slouch when it comes to digging deep into the grooves in search of detail. Add clarity, crispness and a presentation that manages to sound solid yet punchy when the occasion demands, and you have a turntable package that is nothing if not value for money.





**European Digital Source 2014-2015**  
**Sony HAP-Z1ES**

The multinational corporation responsible for audio milestones such as the revolutionary Walkman, the digital compact disc and SACD is embarking on another initiative to bring hi-fi replay back to the top of consumers' wish lists. Its new 'hi-res audio' separates are fronted by the HAP-Z1ES digital music file player featuring a built-in 1TB hard drive and USB expansion port. The HAP-Z1ES connects to a home network via wired Ethernet or Wi-Fi, and it provides internet radio using the vTuner platform but it replays music files directly from its internal drive for a truly consistent and self-contained performance. Dynamic and spacious, the HAP-Z1ES has the capacity to sound all the sweeter with its user-selectable DSD-upsampling mode. It's the perfect digital source for all your hi-res downloads.



**European Hi-Fi Headphone 2014-2015**  
**OPPO PM-1**

They may be the first headphones from a company with no history in the market but these open-back, isodynamic designs are a remarkable debut. Painstakingly engineered, each of the PM1's planar magnetic drive units features a seven-layer, yet thin, diaphragm with flat aluminium conductors on both sides. What's more, these conductors follow a spiral pattern in a bid to maximise the spread and evenness of the driving force. It's a design that not only saves weight but one that results in a huge leap in sensitivity compared with rivals. Add hefty yet superbly even bass and a lushness with richly recorded material and the PM-1 can rightly be described as the most exciting new headphones to have been released this year.





**European Loudspeaker System 2014-2015**  
**Bowers & Wilkins 683 S2 Theatre**

Ever since the first 600-series loudspeakers were launched in 1995, B&W's most popular range has continued to be defined by its application of innovative technologies. The new 600 Series is no exception with all its models benefiting from the latest generation of woven Kevlar bass/mid cones that saw their debut some 20 years ago. In the slim 683 S2 floorstanders these Kevlar units are supplemented by a pair of aluminium bass drivers while the entire range of 683 S2, smaller 686 S2 wall-mountable surrounds and impressive HTM61 S2 centre speaker, all feature B&W's latest decoupled double-dome aluminium tweeter. While the 683 S2 floorstanders would grace any high quality stereo set-up, in combination with the 686 S2, HTM61 S2 and ASW610XP subwoofer they make for a glorious multichannel speaker system.



LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEM

|  |  |
|--|--|
|  | <b>Best Product</b><br>2014-2015                             |
|  | <b>LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEM</b><br>Bowers & Wilkins 683 S2 Theatre |

## European Compact Hi-Fi System 2014-2015 **JBL Authentics L16**

With styling that echoes the company's legendary L100 Century bookshelf model from the 1970s, this desktop speaker system sees a single walnut-veneered wooden enclosure housing three drivers per side, each powered by a dedicated 50W amplifier. It also offers wireless playback via AirPlay for Apple products, DLNA for Android users, Bluetooth with NFC, twin USB inputs for charging devices, and an optional Qi charging pad can be connected for those with devices that support it. For turntable lovers, one input can be switched between a line-in, phono MM or MC. Signal processing is at 96kHz/24-bit and includes Harman's Clari-Fi technology, which is designed to improve the sound of compressed music files. A compact classic, this stylish desktop system deserves pride of place in any music-lover's living room.





**European On-Wall Loudspeaker System 2014-2015**  
**DALI RUBICON LCR**

Part of the Danish brand's five-strong RUBICON series, this full-range on-wall speaker features a version of the high frequency module first heard in the company's EPICON line. This sees a 29mm soft dome tweeter allied to a 17x45mm ribbon tweeter, just 1mm thick, this hybrid module being 'rotatable' in a bid to disperse sound around the room if the speaker is placed horizontally, and so avoid the traditional listening sweet-spot. A 16.5cm wood fibre cone takes on bass duties while two hidden bass-reflex ports running up the rear of the cabinet boost lower frequencies. A stylish and flexible speaker (it can also be used on a stand or shelf), the RUBICON LCR is a persuasive one-stop solution for both stereo and multichannel sound.



ON-WALL LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEM



## European High-End Audio Solution 2014-2015 Avantgarde Acoustic ZERO 1

Who says horn-loaded loudspeakers have to be large? This three-way active design stands just 104cm tall with each sleek-looking 32cm-deep moulded enclosure housing modified versions of the company's XA-series high-quality 50W amp – one for each of its two horns – plus a 400W Class D Hypex module driving a ported 30cm woofer. Source signals are fed to just one speaker, which then syncs wirelessly with the other. What's more, the ZERO 1 is a Plug & Play system thanks to on-board 66-bit FPGA digital processing and six built-in 24-bit Burr-Brown DACs, meaning all you have to add is your source. Advanced digital filters allow calibration of the system's output with great accuracy to ensure time, phase and amplitude coherence across the entire audible range. Clean-sounding and airy, the ZERO 1 represents a compelling fusion of futuristic tech in a compact and user-friendly package.





**European Hi-Fi Accessory 2014-2015**  
**iFi nano iDSD**

Beautiful sounds can certainly come from very small packages, as iFi's nano iDSD serves to demonstrate. This USB DAC is powered via an internal Lithium battery that's charged via the connected USB hub on a PC or Mac, offering up to ten hours of playing time with most headphones or via the RCA line outputs. The single USB input confers compatibility with the highest resolution music files including 384kHz/32-bit DXD and quad-speed DSD256 and will even play DSD files directly from a mobile phone (iOS/Android) or iPad using a third-party App. The specification includes precision, temperature-compensated clocks and a bespoke headphone amp rated at 80mW but it's the impressively sweet and insightful sound that is the nano iDSD's most memorable feature. This has to be the hi-fi bargain of the year!



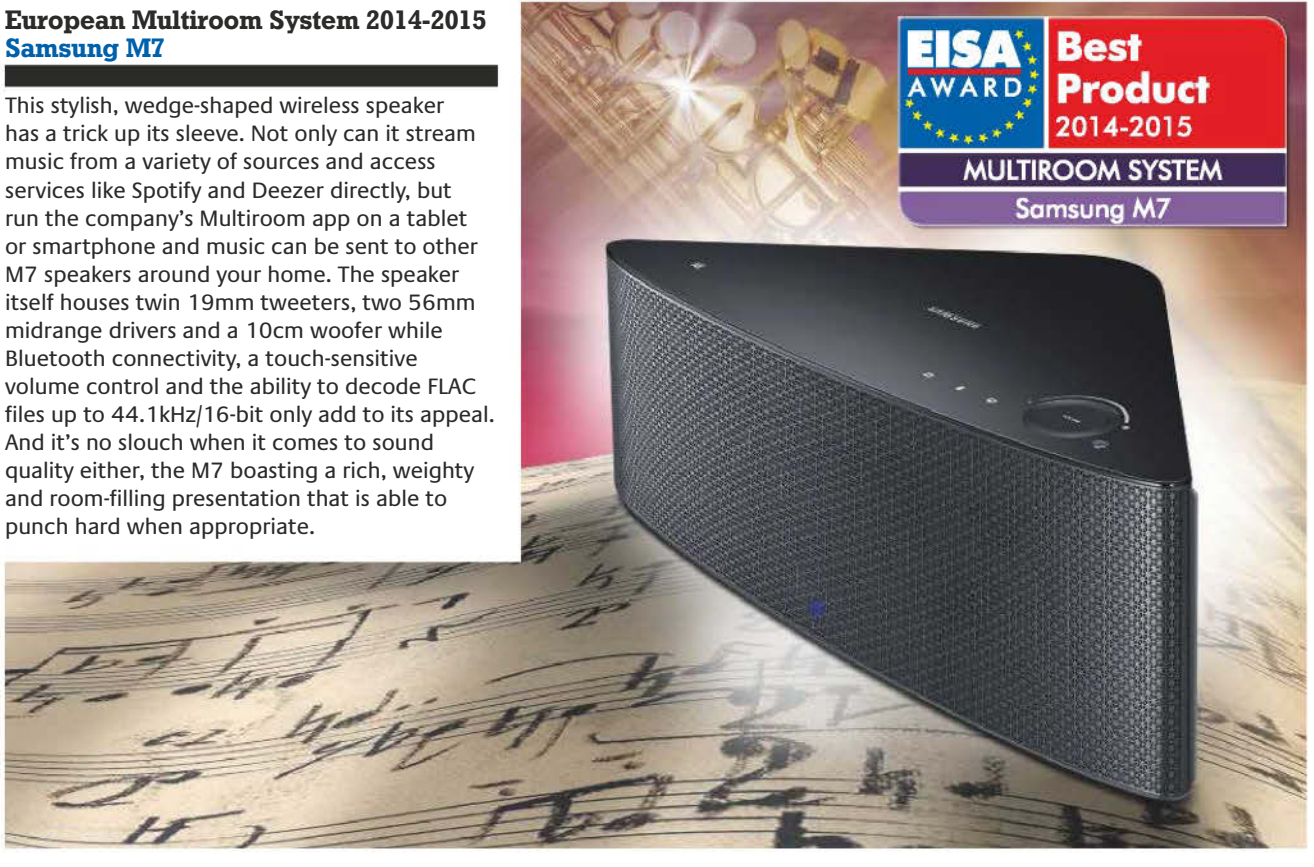
**European USB DAC 2014-2015**  
**ASUS Essence III**

With a reputation for both advanced computer hardware and some of the best performing soundcards on the market, ASUS is ideally placed to develop an external USB DAC with real audiophile pretensions. This is the Essence III, a highly versatile DAC/preamplifier with DSD-compatible USB (DSD64 and 128) plus optical and coaxial S/PDIF and AES/EBU digital inputs. The analogue stages are especially sophisticated, employing a stepped-attenuator volume control and dual-mono DACs to drive balanced line outputs and also a balanced headphone output on mini-XLRs – typically the preserve of very high-end headphone amplifiers. Its performance is as clean and incisive as the engineering, with an honest and compelling sound that puts many traditional hi-fi marques to shame!



**European Multiroom System 2014-2015**  
**Samsung M7**

This stylish, wedge-shaped wireless speaker has a trick up its sleeve. Not only can it stream music from a variety of sources and access services like Spotify and Deezer directly, but run the company's Multiroom app on a tablet or smartphone and music can be sent to other M7 speakers around your home. The speaker itself houses twin 19mm tweeters, two 56mm midrange drivers and a 10cm woofer while Bluetooth connectivity, a touch-sensitive volume control and the ability to decode FLAC files up to 44.1kHz/16-bit only add to its appeal. And it's no slouch when it comes to sound quality either, the M7 boasting a rich, weighty and room-filling presentation that is able to punch hard when appropriate.





## HOME THEATRE AUDIO

|   |                          |
|---|--------------------------|
| EUROPEAN HOME THEATRE RECEIVER 2014-2015  | Pioneer VSX-924          |
| EUROPEAN HOME THEATRE SOUNDBAR 2014-2015  | Focal Dimension          |
| EUROPEAN HOME THEATRE SOUNDBASE 2014-2015 | LG LAB540                |
| EUROPEAN HOME THEATRE SOLUTION 2014-2015  | Philips Fidelio E5       |
| EUROPEAN HOME THEATRE HIGH-END 2014-2015  | Yamaha CX-A5000/MX-A5000 |
| EUROPEAN BLU-RAY PLAYER 2014-2015         | Panasonic DMP-BDT700     |

## HOME THEATRE DISPLAY & VIDEO

|   |                   |
|---|-------------------|
| EUROPEAN FULL HD TV 2014-2015             | Samsung UE55H7000 |
| EUROPEAN HIGH-END TV 2014-2015            | LG 77EC980V       |
| EUROPEAN 4K ULTRA HD TV 2014-2015         | Sony KD-65X9005B  |
| EUROPEAN SMART TV 2014-2015               | LG 55LB870V       |
| EUROPEAN CAMCORDER 2014-2015              | Sony FDR-AX100    |
| EUROPEAN HOME THEATRE PROJECTOR 2014-2015 | Epson EH-TW9200W  |

## PHOTO

|   |   |
|---|---|
| EUROPEAN CONSUMER DSLR CAMERA 2014-2015               | Canon EOS 1200D                         |
| EUROPEAN ADVANCED DSLR CAMERA 2014-2015               | Pentax K-3                              |
| EUROPEAN PROFESSIONAL DSLR CAMERA 2014-2015           | Nikon D4s                               |
| EUROPEAN CONSUMER COMPACT SYSTEM CAMERA 2014-2015     | Olympus OM-D E-M10                      |
| EUROPEAN ADVANCED COMPACT SYSTEM CAMERA 2014-2015     | Fujifilm X-T1                           |
| EUROPEAN PROFESSIONAL COMPACT SYSTEM CAMERA 2014-2015 | Sony Alpha 7R                           |
| EUROPEAN COMPACT CAMERA 2014-2015                     | Sony Cyber-shot RX100 III               |
| EUROPEAN ADVANCED COMPACT CAMERA 2014-2015            | Panasonic LUMIX DMC-FZ1000              |
| EUROPEAN TRAVEL COMPACT CAMERA 2014-2015              | Panasonic LUMIX DMC-TZ60                |
| EUROPEAN CONNECTED CAMERA 2014-2015                   | Samsung NX30                            |
| EUROPEAN DSLR LENS 2014-2015                          | Sigma 50mm F1.4 DG HSM [A]              |
| EUROPEAN DSLR ZOOM LENS 2014-2015                     | Tamron 16-300mm F3.5-6.3 Di II VC PZD   |
| EUROPEAN DSLR TELEPHOTO ZOOM LENS 2014-2015           | Tamron SP 150-600mm F5-6.3 VC USD       |
| EUROPEAN COMPACT SYSTEM LENS 2014-2015                | Fujinon XF56mmF1.2 R                    |
| EUROPEAN COMPACT SYSTEM ZOOM LENS 2014-2015           | Olympus M.ZUIKO DIGITAL ED 12-40mm F2.8 |
| EUROPEAN PHOTO ACCESSORY 2014-2015                    | Manfrotto MT055CXPro4                   |
| EUROPEAN PHOTO & VIDEO CAMERA 2014-2015               | Panasonic LUMIX DMC-GH4                 |
| EUROPEAN LIFESTYLE CAMCORDER 2014-2015                | Canon LEGRIA mini X                     |
| EUROPEAN SMARTPHONE CAMERA 2014-2015                  | Samsung Galaxy K zoom                   |

## MOBILE DEVICES

|  |                            |
|--|----------------------------|
| EUROPEAN ADVANCED SMARTPHONE 2014-2015 | LG G3                      |
| EUROPEAN CONSUMER SMARTPHONE 2014-2015 | Huawei Ascend P7           |
| EUROPEAN HEADPHONE 2014-2015           | AKG K845BT                 |
| EUROPEAN TABLET 2014-2015              | Sony Xperia Z2 Tablet      |
| EUROPEAN MOBILE AUDIO SYSTEM 2014-2015 | Harman Kardon Esquire Mini |

## IN-CAR ELECTRONICS

|  |                             |
|--|-----------------------------|
| EUROPEAN IN-CAR HD MEDIA PLAYER 2014-2015    | Audison bit Play HD         |
| EUROPEAN IN-CAR NAVI-MEDIA SYSTEM 2014-2015  | Pioneer AVIC-F60DAB         |
| EUROPEAN IN-CAR AMPLIFIER 2014-2015          | MOSCONI GLADEN D2 100.4 DSP |
| EUROPEAN IN-CAR SPEAKER SYSTEM 2014-2015     | Rainbow GL-C6.2             |
| EUROPEAN IN-CAR SUBWOOFER 2014-2015          | Morel ULTIMO 10 Titanium    |
| EUROPEAN IN-CAR PREMIUM UPGRADE 2014-2015    | Alpine X800D-ML             |
| EUROPEAN IN-CAR INTEGRATION 2014-2015        | Audison AP8.9 bit           |
| EUROPEAN IN-CAR HIGH-END COMPONENT 2014-2015 | Ground Zero GZPC 163SQ-LTD  |



MASTERED FROM THE ORIGINAL ANALOGUE MASTER TAPES - FEATURING THE ORIGINAL SLEEVE ARTWORK

# HI·Q RECORDS

## The name in audiophile quality LPs

### Catalogue



**HIQLP002**  
Grieg: Music From Peer Gynt  
Royal Philharmonic Orchestra  
Sir Thomas Beecham



**HIQLP003**  
Holst: The Planets  
London Symphony Orchestra  
André Previn



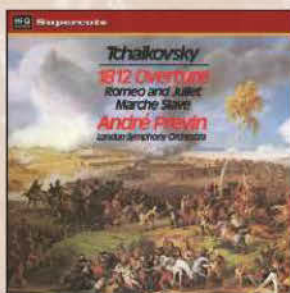
**HIQLP004**  
Mendelssohn/Bruch\*  
Violin Concertos  
Yehudi Menuhin/Philharmonia  
Orchestra/Susskind/Kurtz\*



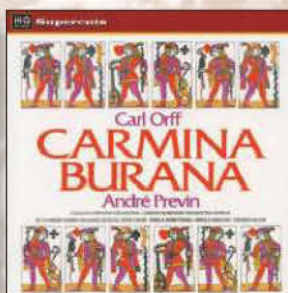
**HIQLP005**  
English String Music:  
Elgar & Vaughan Williams  
Sinfonia of London  
Sir John Barbirolli



**HIQLP006**  
Beethoven: Triple Concerto  
Oistrakh/Rostropovich/Richter  
Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra  
Herbert von Karajan



**HIQLP007**  
Tchaikovsky: 1812 Overture  
Romeo and Juliet  
Marche Slave  
London Symphony Orchestra  
André Previn



**HIQLP008**  
Carl Orff: Carmina Burana  
Armstrong/English/Allen  
LSO Chorus/LSO  
André Previn



**HIQLP009**  
Bach: Violin Concertos in A minor  
and E minor/Double Violin Cto\*  
Yehudi Menuhin/Christian Ferras\*  
Bath Festival/Menuhin



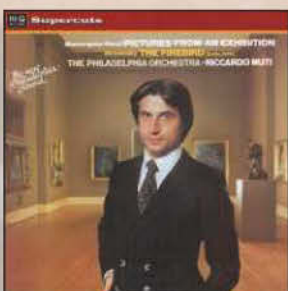
**HIQLP010**  
Sibelius: Symphony No.5  
Finlandia  
Philharmonia Orchestra  
Herbert von Karajan



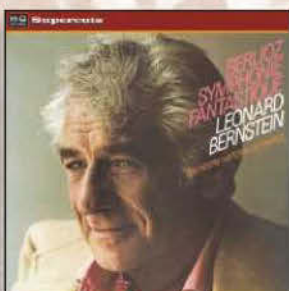
**HIQLP011**  
André Previn's Music Night (music by  
Walton, Dukas, Ravel and others)  
London Symphony Orchestra  
André Previn



**HIQLP012**  
Rodrigo: Concierto de Aranjuez  
Fantasia para un gentilhombre  
Angel Romero/London Symphony  
Orchestra/André Previn



**HIQLP013**  
Mussorgsky (orch. Ravel):  
Pictures From An Exhibition  
Strawinsky: Firebird Suite (1919 Version)  
Philadelphia Orchestra/Riccardo Muti



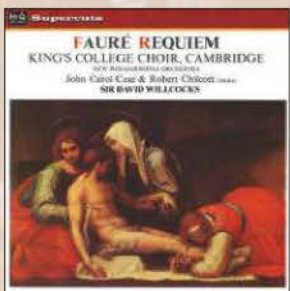
**HIQLP014**  
Berlioz: Symphonie Fantastique  
Orchestre National de France  
Leonard Bernstein



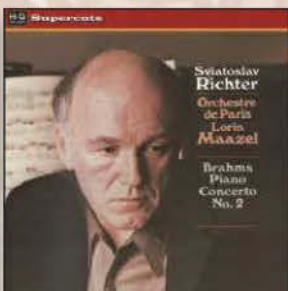
**HIQLP015**  
Paganini: Violin Concerto No. 1  
Sarasate: Carmen Fantasy/Perlman  
Royal Philharmonic Orchestra  
Lawrence Forster



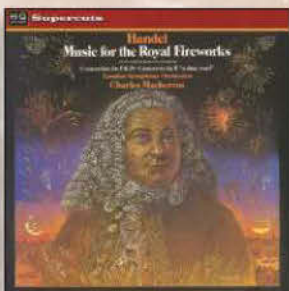
**HIQLP016**  
Dvořák: Symphony No. 9 in E Major  
Smetana: The Moldau (from Má Vlast)  
Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra  
Herbert von Karajan



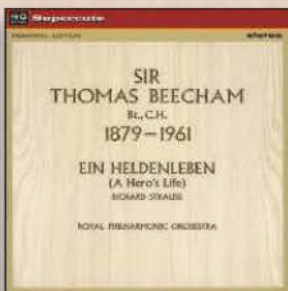
**HIQLP017**  
Faure Requiem  
King's College Choir Cambridge  
New Philharmonia Orchestra  
Sir David Willcocks



**HIQLP018**  
Brahms: Piano Concerto No. 2  
Sviatoslav Richter  
Orchestre de Paris  
Lorin Maazel



**HIQLP019**  
Handel: Music for the Royal  
Fireworks  
Handel: Concertos in F & D  
London Symphony Orchestra  
Sir Charles Mackerras



**HIQLP020**  
Strauss: Ein Heldenleben  
Symphonic Poem Op. 40  
Royal Philharmonic Orchestra  
Sir Thomas Beecham



**HIQLP021**  
Beethoven: 7th Symphony in A  
Rameau (arr. Klemperer):  
Gavotte with Six Variations  
New Philharmonia Orchestra  
Otto Klemperer





**HIQLP022**  
**Ravel: Boléro**  
**Daphnis & Chloé Suite No. 2/Pavanne**  
**London Symphony Orchestra**  
**André Previn**



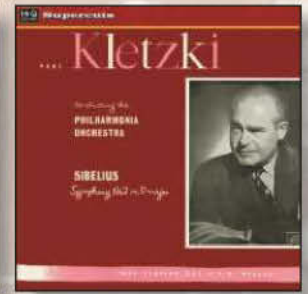
**HIQLP023**  
**Mozart: Symphony No. 40**  
**Mozart: Symphony No. 41 'Jupiter'**  
**Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra**  
**Herbert von Karajan**



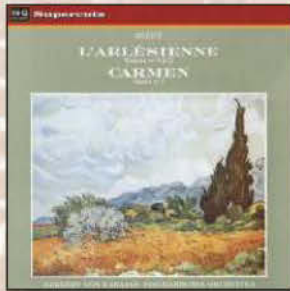
**HIQLP024**  
**Smetana: The Bartered Bride**  
**Dvorak: Scherzo Capriccioso**  
**Royal Philharmonic Orchestra**  
**Rudolf Kempe**



**HIQLP025**  
**Vivaldi: The Four Seasons**  
**London Philharmonic Orchestra**  
**Itzhak Perlman**  
**(Violin & Conductor)**



**HIQLP026**  
**Sibelius: Symphony No. 2 in D major**  
**Philharmonia Orchestra**  
**Paul Kletzki**



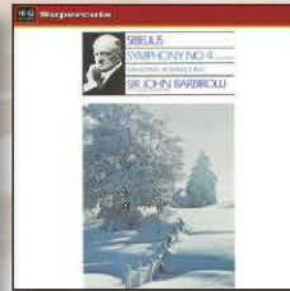
**HIQLP027**  
**Bizet: L'Arlésienne/Carmen**  
**Philharmonia Orchestra**  
**Herbert von Karajan**



**HIQLP028**  
**Berlioz: Harold in Italy**  
**Orchestre National de France**  
**Leonard Bernstein**



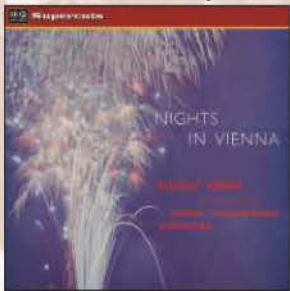
**HIQLP029**  
**Rossini: Overtures**  
**Royal Philharmonic Orchestra**  
**Sir Colin Davis**



**HIQLP030**  
**Sibelius: Symphony No. 4**  
**The Hallé Orchestra**  
**Sir John Barbirolli**



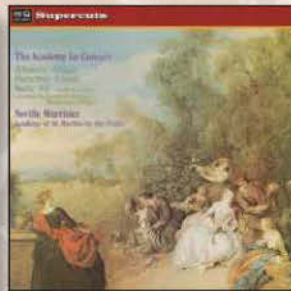
**HIQLP031**  
**Rimsky-Korsakov: Scheherazade**  
**Philharmonia Orchestra**  
**Paul Kletzki**



**HIQLP032**  
**Nights In Vienna**  
**Suppé, Heuberger, Strauss, Lehár**  
**Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra**  
**Rudolf Kempe**



**HIQLP033**  
**Brahms: Violin Concerto in D**  
**Perلمان (violin)**  
**Chicago Symphony Orchestra**  
**Carlo Maria Giulini**



**HIQLP034**  
**The Academy In Concert**  
**Albinoni, Mendelssohn, Bach, Mozart**  
**Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields**  
**Sir Neville Marriner**



**HIQLP035**  
**Mahler: Symphony No. 1 in D**  
**Chicago Symphony Orchestra**  
**Carlo Maria Giulini**



**HIQLP036**  
**Brahms: Symphony No. 3 in F**  
**Brahms: 'St. Antoni Chorale'**  
**Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra**  
**Sir John Barbirolli**



**HIQLP037**  
**Tchaikovsky: Piano Concerto No. 1**  
**John Ogdon (piano)**  
**Philharmonia Orchestra**  
**Sir John Barbirolli**



**HIQLP038**  
**Telemann: Suite in A Minor, etc.**  
**David Munrow (recorder)**  
**Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields**  
**Sir Neville Marriner**



**HIQLP039**  
**Elgar: Enigma Variations**  
**Cockaigne Overture**  
**Philharmonia Orchestra**  
**Sir John Barbirolli**

**Summer/Autumn 2014**



**HIQLP040**  
**Schubert: Unfinished Symphony**  
**Symphony No. 5 in B Flat**  
**Philharmonia Orchestra**  
**Otto Klemperer**



**HIQLP041**  
**Music Of Spain:**  
**Turina/Albéniz/Falla**  
**Paris Conservatoire Orchestra**  
**Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos**



**HIQLP042**  
**Schubert: Wanderer Fantasy**  
**Sonata in A Major Op. 120**  
**Sviatoslav Richter**



**HIQLP043**  
**Tchaikovsky/Glinka/Rimsky**  
**- Korsakov: Capriccio Italiano etc.**  
**Philharmonia Orchestra**  
**Paul Kletzki**



# Classical Companion

BEHIND THE MUSIC WITH HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW

NEW SERIES

## Igor Stravinsky *The Soldier's Tale*

It was a theatre piece, for actors and a chamber ensemble, prompted by world events. And there are two outstanding current recordings, suggests **Christopher Breunig**

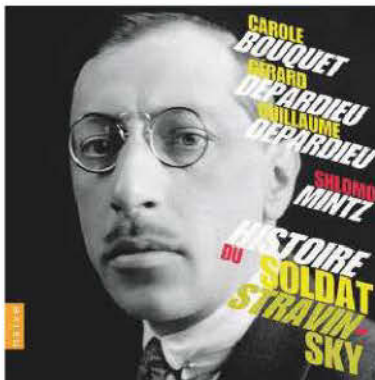
After the success – and scandal – of his three great orchestral scores for Diaghilev's ballet company, *Firebird*, *Petroushka* and the *Rite of Spring*, Stravinsky's fortunes were changed by the onset of the First World War. Exiled from his homeland he was living in Switzerland working on texts with the writer Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz; the Diaghilev touring productions had ceased and assets were frozen after the 1917 Russian Revolution.

A solution seemed to lie in producing a small-scale theatre work requiring a minimum of staging, which could be performed in Swiss village halls.

The idea of a morality tale about a soldier duped by the devil (appearing in various disguises) first took his imagination in 1917. Ever in search of the new, Stravinsky was

→ A live recording with Gérard Depardieu, *et al*, from 1996 was recently reissued

← Igor Stravinsky with violinist Isaac Stern in 1960



also intrigued by jazz: he'd looked at sheet music scores but had never heard any first-hand – or so he claimed in the definitive account of the genesis of *The Soldier's Tale* in *Expositions and Developments*, co-written with his amanuensis Robert Craft [Faber & Faber, 1959].

He also bought and learned how to play percussion instruments.

Wanting to exploit both high and low registers he scored his new piece for: violin/ double-bass; clarinet/bassoon; cornet/trumpet; percussion. Musically, his score embraces marches, pastorale, chorale, waltz, tango and ragtime movements. The actors are Narrator, the Soldier, the Devil – and in at least one old recording we hear the Princess's distant voice at the Devil's triumphal concluding drum music.

The story tells of a soldier returning home who, when he first encounters the Devil, is persuaded to trade his precious violin for a book: a key to untold wealth. But then no-one recognises the soldier back in the village, and his girlfriend seems to be married to someone else. He does regain his violin as a

result of a frantic card game with the Devil and in a later scene hopes to win the hand of a sick Princess, if he can cure her illness. A dance sequence represents her recovery.

But, the narrator solemnly intones, 'You must not seek to share... what you are with what you were' and all is lost to the soldier as he tries to cross the border and his new bride disappears.

### FIRST PERFORMANCES

Stravinsky's friend Ernest Ansermet conducted a sponsored premiere in Lausanne in September 1918 but further performances were halted by the Spanish flu epidemic, when Swiss public halls were closed. He also conducted the later Concert Suite in London in 1920. Staged performances were seen there in 1927; it was done in Paris by

Diaghilev, while the German premiere – also 1924 – was conducted by Otto Klemperer.

One remarkable late 1960s performance

is described in the book *Writings Through John Cage's Music, Poetry, And Art* [Chicago University Press, 2001]. It was the idea of composer Lukas Foss, who persuaded the 'Three Cs of American music' – Cage, Elliott Carter and Aaron Copland to act as the Devil, Soldier and Narrator – in a New York staging. It was Cage's first meeting with Stravinsky. It suggests an event comparable to Gustav Mahler conducting for Sergei Rachmaninov playing his Third Piano Concerto in 1909!

Lukas Foss also conducted the LAPO at the Hollywood Bowl in 1972 where Frank Zappa, no less, narrated. Zappa also included the March, adapted by his bassist Scott

'Stravinsky was taken by jazz, yet had never heard any live'

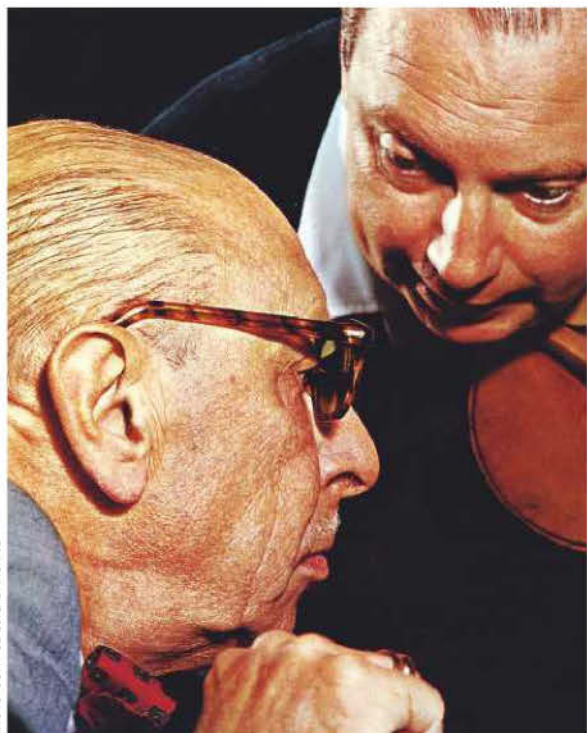


PHOTO: SONY CLASSICAL ARCHIVE



Thunes, for a 1991 live double album, *Make A Jazz Noise Here*.

The Ramuz texts were slightly changed over time; the standard English translation, prepared for the 1954 Edinburgh Festival, is by Kitty Black and Michael Flanders – he's better known for the Flanders & Swann satirical revue songs, taking in musical topics such as *Guide to Britten*, Mozart's Horn Concerto No.4 [*Ill Wind*] and 'Hi-Fi's the thing for me!' [*Song of Reproduction*].

Flanders (who was a polio victim) narrated for a 1956 Festival Hall performance with Ralph Richardson as the Soldier and Peter Ustinov as the Devil – who went on to record the part for Philips [see boxout].

### EARLY RECORDINGS

Unsurprisingly, the work was first recorded by Ansermet (1940) with Suisse Romande principals and

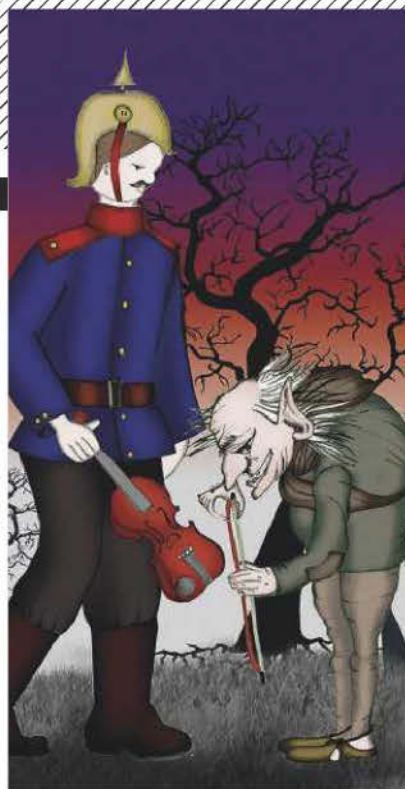


PHOTO: SONY CLASSICAL ARCHIVE

the author C-F Ramuz as speaker. There was a 1990 CD transfer on Claves CD 50-8918 (now out of print). Decca published an Ansermet version of the Suite coupled with Honegger's *Le Roi David* in 1957 [LXT 5321-2], and this is available as an MP3 file from ClassicsOnline [Naxos 9.80445-46].

My own introduction to the work came with an HMV LP based on a successful 1954 Glynebourn Opera production [ALP 1377], with English dialogue: dancer/choreographer Robert Helpmann was the Devil, Moira Shearer the Princess. With distinguished players such as Jack Brymer, Gwydion Brooke, *et al*, the ensemble was directed by Sir John Pritchard. You can purchase this at the iTunes store at £7.99; but as it's out of copyright you can also find a free FLAC version at The Music Parlour – and with it, the 1956 Ansermet/OSR Suite.

➔ Years after DG's memorable LP recording was issued, it reappeared as an Eloquence CD with other, shorter pieces



### STRAVINSKY

The Soldier's Tale  
Octet · Pastorale · Ragtime  
Septet · Concertino

### SCHOENBERG

Chamber Symphony No. 1

### BERG

Adagio (Chamber Concerto)

Sir John Gielgud  
Tom Courtenay · Ron Moody  
Boston Symphony Chamber Players

'Down the hot and dusty road/  
Tramps a soldier with his load...'  
No-one who has heard the (slightly testy) Sir John Gielgud narration on a 1975 DG LP [2530 609] will be likely to forget it; and when LPs vanished it seemed a CD reissue would never appear. It did, in 2011 [Eloquence 480 3300], when we discovered the voices – Tom Courtenay the Soldier, Ron Moody a cantankerous old Devil – had been dubbed in from a London studio, taped three years after The Boston Chamber Players had recorded the music in their excellent series produced by Thomas Mowrey.

The LP was one of my speech test records for judging equipment – as well as being a thoroughly enjoyable integrated production. The contrasts

between the three speakers were perfect, the balance with the music wholly convincing [see *HFN* Jan '11 Opinion, p102], Joseph Silverstein and Boston colleagues impeccable.

### PARLEZ VOUS FRANÇAIS?

If so, the 1996 live recording made at the Champs Élysées Theatre, Paris, with Gérard Depardieu, his partner Carole Bouquet and his son Guillaume, will captivate. It was first on Auvidis Valois, but has just been reissued [Naïve V5371]. There's some explosive dialogue here (it's been another of my test pieces) as Depardieu rails as the Devil. Buy this for the *drama* – since the music, led by violinist Shlomo Mintz rather takes second place. ☺

↙ Ernest Ansermet, who directed the 1928 Lausanne premiere, sitting with the composer

## ESSENTIAL RECORDINGS

### Ensemble directed by Igor Markevitch

Speakers Corner Philips 835181 (180g LP)  
Musically urbane and narrated by Jean Cocteau, and with Peter Ustinov as the Devil, this (French spoken) version was recorded in 1962. The violinist is one-time Philharmonia leader Manoug Parikian; Maurice André takes the cornet part.

### Ensemble directed by Stravinsky

Sony Classical 82876-76586-2 (CD)  
Originally we only had the concert suite recorded by Stravinsky in 1961 with the Columbia Chamber Ensemble led by Israel Baker, although the rest was done in '67. It comes here with a narration by Jeremy Irons, taped in 2005 (a new adaptation written by

Jeremy Sams). If you'd prefer just the suite under Stravinsky, it's on Sony 88697-88414-2 with the ballets (7CDs).

### Ensemble directed by Kent Nagano

Pangea CD-6233 (CD)  
This very fine 1989 release may now be hard to find. The players are the London Sinfonietta; the actors (English texts) are Vanessa Redgrave, Ian McKellen and Sting.

### Ensemble directed by Gennady Zalkowitsch

Argo ZNF 15 (LP - now deleted)  
One to avoid if you see it on ebay or at Oxfam. Glenda Jackson's narration is flat and Rudolf Nureyev as the soldier is even duller! A decent music group though.

# Vinyl Release

BEHIND THE MUSIC WITH HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW

## Jesus & Mary Chain *Psychocandy*

Take a dozen or so perfect pop songs then drench them in feedback. The result? A classic. **Steve Sutherland** reassesses the band's debut LP, now on 180g vinyl

**S**o we're deeply engaged in that most fascinating of Friday night pub debates: what's the perfect pop record? I'm pushing for Frederick Knight's monumentally pathetic Stax epic 'I've Been Lonely For So Long' or, failing that, The Jackson 5's impeccably constructed Motown smash, 'I Want You Back'. William Reid's having none of it. Apart from his own band's – which we'll come to later – he's bemoaning the fact that every great song's got something naff that prevents it reaching utter perfection.

'There's "I Wanna Be Your Dog" by The Stooges,' he says, 'but the horrible guitar solo f\*\*\*s it up. "Heroin" by The Velvet Underground is almost perfect, but I don't like the violin.'

### A BIT OF EDGE

William's brother Jim concurs: 'Some Burt Bacharach and Hal David songs by Dionne Warwick were close but they had a middle-of-the-road production aimed at middle-aged people. If they'd just had a bit of edge, they would have been perfect.'

So anyway, about 'I Want You Back'... 'No, no....' William butts in, '...this is an obvious thing to say, but the nearest to a perfect record is "Leader Of The Pack" by the Shangri-Las. When I listen to that record, I find it hard to pick out anything that should be different.'

'Right now, I'm sick of it and I probably won't listen to it for another two years, but one day I'll be sitting on a bus and somebody'll be playing it on the radio or something and I'll be close to tears. It's that sort of record.'

Jim and William Reid are two shy, moody, pretty intense brothers from the Glasgow overspill sink estates of East Kilbride. Like all teens in their generation who inherited Margaret Thatcher's Britain, they were stuck in their bedroom, nothing to do. But unlike others, who took to smack or self-harming, the brothers Reid developed a deep addiction to the raw emotion

'He's frothing at the mouth, so I say I will, just to get him out of the building'

### 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...



that was oozing from the grooves of their record collection. So deep an addiction, in fact, that it became a replacement for the life experiences being denied them. And, eventually, a crucial escape.

### GIFT FOR HYPE

They formed The Jesus & Mary Chain with a couple of mates to make records like their heroes and were brought to the attention of fledgling label boss and

kindred Scotsman Alan McGee by an enthusiastic wee chap called Bobby Gillespie. Miracles do happen and they rapidly found themselves signed to McGee's Creation label and the somewhat

stunned recipients of their label boss's extravagant gift for hype.

The said McGee turns up out of the blue one morning at my desk in the *Melody Maker* offices, ranting about how he's discovered the best band in the world and that I should get down to a gig and see them pronto. He's so manic he's frothing at the mouth, so in the end I say I will, just to get him out of the building.

Not wanting a repeat performance, I show up at the Old Ambulance Station on the Old Kent Road in South East London one cold and foggy November evening to witness what amazingly turns out to be exactly what McGee has promised: the best band in the world! They are obviously drunk and don't give a damn. The noise is incredible. Feedback. More feedback. The drummer – who by now is the aforementioned Bobby Gillespie – collapses into his drum kit after ten minutes and the show is over. The crowd are equal parts thrilled and p\*\*\*\*d off by the audacious, arrogant unpredictability of it all.

What's not to love?

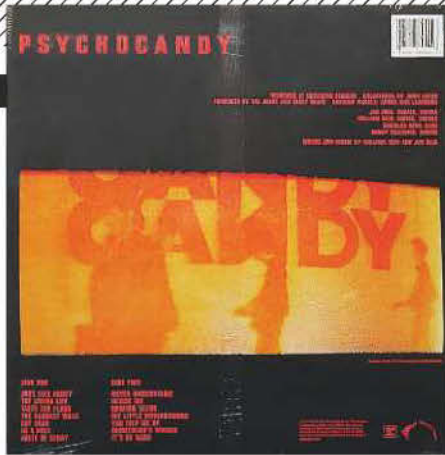
A year down the pike, I'm in a pub talking with the brothers in the very week that their debut LP is being released. It's called *Psychocandy*, which is probably the



WARNER BROS RECORDS

➔ Jesus & Mary Chain (l-r): John Moore, who replaced Bobby Gillespie (drums, guitar, 1985-1987); brothers Jim and William Reid; Douglas Hart (bass guitar, 1984-1991)





➔ Priced £19.95, the 180g release of The Jesus & Mary Chain's *Psychocandy* can be ordered online at [www.rockbox.co.uk](http://www.rockbox.co.uk)

most perfectly self-aware album title ever. There is nothing avant-garde or outlandish here, nothing strictly new. And yet, with its burning mono-vision, *Psychocandy* is unlike anything we've heard before, even though we know exactly where it's come from.

The songs – 14 of them in all, perfectly formed, not an ounce of fat or indulgence, none over three minutes long – have been self-produced by the Reids so that all their melodic influences – The Ramones, The Stooges, The Velvet Underground – are reanimated through coruscating scree of feedback. It sounds as if Phil Spector's Wall Of Sound is being lovingly but violently dismantled, brick by brick.

### BRITISH BEAUTY

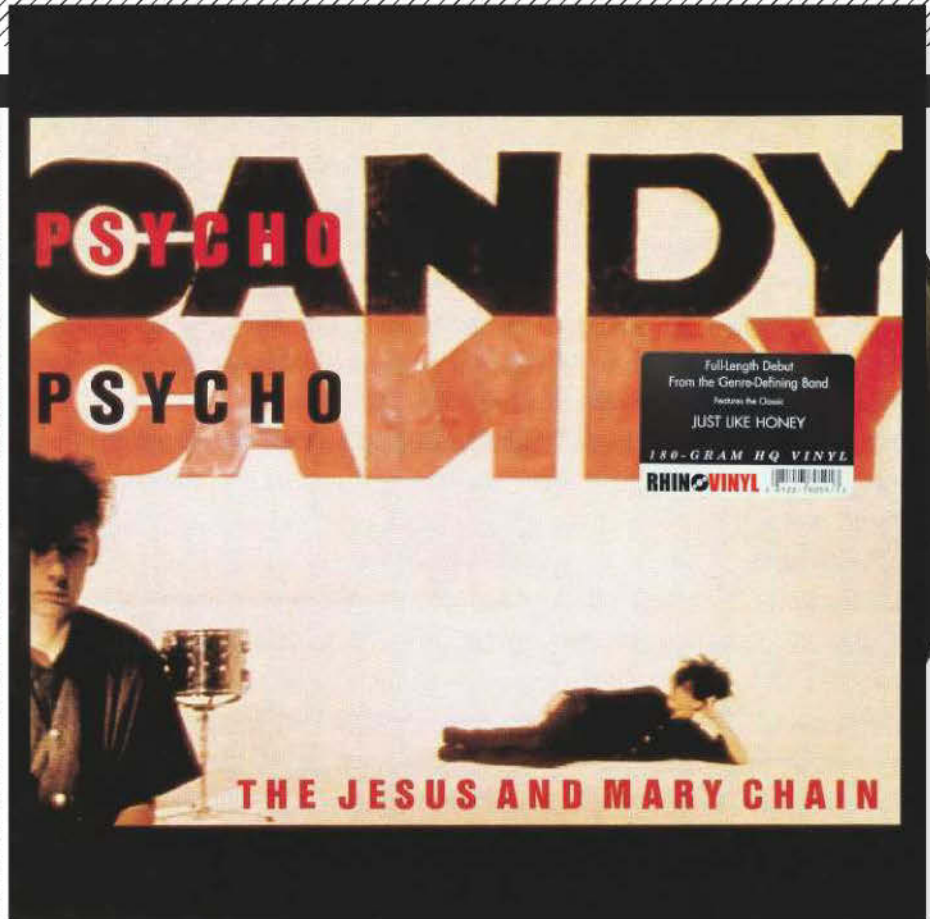
They are songs of lovely melancholy and brutish beauty. 'Just Like Honey' is Iggy, as if he was 18, in 1985. 'Never Understand' is pubescent Cramps. 'Talking Cindy' is Joey, Johnny, Dee Dee and Tommy on downers instead of amphetamines. 'The Living End' is a hymn to narcissism straight out of the Suicide songbook. Jim's is the dark, swoony drawl. William's is the white noise. And the thump-thump-thump Mo Tucker drumming is Gillespie, on the lam from Primal Scream. The best way to describe it all? Perhaps the inverse of the sugar-coated pill. *Psychocandy* is bitter on the outside but the centre is sweet as you like.

And it is, in its own determined way, absolutely perfect. Or as near as dammit.

'I think it's like all the bits missing from all the best groups,' says Jim nursing his pint. 'They're never perfect so we just try to get the bits that weren't on all the classic LPs. The perfect record is always in your head when you write a song and then it's always extremely depressing recording it.'

'To be honest,' says William, 'of the 14 songs, I'd say there's one B side on it and 13 A sides, which is remarkable for 1985.'

Indeed it is and the reviews, by and large, have been laudatory, bordering on



evangelical. The boy hacks at the music mags suspect they've found kindred souls in the brothers Reid and are keen to promote the revolution.

'Too many people want a new movement,' gripes Jim, suspicious of all the adulation. 'Too many people want us to be the figureheads. That's crap. I've never been part of any movement, ever. Movements don't work. You get two good groups and a load of bandwagon jumpers.'

### A NEW AGENDA

Still, it's hardly coincidence that, within a couple of years, The Pixies will emerge, and the sonically-enhanced My Bloody Valentine, and Ride and all the shoegazers, and The Stone Roses (for whom 'Sowing Seeds' sounds like a surefire blueprint). *Psychocandy* singlehandedly sets the new agenda – that 'alternative' or 'indie' doesn't necessarily mean it's too lame or left field to appeal to the masses.

There are a few Doubting Thomases, and most of them witter on about the Mary Chain being one-trick ponies.

'Ah, Jesus & Mary Chain, feedback group,' sighs William. 'Our original feedback idea was completely new, but to suggest that's all we can do is an insult. It's like saying we've got a limited amount of talent and we can only do one thing. I don't think groups should have a concept. We hate the way we've been

pigeonholed. It's incredibly wrong. We object to that because we can write damn good songs. We don't need feedback. It's just an unconventional approach, that's all. We don't like the idea of somebody else deciding what we are. We can do anything.

'People think the feedback is rebellious, like some punk revival or something. That's pathetic. We're part of the present and probably the future.'

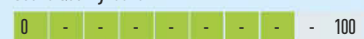
As I'm writing this, the reformed Jesus & Mary Chain are enjoying a nostalgia-fest, re-touring *Psychocandy*. Be careful what you wish for folks. ☺

### RE-RELEASE VERDICT

While not a release aimed primarily at the audiophile, the fact that a wide range of musical fare is finding a market when released on 180g vinyl can only bring a smile. This reissue is on the Rhino label and comes with all the original packaging.

As we've come to expect from Rhino, our copy felt heavy and durable and was devoid of any surface flaws while there was no popping or static to be heard across all 14 songs. Musically speaking, the production hardly sparkles, but rarely has feedback sounded so inviting. HFN

Sound Quality: 80%







## Yes *Close To The Edge*

Epic, operatic, experimental... one thing's for sure, the band's fifth studio album was hardly your everyday rock 'n' roll. Yet it was a huge commercial success, selling over one million copies, and would establish Yes as the most acclaimed progressive rock band ever

Words: **Mike Barnes**



The psychedelic era in British pop culture only lasted from 1966-68, but it marked a huge creative shift, in that groups became inspired to pursue their own paths. Pink Floyd, thanks to Syd Barrett's burgeoning talent as a songwriter, went from being a rather stiff combo who spiced up their R&B standards with a few freakouts, to a group who explored a poetic English whimsy cut with improvised trips to outer space. Meanwhile, Genesis formed in 1967 while at Charterhouse school, and were nurtured as a baroque pop group by producer and svengali Jonathan King, but by 1970 were charting a more individual, exploratory course.

#### A NEW ADVENTURE

Yes formed in 1968, purveying an odd but effective mish-mash of cover versions and originals. Their elongation of songs like The Beatles' 'Every Little Thing' was done imaginatively and featured some inspired playing. This worked for their debut album, but there came a point when they needed to leave that old stuff behind, lose the tacked-on orchestrations and pursue their own vision.

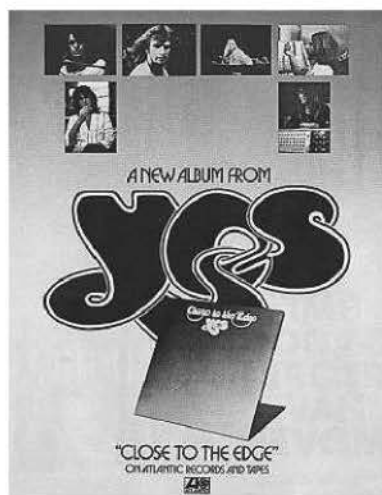
This feeling of liberation can be heard on *The Yes Album* from 1970, which saw their own considerable songwriting talents coming to the fore, allied to a Technicolor group sound featuring Tony Kaye's surging Hammond organ and new recruit Steve Howe's dazzling guitar lines. Howe has said that he always



↑ **Close To The Edge** line-up (clockwise, l-r): Rick Wakeman, Chris Squire, Jon Anderson, and Steve Howe

↗ **Label and picture sleeve** for the single 'America', recorded at the same time as *Close To The Edge*

↙ **Ad from 1972** promoting the LP. A photograph of Alan White replaces one of Bill Bruford, who left Yes that year to join King Crimson



viewed himself as a psychedelic musician. He had been a member of the shortlived Tomorrow, who, with their 1967 single 'My White Bicycle', established themselves as a premier psychedelic group.

Tomorrow's adventurous approach to structure also earned them one of the earliest examples of the epithet 'progressive' in the music press, in 1968. With Yes, Howe had now moved into the vanguard of progressive rock.

#### HISTORY FLATTENED

Progressive rock is a label that has often been used dismissively, but this sort of categorisation rather flattens out history. From the late '60s, record stores would file such fare

under 'Underground' in their racks, and with the upsurge in new and commercially successful new rock forms the albums might be labelled as 'progressive'.

'Progressive' is a term used more today than back then. Musicians didn't go around proclaiming themselves to be 'progressive

rockers' and their music was one part of a rapidly changing and multifaceted music scene.

But Yes were progressive in every sense of the word. When the prodigiously talented keyboard player Rick Wakeman joined for *Fragile* in 1971, the results were uneven, with short solo showcases between full-band numbers.

By the time the material for *Close To The Edge* was worked out, Yes had established a potent chemistry. On the top layer there was Jon Anderson's lead vocal – a natural alto – and although Steve Howe and

bass guitarist Chris Squire weren't lead singer material, their harmony vocals were crucial. With Anderson they formed a curious

**'In bass guitarist Chris Squire the group had their secret weapon'**

vocal weft that evoked English choral music, and the lush West Coast sounds of the Beach Boys and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young.

Meanwhile, Howe's lead guitar lines were a unique mix of country fingerpicking, jazz, flamenco and his beloved psychedelia, and sound unique to this day. Wakeman's frilly



# VINYL ICONS

BEHIND THE MUSIC WITH HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW

## PRODUCTION NOTES

When *Melody Maker* journalist Chris Welch went to see Yes recording *Close To The Edge* at Advision Studios, London, in 1972 he entered a 'dark and rather spooky environment' with a large mixing console in the centre of the main space, with cables leading off to the instruments being recorded in separate rooms. Disconcertingly, Welch came in to witness an exhausted Eddy Offord nodding off and falling from his producer's chair.

Making albums in the early '70s was becoming a protracted business and *Close To The Edge* was taking longer than planned, with takes prevaricated over, much splicing together of tape and all hands on the mixing desk. The birdsong and ambient sounds for the introduction to the title track were on a 40ft tape loop that had to be laboriously snaked around the studio

Howe and Anderson were the only two musicians who seemed to know where the title track was going and so the atmosphere became fractious with Bruford noticeably bored and disruptive. When a particular section needed a name for reference, Anderson called it 'Total Mass Retain'. 'Why not call it "Puke"?' Bruford shot back. Although not one of the articulate drummer's better witticisms he was feeling that all this studio freedom had its downside.

The group took three months to make the record, which in itself was becoming a talking point in the press, as if it somehow underlined the importance of the project. Bruford went on to claim, slightly mischievously, that Yes had heard that Simon and Garfunkel had taken three months to make 'Bridge Over Troubled Water', so they decided 'it would take three months and a day, even if it kills us'.

That said, Bruford thought the end results were 'brilliant' and after hearing an early studio run-through of 'Siberian Khatru', from the sessions, one has to admit that their painstaking approach was ultimately vindicated. Certainly the group were struggling at times and mistakes were made. At the end of the title track, the last verse can be heard to have just slightly more reverb. It was a great take, but not the one they had actually intended to splice in.



pianistics had been heard on David Bowie's *Hunky Dory* and his organ flourishes with his previous group, The Strawbs, but his textural work on synthesiser and mellotron was also crucial. Down in the engine room, drummer Bill Bruford had jazz chops and a crisp, syncopated approach to rock momentum, with a sharp, punchy sound to his kit. And in bass guitarist Chris Squire the group had their secret weapon.

## SOMETHING ELSE...

Big, distorted bass lines had been the driving force of mid-'60s pop songs like The Nashville Teens' 'Tobacco Road' and The Spencer Davis Group's 'Keep On Runnin'', but Squire's Rickenbacker sound was something else. Placed unusually high in the mix it could be chunky, weighty, right in the pocket, but he had also a free-ranging role, which saw his bass lines snarl carnivorously into the midrange.

What's more, his melodic lines, played high up the neck, saw his bass become another lead instrument, often acting as a counterpoint to the vocal melodies.

On *Close To The Edge*, the side-long title track found Yes slipping their moorings and sailing into the unknown. After an intro of birdsong and ambient sounds, the first two minutes of opening band section, entitled 'The Solid Time Of Change', are remarkable.

It's composed, but sounds like an improvisation with no discernable chordal foundation. Howe's angular guitar lines veer crazily, tracked by Squire's hyperactive bass and topped by Wakeman's high velocity,

skittering keyboards, while Bruford explores all the rhythmic possibilities on offer. Occasionally it stops dead on cue and Anderson utters a short 'Ah!'. This was rock music that had said goodbye to the blues scales and the cover versions. It sounded like nothing you'd ever heard before.

## ORGAN OUTBURSTS

Some writers have talked about this being symphonic rock, and although the 18m title track is the longest on the album, as it progresses there are verses and choruses – some recapitulated – some swaggering,

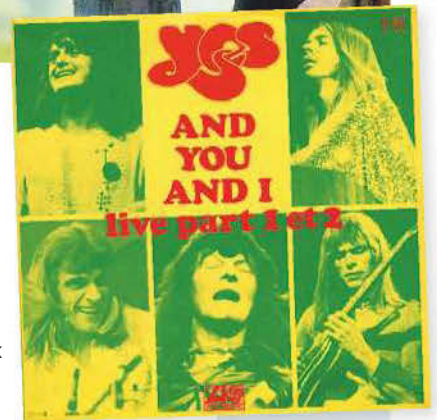
funky interludes (Bruford has mentioned that Sly And The Family Stone were an influence on some of the

'This was rock music that sounded like nothing you had heard before'

grooves), and a beautifully sparse middle section, 'I Get Up, I Get Down', with simple tolling keyboards, vocal harmonies and some huge ecclesiastical organ outbursts.

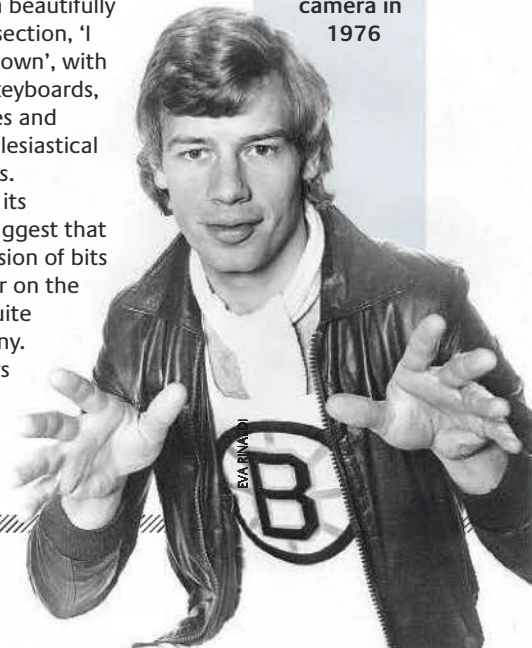
Accounts of its composition suggest that it was a succession of bits added together on the hoof: more a suite than a symphony.

Some writers were wary of what they saw as Yes's pretentious, ☞



↑ The LP's inner gatefold sleeve with one of artist Roger Dean's trademark other-worldly scenes and (above) the sleeve for the 1973 French release of the single 'And You And I'

↓ Bill Bruford caught on camera in 1976





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# D-1



# Alternate Format Discography



➔ Press shot of the LP line-up distributed by Premier PR

over-ambitious music and on *Close To The Edge* Jon Anderson's lyrics have invited critical opprobrium. Much of pop and rock music lyrics don't make any particular sense anyway and Anderson's are a succession of images that flash across the music. Yet on hearing lines like, 'A seasoned witch will call you from the depths of your disgrace/And rearrange your liver to the solid mental grace', many were understandably nonplussed.

## THE BEAUTY OF IT

The two songs that take up the second side of the LP are more tightly structured. 'And You And I' mixes an acoustic guitar strum with towering mellotron chorales, while 'Siberian Khatru' – yes, no one has ever worked out what that means – is the band's rock dynamic working in a new, rarefied space.

They might have begun to disappear into their own world, but that was partly the beauty of it: big chunky riffs, a harpsichord solo from Wakeman and odd interludes packed with glowing vocal harmonies. Progressive, indeed.

Crucially, producer Eddy Offord, who was in essence considered to be a sixth band member, gave it a wonderfully warm and organic, yet unusually clear and vibrant, sound.

Legendary rock journalist Nick Kent, in his '70s memoir *Apathy For The Devil*, puts 'Siberian Khatru' as the lone progressive rock track in his playlist for the decade.

Although an opponent of the group at the time, he has changed his mind, about Yes at least: 'That was an incredible piece of music,' he told me. 'They were trying to do something new and to me *Close To The Edge* is the greatest, classic prog rock – with all the clichés attached – album ever made.' ☺



## THE ORIGINAL LP AND SINGLES

*Close To The Edge* was released in the UK in September 1972 on Atlantic [K50012] in a spectacular gatefold sleeve by Roger Dean, with the lyrics handwritten by the artist on the inner sleeve.

The oddest LP rarity is the version issued in 1974 in the former Czechoslovakia on the Supraphon label [1-13-1019]. Titled *Na Samém Kraji Útesu*, it appears Dean has redrawn the lettering on the cover, as it is in the same style. Another collectors' item is the super-rare 1972 mono promo version pressed for the US only [Atlantic 7244].

Given the length of the three tracks on the album, it was never going to be a goldmine when it came to hit singles, but this didn't deter Atlantic from having a go. 'And You And I' was released as Parts 1 & 2 across a 7in single [45-2920] in the US and a number of European territories, though the UK was excluded.

In 1973 the track was released in the UK in its full-length version on a 7in single [Atlantic K10407] backed with 'Roundabout' from the band's *Fragile* album. That year also saw the release of the single 'And You And I Live Part 1 Et 2' in France [Atlantic 10259].

Yes hadn't finished with cover versions entirely and had contemporaneously recorded a version of Simon Garfunkel's 'America'. An edited version was

released as a single in the US [Atlantic 45-2899] backed by a different take of 'Total Mass Retain' from that which appeared on *Close To The Edge*.

## FIRST CD VERSION (1987)

The album was remastered and first released on CD across all European territories in 1987, on the Atlantic label [250 012]. A non remastered version was released in the US [SD 19133-2], also on Atlantic.

## GASTWIRT REMASTER (1994)

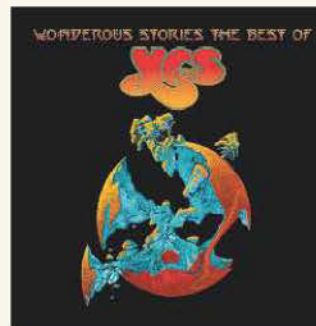
In 1994 the album appeared on CD once more. Remastered at Oceanview Digital Mastering in the US by Joe Gastwirt, the disc came with an eight-page booklet and was released on Atlantic across all European territories [7567-82666-2].

## RHINO REMASTER (2003)

The next significant CD remaster was a 2003 version available across Europe on Rhino Records [8122-73790-2]. This came with a booklet and photographs and included the single versions of 'America' and 'Total Mass Retain', a studio run though of 'Siberian Khatru' and an alternative take of 'And You And I'.

## 180G VINYL (2008)

Friday Music reissued the album on 180g vinyl in the US in 2008 [FRM 9004]. European Yes fans would have to wait until 2012 when Rhino marketed a limited edition 180g version with gatefold sleeve on the Atlantic label [8122797157].



## LIVE VERSIONS & COMPILATIONS

Two compilations that stick out are Rhino's 5CD best-of set, *In A Word: Yes*, released in 2002 [8122-79901-8]. It contains 'Close To The Edge' and 'Siberian Khatru'.

In 2004 Rhino put out a 3CD set, *The Ultimate Yes: 35th*

*Anniversary Collection* [R2 78042]. This features 'Siberian Khatru' and 'And You And I'.

*Wonderous Stories: The Best Of Yes* is a 2CD compilation [Music Club Deluxe – MCDLX507], which includes the whole album.

Meanwhile, the 1973 triple LP live album, *Yesongs* [Atlantic K 60045], with its lavish, Dean-designed sleeve includes versions of all the tracks on *Close To The Edge*, though all feature Alan White on drums who replaced Bruford after the album was recorded.

A Blu-ray release entitled *Yesongs – 40th Anniversary Edition*, includes 'And You and I' and 'Close To The Edge' recorded at the Rainbow Theatre, London in December 1972 on the *Close To The Edge Tour* [Odeon Entertainment Group ODNBM002].

## THE DEFINITIVE EDITION?

In recent years, producer Steve Wilson has been given access to a number of original '70s master tapes to remix them for 5.1.

His 2013 mix of *Close To The Edge* was released as part of a two-disc package on Panegyric called *The Definitive Edition* [GYRBD50012]. It was done respectfully and with the musicians' blessing, but while it sounds close to the original, to these ears some of the heft of the original production has been lost.

Moreover, on the 'I Get Up, I Get Down' section of the title track, Wilson found and reintroduced an unused vocal harmony part. But one has to question his judgment as it now overlaps Anderson's lead vocals, spoiling the call and response effect in the original mix – it was surely left out for a reason.

The first disc is a CD while the second, which includes a flat transfer of the original mix, live tracks and a number of extras, comes as a Blu-ray disc.





# The Nashville Room, *London*

The UK pub rock scene signalled a back-to-basics approach to rock 'n' roll, which would attract music fans disenchanted with progressive rock and lay the foundations for punk. **Steve Sutherland** has the story of The Nashville Room in London's West Kensington

There was once a young girl from a picture postcard village called Tintwistle in the Peak District of Derbyshire. Tintwistle, with its two football teams, cricket green, lovely Victorian pub and local shop, was a pretty idyllic place to grow up and the young girl duly blossomed. Then, at 17, her family abruptly upped sticks and moved to the smoke.

The girl started art college in Harrow but she didn't get on and threw it all over to teach primary school kids instead. As a hobby she started to make jewellery, which she sold at Portobello Road Market and she eventually fell in and shackled up with this bloke who opened a boutique selling secondhand clothes in Chelsea's King's Road.

To supplement the stock, she started making clothes while her beau indulged himself putting together and managing a band. Which is how she came to be standing down front at one of their gigs which, truth be told, wasn't going ultra well. The band had gotten itself a bit of a reputation in quite a short time, mainly due to the manager's hustling, so the crowd was full of inquisitive types looking to be impressed. Plainly the gig wasn't going to plan. The crowd were losing interest, the band were listless and our heroine was bored.



JOE KERRIGAN



➔ View of the venue as it is today on the corner of Cromwell Road and North End Road in West Kensington. It stopped being a live music venue in July 1989

➔ After The Sex Pistols played at the Nashville Room in April 1976 as support act to his regular band, The 101ers, Joe Strummer left and formed The Clash

So bored in fact that, suddenly, entirely out of character, she was moved to slap the nearest person to her, hard around the face. That nearest person just happened to be another young girl whose boyfriend, standing nearby, made to effect a chivalrous intervention. At which point our geezer – the band's manager – clocking the fracas, piled in. Punches were thrown. The band, livened up smart quick, downed tools and joined the fistic fun.

## ALL THE RAGE

Another night, another messy barroom brawl. Except... snapping away at the melee were two photographers – Joe Stevens and Kate Simon – who just happened to freelance for the UK's weekly music papers, *NME*, *Sounds* and *Melody Maker*. And so it was, in no time at all, that the band became notorious as the violent figureheads of the deliciously tasty new Punk movement that was fast becoming quite literally all the rage.

The girl was Vivienne Westwood, the manager Malcolm McLaren, the band The Sex Pistols and the venue The Nashville Room, part of a pub

that was built in 1904 on the corner of Cromwell Road and North End Road in West Kensington.

By the early 1970s, Fullers Brewery, which owned the joint, was trying to bolster falling clientele by offering a Country music dining experience. They were focused on customers keen to enjoy the talents of such American legends as Chet Atkins and the BBC even shot a television series there starring MOR Country shrill George Hamilton IV.

By 1975, this novelty was wearing off and the owners started to branch out and target rock fans as well. Dai Davies of Albion Records took on the task and a band called Grimm kicked it off in May. Before long The Nashville was a key operator in what the music papers were calling the Pub Rock business.

Part of a burgeoning network of venues across London, The Nashville accommodated a bunch of bands who, while rejecting what they saw as the pompous excesses of Prog and the inanity of Glam, were happy to entertain small, appreciative crowds with back-to-basics sets inspired by the sort of sweaty R&B being banged out in the early 1960s



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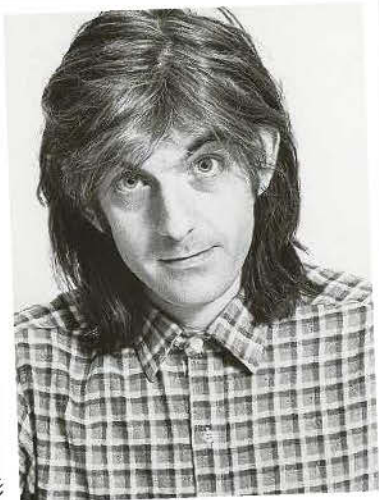
by the likes of The Rolling Stones, Yardbirds, Them and The Kinks.

These bands went about their down-and-dirty business under such names as The Count Bishops, Ducks Deluxe, The Kursaal Flyers, Roogalator, Bees Make Honey, Cado Belle and The Tyla Gang. Mostly long forgotten now, they were a lank-haired, denim clad, bearded bunch of rockers old before their age and, by and large, they left it all on stage, unable to capture the adrenalin of their live shows come the rare opportunity to record.

### YOUNG DOCTORS

A few of their number did manage to make their mark beyond the pub circuit. Kilburn & The High Roads splintered into Ian Dury and The Blockheads, Dury meeting his most successful writing partner Chas Jankel in the band changing room backstage at the Nashville. Brinsley Schwarz also kind of made it when they split up to become Graham Parker's Rumour and their bass player, Nick Lowe, developed his own respectable solo career as a singer, songwriter and producer.

Daddies of the scene were Dr Feelgood from Canvey Island who regularly trod the boards at the Nashville. Several cuts above the rest, they were powered by guvnor frontman Lee Brilleaux and manic



KLAUS HILTSCHER



↑ Eddie & The Hot Rods (l-r): Barrie Masters, Dave Higgs, Steve Nicol and Paul Grey with (top left) ad for an early August weekend line-up

↗ The Count Bishops on stage at The Nashville Room in 1979

↗ Wilko Johnson and Lee Brilleaux of Dr Feelgood

↙ Nick Lowe, solo artist and ex-Brinsley Schwarz bass player

guitarist Wilko Johnson, their back-to-mono, amphetaminated brand of R&B championed by the music papers and admired by a new generation trying to find its own heroes.

Next in terms of recognition wider than just the boozier circuit were Eddie & The Hot Rods, pub rock stalwarts who were en route to the big time when they were supported by The Sex Pistols at the Marquee Club in February 1976.

The Pistols not only upstaged them but did a fair amount of damage to their equipment into the bargain.

The reviews from the Marquee show were partly the reason why the crowd on the 23rd of April, the night of the Nashville fight, included a who-would-soon-be-who in the punk rock firmament.

On hand to witness the fracas were Tony James (soon to form Generation X), Mick Jones (soon to form The Clash), Adam Ant (Subway Sect), Dave Vanian (The Damned) and Sid Vicious who would become a Pistol himself before too long.

The Pistols had actually played the Nashville three weeks previously, on the 3rd of April, and it turned out to be a gig that, even more than the Marquee date, was to turn the musical tide and consign The 101ers, a bunch of alehouse

### THE DIPLOMAT'S SON

The band were supporting The 101ers, a bunch of alehouse

regulars who were fronted by a diplomat's son born John Graham Mellor in Ankara, Turkey. John had drifted to London via Newport where he'd picked

'Punches were thrown, and the band joined the fistic fun'

up a guitar and fashioned himself anew for a while as Woody.

By May '74 though, he was rocking out with his mates in the 101ers and calling himself Joe - Joe Strummer. And on this fateful night, Joe had an epiphany. 'Five seconds into the first song (of the Sex



## CLASSIC VENUES

BEHIND THE MUSIC WITH HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW



Pistols' set), he told journalists later, 'I knew we were like yesterday's paper; we were over.'

Joe had been intrigued by a conversation he'd overheard where Malcolm McLaren had been discussing what clothes his band wanted to wear – an attention to detail that had stunned him with admiration. And once the Pistols launched into their opening number, 'Did You No Wrong', Joe was smitten. Their attitude was off the scale. The 101ers, Joe realised, set out to please. But the Pistols set out to please *themselves*, which appealed to Joe's ego no end.

Within a few days he had hooked up with a wannabe McLaren called Bernie Rhodes and a Mott The Hoople maniac called Mick Jones and The Clash were born, playing their first ever gig supporting The Sex Pistols in Sheffield on July the 4th.

And so it was that Punk wiped Pub Rock off the face of the earth and The Nashville Room was where it all happened. Declan McManus made the transition by turning into Elvis Costello and staging a residency of Monday nights through August 1977. Backed by his new band, The Attractions, a live album was recorded at the Room featuring all the early EC greats – 'Waiting For

The End Of The World', 'Night Rally', 'The Angels Want To Wear My Red Shoes' and 'Less Than Zero'. Released as a bonus disc with the 2007 CD release of the Deluxe edition of *My Aim Is True*, it captures Costello at his snarly best.

### PUB TO PUNK

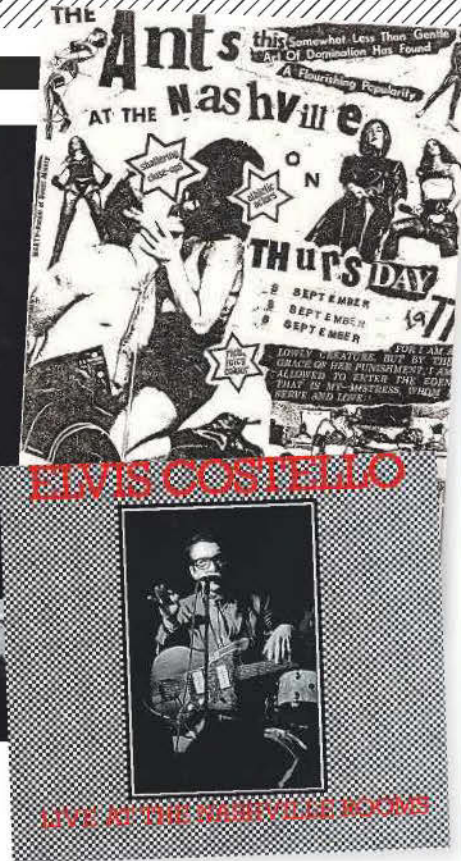
The Stranglers were another band who made the gnarly move from Pub to Punk and they too planned to release a live Nashville recording. This was going to be called *Dead On Arrival* but the tapes didn't turn out to the band's liking so they

went into the studio and did *Rattus Norvegicus* as their debut album instead.

The Tom Robinson Band also made a little bit of history at

the Nashville. Tom, a Cambridge posh boy turned bad, had previously had a pop at fame as a member of an acoustic trio called Café Society who were picked up by The Kinks' Konk label with Ray Davies pencilled to produce their first album.

Things didn't quite go to plan though. The king Kink was busy elsewhere, frustratingly drawing out the recording process to no-one's benefit. When the record finally came out it sold a mere 600 copies and Tom packed it in to form TRB and have the hits he craved with



← Flyer for an early appearance of The Ants at the venue. The band would later become New Romantic teen faves Adam And The Ants

← Early Sex Pistols line-up with Glen Matlock on bass (left of picture). He was thrown out of the band in February 1977 because 'he liked The Beatles' and replaced by Sid Vicious

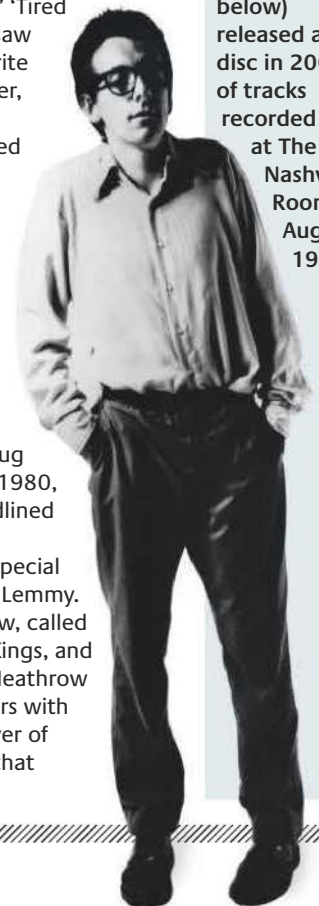
← Elvis Costello (pictured below) released a live disc in 2007 of tracks recorded at The Nashville Room in August 1977

'2-4-6-8 Motorway', 'Glad To Be Gay' and 'Don't Take No For An Answer'.

His band were in their new-found pomp when Ray Davies happened to drop in at the Nashville to catch one of their gigs. Tom spotted him and had the band play a sarcastic version of The Kinks' 'Tired Of Waiting', which saw Ray go away and write his scathing rejoinder, 'Prince Of Punks'.

Others who played the Room included Simple Minds, who made their London debut there, Joy Division, The Police... you name 'em, they did The Nash until, with their sights set on redevelopment, Fullers pulled the plug on the 19th of July 1980, the last hurrah headlined by Wilko Johnson's Solid Senders with special guest, Motörhead's Lemmy.

It's just a pub now, called The Famous Three Kings, and traffic commuters Heathrow bound pass the doors with no inkling whatsoever of the restless ghosts that rock within. ☺

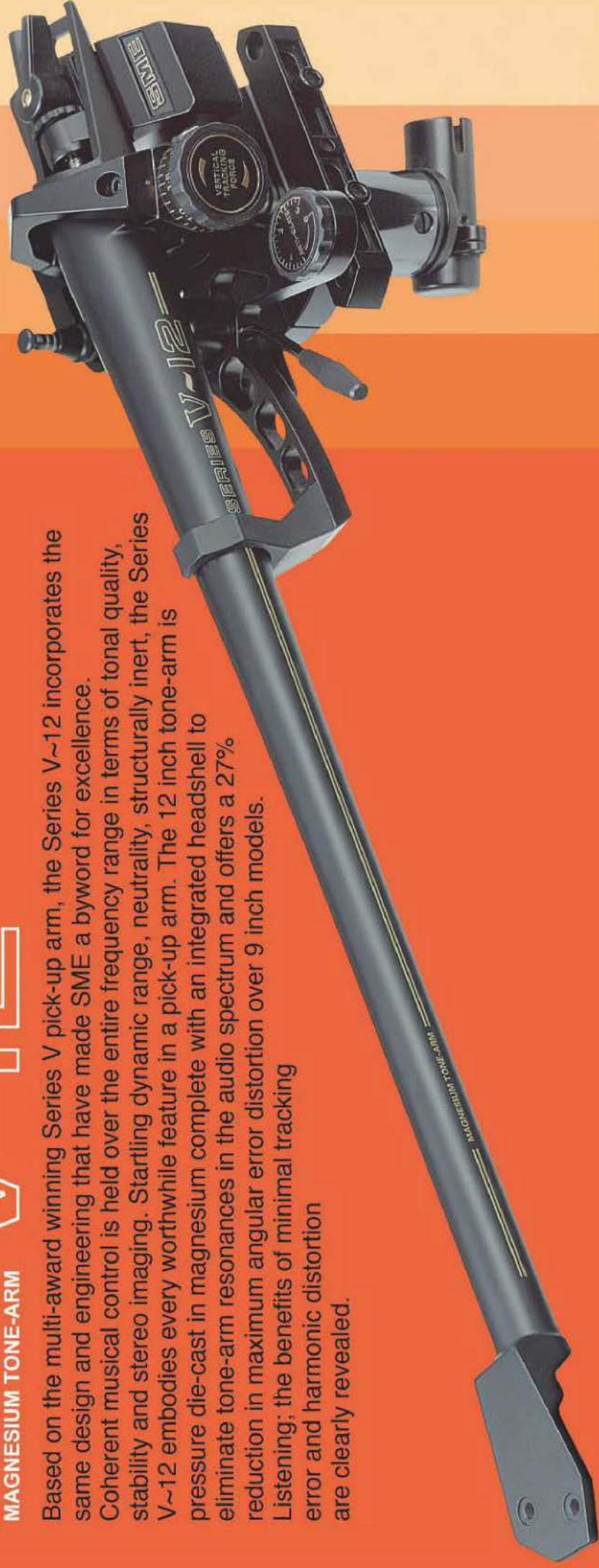




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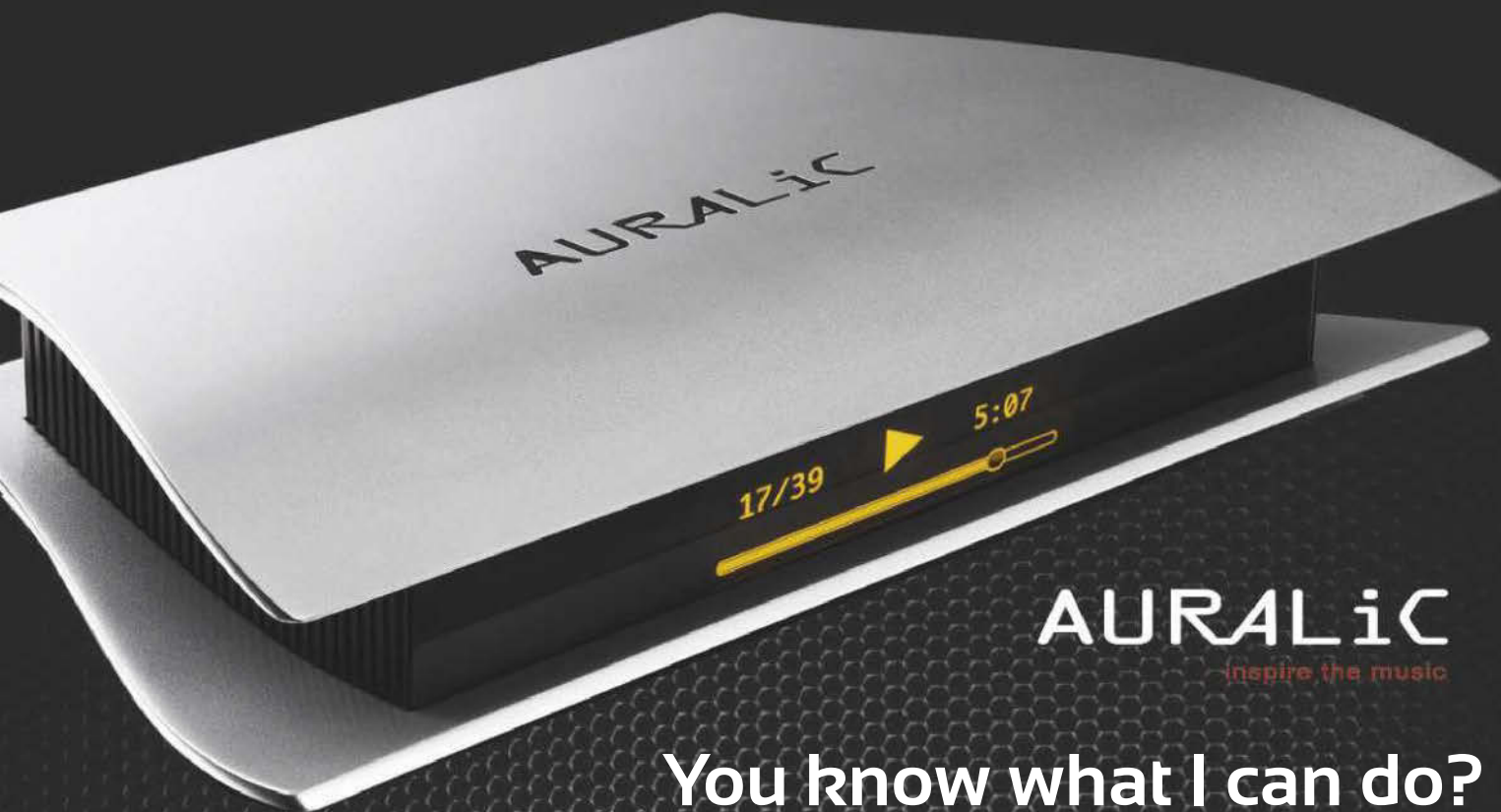
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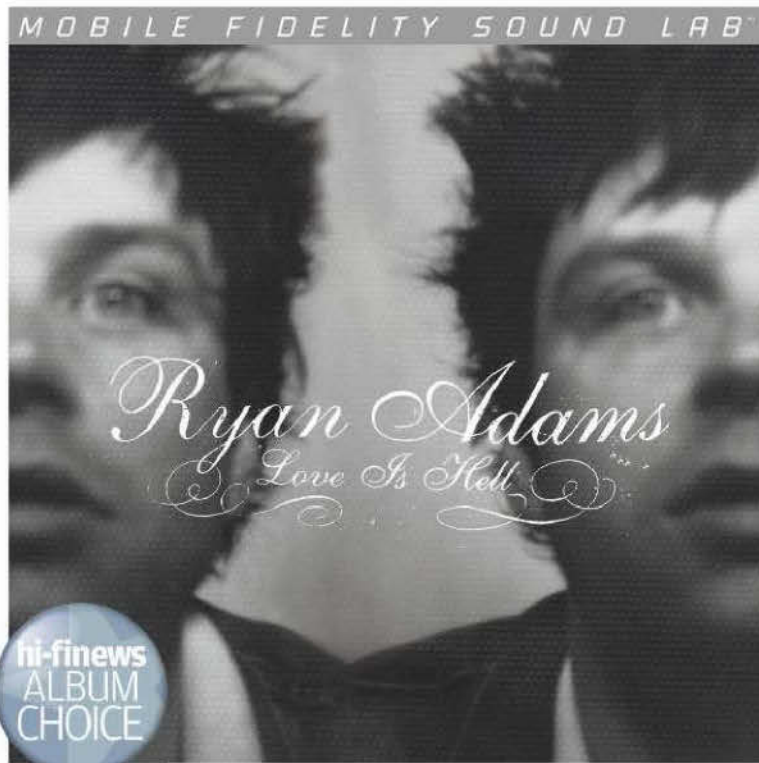


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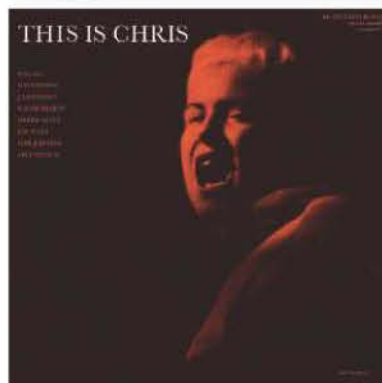
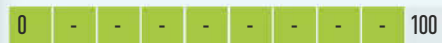
### RYAN ADAMS

Love Is Hell

Mobile Fidelity MOFI 3-040 (three discs, 180g vinyl)

A gutsy choice, but I don't know why MoFi thinks it deserves the same 3LP treatment as Dylan's *Blonde On Blonde* – maybe it's a 10th anniversary celebration? Suffice it to say, you wouldn't know Adams' roots were in alt country, this is so varied. He's a Smiths fan, this is what it got him. You'll wonder, too, why this true genius needs to cover third-rate pap like Oasis's derivative 'Wonderwall'. Maybe someone at MoFi is Adams' cousin or in-law. This offers 23 tracks, so it even includes bonus cuts issued in Japan. Our rating system says 'sound quality', but I'm a big boy, so I'll overrule my doubts about the glum, messy nature of this ambitious box by making it Album of the Month. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%



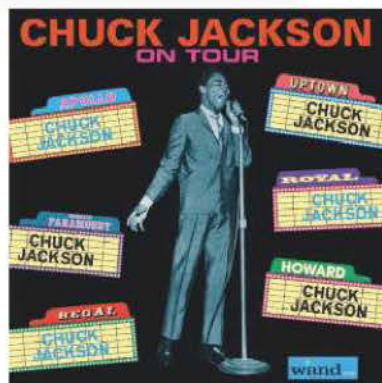
### CHRIS CONNOR

This Is Chris

Pure Pleasure BCP-20 (mono; 180g vinyl)

Even if her name doesn't ring any bells, this jazz chanteuse's backing band will elevate the interest level: on this, her last release for the Bethlehem label before moving to Atlantic, she was backed by an amazing ensemble of Herbie Mann on flute and tenor, pianist Ralph Sharon, guitarist Joe Puma, bassist Milt Hinton and drummer Osie Johnson, plus one of my old man's faves, the trombone duo of JJ Johnson and Kai Winding. Connor favoured material from Cole Porter, source of four of the ten tracks, but the gem just may be a cool reading of the Gershwins' 'Someone To Watch Over Me'. Mono, and as period-sounding as you'd expect from a recording made in '55. *KK*

Sound Quality: 87%



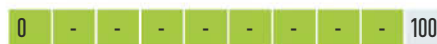
### CHUCK JACKSON

On Tour

Sundazed LP5427 (180g vinyl)

If you're gonna record a live soul album, and the year is 1964, then there is nothing to touch Harlem's legendary Apollo Theater... provided you have the chops to satisfy the genre's toughest audience. Chuck Jackson certainly did, his powerful vocals – the equal of any of the Stax or Atlantic giants – carrying him through a mix of his own releases and covers of songs most wouldn't be brave enough to attempt. Quite why he remains semi-obscure is baffling: listen to his interpretations of such definitives as James Brown's 'Please, Please, Please' and Ben E King's 'Stand By Me' and you'll agree they're masterful. An exuberant partner to last month's studio LP. *KK*

Sound Quality: 88%



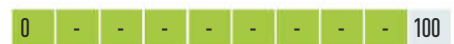
### WORLD OF OZ

World Of Oz

Decca/Deram 375 067-4 (180g vinyl)

From 1969, more psychedelia from the Decca/Deram vaults, this time a rarity that actually (and uncharacteristically for 'heavy' bands) yielded three singles: 'Muffin Man', 'King Croesus' and 'Hum-Gum Tree'. Rock Family Trees fans will know this group hailed from Birmingham, but had more success on the Continent than at home. Their history was turbulent, the timing awful – this was released after their line-up had changed – but the set is a microcosm of the prog's various sub-genres. Strings, organ, Tolkienesque atmosphere: there's a fine line between worthy and cliché when it comes to hippie music, but WoZ had talent, even bearing comparison to The Bee Gees. *KK*

Sound Quality: 85%





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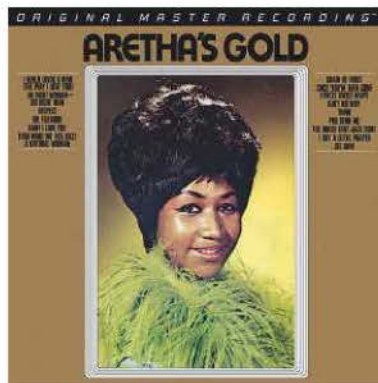
### THE DUTCH JAZZ LEGENDS

Celebrating The Art And Spirit Of Music, Vol 3

STS Digital STS611137 (Purist recording)

If you were weaned on *Jazz At The Pawnshop* and love *Opus 3*, and are a sucker for instrumentals of standards, this latest from STS will push all your buttons. European audiophile jazz recordings are a sub-genre all their own, the playing usually studied but slick and easy on the ears, the sound life-like and involving. This quintet – trumpet, tenor sax, double-bass, piano and drums – covers 15 of the best from *The Great American Songbook*, from Gershwin, Ellington, Rodgers and Hart, *et al*, and the results are both gorgeous sounding and easy to absorb. Inventive without veering off into excess, the arrangements are both familiar and fresh. Don't knock it. *KK*

Sound Quality: 89%



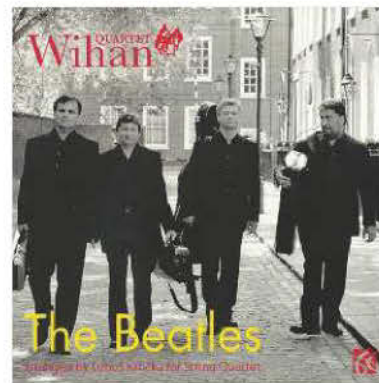
### ARETHA FRANKLIN

*Aretha's Gold*

Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2142 (stereo SACD)

Issued in '69, this 14-track 'best of' contains the cream of her hits for Atlantic, so every song is a soul milestone, from 'Respect' to 'Think' to '(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman'. This material is ample evidence, even if heard on scratched 45s, of Aretha's unchallenged claim as the Queen of Soul, her gospel-hewn power unmatched by any belter ever to face a microphone. MoFi extracts more detail and air from recordings that most music lovers would adore regardless of the sonics. Now they have a presence to humble the most fastidious of audiophiles. This SACD wins on every level: a perfect compilation of peerless soul music, with sound quality to match. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%



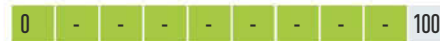
### WIHAN QUARTET

*The Beatles*

Nimbus Alliance NI6272 (Purist recording)

Recorded in Prague in 2000, this release may be to the jaded fan 'yet another Beatles covers album', a tradition that has yielded tributes in every known genre. (Yes, I have 'A Hard Day's Night' sung in Yiddish!) As much as I, a collector who gave up on such albums after reaching around 200, want to be blasé about it, I must admit that the arrangements here are so skilled and subtle that I immediately thought them as refreshing as those on acoustic guitarist Laurence Juber's albums. Songs are the 'usual suspects', but all suit the quartet save for 'I Want You (She's So Heavy)'. Proof that *The Beatles* were composers worthy of Beethoven devotees? *KK*

Sound Quality: 87%



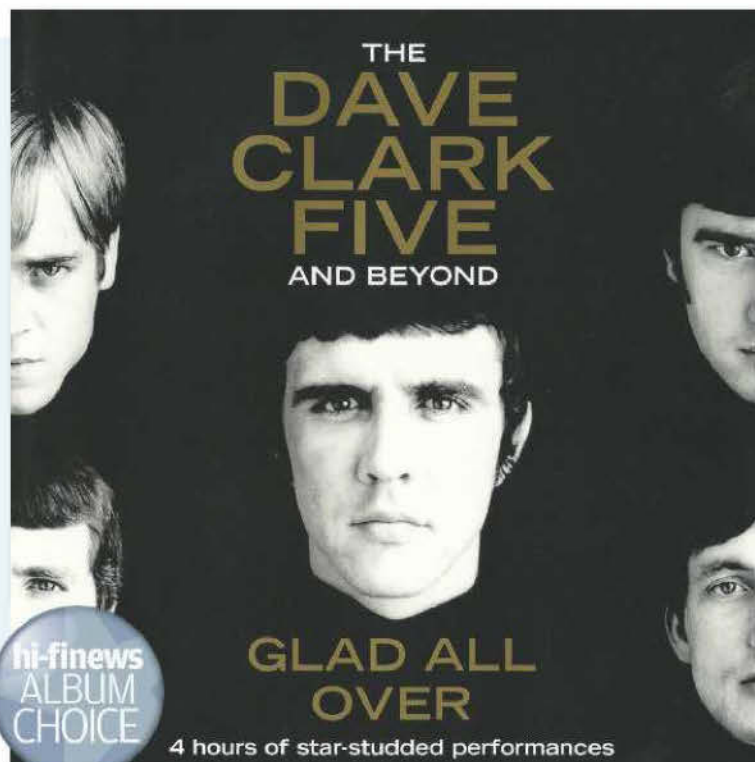
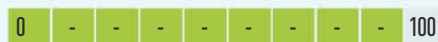
### DAVE CLARK FIVE

*The Dave Clark Five and Beyond/Glad All Over*

Big Five Films/PBS DAC600B (two Blu-ray discs; Region A only)

Along with Peter & Gordon, Herman's Hermits and others, the Dave Clark Five did far better in the US than back home in the UK, so this PBS special may prove to be an eye-opener. Fifteen consecutive hits stateside, over 100 million sales, a record 18 appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show*: they were simply huge. Enough time has passed to justify a US public television documentary – four hours including bonus material – that addresses their musical worth, with interviews from Paul McCartney, Bruce Springsteen, Ozzy and Sharon Osbourne, Steve Van Zandt, Stevie Wonder, Elton John, *et al*, and actors of the calibre of Laurence Olivier. The music stands up as powerful hard rock and pop with inescapable hooks. A delight. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%



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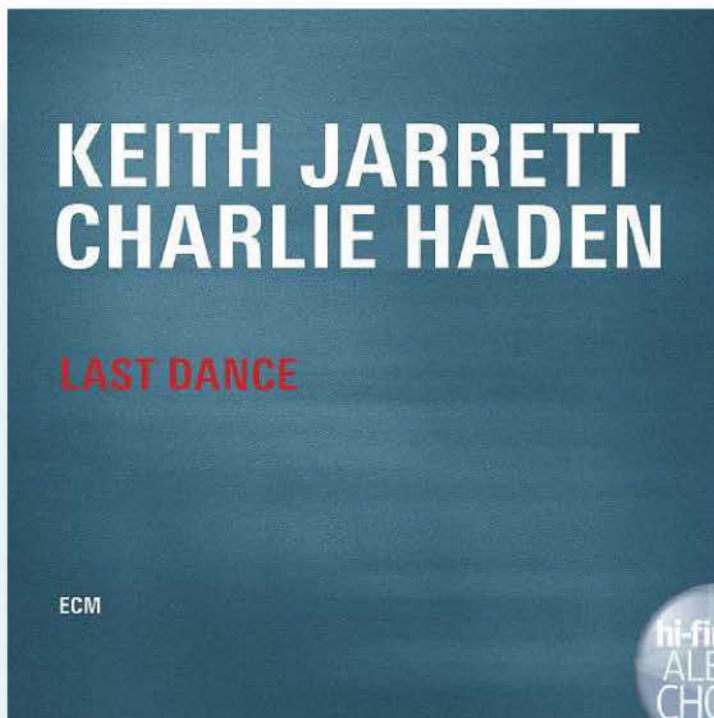
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**KEITH JARRETT & CHARLIE HADEN**

*Last Dance* (96kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

[www.hiresaudio.com](http://www.hiresaudio.com); ECM 2399/378 0524

Featured in our Sept '14 jazz reviews, *Last Dance* is now available as a 96kHz/24-bit download as well as CD. To recap, back in 2007 pianist Keith Jarrett invited bassist Charlie Haden to his Cavelight Studio where they spent four days recording. They'd met up during the making of a film about Haden and these intimate sessions were their first collaborations for 30 years. The result was the 2010 album *Jasmine*, the ECM label issuing a further collection of tracks for this year's *Last Dance* which features

the duo's delightful interpretations of standards such as Monk's 'Round Midnight' and Cole Porter's ballad 'Every Time We Say Goodbye'. Also included are alternative takes of 'Where Can I Go Without You' and 'Goodbye' covered on *Jasmine*. Said *The Guardian's* jazz critic in June: 'It's just as good as *Jasmine* and hopefully not a last dance for this partnership'. But sadly Haden passed away in July. *JB*

Sound Quality: 85%



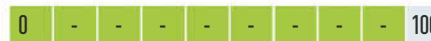
**PINK FLOYD**

*The Division Bell* (96kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

[www.hiresaudio.com](http://www.hiresaudio.com); Warner Music Group 29326

This year marks the 20th anniversary of Pink Floyd's *The Division Bell*, the band's final studio album: released in March '94. It was largely met with critical disdain at the time, although this didn't prevent loyal Floyd followers hungry for *anything* new ensuring it went to the top of the album charts on both sides of the Atlantic. Whether you consider it a true Floyd work or, like 1987's *A Momentary Lapse of Reason*, more a David Gilmour solo outing with contributions from Wright and Mason I'll leave you to decide. Meanwhile this HD download sounds really lovely, albeit only marginally more open and expressive than the original CD. Floyd fans unwilling to invest £110 in the commemorative deluxe box set (which includes a Blu-ray disc and 2LP 180g vinyl edition remastered by Doug Sax) might consider this download an essential addition to their music library. *JB*

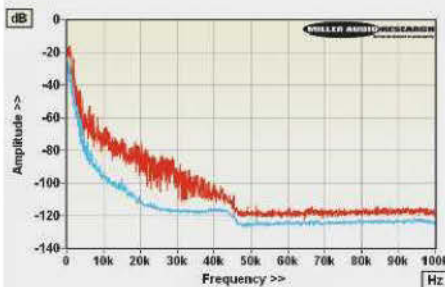
Sound Quality: 85%



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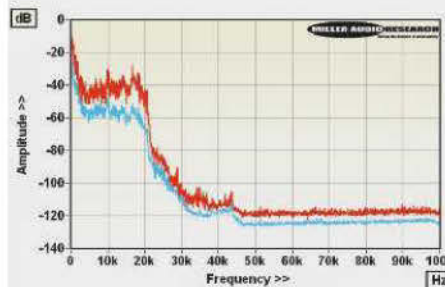
Following our Investigation feature [*HFN*, Jun '11] where we examined the claimed quality of high-resolution downloads, *Hi-Fi News & Record Review* is now measuring the true sample rate and bit-depth of the HD music downloads reviewed on these pages. These unique reviews will be a regular source of information for those seeking new and re-mastered recordings offered at high sample rates and with the promise of delivering the very best sound quality. (Note: asterisk in headings denotes technical reservation explained below.) PM

**LAB REPORT**



Recorded in 2014 at 96kHz, the 45kHz+ bandwidth is very generous for a combination of piano and double-bass, as the liveliest track [Graph - *Dance of the Infidels*] shows little meaningful harmonic content beyond 20kHz. PM

**LAB REPORT**



Recorded 20 years ago, *The Division Bell* is a mix of synthesised and analogue instrumentation. The latter is worthy of resampling at 96kHz but much of the former [Graph, trk 9] suggests the synths were operating at 44.1/48kHz. PM





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## THIS WILD LIFE

Clouded (96kHz/24-bit; FLAC)\*

[www.highresaudio.com](http://www.highresaudio.com); Epitaph/Warner

This debut album outing from California's This Wild Life sees the duo Kevin Jordan and Anthony Del Grosso recording with Aaron Marsh of Florida-based indie rock band Copeland, performing a collection of heartfelt and melodic 'acoustic punk-rock' songs described as a melding of punk and folk. Indeed the band describes itself as being able to successfully perform softer music while touring with heavier bands that play the sort of hardcore punk and metal they spent the formative years exploring. The sound quality throughout is slightly hard-edged and in-your-face, the production 'crowded' and subjectively forward. Lacking air and space between instruments and voices, it soon becomes fatiguing. If you like This Wild Life's expressive sing-along songs buy *Clouded* on CD. The recording frankly doesn't warrant it being in a 96kHz/24-bit container. *JB*

Sound Quality: 70%



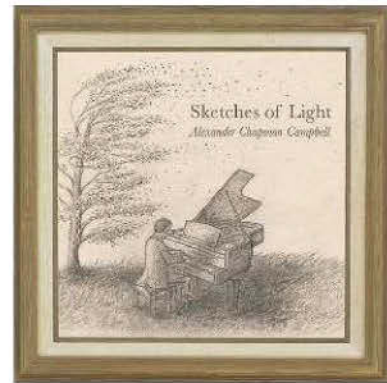
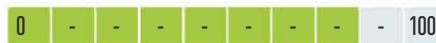
## SCO 40TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

Wagner Siegfried Idyll; Mozart 'Jupiter' Symphony; Sibelius 'The Tempest', Suite 2  
SCO/Robin Ticciati; Sir Charles Mackerras; Joseph Swensen (192kHz/24-bit FLAC/ALAC)\*

[www.linnrecords.com](http://www.linnrecords.com); Linn Records CKD 540

Linn has worked with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra for a decade and marks its 40th anniversary with a new Usher Hall recording of the *Siegfried idyll* and two reissues, upsampled from 88.2kHz/24-bit (Mozart: producer James Mallinson) and 96kHz/24-bit (Sibelius: Andrew Keener) masters. The Wagner is sensitively done, with notable horn playing and a very fine coda. A pity, perhaps that Ticciati didn't opt for the 13-instrument version like Georg Solti [VPO/Decca]. With enjoyable but 'softer' sound also from the Usher Hall (2003) Sibelius's theatre music suite is with the orchestra's Conductor Emeritus. The Mozart is a boldly dramatic reading from Sir Charles's 'Indian Summer' of mostly SCO recordings. City Halls Glasgow adds a slight brashness. *CB*

Sound Quality: 80%



## ALEXANDER CHAPMAN CAMPBELL

Sketches Of Light (96kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

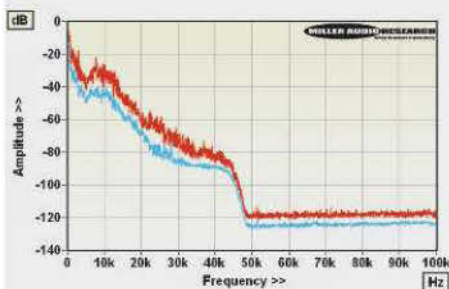
[www.highresaudio.com](http://www.highresaudio.com); Decca 378 0690

Campbell (26) fell in love with the sound of the piano as a child. Rather than training formally he decided to shut himself away with an instrument, playing and writing his own music. The 12 tracks selected for recording – some dating back to his teens – have titles, 'Light on the River', etc, which he says are not meant to be taken literally. But he sees *Sketches* as an integral work. Philip Hobbs produced at St George's Bristol in 2012, and a CD was first released by Music & Media (the Decca has two extra tracks). The booklet too is entirely by Campbell – with drawings rather in the manner of Raymond Briggs'. And the music? It's like a hash of 'Walking in the Air', some Debussy and the late Beethoven way of making the piano sustain sound. But without a trace of originality and painfully vacuous. At best you could admire the illusion of improvisation in the playing. *CB*

Sound Quality: 65%

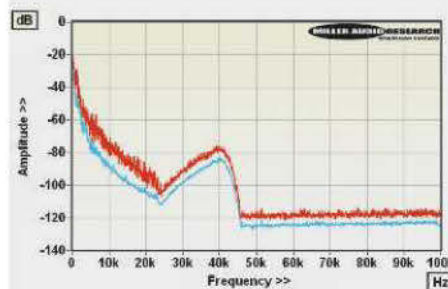


### LAB REPORT



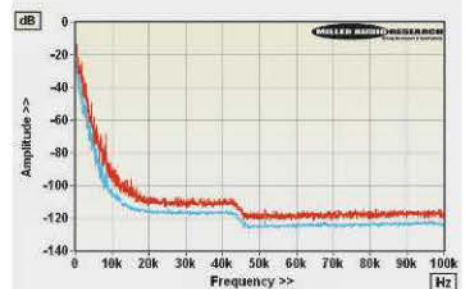
I'm not entirely convinced by this 96kHz rendering, as a sample-by-sample analysis reveals evidence of brickwall filtering at 22kHz on some sections of tracks [concealed by the long-term averaging, above]. Are some tracks upsampled? *PM*

### LAB REPORT



While still lighting the 192kHz LED on your DAC, all but track 1 look to be asymmetrically resampled from 88.2kHz stock. Tracks 2-10 are first downsampled from SACD [see Graph] and tracks 11-14 upsampled from 88.2kHz LPCM. *PM*

### LAB REPORT



A genuine 96kHz recording such as this offers a practical ~45kHz bandwidth but, as we've seen with other albums featuring solo piano, even the most dynamic passages [Graph – *Light In The North*] hit the noise floor at <20kHz. *PM*



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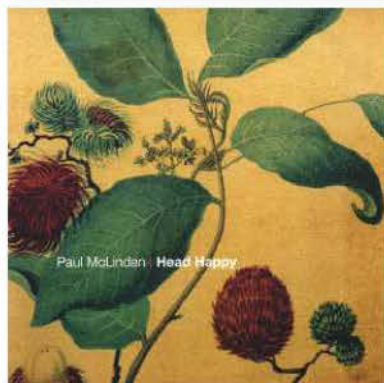
### TINA DICO

#### Whispers

*Finest Gramophone Finest24DigP*

Invited to compose a movie soundtrack, Danish singer-songwriter Tina Dico began exploring more intimate territory than before, so this album may be something of a shock to anyone familiar with her oeuvre. Where once she crafted radio-friendly mainstream pop-rock with big hooks, *Whispers* presents introspective, stripped-down confessional songs that could find favour with fans of Amy Mann or Suzanne Vega. Happily, her note-perfect vocals are still intact and, if anything, this is a more durable, more international, album than anything she's done to date, elevated beyond the norm by subtle arrangements and richly eclectic musical influences. Dico has turned a corner and now looks like a major songwriter for the future. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 92%



### PAUL MCLINDEN

#### Head Happy

*One Inch Punch Records OIP007*

Glaswegian songwriter McLinden is a refreshingly encouraging oddity in this time of manufactured pop tosh. He recorded this glorious album in a tiny loft and played every instrument himself. It's brash, consciously uncomplicated and full of the tell-tale signs of having been hand-crafted by a man with a headful of splendid ideas and relatively little studio experience. His eminently singable songs tend to come in under three minutes each, and display a host of influences as diverse as blues and krautrock, making him hard to pigeonhole as anything except prodigiously talented; but music as euphoric as this is sure to find a massive audience before too long. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 85%



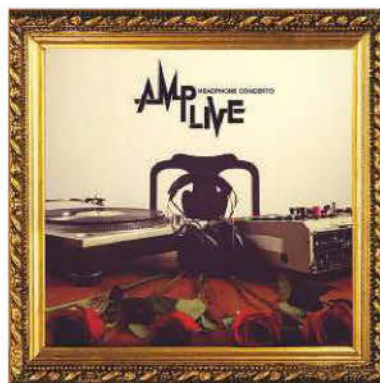
### MORTON VALENCE

#### Left

*Bastard Recordings BRO9*

On their third album, this unusually literate London-based combo is delving further into the Lou Reed-meets-Indiepop ocean that inspired their earlier works but, fortunately, mainman Robert 'Hacker' Jessett knows how to keep things fresh with hazy splashes of acoustic bossa nova rhythms, tongue-in-cheek evocations of punk and Kinks-style '60s pop. Hacker's co-conspirator Anne Gilpin also adds much to the mix, notably her spooky vocals on 'Annie McFall', 'Lost Forgotten Boy' and 'Clouds'. The musical highlight is perhaps the despairing 'Slide Don't Try', and the best lyric probably 'She's dancing barefoot under a moonlit sun', but there's so much more here to savour. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 89%



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Ready for a challenge? Yes? This is for you. Right off, a tinkling music box is interrupted by an authoritarian spoken instruction suggesting the listener should 'Unlock your senses', followed by a glitchy synth-pop riff and a meandering cello. Yes, dude, we're in psychedelic-hip-hop-concept-prog crossover territory where, as enigmatic Californian DJ/producer/arranger Amp Live and his guests move things along, the vibes get very strange indeed. It's worth owning for high-points like the haunting 'Signs', the shiny pop tune 'Run Back', the mystical instrumental 'Remembrance' and the dance groove of 'Penny Nickel Dime'. Amp Live is, very probably, a genius. Trust me. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 90%





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### NEW YORK STANDARDS QUARTET

#### The New Straight Ahead

Whirlwind Recordings WR4654

Tim Armacost, David Berkman and Gene Jackson already had impressive credits when they formed NYSQ in 2006, and so does Daiki Yasukagawa, who has replaced original bassist Yasuke Inoue. They cheerfully set about 'redesigning' tunes as familiar as 'Autumn Leaves', or 'When You Wish Upon A Star', and sometimes their choices are quite extreme or whimsical, like the slower-than-slow tempo of 'It Don't Mean A Thing'. But then they do a shining, chunky and invigorating 'Misterioso' and also a standard once associated with Monk, 'Remember'. This is great music and, as the cover art tells you, it goes straight ahead in many new directions. *SH*

Sound Quality: 85%



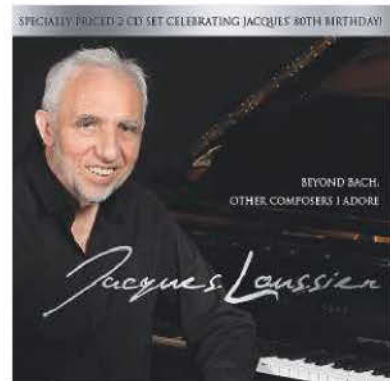
### SEAN JONES

#### Im-pro-vised Never Before Seen

Mack Avenue MAC1080

Although this is the peerless trumpeter's seventh album in ten years for this label, during half that time he also served as lead trumpeter of the Jazz At Lincoln Center Orchestra. Then, in 2011 he led Wayne Shorter and Herbie Hancock's 'Tribute To Miles' tour band. Unlike those previous albums, all to some extent 'produced', this one was recorded straight, with Jones's quartet playing live in the studio, and the sound is excellent. Pianist Orrin Evans can be breathtaking with his subtle touch, incredible rhythm and wonderfully translucent chords, while Luques Curtis and Obed Calvaire are superb too on bass and drums. Not to be missed. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%



### JACQUES LOUSSIER

#### Beyond Bach: Other Composers I Adore

Telarc TEL-35342-02 [2 CDs]

This is one of two double CDs sampling the pianist's Telarc albums of the 1990s and 2000s and marking his 80th birthday year. The other one, a Bach collection called *My Personal Favourites* [TEL-35319-02], kicks off inevitably with 'Air on a G String,' though in a 1993 version that's rather more ornamented than the original 1959 track made famous by all those Hamlet cigar commercials. Bach's music seems to survive any kind of adaptation, but many will find Loussier's jazz trio explorations of other composers sometimes less than persuasive, or even trite. Yet it's impossible not to admire his endless invention and polished mastery in the idiom he created. *SH*

Sound Quality: 80%



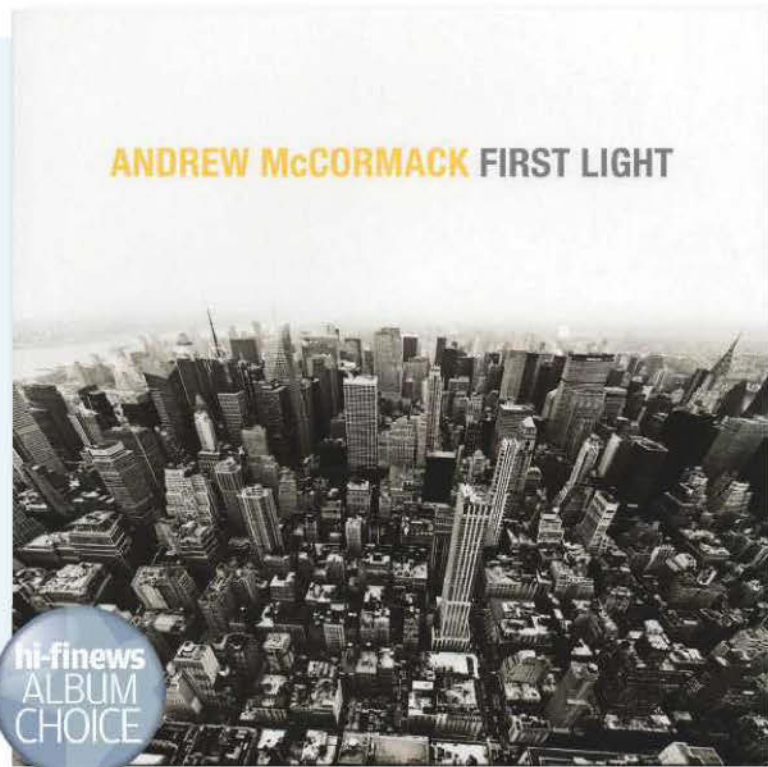
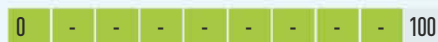
### ANDREW McCORMACK

#### First Light

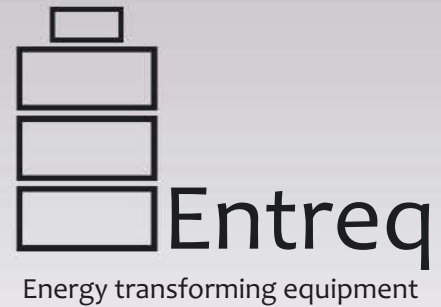
Edition Records EDN1052

After his ear-catching 2007 debut, *Telescope*, pianist McCormack followed through with a couple of fine albums in a duo with saxophonist Jason Yarde and also the trio set *Live In London*. Now based in New York, he's accompanied here by Americans Zak Lober on bass and Colin Stranahan on drums. All but one of the nine numbers are McCormack originals, the beautiful title track building up softly like the dawn itself, and all these compositions combine his never-failing, long-lined melodic invention with a strong structural logic and a solid emotional centre. Finally, he plays Monk's 'Pannonica' with a new rhythmic twist – but after a couple of hearings you feel it could have always been like that. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%







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### R STRAUSS

Don Juan; Death and Transfiguration; Till Eulenspiegel  
Pittsburgh SO/Manfred Honeck

Reference Recordings FR-707SACD (SACD hybrid)

**Impressive engineering just edges this 150th anniversary release into 'album choice' this month. Balances, dynamics and instrumental timbres are certainly pleasing (as you might expect from this label) in this 2012 Heinz Hall 'Pittsburgh Live!' production. Honeck came to the orchestra in 2008 and the playing here is pretty refined; the leader's solos are effective in all three works. The morbid *Death and Transfiguration* comes off best, I think, since there's a rather jarring ending of the climactic horn motif in *Don Juan*; and if you see *Till* as a Bruegelesque character, the sophistication here works against that picture. No real match for the VPO/Karajan Decca versions [478 0155]. **CB****

Sound Quality: 80%



### BARTOK

Bluebeard's Castle  
Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Irmgard Seefried,  
Swiss Festival Orchestra/Rafael Kubelik

Audite 95.626; downloads up to 48kHz/24-bit

Presentation standards are high for this absorbing 1962 Lucerne Festival concert performance, sung in German. There is even more at Audite's website including a downloadable PDF of German/English texts. The radio tape is clean if inevitably limited when compared with, say, stereo studio versions with Kertész or Haitink. The human warmth characterising Kubelik's conducting makes the opera even more poignant, while soprano and baritone project their roles with clarity and dramatic presence. A complementary version, then, rather than a first recommendation. **CB**

Sound Quality: 75%



### BEETHOVEN

Piano Trios: Op.70:2; Op.97 'Archduke'  
Alexander Melnikov/Isabelle Faust/Jean-Guihen Queyras

Harmonia Mundi HMC 902125

The first of the two trios Op.70 is a genial work often overlooked in favour of its 'Ghost' partner: it is given perhaps the more enjoyable of the two recordings here. In the 'Archduke' (its premiere marked the end of public performances by the composer) a double-repeat scheme is given for the scherzo, for which these players adopt a brisk tempo. In the 2011 Cropper/Welsh/Roscoe version [Sonimage] the approach is more leisurely, and the trio is more piano dominated, whereas a wonderful balance is obtained here, Melnikov playing a Graff fortepiano while the two string instruments are from 1704 and 1696. **CB**

Sound Quality: 80%



### SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphony 7 'Leningrad'  
Hallé Orchestra/Sir Mark Elder

Halle CD HLL 7537

Most conductors underline the strident and anguished parts of this wartime symphony, whereas Sir Mark Elder (in a mostly live 2013 Bridgewater Hall production) throws a different light on the work, with a notable transparency in the second movement. There's plenty of volume at the very ending of the symphony – reflected by the applause – but the long build-up from the side-drum entry in the first movement is less overwhelming than with, say, Nelsons and the CBSO [HFN Aug '14]. Elder and the Hallé present the music more as a balanced symphonic structure yet always expressive of pathos and Shostakovich's irony. **CB**

Sound Quality: 78%





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**Paul Miller**  
Editor

Technician and writer on all things audio for some 30 years, Paul Miller took over the editor's chair in 2006. He invented the QC Suite, used across the audio industry

# United by music and hi-fi

The world's largest independent Awards association is evolving, but every year its strength in depth ensures the best kit is recognised says **Paul Miller**, EISA's Hi-Fi Expert Group Manager

**E**uropean Imaging and Sound Association' is, perhaps, a slightly clunky, continental moniker for what is a surprisingly elegant organisation. It all began 30-odd years ago when a small group of photographic magazines clubbed together to deliver an award for the year's best camera. Not only did this single award evolve to include cameras and lenses of every ilk but specialist audio and video magazines joined to add the best in hi-fi to the best in vision. At which point the EISA we know today was born and the seeds of the Awards that grace this month's *Hi-Fi News* were sown.

The 21st century EISA has mushroomed into what is now the world's largest and most comprehensive awards organisation. Maintaining this position rather depends on combining EISA's scale with the flexibility to respond to changes in consumer trends. Currently, EISA combines the talents of some 50 different magazines from as far west as the UK, through the European continent and Scandinavian countries to the vastness of Russia and its one-time republics in the east.

## TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN'

Up until this year, the Association was divided into five broad Panels covering audio and home theatre, video (displays and camcorders), photography, in-car and mobile electronics. But product innovations have blurred these lines – consumers are now taking pictures and creating movie clips with their phones, for example, a trend that's taken its toll on the compact camera market.

Similarly, while the traditional two-channel hi-fi market has witnessed something of a resurgence, the



**ABOVE:** A typical session from the EISA Convention. The EISA year is divided between the Convention, held in spring, and the General Meeting where the Awards are finally voted upon

headphone scene has exploded into every corner of our lives with big, over-ear 'phones being worn out-and-about and driven by some fairly sophisticated mobile devices. Change to the Awards structure was inevitable. This year, EISA's member magazines are represented by a series of 'Expert Groups', the most important

evolution being the sub-division of the old Audio and Home Theatre panel into three distinct Expert Groups – Hi-Fi, Home Theatre (Audio) and Home Theatre (Video).

*Hi-Fi News* is proud to represent the Hi-Fi Expert Group for the UK alongside our sister title *Home Cinema Choice* on the Home Theatre Video Expert Group.

## THE AUDIOPHILE BOND

Worldly-wise audiophiles are likely to be familiar with the best, test-based magazines that are our fellow members. These include *Stereo* from Germany, *Audio* from Poland, *Stereo Prestige* from France, *Hifimaailma* from Finland and *Audio* from Italy, to name but a few. Our Show Blog from Moscow this month was filed by

Mikhail Borzenkov, the Editor of Russia's *Stereo & Video*. Look back at his pictures and you could be looking at a major city-centre show anywhere in the world.

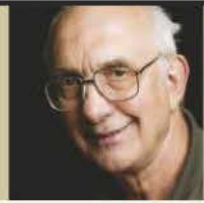
The point is, stereotypical notions of a German, French, Italian, *etc.*, 'sound' dividing our hobby are anachronistic. Our fellow enthusiasts may be separated by language but we're all having exactly the same conversations about vinyl and hi-res digital, solid-state versus tubes, and so on. You can also bet they're equally as excited to read about Krell's Duo 300 power amp and KEF's new Reference 5 floorstanders [p34 and p28] as we are!

The fact we are actually one big audio community, joined by our shared passion for music and great hi-fi, should be no great surprise. When was the last time you saw *Hi-Fi News* populated solely with UK-designed or manufactured kit? Our driving ambition remains to provide fellow enthusiasts with exclusive and in-depth reviews of the best high-end audio regardless of where it originates.

Which means Italian audiophiles join us to read the first reviews of Sonus faber, the French for Devialet and the Germans for T+A or Burmester. If you're a *Hi-Fi News* regular, then you're already straddling the world stage of audio. ☺

'EISA has responded swiftly to changes in consumer trends'





## 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

# Full stream ahead?

This month **Barry Fox** sets off on the trail of patents granted to headphone maker Beats and finds that two, filed in 2008, were finally granted to the company just prior to its sale to Apple...

**W**hy on Earth would Apple pay around \$3bn for Beats? Ahead of the deal Monster's founder and 'Head Monster', Noel Lee volunteered a comment: 'For the first five years, until 2013, Monster was Beats, having developed, engineered, and distributed all of the Beats products... [but] our license with Beats ended with the purchase of Beats by HTC [the cellphone giant]. Monster, by contract, had to turn over all of the IP [that's patents and know-how] and manufacturing in 2013'. So I did a patent search.

### WHAT APPLE NEEDS?

Arguably the most interesting headphone patent is pending application US 2014/72137, filed in 2012. It shows headphones with a control unit and microphone pick-up which can be slid along the headphone cables to different positions. Hardly a \$3bn idea, methinks.

But the search also revealed that the Beats buyout deal went through shortly after two Beats patents on music streaming, filed way back in 2008 were finally granted by the US Patent office.

Apple has of course been seeing iTunes online music sales hit by the success of streaming services like Deezer and Spotify. Beats had successfully launched its own music service, Beats Music. So maybe Beats' streaming patents are what Apple needs.

The Beats streaming patents are hardly in plain English, with eye-glazingly repetitive content. But here is the nitty-gritty. US patent 8,626,707, on 'automatic meta-data sharing of existing media to create streamable collections', was filed in April 2008 by David Hyman

and Andrei Marinescu, assigned to Beats Music and finally granted in January 2014.

Andrei Marinescu is listed as boss of DoorBot, a video doorbell company, and ex-MOG, the music service that Beats bought in 2012. David Hyman is listed as MOG founder.

When they filed their patent in 2008 Marinescu and Hyman pointed out that when someone buys music, movie, game or e-book content through a service such as Apple iTunes, and downloads the content to a home or portable player, they cannot play it on a friend's device. What's needed, they said, is 'universal access to a "streamable collection"', which can be shared by groups of people the system has identified as having similar tastes.

So they cooked up a 'profile generator' which analyses a user's playlist history or music collection on a hard drive, and determines a 'compatibility rating' with other users based on similar preferences. The generator then invites other users to connect and join a group. Sometimes the group will have an 'admired' leader with

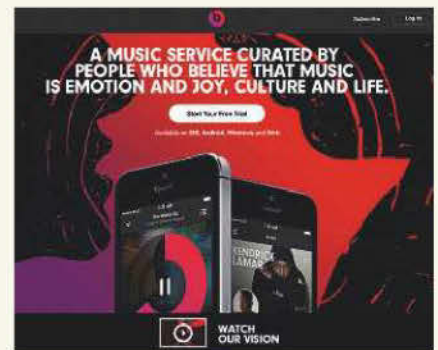
tastes the other group members like to follow.

Patent US 8,688,674 was filed in February 2008 by Lucas Carlson, assigned to Beats Music and granted in April 2014. Carlson

led the development team at MOG and this patent tells how to speed up content searches for online music systems.

Back in 2008, when the patent was filed, when a user enters a query in a search engine, looking for music (or people, lyrics, or reviews), they may have to enter all characters of the query and click on a 'submit' button before the query is sent to a server.

Says the patent: 'The user may be fatigued to enter the query entirely in the search engine every time [and] may



**ABOVE:** Said to offer over 20m songs, Beats streaming service is at [www.beatsmusic.com](http://www.beatsmusic.com)

become frustrated with an amount of time the user may have to wait to receive a response... As a result, the user may begin looking for an alternative search engine that delivers a faster search response.'

### SEVERAL TRICKS

The 'fast search' patent Apple has now bought tells how to make users feel that the system is responding rapidly, by delivering results before the user has finished entering the search words.

Several tricks are used to achieve this. Previous search entries are memorised in a cache. Search words are sent to the music database while they are being keyed in, but when the letters 't', 'h' and 'e' are entered rapidly it is assumed it is the word 'the'. Blank spaces are ignored. Otherwise the search term is sent off as soon as four letters have been keyed.

Ironically Apple's Beats buyout comes just as cracks are showing in the whole concept of streaming. Listening depends on a reliable internet connection, which the user has to pay for. And the streaming sites can be knocked off line by hackers. Deezer recently apologised for several hours of musical silence caused by a massive hack-attack.

You don't get that with downloads, discs or vinyl. ☹

'Apple has been seeing iTunes online music sales hit by streaming services'



**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

# Mysteries of pricing

Half the money you spent on that HD TV years ago will today buy you a set that's likely to be far superior, yet this isn't the case when it comes to high-end audio. **Barry Willis** looks for answers

Some fifteen years ago I saw my first high-definition flat-panel video monitor, at a private, by-appointment-only press showing at a fancy San Francisco hotel. With more than a hint of hushed reverence, the public relations specialist in charge of the event ushered me and a couple of colleagues into a room where sat a 42in Fujitsu plasma display, a commercial signage unit modified for full motion video. It was stunning, a vast improvement over the grainy 4:3 video we had known all our lives. Its price was stunning, too: \$15,000.

Recently I received an advertising circular from electronics chain Best Buy, wherein was featured a Samsung 43in 720p plasma HDTV with 600Hz refresh rate, priced at \$300 after discounts. If a side-by-side comparison were possible, the difference in performance of the two models would be remarkable, but not nearly as much as the pricing: a 50x reduction over 15 years.

**PRICE EROSION**

This is the trajectory – sometimes called price erosion – that most electronics technologies follow.

They debut at prices accessible only for wealthy early adopters, and gradually decline as manufacturing efficiency improves, incorporating many generations

of technological improvement in the process. Consumers patient enough to wait for products to reach their desired price point are rewarded with better performance and reliability, at the small cost of having sacrificed bragging rights.

This is true throughout the electronics realm, except in our little niche of high-performance audio. A recent issue of *HFN* featured an electronic product that

**RIGHT: While a replacement for the Fujitsu plasma set adorning the walls of this high-end cinema room will cost far less than the original today, equivalent speakers and electronics will not. The reason? Mass production**



retails in the US at \$2500. At about the same time I enjoyed my introduction to HD video, I had the original version of this component in my system. I remember it costing a bit under \$1000 at retail.

Assume for discussion's sake that the current version is similar to the original model. Had it followed plasma TV's trajectory it would now be selling for \$20. That's ludicrous, of course – manufacturing efficiencies at the manufacturer in question could not have improved that much – but perhaps too are five-figure prices now

commonly affixed to turntables whose fundamental design and method of manufacture haven't changed in more than three decades.

Consider a theoretical model XYZ turntable that

sold for \$900 in 1980 – a lot of money then, but not an obscene amount. This table has undergone many incremental improvements over the years, but in form and function remains much like the original, except that its selling price is now twenty-five times higher.

Classical economists would predict that a decline in demand would be reflected by a decline in price. Does the audio industry

exist in an alternate universe where normal logic is inverted?

The reason is that differing business models are at work. Bright, beautiful flat-panel TVs are made by high-volume manufacturers, whose single-digit profit margins are offset by selling millions of units. Many audio products are handmade by small companies with few employees, and are represented by a few dealers – or as is increasingly the case today, sold directly via websites.

**FACTORY COSTS**

In high-end audio, the rule seems to be low volumes and high margins. One widely held belief is that retail prices for high-performance audio products are typically five times factory cost – for example, speakers retailing at \$20,000 per pair cost their maker \$4000.

This model made sense when there were many outstretched hands in the distribution chain – importers, national/regional distributors, local dealers.

Now the delivery arc is often direct from manufacturer to end-user. In our musings about why high-performance audio fails to break through to a larger audience, we ought to consider this. In 1999, very few people bought \$15,000 flat-panel TVs, but today everyone with a decent income has two or three. ☺

'In high-end audio, the rule seems to be low volumes and high margins'





## 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

# Keep warring fans apart!

Having a computer plumbed into your hi-fi system serving up music files can certainly be convenient, but noise from PC fans can ruin musical enjoyment. **Jim Lesurf** has a solution...

In theory, theory and practice agree. In practice, they don't. It's a maxim engineers are all too familiar with. In much the same way, it's all too easy to think you know something in principle, but still be surprised by its effects in practice.

Two examples of this thinking struck me recently as a result of adding a new Network Attached Storage (NAS) device to our home network.

I mostly play audio files using a computer plumbed into my main hi-fi system. This only runs audio-related software which passes output via USB to a DAC. I prefer this approach as I find it offers greater flexibility than using an all-in-one streaming device.

### FIDDLING ABOUT

However, there are downsides. Setting up such a system can require more fiddling about than simply buying and using a commercial audio package. It also means being able to find and set up a 'mechanically silent' computer. For obvious reasons, music fans and cooling fans don't cohabit happily. The noise from cooling fans can ruin musical enjoyment. After all, there's no point in having a hi-fi system with an electronic background noise level 100dB down if you can hear a computer wheezing and buzzing across the room.

I knew that streaming players make setting up the process much simpler than using your own computer set-up. But walking to my hi-fi room from the hallway where I'd installed the NAS, I realised that by using a streamer in my listening room to play music files stored elsewhere on a NAS kept the warring fans apart. No need for the user to have to source a silent computer. This was

'For obvious reasons, music fans and cooling fans don't cohabit happily'



ABOVE: A NAS drive connects to your router and can be accessed from PCs also on that network

a practical advantage that I hadn't really appreciated in advance.

Until recently I've always make audio recordings using a standalone recorder. I also have the habit of keeping multiple copies of my files on various USB removable hard disks around the house. This was partly to ensure that one failure wouldn't result in the loss of all my data and partly to ensure I always had a disk to hand when I needed to locate a music file.

The second realisation was a result of also having now switched to using a USB ADC for making recordings. I now use this with the same – mechanically silent – computer that I use for playing back music.

When installing the NAS I didn't actually have audio recording in mind at all. I bought one simply as a central place to store my audio files and I plan to go on making safety back-up copies of files onto removable USB hard disks. But the NAS was intended as a convenient way

to access files from *all* our computers. This now works fine. The surprise came when I resumed making recordings. I quickly realised that now I could make recordings direct to the NAS, and that then they were immediately available to all the other computers in the house.

### RECORDING TO NAS

I do most processing and analysis on another, more powerful, machine. Since this is more powerful it has fairly noisy mechanical fans whooshing away. So it is kept in a different room to my main hi-fi system. It rapidly became clear just how convenient the new arrangement was! The moment a recording had ended I could work on the results with whatever computer was convenient.

I was also impressed by just how reliably and easily I am able to make high-res recordings directly to the NAS. I've now happily made 192kHz/32-bit recordings this way. I hope to try higher rates and DSD/DoP soon.

Again, I knew in theory that this should work, but experiencing it was still something of a delightful surprise. ☺

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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

# Premium platters

With music of all genres now just a mouse-click away, it's easy to forget that sourcing recordings once took both time and effort. Yet for some treasures nothing has changed, says **Steve Harris**

Even though I'm old enough, it's hard to remember what it was like when you had to go to real effort and expense to find and listen to a particular piece of music. When you'd read books enthusing about certain recordings and then spend fruitless hours trying to track them down. When you couldn't find almost anyone's biography by clicking on Wikipedia.

But nothing has brought it all back to me more clearly than *All This And Slowly Deteriorating Fast*, the last memoir of the late Jim Godbolt, who died at the age of 90 in January 2013.

### HOWL OF DISGUST

In 2005, Proper Music issued a 101-track, 4CD box to go with *Jazz In Britain 1919-1950*, Godbolt's best-known book. Although Proper has made it the same shape, *All This And Slowly Deteriorating Fast* is a book with a CD, not a box set. It's a swansong follow-up to Godbolt's *All This And 10%*, describing his efforts as a band agent, and *All This And Many A Dog*, which covered his later experiences when obliged to earn a living as a meter reader.

Before all that came World War II, when Godbolt served in the navy. On shore leave in Cape Town, he came across a backstreet junk shop that had piles of mint-condition 78rpm records from American labels such as Gennett, Paramount and Diva. Godbolt bought 150 of them at a shilling apiece.

Back on board, when he played 'I Heard The Voice Of A Pork Chop' recorded by the obscure banjoist Bogus Ben Covington on the small Paramount label in 1928, his shipmates howled in disgust. They were more appreciative

**RIGHT:** Ad for Jerry's Records features the original Crumb drawing of Jerry Weber and his son Willie holding the 'Holy Grail of 78s'. This is a mint copy of Robert Johnson's 'I Believe I'll Dust My Broom', worth between \$6000 and \$10,000 and acquired by Jerry's in 2012. The store is in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

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of Lil Armstrong And Her Swing Band with 'Safely Locked Up In My Heart' from 1938. Somehow, he got all the treasures home safely, but later sold them for 'a song', to his lifelong regret.

### MAKING HEADLINES

It's hard to imagine that old-style jazz buff Jim Godbolt, who hated 1960s pop even when working as agent for The Swinging Blue Jeans, would have had much in common with Robert Crumb, creator of Mr Natural and Horny Harriet Hotpants. But it was thanks to the cartoonist that only a few weeks after Godbolt had passed away, the very record that once appalled his wartime shipmates made headlines in the *Pittsburgh Gazette*.

The story was that Jerry Weber and his son Willie, of Jerry's Records [see [www.jerrysrecords.com](http://www.jerrysrecords.com)], came across a mint copy of the Covington record. They contacted Crumb, now living in France,

knowing him to be an avid collector of early blues records. Crumb agreed to trade the record for a drawing, which depicts Jerry and Willie exultantly clutching what Jerry called the 'Holy Grail of 78s'. This is a mint copy of Robert Johnson's 'I Believe I'll Dust My Broom', worth probably \$6000 to \$10,000, which Jerry's acquired in 2012.

### INSTANT FIND

If you can't wait to hear Bogus Ben Covington's 'Adam And Eve In The Garden Of Eden', you can find it instantly on YouTube, dubbed off a 2006 CD compilation called *Good For What Ails You: Music Of The Medicine Shows 1926-1937* [Old Hat Records].

And if you want to own *I Heard The Voice Of A Pork Chop*, it's the first track on the CD compiled by Mike Pointon to accompany *All This And Slowly Deteriorating Fast*. Naturally, this follows up with Lil Armstrong before launching into rare British jazz of the Trad era.

Nowadays, you don't have to be a collector to get to hear something. But you'd have to save up for the shellac. ☪

'Godbolt later sold his collection of 78rpm records for "a song", to his lifelong regret'

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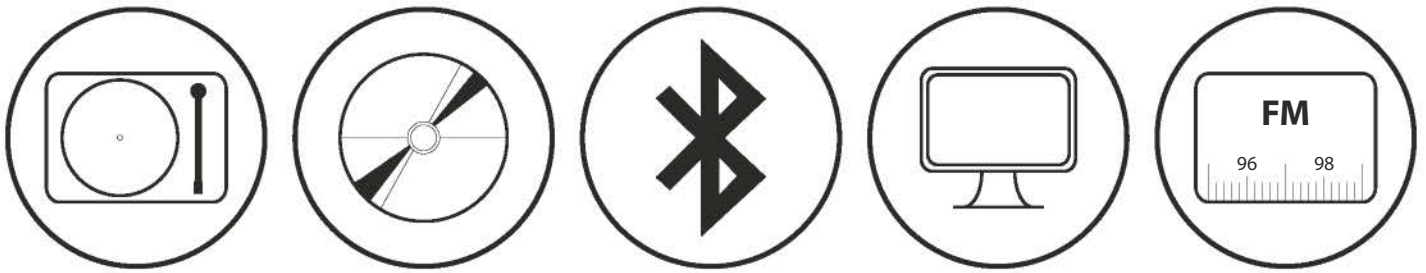
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## YOUR VIEWS

# Sound Off!

Correspondents express their own opinions, not those of *Hi-Fi News*. We reserve the right to edit letters for publication. Correspondents using e-mail are asked to give their full postal address (which won't be published). Letters seeking advice will be answered in print on our Sound Off pages, but due to time constraints we regret we're unable to answer questions on buying items of hi-fi or any other hi-fi queries by telephone, post or via e-mail.

## ALIVE AND KICKING... HFN REKINDLES READER'S INTEREST IN HI-FI

To cut a long story, I recently had time to kill at an airport so decided to treat myself to a couple of hi-fi mags: *Hi-Fi News* and one that used to concern itself purely with hi-fi but now seems content to interest me in high-tech TVs of which I care not one jot.

Now, I have not read a hi-fi mag for some ten to 15 years, so what a discovery to find that so many of your staff are the very same writers whose words I used to read, understand and trust all those years ago: Paul Miller, Keith Howard, John Bamford, Ken Kessler, Steve Harris...

I still run an Exposure 15 (non Super) that dates back to the '80s and which has not missed a beat during daily use. The rest of my system comprises a Pink Triangle LPT/GTI turntable with Tabriz arm, Mission 782 speakers (I can hear you laughing, and yes they have

been re-driven), a Marantz CD63 MkII Ki CD player and an Apple iPad for streaming.

I used to believe that once I was happy with my system I'd stop buying the mags. Oh dear. I fear that after just one read of your June edition I have the need to start auditioning the current gear!

The last 15 years have seen me seduced by names like Rickenbacker, Martin and Gibson but now I feel the urge to revert to my first love. I hope you all feel very guilty.

All joking aside, I relished reading your magazine cover to cover and seeing so many of the old names alive and kicking. Thank you so much and cheers for a great read.

*Steve Hollingbery, via email*

Paul Miller replies: Thank you for the kind words Steve, we certainly aim to please! In many respects the hi-fi scene has never been so energised, so populated with new and exciting products and technologies while still paying homage to the formats we've lived with and loved for decades. It's our mission at *Hi-Fi News* to convey all that's happening in the two-channel world in the kind of depth and with the maturity of experience you'll not find elsewhere. If we convinced you to return to the fold in just one issue then I count that a great success. Why not treat yourself to a subscription and get your fix every month? See p102!

Ken Kessler replies: Once bitten by the hi-fi bug, its effects are incurable – as you've discovered. Sadly too few younger music lovers are embracing decent sound – we may be the 'last generation'. The upside is that nothing beats experience, hence the venerable staff at *HFN* (tempered by a few, much younger writers!).



**ABOVE: Mission 782s from the 1990s, which Steve has blessed with new drivers**

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email your views to: letters@hifinews.com –  
please use 'Sound Off' in your subject field

## The lowdown on downloads...

**GIVE US A REGULAR ROUND-UP OF HI-RES SOURCES, PLEASE**

I have been following avidly the whole subject of hi-res downloads and all it means for us devotees of music. I was delighted to read in your March edition that Sony is evidently taking DSD seriously with its HAP-Z1ES/TA-A1ES media player and amplifier, because it seems to me that the audio industry in general has been slow in developing this market.

However, now that things are beginning to move at a faster pace, is there a possibility that you could publish from time to time a short, but comprehensive, guide to the sources from which us readers could download music? In almost every issue of your wonderful magazine I find references to some new company in this field.

A regular but simple guide to sources with details of what genres of music are featured, the degree of resolution offered and whether companies insist on a subscription would be a huge help. I remember some years back



**ABOVE: Sony's HAP-Z1ES media player is compatible with files up to 24-bit/192kHz and DSD downloads**

Christopher Breunig taking a look at the availability of hi-res downloads for collectors of classical music [*HFN* Dec '11]. He did a splendid job! Perhaps this is a subject for him to tackle?

*James Bruxner, via email*

Christopher Breunig replies: Well thank you James: I checked to see if B&W's Society of Sound subscription system is still current (it is) and spotted an interesting 5m film where veteran producer James Mallinson talks about recording opera, with film of Sir Colin Davis conducting *Der Freischütz*. There are always new things to see about classical music on the internet!

I don't think much has changed since I wrote the Investigation piece on downloading classical music – except that the options for yet higher resolutions are appearing, eg, Channel Classics.

There's sporadic uploading of licensed Universal recordings but, disappointingly, a tendency to market popular new material – like Nicola Benedetti's new chart-topping Scottish album *Homecoming*, or Benjamin Grosvenor – rather than a steady transfer of 96kHz/24-bit classic recordings. Tucked away in a recent press release, Linn Records has announced that it won't be offering other labels any longer [see p18].



## Cable ideas

MODERN WIRES A BALM FOR VINTAGE TIZZ?

It was with interest that I read John Fearon's incantations about his Trio/Yamaha NS-1000M combination in the July 2014 issue.

I also owned the legendary NS-1000M for many years and I am very familiar with its system matching requirements which, if not observed, can lead to a hard or tizzy sound.

The truth is that these speakers were light years ahead in design, and little in the way of amplification that was available in the '70s and '80s could meet their requirements. The beryllium domes on the mid and tweeter are lightning fast and reveal all that goes before them in the chain.

I would suggest John auditions Tellurium Ultra Black and Vertere Pulse C speaker cables in his system. Both will cure harshness (particularly the Vertere), likely dispensing with the need to adjust the pots and have 'lots of soft furnishings nearby'.

Roger Senekai, Dubai



ABOVE: Yamaha NS-1000M from 1975

Tim Jarman replies: The NS-1000M is a revealing speaker but there are plenty of amps of the period that work perfectly well with it, like the B&O Beomaster 4400 [see *HFN* Jun '12] and Technics SU-8088.

Cable suggestions are always welcome Roger, but you don't state the type of the amplifier you used with the Yamahas. Hence, the differences you mention may be a result of the interaction of the cables and the amplifier rather than an absolute attribute of the cables themselves. Users with other amplifiers may not obtain these same results.

## A hit 'revival'

CLASSICAL COMPANION STRIKES A CHORD

Christopher Breunig's new series, 'Classical Companion', is an excellent 'revival' for *Hi-Fi News* and much appreciated. Time was when only classical music was reviewed, in the days of editor John Crabbe. I do hope the feature will expand to four pages.

Humphrey Britton-Johnson, via email

I do like the idea of the new 'Classical Companion' thread from Christopher Breunig. Hopefully it will run for a while. Now all we need is a beginner's guide to modern jazz!

Peter Wood, via email

Christopher Breunig replies: I hope the new feature will be of interest to some readers – and the format lends itself equally to jazz. I was of course one of John Crabbe's classical LP reviewing team, before the amalgamation with Peter Gammond's *Audio & Record Review* when the section (and team) was expanded considerably, and review lengths were at the writer's discretion.



ABOVE: Our Classical Companion feature kicked-off in the July issue with Wagner

In the 1970s we ran library-building pieces and an 'opinion' feature. We also had pop reviews by Arthur Jackson and Fred Dellar. The intention with *Classical Companion* is to blend the two together.

Things have changed over the years: you can find a review of a new release within days of its availability via the internet; and Radio 3 allows you to dip into stored podcasts of *Building a Library* features with music examples which allow the listener to disagree flatly with the broadcaster's views!

# 8

## Lanes On Your Entertainment Superhighway



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RJ/E Cinnamon



RJ/E Vodka



RJ/E Diamond



Cat 600 Pearl



Cat 700 Pearl



Cat 700 Forest



Cat 700 Carbon

Since its origins in the early 1980's, Ethernet, and the Local Area Network (LAN) systems it enables, has become the copper plumbing of the digital age. Originally deployed only over coaxial cable, the Ethernet protocols (IEEE 802.3) now also apply to fibre-optic and "Category" (Cat 5, 5e, 6, 6e, 7) cables. These 8-conductor (4 twisted pairs) Cat cables are the 8 lanes which stream or transport your digital entertainment to equipment a foot away or several rooms away.

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## The lows 'n' highs of hi-fi

HOW ONE READER'S HI-FI JOURNEY TOOK HIM RIGHT BACK TO WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

When the 'mystery' present arrived, Christmas 1962, it was a Dansette record player. From that moment onwards we could choose the music we wanted to play, and not have to listen to the valve radio that took 15 minutes to warm up.

The Dansette lasted until my teenage tears when I became much more interested in 'hi-fi'. About 1973 I bought a Garrard AP76 turntable with a Goldring G800 cartridge, plus a Rogers Ravensbrook Mk11 stereo amp from, of all places, the now defunct Comet. My speakers were homemade and were soon replaced by a pair of Goodmans Minister. I loved them. The sound was astonishing, especially to mum, dad and my neighbours!

As my record collection grew so did the need for hi-fi upgrades. The year was 1979 and FM radio was on the rise, so I needed a tuner and an amp. Due to the cost I opted for a 'receiver' and chose a Sansui TA500, a beautiful black beast of a machine. Next the deck, this time German, a Dual 504 in black veneer with Ortofon VMS 20E Mk11 cartridge. The combination promptly blew the tweeters out of the Ministers.

A change was needed. It had to be the KEF Celeste Mk IV, again in black, no veneer this time, all cloth like the speaker grille – beautiful. In came a TEAC V-370 tape deck. This system lasted me ten years.

I think a new stylus for the VMS 20E 11 was about £20-£25 back then,

changed every six months. Madness! In 1988 my first CD player arrived, a Marantz. The CD collection started, but it would never replace my vinyl.

As the 1990s began, my now incessant need for improved sound quality saw a new amp and tuner added to my system, this time separate. I chose the Arcam Alpha 2 integrated amplifier, black of course, and a Technics ST 600 tuner. I kept the Dual 504 and upgraded the stylus to an Ortofon VMS 30E – £30 I recall!

Divorce, and my beautiful system was left behind, some of it to be ruined in the garage, some of it car-booted. Living in a small flat and money tight I acquired 'hi-fi' through friends, secondhand and later, a bargain-buy retailer. I now had a Dual 505 record deck (yep, black), Concorde stylus, Cambridge Audio Azur 340A amp and 640T tuner (which I still use) and a 340C CD player – all incredible value for money while also giving good sound.

When the finances righted themselves and I once again had a house, I set about upgrading the system once more. This was just two years ago. I bought a Musical Fidelity M3i amplifier with an M3 CD player to match. Speakers were ProAc 150 Mk11. With a great deal of vinyl in the loft and a redundant Dual 505 I decided it was back to black.

The old deck was past its best so I read the mags and reviews and purchased a Pro-Ject Debut Carbon turntable (piano black) with an Ortofon 2M Red Cartridge. I will name three records on 180g vinyl that have astonished me: Sinatra's *Songs For Swingin' Lovers*, Pink Floyd's *Dark Side...* and *Aja* by Steely Dan. If there is a better sound source I haven't found it. That is why I have come full circle.

*Steve Timmins, via email*

Paul Miller replies: Sounds like you've had quite a journey, Steve, but through all your ups and downs your passion for music and hi-fi has evidently seen you through to a happy vinyl-based conclusion. I cannot imagine another hobby that's so fulfilling, or therapeutic, as listening to good music on a great system.



ABOVE: Steve's Pro-Ject/Cambridge/Musical Fidelity and ProAc system

## WIRELESS FRONTIER?



Not only are wires still very much the lowest-distortion highest-performance way to send both analog and digital audio information, but when it comes to sending power, "wireless" is just a nifty science project, not part of a home entertainment rig.

The challenge of not adding distortion as AC power goes from the wall to the electronics, and the challenge of not adding distortion as audio power is sent to a loudspeaker, are almost the same. The amount of energy transferred through these cables, and the size of the associated magnetic fields, puts them in a different class from all other audio and video cables.

Speaker cables need to maintain perfect integrity across the audio band and then some, while AC cables only have to try to be perfect in a narrower band. AC cable design is therefore a subset of speaker cable design because AC cables are subject to almost all the same distortion mechanisms, and benefit from almost all the same damage minimizing techniques.

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# Thoughts on 'cable sound'

IF ONE CABLE AFFECTS ANOTHER THEN SURELY SINGLE-BRAND SETS WILL GIVE THE BEST SOUND

I was interested to read Paul Miller's response to a reader's letter in the May 2014 issue in which he stated that 'we are really no further forward in establishing a hard and fast objective basis for "cable sound".' Despite this, it is obvious to anyone who bothers to listen that different cable designs sound different, and may even alter the sound of a system completely. Many brands have a distinctive 'house sound' in much the same way the major record companies from the analogue era had their own distinctive sound.

This is also the argument in favour of single-brand cable looms, said to ensure that interconnect and speaker cables don't undermine each other's potential.

I recently upgraded my interconnect cables, previously a mish-mash of brands. I had always liked the quality of my Van den Hul speaker cable and decided to invest in interconnects from the company. I eventually settled on two pairs of 3T The Sea single-ended cables for use between my turntable, phono stage and amplifier; a pair of 3T The Rock balanced cables to connect my CD player and amplifier; and a single The First Ultimate Mk II cable to hook up the S/PDIF output of my universal Blu-ray player to a DAC input on my CD player.

This has been a system upgrade more than commensurate with the cost of the cables, resulting in much improved dynamics and soundstaging, and a more natural timbre to vocals. As my listening room is small, the added soundstage depth is a huge bonus.

As a regular reader of *HFN*, I am aware that Van den Hul cables haven't fared all that well in reviews over recent years (eg, the Dec '12 and Feb '14 issues). Given the subjectivity of cable preferences, the dependency on system matching and even music selection, I'm drawing no conclusions about the relative merits of individual reviews here. I would like to raise one point of interest, though.

In a review of the 3T The Valley cable in *HFN* Dec '12, one of the music selections was a 24-bit/192kHz download of a concerto from Vivaldi's *La Cetra* from Channel Classics. The review stated that the cable 'sounded tidy and composed, again it lacked vibrancy and made the musicians' performance seem more lethargic'. I wonder if you are aware that this recording was made using Van den Hul 3T cable. You would have been, had you used the hybrid SACD instead of a download, because Channel Classics, which has always used Van den Hul cable, now displays the 3T logo on all its covers. It is difficult to see how other cables in your group test could improve on the sound of this recording over one which is from the same camp as the cable it was recorded with.

This leads me to the conclusion that other factors are at play. You didn't state in your group test review the speaker cable you were using, which is a possible contender.

Thanks for a great magazine.

Frank Copley, South Australia



ABOVE: Van den Hul's The Valley, part of the company's 3T range and tested in *HFN* Dec '12

steer to its likely sound quality, even if we're unable to prove why this is the case!

Recently we ran a comparative listening test of five cable looms, matching interconnect and speaker cables from Audioquest, Chord, Ecosse, Tellurium Q and van den Hul [*HFN* Feb '14]. Importantly, the perceived influence of each loom was still broadly in accord with the individual sound of the interconnects and speaker cables.

Moreover, the suggestion that brands like van den Hul offer a very consistent 'house sound' in our blind listening tests is testament to the fact that (1) vdH also has a fine grasp of how cable geometry and materials impact on sound quality and (2) our listening process, evolved over years, is also suitably transparent and repeatable. And vdH is not the first cable brand to market itself through the music business – Monster Cable even sponsored a limited edition CD of Michael Jackson's 'Bad Mixes' in 1988.

In practice, it's unlikely that the engineer's choice of cable had any more influence on the sound of his recording than his choice (in the instance of *La Cetra*) of Grimm DSD ADC or Meitner DAC. The sound quality of all commercial music releases is a function of every piece of hardware, cable and software (and, indeed, the competence of its application) across the entire recording chain. Put another way, if the engineer applies an eq function to his recording and we add the same eq to our hi-fi playback, does this render the result more faithfully, more accurately? Of course not – we're just doubling-up on the eq!

Bottom line is this – if you favour the sound of a particular cable brand, then good for you. Stick with it, enjoy the music but always keep one ear open for the possibility of something better just around the corner.

The screenshot shows the Channel Classics website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'CHANNEL CLASSICS' and 'native DSD music'. Below that, there's a search bar and a 'Home' button. The main content area features a large image of the album cover for 'LA CETRA - 12 VIOLIN CONCERTOS OPUS 9' by Vivaldi, performed by the HOLLAND BAROQUE SOCIETY, RACHEL PODGER. The album is noted as being recorded using Van den Hul 3T cables. The page also includes a list of technical specifications for the recording process, such as 'Digital Converters: Grimm A/D DSD / Meitner DA, Jred Soda', 'Mastering: B&W 303 diamond series', and 'Microphones: Blue A, Rycote, Schoeps'. The price is listed as \$34.92.

ABOVE: Channel Classics advertises Vivaldi's *La Cetra* as being recorded using vdH 3T cable

Paul Miller replies: Having personally reviewed hundreds of interconnect and speaker cables in 30+ years, I don't think any of our readers really believe *HFN* is agnostic about 'cable sound'. As you say, we all know they contribute to the overall system performance. My point is that also having measured these same hundreds of cables in numerous different ways, I've still not concocted an objective 'magic bullet' for predicting their sound in every system.

What I can say is that the *experience* of hearing so many brands and models has helped build an empirical model of the likely subjective influence of cable geometry, conductor material and dielectric chemistry. It's a kind of 'objective subjectivism' where the design of a cable gives us a very good



# Living the Pi life

READER OFFERS DIFFERENT TAKE ON BUILDING MUSIC SERVER WITH RASPBERRY PI

I'd just like to voice my disagreement with Paul Williamson's letter (see *HFN* Aug '14) regarding his problems with the Raspberry Pi and Wolfson Audio Card. For a while I had been concerned about Logitech's decision to discontinue the excellent Squeezebox Touch. Like a lot of people, I had been a longtime user of the Touch and believe that it can work at the heart of fairly high-end digital audio systems.

The Raspberry Pi with Wolfson Card offered me the opportunity to build a replacement for the Squeezebox Touch (at a fraction of the sky-high prices commanded by the discontinued Logitech product on the secondhand market).

I decided to download the free software required from the Squeezeplug website at [www.squeezeplug.eu](http://www.squeezeplug.eu). This site has a great video which explains all the steps very simply. I have never used a Raspberry Pi or Linux, but my Squeezebox Touch replacement only took a couple of hours to build once the parts had arrived. Furthermore, the Squeezeplug install handles everything for you. At no point did I need to issue any Linux commands!

The Squeezeplug install includes the SqueezeLite Player, which essentially turns your Pi into a Squeezebox Touch-type player. It has all the features, including hi-res audio up to 192kHz/24-bit, BBC iPlayer and Spotify, etc. The only real difference is that there is no display on the Pi, so you have to control the system using a tablet or smartphone with one of the many free Squeezebox apps on your tablet or phone (I use Squeeze Commander on Android).



ABOVE: The Raspberry Pi is the size of a credit card and was developed in the UK



ABOVE: Find the latest Squeezeplug software at [www.squeezeplug.eu](http://www.squeezeplug.eu)

The Squeezeplug install even allows you to turn a Raspberry Pi into a full Logitech Media Server (LMS) system, replacing your PC LMS. However, I decided to keep things simple and only installed the SqueezeLite Player on my Pi.

The excellent Wolfson Audio Card, which simply screws onto the Pi (no soldering required), gives great sound quality that I found to be at least as good as that from the Touch. All this for less than the price of some people's RCA phono cables. I just felt I needed to redress the balance a little after Mr Williamson's letter as it may have discouraged some readers from trying this approach. If I can do it, anyone can!

*Adam Tate, Hants*

Jim Lesurf replies: Thanks Adam for sharing your experiences with the RPi and Wolfson card. Linux has many diverse 'distributions' – different versions that offer varying features, etc. Unfortunately, this diversity can sometimes initially confuse people acclimatised to Windows. Once you twig the Linux approach you can explore and find a distribution that may suit you better than the first one you tried. And when you do, you can often talk to the developers and nudge them towards making changes and improvements that you'd like.

New distributions also tend to be developed and released to support all kinds of hardware and uses. So I'm not surprised one has now appeared that is targeted on the RPi and Wolfson Audio Card combination for use in the ways reader Adam describes.



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I really don't want to send it back." James Palmer - HiFi Wigwam

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selectable loading options. The F307 also offered tone controls and switched filters, the latter being set at 5kHz, 7kHz and 10kHz. These frequencies were well chosen and are appropriate for suppressing the hiss of noisy tape recordings; no doubt this was the original idea.

The power amplifier inside the F307 was conventional and ran from an unregulated single-rail 65V supply. The use of a single-rail supply mandated AC coupling to the loudspeakers via a series capacitor, and this was constructed using 800µF and 250µF components connected in parallel.

The 1050µF created by this arrangement is none too generous: 3000µF had already become the norm for this type of circuit for hi-fi purposes.

This low value and the high supply voltage both hint at the F307's preference for 15ohm loudspeakers, which were popular in professional environments, as the higher impedance meant long runs of cable could be used without affecting the signal.

The amplifier is specified to work with speakers between 8-16ohm and should not be used with loudspeakers whose impedance is greatly lower than this.

Some of the F307's other design details were unusual at the time but are commonplace today. For example, the main input selector switch is located at the rear of the chassis so that it is as close as possible to the input sockets, the knob being connected by an extension shaft. This minimises internal cable runs, which could otherwise pick up noise.

**'Vocal clarity was excellent and the sound neat and well ordered'**

**ABOVE:** Neat and restrained in styling, the front panel of the F307 was designed to match Ferroglyph's Series 7 tape recorders. The wooden sleeve made it suited to home use

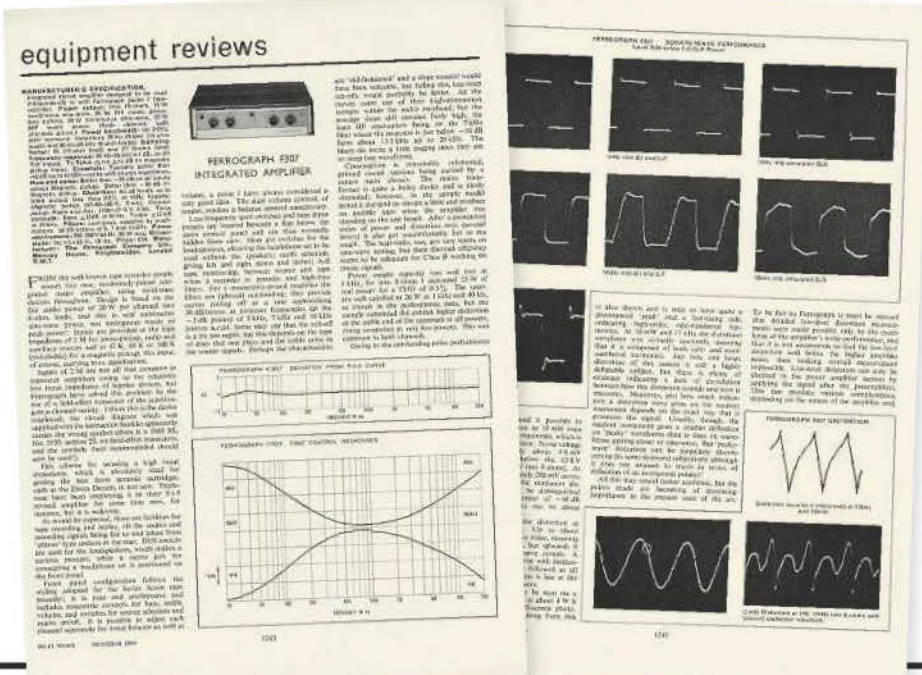
Similarly, the mains transformer is located within a screened enclosure, which also houses the mains switch. This keeps the transformer's magnetic field largely contained and removes the need for mains wiring behind the front panel, both of which are effective at keeping background hum to a minimum.

In 1973 a mk2 version of the F307 was released. This retained the appearance of the original and the basic specifications of 20W into 8ohm and 15W into 15ohm. But it was claimed that the overall level of harmonic distortion had been reduced from 0.25% to 0.18% and that the signal-to-noise ratio had been improved from 65dB to 80dB for line-level sources and from 60dB to 75dB for the MM turntable input.

Larger output transistors were fitted too, despite the amplifier being no more powerful. These changes represented a sensible and logical progression rather than a dramatic change and it is unlikely an existing F307 owner would have noticed the difference. Usually in vintage audio it is the earliest examples of a particular model that are the most highly prized, but given the choice of Ferroglyph F307s the Mk2 (as tested here) is the one to go for.

**TIM LISTENS**  
Connecting the Ferroglyph to modern equipment one encounters the usual old British hi-fi nuisance of small RCA connectors positioned too closely together to take modern bulky plugs, though more modern sockets had been fitted to our mk2 sample. It is also worth pointing out

**LEFT:** Review from *HFN* Oct '69 shows the characteristics of the F307's tone controls – many a 1960s amplifier had tone controls





## VINTAGE HI-FI

**RIGHT:** Interior view shows screening around the mains transformer and the source selector switch, sensibly placed near the input sockets. Quality of construction is generally good

that the design of the mains inlet, power outlets for other system components and the voltage selector do not meet modern safety standards, so care should be exercised when setting the system up.

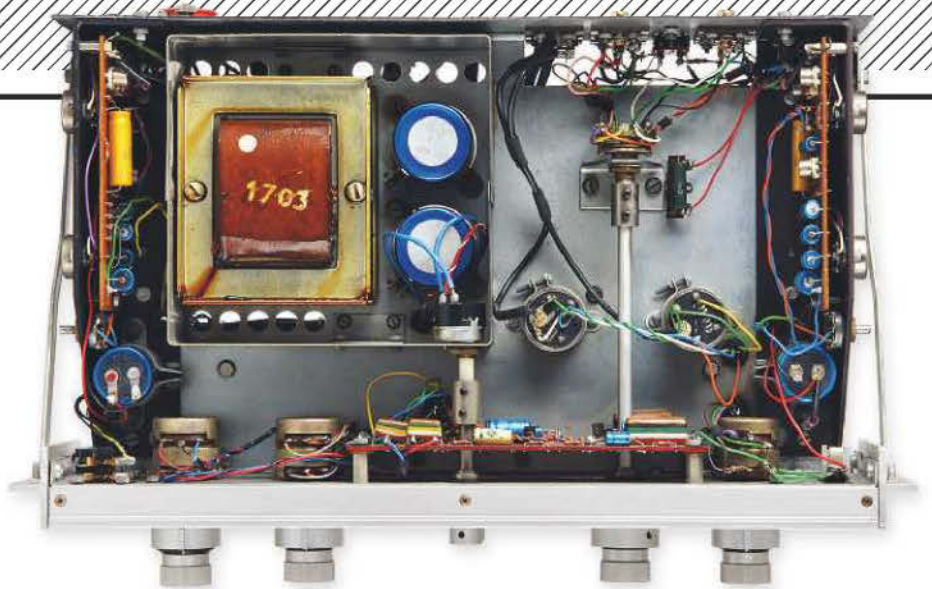
Loudspeaker connections are made via standard DIN sockets, so there are no problems here. The connections for tape recording are at line (rather than DIN) level so there should be sufficient signal available for whatever equipment you want to use, although the outputs are not buffered – which is odd given the manufacturer's expertise in this area.

### MISSING BASS

It would have been an interesting exercise to partner the amp with some period 15ohm loudspeakers in big cabinets, but for the sake of uniformity across our Vintage Reviews my benchmark Monitor Audio PL100s were pressed into service, along with Chord Odyssey 2 cables and 4mm-to-DIN plug adapters.

The source was a Cyrus CD8 SE2 CD player connected to the amp's Aux input via Chord Calypso interconnects, there not being a Ferrograph Series 7 tape recorder on hand whose rubber wheels hadn't turned to goo!

Operation is straightforward, once you find the array of extra controls hidden under the hinge-down flap at the bottom of the fascia. The major knobs and controls are beautifully made, but one ergonomic shortcoming is that the treble, bass and



volume controls have separate concentric sections for the left and right channels, which are not friction locked together. Keeping the two in sync when adjusting can prove tedious.

It is difficult to criticise the Ferrograph's bass, not because it's perfect but because there isn't really any! Blame those small coupling capacitors perhaps, but hooked up to my system there seemed to be at least an octave missing from the bottom end, irrespective of volume settings and the CD being played.

This robbed Chris Isaak's 'Wicked Game' [Reprise 7599-26513-2]

of warmth and glow, and while this lack of bass meant that some usually obscured detail in the guitar strumming and percussion was now revealed in all its glory, it was clear the track's essential character had been changed.

This, to me, is the F307's major flaw. The situation may well improve with the use of higher impedance loudspeakers, but

with the PL100s the sound proved a bit too lean and dry for my taste.

On the other hand, vocal clarity on the Chris Isaak's track, and a number of other vocal-led recordings like 'Don't Marry Her' by The Beautiful South from *Blue Is The Colour* [Go! Discs 828 845-2] was excellent and the sound was neat and well-ordered. What the F307 does, it certainly does well.

So it was that the bright, edgy sound of Kraftwerk's 'Tour De France Etape 2' from the album of the same name [EMI 591 708 2] made it through the F307's various stages relatively unscathed – aside from the track's plump bass line, of course.

The synthetic soundstage of this highly processed music was presented well, being reasonably continuous and spreading out beyond the outer edges of the loudspeakers. A lesser amplifier would create two isolated 'pools' of sound, which is clearly not correct.

### BRISK AND AIRY

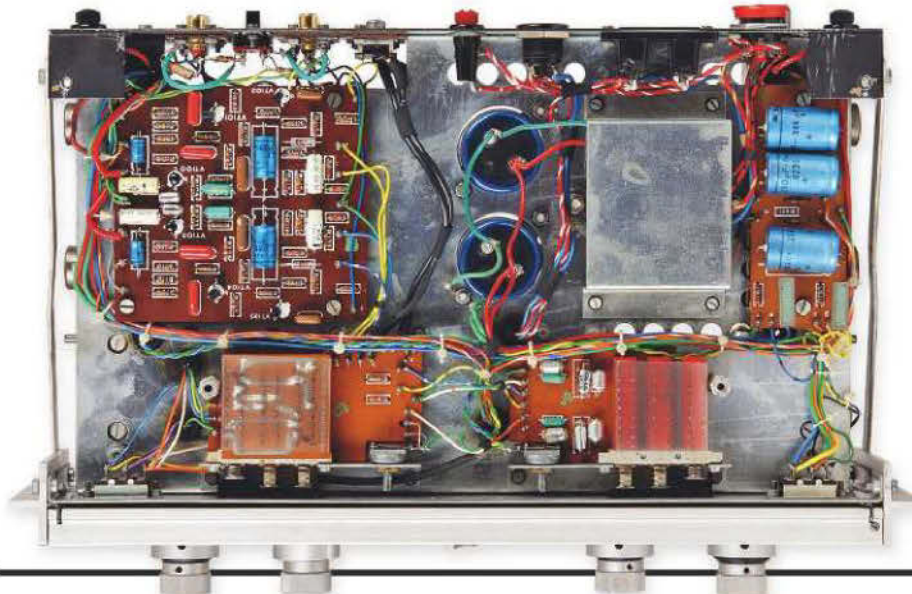
Overall, the F307 mk2 sounded brisk and airy, a world away from the stodgy presentation that characterises lesser equipment of the era. True, the phono stage is a tad noisy, but when it comes to line-level sources, hiss and hum are well suppressed. Indeed, no useful improvements could be made in this area.

The upper midrange is forward and in common with many early designs the treble sounds a trifle clipped. But this makes sense given the likely sources and loudspeakers the unit would have been partnered with. It's in the post-CD age that a bit more treble sparkle would be nice.

The lack of bass means that the midrange stands out and when the amplifier is playing loudly it becomes

**LEFT:** The preamplifier PCB is visible underneath the chassis, as are the switches for the filters. The wiring is not the tidiest, but overall the layout is logical and well ordered

'The upper midrange is forward, but this makes sense'





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## VINTAGE HI-FI



**ABOVE:** The rear view illustrates the usual problem of closely grouped RCA-type sockets into which some modern plugs will not fit. Note the cartridge loading switch

strident. This can be striking with some musical styles and vocals, but with most I tried, such as 'Janet Jackson's stomping, beat-driven track 'Control' [A&M 395106-2], it was a bit wearing.

This is a shame, as otherwise everything hangs together well. The Ferrograph never sounded like a 'big' amplifier yet neither did it feel like a small one out of its depth.

### BUYING SECONDHAND

The Ferrograph F307 mk2 is a well made and reliable amp. Of the components used, most are of good quality so there should be no need to replace anything which isn't actually faulty. Some early examples make extensive use of a type of resistor that takes the form of a short carbon rod with metal end-caps. These can change value or become noisy with age, so if a gain imbalance or an excessively noisy channel is noted then one (or more) of these may be breaking down.

The original F307 used 39285 power transistors in its output stage which have not been available for

many years, but the more easily obtainable 2N3055H can be used if a small circuit change is made and all four transistors are replaced simultaneously. The amplifier's bias current will also have to be adjusted, which on some F307s takes work since a 'select on test' fixed resistor is used to determine the setting. The 2N3055H transistors are also bigger than 39285s so the heatsink will have to be re-drilled to suit.

The Mk2 version uses 16020 transistors, which are also no longer available. However, the 2N3055H is a direct replacement for these with no other changes being necessary. Of course the bias current will still have to be checked, but the good news is that most F307 Mk2s have a proper variable resistor fitted to make any necessary adjustment.

Finally, remember that anything which has been used by a professional, industrial or educational user is likely to have had a hard life and so may be modified, battered, scruffy and worn out by the time it is withdrawn from service. Try to find an example which has had only light domestic use instead. It will be worth the wait. ☺



**ABOVE:** Ad with neat picture and simple message aims for the domestic market

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

A refreshing change from the more obvious vintage British brands, the Ferrograph F307 mk2 nevertheless earns a reserved recommendation for its purposeful character and excellent quality of construction. It's slightly fiddly to operate and matching it successfully with other components takes work, but with the right speakers its well marshalled, vocal-orientated sound will have bags of appeal.

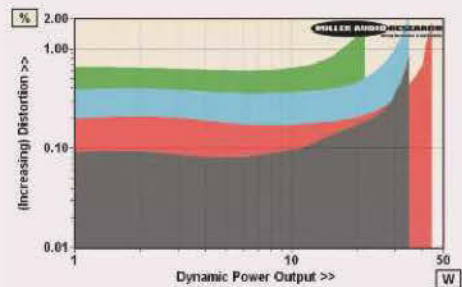
Sound Quality: 72%



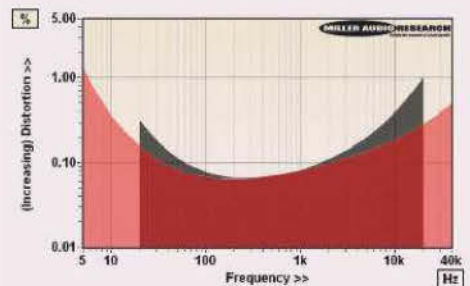
## FERROGRAPH F307 MK2 (Vintage)

This pristine sample of Ferrograph's F307 mk2 (with updated RCA phono inputs) was supplied by John Howes, organiser of the biannual Audio Jumble ([www.audiojumble.co.uk](http://www.audiojumble.co.uk)). Rated at 20W/8ohm and measured at '25W for a THD of 0.3%' [HFN Oct 1969, see reprints on p135], our sample of the F307 mk2 achieved a full 2x27W/8ohm and 2x30W/4ohm at <1% THD. Under dynamic conditions, power output increases still further to 35W and 45W into 8/4ohm, dropping back to 35W/22W into low 2/1ohm loads and suggesting a current limit of 4.7A [see Graph 1, below]. Distortion increases gently with output from a low of 0.023% at 1W to 0.065% at 10W and 0.15% at the rated 20W (all at 1kHz/8ohm). Versus frequency, distortion increases in line with reduced compensation at high frequencies (to 1% at 20kHz/10W) but increases still further at low, subsonic frequencies via the capacitor-coupled output (1.5% at 5Hz/1W) [see Graph 2, below]. The latter is also reflected in the F307 mk2's output impedance which increases from the midrange value of 0.53ohm to 1.77ohm at 23Hz, reducing the damping factor at low bass frequencies.

The frequency response is not as anaemic as you might expect provided you stick with loudspeakers whose impedance is 8ohm+ at low frequencies – into 8ohm it offers -1.6dB/20Hz but this falls to -2.4dB into 4ohm and -4.5dB into 2ohm loads. The treble extension is fine, reaching -0.35dB/20kHz while the A-wtd S/N ratio is about average for the era at 75dB (re. 0dBW). Readers may view a full QC Suite test report for the Ferrograph F307 mk2 integrated 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 vs. distortion (8ohm tap) into 8ohm up to 2% (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads



**ABOVE:** Distortion vs. frequency from 20Hz-20kHz at 10W/8ohm (black) and 5Hz-40kHz at 1W/8ohm (red)

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

|                                       |                       |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)        | 27W / 30W             |
| Dynamic power (<1-2% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm) | 35W / 45W / 35W / 22W |
| Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)         | 0.54-1.77ohm          |
| Frequency resp. (20Hz-100kHz, 0dBW)   | -1.6dB to -5.9dB      |
| Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/20W)      | 40mV / 180mV          |
| A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/20W)        | 75.4dB / 88.4dB       |
| Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)     | 0.065-1.00%           |
| Power consumption (Idle/rated output) | 32W/107W              |
| Dimensions (WHD)                      | 410x127x245mm         |



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# Chimney-loaded speaker

Maurice Taggart on how to build a stereo system in an unwanted fireplace



## Hi-Fi News January 1970

Each month *HFN* will bring you an article from our vast archive of features and reviews from yesteryear

In this article I will describe a simple but very effective loudspeaker arrangement for providing good stereo coverage in a 15x12ft room. The idea is to use the chimney flue of a redundant fireplace as the 'common' bass enclosure for both channels of a stereo system, with wall-mounted satellite speakers on either side to give the stereo information.

With the rapid spread of central heating, I feel sure many audio fans will cast a covetous glance in the direction of the empty fireplace. Here, after all, is a built-in speaker enclosure that offers the music lover considerable potential.

### BEST ADVICE

Perhaps I should point out that the final results may differ very widely in individual cases, as very few fireplaces or listening rooms are identical. Choice of drive units will also profoundly affect the performance, and here the best advice is to consult the makers,



ABOVE: A view of the finished system with the satellite loudspeakers in position

who are usually very willing to give details of optimum loading conditions for their own units.

In an article describing my previous loudspeaker cabinets [see *HFN*, Mar '67], I listed the disadvantages of built-in designs. Two of these were:

- (a) Lack of mobility
- (b) In the event of moving house, one has about two dozen little holes in the plaster which need plugging!

Prophetic words! These very disadvantages were brought home to me forcibly when I moved to a new house. However, dismantling and wall-plugging duly achieved (I handed my young son a large tube of Polyfilla and told him to get on with it!), I arrived at the new abode with two naked Jordan-Watts modules and an armful of wood.

I constructed two temporary reflex cabinets from 1/2in chipboard and over the next four months tried positioning the speakers in various parts of the room. The several possible arrangements did not give complete satisfaction, and I came to realise how incompatible are the various requirements of good stereo listening in an average size room.

I've always favoured 'built-in' speaker enclosures. Indeed, I rather dislike free-standing cabinets, especially the large ones necessary

for full bass. True, with Jordan-Watts modules good bass is claimed from reasonably small enclosures, but I have personally found that a worthwhile extension of the bass is obtained by housing these units in the largest size cabinets recommended by the makers.

### GRATE EXPECTATIONS

Several months' trial had established that the best results were obtained with the speakers on either side of the chimney breast, spaced about eight feet apart [see Fig. 1]. Just around this time my wife and I decided to abandon the coal fire for an electric one, and I had the opportunity to try the chimney flue idea for loading a speaker unit – an experiment which I had considered from time to time for several years.

I had picked up odd scraps of information relating to this topic from several journals over a long period. I remember in particular some very encouraging remarks by Percy Wilson in the November, 1965, issue of the *Gramophone*. None of the audio or loudspeaker textbooks which I consulted had any advice to offer on the subject, so it looked as though I would largely have to 'play it by ear'.

A similar set-up was often described as part of a '3-channel'



stereo system. Sometimes, a third amplifier was used to drive the centre speaker, especially where the left- and right-hand speakers were spaced widely apart.

The volume control of the centre channel was adjusted to 'fill-in' the resulting hole-in-the-middle. More often, a feed was taken from each side of a normal stereo amplifier and the combined signal fed to the centre speaker through a variable resistance, with similar result.

### LEAK STEREO 20

Alternatively, two speaker units can be placed in the centre enclosure, each driven by one channel of a normal stereo amplifier. This is the method I have adopted, and this system has the great virtue that an ordinary commercial stereo amplifier will drive it without any modification whatsoever. My own five-year-old Leak Stereo 20 gives very good results, with plenty of power reserve.

Two Jordan-Watt modules are small enough to fit side-by-side within a small modern fireplace, which makes these units particularly suitable for this arrangement. Using 12in or 15in bass units, only one could be accommodated in an average fireplace, and it would then be necessary to employ one of the above alternative methods to feed it with a mixed signal.

In my system, two Jordan-Watts modules provide the centre-channel output, fitted side-by-side in a rectangular cut-out on a baffle firmly sealed into the fireplace. The baffle has a total thickness of 1 1/4in, in order to avoid flexing at low frequencies. To reduce the possibility of cavity resonance due to the depth of wood around the cut-out, this baffle is composed of two layers of chipboard firmly screwed together, the front layer having a larger aperture than the back layer.

I adopted this arrangement as an alternative to bevelling the edge of the aperture, which is usually recommended when using timber of this total thickness. The outer

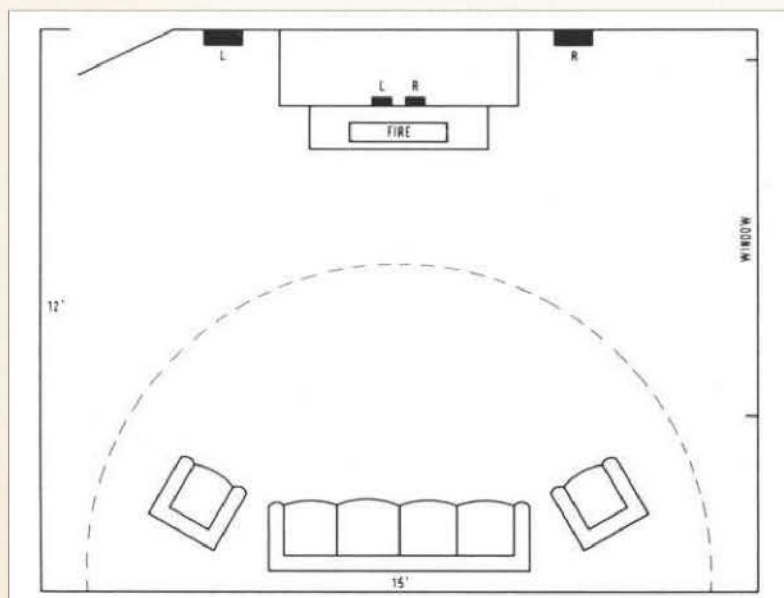
piece of wood is mahogany veneered contiboard, giving a very pleasant finish.

Each of the drive units in the chimney

enclosure is wired in parallel with its satellite speaker on the appropriate side. As the Jordan-Watts modules are rated at 8ohm, the output selectors on the Leak amplifier are set at 4ohm – half the effective impedance of each single unit. The units are therefore correctly matched to the amplifier output.

The physical attachment of the baffle within the fireplace is a problem which would probably benefit from a different approach in each individual case, no two

**'A commercial stereo amplifier will drive it without modification'**



**LEFT: Fig 1 – an advantage of the system, says the author, is that the speaker arrangement spreads sound over an area seating five or six people, though the most dramatic stereo realism is still obtained in the traditional sweet-spot, precisely mid-way between the satellite speakers**

fireplaces being quite the same. One difficulty arises from the fact that the sides of the fireplace cavity usually slope sharply inwards towards the back. I solved this problem by screwing two stout wooden laths across the inner fireplace, from side to side.

Each end of each lath was bevelled to fit the contour of the wall, giving a firm fixing to which the baffle board could be tightly screwed [Fig. 2].

It is worth taking some trouble over this, as the baffle has to withstand surprisingly high power levels on hefty low frequency signals. The leads to my speaker are brought out through two holes drilled low down on the baffle, and soldered to colour-coded terminals.

### FIBREGLASS LINED

Due to any irregular contour of the fireplace cavity, trouble from standing waves is not likely to be encountered, and one would imagine that damping materials are not strictly necessary. I have nevertheless lined the fireplace cavity with 1in-thick fibreglass, on the pretext that it was unlikely to degrade the result and might well improve things.

No vent is provided on the baffle, the enclosure being an effective infinite baffle. This type of loading was largely dictated by the fact that I intended to use completely sealed boxes for the satellite speaker in an attempt to keep them as small as possible for wall-mounting.

If reflex loading had been employed for the chimney-flue enclosure, I feared the increased efficiency due to this type of operation might have swamped the output of the satellite speakers, thus upsetting the balance. It would have been interesting to experiment with reflex loading for centre and satellite speakers. With different drive units, or with Jordan-Watts units in a differently shaped flue, reflex loading might give better results.

My original intention had been to experiment with an adjustable vent on the baffle board just beneath the drive units. I started off with the vent in the fully closed position and the results were so satisfying that I decided to stick to the IB principle.

Another factor which has an effect on bass performance is the



## FROM THE VAULT

length of air column provided by the chimney flue; ideally, the length should be determined for each individual speaker unit. The easiest way of doing this is probably to force a plug of soft material as far as possible up the flue. If a stout string is firmly attached to this, it is possible to withdraw it a little at a time and check the results, either by a subjective listening test or by using an audio generator.

The odd design of my own lounge flue prevented me from doing much experimentation along these lines (much to my wife's relief!). My chimney, which is in a new house, is unusual in that the fireplace is connected to the flue proper by means of an earthenware pipe measuring around 9in in diameter, and a few feet long.

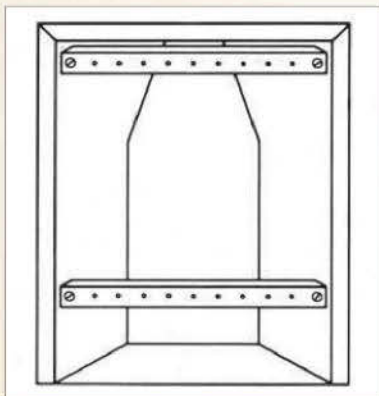
I made a neat roll of fibreglass, attached my string, pushed the roll into the lower end of the pipe and heaved away, using a flexible rod. The roll fitted the pipe very precisely, but popped out of the upper end into the flue proper, which is much wider [see Fig. 3].

### NO NASTY NOISES

The only simple alternative was to withdraw it back into the pipe and leave it there. The fibreglass bung is thus fairly firmly lodged at the upper end of the pipe, probably around five to six feet above floor level.

This arrangement appears to load the Jordan-Watts modules very well, probably because I have been lucky to hit the right volume and pipe length by chance. So far I have not encountered nasty noises on strong low frequency signal.

However, a more conventional design of chimney should present no obstacle to proper 'tuning' in the manner described, and I would



**RIGHT: Fig 3 – tuning the bass. In this example it's not a simple case of inserting foam or straws into a traditional rear- or front-firing bass port but a matter of adjusting the length of the air column provided by the chimney flue. The author recommends pushing a plug of soft material into the flue, but in his case resorted to a roll of fibreglass attached to string**

recommend that this procedure be adopted where possible, for optimum results. Bass with my own system is not obtrusive.

Really deep notes, with considerable window-rattling potential, can roll forth when called for, as in organ records. A good clean recording of male speech does not show any chestiness or marked coloration, and a recent live FM broadcast of a local church service was startling in the degree of realism – mono only, alas!

Usually a 12in or even 15in speaker unit provides the centre channel bass output in these 'compromise' systems. As the large unit handles only frequencies below about 500Hz, its output cannot appreciably degrade the stereo illusion, a very little directional information is conveyed at low frequencies – the stereo effect being supplied by these satellite speakers.

Using Jordan-Watt modules, or similar full-range units, the situation is very different, and serious degradation of the stereo illusion could result if steps were not taken to limit the high frequency output of the centre speakers.

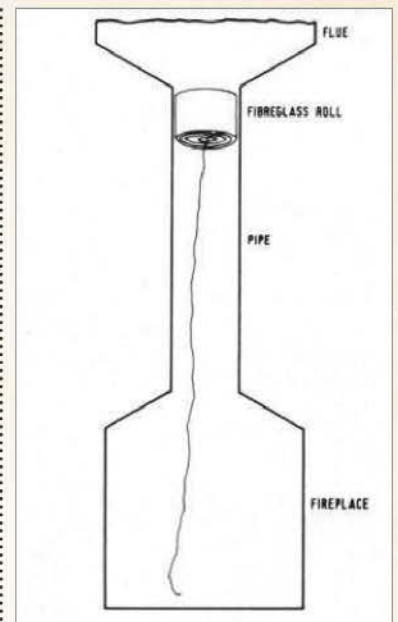
One way to do this to fit a simple low-pass filter at each of the centre speaker terminals.

A single inductor in series with each unit will probably suffice; most speaker manufacturers would be willing to advise on the exact value of component to be used with their own units.

### CONCEALED BY FIRE

In my system, I have effectively solved this problem by acoustical rather than electronic means. The centre speakers are concealed behind the Sunhouse electric fire which replaced the coal fire. A layer of fibreglass is attached to the back of the fire, and this effectively absorbs much of the HF, while low, long wavelength sounds flow around this obstacle unhindered. The back of the electric fire is spaced about 6in away from the speaker cones.

With the fire in position, a little mid-frequency coloration is heard on careful listening. This is noticeable on speech, but does not appear



to affect music adversely. Where the centre speakers are going to be exposed to view, some form of electronic filter will, of course, be necessary, or possibly a felt diaphragm or other frequency-dependent obstacle.

An alternative approach might be to fit a volume control to the centre speakers and balance the sound in this way, though I understand there

**'The centre speakers are concealed behind the electric fire'**

are technical objections to the use of speaker volume controls in the bass region. My chimney breast is fairly deep, projecting

about 18in into the room. I had at first regarded this as a distinct disadvantage, as the sound from the centre speakers would obviously have a head start on that from the satellites, and I feared that unpleasant anomalies might result.

On the contrary, prolonged listening has revealed a pleasant illusion of depth, which I am convinced must be due to this fact.

From the strictly stereo aspect, one other major advantage is that 'precedence effect' is greatly reduced, with quite a pleasant spread of directional sound over an area seating five or six people. The satellite speakers are not angled inwards, but the presence of a central sound source seems to make up for this. The most dramatic



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## FROM THE VAULT

stereo realism is still obtained in the traditional centre seat precisely mid-way between the satellite speakers, and this is the seat I tend to choose when listening alone.

The photographs will give some idea of how my own arrangement fits into the room. The satellite speakers have an internal volume of 360in<sup>3</sup>, which is the smallest size recommended by Jordan-Watts. They are rigidly constructed from 3/4in chipboard to the makers' specifications, loosely filled with cotton wool, and give remarkably good bass for their modest size. I have mounted them with the speaker cones 2ft 9in above the floor, just about ear-level when seated, and 8ft apart.

### THE POSITIVES...

I would like to conclude this piece by tabulating a number of features which I consider to be strongly in favour of this chimney-loaded loudspeaker arrangement.

#### 1 Financial

economy: The cost of timber, etc, for the baffle and small satellite speakers need not exceed £2-£3.

#### 2 Space economy:

There is an obvious saving in space compared with that usually required for full range loudspeaker enclosures.

**3 Simplicity of construction:** No woodworking skill is necessary for the chimney enclosure, while the satellite speakers are simple boxes.

'Sound is less likely to be transmitted to adjoining houses'

**4 Avoidance of resonance:** Provided one uses a thick, rigid baffle, 'cabinet resonance' is avoided, with consequent freedom from coloration of sound.

**5 Stereo coverage:** 'Precedence effect' is greatly reduced, and convincing stereo may be enjoyed over a wide area.

**6 Natural positioning:** Since the fireplace is traditionally the focal or social centre of the room, this system lends itself to a natural arrangement of seating.

**7 Domesticity:** The chimney speakers may be concealed behind an electric fire. With care, the satellite speakers could be hidden from sight, or camouflaged on bookshelves, giving a very high 'housewife-appeal' index!

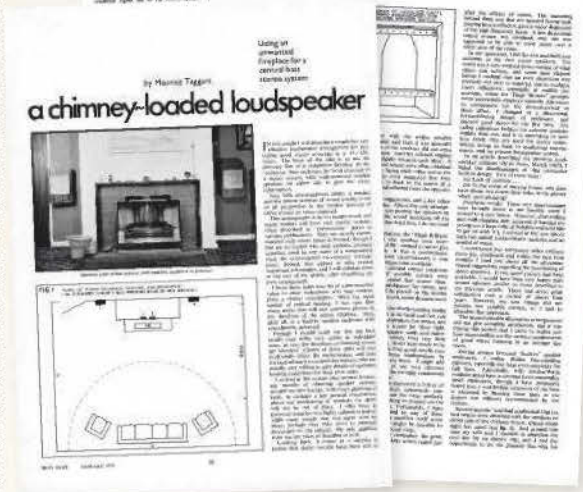
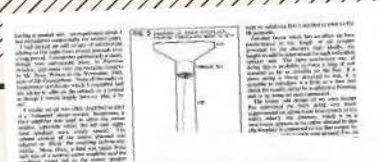
**8 Compatibility:** Where bookshelf 'mini-speakers' are already in use, identical or similar drive units can be installed in the flue, giving low-frequency extension for minimal extra expense.

**9 Sound insulation:** As the loudspeakers are well clear of any resonating structures, such as floorboards, sound is less likely to be transmitted to adjoining houses, and a much higher volume of sound may be enjoyed without causing annoyance to neighbours.

In fact, my own neighbour denies ever having heard any stray sound through the party wall, despite sound levels just short of the threshold of pain! ☺

**ABOVE:** Pages from the January 1970 issue of *Hi-Fi News* in which Maurice Taggart describes how he built his chimney-loaded loudspeaker system

**LEFT:** Original ad for Jordan-Watts' module loudspeaker. Released in the mid '60s, it featured a 4in aluminium full-range cone



Also in *HFN* this month in 1970

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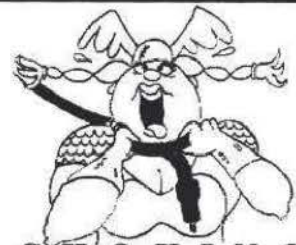
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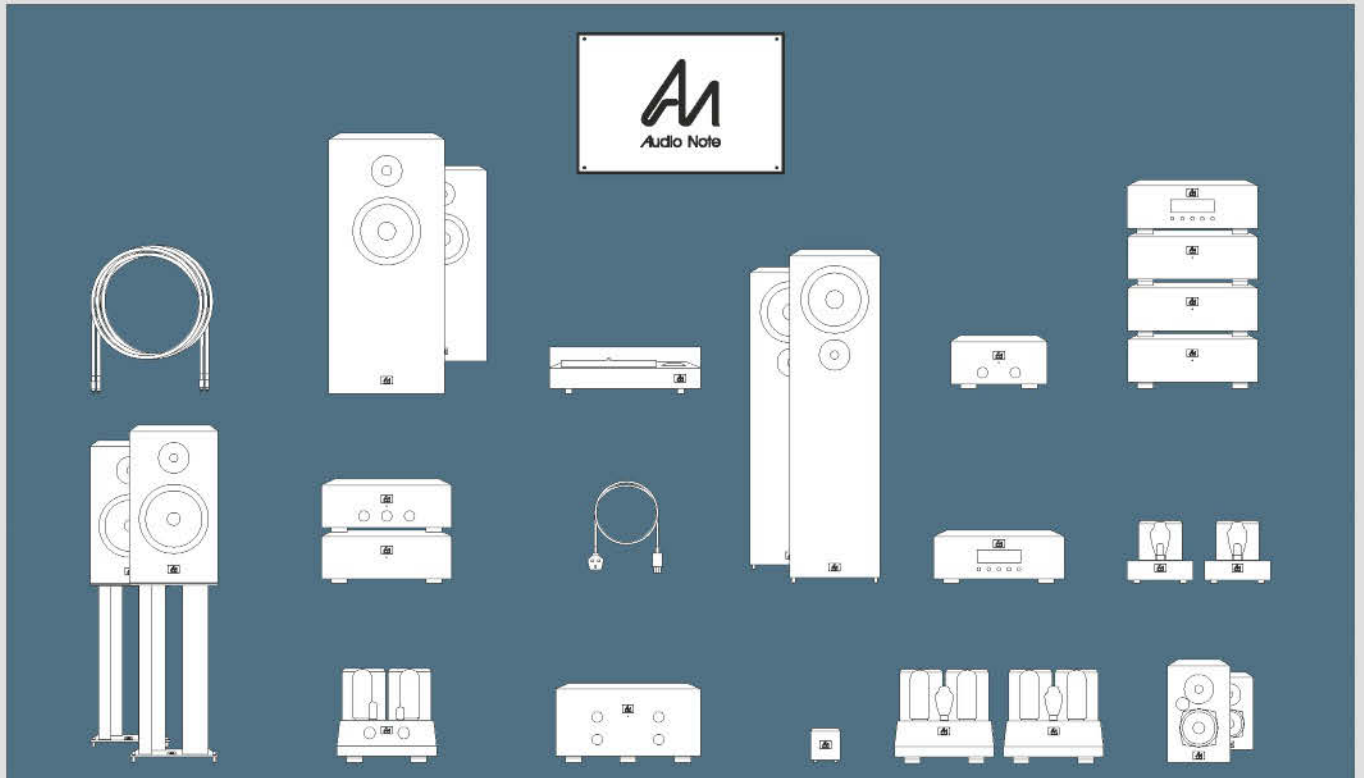
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HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW, ISSN 2042-0374, is published monthly with an additional issue in January by AVTech Media Ltd, a division of MYTIMEDIA Ltd, Enterprise House, Enterprise Way, Edenbridge, Kent TN8 6HF, UK. The US annual subscription price is 65GBP (equivalent to approximately 108USD). Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named Air Business Ltd, c/o Worldnet Shipping Inc., 156-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA. Periodicals postage paid at Jamaica NY 11431. US Postmaster: Send address changes to HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW, Worldnet Shipping Inc., 156-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA. Subscription records are maintained at CDS GLOBAL Ltd, Tower House, Sovereign Park, Market Harborough, Leicestershire, LE16 9EF. Air Business Ltd is acting as our mailing agent.



## LAST WORD

# OFF THE LEASH!

KEN KESSLER TELLS IT LIKE IT IS...

Will portable gear ever be good enough to use in the home? Ken Kessler thinks it's now possible...

**A**s evinced by recent issues of this magazine, portable audio's boom makes the original Sony Walkman's arrival seem inconsequential. Many components, such as Chord's Hugo, have true high-end authority. Such devices are so good that they are causing us to re-think just what is needed to have fine sounds in the home... and on the go.

While the 1980s were characterised by people listening on portables (even Cliff sang 'Wired For Sound'), the Walkman and its progeny inspired few listeners to abandon 'proper' hi-fi. Digital-based portables, though, are doing just that.

### ELEVATING SOUND

Most of us have no problem taking seriously the quality of the better portables, like those from Astell & Kern. Audioquest inspired an entire genre with portable USB DACs (not forgetting HRT's seminal role). Every serious headphone maker offers lightweight cans of audiophile quality.

Such convergence may be the high-end's salvation. Ever since the Walkman arrived, both high-end makers and pro-active audiophiles have attempted to elevate the sound quality of portables. Remember that Infinity once had a tape player called the Intimate. And who didn't try out Sennheiser HD414s with their portables?



Now there is a drive to make portable gear good enough to be used in the home as well as on the move. This is nothing new, and I recall tales of Japanese commuters schlepping the bulky combination of Sony Walkman Pro and Stax SRM-001 mini-electrostatic headphones on Bullet trains. With the elimination of physical software, size ceases to be an issue. With no motors to drive, battery life is of less concern.

Undeniably, the initial assault for burying separates forever was led by iPod docks with built-in speakers, but a schism immediately presented itself: *could* a dock be a standalone substitute for a full system or should a dock be speakerless, to feed a proper system? B&W's Zeppelin and Krell's KiD represent the two schools of thought.

There are others, but these spring to mind for representing, respectively, a genuinely

decent all-in-one standalone system with speakers, and a serious dock for feeding iPods into existing systems. The Zeppelin has little competition, because most standalones with speakers are poor,

and I know people who happily abandoned separates for Zeppelins, especially the neater, prettier 'll. Oh, how B&O must despise B&W! As for the KiD, the Krell name alone imparts gravitas.

Our 'Budget Esoterica' series has uncovered what we might call 'bridge'

components that forge a link between portables and domestic systems. I am still reeling from the sonic revelation that is the Geek Out EM [HFN Sept '14], however much I dislike the look, the heat and the attitude. (Imagine Apple run by children with OCD, on a sugar high.) Meanwhile, Musical Fidelity, Focal and B&W make headphones that flatter whatever feeds them.

If USB DACs are the most obvious means of marrying the transportable and the fixed, there's more good news from an unexpected quarter. While most of the proactive brands have been content to concentrate on USB DACs as peacemakers, those crafty Italians at Carot One have come up with a charmer that will do much to add a sense of purist magic to components smaller than a deck of cards.

### GUERRILLA TACTIC

A new Carot One item at the Munich High End Show convinced me it's possible to downsize and still exercise hard-core audiophile sensibility. While we've been pre-occupied with USB DACs that can run off notebooks or tablets, Carot One has issued a far more important device for improving the headphone performance of iPods, iPads, smartphones and other devices unable to host a USB DAC.

Imagine a portable headphone amplifier... with an actual valve in it. How flippin' wild is that? Obscure, expensive at €699, but Carot One's NIK 58-TUBE is a guerrilla tactic. At 58x23x85mm (whd), it's virtually identical to a (Mk I) Astell & Kern player, so you can strap 'em together.

Its lithium battery feeds off any 5V USB charger. A window in the machined aluminium case lets you see the Philips JAN6111WA valve. And with a claimed 102mW/ch into 300ohm, it could drive B&W P5s with ease. Sheer bliss.

OK, this is so 'cult' as to be almost invisible, but the sound is terrific, it's tactile like a fine pen or watch, and it's, er, orange. A no-brainer if you need a headphone amp for indoors and out.

Most importantly, it's so tiny that you could sneak it into the house without upsetting 'Er Indoors. Try that with an amp filled with EL34s. ☺

'Imagine a portable headphone amp... with a valve in it. How wild is that?'

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