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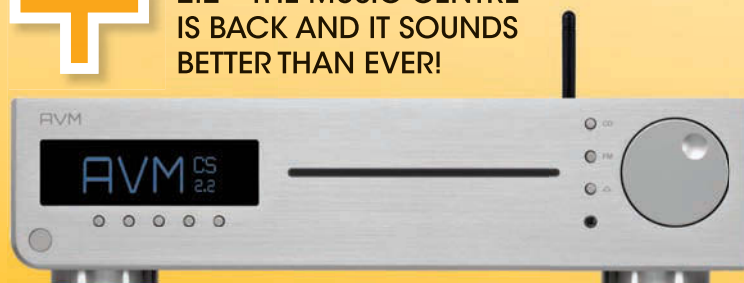
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# editorial

It's the end of another year, but this one came tinged with some great sadness. Early in November, it was announced that Harry Pearson, the founder of our sister title *The Absolute Sound*, had died at the age of 77. His influence on the field of observational audio reviewing is incalculable, and his loss leaves the whole audiophile community diminished. We asked our Chairman and CEO, Thomas B. Martin, Jr. to remember the late, great HP.

This has meant that our coverage of the CanJam at Rocky Mountain Audio Fest and our report on The Hi-Fi Show 2014 will be postponed until the next issue. Our apologies to all those wanting to see the latest headphones and high-end audio devices, but I hope this is acceptable under these difficult circumstances.

However, as I said at first, we are at the end of 2014, and about to welcome in 2015. The audio world has (as ever) gone through some change, and even some changes back. Are we beginning to see a resurgence in CD as we did with LP? Who knows? It's too early to call it either way, but the general switch-over to downloading hasn't happened quite yet, despite the launch of TIDAL high-resolution streaming and HDTracks final arrival to the UK market. We'll explore these new formats, and more, in 2015.

Next month, we'll ring in the New Year with a special *Hi-Fi+* calendar. That's right – twelve months of the hottest, top-notch audio pin-ups. Fortunately, those dozen delightful pin-ups will be taken from some of the finest audio products made today, in part because it's a bit too nippy out there at the moment for me to cavort around in my leopard-skin tankini. Maybe next year, if you're 'lucky'...

2014 has been a bumper year for

competitions in *Hi-Fi+*, and with both Audiodesksysteme's Vinyl Cleaner and Peachtree Audio's nova220SE given away in this issue, 2015 is looking pretty good for the competition haul, too.

However, to round off the year with a bit of joy, here's a list of recent lucky winners. From our National Audio Show prize draw, congratulations go to Malcolm Summers, who wins an iFi Micro iDSD portable headphone amp, preamp, and DAC. Our other lucky iFi winners were Doug Dickinson, Cosmo Hynds, Terry Cymbalisty, and Jeremy Honeybun. Congratulations, too, to Don Howden of Alberta, Canada, who won the excellent Ayon Audio Orion III integrated amplifier, while Gerard Peters of London won the *Hi-Fi+* Signature pair of superb Wilson Benesch Square One loudspeakers, Lucas Armstrong of Wellington, New Zealand won a fantastic pair of Final Audio Design Pandora Hope VI headphones, and Matthew Silvester, of Wallington, UK who one the sublime Vertere Pulse R interconnects.

Merry Christmas.

Alan Sircom  
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# incoming!

## A room with a phew?

I have listened to, bought, and generally played with hi-fi equipment since my 17th birthday some 47 years ago. I have heard the Devialet and can hear that it has a possible place in my home, but in spite of its groundbreaking SAM software, I have found that the biggest influence on sound is the speaker/room interface. In short, if you put a Wilson speaker (any) and a Krell amplifier (for example) with any source of your choice, into a room measuring say, 2.5m by 3m, you will end up with an awful mess! Likewise LS/3a's in an 8m by 5m room will sound... oh dear, words fail me.

With source components now significantly better (and cheaper) than was the case a few years ago, this is important. The average British house has its hi-fi and music in a room roughly 5m square and often smaller, but I venture to guess, few much bigger. Some of the kit you review would be happiest in a Village Hall! Nothing wrong with that, but please make it clear that this is the case. I would like my hi-fi to sound as if I have (for example) Joan Baez or Adele in my room. My hi-fi room is 4m by 3m. It would help if you acknowledged this in your reviews. And I welcome feedback from those who disagree.

**Andy Andrews, via email**

*Where possible, we do strive to put an approximate room size in our reviews. This is, however, somewhat self-selecting; a loudspeaker that demands to be a metre from the rear and side walls, and at least three metres from its partner in crime is only going to struggle to fit in a room smaller than 5m wide, and that also places a limit of 7m or so along the length of the room. Some loudspeakers are remarkably flexible in setting, others less so, and we hope to make that clear in our reviews.*

*According to the Royal Institute of British Architects, our UK living spaces are smaller than anyone else in the west, and getting smaller. Fortunately, some makers are waking up to this. And not just UK makers – Wilson Audio designed its Duette Series 2 specifically for boundary use in very small rooms.*

*There is a school of thought that says there is a minimum room size for good audio and below that you should just stick to headphones. I am somewhat sceptical of this school of thought, simply because I'm one of those UK-based audiophiles who get by in rooms far smaller than this arbitrary figure.*

*However, I agree entirely that the room/speaker interaction is vital. – Ed*

## RIAA all the way?

If you are going to continue to publish reviews by Roy Gregory, which make dubious assertions about the cutting of stereo LPs, I really think it's about time you backed them up with some solid evidence. Peter Copeland's on-line manual of analogue audio restoration says that EMI changed to the use of RIAA equalization in July 1953 and EMI themselves stated this in the April 1956 issue of *Gramophone* magazine. I find it very unlikely that they would have changed back to the 'EMI curve' (whatever that is) for a 'postage stamp' pressing of the 1970s.

Equally I think it is perfectly obvious from Michael Fremer's researches and the statements on the back of early American London stereo LPs, which were produced at the same time, on the same presses, as their SXL equivalents, that they too were cut with RIAA equalization. This is also stated on Decca's test discs (see attachments, B.S.1928:1955 is the British

*“The average British house has its hi-fi and music in a room roughly 5m square and often smaller, but I venture to guess, few much bigger. Some of the kit you review would be happiest in a Village Hall!”*



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Standard publication which enshrined RIAA equalization as the British standard for microgroove records). Copeland puts the change some time in the 1955-6 period, years before the introduction of stereo LPs.

Finally, it is now well-known that American Columbia transitioned to RIAA at the same time as Decca, 1955-6, long before *Kind of Blue* or *The Freewheeling Bob Dylan* were recorded. Fremer has the evidence from people who worked at Columbia and he is reinforced by the research of Gary Galo on the Columbia Equalization Curve.

There is a lot more evidence out there which gainsays what Roy Gregory says (including documents in German, which cast doubt on the continued use of the 'Teldec' curve into the stereo era). I think you should publish some concrete evidence to the contrary if you are to retain any credibility in this area.

**David Mansell, via email**

*Peter Copeland also stated this on the subject: "I consider the whole subject should be a warning to today's audio industry; practically everything which could go wrong did go wrong, and it isn't anybody's fault. But much worse is everyone's apparent attempts to hide what happened." And this, "There were yet more problems after international standards were adopted. Several organisations refused to use them, and at least one country attempted a Unilateral Declaration of Independence on the matter." The matter, it seems, is not as unambiguous as you suggest.*

*Historically, there's a lot of potential blending of 'we will do' with 'we have done' here, in a manner not dissimilar from the UK 'standardising' its voltage with the EU*

*by not doing a single thing except bend the EU standards. It's also worth remembering that the late 1950s were 'a very different time', when people (especially in Russia) would not adopt an American standard simply because it came from America. CCIR reigned supreme in the Eastern Bloc until the Bloc's demise in 1989. Thinking about it though, the Cold War might have thawed, but actually it's not that different today, at least in terms of Russian geopolitics, if not, perhaps, in equalisation curves. – Ed*

### The fall and rise of CD

Although there aren't many players being made now, I think CD will follow LP in a revival. If I am indicative of music buyers, I have experimented with placing music on my computer and even tried streaming, but have returned to CD anew. I even recently bought a new Musical Fidelity CD player to celebrate the return!

Why the return to CD playing? Two reasons. Primarily, CD gives me something tangible to hold while I'm listening to the music I'm playing. It's like a programme at a concert. I know I could get something similar from an iPad, but I find them too distracting. Even though my eyes are not as bright as they used to be, I enjoy the reading experience on paper more than on screen. Secondly, the majority of my music is classical and I simply cannot abide the way computers treat classical music. Not so much the music content, but in the way it's almost impossible to search, store, or play music in the order in which the composer intended. I am not a luddite, but I have tried a number of ways to limit this fundamental weakness in computer audio, and it seems the only way is to spend as long as you might listening to the recording in manually entering information about the composer, conductor, orchestra, and track... information you end up getting from the CD sleeve itself!

If this is convenience, give me the confusion of CD, any day.

**Matthew Reynolds, via email**

*I suspect there are many who share your concerns over the downloading, especially those who listen predominantly in the Classical domain. While there are a few exceptions (such as the music server Sonata, which is designed specifically for classical enthusiasts), most singularly fail to consider the demands of the Classical music lover. And even Classical enthusiasts have it relatively easy next to Opera enthusiasts, where the only option to avoid hours of frustration is to manually enter metadata into the relevant fields. I'd say this has to change, but I fear this is a forlorn hope, because few care today, even though that drives people back to CD. Fortunately, although new CD players are becoming a bit thin on the ground, the ones that are out there are generally quite excellent! – Ed*



IN MEMORIAM

# Harry Pearson, HP and The High-End As We Know It

by Thomas B. Martin, Jr.



I first became aware of Harry Pearson, without exactly realizing it, in the spring of 1973. I was in my first year at university in the U.S., and I happened upon a tiny classified ad in *Rolling Stone* magazine promising a new, critically rigorous, audio magazine. As a budding audiophile I immediately sent in my check for what I suppose was something like \$8, even though that was quite a bit of money for a student in those days. A few months later, I received Issue 1 of *The Absolute Sound* (or TAS for short).

To understand the impact that Harry Pearson (or HP as was his nom de plume) and TAS made on high-performance audio, you need to take your mind back to those days. You need to go back because now it is hard to imagine the advent of a single magazine making such an impact. But at that time, at least in the U.S., there was only one publication attempting to describe, in detail, the sonic differences between different pieces of audio gear. That publication was *Stereophile*, edited and mostly written by the great J. Gordon Holt. Unlike the modern *Stereophile*, JGH published irregularly. And that is putting it mildly, because readers would sometimes wait a year or longer between issues. With

a hobby that was really beginning to take off, that simply wasn't enough to either cover much of the available equipment or to keep up with new technological developments.

HP's TAS stepped into that void. And though HP was hardly publishing on an exact schedule, he generally managed to get at least three issues out per year. That kept audio junkies in the game, though I have to say there were times when the wait for a new issue was excruciating.

But once an issue arrived, oh how it was devoured! On the day of arrival, I would sequester myself in my dorm room or bedroom and just begin reading. A day or two later, the entire issue had been consumed—every word—and then re-reading began. If you have children or grandchildren who were readers of the *Harry Potter* series, you will likely have witnessed similar behaviors. No more avid study would greet the arrival of a newly discovered and authentic book of the bible at an evangelical prayer meeting.

HP built a publication whose success at the time was built on more than just satisfying a real hunger, though. As a newspaper journalist, HP not only wrote well, but he had a great sense of the story. And he surrounded himself with other writers—JWC, PHD, JN and more—who were, while certainly not his equal, quite capable of telling the tale of music as delivered through high-end gear.

HP studied psychology at Duke University and from that he developed a philosophy about audio reviewing that was a game-changer. Harry's idea was that the human perceptive apparatus could be trained to objectively observe the distinctive performance characteristics of audio gear. It not only



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► could do this, but was (and is) the best “test equipment” for that job. What then is needed is a standard for using one’s hearing to judge what is good and what is bad. The standard HP proposed, and then built the magazine on, is the sound of live, acoustic music played in a real space. That sound is the reference to which reviewers should compare the sound of audio equipment when describing and judging its performance. HP called that reference “the absolute sound”. Naturally, he chose it as the title for the magazine as well.

And that philosophy was essential to the development of high performance audio. Without a goal, and a goal that is understood and shared by much of the audiophile consumer base, the audio world would likely have pursued many competing goals and consumers would likely have been confused about what the game was. We would have had an industry in which companies made products that they believed to “sound good”, but where they and consumers lacked a clear way to consider how to make them sound better. Because without a standard, it is hard to know the difference between good and better. It is much easier to understand inaccuracies in matching the sound of live music, and work to eliminate them. And, certainly in the 1970s, the differences between live and reproduced sound were profound, which is to say there was a long way to go and much development possible.

To go with this philosophy, HP and team developed a language to convey what they were hearing. They understood that they needed not only to perceive how music sounded on the gear they were reviewing, but they also had to communicate it in an understandable way. And since objective observation, with the exception of JGH, had largely been missing in audio reviewing, the necessary lexicon was largely missing too. You don’t need, for example, a word to convey “soundstaging” until you have observed the phenomenon and thus need to convey the idea to readers.



HP’s amazing achievement was not only starting a magazine (a difficult operational and financial task, to be sure) but also starting it with a staff and a direction that made it almost immediately influential. HP didn’t just start a magazine; he started a movement. There is no doubt that others at this time were on the same track. Certainly Bill Johnson and Arnie Nudell and Jim Winey and Bob Carver and Mark Levinson and many others were already working on this same project. HP and *TAS* were pivotal in turning it into a community on a mission. ►

*“HP’s amazing achievement was not only starting a magazine (a difficult operational and financial task, to be sure) but also starting it with a staff and a direction that made it almost immediately influential. HP didn’t just start a magazine; he started a movement.”*





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► Fast forward about 25 years. *Stereophile*, led by Larry Archibald and John Atkinson, was now the regularly published leader in the field. And Harry was struggling to get *TAS* out not just on time but at all, having lurched from financial crisis to financial crisis at least one time too many. I vividly recall wondering when the next *TAS* would arrive and if something more serious was wrong. Then, some months later, a new issue arrived and upon opening it and reading the letter from the editor, I found that Harry was indeed in dire straits and inviting readers who might be interested in investing to call him. So, I did. I told him I was interested in buying the magazine. I may have been the only caller, so we agreed to meet.

I flew to Sea Cliff, NY with Mark Fisher, Harry's proposed publisher. For me it was a fascinating meeting. Of course, even though I held most of the cards, I was more than a bit nervous meeting "the great man" of my early adulthood. But Harry, without contrivance, managed to stage a meeting at which I was at once impressed and charmed. As others have observed, Harry had a great, deep voice. He also spoke to a significant degree in pronouncements ("I am at the height of my powers", "this is the finest sound ever obtained from that cartridge", etc.). He was quite willing and able to get down to a discussion of the core philosophical elements that make *TAS* what it is and that, like the constitution, must be protected. He interlaced references to wines and Carnegie Hall into casual remarks. And yet, he set the meeting up in a local pancake house that hadn't altered its architecture since 1965. He was never rude, exuded hope, and clearly wanted help. It was a bit like having a pint with the Queen at the local pub while discussing your views on foreign policy. Odd, and yet engaging.

I learned a lot from Harry in those days. Harry and Sallie Reynolds (who was essential to making the editorial department run) knew people and knew how to get things done with limited resources. They had a deep sense of what readers cared about and Harry had a nose for interesting gear. Harry had some good relationships in the industry, too.

Harry could also test a relationship in surprising ways at surprising times. Almost everyone who knew Harry has some specific memory of this. In my case, he often seemed to carry his journalistic ("don't trust the subject") sensibilities into realms where they didn't belong. We had frankly unnecessary work to do to deliver reviews and return equipment on time.

We (eventually) worked through or around those issues. Still, I don't think Harry was ever happy without the formality of being in charge. It wasn't that he was a control freak. And it wasn't only that he had created *TAS* and now others were shaping it—he actually seemed to enjoy working with others. Mostly, it was that Harry truly was "a great man", and simply being "an important man" in the *TAS* structure didn't fit his identity.

I don't think that should have mattered. Nothing could have or will change Harry's greatness. Harry, wherever you are now, I hope you realise, with some finality, that you were always a great man to a great many of us. Thanks. +

*Editor's note: We decided to run Tom Martin's very personal tribute to HP without pictures of Harry Pearson, because throughout his tenure at TAS, his image never appeared in print. We felt this respected the wishes of the man.*







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# AVM Inspiration CS 2.2 system

by Alan Sircom

**B**ack in the late 1970s, the music centre (as it was once called) was the popular choice among non-audio enthusiasts. This was a time before 'small' and 'minimal' were the orders of the day, so they looked like a cross between a studio mixing desk and the flight-deck of an aircraft carrier. It was a good idea in theory, but one that was chronically hampered by the performance of the electronics at the time. However, the second decade of the 21st Century has witnessed the rebirth of the music centre, but this time it comes with great performance in tow. Which means the AVM Inspiration CS 2.2 can be considered the spiritual heir to the music centre, without any sense of the pejorative.

As with its forebears, it's easier to describe what this modern-day take on the music centre doesn't include, than to list what is available in the one comparatively small and well-made box. So, there's no SACD and no DoP DSD support, there's not much in the way of provision for multichannel or home theatre systems, and you can't use the CD mechanism to rip discs to an external computer. It also won't make its own electricity, can't solve quadratic equations, and won't make you like Brussels sprouts (unless pan-fried with garlic and pancetta).

There's a phrase I all but threw away in the last paragraph, that deserves some serious unpicking: 'well-made'. In fact, 'unpicking' is a very good term here too, because at first glance you might struggle to see how it's put together. Although not an entirely screwless case, this brushed black or silver aluminium design drips quality – not in a back-breaking, high-

mass way, but made in the way you'd expect from a country obsessed by car shut-lines and precision engineering. We've seen this before from AVM, but the no-compromise approach to design seen on the company's high-end separates is writ just as large in one small box. It's the feel of the buttons, the resistance on the volume control... all the kind of things that shouldn't make a difference, but bespeak of assured quality.

On the inside, things are positive too. As the name suggests, the Inspiration CS 2.2 features a built-in CD player, but it also has a phono stage, and a surprisingly good MM and MC one at that. It has three analogue inputs alongside coaxial, USB, and Ethernet digital inputs (all automatically upsampling to 24/192), and it has an FM tuner with RDS. There's no DAB, because it can stream internet radio through its UPnP/DLNA Ethernet connection. There is an update USB socket, allowing the Inspiration CS 2.2 to adapt to future changes in audio as and when they emerge. It has a Class D 165W per channel amplifier for loudspeakers and a decent amplifier for headphones. All of which could be describing any one of a number of 'all-in-one' systems, so where does the '21st Century music centre' come in? It comes in for the form of by-passable tone controls, and even loudness, set and adjusted through the blue fluoro front panel.

The interface doesn't just include tone controls; you can assign names, trim input levels to precisely match sources, and even skip over unused inputs. These are all 'front end'



aspects of use, in that they are best performed when the Inspiration CS 2.2 is being installed, rather than adjusting them on the fly as the need arises.

Historically, tone control have got some very bad press, sometimes for good reason, but the world (and especially the music world) has changed since the 1980s when they were routinely removed from good audio equipment. Since that time, music has become systematically brighter and more compressed, to help it sell to a wider audience. A small amount of tone shaping applied to some of the victims of 21<sup>st</sup> Century recording techniques can help. In the worst cases, it's not much more than a token gesture, but judicious use of tone controls can help make Arcade Fire's *Funeral* [Rough Trade] more listenable, but no less oddly, uniquely, and brilliantly baroque-dangerous sounding. In a way, we could do with a return to the slope filter system used by Quad in its preamps from the 1970s to help compensate for modern recording idiosyncrasies, but this might be asking a lot.

AVM has also approached the loudness button with singular intent, making it a parametric loudness button designed to compensate for lower listening levels. This should be imprinted on people who traditionally used the loudness setting as some kind of 'turbo boost' to the sound at all times. AVM's system increases bass and treble as volume decreases, and you control just how much more treble and bass you need for late night, low level listening. This should be set for your loudspeakers, rather than your listening habits, but also to correlate with equal-loudness contours of the human ear.

The front panel controls are small and elegant. There are a series of five multifunction buttons beneath the blue fluoro display, which change function depending on what the Inspiration is accessing, and the fluoro display helps guide you in this. Sandwiched between the slot-load CD player and the volume knob are a line of three buttons (for source selection) and a headphone socket. It's not as minimalist as it sounds, and the user quickly gets to understand the functionality and operation.

This is aided by the RC9 remote. This sits in a charging cradle, which can be fed from one of the rear mounted USB sockets, or through a plug-top USB charger. The RC9 (also used by Cyrus and Electrocompaniet, among others) extends the front panel functionality, and brings a touch of useful display when using it with an UPnP network. Like many computer-side components, the installation is more complicated to describe than it is to do, because it's extremely automated. You basically need to pair the remote to the Inspiration, and then enter the relevant network name and password. You can drill a lot deeper should you require (or in the unlikely event that the automated set-up does not work as planned). There is also an IOS app, which was not available to test but will be out by the time this review goes to press.

*“Music has become systematically brighter and more compressed, to help it sell to a wider audience. A small amount of tone shaping applied to some of the victims of 21<sup>st</sup> Century recording techniques can help. In the worst cases, it's not much more than a token gesture, but judicious use of tone controls can help make Arcade Fire's Funeral more listenable, but no less oddly, uniquely, and brilliantly baroque-dangerous sounding.”*

If this suggests a relatively lengthy installation process, it needn't be anything of the sort in reality, but this is one time it's worth breaking the cardinal rule of audio; read the manual. Not because you risk damage, but because you can (and should) configure the Inspiration to taste, and an evening spent systematically matching levels, setting brightness, and making sure everything is speaking to everything else pays dividends. Yes, you can automate this process and have the system up and running within about 20 minutes from opening the box, but why not add personal investment to the financial? The great thing though is this is a one-time action. Once the CS 2.2 is set, it stays set.

In order of preference, the built-in CD player ruled the roost. That being said, the other sources are not far behind. But the CD player gives you the best and most immediate impression of the CS 2.2's overall sound. At first glance, it's almost a contradiction, because it is at once warm, yet fast sounding, but some of that makes you realise just how set in our ways we have all become. There is nothing intrinsically 'slow' about 'warm', and there is nothing intrinsically 'bright' about 'fast' sounding equipment, but because so many 'warm' sounding products are never associated with sounding 'fast' or 'upbeat', we just assume the two elements are entirely disconnected. The CS 2.2 shows it's perfectly possible to achieve both, and the resulting sound is extremely good to live with.

This is an easy sound to enjoy, on all formats; just put on 'One More Cup of Coffee' from *Desire* by Bob Dylan [Columbia, streamed through wired Ethernet from a downloaded CD] and ►



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► note how the percussive speed of the guitar strumming blends seamlessly with His Bobness' impassioned sing-cry vocals, evoking the multi-layered emotionality and force behind the song. This isn't a system to pick out the guitar, and it isn't one to focus on the band or the lyrics (although you can do all that). Instead, it's a system that allows you to cut through and listen to the music. This is something separates users are used to getting, but is only now realised in the single-box world.

Moving to LP simply reinforced this feeling that the system manages to combine a degree of refined, warm, smoothness with speed, dynamics, and detail. It isn't the kind of device that invites close investigation of the sound, however, as you spend a lot of time instead simply enjoying what you are hearing.

AVMs intention here was to shrink a multi-box audio system down into one small box, without sacrificing performance in the process, and to that end, the Inspiration CS 2.2 wholly succeeds. The on-board CD, the phono stage, and the Ethernet connection are all extremely well sorted. There is a limit to how much you can get in one box however, and in this case the limit comes across in a mild foreshortening of soundstage. If you imagine an ideal soundstage as a sphere projecting out from a space midway between the two speakers and about a foot behind the tweeters, and extending well past the loudspeaker position, then the Inspiration CS 2.2 creates something closer to a disc-shaped stage, extending to just beyond the outer edges of the speaker baffle. The good news is there's no reduction of musical scale, and you don't feel you are listening to tiny musicians, or through a letter box; it's simply

that the soundstage is a little smaller than you might find from a series of separates, like the ones from the AVM range. In contrast, the headphone socket has no such foreshortening, and sounds remarkably open and powerful enough to drive most headphones (HiFiMAN HE-6s excepted).

How this all happens in the one box without it sounding like someone emptied a sack of spoons down a fire escape is due to some fairly sophisticated technological advances in the last few years. Class D amplification has come a long way sonically in the last decade and a half, and the AVM Inspiration CS 2.2 is one of a number of fine examples of just what the technology can do, given the chance. Where in the past, Class D was grey and flat sounding, albeit with a fairly good midrange, the latest generations have added more life and energy to the upper and lower registers, and retained that smoothness across the mids. Where Class D of a dozen years ago would crap out at the first sign of a phase angle, the AVM amp modules can take some more 'interesting' loudspeaker loads. Just remember to steer clear of anything swinging much below about two-ohm minimum impedance (in practice, this is unlikely; the kind of loudspeakers that would impose very low impedance load problems would rarely if ever wind up on the end of the AVM CS 2.2).

If I'm being picky, the only limitation to the AVM is its use of BFA-type speaker sockets. The BFA sockets are not a problem in the UK and Europe, where 4mm banana plugs reign supreme, but a lot of the rest of the world uses spade lugs as standard, and although multi-way sockets feature in the larger Evolution CS 5.2, there is no provision for their use here. ►



► We'll end as we started; the AVM Inspiration CS 2.2 is the music centre of the 21st Century, but this time without the lo-fi baggage that music centres came with back in the day. The drive to downsize is an ever-present one now, and the AVM Inspiration CS 2.2 is one of the best there is for people making that transition. Today's audio buyers have to think smaller, and this system allows you to do just that without wistfully remembering the days when you had a room stuffed with big black boxes. In short, AVM joins the select band of companies that manage to squeeze a quart into a pint pot, and make it sound good. Highly recommended. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Analogue Inputs:** 4x line (RCA), 1x phono (MM, MC)

**Digital inputs:** S/PDIF coaxial and optical, synchronous USB, LAN and WLAN Ethernet connection

**Outputs:** 1x pre (RCA), 1x line (RCA), 2x pair 4mm/BFA loudspeaker terminals

**Digital outputs:** S/PDIF coaxial and optical

**Power output:** 165W per channel into ohms

**Headphone output:** Pure Class A amp, 3.5mm jack

**CD drive:** Slot drive, spring mounted., TEAC derived

**Digital audio output:** upsampled automatically to 24-bit, 192kHz

**Supported media server:** UPnP 1.1, UPnP-AV and DLNA-compatible server, Microsoft Windows Media Connect Server (WMDRM 10), DLNA-compatible servers: NAS

**Streaming formats:** MP3, WMA, AAC, OGG Vorbis, FLAC (192/32 via LAN), WAV (192/32 via LAN), AIFF (192/32 via LAN), ALAC (96/24 via LAN)

**Internet radio:** vTuner Service, Auto network config., Internet Radio Station database (automatic updates) FM radio with RDS

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 34x9.2x35cm

**Weight:** 10kg

**Finish:** Aluminium silver or black, chrome front optional

**Price:** £3,900

**Manufactured by:** AVM

**URL:** [www.avm-audio.com](http://www.avm-audio.com)

**Distributed in the UK by:** C-Tech Audio

**Tel:** +44(0)7738 714619

**URL:** [www.c-techaudio.co.uk](http://www.c-techaudio.co.uk)



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# Kuzma CAR-50 moving-coil cartridge, 4POINT tonearm and Stabi M turntable

by Roy Gregory

**T**here was a time when radio stations actually played records. Yep – the flat(ish) black things with musical squiggles pressed into their surfaces. To do that, they needed record players: not just any record players, but record players that could play discs of any type, day in, day out, with all the robust practicality that a studio environment demands. And by “any type” I really do mean ANY type. When 78s were the order of the day, running times were so long that radio stations used special 16” discs, running at 33 (or sometimes 16) RPM to get whole musical pieces onto a single disc. These “transcription discs” were essential to the process and so the Transcription Turntable was born. Companies like Garrard, Thorens, and Technics all built their reputations on building such decks, motor units that would be built into a console and often used with a pair of separate arms of different types or lengths as the programme material required. Indeed, they were so successful that pretty soon, the term Transcription Turntable was being applied to any deck with pretensions to high-fidelity performance. Even the LP12, a deck that flew firmly in the face of all things traditional, adopted the moniker. Such was the power of studio association...

The days of the standalone motor unit are long gone (although the appearance of potted direct-drive systems means that they



may be about to re-emerge) and nobody is suggesting that you build Kuzma's latest turntable into your sideboard, but even so, there's an unmistakable air of the studio about the Stabi M. It comes from the unbelievable solidity of its construction, its size, its sheer practicality and its absolute operational and physical stability. It also comes from its lack of visual embellishment and no- ▶



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## COMPETITION

# WIN! Peachtree's excellent nova220SE worth £1,499 must be won!!!

Hi-Fi+ has teamed up with Peachtree Audio to bring one lucky winner the company's outstanding nova220SE integrated amplifier with DAC and headphone amplifier, worth £1,499.

Tested in issue 117, the nova220SE wowed our Publisher Chris Martens, for its extraordinary flexibility at a superb price. But most of all, he was bowled over by its outstanding performance. We urge you to check out the review at [www.hifiplus.com](http://www.hifiplus.com).

Here are just a few examples of what he found so exciting about this 220W per channel, hybrid integrated amplifier with built-in DAC and high-performance headphone socket. He felt that, "the nova220SE is at once the subtlest, most refined, and by far the most powerful Nova-series amp/DAC offered to date." Martens also stated that, "Peachtree's integrated amps have long been known for flexibility and versatility, and the nova220SE is no exception." And he concluded by saying, "In terms of sound per pound and far-ranging versatility, I think the nova220SE deserves



recognition as one of the benchmarks of the class." And we are giving one of these excellent products away. +

### Competition Question

What tube/valve is used by the nova220SE?

- A. H2N1
- B. 205GT1
- C. 6N1P

To answer, please visit Peachtree Audio's dedicated competition page at <http://www.peachtreeaudio.com/nova220se-competition.html>. Alternatively, send your answer on a postcard (including your name, address, and contact details) to "Peachtree Audio nova220SE Competition, Peachtree Audio, 2045 120th Ave, NE, Bellevue, WA 98005, USA".

The competition closes on February 5, 2015.

### Competition Rules

The competition will run from December 2, 2014 until February 5, 2015. The competition is open to everyone, but multiple, automated or bulk entries will be disqualified. The winner will be chosen at random from all valid entries, will be contacted via email (where possible) and their name will be published in the magazine. The Editor's decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into. Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd. is compliant with the Data Protection Act and UK laws apply. Our policy is such that we will not pass on your details to any third party without your prior consent.



► nonsense appearance. At a time when the number of individual elements, materials, and glitzy surface finishes involved seem to be directly proportional to a turntable's price, the Stabi M's look is all business. Externally it's a case of, "move along, nothing to see here", with what little there is hidden below the smoked lid. The lid? What self-respecting high-end 'table has a lid? This one – a fact which underlines just how different this 'table really is.

But the Stabi M story – indeed, the Kuzma story as a whole – is inseparable from the development of the company's tonearms. While the original Kuzma Stogi was a 9" arm, very much in the mold of its contemporaries, it was also quite a bit heavier. That led to compatibility issues with some decks, but not with the Kuzma Stabi, a suspended turntable whose sheer stability meant it had no problems accommodating heavy arms. Nearly 30 years later, the emergence of the remarkable Kuzma 4POINT tonearm has played its own part in the final shape of the Stabi M. What makes the 4POINT so special? It's that unusual combination of evolution and revolution that generates a step-change in performance. Its proven tapered armtube (with what is surely the best azimuth adjustment EVER) originated with the Stogi Reference. Its headshell and beautifully engineered VTA tower have evolved from the Air Line. Its 280mm effective length has been arrived at after experience with traditional 9", 12", and linear tracking designs. But what binds all those different elements into a single whole that's considerably greater than the sum of the parts is the unique 4POINT bearing design, a hybrid configuration that combines a horizontally stabilized single-point bearing for lateral motion with a pair of point-contact "rockers" allowing vertical movement. It might be hard to visualize, but the end result is an almost unprecedented combination of stability and freedom of movement, a performance that is utterly consistent, unaffected

by environmental conditions and impervious to all but the most brutal handling. Combine that with the 4POINT's massive physical rigidity and the ability to adjust and optimize every parameter of cartridge alignment and set up (including independent horizontal and vertical damping) and you have an arm that is capable of not just extracting every last ounce of performance from a cartridge, but exploiting that performance to the full.

Even reviewers (who generally can't face the same way when asked to) agreed that the 4POINT was one of, if not the finest pivoted arm ever made. The problem is that 'finest' isn't the same as 'easiest'. It may have been a model of logical simplicity when it came to set up and use, but if the original 870g Stogi arm was considered heavy, the 2050g 4POINT elevates that issue to a whole new level. The latest Kuzma arm delivers a sense of musical purpose, presence, and dynamic authority that sets new standards – but it has a lot to do with the four pounds plus of aluminium alloy used in its construction. Throw in the massive off-set mounting that goes with the VTA tower and 11" effective ►





► length and you've got an arm that's bigger, heavier, and more demanding of space than a lot of decks are comfortable with. Of course, if your turntable is open-plan, skeletal and rigid (like Kuzma's own flagship Stabi XL) that's not a problem. But Kuzma already had a more affordable and conventional design on the drawing board. Intended to fill the gap in the range between the spring-suspended Ref 2 and the solid, high-mass Stabi XL2, the new Stabi M aimed to combine the best of both worlds, applying the benefits of an ultra quiet, high-torque DC motor drive to a genuinely high-mass, suspended design.

Using small, AC synchronous motors, even in pairs or quartets, with really high-mass platters, the low torque generated leads to slow start up and the risk of increased noise due to any asynchronicity in the drive system. The more motors, the greater the risk. Instead, Kuzma developed an ultra-quiet DC drive with enough torque to spin up and control even a really heavy platter. The end result forms the heart of the Stabi M, built into one of the heaviest

*“Look at the structure of the Stabi M and you find not just high mass, but multiple elements, generally bars or plates of solid aluminium, securely bolted together. Together they create a massive chassis structure that contributes over 45kg to the turntable’s substantial weight.”*

integrated plinth systems I've ever encountered. Of course, mass alone isn't necessarily the answer, or even a good thing. You have to use it intelligently and for all its imposing bulk, the Stabi M is nothing if not clever.

Hang up a bar of metal and hit it; it rings – long and loud. Now bolt another piece of metal to the first one and hit it again. You'll hear little more than a dull 'thunk'. Look at the structure of the Stabi M and you find not just high mass, but multiple elements, generally bars or plates of solid aluminium, securely bolted together. Together they create a massive chassis structure that contributes over 45kg to the turntable's substantial weight, but by using multiple pieces, each of differing dimensions, that structure is also dispersive and inherently self-damping. The external frame is constructed from solid plate, and sits on three large diameter, incredibly easy to use leveling feet. It also supports the top-plate, which sits on four compliantly mounted brass ►

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► adjusters accessible from above for fine-tuning the level of the platter and tonearm. The sub-chassis is constructed from massive blocks of aluminium, bolted together to create a rigid frame that carries the main bearing, and is further stiffened and damped by attaching the solid, 50mm thick aluminium armboard. The whole assembly hangs from the top-plate on a series of elastomeric isolators, providing immunity from external vibration and yet considerable lateral stability. You really wouldn't realize this deck is suspended unless you compare the subtle vertical give in the top-plate to the rock-like solidity of the surround.

That physical stability is key to the drive system, a belt drive that compares favorably with the latest slew of direct drives when it comes to speed stability. The DC motor is encapsulated in a double wall, brass housing, securely mounted to a heavy aluminium plate that is in turn suspended and isolated from the turntable top-plate by four more elastomer pucks. The massive main-bearing is the proven, inverted 16mm shaft, tipped with a ruby ball used in the Ref 2. The aluminum sub-platter is belt driven and supports a 70mm thick, oversized main platter, machined from a laminated aluminium and acrylic sandwich. The platter itself weighs a substantial 12kg and is topped with Kuzma's proprietary bonded interface material, while the spindle is threaded to take a screw-down clamp. But what makes this drive system exceptional is not just its overall speed stability – it's the ability to spin that immensely heavy platter from stationary up to 33 RPM in two seconds – or around one revolution! Both things are a function of the close-coupled drive, a product of the stiff, flat, plastic drive belt and the lack of lateral compliance in the suspension. Of course, if you mate the drive and platter that intimately, you'd better have a decent power supply. The Stabi M's is suitably large, sophisticated

and versatile. It offers simple and incredibly precise, push-button, fine-tuning of 33 and 45 as well as 78 too. It also offers remote control start and stop. Yes, I was non-plussed too – until it was pointed out that the rapid start up allows users to drop the stylus in a stationary lead-in groove, resume their listening seat at a suitably leisurely pace and then hit the start button – with the same relaxed option at the end of the side.

The large footprint of the Stabi M (10cm greater in both directions than the Ref 2) allows it to accommodate pretty much any arm known to man – and to do it within the confines of the plinth and beneath the protection of the cleverly designed, non-resonant lid. The massive suspended weight and stable suspension means that even an arm as heavy as the 4POINT is accommodated with ease, while the massive, heavily damped chassis offers a perfect mechanical termination for the incredibly rigid structure of that arm. The integrated, easily leveled plinth system is an absolute boon, while the effective and fuss-free suspension makes this a serious plug ►



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*“If there’s one word that sums up the sound of this complete Kuzma record replay system, then it’s ‘confident’. The kind of confidence that you see exuded by champion athletes: the confidence that comes with that special combination of balance and power.”*



► and play proposition, almost impervious to its supporting surface. Add a Kuzma cartridge, in this case the flagship, sapphire cantilevered CAR-50 (bigger brother of the CAR-20 reviewed in Issue 110) and you’ve got a one-stop solution for state-of-the art record replay. Kuzma will even mount and pre-align that cartridge for you, if you are buying a complete player. Given construction that is in all likelihood, quite literally bomb-proof, along with the confidence inspiring consistency and reliability that goes with it, it’s not hard to understand why this is a deck that would be perfectly at home in a professional/studio environment. It’s an impression that isn’t just underlined but actively reinforced by its sonic and musical performance.

If there’s one word that sums up the sound of this complete Kuzma record replay system, then it’s ‘confident’. The kind of confidence that you see exuded by champion athletes: the confidence that comes with that special combination of balance and power that allows them to meet and beat any challenge, to control any situation. The Stabi M, 4POINT and CAR-50 are all, individually amongst the heaviest products in their class, yet their combined sound is anything but heavy or leaden. Full of pace and energy, it’s

light on its feet and explosively dynamic, capable of breathtaking power and weight, but also astonishing finesse and subtlety. Piano will always represent the sternest test for any record player, with its long decay stressing speed stability, its range of weight and attack a stern test of dynamic range and resolution while its harmonic complexity demands genuine neutrality: that and the fact that most of us have sat at a piano and even if we can’t play, we know what happens (and what it sounds like) when you hit the keys.

Mind you, few if any of us hit the keys quite like Martha Argerich. Her DGG recording of the Ravel G Major Concerto (with Abbado and the Berliner PO) offers a perfect window on the Kuzmas’ capabilities, from the utter stability with which it presents the instrument, to the superb dynamic discrimination. Throughout the staccato, almost Gershwin-esque opening movement, the table’s speed of response and dynamic discrimination make the most of Argerich’s astonishing rhythmic dexterity and its stark contrasts with the florid orchestration. But the long, meandering lines of the solo entry to the second movement is even more impressive. The measured pace and gently evolving weight in the playing gives space to the notes and poise to the playing, with not a waver in the lengthy decay, utter clarity when it comes to the accent and level of each note and phrase, a perfect balance between left hand and the fleeter fingers of the right. That sense of balance is crucial to any piano recording but here it really is make or break, with Argerich’s legendary lyrical and emotional quality utterly dependent on the fluidity and grace in her playing. Any lumps or discontinuities will destroy the spell, but the Kuzmas’ utterly even yet uninhibited presentation draws you in and keeps you there.

That top to bottom evenness and poise is key to the Kuzmas’ team performance. Whether it’s the perfect balance of Martzy and Antonietti in the Coup d’Archet radio recording of the Kreutzer Sonata, a quality that makes clear the depth of understanding (and respect) between this star and her accompanist, or the sheer virtuosity of Pollini’s Chopin Etudes, this record ►

*“If the mark of a great transducer is to step aside and let the music speak then the CAR-50 certainly qualifies, with the Stabi M and 4POINT helping it on its way. And that’s really the key.”*

► player presents a picture of complete clarity and stability, but a picture that lives and breathes with layered harmonics, space, and vitality. Despite the weight that it brings to the left-hand there’s nothing clumsy or congested in its bottom end. Listen to the attack and power that Pollini generates and that the Kuzmas lift from the groove and you realize just how earthbound and turgid less accomplished players (pianists or turntables) sound.

That confidence extends to all musical genres. The solidity, impact and propulsive nature of the drumbeats on Shawn Colvin’s ‘Shotgun Down The Avalanche’ from *Steady On* [Columbia] is seriously impressive – but so is the subtle intimacy of the vocal and delicate resolution of the sleigh bells. If the mark of a great transducer is to step aside and let the music speak then the CAR-50 certainly qualifies, with the Stabi M and 4POINT helping it on its way. And that’s really the key. As impressive as these three products are individually, the utterly seamless and symbiotic way in which they combine creates a whole that, just like the various elements that make up the tonearm, is far, far greater than the sum of its parts – not in terms of its obvious attributes, but in the way they step behind the performers and the performance, freeing them of constraint or imposed character. There are certainly more detailed cartridges and set-ups that offer greater absolute separation, but there are very few that sound as naturally coherent, holistic, and musically complete as team Kuzma. This level of genuine neutrality and the musical versatility and insight it offers is both rare and reminiscent of the stable clarity that comes from master tape – just without the sterile quality that tape delivers too. That’s what makes this Kuzma combination so impressive and so rewarding, immediately and in the long-term; it will play anything – and it will play it really, really well. At a time when many a vinyl collection is being ripped to hard-drive, maybe it’s time to update and revive the transcription moniker, a traditional title for which this is a genuine contender; what it does with records might just cause a few second thoughts...+

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### Stabi M

Type: Belt drive, suspended chassis turntable  
 Drive System: DC motor with external power supply  
 Platter Mass: 12kg  
 Speeds Available: 33, 45 and 78 (user adjustable)  
 Tonearm Mounts: One  
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 600 x 500 x 280mm  
 Weight: 60kg  
 Lid: Yes  
 Finish: Black (optional coloured plinth)  
 Price: £13,995

### 4POINT

Type: Pivoted with 4POINT bearing  
 Effective Length: 280mm  
 Pivot/Spindle Distance: 264mm  
 Mount/Spindle Distance: 212mm  
 Effective Mass: 14g  
 Interchangeable Arm-Top: Yes  
 Adjustable VTA: During play.  
 Adjustable Azimuth: Precision worm drive  
 Overall Weight: 2050g  
 Price: £4,995

### CAR-50

Type: Low-output moving-coil cartridge  
 Cantilever: Sapphire  
 Stylus Type: Microridge  
 Output: 0.3mV at 3.54cm/s  
 Compliance: 10cu  
 Cartridge Mass: 17g  
 Recommended VTF: 2.0g  
 Recommended Load: >100 Ohms  
 Price: £4,495

Manufactured by: Kuzma d.o.o.  
 URL: [www.kuzma.si](http://www.kuzma.si)

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# Crystal Cable Arabesque Minissimo loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

**T**he Crystal Cable Arabesque Minissimo could be thought of as 'The Little Loudspeaker that Could'. In the Arabesque Mini of a couple of years ago, Crystal Cables moved away from the all-glass floorstanders design of the first models, and that move is continued in the Minissimo. It retains the 'apostrophe' shape of all Arabesque models, which makes the speakers about as 'handed' as it's possible to get, and has 'enduring classic' and 'endearing design' written all over it.

Crystal Cable uses the same ScanSpeak Illuminator drivers it used in the Mini; a 25mm beryllium tweeter and 150mm laminated cone paper mid-bass design. This is no bad thing, because these are some of the most highly respected (which also means 'expensive') drivers in modern loudspeaker design. It's also a reflex model, with the port firing downward. That cabinet, however, is no longer just a pure aluminium construction, but instead is a one-piece block matrix of resin and metal, from which the basic Minissimo





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- shape is milled. This not only retains (possibly improves upon) many of the sonic properties of the aluminium or glass panelled Arabesque designs, but also drastically cuts the cost of the cabinet construction.

Alongside the usual portfolio of R&D tools, Crystal uses a sophisticated program called COMSOL, a multiphysics modelling program used for scientific and engineering problems. It's not commonly used in loudspeaker design, because loudspeaker builders have a habit of thinking of a loudspeaker as being something where modern engineering practices take a bit of a back seat. However, by treating the air inside and outside a loudspeaker as a gas (because, well, it is a gas) and using COSMOL's gas-dynamics modelling abilities, as well as its mechanical modelling parameters, Crystal has created a design that not only looks different, but does so for very sound engineering reasons. In particular, it means a natural resonant delay due to cabinet structure and not a forced resonant delay from cabinet damping.

The last piece in the Minissimo jigsaw is the crossover, an updated variation on the theme of a second-order network that Crystal Cable calls its 'Natural Science' crossover. This is designed to create a 12dB/octave slope while trying to minimise phase and time domain distortions. This means no nasty low impedance dips, and means that while the Minissimo is 3dB down at 48Hz, the slope is very gentle and is only -6dB down at 38Hz. At the other end of the scale, the tweeter extends to 38kHz and the crossover point is 1.8kHz. The trade-off is 86dB sensitivity.

The Minissimo can work well with small, high-quality amplifier designs, but really comes to life with some power behind it. There is an obvious match in the Devialet range, both in terms of amplifier output and industrial design. And, perhaps unsurprisingly, as the magazine went to press, it was announced the Devialet SAM scheme extended to the Minissimo, meaning even better bass depth and control, making an already extremely big sounding small loudspeaker even better. But, away from the Parisian connection, we'd recommend amplifiers of quality and quantity, and both in relatively ample amounts.

It needs sensitive installation and careful partnering then, but the Minissimo delivers much in return. It manages to scale to the room size in a surprising way. Play it in a barn of a room and it is just as comfortable as it will be in a room the size of a pack of cards. Yes, there are the inevitable volume and headroom limits imposed upon trying to make a little speaker spring to life in a big room, and it is best used in a near-field setting, but the speakers limits don't make themselves felt anywhere near as much as you might expect.

*"The Minissimo allows you to better understand what it is about dance music that works for those who like dance music."*

There's a sense of low-distortion rightness about this sound, not dissimilar from the kind of low distortion you get from an electrostatic, but with more dynamic range at the lower end of the spectrum. A semantic issue here is this is a speaker that does no harm and doesn't offend, but these should not be viewed as negatives. There are speakers that never offend because they are too tame and too soft sounding; Minissimo never offends because it is simply communicating music. If you find, say, dance music offensive, the Minissimo allows you to better understand what it is about dance music that works for those who like dance music. No, it's not going to turn an early music enthusiast into a thrash metal fan or a 1970s disco bunny, but it is going to help bring out your inner musicologist. That being said, plainly bad music sounds bad here. It doesn't rose tint your music, because its articulation (in terms of vocal articulation, instrument articulation, and its ability to turn on a crotchet) is so significant. What it does is give you all the information you need to draw your own conclusions about a piece of music, with your own biases set to minimum; my first listen to 'Dangerous Days' on *Taiga* by Zola Jesus [Mute] was not a good one, thinking she was trying to create some kind of bland indie dance anthem rather than her traditionally more intelligent approach to the genre. But on the Minissimo, I could reach deeper into the music and got a better take on what she's trying to do... and it's not sell out. I'm still not convinced, but I'm more willing to try to go where she's going with this new direction.

Where the Minissimo is at its best, however, is when it is in 'proper' territory. Playing 'Optimism' on *Accelerando* by the Vijay Iyer Trio [ACT] perhaps best demonstrates precisely why this speaker is not only extremely good, but extremely important. The best I can tell is this track seems to flip between 7/4 and 7/8 time between bars, making it almost impossible to keep time. In truth, it's one of those pieces of music that never gets played at audio shows (despite it ticking most of the audiophile boxes) because its every-changing time signature tends to sound like two pieces of music edited together for effect. On good systems, you can hear the shifting time signatures, but on the Minissimo you not only hear the time signature shift, but understand the 'length' of the piece of music as a whole and not just get caught up in the bar- ►

► to-bar interplay. You get a profound sense of being deeply impressed with the trio, and begin eyeing those more challenging John Coltrane albums as impending future listening projects, in the process.

Truthfully, I've had to write this review several times, each time toning it down a little more than the last. Regardless, this speaker says many things – all of them good – about what Crystal Cable is doing with its loudspeakers now, and those things are worth shouting about from a great height. No other loudspeaker brand I can think of is going through such a significant improvement between generations at this time. And, while most brands are making improvements over the years, no company is approaching Crystal Cable's 'delta'. All the while, keep in mind that this is starting from the Arabesque series, which is a damn good base of operations in its own right. This important speaker deserves the highest recommendation. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Two way reflex-ported standmount  
**Drive unit compliment:** 1x 25mm beryllium dome tweeter, 1x 150mm laminated paper cone mid/woofer

**Frequency response:** 48Hz-38kHz  $\pm 3$ dB

**Power handling:** 150W maximum

**Sensitivity:** 86dB/W/m

**Impedance:** eight ohms nominal (seven ohms minimum)

**THD:** <0.3% from 200Hz-20kHz

**Finish:** Pearl white, solar orange, aquamarine blue

**Dimensions (HxWxD, with stand):** 96x30x25cm

**Weight:** 25kg

**Price:** £9,998 per pair including stands

**Manufactured by:** Crystal Cable

**URL:** [www.crystalcable.com](http://www.crystalcable.com)

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# GoldenEar Technology Triton One floorstanding loudspeaker

by Chris Martens

**H**i-Fi+ normally doesn't run taglines as lead-ins to its review articles, but if we did the tagline for this review of GoldenEar's Triton One loudspeakers it would probably read as follows: "Great for the price of Good." Allow me to explain.

GoldenEar's founder, Sandy Gross, is regarded as a legend within the audio community because he has had a hand in founding not just one but three successful loudspeaker companies: Polk Audio (co-founded with Matthew Polk and George Klopfer), Definitive Technology, and now GoldenEar Technology. While all three firms have very distinct identities, one common denominator that links them is a shared passion for building loudspeakers that provide serious, high-level sonic performance at down-to-earth, Everyman prices. Sandy Gross is the sort of fellow who stays up late at night dreaming up ways to give listeners ever more sound per pound and the man's passion and commitment to value shines through in virtually everything his company makes.

Still, the denizens of the high-end audio universe can be almost perversely difficult to please, so that for some the term 'value' has become a double-edged sword. On one hand, 'value' is taken to mean that an audio product is generally good, affordable, and worthy, but at the same time the term is sometimes thought to carry a certain stigma—denoting a good product that somehow falls short of true greatness. Thus, high value audio products are perceived as desirable, yet typically are thought not to provide quite the stuff of which audio fantasies are made. Until now. Sandy Gross is enough of an iconoclast and visionary to force a question many audiophiles and music lovers have pondered over the years: Shouldn't it be possible, through careful and clever design, to create value-minded loudspeakers that also deliver truly extraordinary sound quality? Mr. Gross certainly thinks so, and by way of proving his point he offers us GoldenEar's new flagship Triton One floorstanders, which are priced at £5,000 per pair.

At first glance, the design of the Triton One might appear similar to that of earlier Triton-series models, but the closer one looks, the more obvious it is that the Triton One breaks new ground in terms of design and—especially—sound quality. Where earlier GoldenEar models tended, conceptually and sonically, to have one foot in the world of high-end audio and the other in the arguably less demanding (or at least differently prioritised) world of home cinema, the



new Triton One is, by design, a true connoisseur's high-end loudspeaker, with no ifs, ands, or buts about it. What did GoldenEar change or do differently in order to achieve this result? Read on.

The Triton One is a tall, slim, three-way floorstanding loudspeaker that combines a passive tweeter-mid/bass section positioned near the top of its enclosure with an active subwoofer section down below. The passive section consists of a Heil-type HVFR (high velocity folded ribbon) tweeter flanked above and below by a pair of 130mm, low mass, wide-bandwidth, long-throw mid/bass drivers, each of which loads into its own dedicated enclosure chamber. The active subwoofer section, in turns, occupies roughly the lower three-fifths of the enclosure and consists of three, forward-firing, oblong 125mm x 225mm bass drivers supplemented by two pairs of side-firing, horizontally-opposed, oblong 175mm x 250mm passive radiators. This bass driver array is fed by a 1600-watt, Class D subwoofer amplifier that is controlled by a distinctive, hybrid passive/active, balanced mode subwoofer crossover that is implemented, in part, through a new 56-bit DSP engine that is more powerful than any GoldenEar has used in the past.

When you look closer, the Triton One shows new thinking in several key areas. First, the T1's mid/bass drivers leverage everything GoldenEar has learned through the process of developing its successful line of passive loudspeakers (including, the Aon 2 and 3 bookshelf monitors reviewed in issue 92 or the Triton Seven floorstander reviewed in issue 104). From these award-winning passive models, GoldenEar learned how to make mid/bass drivers that simultaneously provide extremely wide-range frequency response, excellent dynamic range, high resolution, and remarkable transient speeds.

Applying this know-how, GoldenEar created new mid/bass drivers for the T1 that deliver a terrific combination of transient agility, powerful and expressive dynamics, and—importantly—authoritative bass response down to below 100Hz. This means the T1's passive tweeter-mid/bass section covers the lion's share of the entire audio spectrum, while the powered subwoofer section handles only low frequency content from 100Hz on down (by comparison, the earlier Triton models used noticeably higher 160Hz subwoofer crossover frequencies).

GoldenEar's new subwoofer crossover network is arguably the most precise that the firm has ever built and the only one that meets the critical objective of having the subwoofer maintain absolute phase coherency with the mid/bass drivers above. Together, the new passive/active crossover and powerful woofer amplifier do a terrific job of preserving bass transient speed, focus, and pitch definition. Finally, the subwoofer section itself benefits greatly from having an elaborate array of both active and passive bass drivers to share the low frequency workload.

Although it probably goes without saying, GoldenEar's decision to give the Triton One an active woofer section carries several key benefits. First, having a built-in amplifier to shoulder all

low-end duties means that, despite its very impressive performance envelope, the T1 really doesn't need to be driven by particularly powerful amplifiers (unless listeners simply want to use the speaker with high-powered amps). Second, the active woofer section sports a rear panel-mounted output control that allows listeners to dial in the amount of low bass support appropriate to the size and acoustics of their listening space. In practical terms this means that the Triton One is one of the very few genuinely full-range loudspeakers that, with the twist of a knob, can as readily be adapted for use in small rooms as in larger spaces—or anything in between.

All in all, the Triton One's design elements coalesce in a synergistic way, giving the speaker a far more taut, well-focused, and coherent sound than any of its earlier-generation Triton-series predecessors could have provided. As a result, the T1 is able to maintain a very high level of continuity from top to bottom. Indeed, first time listeners (even ones who are finicky audiophiles) might never guess that the speaker even has an





- ▶ active woofer section, except for fact that the speaker possesses phenomenal low-end reach, impact, and definition.

Put all these design elements together and you get a loudspeaker that sounds far more sophisticated, expressive, expansive, and refined than its mid-level price would lead you to expect. As you listen, you might find as I did that the Triton Ones fairly beg for comparisons with top-tier loudspeakers—the kind known for their steep, five-figure-per-pair price tags. The astonishing part is that when the T1 is subjected to such comparisons it does not embarrass itself, nor does it sound overmatched by the competition. On the contrary, the Triton One is so good that at times it can expose pricey high-end contenders (or pretenders?) as self-important sonic ‘emperors’ wearing not nearly enough clothes. To illustrate these points, let me offer some musical observations.

Probably the two sonic qualities that most dramatically signal the seriousness of GoldenEar’s intentions with the Triton Ones would be the related characteristics of resolution and focus, both of which these speakers exhibit in spades. To appreciate precisely what I mean, put on Diana Krall’s famous cover of the Joni Mitchell song ‘A Case of You’ from Krall’s *Live In Paris* [Verve] and start taking notes on the speaker’s overall presentation. First, note that the GoldenEars effortlessly capture even the subtlest of inflections and variations in the micro-textures of Krall’s voice, as on the line where she sings of sketching a map of Canada on the back of a napkin, “with your face sketched on it twice.” On that line, and many others, one has less the sense of listening to a recording being reproduced through speakers and more the sense of being physically present on or near the stage as the recording was being made.

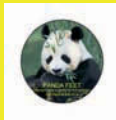
Next, note the sheer vividness and presence of the recording, which again gives much of the feel and sensation of sitting in on a live event. Third, note how believable and realistically three-dimensional the soundstage is—qualities conveyed through faithful reproduction of myriad small yet significant spatial cues in the music. Finally, observe the almost casual ease with which the Triton Ones capture various small ‘action sounds’ of Krall’s piano, such as the occasional pressing of pedals or the delicate release of sustained chords as Krall gently raises her fingers from the keys. This track is, as many audiophiles know, a veritable treasure trove of small, beautifully integrated sonic elements that add up to that elusive quality of realism, but it takes a very fine speaker to show all that the track can do. Happily, the Triton Ones are more than up to the task, delivering a sound so accomplished that it instantly brings to mind the sort of sound one might expect from speakers carrying much steeper price tags. In short, the GoldenEars demonstrate early and often that they are ready, willing, and able to play alongside the ‘big boys’.

Explosive and expressive dynamics are another of the Triton Ones’ strong suits. With many speakers, listeners sometimes tend to do a bit of subconscious “gain riding”, meaning that they instinctively turn levels down in anticipation of loud passages on familiar discs so as to prevent speaker overload. With the GoldenEars, however, almost the opposite seems to be the case. Figuratively speaking, the Triton Ones seem to whisper to their listeners, “C’mon now; don’t be shy. Go ahead and turn the music up to realistic levels; we’ve got you covered.” And remarkably, they generally do (except, perhaps, for scenarios where listeners seek to play, say, Death Metal at ridiculous, ear-bleed levels, ▶





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## Raidho acoustics



▶ which we wouldn't recommend in the first place). Consider the following example to see what I mean.

Prof. Keith Johnson's Reference Recordings are justly famous for their wide, realistic dynamic range and one of my favourites is the track 'Moten Swing' from trumpeter Clark Terry's *The Chicago Sessions, 1995-96* [Reference Recordings, HDCD]. On that cut, listeners initially hear the DePaul University Big Band playing at somewhat throttled-back and subdued levels as the band gently establishes the song's lilting, swinging groove. But as the track unfolds, Terry (sometimes accompanied by the band's full horn section) puts the proverbial pedal to the metal for brilliant, momentary, full-on brass blasts.

What's impressive is not just the way the explosive brass passages are handled (although they certainly do seize one's attention in a compelling way), but also the way the GoldenEar's continually reveal subtle dynamic shadings and nuance, whether they are playing softly, loudly, or somewhere in between. For many loudspeakers such dynamic contrasts seem hard to handle properly, leading to moments where the speakers sacrifice resolution and focus on quieter passages or lose composure on the explosive ones—or both. The Triton One, however, manages to sound effortlessly nuanced and expressive (and three-dimensional), whether it is playing just above whisper levels or cranking along at full-song. This faithfulness to the shape and contours of the music's dynamic envelope, regardless of playback level, is again one of the hallmarks of great, top-tier loudspeakers.

Finally, we come to the matter of the Triton One's full-range frequency response, especially as that term pertains to low-end response. Going low with serious authority was never a problem for either the earlier Triton Two or Triton Three loudspeakers, but one criticism sometimes levelled at them was that their low-end was not as seamlessly integrated as some might have wished. Happily, it's in



this specific area that the Triton One has taken huge steps forward, so that the T1's not only offer superb bass extension and impact, but also a heaped helping of pitch definition and finesse. I became convinced of the Triton One's prowess in these areas when I listened carefully to Barres Phillips and David Holland's *Music From Two Basses* [ECM]. On this disc, Phillips and Holland create duet performances where one bassist occasionally plays pizzicato style while the other plays with a bow, unleashing a veritable rainbow of variously textured bass tonal colours. Frankly, the disk can represent a trial by fire for bass transducers and not all make the grade; happily, though, the Triton Ones, passed the test with flying colours. Through the GoldenEars, there is never any uncertainty as to which bass is playing which musical line, because the timbral differences between the two are captured with rare focus and precision. So, instead of a potentially muddled-sounding bass 'mush', the T1's give listeners an 'up close and personal' view of two master bassists having an intricate yet perfectly lucid musical conversation.

Sonically, the only aspect of the T1's design that gives me pause is the fact that the speaker's HFVR tweeter deliberately presents a gentle (not 'spiky') point of elevated treble lift in the region between 10-20kHz (which Golden Ear strenuously asserts is not a resonance peak). According to GoldenEar this design choice directly resulted from listener feedback gathered during the Triton One's development process. Fortunately, the tweeter sounds very smooth so that the treble lift usually is not a problem, but on some tracks it can add a touch of treble 'sheen' that might not necessarily complement all recordings. For this reason, smooth (but detailed-sounding) electronics are definitely the order of the day for best results.

The only other 'wish-list' item I would mention is that it would be nice to see a future iteration of the Triton One fitted with a wireless remote control for the ▶





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Hi-Fi+ has teamed up with the good people at The Audio Consultants and Audiodesksysteme to bring one lucky vinylista the chance to give beloved LPs the ultimate clean with the excellent ultrasonic Vinyl Cleaner worth £2,199.

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The competition closes on February 5, 2015.

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The competition will run from December 4, 2014 until February 5, 2015. The competition is open to everyone, but multiple, automated or bulk entries will be disqualified. The winner will be chosen at random from all valid entries, will be contacted via email (where possible) and their name will be published in the magazine. The Editor's decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into. Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd. is compliant with the Data Protection Act and UK laws apply. Our policy is such that we will not pass on your details to any third party without your prior consent.

► active woofer section. In my experience, fine-tuning of the speaker's bass output levels had a huge impact on overall sound quality, so it would be a blessing to be able to adjust those levels from the listening chair.

Overall, GoldenEar's Triton One stands as a highly effective and surprisingly affordable alternative to some of today's more inaccessibly priced (albeit excellent) top-tier loudspeakers. As I mentioned near the beginning of this review, the Triton Ones give us a big taste of true sonic greatness—and yes, I am referring to the genuine article—for the price of good, which is a simply remarkable achievement. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Three-way, six-driver, floorstanding speaker with quad passive radiations and a built-in active subwoofer system.

**Driver complement:** One Heil-Type HVFR (High Velocity Folded Ribbon) tweeter, two 130mm mid/bass drivers, three 125mm x 225mm bass driver, four horizontally-opposed 175mm x 250mm passive radiators, 1600-watt Class D subwoofer amplifier fed by a hybrid passive/active balanced more crossover network implemented via a 56-bit DSP engine

**Frequency response:** 14Hz – 35kHz

**Impedance:** 8 Ohms

**Sensitivity:** 92dB/W/m

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** Speaker: 1372mm x 146mm (front width) – 203mm (rear width) x 420mm; Plinth: 313mm (wide) x 502mm (depth)

**Weight:** 44kg/each (shipping weight)

**Finishes:** Black fabric with gloss black trim

**Price:** £5,000/pair

**Manufacturer:** GoldenEar Technology

**Tel:** (410) 998-9134

**URL:** [www.goldenear.com](http://www.goldenear.com)

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# B.M.C. Audio CS2 integrated amplifier

by Alan Sircom

A few issues ago, we raved about the B.M.C. Audio BD1.1 CD player/transport and DAC1 DAC/preamplifier. We liked these products because they represented some of the truest aspects of high-end audio as it used to mean; high performance sound, significant build quality, and 'reassuringly expensive' without being utterly financially unattainable. There is a big piece missing from this B.M.C. Audio line up, however: the power amp.

In this case, it's not just a power amplifier. The CS2 is a cleverly configurable amplifier that can be used as an integrated, or the power amp in a pre-power system. Also, if used with B.M.C.'s own system architecture, it can easily adapt to become potentially an even higher level of amplifier, and the clever fibre-optic comms connections between DAC and amp (or amps) means installing the system is extremely easy.

Easy, that is, in terms of plugging the thing together. Things are a little different when it comes to physically lifting the CS2 into place. In today's Class D, slimline world, this is a beastie. Behind the big front panel, large VU meters and huge volume and control knobs is an amplifier built for the big game. Open the amp up (not an easy task, it's all vents and fins rather than a simple top-plate) and you are met with an exercise in transformer and capacitor use. It's not weighed down by a heavy chassis; it's rooted in place thanks to the sort of power reserves that could jump-start an Airbus. Any amplifier with 2kW of toroidal transformer in the power supply is very likely going to be dynamic, powerful, and stable... and the amp is all of those things.

However, it's not simply a big amplifier. Instead, this uses B.M.C.'s own LEF (Load Effect Free) design. This uses a very small single-ended class-A output stage with a low-impedance voltage output. This stage, as well as the gain stages, has no feedback loop whatsoever. An independent circuit, not attached to the music signal, measures the current inside the voltage stage and keeps it constant by supplying an external phase independent current. Combined with a floating voltage cascade, the voltage stage hardly moves on its non-linear curve and thus doesn't produce any THD. Uniquely, this is actually avoiding THD instead of correcting it by an overall loop.

This partners with BMC's Current Injection system, which replaces the gain stages with a special current/voltage converter, thereby preserving the original current of the signal source through the CS2. Moreover, when used





with other B.M.C. electronics, the CS2's Discrete Intelligent Gain Management circuit moves the gain control out of the input and effectively controls level at the output stage itself, thereby reducing input attenuation and excessive noise and distortion from additional amplifier stages. It's pretty clear this is not just another 200W amplifier.

Do not expect a plethora of inputs and outputs though. The amp has just three RCA single-ended inputs and two XLR balanced, as well as the Toslink-cabled opto control system that allows the DAC1 to take over preamplifier duties. There's not much in the way of control, either; the big knobs turn the amp on and alter the volume, while the two buttons run through the inputs and dim that big display. The display has both power meters and a zero-to-66 volume level in 1dB steps (although using the conventional 'more is louder' relative scale than the correct, but counter-intuitive dB scale), and the relevant input is indicated along the top of the dial. Forget tape loops or balance and tone controls; this is old school purist high-end, and arguably all the better for it.

Like the CD player and DAC before it, there's actually not much you need say about the sonic performance of the CS2. And what you do say, tends to be reflections of negative aspects of other products in its price class. In other words, "X isn't as detailed as the CS2" or "Y isn't as dynamic as the CS2". But, even pulling out these aspects is doing the B.M.C. Audio something of a disservice, because it implies individuated aspects of a performance, where the CS2 shines in delivering the whole package.

You don't focus on the ephemera here. You aren't listening for the detail or defining the soundstage. You are listening to music, as a complete and contiguous whole. It's like it manages to combine the grace of a good valve amp with the power of good solid state. That combination of effortless power and a lot of respect for the music makes the CS2 the perfect foil for some of the larger, more demanding, and great sounding loudspeakers out there. They brought my Wilson Duette Series 2 to life (but that's not really difficult), they brought Avalon Transcendents to life (a much harder proposition, especially in a small room), and practically everything you could put on the end of this amplifier sounded like it should.

The CS2 presents the sound it's fed honestly and accurately. It's fundamentally neutral to the core, and that is what makes it so attractive for use with high-end loudspeakers. I'm finding it a little difficult to

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Michael Fremer, *Stereophile* October 2014.

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Steve Harris, *HiFi News* November 2014  
'Outstanding Product' rating



'...highly recommended and will, I am sure, provide many hours of listening pleasure...'

Tony Bolton, *HiFi World* November 2014  
'Outstanding' rating



'...does it all and it does it with considerable aplomb, it's not inexpensive but it's so revealing and well balanced that it seems like good value if you truly appreciate vinyl.'

Jason Kennedy, *HiFi+* November 2014

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- be entirely rational about this because of what it represents (high-end the way it always used to be) as much as how it sounds, but the fact is it sounds extremely good indeed.

We've lost our way a little, and the musical examples audio reviewers pull out of the hat can sometimes reflect this. It's a function of preaching to the choir and not having enough new blood to be able to play a more diverse range of albums. But the CS2 needs none of that selective audiophile album nonsense. It's just as comfortable wiggling out to Pusifer as it is being cerebral to a Mozart piano concerto. While that doesn't make for pulling out good musical examples to highlight performance aspects (just point the amp at your collection and you'll find such examples) it does make for an amplifier that at once ticks the audiophile and the everyman boxes alike.

We had this amp (and its monophonic M2 counterpart) at this year's Whittlebury Hall show, playing in a huge room with a pair of large Usher loudspeakers and a lot of GilK Acoustics room treatment. In truth, I didn't expect it to work as well as it did given the size and volume constraints of the room, but the level of grip and control this amplifier brought to the party helped a lot. Any loss of control in this setting would set the room off in an instant (a pair of LS3/5as could boom in that room) and the loudspeakers were more than capable of putting a lot of energy in that room, and yet it worked. OK, so playing 'Chameleon' from Trentemøller's *The Last Resort* [Poker Flat] triggered the aircon ducts to start rattling, but that would happen regardless. Fact is, this amp made the sound 'right'; tonally neutral, as dynamic as the source, detailed, and fast in one fairly heavy package. We briefly moved over to the M2s and game was raised, although this proved almost overkill, because the amount of control meant you could push the system to the limits, which meant Wagner, played at whirlwind-raising levels. At one point I turned the volume, looked over my shoulder and saw people cowering – not wincing, but physically cowering from the power this system was capable of producing.

A brief word on cables. B.M.C. has its own monocrystal cable at a less heady price point than the usual suspects that works extremely well, and Colab distributes the excellent Iso-Kinetik Cabezon cables that also make a great case for their inclusion in any system. Were it not that the CS2 does its job so well that you end up thinking everything else a footnote, these would be stars of the show. I suspect in an 'all roads lead to Rome' manner, there will be many who start speaking to Colab through the medium of Cabezon cable and end up catching the B.M.C. bug. But, whatever, it's all good.

I'm surprised by the CS2 and by the state of the rivals at the price. There are a lot of amps at this price point, but few

seem to hold that goal of 'high fidelity' in as such high esteem. Some place emphasis on aspects of musical performance or on shaping the tonal balance in manners euphonic, quixotic, exotic, or neurotic. And some will be drawn to one of these outcomes. But is it right? The B.M.C. Audio CS2 asks this question of its rivals, and many will shy away from the answer.

I think B.M.C. is the intelligent choice in high-end audio right now. Aside from the monoblock option, you have to spend more – vastly more, an order of magnitude more in fact – to achieve any significant uptick in performance. There are many who say there's no such thing as a law of diminishing returns in high-end audio, but I'd disagree. For me, it starts where B.M.C. Audio stops. Highly recommended. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Integrated amplifier:

**Inputs:** 2x balanced XLR and 2x unbalanced RCA

**Input Impedance:** 50kΩ to ground, 100kΩ differential at XLR

**Input Sensitivity:** max 750mV (RCA), 1.5V (XLR)

**Output:** 2x 200W/8Ω, 2x 360W/4Ω

**Frequency response:** 20Hz-20kHz +0dB/-0.08dB @ 1W  
THD+N under 0.1%: from 0.3mW to 150W

**Signal/Noise ratio at DIGM 40 (relative to 1W):** 103dB

**Damping factor:** 250

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 43.5x45x15cm

**Weight:** 40kg

**Price:** £4,595 (M2 mono amp, £4,595 per channel)

**Manufacturer:** B.M.C. Audio GmbH

**URL:** bmc-audio.de

**UK Distributor:** Colab Audio Ltd

**URL:** www.colabaudio.com

**Tel:** +44(0)7768 720456

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## Roksan K3 CD

by Jason Kennedy

For Roksan's latest K3 electronics range, head honcho Tufan Hashemi chose a rather different style of finish to grace the front panels. It seems he's bored of the matte black and brushed silver that is found on the majority of equipment in the affordable arena. He describes these finishes as "somewhat stale," and I have to agree that this is an area that has long been taken for granted. Roksan has some history in different finishes; it used a Nextel coating on its Attesa range, mirroring on the Kandy and Caspian models and most recently white and black piano finishes on the stylish Oxygene series. For K3, Tufan has chosen shades that are designed to match the neutral tones used for interior decoration of late, the 'Farrow & Ball Effect' as it's known. The K3 front panels have a coarse brushed aluminium finish that's hand produced by a German metalwork company. It's subtle but distinctive, and comes in three colours with only slightly confusing names: 'Anthracite' is silver, 'Opium' a dark brown, and 'Charcoal' a very dark grey. The latter has somewhat predictably proved to be the most popular so far... you can lead a horse to water, etc.

The K3 does not supplant the existing K2 models, but sits above them in terms of price and specification, although in the case of the CD player, the features remain almost the same. Unlike quite a few of its competitors, the K3 CD is not attempting to be all things to all men; it doesn't, for instance, have digital inputs and DAC functions. Instead, Roksan has concentrated on making the best disc player that it can for the money by redesigning the main PCB from the K2 player and using higher quality components throughout. It has also added an AES/EBU digital output, which is a far less

compromised means of delivering a bitstream than S/PDIF via coax, and less of a rarity on affordable DACs than it used to be.

The transport mechanism is one that Roksan has built to its own specification, meaning the firm not only enjoys a custom-tailored CD drive but also has a steady supply source – not something that many companies can claim in an age where CD mechanism production is on the decline. Build is reassuringly solid throughout, output socketry is all good quality, and things like the disc drawer operate with a precision that suggests long term reliability. I like the small chrome buttons and clear labelling, but I am less keen on the orangey red on black text on the remote handset. However, with its rounded chrome surround, the remote is good looking and appears to be a solid piece of engineering.

When I started this review, I asked Tufan why the world needed another CD player in what would appear to be the age of digital streaming. He explained, "I feel that there is a certain longevity within the CD format. Being in the industry, it's easy to forget that 'out there', it's still utilised extensively! There is still a big demand for good CD players both domestically and overseas... Also, let's not forget that CD is a simple and effective way of listening to music and it still sounds better than any wireless format." He has a point, and one that undoubtedly resonates with many enthusiasts. There is, however, a button on the K3 handset that indicates Roksan is ready for the future as and when it arrives. It's marked 'streamer'.

In the system, the K3 CD takes a while to run in, it starts out sounding hard-edged and cold, but after a few days of spinning begins to mellow out. The change is quite marked, ►



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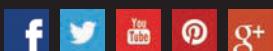
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**WHAT HI-FI?**







► more so than with streaming products or DACs, which suggests there is something about the disc reading process that takes a bit of settling in. Once there, its muscular yet evenly-balanced sound proves very entertaining. I'm not a habitual CD user anymore (I've made the journey to the computer audio side, where they have cookies), so it always takes a while to come to terms with the format, but it was immediately apparent the Roksan has a broad tonal and temporal palette with which to paint aural pictures, and it does so with some aplomb considering its price point.

It did get me wondering what a more expensive player would add to the mix, so I warmed up a Leema Antila IIS Eco (£3,295) and was reminded that 'more' does equal 'more' in the world of CD, specifically lower noise, greater integrity, and better definition of leading edges. Not a fair comparison, but an indication of my expectations as much as anything. The only other alternative I had to hand came from lower down the food chain in the form of a Rotel RCD-06 that appears to be obsolete; I really must update my CD references! Nonetheless it reveals that the K3 is in another league; you can hear so much more realism and detail, the timing is far stronger, and the imaging clearly superior. If you are looking for an upgrade from a relatively affordable player, then the K3 should be on your list.

On its own terms, the K3 has a directness of style that means you get what the musicians were trying to achieve; you may not hear every nuance, but there is more than enough to keep you listening. Joni Mitchell's song 'Edith and the Kingpin' is rather special when its sung by Tina Turner and played by Herbie Hancock and his band, [*River: The Joni Letters*, Verve] and here you get a room-filling sound and a very good appreciation of the expertise of the musicians. It's a lavish recording of a very sophisticated production, that much is clear. The balance is not quite smooth enough to warrant the all-revealing PMC fact.8 loudspeakers I use as a rule and

*"I'm not a habitual CD user anymore (I've made the journey to the computer audio side, where they have cookies), so it always takes a while to come to terms with the format, but it was immediately apparent the Roksan has a broad tonal and temporal palette with which to paint aural pictures."*

reminds me that source and speakers can be mismatched as easily as amps and speakers. Nonetheless, they reveal a low noise floor in the K3, and the layers of fine detail that are allowed to shine as a consequence reinforce the final result.

Bass is also well served. This player delivers surprisingly tactile bass notes from guitars and drums, as witnessed on the 'Bass & Drum Intro' from *Nils Lofgren Band Live* [Hypertension]. This is delivered with maximum texture and harmonic resonance, as the guitar really growls while the drums shift serious amounts of air – it really gets quite physical. Meanwhile, Gregory Porter is a big man but he has a voice of honey on 'No Love Dying' [*Liquid Spirit*, Blue Note], and the Roksan resolves this with perfect timing and strong vocal imaging. The sound really has shape and presence, which means it gets quite involving, despite the amount of times the song gets played round these parts.

With Beethoven's Late String Quartets [*Alban Berg Quartett (Live)*, EMI], you are immersed in the lyricism of the work thanks to good depth of string tone and well differentiated instruments. I can imagine a richer rendition, but ►

▶ this captures the spirit well and delivers the interplay between musicians that the piece requires. Searching around for CDs, I happened across the first Dali demo disc, a compilation of well recorded tracks that includes Patricia Barber's 'Let It Rain' [*Companion*, Premonition]. Her Premonition recordings are all very good, but sadly this is one I don't have. In the Roksan's grasp, the track sounds so very atmospheric that it makes me want to explore her back catalogue (and that is not an euphemism). She sounds so sultry and the acoustic guitar solo is really rather good, and the way the guitarist adds a kick drum effect by banging the body of the instrument is top light entertainment. If this is an indication of the album's overall quality it's one I need. While I try to resist buying music that is very well recorded for its own sake, it gets very difficult if that music also has an emotional appeal.

Finally, a track that I use mainly for professional purposes is 'Down in the Hole', a Tom Waits song performed by John Campbell [*Howlin Mercy*, Elektra]. This is an exercise in separating bass instruments and voice that the Roksan takes ably in its stride, drawing out the massive reverb and revealing the solidity of the bass guitar. The sonic presentation is excellent in more than just the audiophile sense of the word.

I could go on but you will by now realise that the Roksan K3 CD player is at least as good to listen to as it is to look at. It's not trying to change the world, rather it was built for anyone looking for a solid and dependable disc player. It is designed for one purpose: making CDs sound good. If you need a DAC or a streamer there are plenty out there, but if you don't, then there is a lot to be said for buying a machine that's dedicated to its chosen task. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Solid-state CD player.

**Disc Types:** CD, CD-R/RW

**Digital Inputs:** none.

**Analogue Outputs:** single-ended via RCA jacks.

**Digital Outputs:** coaxial via RCA, balanced via AES/EBU.

**DAC Resolution:** 24-bit / 192kHz

**Frequency response:** 20Hz – 20kHz

**Harmonic Distortion:** < 0.002% @ 0dB, 1kHz < 0.006% @ -30dB, 1kHz < 0.002% @ 0dB, 20kHz < 0.008% @ -30dB, 20kHz.

**Signal to Noise Ratio:** < 96dB L&R (IHF-A Weighted).

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 105 x 432 x 380mm

**Weight:** 9kg

**Price:** £1250

**Manufacturer:** Roksan Audio Ltd

**Tel:** +44 (0)20 8900 6801

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# iFi Audio Micro iDSD portable headphone amp, preamp, and DAC

by Chris Martens

**W**hat follows is a review of iFi Audio's remarkable Micro iDSD portable headphone amplifier/preamp/DAC (£415), which is without a doubt the most ambitious product the company has yet released. Moreover, one could argue that the stunningly versatile Micro iDSD is possessed of more clever, creative, and forward-looking features than just about any other product of its size, type, or price. How best, then, to summarise the many things the Micro iDSD can do? My suggestion is for readers to take a brief pause, to flip to the end of this review to scan the TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS for this product, and then to return to our normally scheduled review. I say this because the Micro iDSD does so many different things at such a high level of performance that the specifications panel might be the only way to grasp at a glance the full scope of the product's capabilities.

As mentioned, the Micro iDSD can serve in three capacities: as a high-performance and high-resolution multi-format DAC, as a powerful and flexible headphone amp, and as a (mostly) digitally-orientated preamplifier. Granted, there have been other products designed to fill this same basic design brief, so that iFi's basic product concept is not, itself, unique. What sets the Micro iDSD apart, however, is the sheer depth and comprehensiveness of its very elaborate features set. Stated simply, almost everything about the Micro iDSD seems geared toward pushing performance envelopes right to the cutting edge of technology, and to do so with a serious high-end company's practiced eye for selecting features that actually enhance sound quality (as opposed adding glitzy-sounding marketing gimmicks). High-end sonic values are well represented, too, as you would expect from a firm whose design know-how comes directly from Abingdon Music Research. As a result, there's a certain old-meets-new quality about the Micro iDSD that marks it as a product you can enjoy in the here and now, but that is—in ever-so-many ways—ready for tomorrow.

First, let's look at the Micro iDSD as a DAC. The Micro iDSD is a PCM, DSD, and DXD-capable DAC that uses a dual-core native DSD/PCM Burr-Brown chipset (two DAC chips; four channels; eight signals; custom interleaving). To reiterate, this means that for all supported digital audio file formats the Micro iDSD provides native decoding with no internal hardware format conversions of any kind. Next, iFi pushes the envelope by making the Micro iDSD capable of handling not only the highest resolution formats commonly available today, but also capable of even higher resolution formats that may appear in the future. Thus, the Micro iDSD not only handles single- and double-speed DSD files,



but also quad- and octa-speed DSD files—all with native processing. Similarly, it not only handles single-speed DXD files, but also double-speed DXD files. The pattern repeats itself with PCM files, where the iFi supports everything from 44.1 kHz/16-bit files all the way up to 768 kHz/32-bit files, and all PCM formats in between. Then, to further enhance performance, the Micro iDSD incorporates a built-in 'GMT femtoclock' for ultra-low jitter (<280 femtoseconds). As for inputs, the iFi support coaxial or optical S/PDIF (supporting rates up to 192 kHz) and provides an asynchronous USB port (supporting rates up to 768 kHz). Completing the picture are an extensive set of switch selectable filters (three for PCM files, three for DSD files, and one fixed filter for DXD files).

As has become the norm for products of this kind, the Micro iDSD requires no device drivers for use in Mac environments, but does require installation of an iFi-provided device ►

► driver for use in a Window environment. Actually, the term driver (singular) might be a bit of a misnomer since the Windows driver package includes a bundled set of four drivers (ASIO, WASAPI, Kernel Streaming, and Direct Sound), each with subtly different characteristics to the others.

If you pause for a moment and consider the preceding paragraphs, you might agree that the extensive features set described would more than do justice to any number of premium-priced DACs, which makes the fact that these features are found in a £415 DAC that much more impressive. Plainly, iFi Audio has poured cubic barrels full of ‘midnight oil’ into the design of this affordable but extremely sophisticated product.

Moving on, let’s consider what the Micro iDSD has to offer as a headphone amp. For starters, note that the amp can be either USB-powered or battery powered, depending upon the exact start-up sequence that’s followed. Interestingly, the Micro iDSD is fitted with a ‘SmartPower’ circuit that enables the amp, even when initialised for battery-powered use, to sense when it is connected to a PC and thus to ‘top off’ its batteries via the USB power lines to achieve longer playing times—especially when driving extremely power-hungry headphones.

Next, note that the iFi is one of the most powerful portable headphone amplifiers available, with maximum continuous output of 1,560 mW @ 64 Ohms, or peak output of 4,000 mW @ 16 Ohms. In practice, this means the pocket-sized Micro iDSD is actually capable of driving such power-hungry headphones as the HiFiMAN HE-6 with genuine authority. But iFi has also made provisions for owners of far more sensitive headphones, earphones, or custom-fit in-ear monitors (CIEMs). Thus, the Micro iDSD provides three switch-selectable ‘Power Modes’, which are—in descending order of power output and noise: Turbo Mode, Normal Mode, or Eco Mode. As a detail touch geared specifically for CIEM users, iFi also incorporates a function called ‘IEMatch’ that offers three settings (Off, High Sensitivity, and Ultra-Sensitivity) to help fine-tune the amplifier’s output characteristics to match the sensitivity of the listener’s chosen in-ear monitors.

With audiophiles in mind, iFi includes a polarity control for the amplifier’s outputs, plus two front panel-mounted mini-toggle switches that allow users to engage or disengage iFi’s signature ‘XBass’ low frequency enhancement circuit or 3D Holographic sound circuit. Last but not least, the amp incorporates a side-mounted USB charging port that enables users to re-charge connected iPhones, etc. While iFi anticipates that the Micro iDSD will typically use its built-in DAC as its primary source, the unit also includes a front panel-mounted 3.5mm analogue input so that the amp can be fed signals from the headphone jacks of smartphones and such. Finally, as a savvy nod to those who might use the Micro iDSD either as a DAC or a preamp, there is a bottom-

*“If you pause for a moment and consider the preceding paragraphs, you might agree that the extensive features set described would more than do justice to any number of premium-priced DACs, which makes the fact that these features are found in a £415 DAC that much more impressive.”*

mounted switch that provides either Direct (fixed output) or Preamplifier (variable output) control over the iFi’s analogue outputs.

My point in supplying these details is to emphasize the fact that iFi has left no stone unturned in its quest to give the Micro iDSD a comprehensive and intelligent features set. Indeed, very few full-size, high-priced, tabletop DACs, amps, and preamps are as well-equipped as this affordable iFi is, which speaks volumes for the thoroughness of iFi’s engineering team. One final point I should mention is that the Micro iDSD is thoroughly documented through both a useful set-up guide that ships with the unit, plus additional, supplementary information found on the iFi web site. Competitors would do well to study iFi’s efforts in these areas and then to follow suit (if they are able).

Sonically, the Micro iDSD reflects its Abbingdon Music Research roots, which are made manifest through the unit’s wonderfully natural, organic, and some might say ‘holistic’ sonic presentation. Where many contemporary digital audio products seem bent on achieving maximum delineation of ►





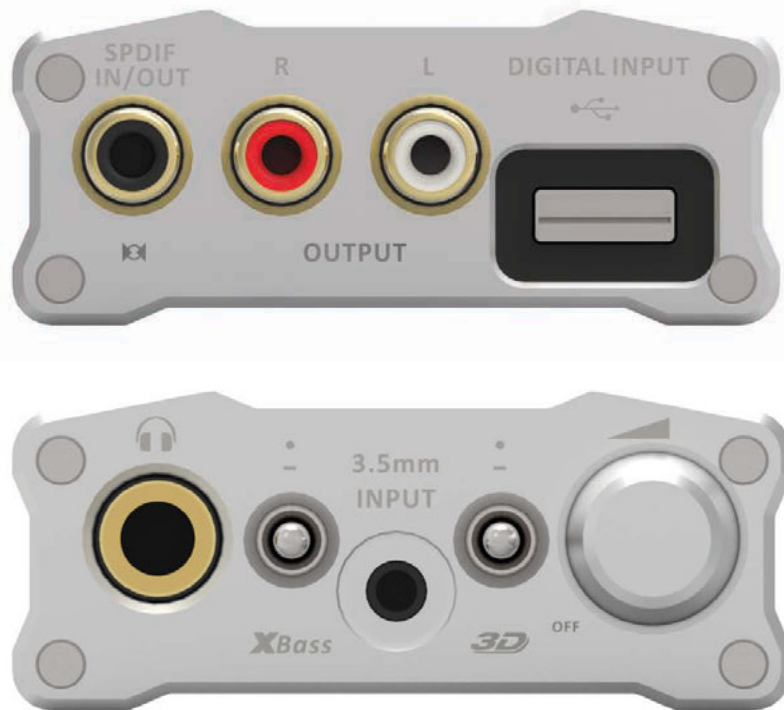


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► musical elements at any price, the iFi takes a completely different tack, seeking instead to weave disparate musical elements into a coherent and unified (though decidedly not 'homogenised') musical whole. The benefits of this approach become apparent on many different types of music.

I put on the Michael Tilson-Thomas/San Francisco Symphony's recording of Mahler's Symphony No. 8 (or 'Symphony of a Thousand') [SFS Media], paying particularly close attention to the symphony's closing 'Blicket auf' and 'Alles Vergängliche' passages. There, in what is arguably Mahler's most challenging and spiritually aspirational finale, the interplay of the soloists, layered choral voices, horns, low percussion, and pipe organ coalesced in a rare and beautiful way to suggest through powerful waves of sound the experience of a soul reaching upward toward the heavens. This ability to put the musical pieces together and to show in an almost tactile way how individual musical threads relate to the larger tapestry is one of the Micro iDSD's greatest strengths and plainly it's a quality made possible through liberal application of AMR-inspired design DNA.

The iFi not only works its magic on large scale pieces where musical coherency is highly prized, but also in much smaller scale and perhaps more detail-orientated pieces. A good example would be Anne Bisson's cover of the Pink Floyd song 'Us and Them' from Bisson's *Portraits & Perfumes* [Camilio Records], which is a carefully crafted, close-mic'd studio recording that is full of sly and subtle textural elements that underscore the dark humour of the lyrics. Above, I said the iFi's sonic presentation does not centre on delineation of details, per se, which is true, but this does not mean that the Micro iDSD is lacking for resolution or focus. Rather, it means that the iFi (rightly, in my view) treats sonic details, textures, and transient sounds as but a handful of many possible means of achieving broader musical ends—not as ends in themselves.

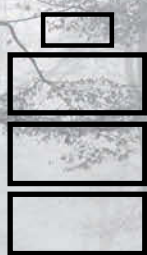


As you listen to 'Us and Them', then, note how Bisson's voice takes on the ever-so-slightly sing-song quality of an off-kilter (or possibly deranged) carnival barker as she delivers the ominous line, "Listen, son/said the man with the gun/there's room for you/inside." The dark undertones of the passage are further emphasized as what initially sound like percussion instruments from a circus take on a subtle and then more forceful martial character. Again, it is not that the iFi draws your attention to any one musical element, but more that it expertly combines elements in a brilliantly understated way to support the thrust of the music.

As advertised, the Micro iDSD is, with the appropriate switch settings, quiet and subtle enough to use with high sensitivity earphones (for example, my Noble Kaiser 10 custom-fit-in-ear monitors), yet with alternate switch settings can belt out full-tilt rock-and-roll through brutally difficult-to-drive full-size headphones such as the Abyss AB-1266. In my experience, no other portable amp/DAC save perhaps for Chord Electronics' superb (but nearly four times more expensive) Hugo can pull off this all-things-to-all-users act as well as the Micro iDSD can. You might wonder whether the iFi's myriad sound enhancement controls, such as its three PCM and three DSD filter settings, power mode settings, and polarity, XBass, and 3D Holographic sound circuit switches offer tangible benefits and the answer is that they do, though often in subtle, situation-specific ways.

I found that the best approach was to start with the power mode settings (experimenting to discover which setting best matched any given headphone or earphone), then to choose polarity and filter settings as appropriate for the music files being played, and finally to try the XBass or 3D settings to see if they added ►





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- anything beneficial to the mix. One further point is that it pays to experiment with running the Micro iDSD under battery power vs. USB power. In an absolute sense, I found battery power tended to produce a slightly more fine-textured and nuanced sound, though this was not an ironclad rule, so that experimentation and careful listening proved the order of the day. The main point is that the Micro iDSD gives listeners useful sonic options and plenty of them.

Industry friends and colleagues know I am a confirmed headphone/earphone enthusiast, so I am frequently asked if anyone makes a genuinely high-performance headphone amp/DAC that sells for under £500. In response to such inquiries, I have—over the past several months—found myself recommending iFi's Micro iDSD to more and more listeners. The reasons for this are simple. Few other DACs (at any price) are more flexible or forward looking, and few other amps can convincingly drive as wide a range of loads as the iFi can. Add to this the iFi's elegant good looks, fine build quality, and solid documentation and you have the very definition of a product that does all things well, and for a price that is not just a bargain, but a gift. +

*"I found battery power tended to produce a slightly more fine-textured and nuanced sound, though this was not an ironclad rule, so that experimentation and careful listening proved the order of the day. The main point is that the Micro iDSD gives listeners useful sonic options and plenty of them."*

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Battery/USB-powered headphone amplifier, preamplifier, and high-res DSD-capable DAC

**Inputs:** Combination coaxial/optical S/PDIF jack; USB-2.0 'OTG' port with built-in iFi iPurifier technology and One 3.5mm stereo analogue input.

**Outputs:** Coaxial S/PDIF jack; 6.35mm analogue headphone output jack; One stereo analogue output (via RCA jack)

**Digital formats and data rates supported:** DSD: 512/256/128/64 at rates of 24.6/22.6/12.4/11.2/6.2/5.6/3.1/2.8 kbps; DXD: 2x/1x at rates of 768/705.6/384/352.8 kHz; PCM: Supports rates of 768/705.6/384/352.8/192/176.4/96/88.2/48/44.1kHz

**Filters:** DSD: three switch-selectable analogue filters (Extreme/Extended/Standard Range); DXD: fixed analogue filter (Bit-Perfect Processing); PCM: three switch-selectable digital filters (Bit-Perfect Processing/Minimum Phase/Standard)

**DAC Dynamic Range:** >117 dB

**DAC Distortion:** <0.003% THD + Noise

**Clock/Jitter:** Ultra low-jitter GMT computer controlled Femto Clock provides <280 femtoseconds of RMS jitter, 12 kHz to 1MHz

**Headphone Amp Power Output:** three switch selectable modes: Turbo Mode: 1560 mW @ 64 Ohms, continuous; 10V and 4000 mW @ 16 Ohms, peak; Normal Mode: 950 mW @ 64 Ohms, continuous; 5.5V and 1900 mW @ 16 Ohms, peak; Eco Mode: 250 mW @ 16 Ohms, continuous; 2V and 500 mW @ 8 Ohms, peak

**Headphone Amp Dynamic Range:** >115dB

**Headphone Amp Distortion:** <0.008% THD + Noise

**Accessories supplied:** USB cable with in-line power filter; One stereo pair of analogue interconnect cables; One 3.5mm – 3.5mm stereo analogue input cable; One 6.35mm to 3.5mm headphone adapter plug; One optical S/PDIF to TOSLINK adapter plug; One USB-A to USB-B adapter cable; One USB-A to USB-OTG adapter plug; One USB-B to USB-2.0 OTG adapter cable; One heavy duty USB-A to USB-2.0 OTG adapter cable; Fabric carrying pouch with drawstring closure; Four adhesive rubber feet; One rubber scuff pad; "I'm An Octa-Adopter" logo sticker; and Two rubber straps for attaching phones or iPods to the Micro iDSD.

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 28 x 67 x 177mm

**Weight:** 310 g

**Price:** £415

**Manufacturer:** iFi Audio

**URL:** [www.ifi-audio.com](http://www.ifi-audio.com)

**Distributed by:** Select Audio

**URL:** [www.selectaudio.co.uk](http://www.selectaudio.co.uk)

**Tel:** +44(0)1900 601954



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# Resolution Audio Cantata Music Center CD/DAC/preamp and Cantata m100 mono amplifiers

by Alan Sircom

**W**hen first I proposed this test, I was keen to see the new Resolution Audio Cantata m100 amps, but thought we'd sideline the Cantata 'Music Center' CD-streaming-USB-DAC-preamp. The Cantata Music Center is far from old news, however. It's the perfect bridge between the old digital world and new, capable of playing CD

though its slot-load transport, network audio, USB audio, and – thanks to the clever Pont Neuf dongle – all points in between. And it will play these to 24-bit, 192kHz precision where relevant. It really is all digital; the front load CD player is joined by a USB, Toslink, S/PDIF coax, and an AES/EBU XLR input. And that's it. Vinyl? Unless it digitises its output, wake up and join the 21st Century. It has variable analogue balanced XLR and single-ended RCA sockets, which should be dimed (set at 100) when used as a source component. It's not possible to set the Cantata to fixed output, however.

Although the Cantata speaks UPnP like a native, the optional Pont Neuf ('New Bridge') is ideal for those wanting to use USB across a distance of more ▶

▶ than 5m. It plugs into a USB socket and provides a simple Ethernet connection designed specifically for audio use (up to 24-bit, 96kHz, without the need for third-party drivers for Mac or PC). If there is a wired Ethernet or Wi-Fi connection following the Pont Neuf, it's all good. Note that this is somewhat different in intent from standard USB-Ethernet ports in that it treats Ethernet like an enormous USB cable, allowing you to run your iTunes library direct from your computer over long distances, rather than supplement existing Ethernet connections for UPnP.

But it was the all-new Cantata m100s that really took our fancy. As you might have guessed from the name, it's a 100W per channel mono amplifier, not dissimilar in effect from the c50 stereo amplifier that has been in the range for some time, except it that removes the control amplifier section.

There's a little extra 4mm plug beneath the red and black terminals that might give some suggestion as to the DNA of the Cantata m100. Not many amplifier companies have promoted the idea of a signal ground at the speaker terminals, but one comes to mind: DNM Design. Jeff Kalt of Resolution Audio might know his way around an audio circuit, but he handed the op-amp/bi-polar Class AB design over to DNM's Dennis Moorecroft for optimum performance. Resolution Audio's distributor Redline also supplied a set of DNM interconnects

and loudspeaker cables for the purposes of the test. The plug sockets in the amplifiers only accept 4mm connectors, which might be an issue in some parts of the world. Resolution also supplies the amp with little jumper-connectors in its XLR sockets as standard, which must be kept in place when using RCAs. Simple answer; use RCA, as they sound better in this context.

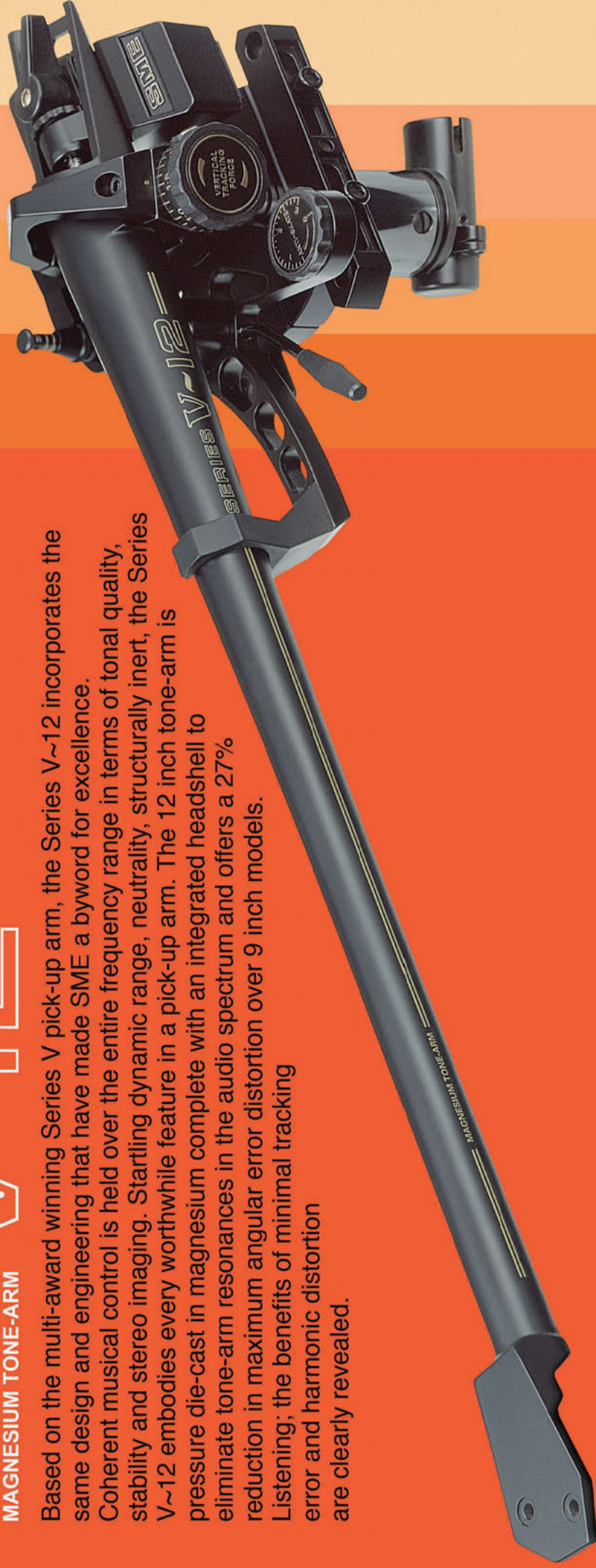
All three amps come supplied in neat little wooden crates (another DNM touch), which are best retained for later use should the need arise. And all three boxes (four if you count the Pont Neuf) sport Resolution's distinctive style; slim, black-based with a solid (but not grotesquely thick or heavy) aluminium top panel, and a unique dimpled top pattern that looks surprisingly organic in the flesh. ▶



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## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### Cantata Music Center

#### Ethernet/USB DAC preamp

**Inputs:** S/PDIF: Coax RCA, Toslink, AES/EBU (to 24 bit, 192kHz)

**USB:** Asynchronous to 24bit, 192kHz

**Ethernet:** 100-BaseTX, 10/100Mbps/s, full duplex, UPnP renderer mode (to 24 bit, 192kHz)

**CD transport mechanism:** slot loading Ethernet link for iTunes (via optional Pont Neuf)

**Outputs:** 1x pair RCA single-ended, 1x pair XLR balanced

**Output voltage:** variable, 5.5Vrms max balanced, 2.5Vrms max single-ended

**Output impedance:** 100Ω

**Analogue attenuation:** 1dB steps from -70dB to -31dB. 0.5dB steps from -30dB to 0dB

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 42x5x22cm

**Weight:** 5kg

**Price:** £4,995

### Cantata m100 mono amplifiers

**Inputs:** 1x RCA single-ended, 1x XLR balanced

**Outputs:** 4mm banana sockets x3 (positive, negative, ground)

**Power output:** 100W into eight ohms THD+N and full output: <1%

**Input sensitivity:** 700mV for rated output Gain: +31.5dB

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 42x5x22cm

**Weight:** 5.5kg

**Price:** £6,990 per pair

**Manufactured by:** Resolution Audio

**URL:** [www.resolutionaudio.com](http://www.resolutionaudio.com)

**Distributed by:** Redline Distribution

**Tel:** +44(0)1268 858222

**URL:** [www.red-line.co.uk](http://www.red-line.co.uk)

▶ Then there is that elegant dot-matrix style front panel display, as seen on the Music Center. It manages to look elegant, and yet can be seen across a room, all the while not at eye-ball scorching levels.

It was a good thing the three devices showed up, because they work together superbly. The m100's by their very nature bestow more grip and authority on the sound compared to the c50, more than enough for most real-world users. Yes, those who think amplifiers are there to be crushed under the weight of a loudspeaker will think the amps lack sufficient low-impedance drive, and they have a point. But for most of us, this is an academic argument pushed by those who think amps don't sound good unless they come with a hernia.

The Cantata amps show strong similarity of tone and character. Tone is the key word here, but 'detailed' is another; incredibly, intensely detailed. These amps deliver tone with accuracy and even mojo. But it's the detail that will woo and wow you. These are information retrievers par excellence, and if a scintilla of musical data is on the disc or in the file, the Cantata Music Center will pick it up and the m100's will convey it with the least amount of reduction and the absolute maximum amount of speed of delivery.

Your ability to recognise this speed of delivery occurs about as quickly too, although initially it blind-sides the listener. There's so much information being sent to the listener, you become almost overwhelmed and start from a position of picking out one instrument in the mix for your attention. This is not necessarily the one front and centre. On 'Holes' by Mercury Rev [*Deserter's Songs*, V2], you're not drawn by Jonathan Donahue's depressed vocals, not even the use of the musical saw (although that's hard to avoid), but rather it's the strings that accompany that musical saw. It isn't an exceptional string part, and it isn't exceptionally well recorded, but it catches you unawares.

After a short while, your listening begins to open out more, and you start to notice that what applied to that one instrument actually applies to the lot of them, and you are just struggling to take it all in. Pretty soon, you can progress to complex, multi-tracked music like the *Innervisions* album by Stevie Wonder [Motown, CD], taking in the whole experience in one hit. And it really is an experience; on a good set of speakers, you are in front of those faders listening to every last part of that recording, good, bad, or indifferent. The image is as wide as the recording, the dynamics are unaffected by the electronics, and practically everything just moves out of the way to let the music through.

Standalone or as team players, the Resolution Audio equipment works well. The Cantata Music Center gives great digital in all its guises – from CD to iTunes to servers in one. And the m100 proves big, detailed sound need not come from amplifiers the size of car engines. This just sounds like music was always supposed to sound, and is highly recommended! +



# Kudos X2 loudspeaker

by Dave Berriman

**K**udos' avowed aim is to bring many of the qualities of its high-end Cardea range to a lower price point, and the firm has created a new series to that end. The X2 is the first model in that range.

The Cardea range of loudspeakers all use 180mm nominal diameter mid woofers.. However, the X2 is designed around a smaller mid-woofer, and its cabinet has been scaled down to suit.

The X2's 18mm thick MDF cabinets are nicely made and neatly veneered in lacquered real oak (with other veneers also available). The loudspeaker stands just 780mm high, 166mm wide, and 206mm deep, and so is quite small for a floorstander. There is an internal cross-brace, mounted just below the woofer, which stiffens the front, sides and back of the cabinet. To deal with internal sound reflections a 25mm thick layer of sculpted white acoustic foam is positioned behind the woofer and tweeter, with a separate piece down inside the lower front panel. Apart from the internal bracing, there are no other methods employed to reduce cabinet panel vibrations.

Drive units are both custom made for Kudos by Norwegian high-quality driver specialists SEAS. The woofer is based on a 150mm nominal diameter cast aluminium alloy chassis. It comprises a doped-paper cone and dust cap, and a 26mm diameter voice coil, with blackened former to improve heat dissipation. The tweeter has a 25mm diameter soft-fabric dome and voice coil, with ferrofluid cooling for improved power handling. Both are made to SEAS' usual high standards

To cover and protect the drive units, there are two chunky MDF framed black cloth grilles, held to the woofer by three magnets which snap onto three cheese-headed steel





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- ▶ woofer fixing bolts (the other retaining bolts are dome headed and not used for grille retention). This neat and simple method means that there is no need for ugly plastic or rubber grill-retaining holes in the front panel, giving a much cleaner appearance when the grilles are absent. Considering that the sound quality is greatly improved when these grilles are removed, they are likely to be off for much of the time.

The acoustic outputs of the two drivers are blended by second-order low and high-pass crossover networks mounted in the upper rear section of the cabinet, behind the woofer and tweeter. The crossover's passive components comprise Clarity Cap polypropylene film capacitors, Volt manufactured air-cored inductors, (wound with heavy gauge copper wire), and what look like Mundorf metal-oxide resistors. All are hand soldered, component to component, and glued to the MDF panel. Elimination of the printed circuit board used by most manufacturers minimises metal-to-metal junctions and avoids the extra resistance of copper tracks. This can result in improved sound quality, at the expense of more labour time required in manufacture.

Internal wiring from the twin-terminal input panel to the crossover networks and between the crossover and drivers, is taken care of by high quality Chord Sarsen loudspeaker cable. This cable features stranded copper conductors and FEP (Fluorinated Ethylene Propylene) insulation, (a softer and more easily formed variant of Teflon than PTFE). All the internal connections are soldered, with no push-on connectors to be seen.

The woofer is reflex loaded at low frequencies by a 50mm diameter internal port mounted in the bottom of the enclosure. It vents into a gap between the cabinet and the plinth, which is defined by 20mm long spacers, retained by long bolts. Unlike rear mounted ports, there is no need to worry about the port being blocked by curtains or furniture, because the low frequencies effectively emerge from all around the base of the speaker. Each loudspeaker has a black-painted MDF plinth, provided with adjustable carpet-penetrating spikes and locking nuts.

The larger and more expensive Kudos Super-20 is characterised by a big, lively, detailed, and musically communicative nature, so I wondered whether this entry level model would share some of those qualities. Frankly, I initially doubted whether such a small speaker as the X2 would be able to reproduce a satisfying sense of scale but, in the event, I was pleasantly surprised.

*“Unlike some speakers that try too hard by thrusting the midrange at the listener in a vain attempt to impress, these little speakers set up a wide and deep soundstage, assisted by a slightly recessed midrange and (like the Super-20) a degree of treble lift. They provided a surprisingly big sound.”*

I connected the speakers up to a Creek Destiny integrated amplifier, which I felt would be representative of real world partnering amplifiers – not super high-end and certainly not bottom rung. The main signal source was the remarkable Sony HAP-Z1ES hard drive storage/DAC unit, delivering a smooth yet very detailed rendition of Red Book CD (as well as higher resolution material, up to double DSD).

Unlike some speakers that try too hard by thrusting the midrange at the listener in a vain attempt to impress, these little speakers set up a wide and deep soundstage, assisted by a slightly recessed midrange, and (like the Super-20) a degree of treble lift. They provided a surprisingly big sound from such modest loudspeakers.

While playing Morcheba's 'The Sea' from *Big Calm* [Indochina], Skye's voice was clear, well focussed, and nicely textured. Low frequencies were surprisingly rich and, while not so deep and powerful as can be heard from larger loudspeakers, were quite tuneful enough for me to be able to enjoy this track.

Swapping musical styles completely, was Brahms' 'Sonata for Piano and Violoncello in E minor Op 38' played by Mstislav Rostropovich and Rudolf Serkin (*Johannes Brahms The Cello Concertos* [DGG 410 510-2]). In the 'Allegro non troppo' and 'Allegretto quasi Menuetto', the interplay between the Rostropovich's cello and Serkin's piano was delightfully revealed. The sounds of both instruments in the recorded acoustic were rich, full, and surprisingly convincing. If I closed my eyes I could easily believe I was listening to a larger and more expensive pair of loudspeakers.

This last factor is important, because, at a cursory glance, the X20 might appear to be rather expensive for such a small loudspeaker, but I quickly gained the impression that its innately transparent qualities help it to punch somewhat over its apparent weight.

Changing musical styles yet again, playing 'I'll be your baby tonight' from Barb Jungr's CD *Every Grain of Sand: Barb Jungr* ▶

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► *Sings Bob Dylan* [Linn Records] showed again how well the X2 reproduced piano and string bass, but also how capably they handled her husky, richly sensual, and intimately recorded voice. The piano presented enough clarity to reveal complex inner harmonics. From this reproduction it was very clear that the microphone had been placed close to the piano's strings. Surprisingly, the instrument was reproduced with a solidity and impact that is quite rare, especially at this price level. Also, the string bass was rich, powerful, and tuneful.

As for detail, the X20's brought it all out, but not always in a kind way. For instance, in the track, 'If Not for You', the lively reproduction of high frequencies was possibly highlighted a little too much.

The track 'Alborado' from Rimsky-Korsakov's 'Capriccio Espagnol' from *Espana!*, [Argenta/LSO/Decca] revealed the X2's ability to set up a big clear soundstage, with dazzling frenetic violin, and tempestuous tambourines. The tuned tympani and sonorous horns resonated realistically from the rear of the orchestra. Rapid changes from lyrical and poetic flow to manic exhibitionism of this exotically orchestrated piece came across with all the vitality one could hope for and, yes, the Kingsway rumble (background sound of underground trains and traffic) captured in this recording was very clearly audible.

As suits the music, this recording is quite lively and brightly lit and that is exactly how it came across via the X2, with maybe an extra degree of brightness thrown into the mix. I had been listening with the speakers firing either straight down the room, or directly at me, but angling the speakers in slightly, so that their axes crossed in front of me helped by feathering off the treble and shifting the tonal balance more toward neutrality.

I knew this was only a recording and for all that reproduced through a couple of wooden boxes, but somehow they ►

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*“I knew this was only a recording and for all that reproduced through a couple of wooden boxes, but somehow they enabled me to close my eyes and lose myself in the performance. Not perfect reproduction, by any means, but one which transported me to the musical event.”*

► enabled me to close my eyes and lose myself in the performance. Not perfect reproduction, by any means, but nonetheless a presentation that transported me to the musical event. I am not quite sure how they pulled off this trick, but there was a lot of low level information and detail transmitted. My guess is that the loudspeakers presented sufficient musical information and cues to the ears to fool them – just enough.

Joni Mitchell's *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* [Asylum] may not be the obvious choice for a review disc, but I have found this CD a good test of equipment's ability to keep musical strands separate and un-muddled. The track 'Jungle Line' is very complex and densely recorded. In short, it trips up less able equipment. The X2 fared pretty well, all things considered. The loudspeaker's treble character did not flatter the recording's high frequencies, sounding slightly scratchy and rough at times. However, the X2's allowed the track's dark, complex, and dirty rhythms to be conveyed clearly, keeping them separate and distinctly audible. Bass reproduction was not particularly powerful, but never boomed and kept good time.

I then played the 'Adagio molto' and 'Allegro con brio' from 'Beethoven's Second Symphony' on Beethoven Symphonies Nos. 2&5 with the Gewandhaus orchestra conducted by Kurt Mazur, [Pentatone Classics 5186 143]. Using the ripped Red Book layer, the speakers again set up a convincingly large sound stage in the Gewandhaus' reverberant acoustic. This recording has the orchestra

set quite distant from the microphone and this can sometimes sound too distant and recessed, but this was not the case with the X2. The instruments were all reproduced with a fresh clarity and the double basses had a good degree of richness. All in all a very enjoyable performance.

I hate to categorise loudspeakers into being particularly suitable for one type of music than another and the X2 is no exception. However, the fine resolving power of these speakers seems suited to well recorded music. Classical, and other music recorded in a natural acoustic, fared particularly well because the X2 pulls out so many tiny details, clues, subtle harmonics, and musical strands.

With over-produced, or otherwise compromised recordings, or harsh sounding electronics, the X2's may fare less well, so this quality can be a double-edged sword. At ►





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► times, when listening to the X2, I felt I could do with a tweeter level control, but at others the speakers were like a breath of fresh air. So, on balance, the musical benefits seemed to outweigh any potential pitfalls. However, partnering with with auxiliaries that deliver the musical details and qualities that they need will be the key to extracting the best results from these speakers.

So, if you care about hearing what's in your recordings, you owe it to yourself to audition the X2 and make up your own mind, not based on size, but on the end results. They may be small, but they are capable of great music making. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Two-way, two-driver floor standing loudspeaker with bass reflex port loading

**Driver complement:** One 25mm soft dome ferro-fluid cooled tweeter, one 150mm woofer with cast chassis, 26mm diameter voice coil, treated paper cone and dust cap

**Crossover frequency:** Not stated  
Frequency response: 30Hz – 25kHz AIRR (Average In Room Response)

Impedance: 8 ohms nominal

**Sensitivity:** 86.5dB

**Dimensions:** (HxWxD) 780mm x 166mm x 206mm

**Weight:** Not stated

**Finishes:** Oak, black, cherry, rosenut and walnut real wood veneers, and plain white.

**Price:** £1,495/pair

**Manufacturer:** Kudos Audio

**Tel:** +44 (0) 845 458 6698

**Email:** [enquiries@kudosaudio.com](mailto:enquiries@kudosaudio.com)

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# EQUIPMENT REVIEW

## RHA Audio T10i earphones

by Chris Martens

**R**oughly a year ago I penned a *Hi-Fi+* web exclusive review of a very fine and surprisingly affordable earphone called the MA750i from the Scottish firm RHA. If you read that review then you already know that we felt the MA750i offered exceptionally good build quality for its modest (£89.95) price. We were also ‘favourably impressed’ by that earphone’s almost self-effacingly neutral voicing, which offered pleasing and unforced qualities of natural warmth and wonderfully even-handed and uncoloured tonal balance – a desirable quality that many earphone makers have found difficult to achieve.

Now, let’s jump forward a year to the present time to ask a simple rhetorical question: What has RHA done for us lately? The answer, in simple terms, is that the firm has just created a new upscale, yet still quite reasonably priced, high performance earphone that goes even further than the MA750i did in terms of both sound and build quality. The new earphone is called the T10i (£149.95) and it has a number of distinguishing features that set it apart from the MA750i. Among these features are:

- An all-new handmade dynamic driver (internally known as the RHA 770.1 driver) that is said to “reproduce all genres of music with high levels of accuracy and detail.”
- An included set of colour-coded, metal, screw-in type voicing filters to fine-tune the T10i’s voicing for a “Reference” (neutrally balanced), “Treble” (slightly treble-enhanced), or “Bass” (subtly bass enhanced) presentation.
- Impressive-looking, ultra-comfortable, and very durable earpiece housings made of Metal Injection Moulded stainless steel (not an easy material to use in moulding processes, so that the construction of the earpieces involves heating the housings to “1300° C for up to ten hours to ensure the steel is the correct shape and density for outstanding comfort and durability”).
- Distinctive, patent-pending, over-the-ear ear-hooks that are relatively flexible and easy to shape, yet that hold their shapes quite well once properly adjusted.
- A multicore, 1.35mm signal cable with oxygen free copper conductors and an Apple-certified three-button in line remote/microphone module.
- An elaborate accessories pack, including a premium carry case, single and dual-flange silicone ear tips and memory foam ear tips, plus a detachable garment hook.

Given how good the original MA750i was, I imagine the first question readers will ask is whether the T10i actually does ►



▶ sound better than the MA750i. The short answer is that it does, though the differences are subtle and more qualitative and textural in nature. As we see it, this is a good thing in that the MA750i offered such admirably neutral voicing; so, too, does the T10i when its Reference voicing filters are installed. And, unlike most earphones on the market, the T10i offers not just one voicing curve, but three distinctly different ones.

Naturally, the sceptics among us will be quick to ask whether the T10i's voicing filters give critical listeners worthwhile voicing adjustment options as opposed to providing garish sonic effects that represent little more than ill-judged gimmicks. The answer, I am happy to say, is that yes, the voicing filters do give listeners useful presentation control options—options that offer relatively subtle adjustments to the T10i's standard, Reference voicing curve. The key word in the preceding sentence is 'subtle', as RHA's Bass filters add no more than a 3dB lift in low-frequency output below 100 Hz, relative to the Reference curve. Likewise, the Treble filters provide no more than a +3dB lift in upper midrange/treble output above 1kHz, again relative to the Reference curve. What is more, the Bass and Treble filters both closely follow the shape of the T10i's Reference response curve, so that the filters could be said to provide "a little lift"—not huge, overwrought, and potentially over-the-top changes in voicing.

For those who might be wondering about this, the small filters (which are a bit smaller in diameter than rubber pencil eraser tips) feature beautifully made, metal enclosures with knurled rims that make the filters easier to grasp and to install or remove. The screw-in filters fit into machined and threaded holes in the mouths of the T10i earpiece sound outlet tubes. Changes, then, are as simple as unscrewing one set of filters and screwing in another. To help owners keep everything straight, the filters are colour-coded (black for Bass, silver-grey for Reference, and copper-colour for Treble) and RHA thoughtfully provides a small stainless-steel carrier plate where users can store those filters not presently in use.

One might well ask whether having multiple voicing filters is even a good idea, but I think that it can be, at least where earphones are concerned. I say this because firms such as the Swiss hearing technology company Phonak and others have done research that shows different individuals do have different in-ear perceptions of sonic neutrality. Part of the reason for this may be that, with earphones, the wearers' ear canals, which of course differ from one another in size, shape, and volume, are in a sense the "enclosures" into which the earphone drivers will load. Given this, offering a means of making judicious voicing adjustments seems a step in the right direction. Readers might find it instructive to note



that one of the finest and most expensive earphones ever reviewed by *Hi-Fi+*, namely the AKG K3003i (£1,000), also provides screw-in voicing filters, meaning the T10i is certainly in good company.

How does the T10i sound? Well, obviously the answer depends to some degree on which filters are installed, but to establish a baseline of sorts I did the preponderance of my review listening with the T10i's Reference filters installed. Then, as a useful comparison I listened to the T10i in comparison both to RHA's original MA750i earphones and to the more expensive Westone W10 earphones (£199).

The T10i (with Reference filters) is voiced quite similarly to the MA750i, which is to say that it offers refreshingly neutral tonal balance coupled with what I consider desirable qualities of natural, organic warmth with ample (but not overblown) bass weight and impact. If you listen closely, though, one significant difference you would find is that the T10i offers even higher levels of transient speed, resolution, and overall textural nuance than does the MA750i, so that the T10i figuratively might be described as an MA750i 'on steroids'. Though both models carry the same 100dB sensitivity rating, it seemed to me that the T10i needed just slightly higher amplifier output settings to achieve the same playback levels as the MA750i. Both RHA earphones are, though, extremely easy to drive. ▶



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Once the Westone W10 was brought into the comparison, my observation was that the W10 produced a somewhat more midrange/treble-forward presentation than did the T10i—a presentation replete with crisp, energetic transients. But, one obvious trade-off was that the Westone offered noticeably less mid- and low-bass weight and support. At first, casual listeners might be tempted to blurt out that the Westone ‘sounds clearer’, but further listening reveals that this initial perception is mostly down to the fact that the W10 achieves its perceived edge in clarity at the expense of slightly skewed overall tonal balance and limited bass support, both of which are areas where the RHA, by comparison, excels.

This, however, is where the potential benefits of RHA’s optional voicing filters loom large. Suppose, just for the sake of illustration, that you did an A/B comparison between the T10i and Westone’s W10 and found yourself narrowly preferring the Westones (even though you might miss the RHA’s more even tonal balance and superior bass). In such a circumstance, all you need do would be to substitute RHA’s Treble filters in place of the standard Reference filters to enjoy a touch of midrange/treble lift comparable to that provided by the W10s, while still benefitting from the RHA’s greater bass weight and low-end impact. The point is that the T10i’s give you the means to fine-tune tonal balance to suit your personal listening tastes and preferences, yet without veering into the realm of garish sonic colourations.

One disc that does a beautiful job of highlighting these characteristics is Marilyn Mazur and Jan Garbarek’s *Elixir* [ECM], and in particular the tracks ‘Bell Painting’ and ‘Talking Wind’ from that album. The tracks referenced both offer a brilliant blend of crystal clear and richly varied midrange and treble percussion sounds offset, especially on the track ‘Talking Wind’, by lower midrange, upper bass, and low bass percussion. With the T10i fitted with its Reference filters that track sounds wonderfully clear and well balanced, with plenty of transient ‘snap’ and cracking good lower midrange and bass articulation and power. But, with the Treble filters fitted, the T10i’s take on a subtly different character, still sounding much like they did with the Reference filters installed, but with midrange and treble elements in the music drawn forward a bit within the mix. Isn’t it nice to have such options?

RHA has another winner on its hands with the T10i, pure and simple. In my view the T10i offers both the best baseline performance (and build quality) of any sub-£200 earphone I’ve yet heard, but with the added benefit of easy-to-use optional voicing filters that afford a significantly expanded range of performance options. But even if you stick with just one filter, the T10i is very highly recommended. +



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Single-driver universal-fit earphone with moulded stainless steel earpieces and three sets of voicing filters.

**Driver complement:** One RHA 770.1 handmade dynamic driver per earpiece.

**Accessories:** Multiple ear tips (two pairs of double-flange silicone tips, six pairs of single-flange silicone tips, and two pairs of memory foam tips), stainless steel ear tip carrier card, three pairs of colour-coded screw-in type voicing filters (Bass—black, Reference—silver/grey, and Treble—copper-coloured), stainless steel voicing filter storage plate, signal cables made with OFC conductors and heavy-duty stainless steel fitting with gold-plated conductor plug, in-line iDevice-compatible mic/remote control module, zip-closure carry case, and garment clip.

**Frequency response:** 16 Hz – 22 kHz

**Impedance:** 16 Ohms

**Sensitivity:** 100dB/mW

**Weight:** 41 grams

**Price:** £149.95

**Manufacturer Information:** RHA Audio

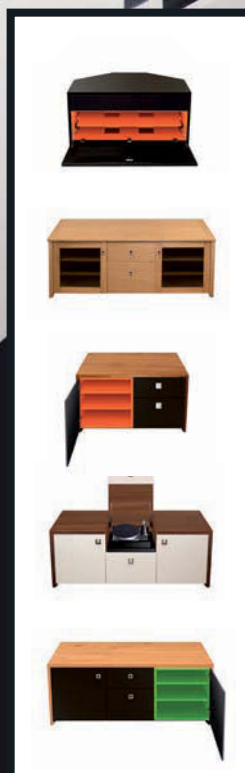
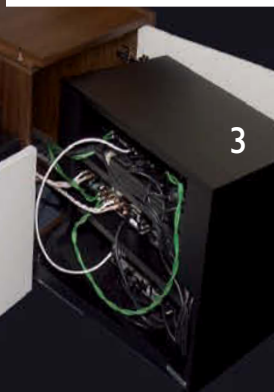
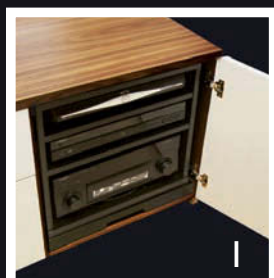
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# Stirling Broadcast SB-88

by Jason Kennedy

In this business, there are traditions and there are BBC loudspeaker designs. Harbeth founder Dudley Harwood must have got something right back in the late 1960s when he was in charge of the BBC's considerable research funding. The Beeb's LS-series takes 'classic' to a whole other level by having a specification set in stone. Confirming that many audiophiles are averse to change, it remains a popular range of designs; the compact LS3/5a is almost as popular today as it was in its heyday. Stirling Broadcast made its name in the studio world by first repairing LS3/5a loudspeakers, then building LS3/5a-specification loudspeakers in its own right, and ultimately refining the LS3/5a into Stirling's own V2 version, when the original KEF drive units became hard to get.

Founder Doug Stirling now makes another BBC design, the LS3/6, a larger bookshelf loudspeaker with a supertweeter alongside mid/bass and treble drivers. The same drivers can be found in his latest creation the SB-88, which he built as a scaled down LS3/6. The SB-88 is basically the LS3/6 with 13cm lopped off the top, but as it's not a BBC design there is some scope for tuning to taste by the manufacturer. It has a 200mm mid/bass driver with a polypropylene cone and a 25mm tweeter, a combination of sizes that is relatively scarce nowadays thanks to the fashion for narrow baffle loudspeakers and the greater concern for coherence of dispersion between drivers.

The SB-88 was designed by Derek Hughes, who ran Spondor in the 1980s. The design employed here is based on BBC thinking and principles, the most obvious element being the use of critically damped, thin wall, plywood in the cabinet construction. The theory here is that a thin stiff plywood is easier to control than lossy MDF, as it avoids energy retention and stops vibrating more quickly. The drive units choices are very BBC; this may not be a KEF cone, but that's where it's antecedents lay. The sonic difference between the SB-88 and the LS3/6 come down to the voicing, which is deliberately warmer than the BBC design's relatively dry presentation. Doug and Derek wanted a fuller sound with a bit more character in the bass for this model.

Like its near relatives, the SB-88 is designed to be an easy amplifier load. The specs of 87dB sensitivity and a nominal eight-ohm impedance are unlikely to trouble most systems. I asked Doug what his amplifier recommendation



would be and was told that most decent options should work.

The fit and finish of the SB-88 is greatly enhanced by its high quality veneer on all surfaces. It might look like the sort of speaker you should keep the grille on, but aesthetically as well as sonically this is a bad idea. The sample that came my way was finished in bookmatched wild oak, a particularly rich and dramatically figured veneer that makes this speaker stand out. There are two pairs of cable terminals on the rear for bi- ►





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*“It does not disappoint, and its primary characteristic is nimbleness; that thin-wall cabinet avoids the slowing effect of energy storage and lets the music flow with the minimum of time-smear.”*



► wiring, and they came with bridging bars clamped securely in place, I hooked them up with single wired Townshend Isolda DCT speaker cable. I was tempted to try an alternative bridging method to the gold plated pins supplied but would have had to resort to a potentially damaging pair of pliers to undo them (they were that tight).

Stirling recommends open stands that are shorter than average at 48cm, and it recommends and supply stands made by Something Solid that fit this description. A pair of these were supplied and employed for the review and I have to say that they have a certain appeal after years of thick tubed column stands. They came with spikes for the outrigger legs and fixed, hard plastic tips to support the cabinet – damping is clearly an anathema to the Stirling Broadcast ethos.

There are so many differences between this BBC-inspired loudspeaker and the majority of loudspeakers made today that it would be surprising if the SB-88 did not sound a bit different. It does not disappoint, and its primary characteristic is nimbleness; that thin-wall cabinet avoids the slowing effect of energy storage and lets the music flow with the minimum of time-smear. Angela Hewitt's 'Bach Toccatas in C minor' [Angela Hewitt plays Bach, Hyperion] reveal the reverb on the piano as well as the full envelope of each note. This speaker stops and starts almost as fast as the music, and in the case of bass light music, there can't be much in it. It's only the lower registers that are slowed slightly, and it's the contrast that shows this up. This relates to the warmth that was added at low frequencies, a hump in the response that makes for a more relaxed sound at the expense of overall pace.

A less straightforward recording is Matthew E. White's *Big Inner* [Domino], the track 'Big Love' has strong phasing effects that were very evident on the SB-88. Sounds seem to come from beside you when the speakers are 10 foot in front. It is also apparent that the voice has been put down in dual mono or that at least is the effect. The speaker's good though on 'Big Love' inspired me to play a classic. The outtake version of 'Mother Nature's Son' [Beatles Anthology 3, Apple] is a great test of speech clarity, because McCartney is talking to the engineer at the start; it usually shows up incongruities in the bass but none were apparent here, so that hump is pretty subtle in truth.

One limitation of this design is its imaging. The sound does not escape the boxes as well as the best examples in modern loudspeaker design. So Yello's 'The Expert' [Touch, Polydor] seems a little restrained, you get a fair amount of the dynamics on offer and reasonable bass extension but it's the spatial dynamics that mark this piece out and they are somewhat underplayed. Going back to more natural recordings works ►



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▶ rather better. For example, Gregory Porter's 'Liquid Spirit' [*Liquid Spirit*, Blue Note] is an up tempo piece where the SB-88 revels in the reverb tails and the quality of both voice and saxophone, the latter delivering lots of tonal colour without the glare that many speakers seem to add.

It was around about this point that I wondered if removing the grilles would make much difference. Beeb designs of yore were voiced with them in place, but as the SB-88 is not precisely of that school, I gave it a shot. The result was a little alarming; now the image scale was considerably better, and while the sound still had a tendency to cling to the speakers, the effect was reduced to a considerable extent. You could also hear more detail, it's surprising what a piece of open weave cloth can obscure.

I also replaced the trusty ATC P1 power amplifier with Velvet class A monoblocks of a third the power. Their silky smooth presentation was immediately apparent, as was a reduction in lower-end control. Now, you could hear further into the mix, down into the quiet sounds that get closer to the emotional quality of the performance. On this occasion it was provided by Norah Jones singing 'Court and Spark' [Herbie Hancock, *River: The Joni Letters*, Verve], where you can hear the acoustic of the studio around the piano alongside the effortless prowess of the player. This speaker loves acoustic instruments, meaning the sound of the drum kit in its reverberant recording booth were readily apparent. The voice, on the other hand, is in a more damped environment, so you just hear the subtle inflections that bring the singer into the room to set your senses tingling.

The greater part of the listening was done with files streamed from a Naim UnitiServe via a Resolution Audio Cantata, but as the Roksan K3 was in residence too I tried spinning a few discs. The K3's harder edged sound proved useful for cutting through the low end warmth in the speaker, the Roksan and the Stirlings combining to make a gripping sound. Again it was voices that caught my attention; Jocelyn Smith and John Campbell in particular worked very nicely indeed.

The more I listened to the Stirling Broadcast SB-88s, the more I enjoyed them. They are very even handed and quick, a combination that is relatively scarce, yet one which serves all sorts of music very well. It is a slightly old-fashioned sound but so is a lot of the music we enjoy, and it's certainly no barrier to any type of material, death metal notwithstanding. This, allied to the quality of build and finish, make the SB-88 a very interesting alternative to both the standard BBC designs and more modern rivals. +



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Two-way, two-driver stand-mount monitor with front-ported bass reflex enclosure.  
**Driver complement:** One 27mm soft dome tweeter, one 220mm polypropylene mid-bass driver.  
**Frequency response:** 48Hz – 18kHz  
**Crossover frequency:** 3kHz  
**Impedance:** 8 Ohms nominal  
**Sensitivity:** 87dB/W/m  
**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 500 x 270 x 300mm  
**Weight:** 14.4kg/each  
**Finishes:** Cherry, Walnut, Black Ash, Ebony, Rosewood.  
**Price:** £2,395/pair  
**Something Solid XFiI stands:** £300/pair

**Manufacturer:** Stirling Broadcast  
**URL:** [stirlingbroadcast.net](http://stirlingbroadcast.net)  
**Tel:** +44(0)1963 240 151



# Transfiguration Phoenix S

by Jason Kennedy

When a hi-fi company, or any company for that matter, doesn't have a website today, you can draw one of two conclusions: it hasn't got around to making a website, or it doesn't need a website. Transfiguration maker Immutable Music Inc., of Japan would appear to be from the second group; a company that is kept busy enough by its distributors sites and word of mouth. In other words, a company with an enviable position in such a competitive market place.

Transfiguration now makes just three moving coil cartridges; the entry-level Axia, the Phoenix S seen here, and the range-topping Proteus. Sadly, it no longer makes the Orpheus, which used to be top dog. However, the S suffix on the Phoenix indicates rather more than you might expect. It differs from its predecessor by virtue of having fewer turns in its (moving) coil, which means a lower output impedance and lower moving mass; if you know anything about suspension this is always a good thing. Transfiguration MCs are quite different from the norm in that they have relatively small ring magnets that do not rely on a yoke system to channel the flux toward the coils; instead the magnets themselves are very close to the coils. It didn't take any research to notice this when setting up the Phoenix S, because I normally use a very small, circa 1mm, allen key as an indicator of alignment. Most MCs will hold this key magnetically and it gives you a precise indication of the angle of the cartridge body when used with a gauge. The Phoenix S wouldn't hold it and this

*"It turns out that the shape of the aluminium body is not the result of creative whim, but was designed to combat vibrations, which in a device that's designed to measure vibrations is pretty crucial. It also features a solid boron cantilever with the same Ogura PA stylus that is used across the range."*



combined with its short cantilever and sculpted shape make it more tricky than usual to set up (if you are me, at least). The manual does, however, state that "Ultimate alignment is based on the cantilever – NOT on the cartridge body."

It turns out that the shape of the aluminium body is not the result of creative whim, but was created to combat vibrations, which in a device that's designed to measure vibrations is pretty crucial. It also features a solid boron cantilever with the same Ogura PA stylus that is used across the range. It has neodymium magnets front and rear, and produces 0.4mV with its silver coils. The Phoenix S needs two grammes of downforce or thereabouts; the manual suggests between 1.7 and 2.2g because variations in humidity, temperature, and arm mass mean that the optimum is not entirely predictable. It is also keen to point out this cartridge is very sensitive to set up and gives in-depth instructions on how to arrive at the best starting point prior to fine tuning by ear. It's all good stuff and more than you get with some high-end models.

Listening commenced with the Phoenix S painstakingly installed in an SME 20/3 with SME V tonearm; an easier turntable than most from a set up point of view but not completely idiot proof! This I discovered after several days listening, during which I was very impressed by the bass and

tonal richness of the cartridge, but less so with its drive and timing. In an attempt to balance this equation, I tried variations in VTA and downforce. These produced notable differences, but failed to give the energy I craved. Then I wondered about bolt tightness and gave the tiny bolts a tweak. Voila, more upbeat, timely and dynamic sound. It seems that while you can be as careful as you like in some respects, all the details have to be covered, and bolt tightness is one of the crudest.

I also tried different impedance settings on my Trilogy 907 phono stage. The cartridge's manual gets a little less precise at this stage, and merely suggests a setting greater than 7 Ohms; a figure that implies a predilection for step up transformers. The Trilogy's lowest setting is 70 Ohms but I found 100 Ohms to be a good match. In this configuration, the sound was powerful and magnificent, Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsodies (Masur, Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, Eterna) sounding assuringly solid yet richly detailed.

Steely Dan's 'Pearl of the Quarter' [*Countdown to Ecstasy*, ABC] is both detailed and deluxe in that mid seventies style, with lovely lap steel sound and deeply excavated detail in the context of musical fluidity to die for. At this stage I'm getting quite excited about the Phoenix S, not many MCs have both power in the bass, high resolution across the board and top notch musicality, but this is one of them.

I also installed the Phoenix S in the RB2000 tonearm attached to a Rega RP10 turntable. This arm does not offer VTA variation, which simplifies set up at the expense of tweakability, yet it is such a compelling turntable that

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Low output moving coil phono cartridge.

**Stylus/Cantilever:** PA 3 x 30µm solid diamond, 0.3mm boron cantilever

**Tracking Force:** 1.7g – 2.2g (2g recommended)

**Load:** >7 Ohms

**Compliance:** 12 x 10<sup>-6</sup> cm/dyne

**Output (at 1 kHz @ 3.54cm/s):** 0.4 mv

**Weight:** 7.8g (without stylus cover)

**Price:** £2,249

**Manufacturer:** Immutable Music, Inc, Tokyo, Japan

**Distributor:** Decent Audio

**URL:** [www.decentaudio.co.uk](http://www.decentaudio.co.uk)

**Tel:** +44(0)5602 054669

tonal issues are secondary to the overall result. None of the cartridges I've tried on the RP10 have matched Rega's Apheta MC when it comes to speed, but the Transfiguration gets close. Where it improves on Rega's cartridge is in tonal rendering and low end power, finesse too is improved. It sounded beautifully open with crisp highs and luxurious mids when playing Leo Kottke's *Great Big Boy* [Private Music], while the quality of production and engineering is really brought to the fore. The scale of the studio is revealed in a big kick drum, an instrument which also reveals the quality of dynamics on offer. The track 'Nothing Works' is particularly effective in this respect. It's quite dense, but this MC has no difficulty whatsoever in separating out the various elements in the mix and rendering the timbral character of each.

These factors become clear on the latest mastering of Patricia Barber's *Modern Cool* [Premonition]. Her voice on 'Touch of Trash' is there in the room, solid as rock, and real. I love the weight and texture of the double bass and when the band kicks, in it has all the energy and power you should demand from your vinyl.

I get it now. I understand why Transfiguration does not need a website. When you make cartridges that are this good, the world will come to your door. The Phoenix S does it all and it does it with considerable aplomb. It's not inexpensive, but it's so revealing and well balanced that it seems like good value if you truly appreciate vinyl. +



# In-akustik 1203 cable system

by Alan Sircom

In-akustik is one of those brands that we should know more about. On its home turf in Germany, the brand is highly respected and aspirational, representing the more professional end of the audio cable business. But you can tell this the moment you open the packaging. It's not audio jewellery, not made from Star Trek materials, and doesn't come with the attendant wild claims of transformation (although some of the German-English translations do end up a trifle hyperbolic). This is good, solid, well-made cable by good, solid cable people.

We went for a complete system, featuring the 1203 interconnects and speaker cables, and the 1502 power cords, taken from In-akustik's top Referenz Selection range. Currently, the examples of the 1502 cable we had used EU/Schuko rather than UK/13A plugs, so although they are included as part of the complete system, their overall influence is given a back seat here.

There is a more up-market 1603 interconnect and speaker cable and even a still more upmarket 2403 loudspeaker cable. We also had a set of bi-wire adapters to hand, although as the speakers were single-wired, these didn't see a lot of use!

The first part of the number relates to how many multicore copper strands are used in that particular cable, the 1203 models all having 12 high-purity lacquered copper conductors, each in two layers of polyethylene (PE) insulation, wrapped concentrically around a central air-filled PE core. All of this is subsequently wrapped in a high-purity copper braid sheath and then jacketed in PE before putting on

its black-and-white braided outer jacket. In the interconnect cables, this terminates in In-akustik's own Referenz Gap II RCA plugs, which create a three-connection plug inside



the two-connection RCA architecture, and are designed to accommodate the symmetrical construction of the 1203 cable itself. Meanwhile, the loudspeaker cables are fed through a solid metal splitter into spade lugs, pins, or 4mm/BFA connectors. Both speaker and interconnect plugs are rhodium plated.

It should be noted, however, that this symmetrical construction with individually isolated conductors is essentially a Litz design. Litz style cables were popular in the 1980s because of their inherently low inductance, which helps lower series resistance even on longer cable runs, and the increased capacitance that results often helped smooth out the high frequency response of an amplifier. This is also historically worthy of note because some older amplifier designs (in particular, early Naim amps) could find long runs of Litz construction speaker cable particularly difficult to drive. The In-akustik design is not overly capacitive, however.

In-akustik is very easy to live with, creating a sound that is at once as unfatiguing as it is refined and detailed. It's also a very 'big' and effortless sound, not rolled off, but also not as bright as some other contemporary cables. Those after the last word in leading-edge detail and treble analysis will probably



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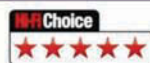


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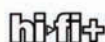


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- ▶ look elsewhere, but those wanting a sense of vocal projection and really good bass will warm to this cable system.

The cable family doesn't overstate vocals and certainly doesn't push them forward in the mix, but its tonal balance simply projects a vocal in an effortless manner. I'm reminded of cables like Cardas Clear in this respect, as both help make Plácido Domingo's tenor stand proud when singing 'Una Furtiva Lagrime' from Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore* [Opera Gala, DG]. This is passionate stuff, sung passionately, and the focus of that midrange coupled with the authoritative bass underpinning gives this a greater sense of sitting in front of a singer, rather than listening to a recording.

Where these European cables differs from its American counterparts is that deep bass can sometimes be over authoritative. This is possibly a combination of too much of a good thing (taken separately, the LS and NF-1203 have a good

deep bass, but in combination this can be a very powerful effect) and yet is ideal for the kinds of systems for which the In-Akustik cables are intended. That almost overbearing bass on full-range speakers just becomes a powerful underpinning on smaller designs.

There's a strong sense of order and structure here, too, which is common to both cables. Where other cables emphasise the imagery and high-frequency extension, these cables both had a more balanced perspective. This was useful on one of the least 'audiophile' discs I own: *Jerry Lee Lewis Live at the Star Club Hamburg* [German Philips/Bear Family]. This early 1960s raucous session was 'The Killer' proving he was no washed-up rocker in the age of Beatlemania, and he tears into the piano with the Nashville Teens barely able to keep up. Playing this on a good system is as much about damage limitation as it is about information retrieval, and the In-Akustik set manages to convey the wild energy of the recording without undermining the control required to tame this wild beast of a session when played at volume. Once again, the powerful bass helps deal out that hammer-blow left hand boogie-woogie with the sort of intensity it needs.

In-Akustik's cables have a similar well-balanced basic presentation, with the interconnect sounding smooth and even, the loudspeaker cable deep and sonorous, and the power cord as the balancing act. That makes for an ideal combination in middle-range systems, where often the source needs a touch of taming, and the speakers need a bit of help in the bottom end. That doesn't mean 'tone control': it means the 1203 and 1502 cables are intelligent products for their price and will bring out the best in many a good system. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**In-Akustik Referenz NF-1203 interconnects**

£395/1m pair (RCA)

**In-Akustik Referenz LS-1203 loudspeaker cables**

£1,079/3m pair (spade lugs)

**In-Akustik Referenz bi-wire jumpers**

£72.25

**Manufacturer:** In-Akustik GmbH & Co. KG

**URL:** [www.in-akustik.com](http://www.in-akustik.com)

**Distributed by:** HiFi Network

**Tel:** +44(0)7873 416045

**URL:** [www.hifi-network.com](http://www.hifi-network.com)





# Walls Of Sound installation

by Alan Sircom

**T**he Walls Of Sound system does not lend itself to a normal review. It's an in-wall system, designed with stereo parameters – rather than home cinema impressiveness – in mind. The 'designed for stereo' part perfectly fits our bill, but the 'in-wall' part makes it somewhat difficult to muster, because the transitory nature of review schedules do not sit well with things that are permanent fixtures to the house. This is a shame, because, in doing away with the boxes, you can make possibly the best sound that can be heard from home audio.

An Estonian *Hi-Fi+* reader named Aivar ("no surnames please!") read our July 2012 review of the Walls Of Sound concept and contacted Stuart McGill, the man behind the system. As a result, Aivar flew over from his native Estonia to listen to the system, then flew back and asked McGill to follow, meters and microphones in hand, to replicate the same basic system in his own modernist home by the Baltic. Sadly, Aivar is a very private person who prefers not to see his face in print, but in a way this doesn't matter because the system is at once an expression of his requirements and more like music than many, so to see the speaker system is to look into Aivar the audiophile and music lover.

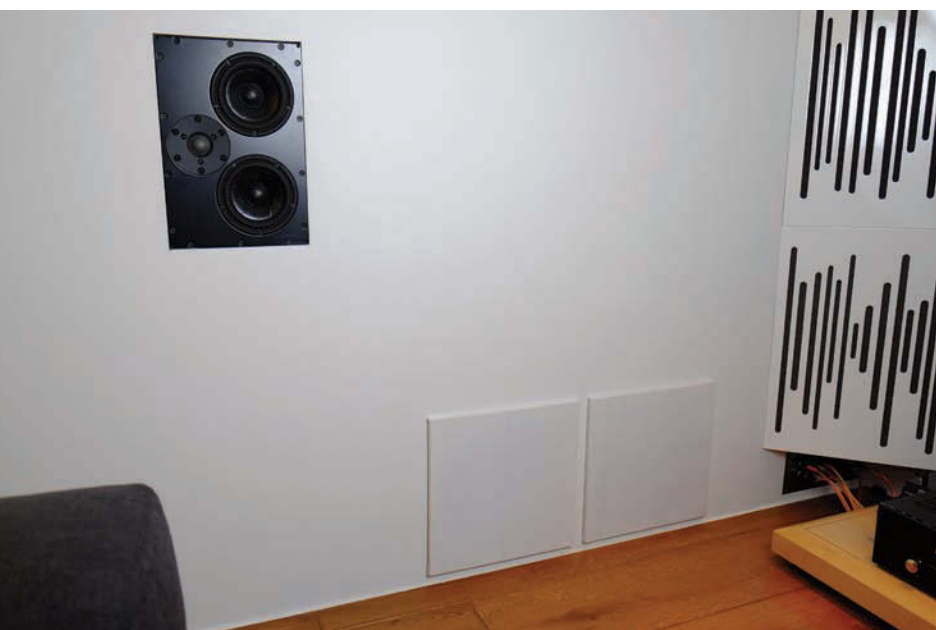
So, over the course of several months, Stuart McGill flew from London to Estonia's capital city, Tallinn: a pretty, walled medieval port to the north of the country and not far from the Russian borders. In Soviet times, the fact the medieval town planners had future-proofed the town by making the streets wide enough to get a Zil down them meant that Tallinn became something of an apparatchik tourist haunt, and didn't fall victim to Cold War town planning. The communists left, and were replaced by beer-fuelled Brits on a cheap

booze cruise until the prices rose. It's now an industrious and rapidly growing city full of nice pubs, good restaurants, great vodka, and achingly beautiful women!

Travelogue aside, we followed Stuart McGill to Tallinn to see the Walls Of Sound process in action. It begins, as it should, with measurement, with McGill taking readings of the acoustics of the room, typically focussing on the room's frequency response and its RT60 reverberation times. While these can be altered somewhat by room treatment (that McGill is keen to advise on), the tests are to get a broad picture of the room itself and how to design a system to interact with the room in the ideal manner. This involves a choice of low bass units and precise adjustment to the system's active crossover network.

A back-and-forth series of discussions between McGill and the client follow, as the system is designed for the room. Walls Of Sound still broadly divide rooms into one of five system solutions, but there's a little more wiggle room now, and users can specify good, better, or best drive units for a given room size. Most, in fairness, go for 'best' – that's what Aivar chose; high performance ScanSpeak Revelator drive units for the mid/high frequency 'satellite' boxes, but with two 320mm aluminium bass drivers for the subwoofers. There is a spot of trial and error and accommodation in terms of optimum placement for both main speaker and subwoofer, so the Walls Of Sound project is best undertaken during the 'first fit' stage of a home rebuild.

Anyone who has ever been fitted for a bespoke suit will recognise a close parallel here. The initial measurement stage is followed soon after by at least one and often two further fittings, and the whole process takes a few months rather than a few days. You want it sooner? Off the shelf audio for you! These things take time. ►









► The active nature of the system has meant that Walls Of Sound has designed small, but powerful Class D amplifiers designed to take on some of the power amplification task. Aivar still has his Leben and Audio Note valve power amplifiers from his past system (which ended in a pair of Living Voice Auditorium speakers), but is in the process of migrating across to the smaller, more powerful amplifiers for his system. Aivar's system also shows that your existing system simply plugs into the Walls Of Sound, without a problem. So, his excellent Kuzma XL4 turntable with matching arm and Air Tight cartridge does not stand out of place in this system; it blends perfectly.

Normally, I try to bring my own discs to a listening session, but travelling light, and travelling with my own photo equipment prevented that. So, I asked Aivar to play three pieces of music that best summed him up. The first – *January* by the Marcin Wasilewski Simple Acoustic Trio [ECM, CD] best summed up his stance; intelligent, sophisticated, and cool. The jazz put him at ease and he relaxed. The man was in his element, and the system just breathed music in the way we all wish our own equipment could. Truth is, I didn't even need to hear those three recordings (one was Mozart, one was Led Zep, so the guy has diverse and classy tastes). It was clear his music was his passion, and he knew how to get the most out of that passion. Most and best of all, the music put a smile on his face.

Aivar gets it. He gets music. And someone who gets music gets the Wall Of Sound concept. It's worth the disruption, the listening tests, the back and forth with tripods and microphones. It's worth the holes in the wall, and it's definitely worth the money. +

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# record reviews

## How To Read Them

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

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

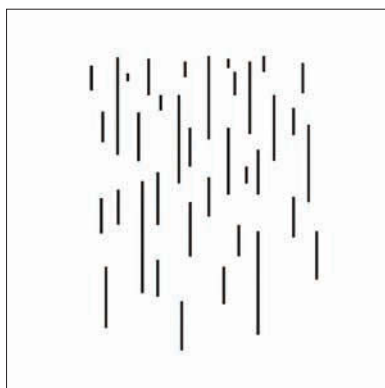
*This issue's featured reviewers are:*

**DD** – Dennis D Davis

**JK** – Jason Kennedy

**PT** – Pete Trewin

	CD		120g LP
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	HDCD		180g LP
	XRCD		200g LP
	Double Disc		10" LP
	DVD		Availability As S/H LP
	SACD		Vinyl Double Album
	Hybrid SACD		45 RPM
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**v2.0**

**GoGo Penguin**

Gondwana Records

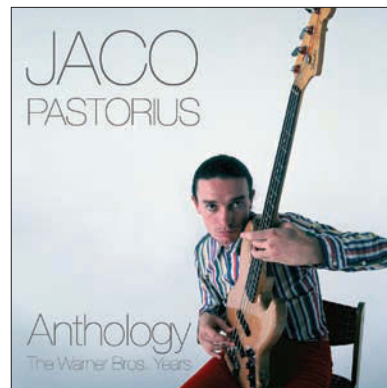
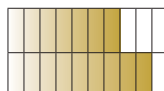


British jazz trio nominated for Mercury Prize shocker. OK they didn't win, but to have made the running is quite an achievement for a piano trio from Manchester. Their angle is the ability to play acoustic instruments in a staccato broken beat style that sounds like electronica, and they do it live. GoGo Penguin are pianist Chris Illingworth, bassist Nick Blacka, and drummer Rob Turner. The music they make, while ostensibly straight ahead jazz, is influenced by the likes of Squarepusher, Aphex Twin, and even John Cage. So, the end result is extremely interesting.

They are in many respects a British est. They have the same ability to play together with total cohesion, but come from a different musical background. This is most apparent on 'One Percent', where they use a stutter effect that is so off kilter that it's hard to believe it can be done outside of the box. This is because all three musicians are playing rhythm a lot of the time, which lends itself to arrangements that are very new to the world of acoustic instruments. It also means that you don't usually have a central voice. v2.0 isn't deep and meaningful, it's just brilliant. Which makes GoGo Penguin the most exciting thing in British music right now. They should have got that gong. **JK**

**RECORDING**

**MUSIC**



**Anthology: The Warner Bros. Years**

**Jaco Pastorius**

Rhino



Jaco Pastorius is arguably the greatest bass player of the jazz rock era. Through his work with Weather Report and Joni Mitchell, Pastorius touched a lot of hearts and minds. This anthology spans his later recordings, primarily the albums *Word of Mouth*, *The Birthday Concert*, a live big band set made in 1981, and *Invitation*, recorded during his tour of Japan the following year.

Very little of this material sounds like his earlier work, primarily because these later works emphasise his love for brass and latin rhythms and also introduce a new set of musical collaborators. Among these are Herbie Hancock, Hubert Laws, Airtio Moreira, and the harmonica player Toots Thielmans. The most impressive thing about Pastorius apart from his brilliance on the fretless bass, (he is the only electric bass player to have been inducted into the Down Beat Jazz Hall of Fame) are his skills in composition and arrangement. Writing most of the pieces on one disc and arranging many on the second, his playing was only one aspect of his musical ability. A 1981 version of Charlie Parker's 'Donna Lee' is the only previously unreleased track, but the 22 gathered here give a good overview of a great musician's most ambitious works. **JK**

**RECORDING**

**MUSIC**



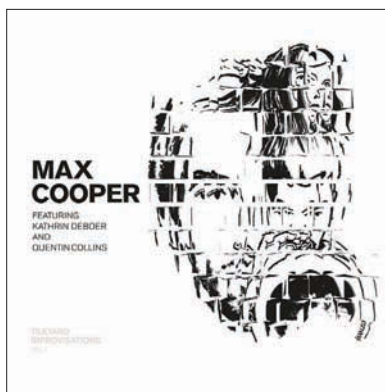
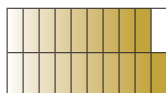


## Saturday Night & Sunday Morning

**The John Aram Quartet**  
with Kenny Wheeler  
Coup Perdu

This beautifully presented double album from Nottingham's hippest jazz label was recorded in Switzerland by composer and trombonist John Aram with Colin Vallon (piano), Andy Scherer (tenor saxophone), Dave Whitford (bass) and Norbert Pfammatter on drums, with the late Kenny Wheeler (flugelhorn) sitting in on more than half the pieces. It's based on the Alan Silitoe book and screenplay of the same name and uses occasional clips from the movie to reinforce the link. Aram explains that in his youth he was inspired by the central character.

It's an extremely impressive and mature work that reflects the moods and themes of the text while working on the higher level that only the language of music can reach. Scherer is brilliant as is Vallon; in fact, this is a very strong ensemble with the added benefit of Wheeler who played on the film's soundtrack. He contributes two pieces on the fourth side, where the mood is very different, with the the main suite taking up sides one through three. The style has a clear bop influence, but the British composer gives it some inspired twists that mark Aram out as the best musician you've never heard of. **JK**

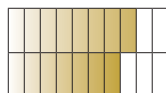
RECORDING  
MUSIC

## Tileyard Improvisations Vol. 1

**Max Cooper**  
Gearbox

The latest Gearbox release finds singer Kathrin deBoer alongside trumpet and flugelhornist Quentin Collins improvising under the guidance of producer and electronic beat master Max Cooper. Cooper is interested in stereo imaging, which presumably explains why the spatial effects are so strong on this four track EP. This marks him out as being unusual in the field of electronic musicians, as does the breadth of sounds contained on this release.

Cooper's contributions provide distinct cues on each track; the opener 'Chronology' has deBoer in full expressive mode trading the spotlight with Collins' almost bop style trumpet, but both are at the mercy of the beats. It's followed by the *Blade Runner*-esque 'Dusk Mass', which changes the perspective completely. Side two charts a wider emotional range, the highlights of which are the Cocteau Twins-like phrasings of 'Animate Expanse'. It's unusual to hear this type of music recorded so well, where even the electronically originated sounds have a degree of colour and depth. This is also the first time I've seen Gearbox founder Darrel Sheinman credited on a record. It seems he's a bit of a dab hand with the drums and percussion. **JK**

RECORDING  
MUSIC

## Dialogue

Wesseltoft Schwarze Berglund  
Jazzland

A new Bugge Wesseltoft release is always a reason for celebration in the Kennedy listening room and this combo of musicians makes it even more so. Bugge made a superb album with Henrik Schwarze called *Duo* in 2011. Here they are joined by bassist Dan Berglund, best known for his work with est. I don't know if it's his presence or Bugge's born again hair, but this is a more relaxed album than *Duo*. In places it has the finesse and sublimity of a Tord Gustavsen release, but Schwarze can be relied upon to keep the tempo moving, and to undermine the Scandinavians inclination to chill out.

Track two, 'Valiant', fits this chill out vibe. It is beautiful; piano and bass work so well together that one hopes there will be a *Duo 2*, this time with Berglund. Schwarze's contributions are subtle and fit right in, but their digital orientation lacks the radiance of the acoustic instruments. There are two 'Movement' pieces where the trio is joined by strings and trombone. This broadens the palette tonally and in the case of 'Seventeen' brings in a Reichian feel that works well. Rhythm is the key to this album; it's where these guys are at home but they do it so inventively that you can't stop listening and enjoying. An album of the year methinks. **JK**

RECORDING  
MUSIC



## Straight Life

Freddie Hubbard

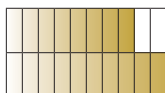
Pure Pleasure CTI 6007

180g 33 RPM

Freddie Hubbard's *Straight Life* was recorded in November 1970, the middle of a trilogy of great releases on CTI. It's one of the very best LPs Hubbard recorded and a masterpiece of the jazz-rock fusion era. George Benson, who later devolved into more easy listening fare, plays a smoking hot guitar, especially on the title piece that occupies all of side one. Tenor sax player Joe Henderson is in top form, and his edgy playing on thirteen minute-long 'Mr. Clean' is as good as anything he recorded under his own name.

Hubbard fuses jazz with Latin rock, and the rhythm section of Ron Carter, Jack DeJohnette, Herbie Hancock, and Richie Landrum sound like they were born to the genre. Santana's fusion of Latin with rock a year earlier echoes through in the tight Latin groove. The LP contains only three numbers — two hot pieces together taking up thirty minutes, but the music never flags or becomes repetitive. Rudy Van Gelder recorded the album and green label originals are scarce, unlike the later tan label issues. Ray Staff's remastering job brings this essential classic back to wide circulation in sound that rivals the original. If you don't own this LP your jazz collection has a big hole that needs filling. **DD**

RECORDING  
MUSIC



## Orchester Kurt Edelhagen Feat. Mary Lou Williams

Big Bands Live

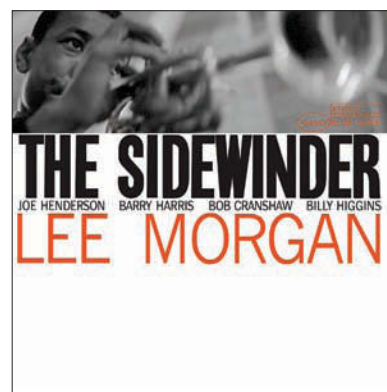
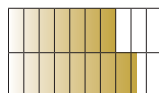
Jazz Haus 101742

180g 33 RPM

At the instigation and guidance of tonearm designer Frank Schröder, Jazz Haus Records of Freiburg, Germany, started releasing German broadcast station archival tapes. Here, side one is a July 1954 studio recording of the traveling Edelhagen big band, and side two is a live performance, adding Mary Lou Williams on piano. Both sides feature compositions and arrangements by Klaus Ogermann, who would soon leave for Hollywood and become an arranger for Frank Sinatra, Jobim, and a host of other musicians.

This is a part of an important archive of the greatest names in jazz, who were welcomed to post-war Germany. Despite the challenges of the times, German recording technology helped preserve a treasure trove of performances from the likes of Chet Baker, Duke Ellington, and Cannonball Adderley. Anyone interested in listening to more than the twentieth reissue of *Kind Of Blue* will find much to love here. The studio performances on side one are extremely well recorded and the side two live performances preserve crowd enthusiasm. A great entry point of entry for jazz lovers seeking out new sounds. **DD**

RECORDING  
MUSIC



## The Sidewinder

Lee Morgan

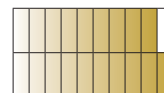
Music Matter ST-84157

180g 33 RPM

Everything about Lee Morgan was outsized, from the way he burst on the jazz scene at the age of eighteen to the way he left it at thirty-two, shot between sets by his common law wife. Fortunately he lives on in his recordings for Blue Note and the photographs of Francis Wolff. These gifts converge in Music Matters' standard speed reissue of Morgan's masterpiece and most popular album. Recorded in December 1963, the session featured a young Joe Henderson, fresh out of the military, along with Barry Harris, Bob Cranshaw, and Billy Higgins. The catchy and energetic rhythms, especially of the eponymous opening tune, proved that popular music could be great music.

*The Sidewinder* was one of the precursors of the brand of soul jazz that was to become immensely popular in the late 1960s. It is one of a handful of jazz combinations that is instantly recognized even by strangers to jazz, and has had numerous reissues over the years. This new package, however, combines for the first time the updated mastering room magic of Kevin Gray with sumptuous foldout packaging, full of Francis Wolff photos, making it easily the best game in town for both sound and good looks. **DD**

RECORDING  
MUSIC





**Nefertiti****Miles Davis**

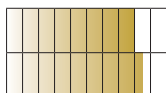
Mobile Fidelity MFSL 2-436

180g 45 RPM

Mobile Fidelity's Miles Davis series has produced some of the finest reissues over the past year or two, but it's the mid-1960s quintet recordings with Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter, and Tony Williams that I suspect will be the highest achievement of this series. Despite being recorded by Columbia's best engineers, the recordings always suffered from problematic sound. Nevertheless, these quintet recordings are among the greatest Davis releases, and *Nefertiti* is at or near his zenith.

Recorded in the summer of 1967 at Columbia's 30th Street Studio by Fred Plaut and Ray Moore, *Nefertiti* was the group's last fully acoustic album. In the eight years since *Kind Of Blue*, Miles had continued to grow and was still surrounded by jazz's greatest musicians. The same engineer and the same studio were employed for this recording as were used with *KOB*, but you would never suspect this from the thin and grating sound of the 1968 release. The Mosaic box reissue improved on the situation somewhat, but still left the nagging feeling that something had gone wrong with Columbia's sound crew. But Mobile Fidelity disproves that theory—the sound of the new 45 RPM two LP issue finally sounds like

**RECORDING**  
**MUSIC**

**Solo Monk****Thelonious Monk**

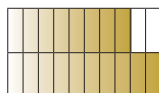
ORG Music RGM-1087

180g 33 RPM

Thelonious Monk's angular, percussive, and eccentric style has been absorbed so thoroughly that today's jazz piano playing would sound quite different but for his contribution. Earlier players such as Willie Smith, Art Tatum, and Fats Waller missed out or barely made it into the LP era as recording artists, but Monk created a body of work during the golden age of recording for Riverside and Columbia with a high standard of recording quality that still sounds modern. Perhaps the best way to enjoy pure, unadulterated Monk is his solo recordings, and none shine so brightly as *Solo Monk*.

Recorded in LA in late 1964, *Solo Monk* shows a combination of popular tunes mixed with a couple Monk compositions. The playing is so complex and packed with such emotional content and introspection, that it's almost difficult to listen to the album through without stopping occasionally to absorb each piece—no matter how many times you've heard the LP. Remastered by Chris Bellman of Grundman Mastering, the reissue lacks the last bit of "you are there" piano sound evident on an original pressing, but makes up for that with dead quite Pallas vinyl, particularly important with solo piano music. An essential recording. **DD**

**RECORDING**  
**MUSIC**

**Use Me****Vanessa Fernandez**

Groove Note GRV 150-1

180g 45 RPM

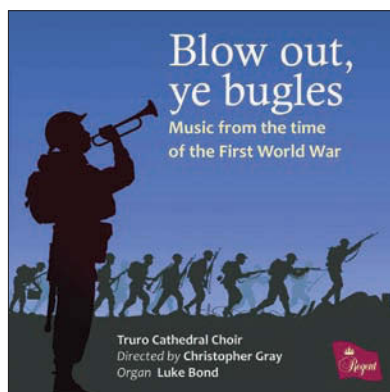
Unlike other recent female vocalist discoveries, Vanessa Fernandez is the real deal — an amazing talent, with sound to die for. Fernandez is a 32 year old Singaporean singer and radio presenter, who went from a church choir singer, to musical theatre director and performer, to hip hop singer, and also to DJ and radio producer (with a degree in Mass Communications) under the name Vandetta.

In this two LP 45 RPM set, Fernandez explodes on the scene with a captivating set of performances covering everything from Barry White to Curtis Mayfield to Al Kooper. Sounding more like she hails from Nashville or Detroit than Singapore, Fernandez easily escapes the 'female vocalist' genre — that dreaded music played at shows to make an audio system sound sweet without disclosing its weaknesses.

Recorded with a crack group of Los Angeles studio musicians at Oceanway Recording, *Use Me* combines a truly outstanding set of performances with some of the best sound you could hope for. Recorded analogue to 30 ips ¼ inch tape and mastered by Bernie Grundman, Al Green's 'Simply Beautiful' as sung by Fernandez creates the illusion of having the master tape at home. Jaw-dropping sound. **DD**

**RECORDING**  
**MUSIC**





## Blow out, ye bugles



Music from the time of the First World War

Truro Cathedral Choir – Directed by Christopher Gray

Regent Records – REGCD451

Regent released this album to coincide with the commemoration events surrounding the centenary of the outbreak of World War I. Music became a vital part of peoples' lives then, as the full horrors of that conflict began to unfold.

The first track, 'For lo, I raise up', composed by Stanford uses dramatic cadences that, when juxtaposed with the words "We shall not die," create a real sense of stoicism redolant of the age. The latter section of this magnificent anthem has the organ and voices fading away as the choir sings "But the Lord is in his holy temple, let all the earth keep silence before him." A desperate request for peace.

Following this, we hear a selection of three pieces under the heading 1914 by Alan Gray, who would later lose two of his three sons in 1918. The second piece of this trio is entitled 'The Dead'. The words are taken from Rupert Brooke's five-part War Sonnets, and I found the piece particularly harrowing given the loss Gray later encounters. Presumably Gray wrote these pieces as a consolation for those who had lost loved ones, attempting to offer hope in the final piece, 'The Soldier'. How much solace would he have received from these pieces in the depths of his own grief, one can only wonder.

Fittingly, Regent producer and engineer Gary Cole, has included a Requiem which occupies nine tracks on the album. Walford Davies is the composer and the work is entitled 'A Short Requiem'. It was composed "In sacred memory of all those who have fallen in the war." He was well known as the London's Temple Church organist and he spent a considerable amount of time attempting to ensure that the troops had access to music, realizing that they needed all the morale boosting possible. A well known choral composer, Davies' requiem is beautiful. While all the movements have Latin titles, only the Missa pro defunctis are actually sung in Latin. Interestingly, both of these Requiems æternam pieces are different. One would expect them to be the same, perhaps sung as a repetition. Track eight, Levavi oculos, uses the words from Psalm 121 and has been written as a psalm, with a plainsong twist, in so far as the first half of each verse is sung as a solo and the choir responds with the second half of the verse. Following this is the second Missa pro defunctis. It is a strange combination to mix languages; even the lesser doxology is sung in English, despite the title.

Following the short requiem, we hear a collection of beautiful pieces by the hugely talented Parry. Beginning with the exquisite anthem 'My Soul, there is a country far beyond the stars' and ending with the equally superb 'Lord, let me know mine end.' If you are unaware of these pieces I urge you to buy this disc just for those two tracks, if nothing else!

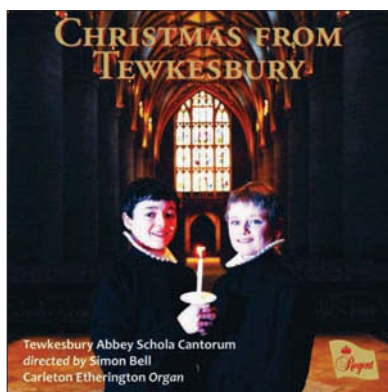
The words for 'My Soul, there is a country' are by Henry Vaughan. Parry uses beautiful suspensions to emphasise the text. He gives each part elegant phrases that build, grow, and fade away, also using both canonic and contrapuntal phrasing. At one point when the words state 'none than thee secure' the choir is singing in unison. The last three phrases – 'Thy God, thy life, thy cure' – build to a climax getting louder and louder as the chord progression combined with the dynamics creates a superb dramatic ending to this piece.

It is said that Parry compared the war to the fall of Lucifer. As Director of the Royal College of Music, he saw so many of his students going off, all too often, to their deaths. This is said to have had a profound affect on him personally.

The final track is by Vaughan-Williams and is a haunting anthem. 'Lord thou hast been our refuge, from one generation to another'. The piece is very complex. Written for double choir, and interweaving the text of Psalm 90 and the text of the same written by Isaac Watts, Vaughan-Williams also introduces a trumpet into the piece: a reminder of the death of so many soldiers. When the trumpet is introduced, the choir are imitating a fugue. I feel these are two pieces that could work on their own, yet work equally well together; this is an extremely clever feat. **PT**

RECORDING  
MUSIC





### Christmas from Tewkesbury

CD

**Tewkesbury Abbey Schola Cantorum**  
**Cantorum – directed by Simon Bell**  
**Carleton Etherington – Organ**  
 Regent Records – REDCD440

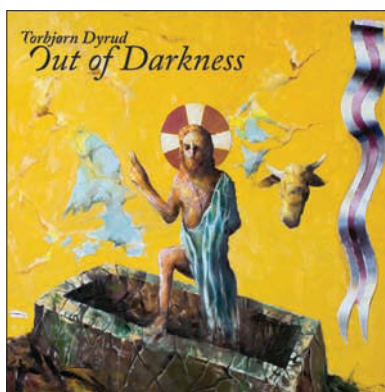
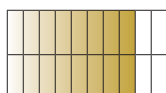
It would be wrong to produce a December issue of *Hi-Fi+* and not review a CD of carols. While some pieces featured on this disc may not be as familiar as others, I guarantee you will be humming or singing along to the majority as I did... in October!

The usual carol suspects, Chilcott and Rutter, are featured, as well as a piece commissioned by the Dean Close School (the school which educates the choristers), written by Bob Chilcott, and called 'the Night He was born'.

The chosen combination of lesser known and popular carols makes a nice change, and the choir handle both with great ease. The trebles' descants are often beautiful and well controlled. Meanwhile, the Organist is sympathetic not only to the choir but to the building and the capabilities of the recording.

Bell, who has recently taken over as Director of Music for Schola Cantorum, is carrying on the traditions of his predecessor and continuing and progressing the choir in a positive way. This is heartening, as it was not too long ago that it looked as though the choir would be lost from the Abbey for good. Highly recommended. **PT**

RECORDING  
MUSIC



### Out of Darkness

SA

**Torbjørn Dyrud**  
**Nidaros Cathedral Choir**  
**– Vivanne Sydnnes**  
 2L – 2L-099-SABD

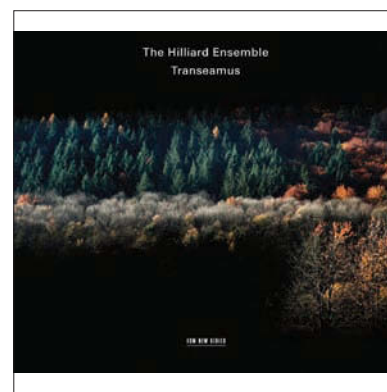
The composer uses space to create dramatic effect in *Out of Darkness*, and Dyrud moves the choir around for each scene. This gives the listener a slight sense of awkwardness, as this movement is disconcerting.

The scenes themselves are interspersed with readings taken from the Gospel of St John. You would be forgiven for thinking this is a modern day attempt at Bach's St. John's Passion, however this story ends at the Sea of Tiberius, where Jesus appeared to his disciples after he had Risen.

Dyrud uses vocal glissandos and percussion to emphasise the mystery surrounding the story. He uses both English and Latin text in order to convey his part understanding of religion, with the English being the bits he understands, and the Latin being the areas upon which he stumbles. This takes some getting used to.

2L have yet again produced a great disc, and the recording quality is excellent. Part of the importance of a work like this is the ability to hear the 'incidental' sounds. The muted trumpets are not overpowering, and the balance of muttering voices against the timpani are expertly reproduced. Outstanding! **PT**

RECORDING  
MUSIC



### Transeamus

CD

**The Hilliard Ensemble**  
 ECM New Series - ECM2408 4811106

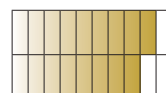
This disc is one of the latest offerings from ECM and is a combination of Carols and Motets, from 15th Century English composers such as John Plummer, Walter Lambe, William Cornysh, and Sheryngham. There are a couple of compositions where the composer's name is lost to the ages.

John Plummer worked at both the Chapel Royal and St George's Chapel Windsor under King Henry VI. Very few of his works survive, but the Hilliard Ensemble have recorded many of those pieces. Plummer composes in an extremely sensitive way; the phrases are long, slow, and hugely expressive. The ensemble understand the music and perform with sympathy; the four singers are extremely well balanced and their voices blend perfectly.

The text in some of the works is fascinating; the olde English in which they sing. 'In London was bore this matyr sothely..... To Godes grange now were thou borne'.

Yet again this is another superb recording from ECM. Do not be misled by the fact that this is a CD of carols; these are not carols you know! However, it is well worth a purchase. You will soon be happily listening to 15th century music and will no doubt find yourself transported to the royal courts of King Henry VI. **PT**

RECORDING  
MUSIC





# Album of the Month: The Clash 'London Calling'

by Colleen 'Cosmo' Murphy

**A**fter much consideration I have come to the conclusion that The Clash are my favourite punk rock band, because they were so much more than just a punk rock band. And with *London Calling*, they showed they were a rock n' roll band in the same league as some of rock's finest.

Punk's early beginnings were seeded with Detroit's MC5 and The Stooges, along with New York City's Velvet Underground and later The Ramones. These acts did not yet have a 'punk' badge pinned onto them, but the attitude was there and it shouted a rebellious defiance toward authority and a musically subversive, abrasive sound. Sonically, bands like the Sex Pistols sounded like the antithesis of the contemporary slew of prog rock acts and Rotten even took to wearing a Pink Floyd tee-shirt with the words 'I Hate' scrawled upon it. Punk itself had become a movement and although it spawned a host of great bands, it eventually fell in line with the fate of most musical subcultures in that it was soon overrun with a litter of copycat acts and became something of a diluted fashion statement with its own sartorial protocol.

In *London Calling*'s title track, Joe Strummer roars 'Now don't look to us, phoney Beatlemania has bitten the dust'. He admired The Beatles, but was concerned about being a band branded as 'punk rock' when the genre was becoming more of a parody of itself. The Clash had already acted out of character when they signed with the major record label CBS and they further ignored the strictures of the punk police by releasing a double album in the vein of acts like Yes and ELP. However, they stayed true to their lefty roots when they insisted *London Calling* retail for the roughly the same price as a single LP.

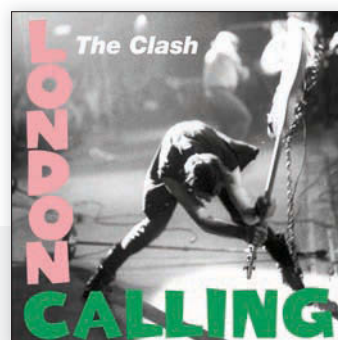
And while their third album still retained their spikey revolutionary sensibility (the title track addressed the Three Mile Island 'nuclear error'), musically it was a much more mature and adventurous effort. Paul Simonon may not have known how to play his bass when The Clash first got together, but by this album he had tightened his chops and, together with accomplished drummer Topper Headon, formed a formidable rhythm section. To top this off, Strummer and guitarist Mick Jones were writing great songs with wide-ranging topics and musical sensibilities.

Due to their friend Don Letts' influence, The Clash had paid tribute to Jamaican music with their cover of Junior Murvin's 'Police and Thieves' on their debut album. However, on *London Calling* they took it many steps further as, with a newly improved

rhythm section, they could truly skank on tracks like 'The Guns of Brixton', 'Wrong 'Em Boyo' and 'Revolution Rock'.

The band also took musical cues from big band jazz, funk, soul, and even pop. But along with the ska and reggae influences, the other sound that resonates most is that of good ole rock n' roll. The second song on the album is a blazing cover of 'Brand New Cadillac' originally performed by Vince Taylor, England's own version of Elvis, whose star shone bright and short before he faded into drug-induced obscurity (becoming an inspiration to Bowie's Ziggy Stardust).

The Clash were lamenting what they saw as the death of rock n' roll and initially wanted to call the album *The Last Testament*. The cover image echoes this sentiment as it mimics that of Elvis Presley's debut where The King is holding his guitar, but in this latest instance, Simonon is smashing his bass figuratively signalling the end of the medium. Whether *London Calling* is the last rock n' roll record is arguable, but what is not up for debate is that even 35 years later, it is one of its finest examples. +



**Recorded:** August–November 1979, Wessex Sound Studios, London UK

**Released:** 14 December 1979

**Producer:** Guy Stevens, Mick Jones

**Label:** CBS, Epic

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