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Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung - Wolfgang Tunze

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editorial

It's another New Year, and 2015 looks like it might be full of big changes for the audio industry. We are starting to see something of a fight-back by CD player makers (especially those in the high-end), as a small, but growing, group of audiophiles move away from downloading, ripping, and streaming in favour of good ol' physical formats. Whether this has the same level of success as the vinyl revival remains to be seen.

Our take on this is a pragmatic one – it's all good! Because, at the same time as people are returning to CD in small numbers, some of the most reluctant digital music lovers have begun to adopt next-generation audio. The UK audio buyer is notoriously sceptical of formats beyond 16-bit, 44.1kHz (perhaps we swallowed the 'Perfect Sound Forever' marketing line a little too readily), but even this has begun to change. High-performance audio services such as HDTracks download site and Tidal's high-grade streaming service finally arrived in the UK at the end of last year.

For my part, I can't help feeling Tidal is the more exciting of the two today. The UK listener was swift to adopt Spotify, to the point where even hard-core audio enthusiasts were giving up buying new music in favour of Spotify's subscription service. Good though Spotify's service can be, even in its dressiest get-up, I feel it should be considered more a music discovery service than a high-grade audiophile music streaming option. Now with Tidal joining the fray, those Spotify migrants can continue their subscription-only model of listening to music, but this time can listen to that music in CD-grade sound quality and beyond. This could drive wider interest in good audio, too.

We're really excited by seeing these services come to town. The lack of truly trans-national support for higher-grade audio formats has meant we've always fought shy of including streamed and downloaded formats in our music reviews, and in any technology features. However, seeing the increase in momentum that comes from bringing these formats to new listeners around the world, that restriction is lifting fast!

I am also hopeful that more ways of getting better quality recordings help continue to straighten out the music business in this respect. I'm wary of using the term 'high-resolution' here, because there have been cases of so-called 'high-resolution' audio files actually being up-sampled versions of the 16-bit, 44.1kHz master, sold for a premium. With more services available, you get the ability to vote with your mouse; rejecting the unscrupulous bad apples and going with the good guys.

It looks like 2015 is going to shape up well for the audio enthusiast!

Alan Sircom
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Or email them to editor@hifiplus.com

incoming!

Kronos Conversion

The last time I wrote to the magazine, I felt frustrated with the over-pricing of hi-fi, and how little attention *Hi-Fi+* paid to equipment under £5,000. I have seen that your magazine does now feature equipment at all price ranges, and that is a good thing, in my opinion.

That being said, one Saturday recently, I visited KJ West One in Central London (along with my friend Kuldip, who has a superb system) to hear the Kronos turntable. I admit I was lured in by the looks, and just had a gut feeling this turntable could sound good, too.

When I arrived at KJ West One, I saw the deck in the flesh and liked its appearance all the more as a result. From that moment however, I told myself to forget its looks, and just listen. I only intended to listen for 20 minutes or so (maybe half an hour tops), because I had plans to do some record hunting in Berwick St. All I can say is two hours later, I had become a Kronos evangelist!

I'm sure you remember the almost cult like talk for the Linn Sondek in the 1980s, but I can say THIS is the transcendental vinyl replay solution! No audiophile talk from me; it was the best system I have ever heard in my life (*Editor's note: the rest of this system comprised electronics from Constellation Audio and Focal Utopia Grande EM loudspeakers*). I had the fortune to hear a sample of The Specials debut LP, brought along by a fellow customer, and... wow!!! Everyone was floored by that deep black, stable, clean soundstage.

The designer Louis played the a track from the *Bullitt* OST...
OUTSTANDING!

A member of KJ West One's staff said to me, "In 43 years of selling, listening, and dealing with hi-fi equipment, this is the best turntable I have ever heard." I agree. Louis told me that you visited and liked what you heard. I hope you share the experience with your readers.

Nass Khan, via email

I almost don't feel like I need to share my own experiences of this system, because you do it so well! I find myself agreeing with you totally, too. The Kronos turntable, its Sparta little brother, and the two Helena and Black Beauty arms are remarkable designs that simply show what vinyl is capable of at its very best.

In fact, my only real criticism of the Kronos is "why does it justify its price so well?" Short of a lottery win (or a train of thought that sounds like the plot for a Guy Richie film), the best like the Kronos, or the Kuzma M, or some decks that don't begin with a 'K', remain an impossible dream for me, and I know that the finest possible vinyl sound will always be unattainable.

I did interview the Kronos designer and all-round cool guy Louis Desjardins at KJ West One, and will run this interview at www.hifiplus.com, soon. Louis let slip some future plans in the interview that remain under embargo until after CES, however. We will also plan to run this interview in print, too, hopefully to coincide with a review of that stunning Sparta. – Ed

The Devialet and Miss Jones

I'd like to thank you for your review of the Devialet Ensemble system (Issue 116), because it has probably saved my relationship with my fiancé! My intended is a fairly keen hi-fi buff, we recently moved in together, and plan to marry next year. However, his ever-expanding collection of

"I only intended to listen for 20 minutes or so (maybe half an hour tops), because I had plans to do some record hunting in Berwick St. All I can say is two hours later, I had become a Kronos evangelist!"



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ugly black boxes was beginning to fill up my (OK, our) living room. His argument was that separating everything out into its own parts made everything sound better, and what we really needed was bigger loudspeakers, and yet more bloody boxes!

He reads your magazine religiously, periodically pointing out the next big thing, usually with the accent on the word 'big'. This time, however, he showed me your review of this one little box and two little loudspeakers, and the review was full of how good it sounded. If this is all he needs, it's all I could ever want!

Sure enough, he wanted to try this system, but was a bit surprised when I not only agreed, but said I was interested too. When he heard it, I said it sounded good, because it sounded good (but it all sounds good to me), but also because it doesn't look like a dustbin. Now, we have this nice looking Devialet Ensemble system in my living room. He's happy, I have my room back, and I can marry the man without fear of black boxes littering the house.

There's just one thing. Please don't start him off on another hi-fi crusade. Let him be happy with what he's got, at least for a few years!

Alison Jones, via email

My wife was heard to mutter "lucky cow!" on hearing about this email, and I'm sure she's not alone. There are a lot of hi-fi widows (and a few hi-fi widowers) out there, who lose whole swathes of their homes to stray bits of audio equipment. Every reviewer I know has at least one room and the hallway filled with cardboard boxes, and that never makes for effortless domestic harmony. I'm pleased we can be of service, and pleased too that the Devialet Ensemble

lives up to its reputation in your home. It does have the potential to unseat a lot of larger, more traditional boxes.

Fortunately, it seems like your intended is more open-minded about his living arrangements than some audiophiles. I know one or two who have become bellicose at the idea of reducing the size and number of boxes, even to the point of adding bigger, heavier, and uglier audio equipment to prove a point. This is kind of like a hi-fi version of the Darwin Awards, because their actions tend to lead to them being removed from the gene pool... by divorce lawyers. – Ed

Headphony?

My nephew might not be the next great hi-fi buff, but he loves his music. He also loves his bargains. Recently, he bought a pair of 'Beats' headphones very cheap from a market stall. The implication was that they were overstock of a previous generation of Beats that the company was trying to sell off at great discount. However, he wasn't happy with the sound quality as one channel sounded distorted, so he went back to the market stall the next week, only to find it closed down. Other traders on the market told him the stall was closed down by the authorities for selling fakes.

Is this commonplace? I can understand that Beats (being a big name in headphones) is a target for fakes, but does the same happen in other branches of audio? If I buy a pair of KEF loudspeakers from eBay (for example), how can I be sure they really are made by KEF?

Mark Pettigrew, via email

Audio's relatively low profile is our friend here! Beats by Dre headphones remain extraordinarily popular (at one point, that brand on its own commanded more turnover than the whole of the rest of the audio industry put together), and few brands in audio have the same 'draw' to the general public and are thus less likely to fall victim to fakes. At least, not in the West; successful American and European audio brands do have to be wary of finding their best-selling models being copied and sold across some of the Asian markets. But these products are extremely rare on this side of the planet, although fake high-end cables have been seen on occasion.

A more pressing concern for manufacturers is the rise in fake components, which can end up in products on sale, especially if the product is not adequately tested in the build phase. Buying from reputable suppliers, and applying more stringent controls and testing, is more expensive in the short term, but worth the extra in long-term customer satisfaction, even if a product ultimately costs more in the process. Ultimately, remember the classic maxim: "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is." – Ed

Rocky Mountain Audio Fest/CanJam 2014

by Chris Martens

To quote cheesy British soccer pundits, the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest is, “a game of two halves”. It’s divided between the RMAF show for traditional two-channel audiophiles, and the brands they love, and the all-things-headphone-related CanJam event, both running concurrently in the same Marriott hotel on the outskirts of Denver, Colorado. Although traditionally there is surprisingly little crossover between the ‘in-room’ and ‘in-head’ worlds, that is changing, with a greater number of traditional

audio companies (not just loudspeaker companies) discovering the exciting world of headphones.

In truth, convincing the audio enthusiasts is proving more of a struggle judging by the visitors in Denver. In part, this comes down to the sky-rocketing prices of top-end audio on show at RMAF; hearing a system that fails to come up to the performance of your headphone system, but costs 1,000x more will do that! However, stepping away from the grandiose end of audio, there were a number of high-performance audio systems that delivered excellent performance without the attendant six-figure cost.

RMAF/CanJam has become so large now, with so many new products on show, it has become almost impossible to cover all the latest equipment without devoting a whole issue to the events. Instead, here is our personal collection of the ‘best in show’! ➤



Dan Clark ‘Head Master’ of Mr Speakers, shows the clever 3D printed drivers in the Alpha Prime headphones



WyWires Red series cables are specified for high-grade headphones



Sandy Gross of GoldenEar played Triton Ones through Marantz electronics, to deliver high-performance at truly reasonable cost

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

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



GAUDER
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Carl Marchisotto and Nola's Studio Grand Reference Gold



Woo Audio brings tubes to portable headphone systems... soon



Schiit's Ragnarok headphone and integrated amp with Yggdrasil DAC



LH Labs's Gavin Fish (left) and Larry Ho (right) show off the new Geek Pulse desktop headphone amp/DAC



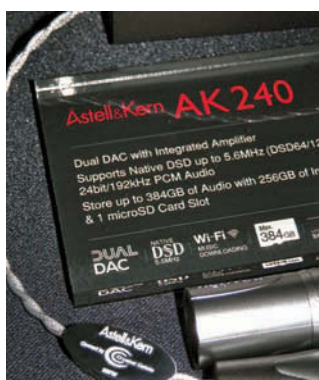
Magnepan's five 1.7 panel speakers, exaSound's e28 multichannel DAC, and Bryston's 9B-SST-2 amp showed what great value sounds like!



MrSpeakers Alpha Prime headphones are based on Fostex designs



HiFiMAN's new EF100 headphone amplifier is made for analogue lovers



Astell & Kern and Crystal Cables. A new dream team?



Matt Nagaye from MIT with the new Vero cable designed for headphones

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Paul Barton of PSB with the new Imagine 3 loudspeakers



Ultimate Ears was using 3D scanning to create custom in-ear monitors



Moon's new 430HA headphone amp



Lenbrook's Greg Stidsen with NAD's latest Master Series electronics



Lionel Goodfield from Moon trying MrSpeakers headphones connected up with Nordost's terrific-sounding new Heimdall headphone cables



Cavalli Audio's new Liquid Crimson headphone amplifier is setting an extremely high standard for many users



It's been seen before, but iFi's Retro system is pushing all the right buttons!



Oppo's Jason Liao with the new and affordable PM-2



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The Hi-Fi Show 2014

by Alan Sircom

One of our 'fellow travellers' in the audio magazine world – *Hi-Fi News & Record Review* – restarted *The Hi-Fi Show* a couple of seasons ago. The original event in a hotel just outside Heathrow Airport was once the most important event on the international audio calendar this side of CES, but that baton was passed to Munich some years back. The new event, fast becoming a fixture in the first weekend in November at the Beaumont Estate in Old Windsor, is an attempt to rekindle the high-end audio flame in the UK. Now in its second year, *The Hi-Fi Show* had grown in exhibitor numbers considerably.

In a way, this made the show something of a victim of its own success, with newcomer exhibitors in different parts of the Estate. In one case, visitors had to navigate through the overspill from a wedding breakfast to find an enclave of half a dozen audio rooms. This had its own interesting development – it's odd to see someone in full formal morning dress listening to the latest music streamer in a hi-fi show – but these are teething troubles to be expected as a show scales up.

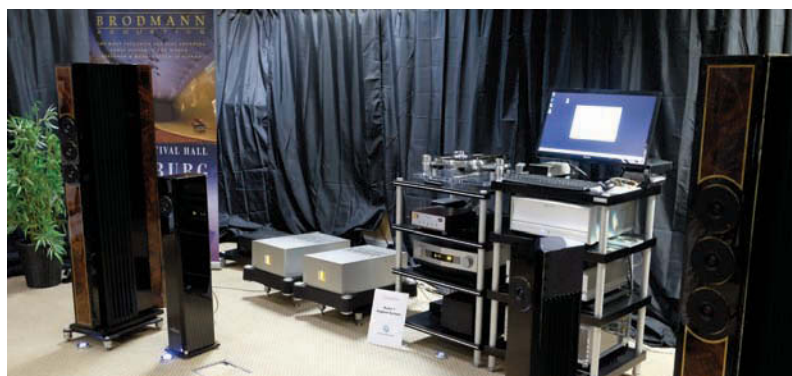
What is interesting about *The Hi-Fi Show* is that it has rapidly become the venue where the UK high-end distributors exclusively show their product lines, with distributors such as Absolute Sounds and Symmetry choosing this event as their only open showcase, and events for the rest of the year are all local dealer expos. This may be a trend that looks set to continue for some time. +



Launched just weeks before, Paradigm's new Prestige speakers sounded great



Karma AV demonstrated several systems, including two versions of Mark Levinson and JBL. This one's the biggest system they could get!



Nu-Nu Distribution were making fine and sophisticated sounds from Oracle vinyl, TAD electronics, and Brodmann Acoustics loudspeakers



Wilson Audio's new Sabrina speaker in prototype form



After several years, Audio Alchemy is back, bigger and better than ever!



Brinkmann's Balance turntable system sounded outstanding, too



Micromega's growing MyProduct line includes this fine, yet tiny system



BD Audio made one of the most effortlessly right sounds at the show with its JC Verdier, ModWright, and Tune Audio based system



Studio AV demonstrated a fine-sounding system from dCS and Kog Audio



This was the first UK showing of ARC's G-Series amps and Wilson's Sasha 2



AKG's hugely successful £80 Y50 headphones



Puresound was showing its system featuring the STST direct drive deck



PMC's fact 12s were singing sweetly throughout the day



Trilogi launched its first integrated amplifier: the 135W hybrid 925



Primare's electronics proved a perfect match for Revel loudspeakers



The biggest, and most chilled out, room in the show was playing Constellation Audio's new Inspiration series amps, driving the Magico S5 floorstanding loudspeakers with effortless ease



IsoTek's new EVO3 Mosaic Genesis Hybrid brings together the best of mains conditioning and regeneration for small to medium systems



Melco is an SSD-driven music-only NAS built by the hard drive experts at Buffalo



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Copland's new DAC has a distinctly retro look to it!



Norma electronics, In-Akustik cables and ELAC speakers sounded great!

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In addition to this they also put together high end systems using brands such as TAD, Brodmann, Oracle, Concert Fidelity and their own cable brand. Their love of music and style shines through in all the systems they put together.

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Naim Audio mu-so network music centre

by Chris Thomas

Back in the 1970's Naim Audio was the outsider; the hair-shirt amplifier manufacturer so beloved of the then nascent 'Flat Earth' school of audio.

Today, despite some fairly considerable changes to both the company and the entire audio world, arguably Naim Audio has stayed truer to its original goals than many of its contemporaries. However, in 2014 Naim announced a couple of left-field products that unseated the mainstream view of the company, held by fans and critics alike. First came *The Statement*: £130,000 worth of pre/power amplification exotica that gave the middle finger to those who had questioned both the direction and the confidence of the company, and who suggested Naim Audio would lose its identity in the wake of its well-publicised hook-up with French loudspeaker brand, Focal. *The Statement* was followed by *mu-so*, a self-contained network music centre that was the company's first product available both within and without the ardent Naim dealership network.

At first glance, Naim Audio making a wireless music centre might seem as out of

place as Rolex making a Swatch watch. The terminology itself makes it sound stranger than it actually is in reality but, at the press launch earlier in the year, the three products on show did appear incongruous to the traditional view of the company. A couple of fully fitted Bentleys, *The Statement*, and a huddle of the little *mu-so* machines perhaps show why it's more an expression of the traditional company reaching out to a far wider audience. A press launch for a new Naim power amplifier will draw in members of the audio press and a few hi-fi bloggers at most; the launch of *mu-so* saw Naim Audio appear on the radar of a wider range of tech magazines and TV programmes like *The Gadget Show*. Unless we want hi-fi to stay an ever-diminishing clique of aging audiophiles, we need more Naim Audios making more products like *mu-so*. It's as simple as that!

In a way, though, *mu-so* remains curiously true to Naim's core values of inspiring people to look deeper into exploring the musical and sonic arts. It was those core values that 'minted' so many music lovers who started down the hi-fi rabbit hole in the 1970s and 1980s. And, even in the general melee of that press launch, Paul Stephenson, Naim Audio's Big Cheese (note: Big Cheese, not *grande fromage*), showed me how those same core values exist today in *mu-so*, by accessing it through the Naim iPad app. You can make no judgements at such a noisy event, but *mu-so* certainly looked sharp and I could hear that it was clean sounding, had decent bandwidth, and it went loud. Most of all, though, I wanted to get one at home, and a few months later, ►





► I did just that. I am not sure exactly what I was expecting quality-wise, but to say I have been surprised would be an understatement.

Naim's mu-so was larger than I remembered. The case is made from MDF and covered in a beautifully finished brushed steel sleeve. At the rear is a full-width finned aluminium heat-sink while the front is a rather nicely sculptured waveform grille that comes in black although replacements can be obtained in 'Deep Blue,' 'Burnt Orange' (which is nicer than it sounds), and 'Vibrant Red'. Perhaps this range will be extended, but the cost per grille will be £70. The app allows the listener to change the background screen colour to match any of these grille colour schemes, too.

Naim Audio builds mu-so in China of course, and the story as to how Naim sourced the right manufacturer included just about everything from quality, through consistency, even to ethical standards. These important aspects of the construction process are often overlooked in bringing a product to market, but not this time it seems. Despite this, there will still be many demanding a UK built product, but it would be simply impossible to build a machine like mu-so in Salisbury at anywhere near this price without compromises, and that is an inescapable financial reality.

On mu-so's top is the 'control centre'; a large sunken rotating aluminium volume control, illuminated with the switching functions and level indicators, which looks very much like the design fitted to The Statement. I like that Naim decided against a touch screen with volume up and down arrows, because the feel of the control is simply gorgeous. It is, without question, the best feeling dial that Naim has ever employed. It is large, smooth, needs only a light touch, and has no backlash whatsoever. As you adjust the level, an illuminated display atop the control shows you where you are, and the other inputs can be selected via this display, too. One touch, and you just know you are dealing with a quality piece of equipment. Given mu-so is rolling out to chic department

stores and Apple Stores as well as the usual purveyors of fine audio, that touchy-feely aspect of design suddenly becomes all important, and I wouldn't be too surprised if many mu-so sell on that alone. I have to say that, in comparison, the remote handset strikes me as something of an afterthought. It is far too flimsy and rather clunky in action. I doubt you'll use it very often, especially as its functions are replicated in the dedicated app (it requires iOS7 or above, or Android 4.0 and above) that you need to drive mu-so. This app gives you full control over input selection and volume and is loaded with the full range of Internet radio selections, but more on these options later.

Once powered, mu-so reinforces its 'lifestyle' product credentials as it illuminates the Naim logo, and this extends across the width of the solid acrylic base giving it a cool look as if floating above the table. If the illumination is too bright, you can scroll through three levels of intensity, or turn it off altogether.

Set-up is simple and progress is shown by a tiny LED on the side of the case that changes colour as you move through the process. Alongside this is a USB port that can play music from Apple iOS products as well as charging them, or music from a USB memory stick. There is an optical input that will function up to 24-bit/96kHz and a 3.4mm stereo analogue input jack, too. Beneath the unit, adjacent to the mains ►



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► socket, you will also find an Ethernet port for a physical network connection, keeping visible wiring to a minimum in the process. While a wired connection offers resolution up to 24-bit/192kHz with FLAC, WAV or AIFF files, wireless connection manages only 48kHz with robustness. My advice, as with all such components is that, if it is possible, then hard-wire it. With the increase in the number of things accessing a wireless network these days, always take this option if you can. Once connected, mu-so will see all compatible devices linked to the router.

Throughout my time with mu-so, I tended to use the app through an iPad. This gave me access to all the formats I needed. It can support Apple Airplay, UPnP, Spotify Connect, and even the aptX version of Bluetooth (not currently supported by Apple).

Naim seems to have covered most bases with mu-so and it will play back from just about any phone, tablet, or even NAS drive, and several mu-so can be wirelessly linked for multi-room use, which can also be controlled by the app.

Pop the front grille off and you will see the on-board speakers. There are custom bass, mid, and treble drive units for both channels, each unit driven actively by a 75-watt digital amplifier, giving, Naim claims, a total of 450 watts of output power. The drivers are arranged in a mirror-image configuration, and this installation incorporates a flared and ribbed port too, exiting at the bottom of the cabinet. The amplification, and the way it drives the speaker units, is controlled by a DSP chip capable of 150 million calculations per second, running Naim-written custom code. The incorporation of this was inspired by the Bentley car program, though this chip itself is totally custom. Processing the signal and the 'active configuration' of the speakers was one of the biggest challenges in creating the exceptional sensation of the music being out of the car's body and into the passenger space within, and the experience of the car program has been invaluable in my opinion. Having used a Bentley for an unforgettable week of cruising around enjoying the on-board sounds (*yeah, yeah, no need to rub it in – Ed*), I hear a lot of the same character and musical experience with mu-so, too.

When you think of the amount of work a product like mu-so has to do and consider the limited amount of physical space, it's no wonder that most similar devices sound so small and strained. But the steps that Naim has taken in making the mu-so cabinet from a material often associated with loudspeakers, with such an excellent finish, and going for plenty of usable power have been worth it. It doesn't take long once you sit and listen to mu-so to realise that the whole endeavour has left Naim Audio with a truly class-leading product on its books.

Naim's mu-so has four levels of equalisation that are accessed through the app. A couple of these equalisation settings adjust the tonal balance to reflect mu-so's proximity to a rear wall, but you can switch the Loudness control in or out depending on how low a level you are listening at. It's been a while since I have seen a Loudness option, but as this is DSP driven, at lower levels it gives the low end a very worthwhile lift and fleshes out the sound nicely. You wouldn't want it on as the volume level is increased. Well, I wouldn't anyway. Head-bangers might.

Sitting mu-so on a kitchen work surface works but, at 628 mm wide, it is quite large and I certainly couldn't find that sort of spare workspace in my kitchen. Anywhere you want to take quality music that can accommodate mu-so will be a success but, in my opinion, it is good enough to warrant a more considered installation. I can even envisage it as a complete audio system where space, finances, or an aversion to trailing wires would mitigate against separates. However, try to avoid sitting it atop hollow furniture if possible; although mu-so has some resonance control thanks to its dimple feet, it still generates enough energy through its cabinet to excite any box-like structure and set it off resonating away with the music. Adding three or four custom feet, preferably hard-coupled, like some small hardwood blocks will lessen the booming effect greatly.

Whether playing a NAS box full of music or simply armed with a Spotify Premium account, the possibilities really open up because mu-so does bop along with a sophistication and open friendliness to its sound that none of its rivals, at least none that I have heard, come close to matching. It is punchy and has great presence, and what's more important is that it is so musically together and consistent over all of its inputs. Forget about low colouration and true-to-life accuracy. That is not what mu-so is about at all. This player is about

fun, and good old foot-tappin' involvement. But that's not to say it lacks sophistication or is a one-trick-pony, far from it. Give it a high quality file to play and I guarantee that you will be delighted at its musical coherence and articulation. So many large, expensive systems that play digital files are all about pristine resolution and micro detail. But, can they carry a tune, do they disseminate the music somewhat, and are they rhythmically in-the-groove? To my ears at least, very few of them tick those boxes to the same extent that Naim's systems can, and (perhaps surprisingly) the way mu-so does. It's not a majority view among today's audiophiles, but I feel that desire for higher bit-rate music has a way to go yet and the rather tiring nature of the early CD players is being reprised at times. Naim's mu-so avoids all of these things, and I have to say that whoever sorted the DSP procedures has got things spectacularly right. The way the music manages to stay free of the sort of colourations that you might well expect from this amount of power being confined within such a relatively compact box is a constant surprise and a constant joy.

Those who have heard and commented on mu-so tend to concentrate on the way it deals with high-resolution files from a NAS or other storage device, but I have to say that I am a huge admirer of both its Spotify performance and its approach with Internet radio, one of the most undervalued sources of free music. If you do have the aforementioned Spotify Premium account then mu-so will ►



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Single box solid-state network wireless music system

Inputs: Bluetooth (aptX), Spotify Connect, UB/IOS, Naim Multiroom UPnP, Airplay

Digital Inputs: TOSlink, 24-bit/96kHz Optical

Analogue Inputs: 1 x 3.5mm jack (stereo)

Formats Supported: ALAC, 24bit/96kHz, MP3/AAC 48kHz, 320kps, Bluetooth SBS, AAC and aptX. 48kHz limit for wireless connection

Speakers: Mirror imaged 3-way x 2

Amplifier Power: 6x75 watt actively driven

Dimensions: 628 x 12 x 25.6mm (HxWxD)

Weight: 13kg

Price: £895

Manufacturer: Naim Audio

URL: www.naimaudio.com

Tel: +44 (0) 1722 426 600

► access the music for you via Spotify Connect and your hand-held device will act merely as a controller while mu-so does the streaming work.

In a world of today's music files, where the bitrate is king, I think Naim has, as usual, also done a superb job where Internet radio is concerned, and I spent a lot of my time surfing the world's radio stations. The Naim app allows you to search by genre and then country if you wish, so being able to explore the world of Jazz and Bluegrass, should you so desire is very easy. When you find a high bitrate broadcast there is no disputing the quality, but it was the lower rate stations that really surprised me with their broadcasts being remarkably listenable through mu-so. I guess what I am saying is that the music you like will always sound better than technically higher quality broadcasts of music that you are indifferent to. One of Naim's favourites, Radio Paradise and indeed Naim Radio itself, can sound enormously impressive through mu-so and it is easy to spend a long time flipping through the stations. I guarantee you that a couple of hours of this and you will hear several albums you will want to get for your own collection, whether that be as a digital download or in hard form like a CD. And of course, the sounds from ripped CDs stored to a NAS box in the system played through mu-so are very, very good, too.

Naim's mu-so is a great device that succeeds on many levels. What it lacks in ultimate sophistication, it more than makes up for in exuberance, immediacy, and the fun of involvement, to say nothing of its very reasonable price. If you want to get more music in your life, then get a mu-so. It's as simple as that. +



COMPETITION

RHA Audio T10i earphones worth £149.95 must be won!

Hi-Fi+ has teamed up with the clever audiologists and headphone engineers at RHA Audio to bring one lucky headphonista the chance to hear their music as good as it can get, thanks to the sound of RHA's outstanding T10i earphones, which normally sell for £149.95.

Glasgow-based RHA Audio impressed us with its affordable MA750i earphones, but the T10i raises the game. With its clever injection molded stainless steel housings, new design handmade dynamic driver, screw-in, colour-coded voicing filters, and unique over-the-ear ear-hooks, the T10i is practical, good-looking, and capable of excellent sound.

When reviewed by our resident earphone expert Chris Martens in *Hi-Fi+* issue 118, he praised them for being, "wonderfully clear and well balanced", and noted they have, "plenty of transient 'snap' and cracking good lower midrange and bass articulation and power". He concluded that, "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. Very highly recommended."

And you can't say fairer than that, as one lucky reader is going to find out! +



Competition Question

What are the T10i housings made from?

- A. Injection molded stainless steel
- B. Liquid metal mimetic polyalloy
- C. Aluminium oxynitride

To enter, please visit www.rha-audio.com/competitions. Alternatively, send your answer on a postcard (including your name and address and contact details) to "RHA Competition, RHA Audio, Unit 3, 69 Haugh Road, Glasgow G3 8TX".

The competition closes on March 5, 2015.

Competition Rules

The competition will run from January 8, 2015 until March 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.

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Hegel H160 integrated amplifier

by Alan Sircom



On its website, Hegel says of its new H160 integrated amplifier, “Connect whatever you want and make it sound as good as it can”. I think Hegel might not have had any idea just how true that was, until they played a last prototype of the amp to an assembled group of European journalists in Oslo in late summer last year.

We crowded round an office desk, which was rigged up with two Hegel amplifiers in perhaps one of those ultimate fighting above its weight tests, because they were connected to what most of us would happily call a ‘gnarly’ speaker load. The H160 was the new pretender, going toe-to-toe with the company’s big bruiser, the 250W H300 behemoth integrated. OK, so at 150W per channel, the H160 is no slouch, but no one really expected the outcome, least of all Anders Ertzeid, Hegel’s VP of Marketing and Sales. The H160 creamed the H300; not quite to embarrassing levels, but certainly to the point where it was obvious the newer, smaller amplifier was very clearly the better performer. Anders later confided in us that he’d played this same H160 tacked onto a pair of big Magicos (creating in the process an über-mullet system where the loudspeakers cost almost 15x the price of the amplifier) and it just sang sweetly. Maybe Anders knew all along.

Hegel pulled out all the stops on the H160, especially on the digital side. The amp is exceptionally richly configured for digital audio, with a coaxial, three optical, one USB, and an Ethernet input, the latter fully UPnP and DLNA-chummy. And, if you connect the Ethernet port to your wireless router, it can be used as an AirPlay device. OK, so it’s more a DAC/dumb terminal than a media player, server, or renderer (in that it can only be used to play tracks sent to it, rather than actively search or access them). However, I feel this is a refreshing change from DACs that try, and mostly fail, to be a kind of network streaming device. All this being said, some kind of on-board wireless connection would be useful. It’s probably a good plan to think of the built-in converter as basically Hegel’s HD11, with an Ethernet link. It’s the same 32-bit AKM DAC-chip architecture, capable of 24/192 precision on all bar the USB, and 24/96 on that input. It’s not an asynchronous USB input, because Hegel prefers adaptive. Hegel also prefers a linear phase output, and deploys its patented LineDriver high current, low impedance circuit block to limit the ingress of high-frequency digital noise elsewhere in the circuit.

The amplifier section itself is a 2x 150W into eight ohm design which near doubles to 250W into four ohms. Hegel, however, doesn’t just make off-the-peg circuits that ape ►



► those of hundreds of other amp manufacturers; this is more back to the drawing board. Hegel, as in all its amps, keeps the current and voltage gain stages completely separate through the amplifier circuit (even to the point of feeding these stages from different power supplies) in an attempt to deliver higher dynamic range and lower distortion. Also, although the amplifier is notionally a Class AB design, its ‘SoundEngine’ local, adaptive feed-forward circuit gives the amplifier effective error cancellation instead of error correction, and sonically combines the ‘purity’ of Class A with the high damping factor of Class AB, which once again aims to lower distortion while raising dynamic range. Both of these characteristics took a good couple of hundred hours to come to light, with the amp sounding a little rough-edged and uninspiring before that.

Once suitably conditioned, this is one of the least ‘sounding’ amplifiers I’ve heard in a long time. The Hegel does this not in a colourless, bloodless manner, but rather with the kind of intrinsic ‘rightness’ that should be inherent to all amplifiers in theory, but usually fails to appear in the real world. Describing the H160’s performance in terms of musical presentations is a little pointless, because you might as well read a review of the recording itself, the amp adds and subtracts so little from the mix.

Hegel’s design is such that it can be perfectly comfortable making a good sound with no tweaking or messing around, or you can throw extreme amounts of special treatment at the project and it will show you how much better things can get. For experiment, I used this with lots of Nordost Valhalla V2 cable, connecting the H160 to a pair of Wilson Duette Series 2, with an Audiocom-modded Oppo BDP-105 and a maxed out 2014-spec Mac Book Pro running Audirvana Plus, with all its music files on a Thunderbird hard drive. In other words, almost every component in the system cost

at least as much as the H160, even the power cords. And it both highlighted and gained from every single, extremely expensive, performance enhancement. Such treatment is not mandatory; at best consider it a birthday present to you, your music, or your system. But it does show how much scope the H160 has.

I was beginning to get a handle on just how important that Hegel tag line was. The H160 is capable of helping create a good sound from either a small system, or an elaborate high-end audio extravaganza.

The great news here was the H160’s office performance wasn’t a one-off. It’s uniformly good at making a pair of

“The Hegel does this not in a colourless, bloodless manner, but rather with the kind of intrinsic ‘rightness’ that should be inherent to all amplifiers in theory, but usually fails to appear in the real world. Describing the H160’s performance in terms of musical presentations is a little pointless, because you might as well read a review of the recording itself, the amp adds and subtracts so little.” ►



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► loudspeakers sound good. Really good, in fact. Not a euphonic, swamped-in-even-order-harmonic-distortion 'good', just good at showing what the loudspeakers can do. Sorry to labour the point, but the H160 just does so little to flavour the sound as it passes through its circuits that you just get to hear the capabilities of the loudspeaker.

Despite my misgivings, musical snippets are demanded. The best one to use is perhaps one of the most thunderous; the last movement of Mahler's Eighth Symphony, conducted by Georg Solti and a cast of thousands [Decca]. This is musical *Ben Hur*, a dynamic challenge for even the biggest amp and loudspeaker, and the H160 brushed off the challenge like it wasn't there. It took any music in its stride, from heads-down, bone-crunching metal to polite dinner jazz, and at each turn, the H160 simply got out of the way.

Some of the H160's authority comes down to a claimed damping factor of 1,000 or more, because when listening to the Hegel, it's easy to hear it grip hold of those bass units like an angry bull terrier. It doesn't matter how many miles the listener has on their personal audio odometer, they will easily be able to hear this amp ordering the loudspeakers about, and the loudspeakers will love the H160 for being so bossy. This isn't just a dub thing, it doesn't need a bass line to show it off, and just playing Fiona Apple's 'Every Single Night' from *The Idler Wheel...* [Epic] is enough. Her voice is more authoritative and precisely placed front and centre stage. It's not about boom and bass; rather, that power is about constraining that boom so it doesn't affect the bass, the 'deeper than you might expect' bass.

Big speakers, big rooms, power hungry situations the likes of which should never be a safe haven for an integrated amplifier like the H160... the H160 takes all in its stride, but there are limits. 150W per channel is not a kilowatt, and the H160 might be surprisingly meaty, but it doesn't have the kind of power supply needed to play super low impedance loads at high levels. That's where its bigger brother comes to the fore. Or even bigger amps. The old cliché of 'punching above its weight' fits well here, but we are discussing putting Floyd Mayweather Jr. up against Wladimir Klitschko here. And in the real world, that's not what the H160 is about, and not how it is going to end up.

In the real world, the Hegel H160 is going to control the bass drivers of good Sonus faber Olympica, ProAc Response, PMC Twentys and Facts, Focal Electras, and other products in that kind of £3,000-£8,000 per pair region. And it's going to do a sublime job, combining that bass control with a smooth and engaging midrange and an upper end that is accurate, and never hard unless the music

"Some of the H160's authority comes down to a claimed damping factor of 1,000 or more, because when listening to the Hegel, it's easy to hear it grip hold of those bass units like an angry bull terrier. It doesn't matter how many miles the listener has on their personal audio odometer, they will easily be able to hear this amp ordering the loudspeakers about, and the loudspeakers will love the H160 for being so bossy."

demands it. The fact it could go a lot higher and be used with loudspeaker systems that you would never expect to see being driven by a £2,350 amplifier probably means you won't see them driven by the H160. This is more to do with the 'order of things' than it is to do with performance, and this is a shame, because I'd love more super high-end people to hear what is possible from such a system today.

Showing a clean pair of loudspeaker terminals is lovely, but it's not completely 21st Century in outlook. For an amplifier to really hit the high notes today, it needs to be a good headphone amplifier, too. The H160 hits this one for six ('knocks it out of the park' for those unfortunate, cricket-free parts of the world). This is a properly designed, full-blown headphone amp in its own right, capable of playing mean loads including the HiFiMAN HE-6 and now the Otravo HAMT-1, and making a damn good job of it, too. OK, so a really top-banana dedicated headphone amp will edge past the performance of the H160 in the ultimate control and last scintilla of detail stakes, but you are talking about a headphone amplifier that may conceivably cost as much the H160 in its own right.

There's one *Hi-Fi+* Issue 119-specific coupling that is more than worthy of note – the H160 with the little Russell K Red 100 loudspeakers. In fairness, I probably went a little more crazy over the Red 100 than I might have done because they walked into the system as the H160 was walking out, and the time they spent together was wonderful. The H160 ►

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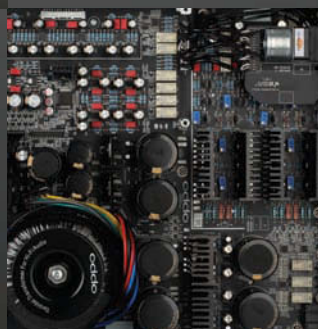
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► gripped those little loudspeakers perfectly, letting them have the kind of bass depth and control they so richly deserve and so brilliantly exploit. There are some combinations that cost £4,000 and sound like they should cost more, less, or £4,000. With this one you didn't think about money, you just listened to music. I've heard systems costing 10x, perhaps even 100x as much as this that didn't tick that fundamental box as well as this one. If I had to press the audio career ejector seat right now, and this combination was the one I'd take with me, I'd be perfectly happy and seldom feel the need for anything bigger (although I'd want some vinyl along for the ride, too).

There are tiny gaps in the Hegel armour, but they all feel like nit-picking. The biggest ones are the absence of a balance control, and the limited number of analogue audio inputs. I suspect the latter is unlikely to be a big deal, in that the intended client for a H160 probably musically migrated to an all-computer platform many years ago, and analogue inputs are very much a legacy for that kind of listener.

In some systems, that grip over the bass could be too much of a good thing. The Hegel H160 is adept at controlling loudspeakers with good bass, but those with not much bass to begin with can be almost overdamped under the Hegel's power delivery, and a smaller amp might fare better.

If our little audio world wasn't quite so set in its ways, the Hegel H160 should be a Shot Heard Round the World, like the Devialet. If there were any justice, this £2,350 integrated amplifier shouldn't just be driving £3,000 loudspeakers; it could be powering £30,000 loudspeakers and replacing big fat power amps with something just as good, for a fraction of the price, the size, and the electricity bill of what went before. A great amplifier with an excellent headphone amplifier and an extremely fine DAC all rolled into one awesome giant-killing package – where did it all go so wrong! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Analog inputs: 1x pair balanced (XLR), 1x pair single-ended (RCA), 1x pair home theatre (RCA)

Analog outputs: 1x pair fixed line level (RCA), 1x pair variable line level (RCA)

Digital inputs: 1x coaxial, 3x optical, 1x USB, 1x ethernet (RJ45)

Headphone output: 1x 6.3 mm Jack (front)

Power output: 150 w/pc into 8 Ohms, 250 w/pc into 4 Ohms

Frequency response: 5Hz-100kHz

Signal-to-noise ratio: Better than 100dB

Crosstalk: Less than -100dB

Distortion: 0.005% @ 50W 8 Ohms 1kHz

Intermodulation: Less than 0.01% (19kHz + 20kHz)

Damping factor: More than 1000 (main power output stage)

Dimensions (HxWxD): 120x430x410cm

Weight: 19kg

Price: £2,350

Manufactured by: Hegel Music Systems AS

URL: www.hegel.com

Tel: +47 22 60 56 60



Brodmann Acoustics F2 loudspeakers

by Steve Dickinson

When you go to a live concert, where do you sit? Are you a stalwart occupant of the first five rows, keen to hear everything the conductor hears, including the rustling as he turns the score? Or do you sit a little further back, maybe the next ten rows or so, preferring to let the venue make more of a contribution, perhaps? Your answer to this question may give a clue as to whether the Brodmann F2 loudspeakers are for you.

The Brodmann name is well known in certain Viennese circles; the good Mr. Brodmann started making pianos in Vienna over 200 years ago, passing the baton to his protégé, a Mr. Bösendorfer, in 1828. Over the years, the Bösendorfer name became extremely famous for piano making, but the Brodmann name never completely went away. Several years ago Bösendorfer, developed a range of high-end loudspeakers, but when Bösendorfer was taken over by Yamaha, the loudspeaker range was handed over to Brodmann, which still makes a range of well-regarded pianos.

The F2 sits at the top of the junior range of Brodmann loudspeakers, the Festival series, which comprises one wall-mount, one standmount, and two floorstanding models. The more expensive VC (Vienna Classic) models are all floorstanders. The F2 is an elegantly proportioned, moderately tall, and fairly slender floorstander finished, as you might expect, in impeccable piano black. For the Festival series, Brodmann has helped keep prices manageable by adopting Henry Ford's colour palette, whereas other finishes are also available for the VC series. I do enjoy a nice piano black finish, particularly one as well executed as this one (unsurprisingly proving that piano makers know how to make a good piano finish), so this was absolutely no hardship at all.

The thing that struck me about Brodmann loudspeakers when I first heard them was the way in which even the small standmounts filled a moderate sized room with music. There was something about the way the musical energy found its way into the room, which felt quite natural and unforced. Thus, a small box, without obvious strain or effort, could drive a largish room to quite respectable levels. This is something of a Holy Grail among loudspeaker builders. The reason for this appears to be a feature of the unusual 'sound-board' design adopted in all Brodmann designs, in one form or another. Certainly, the Brodmanns' room-filling abilities extend beyond what might be expected for the size of the cabinets.

Brodmann does draw on some musical instrument design principles, most obviously the fact that its loudspeaker cabinets are entirely devoid of damping materials. Like the sound boxes of many instruments, the loudspeakers rely on bracing for rigidity, and careful design to produce a cabinet whose

contributions are minimal and largely benign. Not having to work against damping is said to help the driver to more accurately follow the signal, and unwanted resonances are minimised by careful driver design.

The second interesting feature is Brodmann's 'sound-board' bass management. Rather than a port or a transmission line, bass output is controlled by a slot in the cabinet, which creates what Brodmann refers to as a 'horn resonator', an invention of the loudspeakers' designer, Hans Deutsch. The mass of air in the cabinet is driven by the output of the sideways-firing bass/mid driver (hence the lack of damping), and this energy exits the cabinet via a carefully dimensioned slot created by the gap between the cabinet proper and the 'sound-board'. In the VC series, this slot stands off from the cabinet sides, but in the F2 it utilises the speaker's baseplate.

Imagine listening to music from outside the listening room, with the door half open. As the door is progressively closed, the upper frequencies are attenuated until all that exits the room is the bass. The slot created by a slightly open door acts as a low-pass filter, and the frequency response is dependent on the width of the slot. This is the working principle behind Hans Deutsch's horn resonator. The slot, acting as the low pass filter, rolls off linearly from 130Hz at 4.5 dB/octave, rather than the more familiar bass reflex port augmenting the bass at a tuned frequency. This makes for a more even and linear bass response and drives even large rooms with little apparent strain or effort. The sideways-firing bass/mids also fire directly into the room, via a slatted grille panel on the

cabinet sides. The only forward-firing drive unit, indeed the only visible drive unit, is Brodmann's own silk dome tweeter.

It all seems to work; the sound floods out of the Brodmann F2 with a sense of ease and naturalness, which makes some comparable conventional loudspeakers sound distinctly unsubtle. Rarely have I heard sideways-facing drivers give a truly satisfying result, probably because in many applications they are mainly a way to get a quart-sized driver into a pint-sized cabinet. Here though, as part of the design principle, the application is considerably more coherent and successful. Image focus was gratifyingly tight and stable, with solo performers occupying a definite space front and centre, well clear of the boxes. Here, careful placement is key, and amply rewards a little time and effort spent in the setup. It yields an even and well-proportioned output, with good imaging and spacious soundstage, which isn't tethered to the cabinets.

The Brodmanns do like a bit of elbow room, and my modest-sized 4x3m listening room was probably as small as you'd want to try to use them in. Bass is indeed solid and convincing; Seal's 'Killer' [Seal, ZTT] has real impact and drive. Despite their classical (in so many senses of the word) heritage, Brodmanns aren't too polite to boogie – so don't make the mistake of assuming these are loudspeakers mainly for classical music. I got excellent results with jazz and rock. The F2 loudspeakers will play loud, with excellent dynamics, spaciousness, and 'air', without that 'one too many cups of coffee' sense of trying that bit too hard to impress. They impress, sure enough, but mainly because they are not overtly impressive.

As you might expect, piano is rendered particularly well. Abdullah Ibrahim, playing 'Whoza Mtwana' with the NDR Big Band [Ekapa Lodumo, Tip Toe], is a prime example of where the F2s excel. Ibrahim's piano is rich and sonorous, with appropriate weight and mass, but not big and lush. The band is bold and brassy, with just that authentic degree of stridency you expect from a jazz big band, and no added sourness from the loudspeaker. The piano's upper register was also gratifyingly free of aggression – a good example: Graham Fitkin's complex, rhythmic piece for two pianos, 'Piano Piece early 89' from *Flak* [Fitkin CD] ably demonstrates the F2's ability to delineate two separate lines of music, keeping the threads of the two intertwined pianos nicely sorted, without dissecting them into component parts, or dislodging your earwax with the high notes. ►

“Despite their classical (in so many senses of the word) heritage, Brodmanns aren't too polite to boogie –so don't make the mistake of assuming these are loudspeakers mainly for classical music. I got excellent results with jazz and rock. The F2 loudspeakers will play loud, with excellent dynamics, spaciousness, and 'air', without that 'one too many cups of coffee' sense of trying that bit too hard.”





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▶ The Ravel Sonata for violin and piano, performed by Viktoria Mullova and Katia Labeque [*Recital*, Onyx Classics], was also interesting when played through the F2, because uniquely the piano is clearly on equal terms with the violin, and not simply an accompaniment. The F2 renders this not merely apparent, but obvious. When each passes the musical baton to the other, the interchange is clearly evident, as are the dynamic and rhythmic subtleties; the degree of interplay between these two world-class solo performers is one of the joys of this piece, and that is rendered here entirely without artifice or undue emphasis.

The most obvious difference between the 'Festival' FS series, of which the F2 is the largest, and the 'Vienna Classic' VC series is the quality of the drivers, and the arrangement of the horn resonator/sound board. In the F2, the base of the loudspeaker forms the sound-board, with the slot for the horn resonator formed by a small gap between the base and the rear panel. The VC series use a vertical slot, the full height of the cabinet, with a sound-board mounted proud of the cabinet sides to form the all-important slot. This makes for better bass output in terms of level, and degree of control. It is this bass where perhaps the F2's compromises are most apparent.

Bass is strong, powerful, and convincing through the F2, but lacks that nth degree of speed, focus, and tautness. Stanley Clarke fans, for example, may find themselves better served by something a little more nimble in the lower registers. He gets the sort of bass sounds on 'Bass Folk Song number 10' [*The Stanley Clarke Band*, Heads Up] that most of us could only get by hitting a piano bass string with a tyre iron, and that effect would surely benefit from a speaker with a faster, more immediate bass response; having said that, the overall sense of melody and flow of the piece through the F2s is impressively



natural and devoid of any sense of artificial emphasis. Clarke's position in a 3D soundfield is not as precise as I've known it, however; the loudspeakers do a very decent job of disappearing but performers and instruments don't quite coalesce into a definite space in the way that they do with my regular Focal 1028Bes. Miles Davis' 'Tutu' [*Tutu*, Warner] doesn't explode into life and the bass isn't as relentless as it is in some systems, although Davis' managing of the mood of the piece is clearly evident through the F2s and this still makes it a compelling listen.

Similarly, intensely rhythmic, driving jazz, such as '1979 Semi Finalist' from The Bad Plus' *Give* album [Columbia], may well benefit from the delivery of a more in-your-face loudspeaker; Reid Anderson's bass, while far from ponderous, trades a little agility and drive for weight and power. That said, the overall rendering is still potent, taut, and highly effective. Do not mistake this for a loudspeaker with big, bloomy, and blowsy bass. In absolute terms, it has peers that do a better job of the lowest registers, but that's just because their compromises lie elsewhere.

More subtle music, the Tord Gustavsen Trio being an excellent example, is very effectively and powerfully rendered through the F2. Gustavsen can get more intensity out of a mezzo forte than most pianists can manage with it all turned up to eleven; 'At Home' from *Being There* [ECM], builds naturally ▶

► and inevitably in energy and propulsion, a zephyr building into a gale while you barely notice. This doesn't work if the individual parts aren't finely and exquisitely balanced, but when it does work, as here, it is a deeply affecting piece of music. 'Six Pianos' by Steve Reich [*Drumming*, DG] was utterly mesmerising, too; the constantly shifting interplay of the six pianos created a compelling sense of relentless forward motion, which didn't let up until the final note, and all the more effective and breathtaking for it.

The F2 is a curious mix of the truly wonderful, and the occasionally flat-footed. But then, all loudspeakers are compromised, your weapon of choice depends on what you want it for, and I'd say the Brodmann F2's compromises are well chosen, all things considered. In fact, the F2 exhibited little that drew attention in a negative way, which is why I've homed in on the bass a little more than it deserves. This is a very unassuming loudspeaker, which mostly just gets on with the job of communicating music. It has an effortless and untiring sound. Sometimes, untiring is code for boring and bland. Here, it just denotes a speaker I'd be happy to listen to all day.

I did find myself rediscovering a lot of my orchestral and choral music. Lately I'd been hanging out more with the jazz side of my collection, so it was nice to revisit some old favourites and hear them in a new light. Although it's easy to overstate the classical link, it would also be fair to say that the Brodmanns are made for music like this. The sense of scale they offer for large musical forces, flooding the room with sound rather than throwing it at you, makes for an experience much more akin to sitting in the concert hall.

As I hinted in the opening paragraph, the Brodmann F2 has a 'ten rows back' presentation, rather than 'front row stalls', which is fine by me. So, if you want to wallow in the beauty of Brahms' German Requiem, rather than be pinned to your seat by the massed musical forces, then the Brodmanns definitely deserve your serious attention. It's a different style of delivery to many conventional loudspeakers, and in some ways it reminded me of a good panel such as the Magneplanar 1.7, albeit with more scale, power, and authority, but retaining that sense of unforced ease. There is definitely something very beguiling about the way the F2s set about their music-making. Highly recommended. +

"The F2 exhibited little that drew attention in a negative way, which is why I've homed in on the bass a little more than it deserves. This is a very unassuming loudspeaker, which mostly gets on with the job of communicating music. It has an effortless and untiring sound. Sometimes, untiring is code for boring and bland. Here, it just denotes a speaker I'd be happy to listen to all day."

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way, three driver, floorstanding speaker with acoustic horn bass system

Driver complement: one Brodmann acrylic coated artificial silk dome tweeter, two sideways-firing Brodmann 125mm moulded paper and carbon-fibre bass/midrange units.

Crossover frequencies: 2.15 kHz

Frequency response: 36Hz – 25kHz ± 3dB

Impedance: 8 Ohms

Sensitivity: approx. 89dB/W/m

Dimensions (HxWxD): 1112x216x275mm

Weight: 19kg

Finishes: gloss piano black

Price: £4,795 per pair

Manufacturer: Brodmann Acoustics

URL: www.brodmann.at

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Oppo HA-1 desktop headphone amplifier/DAC/preamp

by Chris Martens



Best known for its high-performance, high-value universal disc players, Oppo has expanded into the high-end headphone and personal audio electronics marketplace. First came the firm's flagship PM-1 planar-magnetic headphones (reviewed in issue 115 and 116), and now we have the long-awaited HA-1 desktop headphone amplifier/DAC (£1,199), which effectively completes Oppo's premium headphone system.

The HA-1 borrows analogue and digital audio technologies from the firm's award-winning BDP-105-series disc players, but then ups the performance ante in several respects. To begin, the HA-1 provides a broader set of digital inputs and two sets of analogue inputs, giving owners outstanding flexibility in source selection.

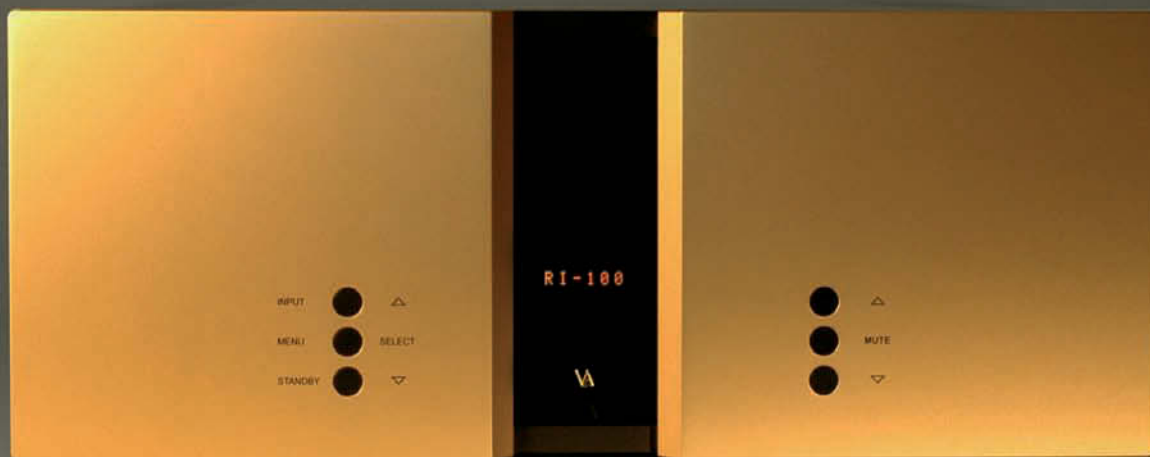
Also, like the BDP-105D, the DAC section of the Oppo HA-1 is based on the ESS 9018 Sabre32 Reference

DAC. This supports PCM formats up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD files ranging from DSD64 on up to DSD256. The HA-1 is supported native in Mac-based systems, but needs an Oppo-supplied driver set for use in Windows environments.

By design, Oppo's HA-1 supports a different and somewhat broader set of roles than its disc players. Thus, it can be used as a conventional high-end stereo DAC, as an analogue/digital preamplifier (complete with home theatre bypass), or as a high-powered and full-featured headphone amplifier/DAC sporting both digital and analogue inputs.

The analogue amplifier section of the HA-1 is a fully balanced design, based on discrete Class A circuitry. In exchange for that extra bit of heat Class A brings to the party, listeners enjoy extra precision and clarity, plus all of the high gain/low-noise benefits that fully balanced amplifier circuits confer. Oppo takes an unabashedly purist approach to its balanced circuit topology, emphasising that, "For digital ►

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Positive Feedback December 2013



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▶ audio, the signal runs in balanced mode all the way from the DAC to the output jacks.” Further, Oppo stresses that the HA-1’s, “balanced analogue input is kept intact, and (the) single-ended input is converted to balanced at the input buffer.”

The HA-1 provides both a single-ended headphone output (via a 6.35mm headphone jack) and a balanced headphone output (via a 4-pin XLR connector). In balanced mode the amp delivers output of 800 mW @ 600 Ohms or 2000 mW into 32 Ohms, while in single ended mode the amp delivers 200mW @ 600 Ohms or a 500mW @ 32 Ohms. Frequency response is quoted at 10 Hz – 200 kHz (+0B/-1dB) or 20 Hz – 20 kHz (+/-0.04dB).

Oppo’s HA-1 is offered either in brushed black or silver, with both versions offering the type of upscale anodizing and surface finishes rarely seen in affordable components. It also comes with a lovely, sturdy, and easy to use remote control whose metal-sleeved housing gives it a just-right touch of weight and heft in the hand. Moreover, the HA-1 provides an absolutely beautiful, colour user interface screen that is highly reconfigurable to suit the owner’s tastes.

The display supports basic setup and control functions, enabling users to choose from among digital or analogue inputs, to configure muting options, to select screen dimmer settings, to set fixed or variable DAC output modes, to enable or disable Home Theatre bypass settings, to choose between normal and high gain modes, and to set playback volume levels. Moreover, the HA-1 provides three primary display options: a text-only Settings Summary screen, a real-time bar-

graph type Spectrum display, or a display panel that depicts an old-school pair of VU meters. All in all, the display panel adds a welcome touch of polish and class to the HA-1, giving it the look and feel of a considerably more expensive product.

Importantly, the HA-1 comes with a first rate User Manual, which is worth taking time over. Sophisticated multifunction components such as the HA-1 merit a certain amount of study, if only so that owners learn how to take full advantage of the broad range of features and functions they support. In any event, the quality of Oppo’s documentation sets an example I wish more manufacturers would follow.

During my listening tests, I fed the Oppo HA-1 a variety of uncompressed standard and high-res PCM, DXD, and DSD digital audio files from a Lenovo-based music server running jRiver Media Center 19 software. Test headphones included Oppo’s own PM-1s; HiFiMAN’s HE-400i, HE-560, and HE-6; and the Abyss AB-1266. Finally, to assess the HA-1’s capabilities as an analogue/digital preamplifier, I used the HA-1 in my main reference system, where it drove a pair of AURALiC MERAK monoblock amps connected to a set of GoldenEar Triton One loudspeakers.

Considered as a headphone amp/DAC, the HA-1 offers a sound that is articulate, that offers very fine levels of resolution, and whose tonal balance is neutral without becoming ‘clinical’ or sterile. Where some past Oppo products have exhibited tonal balance shaded to a degree toward the colder or brighter-sounding end of the ‘neutrality sweet spot’, the HA-1 really plays things straight up the middle of the tonal ▶



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► balance fairway. This is very important because today's better headphones are exceedingly revealing and thus tend not to tolerate even trace amounts of excess brightness or sonic sterility very gracefully. Happily, the HA-1's neutral sound lets the natural warmth of good recordings shine through, producing gorgeous—yet not unduly lush-sounding—results with top-tier headphones.

The only very small caveat I would mention is that, because the amplifier section of the HA-1 features pure Class A circuitry, it is important to allow the unit to come up to full operating temperature before doing critical listening (this takes about a half hour, give or take a bit). This wait-for-warm-up precaution is, as many *Hi-Fi+* readers know, pretty much par for the course when using any solid-state Class A audio device. When cold the HA-1 can sound, well, a bit cold and 'stiff', but as it warms up it invariably begins to sing quite sweetly.

One interesting aspect of the HA-1 is that its own capabilities seem to expand to match the capabilities of the transducers with which it is used, which I consider one of the hallmarks of fine audio electronics components. For example, if you use the HA-1 with a very good but moderately priced headphone such as HiFiMAN's excellent HE-400i, the HA-1 will show the HE-400i in a favourable light, enabling the headphone to deliver very good (albeit not quite top-tier) levels of definition, resolution, and finesse. But, if you plug in a headphone with considerably higher performance limits, such as the Abyss AB-1266, the HA-1 unleashes whole new levels of textural refinement, dynamic agility, and sonic subtlety. After a time, I came to trust the fact that the HA-1 would let me hear all—or nearly all—that even the finest headphones have to offer.

As you might expect, the HA-1 makes a terrific partner for Oppo's fine PM-1 headphones, serving up more than enough

power to drive those headphones up to and beyond sane listening levels. It also has sufficient power to drive very inefficient headphones, provided that you use the HA-1's balanced outputs, which have considerably more dynamic 'oomph' than the single-end outputs do. If you're the sort of listener who, down deep, prefers a one-stop shopping experience, you could order up a pair of Oppo's PM-1 headphones (or perhaps the new cost-reduced PM-2 headphones) plus an HA-1 amp/DAC and live quite happily ever after.

However, the really interesting part is what happens when you match up the HA-1 with even higher performance transducers like the Abyss AB-1266. When you do that, the HA-1 serves up stunning layers of power, subtlety, and finesse, in the process showing that its sonic sophistication belies the unit's comparatively modest price. This point was driven home to me during a session where I used the HA-1 to power the Abyss AB-1266s as I listened to the powerful and passionate 'Eat, Drink' passage from Ståle Kleiberg's opera *David and Bathsheba* [2L, high-res DXD]. The passage shows an interchange between King David and Uriah that—with the Oppo's help—proves to be packed full of vocal power, nuance, and emotion, plus a quality of stage presence so vivid that it nearly takes one's breath away.

On *David and Bathsheba* the Oppo waded right in with the suave self-assurance of a much more expensive amp/DAC, letting listeners hear how Uriah is torn between a desire to please his King yet committed to honouring his men by declining the offer of dining with the King. The Oppo/Abyss combination captured, but did not overplay, the complex interplay of emotions revealed in both of the singers' voices, with the Oppo demonstrating power, nuance, and control comparable to—if not fully the equal of—far more costly components. ►

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Solid-state, class A, balanced-output, desktop headphone amplifier/preamplifier with high-resolution DSD and DXD-capable DAC.

Inputs: Digital: Bluetooth with aptX support, one AES/EBU input, two S/PDIF input (one optical, one coaxial), one asynchronous USB, and one mobile USB. Analogue: One stereo single-ended input (via RCA jacks), one balanced input (via XLR connectors).

Outputs: One single-ended headphone output (via 6.35mm headphone jack), one balanced headphone output (via 4-pin XLR connector), one stereo single-ended analogue output (via RCA jacks), and one stereo balanced analogue output (via XLR connectors). Other: 12V trigger signal in/outs.

Device drivers: None required for Mac environments, Oppo-supplied driver pack required for Windows environments.

Supported digital formats and sampling rates: S/PDIF and AES/EBU: PCM, 44.1 kHz – 192 kHz, 16 – 24-bit. Asynchronous USB: PCM, 44.1 kHz – 384 kHz, 16 – 32-bit; DSD: DSD64, DSD 128, and DSD 256 (native mode only). Mobile USB: PCM, 44.1- 48 kHz, 16-bit

Headphone amp power output: Single-ended: 200 mW @ 600 Ohms, 500 mW @ 32 Ohm, rated power. Balanced: 800 mW @ 600 Ohms, 2000 mW @ 32 Ohms, rated power. Maximum short-term power output allows generous headroom reserves

THD + Noise: DAC: <0.00056%. Preamp: <0.00071% single-ended, <0.00056% balanced. Headphone Amp: <0.0056% single-ended, <0.0018% balanced, both figures at rated power.

Signal to Noise: DAC: >113 dB single-ended, >115dB balanced. Preamp: >105 dB single-ended, >110dB balanced. Headphone Amp: >111 dB single-ended and balanced

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Weight: 5.9kg

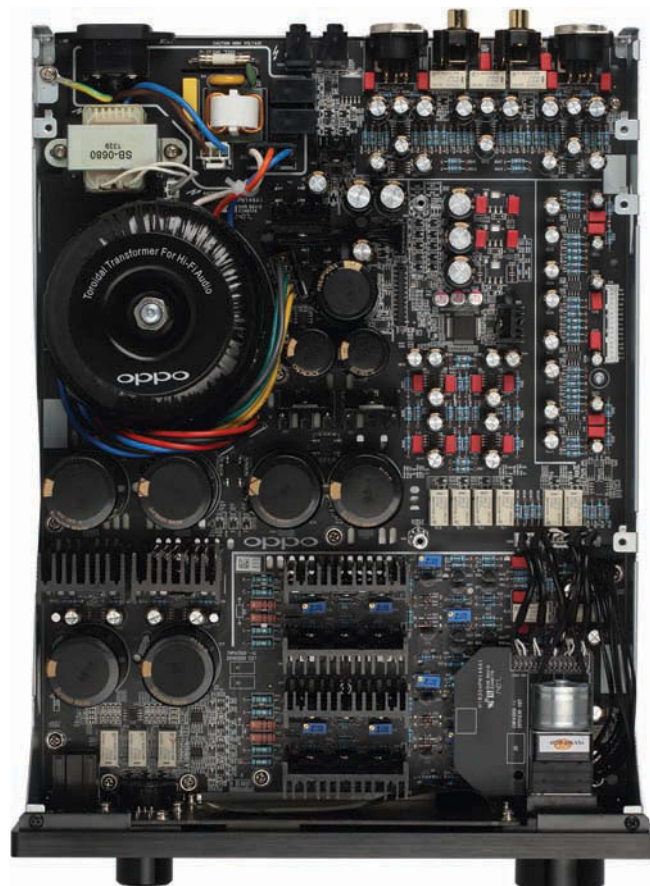
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► But an even bigger surprise came when I inserted the HA-1 at the front end of my reference system. From the outset, it was apparent that the HA-1 was very quiet and that it offered plenty of gain. I heard that same subtle, powerful, self-assured quality that had won me over during my headphone listening sessions. But I also heard one thing more: namely, an unexpected treble delicacy and ‘sweetness’ of the kind no previous Oppo component has been able to achieve in such an effortless way. As a result, the HA-1 found the elusive sweet spot between detail and resolution and graceful musicality of the sort that fosters long-term satisfaction.

Oppo has a long history of building well-respected high-value products, but in my view the HA-1 stands as the firm's best all-around effort to date. What is impressive is not just the number of roles the HA-1 can play (as a high-performance headphone amp, preamp, and DAC), but the astonishing sonic sophistication that it brings to each of those roles. If you have wanted near benchmark levels of performance for a fraction of what most benchmark components cost, look no further. In the best possible sense of the term, Oppo's HA-1 represents a true ‘point of diminishing returns’. +

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Cambridge Audio Aeromax 6 loudspeaker

by Jason Kennedy

Cambridge Audio has used balanced mode radiator (or BMR) mid/treble drive units in its loudspeakers since the launch of its Minx range, but it was the company's Aero models of 2013 that really caught the enthusiast's eye. Aero couples a BMR mid/treble unit with conventional bass drivers, but does so in a cabinet that shows its limitations all too readily for some listeners. The latest Aeromax range (comprising Aeromax 2 standmount and the Aeromax 6 floorstander tested here) was created to provide superior enclosures, but ended up bringing more to the party.

Let's backtrack a moment, though. Precisely what is a 'balanced mode radiator'? It's impossible to write this without a lot of TLAs (three-letter acronyms), but a BMR is a radical piece of engineering, which came out of the DMT ('distributed mode loudspeaker') technology project developed by NXT in 2001. Unlike DMT designs, the BMR is all about wide bandwidth, with a usable range from around 250Hz all the way to 22kHz.

The BMR not only offers wide bandwidth but also wide-angle uniform dispersion over its entire operating range. It achieves these goals by acting as a regular pistonic driver at low frequencies, where the action of a drive unit behaves in a uniform manner, but then switches to the distinctive 'ripple-motion' operating mode of DMT drive units at higher frequencies. A BMR driver also limits timing or phase issues simply by covering the broadest possible frequency range with just one driver. Even loudspeakers with concentric acoustic centres (such as Tannoy's Dual Concentric drive units) arguably cannot achieve the same reduction in timing and phase problems, because they are still using two drive units ▶



► that occupy the same loudspeaker frame or basket. Although a BMR driver starts as a piston and ends like ripples in a pond, it's all one drive unit, and the coherence it brings to the sound is clearly audible.

The theory behind balanced mode radiators is not easy to describe in print, but the technology is also hard to build, and harder still to put into a loudspeaker. This is one reason for the relatively small number of companies currently using the drive units (although both Naim and Rega also use the technology).

In the Aeromax 6, this BMR driver is a fourth-generation design, which isn't found in any other loudspeaker on the market. The drive unit is 46mm in diameter and has a flat radiator panel made out of a honeycomb structured material, the main improvement over the third-generation BMR used in the Aero. Essentially, it's a more uniform panel that has more consistent (or isotropic) properties, claimed to result in a smoother and more extended high frequency response.

As suggested earlier, the Aeromax models have a stiffer cabinet than the cheaper Aero designs, and the new Aeromax speakers look significantly better as a result. A plastic wrap veneer is replaced with black or white piano lacquer finishes, the cabling has been upgraded, and the cable terminals are more beefy. The changes are more than skin deep, as the cabinets have 'superior' bracing, which is additionally claimed to lock the drive units in place.

Both the cone drive units on the Aeromax 6 are bass drivers (or "high power subwoofers" as the website suggests), and despite appearances, this is a two-way loudspeaker. It's also a reflex design, with a front firing port on its near metre-high cabinet. The Aeromax 6 comes with a bolt-on plinth that leaves a shallow gap under the main box thanks to alloy spacers on each fixing. Threaded inserts are provided for the lethal-looking conical spikes or the more peace-loving press-in rubber feet. The overall fit and finish is exemplary for the price.

The Aeromax 6 produces wide yet precise soundstaging with decent temporal coherence and plenty of low-end clout. With some material, the reflex port makes itself heard in a thickening of bass notes, but to no greater extent than most front-firing designs. At the other end of the scale, the mid and top are clean and devoid of the usual crossover issues. This, combined with the inherent coherence of BMR drivers, makes for very pleasurable long-term listening. It's a fatigue-free driver that delivers plenty of level without complaint.

The stiffer cabinet is very beneficial, primarily because it no longer sounds boxy compared to its Aero stablemates; in fact, it is as inert as any speaker of the same size at anywhere near the price. Generally I would shy away from affordable floorstanders of this size because cabinet rigidity is usually compromised, but that's not the case here. The Aeromax 6 delivers an engaging and propulsive sound where the material requires; Goran Kajfes' *The Reason Why Vol. 1* [Headspin] is the sort of high energy, complex music that needs a loudspeaker that won't trip over itself when things get dense. This Cambridge fits the bill with power and speed to match that of the musicians. The double bass on 'A Touch of Trash' [Patricia Barber, *Modern Cool*, Premonition] is a bit heavy-footed here, but the voice and guitar work are portrayed very nicely.

I wondered if the bass might be tauter with a less powerful amp than a 150 watt ATC P1, so I tried a pair of 50 watt, Valvet Class A monoblocks. Their use did calm things down in the low end and brought a delicacy to the overall sound. This worked wonders for tone, which means the shine of the brass on Henry Threadgill Sextett's 'Bermuda Blues' [*You Know The Number*, Novus] is to die for and the band sounds tactile and real. The dynamics of the recording are brought to the fore with minimal effort and the three horns remain coherent despite the musical mayhem unfolding.

I tried using the supplied port bungs to tighten up the bass, and they tilted the balance upward a bit and smoothed out the low end without significantly restricting extension. However, the dynamic life went out of the music, and this proved too high a price to pay, so the bungs came out. Another trumpet proved once again how good the Aeromax 6 is with brass; the vitality, pace, and intensity that it can deliver without shouting at you is very enjoyable indeed.

A more appropriately priced amplifier, in the form of the Roksan K3 integrated, showed that the Aeromax 6 can also deliver very nice violin tone in the context of good image depth. This is a melodically strong amp and it delivered a fluent and finely detailed sound through the Cambridge Audio ►

"The mid and top are clean and devoid of the usual crossover issues. This, combined with the inherent coherence of BMR drivers, makes for very pleasurable long-term listening."



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Michael Fremer, *Stereophile* October 2014.

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► Aeromax 6. A similarly priced alternative is Rega's remarkable Elex integrated, which lets the loudspeaker deliver a more 'warts 'n' all' sound that communicates the essence of each performance extremely well. There's greater emotional power, even if the overall picture is less glossy.

The Cambridge Audio Aeromax 6 is both technologically and sonically a remarkable loudspeaker for the price. The incorporation of the latest generation of BMR driver gives it advantages that only the best can compete with, and unless you want a brighter sound, the competition does not look that strong at the price. There is a danger that serious enthusiasts will overlook the Aeromax 6 due to its low price and even brand snobbery, but that would be a mistake. In short, the Aeromax 6 is a remarkably sophisticated loudspeaker and one that many will find extremely enjoyable. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way, three-driver, floorstanding speaker with reflex enclosure.

Driver complement: One 43mm flat panel BMR mid/tweeter; two 165mm paper bass drivers.

Crossover frequencies: not specified.

Frequency response: 30Hz – 22kHz

Impedance: 8 Ohms nominal.

Sensitivity: 90dB/W/m

Dimensions (HxWxD): 980 x 240 x 344mm

Weight: 17kg/each

Finishes: black or white piano lacquer.

Price: £900 per pair

Manufacturer: Cambridge Audio

URL: www.cambridgeaudio.com

UK Distributor: Richer Sounds

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EAT E-Flat turntable

by Alan Sircom



One of the big problems facing 21st Century audio is a lack of long-term memory. A good product may have a life-cycle stretching a decade or more, but just a few short months after it's launched, it's all-but forgotten. In fact, there are modern classics that deserve continued coverage long after that first flush of reviews have subsided.

One such modern classic is the EAT E-Flat turntable, so named because of that extremely clever flat tonearm. This is a 10-inch woven Kevlar unipivot design, which is effectively extremely flat (naturally), very light, and exceptionally rigid, with a Sorbothane-damped adjustable counterweight, and an outrigger type anti-skate mechanism. Most modern cartridges will be accommodated with ease on this arm, but in the unlikely event you want to use the E-Flat with something truly old, weird, and (potentially) wonderful, there are even lighter or heavier arms available for 'outlier' compliances. Of course, having no arm-tube to speak of means there's nowhere to house the arm leads from cartridge to pivot, so they are held in place with industrial-strength sticky tape.

The E-Flat is not simply a great arm on an OK deck; the rest of the package is up to the task, too. The twin-motor design is elegantly positioned in the platter recess, and this

recess helps to make a high-mass platter take on a low-profile look. In fact, the style is reminiscent of one of the better direct drive designs from the 1980s. The platter itself is deliberately oversized at 13", critically damped and has a 'mat' made out of recycled vinyl albums. EAT adds a big shiny record clamp. The polished black plinth is wooden (no ringing, but not so obviously wooden as to make it look like an old fruit box) and the judicious use of Sorbothane in the deck and the adjustable feet help to keep it and the outside world that bit more separated. A two-speed, soft-button controller sits beneath the cartridge itself.

The turntable is incredibly easy to set up, even if it does arrive as a kit of parts. Jozefina Lichtenegger of European Audio Team is married to Heinz Lichtenegger of Pro-Ject Audio Systems and the two share a common goal of demystifying the set-up process. The instruction manual – although a little 'international' in translation at times – is thorough. However, it glosses over one of the joys of a unipivot; that you can mount ►



► the cartridge on the arm before you mount the arm to the arm-base. Yes, you need to align the cartridge, but it speeds the process along rapidly. You could also own several arms for different cartridges.

Be warned however, the 'kit of parts' is fairly formidable in terms of it arriving in a big wooden box. A fairly big change that happened after those early reviews was the big wooden box is now filled with plastic inserts instead of sheets of styrofoam, so the original criticism of the turntable coming with its own snowstorm is now completely unfounded. But the 'big wooden box' part remains.

I tried the turntable with two outstanding cartridges; the Benz Micro Gullwing SLR and the new Miyajima Labs Kansui (a fine stereo moving coil from a brand better known for its monophonic cartridges), both plugged into RCM Audio's THERIAA dual mono phono stage, and also used with the Allnic AUT-2000 Step-Up Transformer in place (using THERIAA in MM mode). This was fed into a Townshend Audio Allegri into a pair of Resolution Audio m100s and thence to a pair of Wilson Audio Duettes IIs. Alternately, all the electronics were replaced with a single Devialet 250! Cabling throughout was single-ended, using either Nordost Valhalla 2 or AudioQuest new Elements-series cables. The table in this case was from HiFi Racks, but the E-Flat didn't prove too table fussy. An SME Model 20 with an SME V was on hand as a benchmark.

I confess I had to overcome some bias in my own head with the concept of a flat tonearm. Conceptually, it's never going to be as rigid as a more conventional arm tube, and that must have an effect. I keep thinking of diving boards, for some reason. However, in use the arm proved that my fears were ill-founded, as the more important factor here is the reduction in arm resonance in audible regions of the frequency response. Life is a series of trade-offs, however, and I think many will like the way the E-Flat manages them. Of course, it's possible to compare it to arms that manage to reduce the effect of an arm tube, but when you do the sums, you end up spending more on one of those arms than you will on the whole E-Flat turntable and tonearm package.

The concept burns into your head, though. It's a good idea, when you start thinking it through, and just as importantly, it's one of those tonearm designs that doesn't fall into the 'me too' design school. I'd like to say it will become the first of many, but three years on since its launch, only the E-Flat arm and the Scheu Cantus keep the flat flag flying. I hope this is due to trying to perfect the next models, rather than poor sales. But the audio world sometimes fears change, and that I had to overcome bias, might mean bias is a stumbling block in the wider audio community. I hope this isn't the case because if you skip this because of its shape, you are missing a tonearm trick! ►



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► And what that trick does is make the midrange and treble just sound free and open. In fact, it was more like someone making the sound more 'legible', which is not a part of the standard audio lexicon, but works here. On an album like Tom Waits' *Asylum Years* [Asylum], and tracks like 'Burma Shave', Waits was slightly less growly and more jazz singer than in later works, but there is still a lot of lyricism that can be lost to an inarticulate tonearm, and this shows just how much lyricism can be swamped. His voice is not simply sonorous and rasping; between these two aspects there's an intensity and beauty that draws you closer to the music. Replace singer with instrument, or even orchestra and the same increased 'legibility' applies to the midband and upper regions. In some respects this is what people like in unipivot designs; it's just that the E-Flat arm gives you more of what people like in a unipivot. The fact it seems to deliver transient information with aplomb helps too; digging out a well worn copy of Rush's *2112* [Anthem] highlighted this fact thanks to Neil Peart's fast-paced tour round the tom-toms, which was delivered with pace and space to spare.

The limits of a unipivot are typically the frequency extremes, especially the bass. But it's here where the whole package helps. The big, meaty platter and chassis help deliver big, meaty bass. Not swamping the sound with bass, just giving it the sort of depth and energy that makes bass-heads nod along knowingly. Rush's Geddy Lee is a paradox here; cavernous low-end from his bass guitar coupled to that squeaky high-pitched wail, and the two are in dynamic balance here. Even the swirling, sweeping chilled out vibe of The Orb's 'Little Fluffy Clouds' [*The Orb's Adventures Beyond the Ultraworld*, Big Life] was presented in a bouncy, yet powerfully underpinned manner, which can be extremely difficult to get right.

I can't help but like what the E-Flat does to LPs. There is something inherently unforced and natural about the sound from the arm, and it sounds positively 'right'. Couple that to a precise, pitch-stable turntable that is built to last, and prodigious amounts of deep, potent bass, and it's not hard to see why we should hold to that 'modern classic' statement. EAT made a good thing here, and one that presages well for the future, because that flat arm is a perfect candidate for 3D printing. Three years on from its launch, this is still one of the best turntables at the price, and still comes highly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Full-size, twin motor turntable with flat Kevlar unipivot tonearm.

Rotational Speeds: 33 1/3 RPM, 45 RPM.

Supported Tonearm Length(s): 10 inch arm supplied.

Drive Mechanism: Belt driven via two AC motors.

Speed Control: Microprocessor control to illuminated buttons on plinth

Platter Diameter: 340mm.

Platter Weight: 6.9kg

Bearing Type: Teflon lined inverted bearing, with ceramic ball.

Plinth Configuration: Rigid plinth, no suspension system, leveling feet.

Dimensions (HxWxD): 400 x 500 x 145mm

Weight: 18.7kg

Price: £4,100

Manufacturer: European Audio Team

URL: www.europeanaudioteam.com

UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds

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Noble Audio Kaiser 10 custom-fit in-ear monitors

by Chris Martens



For those not familiar with the terminology, 'custom-fit in-ear monitors' (CIEMs) are very high performance in-ear headphones whose earpieces have been custom-moulded to fit the exact contours of their owners' ears. When properly made, CIEMs offer exquisite and obviously personalised fit, plus unbeatable levels of noise isolation, highly sophisticated driver arrays, and extensive customisation options in terms of physical appearance and design. Put all these factors together and it becomes easy to see why growing numbers of music lovers are now turning to CIEMs as their personal listening devices of choice. The Kaiser 10 (£999 or \$1,599) tested here is flagship of the California-based Noble Audio company, and is a fine example of the concept, as it is one of the most technically ambitious CIEMs on the market today.

Noble Audio is a relatively small and comparatively new firm, but in the year or so that Noble has been on the scene, the company has already made quite a name for itself among earphone cognoscenti. Some key principals in the firm are Dr. John 'Wizard' Moulton (Noble's president, co-owner, and head of sonic and visual design), Brannan Mason (Noble's co-owner and overseer of business matters and customer relations), and Kaiser Soze (a highly skilled earphone technician who teams with Dr. Moulton in development of new designs and in whose honour the Kaiser 10 is named) – yes, Kaiser Soze; but not *that* Kaiser Soze.

The Kaiser 10 (or K10) is a four-way, triple-bore, custom-fit in-ear monitor that employs an impressive array of ten (no, that's not a typo) balanced armature drivers per earpiece. The array comprises two bass drivers, two mid drivers, two mid/

► high drivers, two high frequency drivers, and two super high frequency drivers. The earpieces of all standard K10 models are custom-moulded of acrylic material and are beautifully finished. K10s ship with detachable, user-replaceable signal cables that are roughly 1m long and that use an industry-standard two-pin connector on each earpiece. The Kaiser 10s arrive in a sturdy, watertight, padded hard-shell carrying case that bears a Noble logo plate on the outside, with the owner's name etched into the top surface. On the inside, the case includes the K10s sealed bag, a pair of Noble-branded rubber straps (used to attach one's portable audio device or smartphone to a portable headphone amp or the like), a cleaning tool, and an owner's card.

The Kaiser 10 and most other Noble CIEM models can be ordered with simple on up through very elaborate visual design treatments, starting with monochrome-coloured acrylic earpieces, but ranging upward through three additional-cost design options: Personal Design (customers' personal design selections based on a Noble-provided menu of design elements), Wizard Reprints (£130 or \$200, featuring an extensive library of Moulton-created artwork motifs), and Wizard Design (£260 or \$400, featuring one-of-a-kind visual themes created by Moulton). Moulton has a rich imagination and a keen sense for striking designs, so somewhere within his catalogue of works is a design likely to strike your fancy.

For Kaiser 10 customers seeking even higher levels of customisation, Noble offer what it calls its Prestige-series design treatments. Unlike standard Kaiser 10s, Prestige-version K10's do not use moulded acrylic earpieces. Instead, their earpieces are precision cut from an extensive range of rare, beautiful, and exotic solid materials at a range of prices to match. A few examples of available Prestige options would be spalted tamarind wood, or colour-infused aerospace-style honeycomb or carbon-glass materials. The point is that Noble aims for the K10s to be a treat not only for the ears, but for the eyes.

Noble describes the K10 as being one of John Moulton and Kaiser Soze's proudest creations—one said to be, “seemingly unchallenged at every frequency and capacity.” More to the point, Noble claims these monitors offer, “Ten drivers working in unison as one (to create) what is likely the most coherent sound ever produced by a portable audio product.” Now, bold performance claims like these are easy to make while serious high-end sound is difficult to achieve, so one key question is whether the K10 can live up to its billing. Let's find out.

For my listening sessions, I fed the Kaiser 10s a variety of standard and high-res uncompressed digital audio files from a Lenovo-based music server running jRiver Media Center 19. Files were played through a variety of amp/DACs, with

the bulk of my listening done through the Chord Electronics Hugo and the iFi Micro iDSD. For comparison purposes, I had on hand several sets of competing CIEMs, including Westone ES-5's and Ultimate Ear's Personal Reference Monitors (PRMs) and In-Ear Reference Monitors (IERMs).

The K10s are not 'monitoring' CIEMs, in that they do not provide (or claim to provide) ruler-flat frequency response. Instead, the Kaiser 10 offers slightly elevated bass response, neutral midrange and upper midrange response, and subtly subdued highs. Thus, the K10's sound reminded me of the sonic presentation of certain loudspeakers that offer a 'mid-hall' listening perspective, as opposed to a 'front-row centre' or ultra-close-mic'd perspective.

While the Kaiser 10s do enjoy a certain amount of bass lift, their low end does not sound slow, sluggish, bloated, or painfully overblown. On the contrary, they offer excellent bass pitch definition, detail, transient speed, and dynamics. Thus, the listener is treated to a mildly 'zoomed-in' view of the low-frequency content in his or her favourite recordings—a view that reveals richly textured and densely layered pieces of important bass information of the sort that often gets lost or goes under-represented with most earphones and speaker systems.

To grasp the K10's impressive low-end capabilities, it would help for you to hear them powered by a good amp/DAC and playing the album *Planet Drum* from former Grateful Dead percussionist Mickey Hart [Rykodisc]. The album is a veritable treasure trove of beautifully recorded percussion sounds, many with deep low-frequency content, but a particularly revealing ►

“Noble describes the K10 as being one of John Moulton and Kaiser Soze's proudest creations – one said to be ‘seemingly unchallenged at every frequency and capacity’. More to the point, Noble claims these monitors offer, ‘Ten drivers working in unison as one (to create) what is likely to be the most coherent sound ever produced by a portable audio product.’ Now, bold claims like these are easy to make while serious high-end sound is difficult to achieve.”

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► track is 'Temple Caves'. 'Temple Caves' features an elaborate mix of mid and high-pitched percussion instruments set against the backdrop of an extremely low-pitched drum whose fundamentals range all the way down into pipe organ territory. Through the K10s you not only hear those deep fundamentals, but also the drum's fast-rising and thunderously powerful attack, the 'skin sounds' of the drum head, the shuddering envelope of notes sustaining within a reverberant space, and the slow decay of notes gradually fading away. With the K10, then, bass is no longer vague low-frequency stuff happening down below the 'real' music, but rather it takes its rightful place as part of the main musical event.

The midrange of the K10 is, as mentioned above, reasonably neutral in its balance, but what I did not mention is that it is also uncommonly expressive and dynamically alive. By 'dynamically alive' I mean that the Kaiser 10s not only take big, explosive dynamic moments in their stride, but that—perhaps more importantly—they get all the small and subtle dynamic shifts right, too. For an enticing example of these qualities in action, try listening to the song 'Poison & Wine' from The Civil Wars' *Barton Hollow* [Sensibility Music]. The

Civil Wars is a folk/pop duo featuring vocalists Joy Williams and John Paul White who are justly famous for their uncannily precise, evocative, and tightly synchronised harmonies. From Williams and White we hear something very rare and beautiful, which is two distinct voices seemingly actuated by one shared musical mind. Thus, the singers start and stop phrases exactly at the same time and track flawlessly with one another through subtle and often intricate shifts in inflection and dynamic emphasis. The K10s faithfully allow the listener access to the deep, inner secrets of Williams and White's performances, especially on the haunting chorus refrain, "Oh I don't love you but I always will..." This ability to probe the inner depths of recordings is one of the main things that potentially makes the K10s so desirable.

As I stated near the outset, the Kaiser 10 doesn't offer monitoring-grade levels of tonal neutrality and in my assessment this is most apparent in the treble region, where the Nobles apply a deliberate touch of treble roll-off. Ordinarily, such a voicing choice could and probably would make for a slightly subdued or even dull-sounding presentation, but for the fact that the K10's highs, though somewhat restrained in ►

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Four-way, triple-bore, ten-driver custom-fit in-ear monitors.

Driver complement: Ten balanced armature-type drivers per earpiece, comprising two bass drivers, two mid drivers, two mid/high drivers, two high frequency drivers, and two super high frequency drivers.

Frequency response: Not specified.

Impedance: <35 Ohms

Noise isolation: 26 dB

Distortion: Not specified.

Sensitivity: Not specified.

Accessories: Detachable ~1m signal cable with industry-standard 2-pin connector, cleaning tool, rubber straps, owners card, and rugged watertight hard-shell carrying case.

Weight: Not specified.

Warranty: Two (2) years, parts and labour

Price: £999 or \$1,599, and up. Pricing varies with the exact levels and types of custom finishes ordered. Note: Noble recently announced a universal-fit version of the K10, called the Kaiser 10U, also priced at £999 or \$1,599.

Other: Noble offers a special Ownership Transfer Service where, for a £150 or \$250 fee, it will remanufacture earpieces for an existing set of Noble CIEMs to fit a third party owner who has purchased a set of Noble CIEMs second hand. To our knowledge, no other CIEM maker offers such a program.

Manufacturer information: Noble, 19 W. Carrillo St., Santa Barbara, CA 93101

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US URL: www.nobleaudio.com

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Japanese URL: www.nobleaudio.jp

► level, are nevertheless beautifully extended and detailed. For a terrific example of how this works in practice, go back to the previously mentioned track 'Temple Caves' from *Planet Drum*, this time paying careful attention to the high harmonics of the higher-pitched percussion instruments and also to the almost subliminal high-frequency reverberant sounds captured in the recording. What you discover is that the highs, though pulled back in the mix to some degree, remain precisely (even sumptuously) detailed and exhibit admirable extension, thus conveying an uncanny sense of the 'air' surrounding the instruments. What is more, this high-frequency 'air' helps give the presentation a wonderfully three-dimensional quality.

Granted, listeners who favour monitoring-grade tonality might prefer more neutrally voiced CIEMs, such as Noble's 4C or 4S models. However, taken on their own terms the K10s have about them a terrifically seductive quality that tends to win over critical listeners in spite of themselves. I found that, after listening to the K10s for an hour or so, it was actually surprisingly difficult to switch back to competing 'neutral' CIEMs because, by comparison, they seemed to lack natural musical richness and warmth and to sound a bit sterile, mechanical, and shrill.

Finally, we come to the quality of sonic coherency. Stated simply, Noble's claims regarding coherency are the real deal—not hype, meaning that John Moulton and Kaiser Soze have somehow compelled ten frequency-specialised balanced armature drivers to sound like one highly capable full-range drive unit. As you listen through the K10s, then, there is an underlying quality of consistency about their presentation, which means that in each frequency band the flagship Noble CIEMs offer more than ample levels of resolution, definition, dynamic headroom, and transient speed. Not surprisingly then, textures remain consistent from top to bottom. Partly as a result of this coherency and partly as a result of Noble's voicing choices, the Kaiser 10s do an exceptional job of rendering spatial cues in the music and to foster a sense of 'total immersion' in the music at hand. Not many earphones or CIEMs can do true 3D soundstaging, but the K10s can and it is delight to hear.

By way of summing up, let me concede in advance that the Kaiser 10s won't suit every taste (and, truth to tell, I initially wondered if they would suit my own). The K10 might not be the CIEM of choice for in-studio monitoring applications (where the emphasis is more on knowing the exact contents of a given recording than on enjoying the music at hand). But for purposes of relaxing and listening for pure enjoyment, allowing oneself to become complete caught up in the complex, intoxicating beauty of music, Noble Audio's Kaiser 10 is very tough to beat. +

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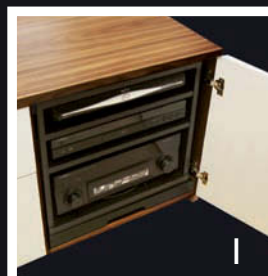
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Eclipse TD-M1 desktop system

by Nicholas Ripley

The humble desktop loudspeaker often gets short shrift among audio enthusiasts. Our traditional obsession with a stereo system in the listening room now has a challenger in the headphone and CIEM environment, but there's little drive to improve the loudspeakers that flank our desktop and laptop computers. Eclipse TD – never a company to follow the herd – is one of the rare exceptions with its £999 TD-M1.

In great fairness to Eclipse, the TD-M1 is not a typical desktop loudspeaker system. Granted it is small and has built-in (20W, Class D) amplification, but similarities end there. The rear-ported, single-driver pods sit on a levered foot, which doubles as a combination DAC, AirPlay, and amplifier module, all rolled into one. As ever with Eclipse loudspeakers, the 80mm driver is a 'full-range' design (as in, it covers the frequency range from treble to bass on a single driver, rather than this being a single drive unit that can cover the 20Hz-20kHz range in one). This little drive unit is not attached to the loudspeaker baffle at all, and is instead mounted rigidly to a rear mass anchor system, which makes a vibration-isolated three point contact to the mid-point of the speaker's side view. In basic terms, the loudspeaker drive unit does what it needs to do while the loudspeaker cabinet does what it needs to do, and the two don't interact. Naturally, with just the one drive unit, there is no need for a crossover network, and the amplifier inside the base unit could be considered active as a result.

A series of touch-sensitive lights give the user a basic indication of volume level, but this is not related and not matched to the



volume control on the computer itself. This is because a computer's output is best served flat-out, and any adjustment is performed at the amplifier end, rather than risk less than bit-perfection from the connected device. The DAC itself shows just how serious Eclipse takes the project: it's a non-oversampling, 24-bit, 192kbps capable DAC, the kind of thing you would normally find in crushingly expensive, hand-made digital products.

I work from home, and most of that work is spent in front of a screen. It's not possible to work with headphones, because I would be forever removing ►

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► them to answer my landline or mobile phone (although this would screen the telemarketers...), so I'm a prime candidate for good desktop audio. What I didn't realise is how much pleasure I would extract from good desktop audio. What I also didn't realise is just how easy it is to find distraction techniques when the audio quality is this good. YouTube becomes a significant time-vampire, luring you onto the rocks of spending hours listening to hitherto-unexplored classical concerts (and strange, lurid K-Pop). Spotify becomes a constant companion, and the sonic benefits of a recent upgrade Audirvana over iTunes are readily apparent, because the TD-M1's are more than capable of resolving the differences between the two formats.

It's perhaps unsurprising that a point source loudspeaker gives good soundstaging. However, what is surprising is just how good this speaker system is at imaging under the most hostile of conditions in the domestic world; situated to the sides of a whirring, noisy, and physically large computer-sized box smack, bang in the middle of the place where soundstages get undermined. You get a feeling of true, unforced, three-dimensional sound, the kind you normally get with an extremely carefully manicured audio system. This came over well on the *Recomposed by Max Richter* versions of Vivaldi's Four Seasons [DG]; although the looped, treated strings are folded into the mix, they have their own physical space in the soundstage. The whole effect is atmospheric, if a little 'film-scorey'. This track also highlights the tonal accuracy of the TD-M1 – because Vivaldi is so well known, this mixed up version can sound broken and unsettling unless the tonality is absolutely right, at which time the music becomes precisely the kind of thing you might have expected Vivaldi to do with his music today.

Of course, bass is not on offer here. In fact, it's the frequency extremes that are inherently the weak spot of any small, single-driver loudspeaker like the TD-M1, but it's the lack of bass that's perhaps the most obvious shortcoming. Curiously, I think this to be a good thing all told. The TD-M1 is more about precision than depth, and the bass roll-off is steep, but extremely well controlled. In the confines of an ultra-near-field environment (I don't need to outstretch my arms to touch the loudspeakers), it's easy for too much bass to overreach, adding boom and bloom to an otherwise crisp, fast, and clean sound. Less really is more here, although if my musical tastes ran more to those of the organ enthusiast or reggae fan, I may not have been so enamoured with the curtailed frequency response.

As above, so below, and the roll-off in the LF exists to a lesser extent in the HF. This, coupled with the non-oversampling DAC, can make for a treble that is at once exceptionally precise, detailed, and occasionally a little too forthright. Once again, this comes down to musical choices; Elgar's Symphony No 1 [Vernon Hadley, LPO, EMI] recorded in Abbey Road for the Classics for Pleasure series in 1979 (don't knock it, it's a fine recording) was absolutely sublime, but 'I Bet You Look Good on the Dancefloor' by Arctic



Monkeys [*Whatever People Say That I Am, That's What I'm Not*, Domino] played through the TD-M1 exhibited a touch more spitchiness than I'm used to. While the track has raw charm and a great sense of fun, it can easily sound ragged. Played through the TD-M1, the track just manages to stay the right side of exuberant, but the rough edges of the raw, guitar-based music, and poor 'Loudness War' recoding techniques with heavy-handed signal compression might go some way to explain a sound that gets brash and raw.

I don't want to overstate this, however, and my relatively limited portfolio of such recordings prevents me from further investigation. It didn't ►

► warrant further investigation, too, because at no time did anything detract or derail the listener from the goal of listening to and enjoying music. Our job is to be observational, rather than objectionable, or sceptic rather than cynic, and to overstate the shortcomings of the TD-M1 crosses over from the first class to the second. The TD-M1 is extremely revealing, and doesn't suffer foolish recording gladly, so I don't think it should be criticised for being good at high-fidelity in a high-fidelity context.

Stating the obvious, I'm mostly describing the TD-M1 used in the way I mostly used it. There is a lot more to the Eclipse TD-M1, though. I can see it being used flanking a TV for someone who discovered there is more to life than soundbars. I can also see it being used by those with no desire to play music through a wired-in computer, with AirPlay speaking from iDevice to speaker system perfectly. Reception, from the stubby aerial on the rear of the main speaker, is very good, although it's not one for establishing a connection at extreme distances; somehow,

I doubt this will ever be a demand, and the joy of AirPlay here usually falls to being less than about 3m from the loudspeakers. Besides, if you aren't able to AirPlay tracks from your iPhone, while less than 3m from the TD-M1, I'd be more worried about things more catastrophic than dropped signals. AirPlay sounds particularly fine through the TD-M1, paradoxically by seeming to limit the top-end honesty slightly. I found any major differences in sound through both wired and wireless to fall within a 'good enough for government work' catch-all. Which makes this one of the better AirPlay installations I've encountered. And while it's currently uniquely Apple-oriented, by the time this review goes to press, it will be just as friendly toward Android devices, too.

Truth is, I've really enjoyed my time with the Eclipse TD-M1, to the point where I'm reluctant to give them back in a hurry. Desktop loudspeakers are not for everyone, but conventional loudspeakers in a living room are not for everyone anymore either, and I suspect there are more people out there today for whom the TD-M1 is a more acceptable proposition than the full-scale audio system. This is just a good, fun, active loudspeaker that just happens to be designed for the desktop. Try it, you might find it changes the way you listen to music. And for once, that isn't an exaggeration! Highly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Ported single-drive active desktop loudspeaker with DAC

Drive unit: 80mm glass-fibre, full range cone

Frequency Response: 70Hz-30kHz

Input: Wi-Fi, USB B (for PC/Mac), USB A (for iPhone/iPod touch), and analog 3.5mm stereo mini jack

Amplifier power: 2x 20W, Class D

DAC: non-oversampling DAC to 24-bit, 192kHz precision

Impedance: 10kΩ

Dimensions (WxHxD): 155x242x219mm

Weight: 4kg

Finishes: Black, White, Silver

Price: £999 per pair

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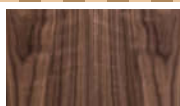
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Martin Colloms. HiFi Critic

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This is a cracking set of cables - Townshend may be rather coy about the Fractal process itself but the benefits of cryogenic cooling are already well established just as the elegant solid-core conductor and air/PTFE methodology ticks all the right boxes.

The cable sound deliciously smooth and detailed, promoting the kind of easy-listening inky-black backgrounds typically associated with the best audio systems. Go on, treat yourself!

Paul Miller. Hi Fi News



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Russell K Red 100 loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

Russell K loudspeakers is the brainchild of Russell Kauffman, a man well known in the UK audio world. Russell has been involved in many of the country's best-known loudspeaker brands in one capacity or another for more years than any of us would care to remember, although his most recent client was working as the designer for Morel loudspeakers. Perhaps his best-known design there is the Fat lady, an intriguing three-way, four-driver flagship tower speaker that looks a little like a, erm, fleshy female.

However, the course of the international design does not run smooth, and with Morel based in Israel and Kauffman based in the Home Counties of England, the relationship gradually came to an end. It was time for Kauffman to carve his own niche, creating a line of loudspeakers that bear (most of) his name. The Red 100 Precision Audio Loudspeaker was the first product from the brand, although a smaller Red 50 bookshelf quickly followed, and yet more models are in development. The design stays in the UK, although manufacture moves to Poland, where quality speaker builders still exist in good number.

This preamble would be unimportant were the Red 100 just another two-way, front ported standmount. Looks can be deceptive however, and the loudspeaker has a lot going on under the skin. Russell Kauffman's design draws on some elements of the classic BBC research and development that gave us loudspeakers like the LS3/5a. In particular, he agrees with the concept that a thick-walled loudspeaker cabinet adds coloration that can be heard in a thickening of vocals. By using 16mm MDF, except for the 19mm thick front baffle, the Red 100 manages to retain a lot of the benefits of a thin-walled cabinet. However, instead of using bitumen pads for damping, Russell Kauffman just goes for low cabinet flexing, thanks to two braces above and below the woofer. These feature a number of apertures that act as tuned acoustic loading. This makes for an energetic cabinet when music is playing, but one that dissipates energy quickly when it isn't.

The cabinet is totally undamped, without even a glimpse of BAF wadding, foam, or bitumen-lined walls. If you unscrew the bass driver, you are met with bare MDF walls. The reason for the absence of damping in the Red 100 is that Kauffman suggests its action is never even across the full frequency response and acts to slow down the speed of sound



travelling within the cabinet. However, he's also quick to point out that this doesn't mean those with damped cabinets (which is probably about 90% or more of loudspeaker users) should experiment with removing that damping; a designer engineers a cabinet anticipating the acoustic load that comes with the damping used, and changing that damping messes up those loading calculations, and messes up the sound of the loudspeaker in the process.

The drive units are a well-made 165mm doped paper cone mid-woofer and a 25mm soft dome tweeter, both using high quality ferrite magnets (rather than rare-earth materials) and Faraday-distortion cancelling copper rings. Kauffman ►

► eschews the current trend for metal, plastic, or diamond cone and dome materials, for a more tried and trusted approach, because they both measure well and sound good. The crossover, however, is a little less conventional. It's a 12dB per octave slope, crossing over at 2.2kHz. The norm here is to go for reverse phase at the crossover point, but by deliberately shifting the textbook crossover values, the Red 100 retains crossover phase integrity, all the while keeping the drivers connected in positive phase.

The component count in the signal path is very low in this crossover; just one component per drive unit. However, the tweeter is attenuated by a deliberately misaligned Zobel network (instead of the conventional L-Pad), while the low frequency inductor isn't the normal air-cored type, but instead an enclosed field ferrite core. Theoretically, this is an odd choice over the air-cored inductor, because this type of coil is very frequency dependent and has to be matched to the pass band of the crossover design. However, Kauffman has custom a UK supplier build to his precise specification. The 'enclosed field' part also stops a ferrite core from acting like a tiny performance-destroying radio transmitter.

This crossover network has an added bonus to the Red 100. Although it has a relatively low sensitivity rating of 86dB, the design of the crossover is such that it makes the loudspeaker an extremely benign load. Although it might not raise the roof in doing so, it's the kind of loudspeaker that can work with low-output single-ended triode designs.

Although the Red 100 is front ported, the reflex port itself is tuned down to 35Hz, so instances of the port making that 'chuff-chuff' sound along with bass notes are functionally eliminated. Russell K wanted his speaker to behave almost like a sealed box in terms of bass precision and a reflex design in terms of bass depth. Of course, everyone would like this, but the Red 100 gets closer than many. That front port also means the Red 100 is relatively flexible as to placement. It needs about 30cm from the rear wall and a slight toe-in, but the loudspeaker really isn't fussy. In terms of stands, it works best with very rigid, middling-mass designs (the company has a prototype in the works), and it is extremely flexible in terms of amplifier compatibility.

The sound of loudspeakers has changed in recent years, and not necessarily for the better. The Red 100 is one of the exceptions. OK, so there are few 'bad' loudspeakers today, but there are a lot of 'so-so' sounding loudspeakers that are about as exciting as boiled vegetables, and the Red 100 is very definitely not one of them. There are several reasons for increasingly bland loudspeakers; CAD programs have become so elegant you can almost build a loudspeaker

"The sound of loudspeakers has changed in recent years, and not necessarily for the better. The Red 100 is one of the exceptions. OK, so there are few 'bad' loudspeakers today, but there are a lot of 'so-so' sounding loudspeakers that are about as exciting as boiled vegetables."

without ever having to listen to it, a lot of companies started playing it very safe when the world turned to iPods (and safer still when the global financial walls came tumbling down in 2008), and the shocking state of many signal compressed recordings from the last two dozen years have all worked against making an exciting sounding loudspeaker. I'd add the 'exciting sounding loudspeaker' is often mistaken for an 'uneven sounding loudspeaker': often, the reverse is true.

What the Red 100 does is expose the music without necessarily exposing the dark side or music replay. Yes, if you have a very thin, very bright modern recording, it will play that accurately (otherwise it wouldn't be a loudspeaker; it would be a filter), but it makes that music fun to listen to. All reviewers have their stock pieces of music (I often don't mention these, but use them universally; if I listed them in every review, the magazine would read like a stuck record), and it's a sure sign of something good going on if you end up not focusing on them as test tracks and listen to the music, and the tracks that follow. I found this on albums like *Rare on Air Vol 1* [Mammoth], which I've been using for nigh on 17 years as a day-in, day-out test, and found myself going past my regular track four ('My Drug Buddy', by Evan Dando and Juliana Hatfield – which ages it) and getting as far as track 12 ('The Captive Heart', by Brendan Perry) before coming to my senses and reaching for the next test disc. Then I did it again, this time with *Rutter: Requiem and Five Anthems* [Reference Recordings]. I played the whole album that time. And again, each time my Moleskine remained entirely blank as I switched out of reviewer mode and into 'I like this, what's next?' mode.

Finally digging deep to dredge up those critical faculties, I think the reason the Red 100 works so well is it combines the twin demands of timbre and tempo exquisitely. The loudspeaker has good soundstaging – as befits a small, but wide-baffled box – and it preserves that staging as you move ►

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way, two-driver stand-mount monitor with front-ported bass reflex enclosure.

Driver complement: 25mm soft dome tweeter, one 165mm doped paper mid-bass driver.

Frequency response: 35Hz-20kHz

Crossover frequency: 2.2kHz (2nd order)

Impedance: eight ohms nominal

Sensitivity: 86dB/W/m

Dimensions (HxWxD): 400 x 260 x 270mm

Weight: 10kg

Finishes: Walnut Burl veneer, Piano Black, High-Gloss White, all possible paint colours.

Price (excluding stands): £1,199 per pair (std finish), £1,399 (wood), £1,599 (piano gloss), £79 (optional grille)

Manufacturer: Russell K Ltd

URL: www.russellk.co.uk

UK Distributor: Prometheus A.E. LTD

URL: www.Prometheus-ae.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)7981 304488



► around the room. It also has excellent detail; perhaps not the separation of a three-way, but deceptively deep, taut bass for a small box. And it's both in the pocket and in the groove, when you play anything with a beat.

I keep coming back to a famous name in audio's past with the Red 100, and I can't quite work out why. That loudspeaker is the Epos ES14, and it is still considered in many quarters as the acme of loudspeaker design. The audio world is littered with people who for some reason sold their ES14s and almost immediately bitterly regretted the decision. While the original Epos designer Robin Marshall and Russell Kauffman are old friends, I think the reasons for the connection run deeper. It's the bass. The ES14 had the simplest crossover possible, and the bass driver was run straight from the power amplifier. The Red 100 has just one component in the signal chain between amp and driver, and coupled with the lack of internal damping, it makes the Russell K loudspeaker as unconstrained as its spiritual forefather.

Most of all though, what is really likeable about the Russell K Red 100 is that it's easy to like, and yes that sounds like circular logic. But here's how it works; a lot of loudspeakers at this price are like the kind of people with which you might

want to share a cerebral discussion about the early works of Sibelius. The Red 100 is that guy who's so passionate about Sibelius, you catch his enthusiasm, and move to Finland. You know it's going to be a good evening with the Red 100; there may be tears, some red wine will be spilled, and someone's probably going to wake up dazed, confused, and pregnant. It's a Byronic figure in a world of actuaries and accountants. OK, so not everyone's going to like that. Some like their world grey and unassuming and bland. So be it.

We try to distance the designer from the product in 21st Century audio, because everything has gone a bit 'corporate'. But in the Russell K, that's impossible. You buy the Red 100 because you buy into Russell Kauffman's ideas about the way a loudspeaker is supposed to sound. Although this is predicated on good engineering practice, he's prepared to go off the map as and when the sound demands it. His take is one of science as empiricism and observation, rather than rigid adherence to the *status quo*, and the Red 100 loudspeakers sound all the better for that. The Red 100 is a good speaker, but more importantly it's a good idea, and they are rare. Not an easy speaker to classify in audio terms, but highly recommended, and fabulous value to boot. +



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AGAINST

- only available in black

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



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Audiomica Europa Ultra Reference interconnects and Genimides Ultra Reference loudspeaker cable

by Steve Dickinson

If we're honest, when we describe a cable as 'very good' or even 'excellent', all we're really saying is that it spoils the performance of the system less than the alternatives.

Whether you agree or disagree with that premise, occasionally you may get to hear a product, whether a cable or anything else, which recalibrates your expectations. The Europa and Genimides Ultra Reference products from Audiomica form a part of that recalibration process.

Recalibration on this scale is comparatively rare now; most products are at least 'competent' these days, sometimes even 'decent'. OK, so 'good' tends to cost a bit, and 'very good' or 'excellent' are seldom less than expensive. So hearing a pair of products that redefine what you thought was possible, and which don't require the sale of a kidney, or indenturing your first-born child into slavery, especially in a sector of audio where 'expensive' can mean 'staggeringly expensive', is something to savour.

Even those of us who believe that cables form a fundamental component of a well thought out system can balk and blanch at the ultra-high-end pricing of some übercables. So, it is refreshing to come across a cable brand that can put a marker down on the outer edges of the performance envelope, at a price attainable by an audiophile, rather than an oligarch. Audiomica Laboratories is barely known outside its native Poland and has only comparatively recently begun making inroads into export markets. No doubt its location plays a part in the cost equation, but whatever the reason, it is high time the brand crossed more people's radar screens.

The Audiomica range is extensive and the prices are, by and large, at the sensible-to-aspirational end of the market. The Europa and Genimides Ultra Reference cables use pure silver conductors, FEP dielectric material, and the



► designs show great attention to detail in the application of screening and connectors. If you're not a fan of pure silver cables, stay with me because I wasn't either, before I tried these cables in my system. Audiomica appears to eschew directional markings so, having had a quick listen both ways round, I picked one, marked the upstream ends for consistency, then stuck with it for the duration of the review.

The cables sit one notch down from the very top of the Audiomica range; a 1m pair of Europa Ultra Reference interconnects costs £1,330, while a 3m pair of Genimides Ultra Reference loudspeaker cables is a modest (by high-end standards) £1,800. These prices may put the Audiomica cables in an odd position in the marketplace: too expensive for many to contemplate, yet too cheap to be taken seriously by those in search of the best available. That would be a shame, because these cables are truly remarkable, and capable of delivering a level of performance from a system which I think it would be very hard to exceed, and not just 'for the price'.

Sometimes, you don't realise there is a problem until you hear a product which doesn't have the problem. The Audiomicas are simply better at getting out of the way. They seem to excel at the important stuff, like pitch, timing, and dynamics, largely by not impeding those qualities to any appreciable extent. They do this while also delivering levels of subtlety, texture, and detail, which amply complement those most vital of attributes.

Taking the Europa first, I was struck by the degree of intensity to music conveyed by this interconnect. Short piano runs in Michiel Borstlap's playing on 88 [Michiel Borstlap Trio, Challenge Records] stop being mere noodly flourishes and gain a real sense of purpose. Suddenly, you are much more aware what the players are about; music gains in shape and sense of direction. Any given line is deliberate and considered; any emphasis is 'just-so', because that's what was intended. The performance is simply more skilful.

"These prices may put the Audiomica cables in an odd position in the marketplace: too expensive for many to contemplate, yet too cheap to be taken seriously by those in search of the best available. That would be a shame"

This is partly down to timing, in its most fundamental sense of when the various bits of the signal reach your ear. There is 'rightness' about the timing, as delivered through the Europa. Percussion, of which there is plenty on 88, suddenly makes much more sense, hitherto random bangs and crashes coalesce into inventive and skilful playing; the trio gel together as never before and the effect is a compelling, propulsive performance that carries the listener along with the music-making. The opening bass and sax riff on Jennifer Warnes' classic version of 'Famous Blue Raincoat' [Famous Blue Raincoat, RCA] catches your interest and draws you in, and there is a greater sense of storytelling to the vocals. The song goes from very good to great. It was always great, of course, but now it's obviously great.

And so it goes on: the usually ebullient 'Kramat' from Abdullah Ibrahim's *Ekapa Lodumo* [Tip Toe] is even more joyous and exuberant. From the moment the NDR big band joins the solo flute opening, there is an event taking place in front of you. It's a big and impressive performance, and has been rendered so by many a big and impressive system in its time but which, for all their size and impressiveness, have rarely conveyed the way in which the various different elements combine into something quite as marvellous as this. 'Black and Brown Cherries' from the same album conveys a real sense of conversation between the piano and the horns. The piece builds in emphasis without becoming strident or over-excited, because the band, pianist, and percussion remain locked together.

Interestingly, this sense of heightened lucidity is not imposed on the music from outside. Sometimes when auditioning cables it is hard to escape a feeling that a cable is keeping a lid on things in the interests of coherence. Here, in contrast, you sense that the music is more dramatic and interesting because everything has relaxed into its proper place, any nervousness or edginess has gone, as has any sense of overt 'control', to be replaced by a natural ease and freedom – truly wonderful for conveying a big jazz band at the top of its game.

The Genimides loudspeaker cable behave entirely like the interconnects, suggesting a commonality of design. Dynamics are not simply big and bold, but expressive and decisive: not dynamics for dynamics' sake, but part of the essence and vitality of the music. Moreover, there is never any worry that these dynamics will overwhelm proceedings, even when the system is playing at my customary neighbour-baiting levels, which can occasionally trip up a system. The speaker cable lets timing stay resolutely solid, instruments play together from deepest bass to tinkliest triangle, so that it is easy to get into that zone where you lose yourself in the music and stop listening to the sound it makes. ►

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► Borstlap's piano articulation is now exquisitely judged and controlled, contributing to the sheer insistence of the music, which derives its sense of forward motion not just from the beat, but from an awareness that each phrase has a destination, a way to carry the listener along to the next line. The countless little dynamic pushes and inflections all add their own unobtrusive little contribution to the whole, and the Audiomicas are instrumental in allowing the system to get all this information into the room, intact.

Tom Waits voice on 'Georgia Lee' from *Mule Variations* [ANTI-] is truly affecting. When he sings, "Why wasn't God watching?" you can sense the heartbreak. Most systems render this as schmaltz, but the Audiomicas gave me pathos.

Taken together, the Audiomica interconnects and loudspeaker cables allow the system to breathe freely with little sense of constraint. Yet this isn't a licence to run riot, everything just takes its place and doesn't intrude where it isn't wanted. It's a freedom from smear, hash, bloom, or other artefacts, which I've rarely heard, and it is very, very beguiling. Yet this isn't a cable which wants you to love it because it sounds lovely. It just is what it is, and if your music is gnarly and raucous, a bit of The Bad Plus perhaps, then the Audiomicas just present that music a bit gnarlier and, er, raucouser.

Going back to *Ekapa Lodumo* by way of conclusion, as a means to convey the delights of Abdullah Ibrahim's music, the Audiomica cable set is exceptional. That album doesn't just pique my interest, it captures my heart, and if a cable can do that, it's pretty much got it made in my book. Here, there is more sense of three-dimensionality, the big band is bigger, plays tighter with seemingly superior skill, and even more enthusiasm, but also with a greater sense of give and take between the parts. The piano has more bounce, and Ibrahim's playing has more physicality.

This is not simply a big, brash, blowsy performance, but a properly thought through musical event. The chaos that is the first third of 'African Market' is now clearly conveying the riotous, joyous, cacophonous delight of a real African market, and when the piece settles into its groove, it is all but impossible not to be carried along. And why would you possibly want to resist? +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Audiomica Europa Ultra Reference interconnects

£1,330 (1m RCA termination)

Audiomica Genimides Ultra Reference loudspeaker cable

£1,800 (3m stereo pair)

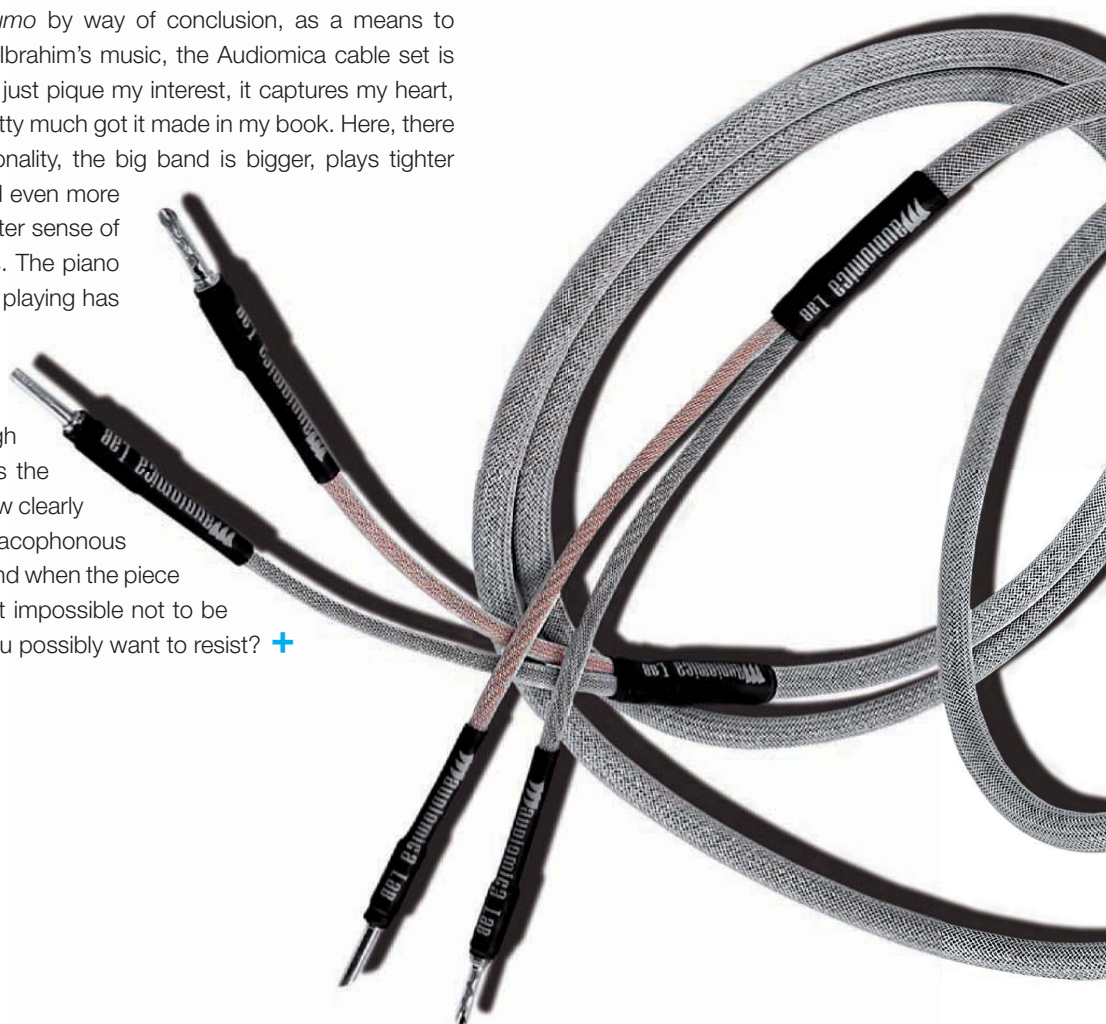
Manufacturer: Audiomica Laboratory Company

URL: www.audiomica.com

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Heretic Audio Huron 3SV loudspeakers

by Nicholas Ripley

Note Audio, the company behind Heretic Audio, also runs a shop in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire called Deco Audio. Deco Audio is one of those rare audio stores that supplies extremely high performance single-ended triode amplification, and is one of those equally exceptionally rare stores that listens and puts together systems based on sound quality rather than profit margins or manufacturer decree. As a result, Note Audio was able to spot a distinct gap in a niche market; the need for a high-sensitivity, triode-friendly floorstanders that gave good bass from low output amps, and that didn't cost a fortune. The Huron 3 and Huron 3SV is the result, although why 'Huron' (an indigenous tribe in North America, and the second largest of the Great Lakes), and what happened to '1' and '2' is shrouded in mystery.

The first thought was this five-driver loudspeaker was a three-way design, but four of those five drivers are a virtual line array of 170mm doped paper cone mid-woofers (with rubber surrounds) used in unison, alongside the 25mm soft dome tweeter in a deep horn waveguide. So, in fact it's a two-way design (more accurately a two-and-three-halves way design). Heretic Audio has gone for a simple second-order crossover network, albeit with high-grade film capacitors and oversized air-core inductors to give it a 12dB per octave slope and, although the crossover point itself is not publically stated in Heretic's literature, in fact it is in the lower presence region (specifically, 2.7kHz) and just outside the all-important midrange where vocal articulation reigns supreme.

We got the 3SV edition, which stands for Silver Version. How this differs from the standard version is the use of Heretic's own cotton-covered pure silver wiring, closer pair matching of drivers, and the replacement of ferrofluid with a larger damping chamber in the tweeter and a lot more visco-elastic damping in the cabinet. And of course, those components in the crossover are of the highest specification.

The key to making a loudspeaker that works with almost anything is to make it efficient and a very easy impedance load. That second-order crossover network helps, in that it avoids evil phase angles and nasty low impedances across the frequency range, but even by these standards, the Huron 3SV is a benign load. It has a nine ohm nominal impedance and at its worst, the minimum impedance is only 7.5 ohms, which means it can be used with practically any amplifier without troubling it. Moreover, with a suggested sensitivity of 95dB/w/m, it won't have a problem playing at comfortable listening levels almost regardless of room size and amplifier power. Heretic goes on to suggest the Huron 3SV can cope with an unclipped load of 200W, which is not only impressive, but in a typical room, could be loud enough to be truly anti-social.



“The Huron 3SV is a refreshing change, and far removed from the laser-guided precision installation demands of some of the more fussy ends of the loudspeaker catalogue. However, I’d suggest Heretic Audio possibly supplies the loudspeakers with foam bungs to fit in the ports, for rooms where that bass needs taming.”



► Huron 3SV's low front port does help efficiency and bass response, but it also means the loudspeaker is easy to position. It can work surprisingly close to the rear wall (although anything closer than about 30-50cm from the back wall compromises soundstage width and especially depth), and is equally at home in free space. *Hi-Fi+* might stress the point at times, but the fact remains room sizes (especially those in the UK and some parts of Europe and Asia) are getting smaller, and our loudspeakers need to be more pragmatic with respect to placement and positioning. In these aspects, the Huron 3SV is a refreshing change, and far removed from the laser-guided precision installation demands of some of the more fussy ends of the loudspeaker catalogue. However, I'd suggest Heretic Audio possibly supplies the loudspeakers with foam bungs to fit in the ports, for those rooms where loudspeaker bass needs taming, or where listeners sit close enough to hear the port resonance at around 50Hz.

Heretic Audio suggests 200 hours of full run-in, but also claims the nasty bit is over and done with after 20 hours or so. We were somewhere between the two when testing commenced, and didn't notice any significant tonal shifts in the performance over the test period. Contrary to sceptical dogma, this shake-down period does have an effect (especially with loudspeakers) and isn't just there to either soften up the listener or put them outside the cooling-off period for returning goods. It is also worth noting that designs like the Huron 3SV that use 'traditional' materials (fabric instead of metal domes, doped paper instead of plastic cones, ferrite magnets instead of rare-earth metals, and rubber surrounds in place of sci-fi materials) can require some further running in if they are stored for long periods; I had a pair of Audio Note AN-E loudspeakers that sounded great, then I moved house and put them into storage for a couple of months and when they finally came back, they needed a prolonged running in a second time. I would assume the same applies here.

Audio Note AN-E loudspeakers are a perfect parallel here, because there is much that the Huron 3SV shares with that standmount design, tonally at least. Granted the Huron 3SV has more bass because of more bass drivers, and the original AN-E has now gone through myriad upgrades and enhancements, but the two have a lot in sonic common. Both have a sense of effortlessly natural presentation, which is very much at odds with both the 'boom/tizz' sound of many modern loudspeakers and the overly impressive soundstaging of others. Like the AN-E, the Huron 3SV loads the room in a way few conventional 'cone and dome' speakers ever manage to achieve. And ►



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- ▶ also like the AN-E, the Huron 3SV is effortlessly dynamic, which makes music sound like real music played by real musicians.

I found myself listening more to piano sonatas and string quartets than larger scale orchestral works, not because the Huron 3SV cannot handle larger orchestral works, but because its dynamic shading made Maurizio Pollini's piano all the more real [*Beethoven's Late Piano Sonatas*, DG], more like a real pianist playing. Note however, that this is a very different presentation to the kind of detail-oriented version of 'real' one might be used to from listening to Quad Electrostatics or BBC loudspeakers. That is more about resolution and spatial precision, where the Huron 3SV is about energy and solidity.

That line array of bass drivers helps bring some bottom-end heft to the sound, which helps carry a bass line better than many of the light and loose, high-sensitivity speakers in use today. I wouldn't call the bass of the Huron 3SV 'taut', but these things are relative, and anything taut enough to prevent Bruckner's Sixth Symphony [Sir Colin Davis, London Symphony Orchestra, LSO Live] from being tarred with its 'ugly duckling' brush, and bring out the bold harmony, almost early-Romantic-era beauty of the melody, and the drive of the low strings from the outset is more than good enough. But that's the key and core of the Huron 3SV; the presentation is melody and harmony, rather than transient response and 'inky silences'. I can well imagine that will prove off-putting to many who are more used to listening to music through loudspeakers than live, but the Huron 3SV is a fine example of the goals of the 'absolute sound' in so many respects. Paradoxically given that last observation, it's those instruments that are never heard unamplified that highlight what the Huron 3SV does well, although playing well-recorded rock ['Heartbreaker' on *Led Zeppelin II* 2014 Remaster, 24/96 download, Atlantic] shows just how much presence and energy this loudspeaker can put into a room.

High sensitivity is hard to do without a trade-off, and there's a temptation to think the trade-off in the Huron 3SV is going to be coloration. In fact, that's not 'quite' the case. The caveat is that, if you use these loudspeakers with something big, powerful, and possessed of a high damping factor (a big solid-state amplifier, in other words), the tonal balance can exhibit a 'shouty' quality in the upper midrange and top, at the same time becoming a touch dry and lean in the bass. However, I'm fairly sure Heretic Audio (and many supporters of tube amplifiers in general) would lay the blame at the amplifier itself, especially in the way solid-state amps sound across the midrange and treble. I'm not entirely in disagreement with this mindset, having experimented with SET amps, and I think that the loudspeaker works best in partnership with more tonally rich sounding valve designs rather than electronics that tend toward 'lean' and 'dry'.

The Heretic Audio Huron 3SV is not for everyone, but for those who need a good valve-amp friendly floorstander with excellent bass and truly no-nonsense appeal, you'd be hard pressed to better this loudspeaker. Check it out! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way, five-driver, floorstanding reflex speaker.

Driver complement: One 25mm soft dome tweeter in custom waveguide; four 170mm doped paper mid-bass drivers.

Crossover frequencies: not specified

Frequency response: 30Hz – 20kHz

Impedance: 9 Ohms nominal

Sensitivity: 95dB/W/m

Dimensions (HxWxD): 104x24x46cm

Weight: 25kg/each

Finishes: natural cherry, walnut, satin black or white as standard, high gloss black or white to order.

Price: £4,000 per pair (std finish), £4,500 per pair (high gloss black or white)

Manufacturer: Heretic Audio

Tel: +44 (0)1296 334477

URL: www.hereticaudio.com

“The presentation is melody and harmony, rather than transient response and ‘inky silences’. I can well imagine that will prove off-putting to many who are more used to listening to music through loudspeakers than live, but the Huron 3SV is a fine example of the goals of the ‘absolute sound’ in so many respects.”




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Townshend Audio Seismic Speaker Bars

by Jason Kennedy

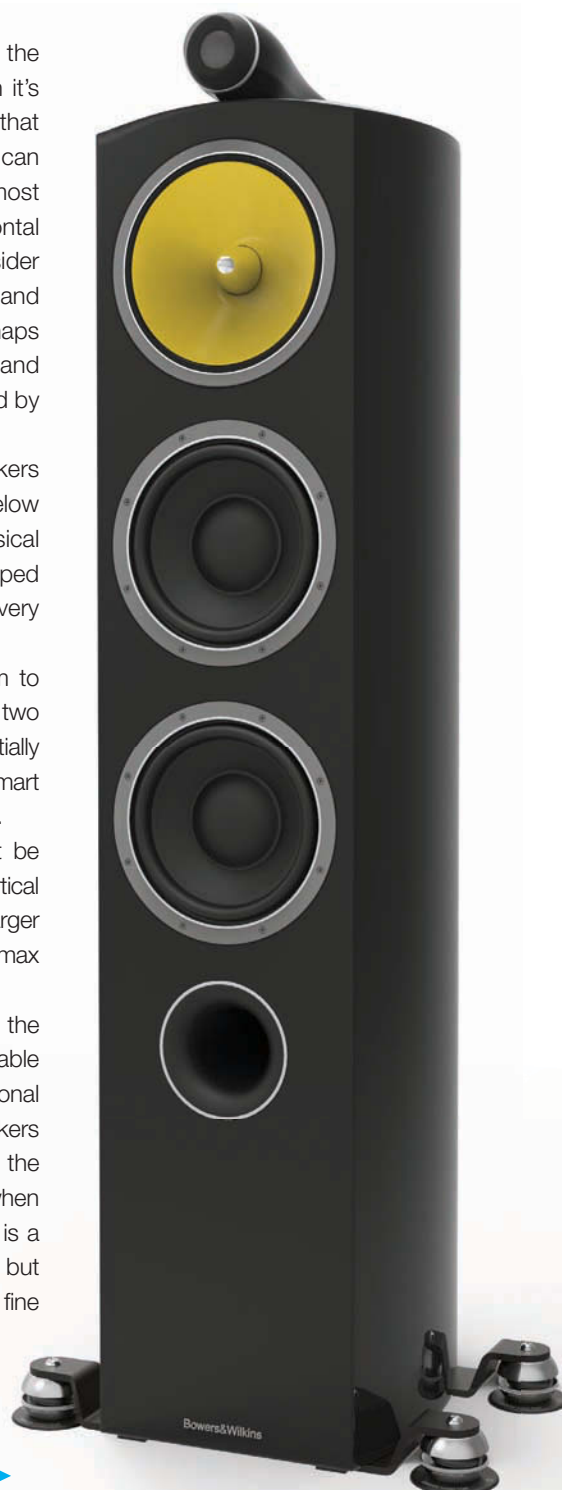
Like many things associated with Max Townshend, how the Seismic Speaker Bars work sounds eminently sensible when it's Max explaining things, and complete gobbledegook when that explanation is passed on to someone else. Here's the best we can do: Although they are too weak to feel, we are shaken by an almost constant series of earthquakes at Magnitude 2.0 and below. The horizontal displacement of such quakes is in the order of microns, but when you consider that a loudspeaker cone only needs to move 0.01 microns to emit sound, and that localised displacement caused by traffic has its own effect, it's perhaps not much of a jump to conclude that vibration transmitted from the ground and through the structure of a building can easily undermine that being created by the cone. So much for having a speaker physically spiked to the floor!

Townshend's Seismic Speaker Bars are designed to decouple speakers from the floor, so that all save for the lowest frequencies (as in, those below three hertz) cannot travel between floor and speaker. Until this geophysical explanation came to light, I was under the impression that the bars helped reduce energy travelling from the speaker to the source and amp: but it's very likely a much bigger issue than that.

Townshend's Speaker Bars are available in four widths, from 250mm to 550mm, and seven spring ratings, for speakers weighing anywhere between two and 256 kilos. Each steel cradle sits on two Seismic load cells, which are essentially damped springs supported by flat, felt covered bases. It's a simple but smart solution that doesn't look too out of place, even under a serious loudspeaker.

Installation of the Seismic Speaker Bars requires any spikes or feet be removed and the cradles placed such that the speaker is balanced in a vertical position. This can take a bit of experimentation and can be quite tricky with larger floorstanders; I used them with 20kg PMC Fact.8s and 17kg Cambridge Aeromax 6s, and both required precise positioning of the bars to balance properly.

The effort was more than worth it when I put on some music, however; the effect is a bit like freeing the sound from the speaker. Music seems to be able to escape the boxes with greater ease and form a cohesive, three-dimensional image in the room. For instance, Javier Perianes piano sits behind the speakers in a precisely defined acoustic and the Seismic Speaker Bars help deliver the entire nuance and delicacy that this talented Spaniard is able to muster when playing Manuel Blasco de Nebra's Piano Sonatas [Harmonia Mundi]. This is a fine recording, that much is apparent even without Seismic Speaker Bars, but they take the noise floor down and let the speaker reveal a lot more of the fine detail that goes into producing such a compelling illusion. As mentioned, the speakers better remove themselves from the picture when sitting on these bars. It's a spectacular trick that is achieved through the extra isolation enabling the speaker to deliver a cleaner and significantly better focussed version of events. Overhang is surprisingly well eliminated, ►



▶ but not by rolling off the bass, which is still extended and powerful. The cradles are designed so that there is very little difference in height when they replace spikes – it's proximity to the floor that has the greatest effect on bass and that is maintained.

With the *Nils Lofgren Band Live* album [Hypertension], it's clear that the pace has gone up a gear. The removal of overhang from the bass means that notes stop and start a lot quicker so you get a faster sound.

This is very gratifying with an electric bass and drum workout, because you feel the power of the drum kit and the chunkiness of the bass strings, with less of the 'smear' that usually gets in the way.

The system revealed more nuance, subtlety, and realism across a whole range of music with the speakers isolated on the Seismic Speaker Bars. I really like the way you can hear further into each element of each piece of music. I also like the way that so much more of the acoustic signature of each recording is exposed, but also the treatments used on different instruments and voices. It's proper eye opening stuff.

With the Aeromax 6, also reviewed this month, and the GoGo Penguin track 'Kamaloka' [v2.0, Gondwana] both the speed and the overall integration of the musicians increase. The piece makes more sense, sounding more like a tune than a display of technical achievement. This might be hard to parse, but this change in musical integrity entirely relates to the dropping of the noise floor, and the fact that there is less time-smear to distract you from the underlying vibe. Moving over to Herbie Hancock's version of 'The Jungle Line' [*River: The Joni Letters*, Verve], Leonard Cohen's voice has astonishing focus and depth not often heard through most loudspeaker systems. I was quite taken aback by this and had to reassess my opinion of the loudspeaker,



or its potential at least. Of course, a set of supports that cost as much as the loudspeakers themselves is an unlikely combination, but perhaps that shouldn't be the case. The performance of both speaker and Seismic Speaker Bars justifies the price of both.

This was another instance of the speakers disappearing atop the Seismic Speaker Bars, and then those same loudspeakers subjugating themselves to the music in the best possible way. With the rather more lively Major Lazer and his ragga hip hop [*Guns Don't Kill People... Lazars Do*, Downtown Music], two things stand out; the horse hoof sound on 'Hold The Line' is more realistic (although still not quite real), and the bass line has more weight and kick thanks to greater dynamic freedom. Impressive!

Townshend Seismic Speaker Bars produce a result that goes way beyond what you might expect from 'speakers on springs'. To get an improvement in absolute resolution, precision of timing and solidity of stereo image from something so apparently simple is extraordinary. These things really do change the game, move the goalposts, and revolutionise the way we should think about speaker support. This is not an accessory... it's an essential. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: loudspeaker isolation system

Width options: 250mm, 350mm, 450mm, 550mm

Load options: 2 – 4kg, 4 – 8kg, 8 – 16kg, 16 – 32kg, 32 – 64kg, 64 – 128kg, 128kg – 256kg

Isolation above 3Hz

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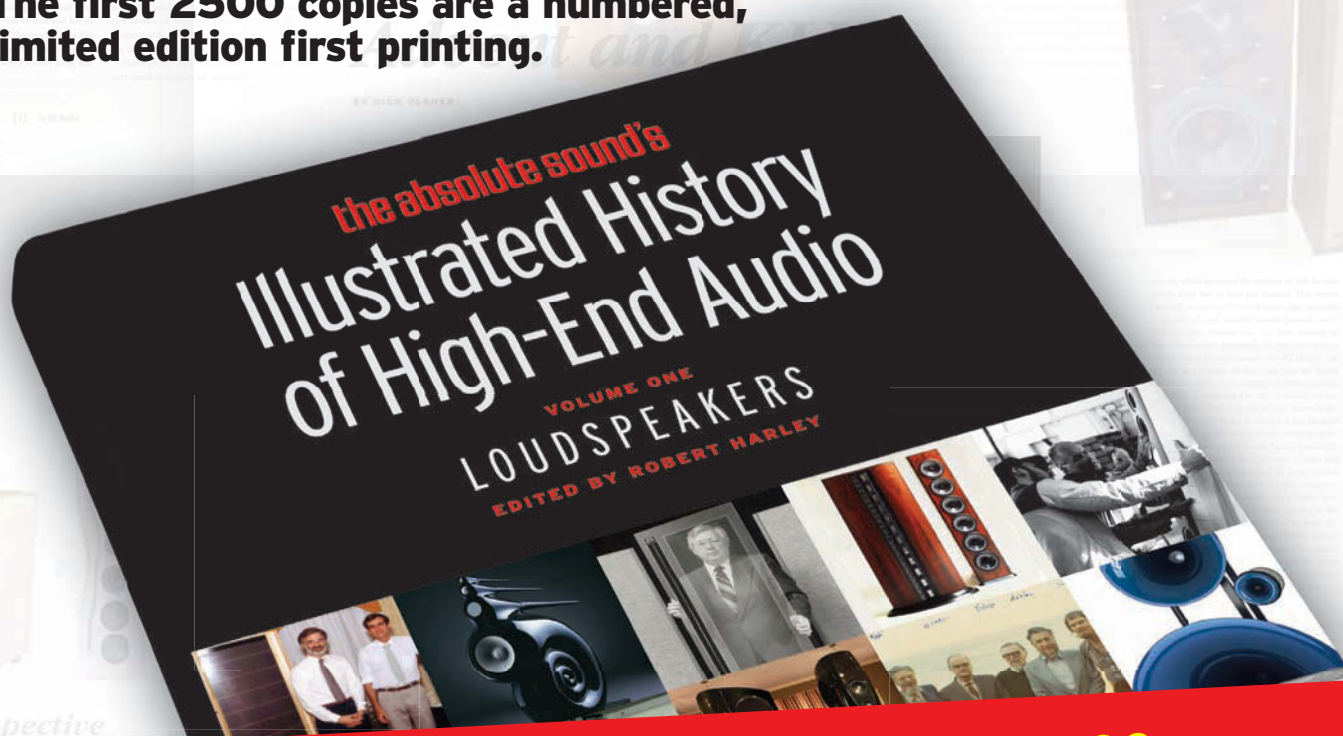
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record reviews

How To Read Them

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

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

This issue's featured reviewers are:

DD – Dennis D Davis
JK – Jason Kennedy
SP – Stephen Priest
AS – Alan Sircom

	CD		120g LP
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	Hybrid SACD		45 RPM
	Multi-Channel		



Sun Zoom Spark

Captain Beefheart

Rhino



This is a limited box set collection of three Captain Beefheart albums, originally released in the three years after *Trout Mask Replica*, alongside a fourth disc of out-takes from the sessions. They represent three levels of 'difficulty', from an attempt at accessibility to undiluted angularity.

Lick My Decals off Baby (1971) followed *Trout Mask Replica* and distils that album to its essence. The least compromising and most challenging of the three, *Decals* reveals the astonishing compositional powers and musicianship of Don van Vliet and his band. Many artists have made a single album, from which all subsequent works flows – the source, if you like – but they are not always the most popular. In Beefheart's case, though, this is it. The album's intensity should not be approached unawares, especially if the other two albums in this collection give cause for concern.

The album contains two exquisite guitar based instrumentals that form a blessed relief from the intensity of the full band antics. The voice may be the result of too many blues records, but *Decals* is not blues in any conventional sense. Apparently Vliet would deliberately wind up musicians, so that their mood came through the music. He was into tension and averse to mellowness, although there are mellow pieces on here. It's not aggressive, but neither is it relaxed, and at its best it's plain phenomenal.



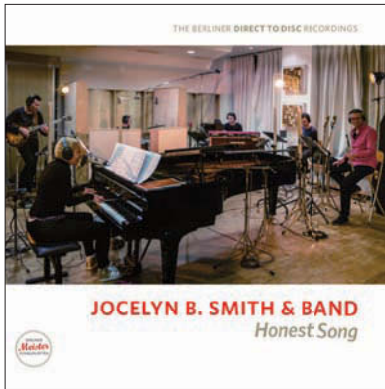
Realising that not everyone was ready for such extremism, *The Spotlight Kid* (1972) is a considerably 'easier' piece of work that, while it has the same left-field blues feel, lacks the intensity of its predecessor. Which makes it a perfect entry point for newcomers. It features several Beefheart classics including 'Alice in Blunderland' and the superb railroad blues 'Click Clack'. The same band as *Decals* (with one extra member) delivers compelling grooves that owe a lot to the dexterity of drummer John Drumbo French and guitar player Mark 'Rockette Morton' Boston.

The highlight in this set is *Clear Spot* (1972), where Vliet found a perfect balance between dissonance and groove. It's intense with some tunes, 'Big Eyed Beans From Venus', and gentle on others, 'Her Eyes Are a Blue Million Miles', but it always boogies. There is angularity for sure, but never at the expense of the tune; it's a mellower album than *Decals* but has greater integrity than *Spotlight*. It is also the best sounding of the three, thanks to the presence of Ted Templeman at the controls.

The remastered sound is a little 'hotter' than earlier CDs, but only subtly so. On a good system, you can turn it up to 11 without fear of the consequences, except for the possibility of being "Booglarized" of course. But that's what living is all about in the wonderful world of Beefheart. **JK**

RECORDING
MUSIC



**Honest Song****Jocelyn B Smith and Band**

Berliner Meister Schallplatten

180g

Jocelyn B Smith is an American soul singer who, like David Hasselhof, is big in Germany. Unlike 'The Hoff', though, she has made a direct-to-disc vinyl recording, and a phenomenally good recording at that. It's particularly good when you get voice and piano alone, not least because this pairing does not appear to have any limiting applied (if it does, it's very subtle). It is also extremely musically appealing, because there is nothing between the listener and the artist singing and playing live. This is a very live-sounding recording, right down to applause from the studio audience and the band credits on the second side.

Smith has an almost classical piano style, combined with lyrics of a very personal and distinct, even honest, style. She's a singer who is prepared to lay it on the line in a manner considerably more open than most mainstream artists in the genre. The band is pretty good too, but their dynamic capabilities are somewhat greater than the recording medium, so you can hear compression at work. However, this really is the best contemporary music recording I have heard in a long, long time. Direct to disc is a massive advantage, but the Berliner Studio guys obviously know what they're doing as well. **JK**

RECORDING
MUSIC

**Spark of Life****Marcin Wasilewski Trio
with Joakim Milder**

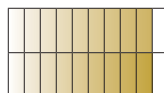
ECM

CD

Marcin Wasilewski and his band are young men in their thirties, yet they have more than 20 years of shared playing experience between them, and they certainly sound pretty tight. But this is not tight music; it's fluid, shimmering, and at times totally radiant. Think of a Polish Tord Gustavsen Quartet with added warmth. Joakim Milder is a Swedish saxophonist who brings some Nordic cool to the vibe, but he fits in beautifully with Slawomir Kurkiewicz on double bass, Michal Miskiewicz on drums, and Wasilewski on piano. This is a trio whose members play what they, and most of the time that's in the groove and the moment, a moment that's more open-hearted than for many of their ilk.

The album contains pieces by other pianists, including the excellent 'Sleep Safe and Warm' by Krzysztof Komeda, Herbie Hancock's 'Actual Proof', and the non-pianist Sting's 'Message in a Bottle'; the latter is an unusual choice for a piano trio, but quite a successful one. The quality of Wasilewski's writing is extremely strong; the opener 'Austin' (in memory of the late Austin Peralta) is particularly beautiful, and because the band is so much in tune, pretty much everything they do touches a pleasure point. **JK**

RECORDING
MUSIC

**Live 1970****Nucleus with Leon Thomas**

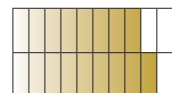
Gearbox

180g

The musical world was a more fluid place 45 years ago. In their first year, Brit jazz rock pioneers Nucleus teamed up with idiosyncratic vocalist Leon Thomas, whose signature tune, 'The Creator has a Master Plan', had been released the year before. Nucleus was led by trumpeter Ian Carr and featured Karl Jenkins (oboe, piano), Brian Smith (saxophones, flute), and Chris Spedding on guitar – the latter being responsible for the most scorching solos on this set. Jenkins' oboe is the other lead instrument, but it seems slightly out of place on what is essentially blues material. This concert was part of the Montreux Jazz festival, where they Nucleus the international jazz band prize.

The set opens with a near 19 minute long rendition of Thomas' 'hit', a showcase for his ululating vocals, and the remarkable talents of Nucleus. This was a band he had first worked with only a few weeks before at a Ronnie Scott's gig. It's a remarkably successful pairing, thanks to the band's ability to bridge jazz and blues styles behind Thomas' soulful vocals. The recording is very good for its vintage; a state of affairs greatly aided by this excellent Gearbox mastering. It has wide dynamic range and plenty of space but sounds entirely natural and real. **JK**

RECORDING
MUSIC





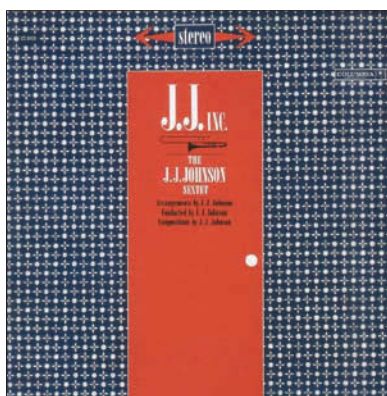
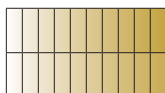
Somethin' Else
Cannonball Adderley
Music Matters 81595

180g 33 RPM

Somethin' Else is proof against the naysayers who complain that the record companies just keep releasing the same records over and over again. Who can seriously argue that there are too many copies of *Somethin' Else* in circulation or that the craving for greatness should subside? This was only the second Blue Note album I broke the bank on by buying an original pressing many decades ago.

Recorded in March of 1958, while alto player Adderley was part of the Miles Davis sextet, the album features Davis in one of his very rare appearances as a sideman, alongside Art Blakey on drums, Hank Jones on piano, and Sam Jones on bass. Davis wrote the title track and selected the other material, while taking many prominent solo turns. Recorded a year before *Kind Of Blue*, this was recorded by Rudy Van Gelder in the specially-built studio in his parents' home, and provides an interesting counterpoint to the sound captured a year later in Columbia's 30th Street studio by Fred Plaut. This is the last increment of Music Matters' release of 25 of its Blue Note titles on one-disc 33 1/3 RPM packages. If you are looking for a great sounding version of this indispensable title, this is the way to go. Bravo! **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



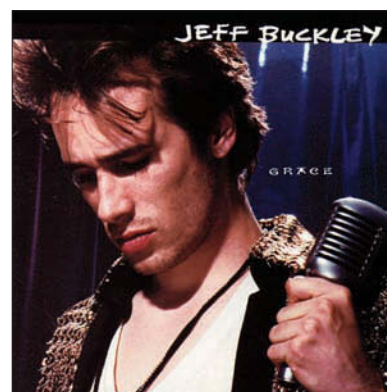
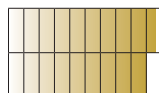
The J. J. Johnson Sextet
J. J. Inc.
Speakers Corner CS 8406

180g 33 RPM

Jazz trombonist J. J. Johnson recorded a body of work second to none, and was one of the most important figures in twentieth century jazz. His playing was quick and effortless sounding, not an inconsiderable feat with such a comparatively awkward instrument. He played and recorded with virtually every major jazz artist, and had long-term relationships with Blue Note and Columbia. However, such are the vagaries of music lovers and record collectors alike that reissues of his LPs do not adequately reflect his importance. Which makes this reissue by Speakers Corner of one of his best LPs all the more welcome.

Johnson not only plays on the set, but also composed and arranged all the tunes. The all-star cast includes a young Freddy Hubbard on trumpet along with Clifford Jordan on tenor sax, Cedar Walton on piano, Arthur Harper on bass, and drummer Albert Heath. Recorded at Columbia's 30th Street Studios in August of 1960 by Fred Plaut, think of this as a Blue Note session recorded in a better studio with a better engineer. Add to that the particularly long time that the group rehearsed before recording, and you can appreciate why this session is so satisfying. Great music and sound. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



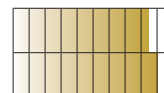
Grace
Jeff Buckley
ORG 194

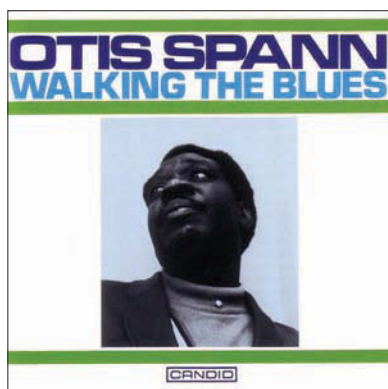
120g 45 RPM

Jeff Buckley only released one record album (and one EP) before drowning in an accident at the age of 29. The album started with modest critical acclaim and slow sales, but over time has become a favorite of numerous 'best of' lists. While rock critic Robert Christgau may not have been far off the mark about Buckley being a "total Jerk", one cannot gainsay that *Grace* has some very high points and is an apt reflection of early 1990's teen sentiments.

Recorded in late 1993 and early 1994, Buckley's album incorporates a host of musical influences, perhaps most obviously Led Zeppelin, but also something from the psychedelic era of female vocalists and jazz female vocalists such as Nina Simone. Strangely, it's harder to hear the influence of his father, Tim Buckley in Jeff's music. Jeff Buckley's famous, earworm version of Leonard Cohen's 'Hallelujah' would be enough to keep Buckley's flame lit, even without its overuse in TV series and advertisements. The album's high points, and they soar quite high, were watered down with the Legacy Edition on CD. The sound of that disc was disappointing, but this fine new mastering by Bernie Grundman, presented in two-disc 45-RPM format, is the best it has sounded. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



**Walking The Blues**

180g 33 RPM

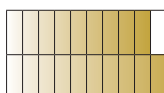
Otis Spann

Pure Pleasure 9025

Otis Spann followed the common trajectory for blues musicians in the mid-century. Born in Mississippi in 1930, he moved to Chicago shortly after World War II. Generally considered the greatest post-war blues piano player, Spann joined the Muddy Waters band in 1952, and stayed with the band until shortly before his death in 1969. He also recorded prolifically as a leader for Candid, Storyville, and Prestige. *Walking The Blues* was a part of Spann's first solo session for Candid, recorded on August 23, 1960; the great Robert Lockwood, Jr. backed him on guitar and James Oden supplied vocals.

The session was recorded by legendary engineer George Piros at the Fine Recording Studios, better known for the Mercury Living Presence series. Enough was recorded to produce two LPs, and *Otis Spann Is The Blues* was released in 1960. The balance of the session remained in the can until 1972. The music explodes off the grooves, and this posthumous release may be Spann's greatest achievement. Pure Pleasure has now reissued this great LP to sit alongside its earlier reissue of *...Is The Blues*. It doesn't get any better than this. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC

**Saint-Saëns
Symphony No. 3**

200g 33 RPM

**Boston Symphony Orchestra/
Charles Munch (cond.)**

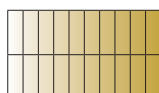
Analogue Productions LSC-2341

During the early decades of our audiophile obsession, classical music was the touchstone of an enthusiast's sensibility, driven in part by the late Harry Pearson's definition of 'the absolute sound' and Sid Marks' wonderful series of Mercury and Living Stereo record reviews. Today, classical music is a minor sub-set of vinyl reissues, but that hasn't stopped companies from taking a run at the RCA Living Stereo catalogue.

So far, Analogue Productions' series of outstanding reissues have avoided the missteps of the previous Classic Records issues, instead offering real improvements over the originals.

The latest release, of this title and the Offenbach *Gaite Parisienne* (LSC 1817), keeps a perfect track record of outstanding Living Stereo releases by Analogue Productions. Pristine surfaces and better-defined layers of sound along with much finer texture add up to a wonderful experience of the famous *Organ Symphony*. The original is almost coarse sounding compared to this reissue. While the Offenbach reissue does not eclipse the original in all areas, the original remains very expensive and the reissue is superb. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC

**The Giant Is Awakened**

CD

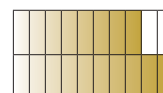
Horace Tapscott Quintet

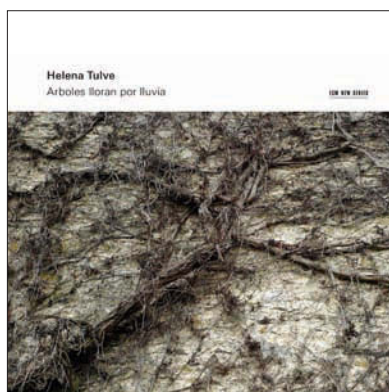
Flying Dutchman FDS-107

Horace Tapscott has always taken the road less travelled and never elected to drive a path likely to generate significant sales. Although Tapscott had been an active musician since his teen years, his first recording as a leader was this title, recorded in 1969 after he had turned 35. It was also his last for almost ten years. Tapscott's piano playing is backed by Arthur Blythe on alto sax, David Bryant and Walter Savage taking turns on bass, and Everett Brown on drums. The music is uncompromising, intense, even startling, but never unapproachable.

The 'wakened giant' of the title tune is black power. The music is powerfully spiritual and the title track conjures up parallels to Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*, while the album cover photo reflects Roy Haynes' *Out Of The Afternoon*. Heady company, but Tapscott's achievement reaches those heights. Jonathan Horwich's gift for selecting outstanding and underappreciated classics from the jazz archives is again spot on with this latest International Phonograph production. Mixed to 24/96 digital from the analog masters, this new reissue is packaged in a gorgeous mini-LP foldout cover with generous and scholarly notes included in two inserts, and the music sounds as fresh as ever. It belongs in any modern jazz lover's collection. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC





Arboles lloran por lluvia CD

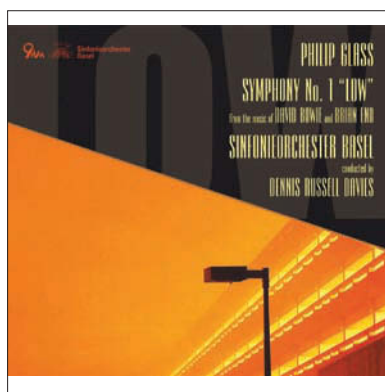
Helena Tulve

ECM New Series ECM 2243

Manfred Eicher's ECM label is perhaps best known for mixing up musical genres and making weird and wonderful music as a result. This time, no genre-bending was required; The Estonian composer Helena Tulve does weird and wonderful as standard. The five tracks here are pure avant-garde choral pieces, based on Gregorian chant broken-up and rebuilt in a hundred different ways. This is Tulve's second album for ECM, but where *Linjen* was more orchestral, this is almost pure voice.

Non-architectonic, Ligeti-esque spectral variations on the theme of Eastern music, featuring nykelharps, musical glasses, and wind chimes played by the composer are not the stuff of rapid understanding or easy listening. Instead, it's the sort of music you go to work on. The recording slides from 'theme' to 'theme' easily, to the point where you don't even notice the transitions. There is something mesmerising about these five tracks, like hearing someone singing passionately in a language you can't understand, in a musical style that's alien to you. However, suddenly, when you start playing more traditionally constructed music, it all sounds arch and fake. That's Tulve's power. And, as you might expect from ECM, it's wonderfully recorded, to boot. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Symphony No 1 "Low" CD

Philip Glass

Sinfonieorchester Basel,

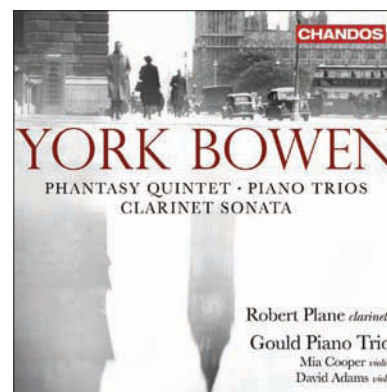
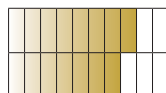
Dennis Russell Davies (cond)

Orange Mountain Music OMM0095

Philip Glass is at once one of the most important American composers alive today, and the creator of some of the most repetitious and most overblown noodling ever put to a stave. And his Symphony No 1 (entitled 'Low', as it's inspired by the works of David Bowie and Brian Eno in the 1977 album of the same name) is a perfect example of that dichotomy. This three-movement symphony can be seen as a work of rich harmony, or it can be a broken musical starter-motor: always spluttering, never starting. For my part, I find it something like 'orchestral ambient'. It may not go anywhere fast, but it's more about the journey than the destination with Glass.

This CD is also the Philip Glass motherlode. The conductor, Dennis Russell Davies, is a close friend and powerful supporter of Glass, and one of his best musical interpreters. He's principle conductor for the Sinfonieorchester Basel, so they work together beautifully, and while the Musikaal Stadt-Casino in Basel is not the best-known venue, it's a fine recording too. And Orange Mountain Music is fast becoming the go-to label for all things Glassical. For those willing to explore the later works of Philip Glass, this is an excellent place to start. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC



York Bowen CD

Chamber Works

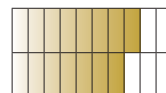
Robert Plane/Gould Piano Trio

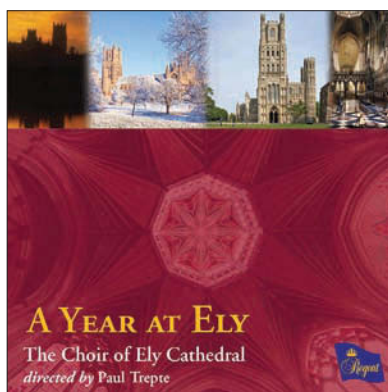
Chandos CHAN10805

The English composer and multi-instrumentalist York Bowen (1884-1961) created more than 160 works in his fifty-year career spanning the first half of the last century. Bowen's style is very much in the Romantic vein, like Brahms with a North London accent, and that was possibly his downfall; Romanticism had no part to play in the England directly after the Great War, and Bowen's star faded fast.

Chandos seems determined to rebuild Bowen's reputation, and this collection of his better-known chamber works is a fine start. The Gould Piano Trio have a sense of fluency to their interplay that lends itself to the Piano Trio in E minor that closes the album, and the addition of Robert Plane on clarinet, Mia Cooper on violin, and David Adams on viola combine to bring a melodic integration that perfectly suits the composer's style. In truth, York Bowen's work could so easily tip over from 'flowing' to 'plodding', but the ensemble here never trip up. The recording is somewhat dry, true to recent Chandos form, but it is also incredibly crisp and detailed. You might find it hard to believe you aren't listening to music from the mid-19th Century, but it's extremely well executed here. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC





A Year at Ely

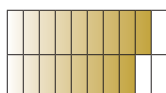
The Choir of Ely Cathedral
Regent Records REGCD441

Ely cathedral and its choir are significant for their contribution to the history of choral music in England. Ely's 'Anglican tradition' choir has been in existence since the mid-sixteenth century, and the acoustics (especially the renowned Lady Chapel) are among the finest in the land.

The choir itself is very good; it is well balanced and with a nice 'uniform' sound – solid and smooth. The pieces on this disc represent the liturgical year in the Anglican church. The mix is nicely representative of the genre; potboilers such as S. S. Wesley's 'Ascribe Unto the Lord' are interspersed with well-chosen 20th century pieces, for example. Outstanding performances include 'When David Heard' by Thomas Tomkins, the wonderful three Motets Op. 38 from Charles Stanford, 'My Beloved Spake' by Patrick Hadley, and 'Out of Your Sleep' by the late Richard Rodney Bennett; a composer whose very fine liturgical choral pieces are often overlooked.

Ely is a fine edifice with sensible dimensions, which makes for excellent recording quality, and the unmistakable autumnal sound of the Anglican tradition (one of the great musical sounds in western culture) is captured beautifully by fine singing and a vibrant, life-like acoustic. **SP**

RECORDING
MUSIC



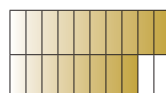
Remote Galaxy

Flint Juventino Beppe
Philharmonia Orchestra
Vladimir Ashkenazy
2L Recordings

Beppe is a Norwegian composer currently residing in Germany. While not internationally renowned, this recording is the second in a row to receive a Grammy nomination, both albums featuring the same orchestra and conductor. He has no formal musical education and suffers from both Tourette's and Asperger's syndromes. The result is a tangible liberation from formal technique and conventional compositional barriers, a tonal mélange of cinematic foundation, demonstrating a wide breadth of colour and dynamics that makes for fine audio demonstration material (hence the suiting of the high-res Pure Audio Blu-ray format).

Musically, there is nothing particularly unique here. It's full of animation and life, however, and the orchestration has some nice quirks such as the use of the 16th century sound of the viola da gamba juxtaposed with the futuristic, specter-like sound of a glass harmonica. However, while it all sounds great, the music doesn't quite hit home. However, the playing of the Philharmonia is excellent as always and the recording quality is nothing short of superlative – it's all air, space and dynamic range with realistic vibrancy. **SP**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Souvenir

Trondheim Solistene
Øyvind Gimse & Geir Inge Lotsberg
2L Recordings

This is another fine sounding disc from the 2L label on high-resolution DXD multichannel or stereo Pure Audio Blu-ray format (also available on LP). It consists of two pieces each from Tchiakovsky and Carl Nielsen for string orchestra, played by the Trondheim Soloistene chamber orchestra. Three of the four pieces are suites, while one of the Nielsen pieces ('Ved en Ung Kunstners Baare') is a single-movement composition.

The opening 'Souvenir de Florence' by Tchiakovsky is played with a momentum and vigour that remains throughout the entire disc. The lines are played in lyrical long phrases whilst rhythmic passages are kept moving by pinpoint accuracy. Nielsen's one-movement piece has the underlying Scandinavian bleakness expected from the composer and the playing here is sympathetic, as it is with his excellent 'Suite for String Orchestra' (perhaps the best performed piece here). Spiky pizzicato passages are intertwined with whimsical and delicate phrases and glorious sonorous homophonic playing. Tchiakovsky's well-known four movement 'Serenade for Strings' (with its tenderly played, beautiful Elegie) finishes off this excellent disc in fine style. As ever with 2L, the recording is excellent, too. **SP**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Album of the Month:

Jerry Lee Lewis 'Live at the Star Club, Hamburg'

by Alan Sircom

It might seem unbelievable to those who were there at the time, but the rock 'n' roll era turns 60 this year. Although elements can be traced back to swing music of the 1930s, many pin the start of the rock 'n' roll era to 1954-55, and the proliferation of rock 'n' roll from a regional fad to international revolution with the release of the movie *Blackboard Jungle*, in March 1955.

Rock 'n' roll may have gone on to change the world, but by the early 1960s, the world had changed, moved on, and rock 'n' roll was on the slide. Buddy Holly, The Big Bopper, Richie Valens, and Eddie Cochran were dead. Chuck Berry was in prison. Little Richard had gone gospel after his mid-air religious conversion. Elvis had descended into bad movie hell and it would be half a decade before he rediscovered his mojo hiding in a pair of black leather jeans. And then there was Jerry Lee Lewis. 'The Killer' was a member of Sun Records' 'Million Dollar Quartet' (along with Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, and Johnny Cash), and had huge hits like 'Whole Lotta Shakin Goin' On' and 'Great Balls of Fire' in 1957. A year later, the 22 year old Lewis would hit the headlines for all the wrong reasons, thanks to his marriage to his 13 year old cousin Myra Gale Brown. Welcome to oblivion.

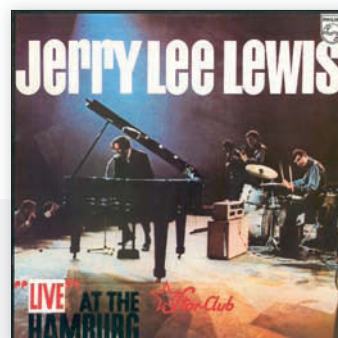
By 1964, Lewis was becoming an early prototype of the washed-up rock star going through his 'wilderness years'. But if he was going down, he was going to take an audience with him! The Star-Club beckoned; a seedy dive a stone's throw from Hamburg's Reeperbahn red-light district. And in April 1964, the Star-Club played host to an unlikely partnership, Jerry Lee Lewis backed by a British pop band from Weybridge called The Nashville Teens. And the session was recorded by the then-head of the jazz department of the German arm of Philips, Siggie Loch, using a series of microphones close to the individual instruments and a simple stereo fill for the audience, all mixed to a two-channel recorder.

Right from the opening bars of 'Mean Woman Blues', Lewis is on blazing form. About two minutes into this four-minute blast, you find yourself respecting the piano makers for producing a keyboard ruggedized enough to withstand this kind of onslaught. The LP continues for another twelve tracks, with no let up whatsoever. All The Killer's best known works are here, but arguably it's what he does with 'Your Cheatin' Heart' by Hank Williams that's so powerful. He tears into this music with the kind of force that would make death metal acts run for cover. It's brilliant, breathtaking stuff. OK, so in terms of recording it's not perfect, as Loch is obviously more

at action stations and trying to constrain a musical tornado. But, neither is it simply a wall of sound, and the sense of machine-gun urgency is palpable. If as a sublime piece of recording it's lacking, as a sense of musical occasion, it should be required listening for every generation, to show them what a live gig is all about.

The Nashville Teens would quickly find their own chart success with 'Tobacco Road' in the middle of that year, but sustained fame and fortune eluded them. They deserved better from history. Any band that can keep up with The Killer when he's at this kind of barbaric peak are not to be trifled with.

Live at the Star Club, Hamburg (as distinct from *Live! At the Star-Club, Hamburg*, which is the proto-Beatles album that shows the power of punctuation) is commonly considered by many pundits as one of the best live albums ever made, and by far the best live rock 'n' roll album ever. But it's more than that. Jerry Lee Lewis single-handedly weaponised rock 'n' roll, and showed what a small, highly mobile unit of musicians can do to an audience. Rock (without the "n' Roll" part) was listening, and learning... +



Recorded: April 5, 1964

Released: 1964

Produced: Siggie Loch

Label: German Philips, Bear Family Records



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