

SENNHEISER'S VERSATILE HD 630VB HEADPHONES



# hi-fi+

ISSN 1465-5950

\$4.99



36 >

REPRODUCING THE RECORDED ARTS  
[www.hifiplus.com](http://www.hifiplus.com)

JUNE 2016 • 136

## DIAMOND CLASS

BOWERS & WILKINS  
803 D3 LEADS OUR  
QUEST FOR AUDIO  
EXCELLENCE

**WIN! ENTOTEM MEDIA PLAYER  
AND SYNERGISTIC RESEARCH  
POWER CABLE!**

AUDIO RESEARCH REFERENCE  
PHONO 3

MCINTOSH C52/MC301


ROKSAN PUG

SOULUTION AUDIO 520



IS THE MARK LEVINSON 585  
THE BEST INTEGRATED AMP EVER?





# soultion

nature of sound

Highend Audio Equipment  
made in Switzerland

Distributed by Select Audio

Tel 01900 601954

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

**EDITOR**

Alan Sircom  
Email: editor@hifiplus.com

**CONTRIBUTORS THIS ISSUE INCLUDE:**

Jeremy Davies, Dennis D Davis,  
Roy Gregory, Jason Kennedy,  
Chris Martens, Chris Thomas

**GRAPHIC DESIGNER**

Jenny Watson  
Fonthill Creative, Salisbury

**ADVERTISING**

Tom Hackforth  
Tel: +44 (0)1425 655255  
Email: tom@hifiplus.com

**ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER**

Pete Trewin  
Tel: +44 (0)1425 655699  
Email: pete@hifiplus.com

**PUBLISHER**

Chris Martens  
Tel: +1 (512) 419-1513  
Email: cmartens@nextscreen.com

**THE EDITORIAL OFFICE CAN BE CONTACTED AT:**

**Hi-Fi+ Editorial**  
Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd  
Unit 3, Sandleheath Industrial Estate,  
Sandleheath, Hampshire  
SP6 1PA  
United Kingdom  
Tel: +44 (0)1425 655255  
**Web: www.hifiplus.com**

Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd is a  
subsidiary of TMM Holdings LLC,  
2601 McHale Court, Suite 100  
Austin, TX 78758, USA

**CHAIRMAN AND CEO**

Thomas B. Martin, Jr.

All Rights Reserved.

Not one word of Hi-Fi+ may be  
reproduced without the written consent  
of the Editor. We are perfectly happy  
to co-operate, but we don't want  
quotations to appear out of context.

Printed By  
Pensord Press, Caerphilly

Hi-Fi+ is published twelve times a  
year by; Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd

ISSN 1465 5950



[www.hifiplus.com](http://www.hifiplus.com)

# editorial

**W**e started out on the theme of this issue with a simple goal – the best of the best. And naturally, when dealing with an industry that has seemingly no upper limit to its price structure, that can automatically translate to astronomical prices. While there are some products in this line-up that certainly fit that bill, in the process of compiling this flight into audio's stratosphere, we ended up with performance over price.

Maybe it's a sign of some much-needed sanity hitting the upper tiers of the super high-end, but whenever we looked at something supremely expensive, something simply 'expensive' invariably sounded better. In some cases, the super-high-end was in performance only. While 'The Man on the Clapham Omnibus' might think anyone suggesting a £12,500 loudspeaker marks a return to sane prices is not themselves sane, stepping back from £125,000 loudspeakers and beyond makes such a price tag seem positively cheap!

I'm not saying this necessarily marks a sea-change for the audio industry or even for *Hi-Fi+*. Even the most cursory glance around May's Munich High-End would show the cost-no-object model still has a lot of traction in high-end audio, but I think we are beginning to see products made that don't just appeal to plutocrats and oligarchs.

I suspect this is the start of a trend, based around the so-called 'squeezed middle' beginning to return to an even keel after too many years of financial turmoil. Real people are starting to regain confidence in their spending power once more, even if their life savings and investments have been put on a low gas.

This is great for the audio business, because while there are many who only cater to the elite, that elite reflects the demands of the wider market, just written bigger, and in solid gold lettering. And without the wider market, the elite slowly goes away, too.

So, welcome to *Hi-Fi+*'s super high-end issue, which features super high-end equipment but not at super high-end prices. And long may it remain that way!

Our congratulations go out to Dr Dirk Oberbeck in Germany, who wins a set of DALVIVO loudspeaker cables and INCANTO interconnect cables, all worth £2,130 and Catriona Macdonald in the UK, who wins an Ensemble DALVIVO power cord and INCANTO interconnect cables worth £1,370 in our Ensemble AG competition. Also, our congratulations go out to Sandy Ralph, Wayne Griffiths, Emma Davock, David Adkin, and Stan Avery, all of whom win a fabulous set of Chord & Major earphones. Well done!

Alan Sircom  
editor@hifiplus.com

**ISSUE 137 (PERSONAL AUDIO) ON SALE: UK JULY 7, 2016 ... US AUG 4, 2016**





The Art of Science and Sound



NEW  
ARABESQUE  
minissimo  
SCALA



Every product from Crystal Cable is renowned for its elegant appearance and flawless finish. But every product from Crystal Cable is also renowned for its clarity of concept, advanced technology and the elegance of its engineering. These are products where the beauty really is more than just skin deep.

For more information about Crystal Cable's highend cables, Arabesque Minissimo loudspeakers and the Cube System visit: [www.crystalcable.com](http://www.crystalcable.com) [www.facebook.com/CrystalCable.IAH](https://www.facebook.com/CrystalCable.IAH)

 **absolute sounds ltd.**

International Distributors & Consultants of Specialised Hi-End Audio & Video Systems

58 Durham Road, London, SW20 0TW T: +44 (0)20 89 71 39 09

W: [www.absolutesounds.com](http://www.absolutesounds.com) E: [info@absolutesounds.com](mailto:info@absolutesounds.com)

For Your Nearest Dealer Please Visit The [Absolute Sounds](http://www.absolutesounds.com) Website





# contents

# EQUIPMENT+

ISSUE 136

## COMMENT

- 4** **INCOMING!**  
Your views on all things audio
- 8** **MUNICH HIGH-END 2016**  
The most important audio show in the world, today
- 101** **MEET YOUR DEALER**  
Is Choice Hi-Fi the audio retailer of tomorrow?

## MUSIC

- 109** **CONTEMPORARY, AUDIOPHILE, AND CLASSICAL MUSIC**
- +**
- 80** **COMPETITION**  
Win! Superb Synergistic Research equipment
- 89** **COMPETITION**  
Win! Entotem's Plato media system worth up to £3,300!
- 90** **SUBSCRIPTIONS**
- 108** **ADVERTISER INDEX**
- 112** **NEXT MONTH**  
Find out what's happening next month!

59



- 16** **MARK LEVINSON AUDIO SYSTEMS 585**  
integrated amplifier with DAC
- 22** **AUDIO RESEARCH CORPORATION REFERENCE PHONO 3**  
valve phono stage
- 28** **BOWERS & WILKINS 803 D3**  
floorstanding loudspeaker
- 34** **SOULUTION AUDIO 520**  
full-function preamplifier
- 42** **McINTOSH C52/MC301**  
full-function preamplifier and mono power amplifiers
- 49** **FONO ACUSTICA VIRTUOSO**  
loudspeaker cables
- 53** **DS AUDIO DS-W1**  
optical cartridge and equaliser
- 59** **AUDIO ALCHEMY DDP-1/PS-5/DPA-1**  
digital converter/preamp, optional power supply, and stereo power amplifier
- 69** **TEDDY PARDO i80a**  
integrated amplifier
- 75** **ROKSAN AUDIO PUG/VSC**  
tonearm and phono stage/speed control for the Xerxes turntable
- 81** **AUDIOMAT ARIA**  
integrated valve amplifier
- 87** **SENNHEISER HD 630VB**  
variable bass closed back headphones
- 92** **SYNERGISTIC RESEARCH GROUNDING BLOCKS AND CABLES, TRANQUILLITY BASE UEF, AND ATMOSPHERE**  
system tuning components

Please send your letters to Hi-Fi+, Unit 3, Sandleheath Industrial Estate, Sandleheath, Hampshire, SP6 1PA, United Kingdom.  
Or email them to [editor@hifiplus.com](mailto:editor@hifiplus.com)

# incoming!

in association with **audioquest**

## LETTER OF THE MONTH WINS A DRAGONFLY BLACK

Both AudioQuest and *Hi-Fi+* are passionate about music and the sound it makes. We know what makes a good audio experience, and we know what makes it better. Most modern audio equipment is good, but with the right attitude, right advice, and the right components, the sound it delivers can move from 'good' to 'great' to 'fantastic'. AudioQuest has to deal with a lot of queries regarding audio systems, because almost everything in an audio system is connected with a cable. The company has amassed a wealth of information on a range of topics in audio, both in general terms and with a team comprising keen, specialist audio experts willing to impart their expertise.

Which is why we've teamed up with the good folks at AudioQuest to award the letter of the month a free AudioQuest Dragonfly Black headphone amp/DAC.

### Keep taking the tablets

Although I have a very good if 'vintage' system (Sony CD player, Audiolab 8000A/8000P amps, and Rogers LS7t loudspeakers) but increasingly I find myself listening to music and audio books through my Apple iPad on headphones.

I am not convinced by the performance of the DAC and amplifier within the iPad, however, because when I compare the sound of the music played through the headphone socket on the iPad to the same headphones played through the Audiolab's headphone output, the difference is noticable. I use 32-ohm editions of the Beyerdynamic DT-770 Pro, which is designed for ease of driving, and I've heard better sounds through my old iPod Classic, too, although that has now broken down.

What can I do to improve the performance of the headphone output of the iPad? Is there a DAC I can use, through the Lightning connector at the base of the iPad, or do I add something to boost the sound from the headphone amplifier. Notionally at least, I prefer the first option.

**G.D. Cross, via email**

*In a very real sense, we have become very selective in what constitutes bad sound. The output from an iPad might not be as good as the best in home audio, and not up to the performance of the latest Digital Audio Players, but it's streets ahead of the sound you could get from a cheap-sounding, yet surprisingly expensive, first-generation Walkman clone of the early 1980s. As I know from bitter memory.*

*The Apple iPad's audio limitations largely come down to the device's inherent flexibility, and it's comparatively low price for such a slice of high-tech. The amount of money allocated to making a good audio pathway*

*inside an iPad is relatively tiny, and you can do better by looking at something more dedicated to the task.*

*As you suggest, the options are limited to finding a device that supports the digital output of your iPad, or one that takes the headphone output and amplifies it further. As European phones are output limited by legislation, the in-line amplifier can be a good option in some cases, but for most people, some kind of DAC or headphone amp/DAC will be a better fit.*

*The only downside to this is Apple imposes limits on the amount of power that can be drawn from the iDevice by the product connected to it. This means many self-powered USB-based headphone amps and DACs will not work with Apple products. Fortunately, the Dragonfly Black we are going to send you for writing the prize-winning letter this month has been designed specifically to draw so little power that Apple's iPad will work with it.*

*All you need is Apple's Lightning to USB camera adaptor!*

**Robert Hay – AudioQuest**



# Pure Clarity



*"This compact and exquisitely made floorstander is a legitimate ultra-high-end loudspeaker—one that offers transparency, detail, neutrality of voicing, and overall refinement..."*

Hi-Fi+, October 2015

*"That the Carmel belongs in the reference class is unquestionable."*

*"I found myself completely unable to play short excerpts, the sound so captivating I simply had to play it through to the end."*

Phil Gold  
Enjoy The Music, July 2015

Distributed in the UK and Ireland by:



www.padood.com | info@padood.com  
+44 (0)1223 653199 | 20 Station Road, Cambridge CB1 2JD





### ► How small is 'big'?

I currently run B&W 802 Diamonds in a room that is about 22ft by 16ft by 9ft high. In considering other speakers I am always faced by the big room v small room debate and I would like to know what kind of size would be considered as 'big' in order to short list some alternatives. I would be grateful for any advice.

**Denis Stakounis, via email**

*Your room size should be fine for most loudspeakers. You could improve things slightly by having a 10' or 11' high ceiling instead of a 9' one, which places it in the so-called 'Bolt area' of room sizes that give a good distribution of room modes, but as is the room is close enough to deliver good sound with the majority of loudspeakers. This is, as ever, subject to a lot of 'wobble room', most notably surrounding furnishing, seat position, and room construction. However, the room itself is considerably better to use as the basis for a listening room than a small 9' cube, for example.*

*Your room would comfortably accommodate most loudspeakers except for some of the largest models, which often require a longer 'throw'. – Ed*

### It's the vinyl countdown!

*It's great that people are buying more LPs than they have done in years, but I can't help wondering when this bubble will burst. The whole hipster movement is all but played out now, and their interests and looks are largely the subject of parody and derision. Vinyl was one of their core interests, and I can't help but feel its time will come soon.*

*I don't have a chip in this game. I sold all my LPs for almost nothing in the 1990s and I have no interest in rebuying LPs again. I wonder if the inflated prices and limited*

*editions in vinyl are a flash in the pan. OK, so it's been a half-decade long flash in the pan, but I maintain the point still holds fast.*

*In all other walks of life, new replaces the old. There might be a handover period, but the concept that the older format should continue to challenge the new is absurd. LP was dead and buried in the 20th Century. It's back in tiny numbers by a small cabal of retro types who think the world looked best through a 1970s filter (I was there at the time... it didn't). The rest of the world views us as idiot luddites. So why continue to support this nonsense with endless reviews of obsolete LP gear? CD sounded better than LP decades ago, but rose-tinted hearing aids, and the glib patter of snake oil vinyl peddlers means you can still fool some of the people all of the time.*

*I'm calling it! I think the whole vinyl revival will be dead by this time next year. The teenagers who buy their music at Urban Outfitters to hang on the wall are getting bored with the whole idea of collecting old musical artefacts, as evidenced by the fact LPs were once at the front of Urban Outfitter stores and now they are pushed to the back. Music might be vital to the older generations who remember the days when LPs were million seller kings, but to the people who actually matter today, why would you pay for a piece of plastic when you can get the music you want to hear with you everywhere you go for free? It doesn't make sense, and when I see that Pink Floyd is one of the biggest selling vinyl LPs of the last year, why it doesn't make sense, makes sense. These LPs are not being bought by callow twentysomethings wanting to own their music in a physical form, but by their fathers or even grandfathers attempting to rekindle their youth. If that's the future of audio, it comes with a very short fuse!*

*I think by the end of next year, not only will this little vinyl bubble have burst, but sales of CD will have dropped to such a level, even the hardest of hardcore audiophools will have adopted some form of downloading. They may only be a dozen years or more late to the party, but they will get there in the end! The crazy thing about all this is that in 2016, with CD in its dotage and the rest of the world abandoning physical media at speed, the audio world is still firmly lodged in the 20th Century. Perhaps it had its best years in the last century and is just waiting for a space in the old format home!*

**David Finch, via email**

*I'm not entirely convinced that the vinyl revival deserves such animosity. It is, after all, down to the individual to decide what format they choose, and if this was driven solely by retro-style obsessed hipsters seeking obscure slices of history, why haven't we seen an 8-Track revival?*

*Vinyl is still the first choice of collectors in a way CD never quite achieved, and in a way that downloads can never satisfy. And, although many like the sound of digital, many also still think LP sounds better. Deal with it! – Ed*



# Muon

## THE BEST JUST GOT BETTER

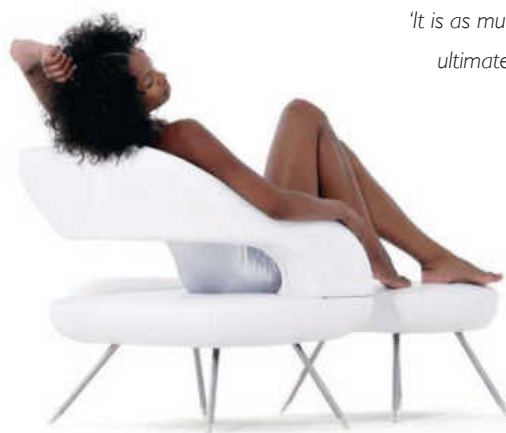
The result of Ross Lovegrove's unique design and KEF's acoustic expertise, KEF Muon has now evolved.

Thanks to the learnings from the development of the iconic KEF Blade, KEF engineers have enhanced the sonic abilities of KEF Muon with new driver technology. Existing Muon owners can even take advantage of these new advancements with a worldwide upgrade service to be carried out in their own listening room by a senior KEF engineer.

Arguably the world's most extraordinary audio speaker is now even better.

*'It is as much an extraordinary piece of sculpture as it is the ultimate sound provider - an exquisite example of British engineering and design at its very best.'*

Joshua's Magazine, Issue 5



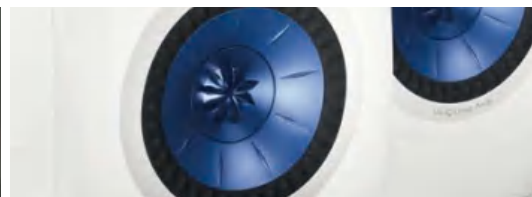
Thanks to the emergence of the iconic **KEF BLADE**, **KEF MUON's** technological prowess has been further enhanced, namely through the use of the latest iteration of KEF's landmark innovation, the unique Uni-Q 'point source' driver array.



**BLADE & BLADE TWO**



**THE REFERENCE**



**LS50**

## Munich High-End 2016

The most important show in the audio calendar is larger than ever *by Chris Martens and Alan Sircom*

**W**ith almost 20,000 attendees from 69 countries, and more than 500 exhibitors from 42 countries, the Munich High-End 2016 has truly earned its place at the forefront of audio expos worldwide. Every year it gets larger than ever, now expanding into four halls, two upper atria, and dozens of exhibition rooms across two upper floors. In fact, every May, the halls of the Munich M.O.C. are alive with the sound of music! In fact, the show itself is becoming so packed, there are a wealth of satellite events taking place in hotels and stores around Munich at the same time.

With such a plethora of new products in the same place, it becomes a mammoth

task in sifting through hundreds of great audio devices to find the important products and trends. Munich has almost become a victim of its own success: with so many brands vying for distribution, dealers, or coverage, they cannot all compete. Nevertheless, there were three distinct trends at Munich this year: the return of the grandiose statement turntable; the rise of MQA as a viable music source (serendipitously, Warner announced it joined the MQA club mid-way through the show), and the growing use of the phrase 'Roon-ready' on high-performance digital devices.

For more details on the Munich Show, along with reports on AXPONA and the Sty:us Show, please go to [www.hifiplus.com](http://www.hifiplus.com) +



*It's not all astronomical prices at Munich. British electronics expert Cyrus Audio went back to its 'singing shoebox' roots with the new £699 One integrated amplifier, a deceptively powerful Class D design that punches above its weight*



*"In fact, every May, the halls of the Munich M.O.C. are alive with the sound of music!"*



*Away from the show, Bowers & Wilkins – now owned by a US tech start-up! – showed the impressive new £22,500 800 D3 flagship floorstander*



*Magico debuted its outstanding new S5 mk II floorstanding loudspeaker at Munich, complete with graphene mid and bass drivers and a diamond-coated beryllium dome*





Acoustical System's massive (380kg) Apolyt air-bearing turntable defines 'over the top'



The new Avenger from VPI saw its first European outing in the Nordost room. The deck (priced from \$9,500) looks set to repeat the success of the company's ever-popular Prime



UK hybrid amp experts Trilogy launched the £4,995 903 preamplifier with the matching 125W £4,995 993 power amp. The 903 can be fitted with a top-class phono stage for £1,450



Launched last year as a two-speaker range, Focal has added a new larger three-way, four driver €18,000 No. 3 floorstander (as well as centre, surround, and subwoofer) to the Sopra line



Abyss previewed its slim, elegant new Diana planar magnetic headphone whose design is dramatically different to the firm's original AB-1266 model



Looking ostensibly similar to the Air Force One, the working prototype of the new flagship €104,000 Air Force One Premium model Improvements, including a new platter, are said to be 'significant'



► Danish loudspeaker expert Audiovector launched its new QR series at the show. The two strong range includes the €1,800 QR 3 tower loudspeaker that brings folded AMT ribbon technology to a new price point



Raidho's new D-4.1 slimline tower loudspeaker might cost €100,000, but is still dwarfed by the company's flagship. The new tower sounded great, driven by Avik electronics



Marten's new product for 2016 is the €45,000 Mingus Quintet, which also draws from technology first seen in the company's award winning Coltrane Reference 2 flagship



The best digital sound at the show came from an analogue brand! Brinkmann's latest foray into digital audio – its first since 1986 – is the modular, upgradable Nyquist. It is expected at the end of this year, for €12,000



▼ Hegel swore it would never make another CD player. Fortunately the Mohican (as in 'Last of the...') isn't just another CD player. Hegel claim it's the best CD player, ever!



► As ever with Burmester, the clue is in the name; the Concept 500 began life as the loudspeaker equivalent of a concept car and weighs 500kg per side. However, it will become a production model soon, and not in 'dazzle pattern' camouflage



Mytek's cool and affordable Brooklyn DAC/headphone amp is one of the first to provide hardware-level MQA support





# HA-2

## EUROPEAN HI-FI USB DAC/HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER OF THE YEAR 2015-2016

HA-2 is a compact headphone amplifier and USB DAC featuring ESS Sabre<sup>32</sup> Reference ES 9018-K2M DAC chip and support for 384 kHz/32-bit PCM and DSD up to 11.2MHz



“HA-2 is the smart choice for those seeking a polished-sounding and gutsy performer that's keenly priced.”

“For £250, you'll struggle to find better detail or dynamics from a headphone amplifier and USB DAC.”

“A gem of a headphone amp/DAC at a very competitive price. Deserves to win plenty of friends.”

“It's this combination of power and finesse that's so alluring in something so affordably priced.”

“...a crushingly competent piece of equipment for the asking price.”

oppo

[oppodigital.co.uk/where-to-buy](http://oppodigital.co.uk/where-to-buy)





*for the love of music...*  
*...internet and FM radio tuners*



MD 809 Internet Media Tuner



MD108 Triode FM Analogue Tuner



The broader your taste in music, the more you will love them...

*Distributed Exclusively by*

**AUDIOFREAKS**

DISTRIBUTION AND CONSULTANCY OF FINE AUDIO INSTRUMENTS

Cardas • conrad-johnson • finite elemente  
High Resolution Technologies • Karan Acoustics • Kuzma  
**Magnum Dynalab** • McCormack • Muse Electronics  
Running Springs Audio • Zanden Audio

tel: **020 8948 4153** fax: 020 8948 4250 email: [info1@audiofreaks.co.uk](mailto:info1@audiofreaks.co.uk) [www.audiofreaks.co.uk](http://www.audiofreaks.co.uk)

*for the love of music...*  
*...internet and FM radio tuners*



MD90 FM Analogue Tuner



MD 807 Internet Media Tuner



The broader your taste in music, the more you will love them...

*Distributed Exclusively by*

**AUDIOFREAKS**

DISTRIBUTION AND CONSULTANCY OF FINE AUDIO INSTRUMENTS

Cardas • conrad-johnson • finite elemente  
High Resolution Technologies • Karan Acoustics • Kuzma  
**Magnum Dynalab** • McCormack • Muse Electronics  
Running Springs Audio • Zanden Audio

tel: **020 8948 4153** fax: 020 8948 4250 email: [info1@audiofreaks.co.uk](mailto:info1@audiofreaks.co.uk) [www.audiofreaks.co.uk](http://www.audiofreaks.co.uk)



Lindemann's versatile Musicbook: DSD upsamples PCM files to higher resolutions or to DSD, while serving as a combination DAC, streamer, and preamplifier



IsoTek's new EVO3 Genesis One and Titan One are respectively slimline power regeneration and power conditioning devices designed for individual source component use



Dynaudio revised its ever-popular Contour range with two new standmounts and a floorstanders. The baby of the range – the €4,500 Contour 20 sang sweetly in a large room



The new DAC9 converter, PH9 phono stage, and LS28 line pre form Audio Research's new Foundation range, and are expected to cost \$7,500 per unit. Power amps and integrated amps are expected to follow



The British Pro Audio experts at Prism Sound entered the consumer electronics fray with their classy new Callia high-res USB DAC/headphone amplifier



► Ohravo's ambitious, hybrid dynamic/AMT driver-equipped eamt-1W might be the highest performance universal-fit earphone on the planet



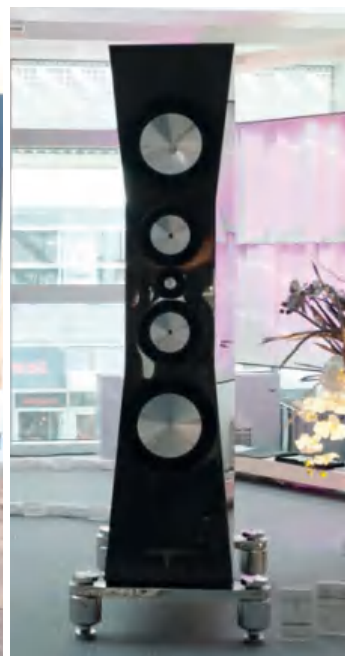
Before it made loudspeakers, ELAC was best known for its turntables. For its 90th Anniversary, ELAC returned to its roots with the €2,000 Miracord, available in some very funky colours!



At Munich, Ayre debuted its incredibly flexible, Roon-ready, and very high performance €9,980 QX-5 Twenty streaming DAC/digital hub/headphone amplifier



Living Voice's new Vox Palladian feature a less ornate build and chemically patinated bronze, shaving more than a third off the Vox Olympian it's based upon. That still means £210,000, of course. But partnered with the prototype Vox Basso sub, this remains an awesome loudspeaker system



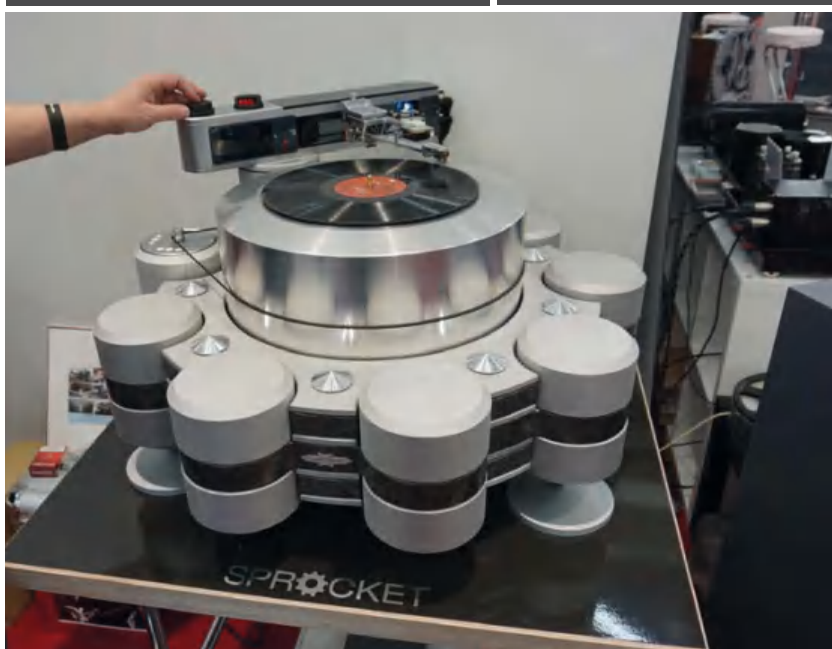
Zellaton showed its ultimate loudspeaker, the €299,950 Statement. The three-way, four-ohm, five-driver loudspeaker weighs in at 350kg, with Schnerzinger treatment built into the actual design



Bergmann's new €15,000 Galder air bearing turntable is the first from the brand that includes an arm-board instead of a built-in arm. Make that four arm boards, if you want!



Built out of its top HD range, Nagra's showed a prototype of its one box valve Classic Preamp, which joins the Classic DAC and integrated amp in September this year



Tone Tools' sophisticated Sprocket turntable and Dereneville DTT-02 radial-tracking tonearm are chockfull of advanced technologies



# North West Audio Show

**One Great Show,  
Two Fabulous Venues**

**Sunday 26th June 2016**

**Free Entry, Free Shuttle, Free Parking**

Reserve your ticket at  
[www.audioshow.co.uk](http://www.audioshow.co.uk)  
or ring 07561803670

Exclusive Media Partner

**Hifi Pig**

[www.hifipig.com](http://www.hifipig.com)

**KENNERTON**  
AUDIO EQUIPMENT



Kennerton were the  
first to show their Planar  
Magnetic Headphones in 2014

Hearing is believing

For your nearest dealer call 0203 5442338  
More fantastic products from NuNu Distribution Limited  
[www.nunudistribution.co.uk](http://www.nunudistribution.co.uk)

NuNu Distribution Ltd



# Mark Levinson Audio Systems No. 585 Integrated Amplifier

by Roy Gregory

**W**hat's more common than high-priced, heavyweight, high-end integrated amps? High-priced, heavyweight, high-end integrated amps that incorporate an internal DAC. You can argue about who was the first to offer a high-end integrated amplifier, aiming to offer the performance and advantages of (and thus monetise) their high-end brand identity at more approachable prices. If you really wanted to get archaeological on the subject one might brandish names like Lenteq, but for me, the first company that actually made the concept work was Mark Levinson with their No. 383. It wasn't the first to market, but it was the first such product that embodied both the superb ergonomics and build quality of the flagship products with more than a slice of their musical qualities too. The fact that it still holds its own today is no mean feat and rather proves the point.

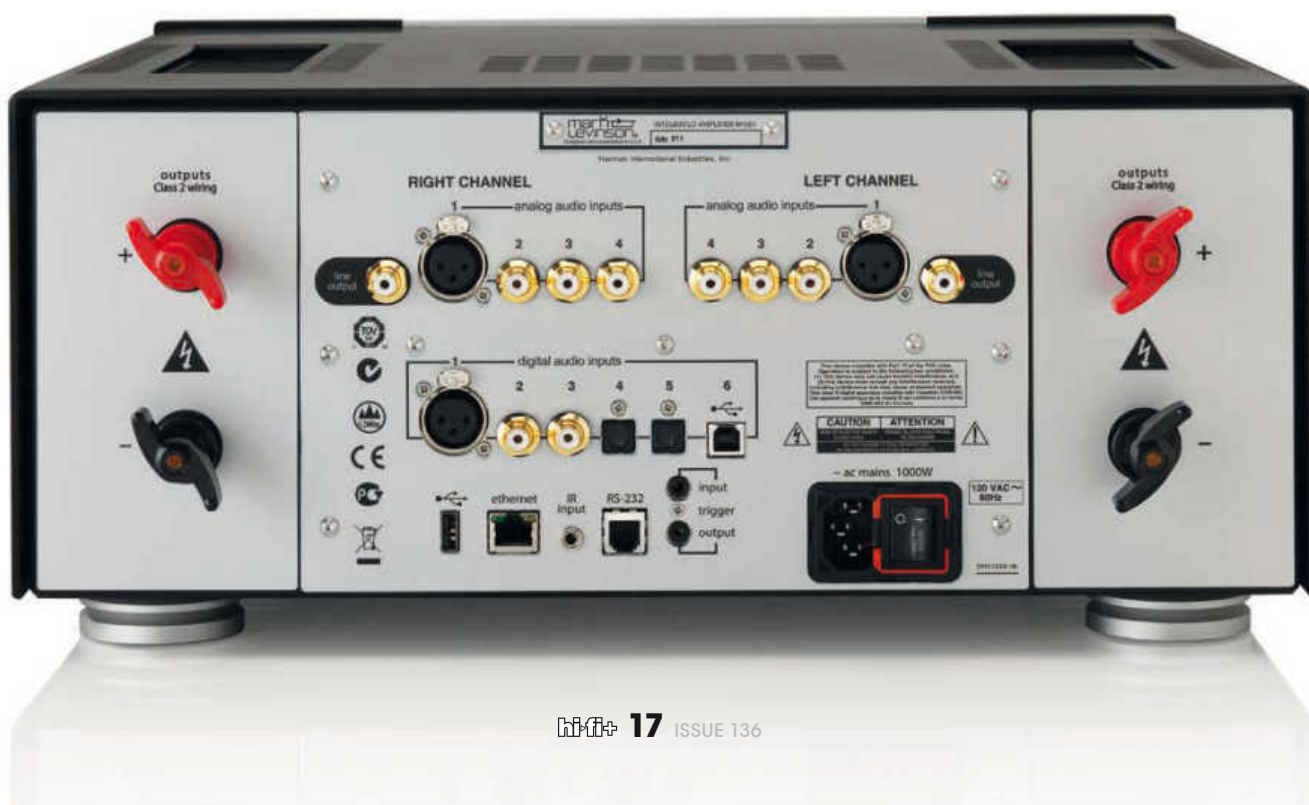
They say that history repeats itself and in this case, they're definitely right. Just as MLAS were far from first to the high-end integrated party, they've been pretty slow off the mark when it comes to the digital integrated market too, but once again, they've nailed it. Of course, that terminology – digital integrated – covers a lot of technological real estate and since the 383's hey-day we've seen the rise and rise of Class D amplification that offers huge amounts of cool-running power from diminutive dimensions. But by now you'll have gathered that I'm far from impressed with the vast majority of 'digital integrations' and the seemingly ubiquitous use of Class D, hybrid Class D, pseudo Class D, and every other kind of clever, not quite Class D you've ever come across has a lot to do with that. The archetypical example is the Devialet, a product that embodies everything good and bad with the whole concept – from its compact dimensions, stylish exterior, and multi-room, multi input versatility to its pan flat dynamic range and fractured temporal domain.

In many ways the £10,500 Levinson 585 is both a contrast and a direct response to products like the Devialet. Traditionally beefy, its substantial casework houses a classic fully differential, load tolerant, high-current Class AB output stage that will happily pump 200 watts into an 8 ohm load

(twice the rated output of its predecessor), while its 33kg dead-weight will come as a distinctly unpleasant shock to Class D fans. This amplifier looks and feels like it means business and that's something that carries over to both its connectivity and, as you'll see (and hear), its sound. As well as one balanced and three single-ended analogue inputs, the 585 offers six digital inputs (asynchronous USB, two Toslink optical, two S/PDIF on RCA, and, thank the Lord, AES/EBU). Each output can be named and have its level set. The analogue inputs can each be configured for use with a surround sound processor, while you can choose the PCM filter characteristics for each of the digital inputs as well as whether or not to apply Harman's proprietary Clari-Fi circuitry, designed to restore dynamic range to compressed file formats like MP3. There's also a set of outputs (on single-ended RCAs) that can be set as fixed, variable, or pre-out (power-amp disabled). Finally, there's a high-pass option on the main speaker connections, for use in systems with a sub-woofer.

But the real clincher here is not the sheer range of options, but the ease with which you can access and control them. When the 383 first appeared back at the turn of the century, it embodied the state-of-the-art user interface and menu system from the Levinson Reference products. Super intuitive and incredibly straightforward, it has yet to be bettered, and in a world where systems are starting to seriously resemble computers, with all the opaque operational complexity and software glitches that implies, you can imagine how pleased I was to discover that the 585 has inherited the 383's control logic lock, stock, and barrel. Throw in a display that's big enough and clear enough to read from across the room and that can be dimmed or set to switch off after ten seconds, and you have pretty much the perfect interface. You can even define how quickly the volume control responds to input...

The rear panel is the same model of clarity, with well-spaced and clearly labelled connections on a silver panel that makes things easy to read; even upside down in the back of a rack. One welcome change is that the wings on Harman's butterfly binding posts have been profiled to accept thicker spades, while their centre plugs can be removed to take ▶







*“Only a fool underestimates the difficulty of building a DAC and an amplifier into the same box.”*

surprise to discover that the balanced line inputs of the fully differential 585 were noticeably cleaner, more dynamic, and more musically expressive than the single-ended option. What WAS a surprise was just how much better the AES/EBU input sounded than the balanced analogue alternative. Crisper, more transparent, more dimensional, and more immediate, it brought a sense of vigour and purpose to playing where it was needed, a stately calm where that was appropriate, extending the rhythmic flexibility and expressive range still further. This is high-end music making as it should be, the system receding into the background and the performers taking centre-stage.

Only a fool underestimates the difficulty of building a DAC and an amplifier into the same box, with successful examples countable on the fingers of one hand, virtually all limited to pre-amplification/control duties and all at prices considerably higher than the not-inexpensive 585. Whilst I can name a number of impressive integrated amps with genuine high-end aspirations, in the case of those that offer an internal DAC option it is generally best deployed as a stop-gap until you can afford something better. Rarely does an internal DAC compete with the analogue outputs of an even half-decent CD player, let alone standalone designs. Which is fine, because the internal options score on price where they lose on performance. Until now: Levinson has always made great sounding and above all, highly musical DACs and the one inside the 585 is no exception. This thing sings! It requires no excuses or apologies, no claims as regards value for money. This thing is just plain great, with a fundamentally musical quality that is right at the heart of and perfectly matched to the performance of the 585 as a whole. Based around an ESS Sabre chip-set, Levinson has executed the implementation with its normal attention to power supply arrangements and engineering detail. Able to accept data rates up to 32bit/192kHz it might not be fully signed up to the latest round of escalation in the digital numbers game, but if you can drag yourself away from the numerical claims of high-res long enough to actually listen, you’ll discover just how remarkably convincing even Red Book CD can be when it’s played through a really good decoder. And lest you think that ‘acoustic music’ translates to ‘warm and woolly’, just try a bit of Deadmau5 with the DAC filter set to Fast. The 585’s 200 Watts might not be quite as muscular as the sort of Watts that ▶

▶ bananas. In fact, about the only operationally retrograde step relative to the 383 is the switch from the latter’s ‘soap-bar’ remote to a more conventional rectangular design, although I guess that’s just a case of personal preference.

Yet, despite all this versatility the 585 remains at heart a purist device. As it stands, it offers no streaming or network connectivity beyond its USB input (although you can expect that to become an option, along with an internal phono-stage, at a later date). For all its configurable inputs, filters and offsets, these are set and forget options rather than constant invitations to fiddle. Which is just as well because once you start listening, the desire to adjust the 585’s set-up quickly recedes. Like the 383 before it, the 585 is so inherently engaging that you soon forget about functionality and lose yourself in the music. Its sound is big, solid, and dimensional, with a presence, shape, colour, and dynamics that really breathe. For what it’s worth and after exhaustive comparative listening, I set the digital filter to its Minimum Phase position (exactly as suggested by Levinson for the predominantly acoustic music I listen to). But my investigation wasn’t entirely wasted time, as it left me seriously impressed by the 585’s internal DAC. Carefully controlled listening to the digital inputs as compared to the balanced and single-ended analogue connections (you’ll need to trim the offsets to match levels) established a clear hierarchy. Fed by the analogue and digital outputs of the Audio Research Reference CD9 – no slouch itself when it comes to digital decoding – it was no



Zero-compromise isolation technology  
A necessity — not an accessory.

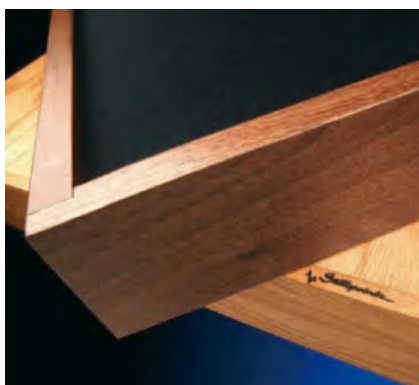
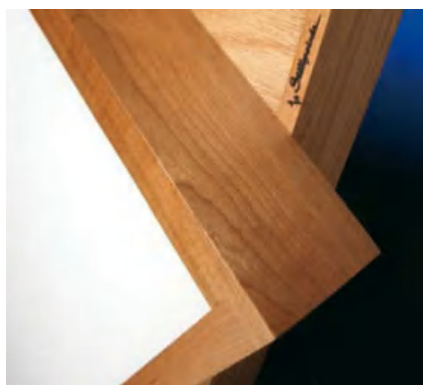


*"The Ultra 6 is a state-of-the-art isolation device. Deploy it under an audio chassis and it will disclose addictive new layers of detail and harmonic richness - in addition to improvements in dynamics and just about anything else that contributes to the lifelike reproduction of music."*

Product of the Year Awards 2015, The Absolute Sound



An absorber, a diffuser, a resonator.



The Stillpoints Aperture is a patent-pending design blending three essential elements of sound contouring; an absorber, a diffuser, and a resonator, *all in one product.*

*"The effect of the Apertures in my room was dramatic: almost a sonic black hole....the Stillpoints made the boundary seem to disappear, greatly enhancing center-image stability, solidity, and focus - areas where I'd thought no improvements were possible.... the Stillpoints Apertures produced a truly dramatic and positive change in the sound. Your dealer should let you take some home to try out. If your experience with them is like mine, you won't return them."*

Michael Fremer, Stereophile February 2015

*To try Stillpoints for yourself, please contact your local stockist.*

<b>Analogue Seduction</b>	Peterborough	01733 350878	<b>Lotus Hifi</b>	Weybridge	07887 852513
<b>Audio Destination</b>	Tiverton	01884 243584	<b>Lintone Audio</b>	Newcastle	0191 477 4167
<b>Choice Hifi</b>	Richmond	020 8392 1959	<b>Martins Hifi</b>	Norwich	01603 627010
<b>Criterion Audio</b>	Cambridge	01223 233730	<b>Rayleigh Hifi</b>	Rayleigh	01268 779762
<b>Homesound</b>	Edinburgh	0131 662 1327	<b>Sonic Synergy</b>	Swansea	07971 849474
<b>KJ West One</b>	Marylebone	020 7486 8262	<b>Studio AV</b>	Eton	01753 863300



Distributed by  
**KOG AUDIO**

[www.kogaudio.com](http://www.kogaudio.com)

[info@kogaudio.com](mailto:info@kogaudio.com)

024 7722 0650

*“Levinson describes the 585 as its Swiss Army Knife and, while I get where that’s coming from, I think it’s selling this product short.”*

► come from similarly rated mono-blocs at six or so times the price, but they still deliver exactly the sort of slam and attack, weight, and slab sided dynamics that take dance beats from bouncy to compelling, stopping by addictive on the way. Just as you’ll never have to apologise for the 585’s digital inputs, you’ll never have to apologise for the way it drives speakers either. Its marriage with the Ubiq Model One, a speaker dedicated to delivering musical bandwidth, presence, and above all level, was surely made in heaven; for as supremely subtle and coherent as the 585 is, when required it will get down and get seriously messy with the best of them.

If one musical experience sums up the 585 it has to be the sheer gusto with which it delivered Berglund’s typically barnstorming rendition of Sibelius’ ‘Karelia’ [Warner], especially the opening intermezzo, a piece that starts with an almost schizophrenic combination of stately meter and underlying urgency, building and building and building to one of the most intense crescendos that Sibelius ever wrote. If you start this at realistic listening levels then more often than not you soon find yourself backing off the volume control. I decided to risk giving the 585 its head – with remote close at hand just in case – but I needn’t have worried. This might be Levinson’s junior amplifier but it drove Focal’s Sopra No.2s within an inch of their life without the slightest sign of strain, congestion, or compression: it just got louder – and louder – and went on getting louder right up to the climax. That’s pretty impressive in a number of ways, but it’s not just the sheer volume but the consummate grace that’s the thing. The energy, vitality, substance, and intent that informs the impressive, in-the-room presence the 585 brings to a Vivaldi Cello Sonata or intimate female vocal simply scales up with larger pieces and bigger bands in a way that few systems can manage.

Levinson describes the 585 as its Swiss Army Knife and, while I get where that’s coming from, I think it’s selling this product short. The classic do-it-all tool will allow you to get most jobs done – just about. The 585 does pretty much everything and does it so well that it really does deliver on the simple is better promise of integrated electronics solutions. This is the heart and soul of a genuinely great, genuinely high-end system: just add source components and speakers, and you’ll end up with a set up that doesn’t just stand head and shoulders above its peers, it will easily better many bigger,

more complex, more ambitious, and far more expensive rigs. Perhaps I haven’t spent enough time discussing not just how capable the 585 is, but how genuinely engaging and musically satisfying it is. There’s a rightness and completeness, a coherence, and authority to its delivery that renders the musical performance separate from the system recreating it and actively encourages listening. It’s elegant, versatile, and utterly unflappable, allowing you to enjoy what it does without worrying about (or even noticing) how it does it. Once again, Levinson has set the high-end integrated benchmark. Stepping into the shoes of the 383, the 585 is bigger, even better, and much more versatile. It’s the real deal, the genuine article in a world where many promise and so few deliver. In fact, ‘genuine’ pretty much sums up what is a superbly complete and accomplished product: one that actually does deliver on the musical promise that so many of us spend so much time and money pursuing. One amp to live with, in sickness and in health? Right now, the 585 is it! +

## TECHNICAL PANEL

**Type:** Class AB integrated amplifier with built-in DAC

**Inputs:** 6x Digital (AES/EBU, 2x S/PDIF, 2x TOSlink, USB),

1x Analogue line-level balanced XLR, 3x Analogue line-level single-ended RCA

**Bit Depth/Sample Rate:** 32bit/192kHz

**Outputs:** 1pr RCA configurable for fixed, variable or pre-out

**Rated Output:** 200 Watts/8 Ohms  
350 Watts/4 Ohms

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 438 x 193 x 507mm

**Weight:** 32.6kg

**Price:** £10,500

**Manufactured by:** Mark Levinson

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

**UK Distributor:** Karma AV

**URL:** [www.karma-av.co.uk](http://www.karma-av.co.uk)

**Tel:** +44(0)1423 358846





# BUY • SELL • EXCHANGE



## GREAT VALUE NEW & PRE-OWNED HIGH END HI-FI

Huge range of high end brands • Expert system matching advice • Used High end hi-fi bought and sold  
Part exchange available • All items checked and guaranteed • Major credit cards accepted

### LATEST TOP 40

Thales Simplicity II	£4990
Nordost Heimdall	£300
Tice Audio Solo (80/P-3 Circuit)	£390
Jeff Rowland Model 2 & Synergy III pre	£4490
Ortofon RS 309D 12	£1490
Audience AdeptResponse AR12 (8x UK sockets)	£2750
Townshend Audio Maximum Supertweeters	£790
SHUNYATA RESEARCH King Cobra Power Cable 13A	£1290
SHUNYATA RESEARCH King Cobra Power 20A	£1290
LFD MC1 Phono	£490
Koetsu Black Goldline	£890
Martin Logan Fresco (pair)	£690
Dr. Feickert Analogue Woodpecker 2 (Rosewood)	£1790
Unison Research Unico Pre and DM	£2250
Heed Zene	£390
PS Audio DirectStream DAC	£3250
Rockport Technologies Mira	£4500
Vertex AQ Mini moncayo links	£275
Krell KCT	£2495
Naim Audio cdx 2	£1680
Dan D'Agostino Momentum Pre & Power	£2990
Audiolab 8000A	£130
Koetsu Black Goldline	£1500
Revel Ultima Salon 2	£8500
B.A.T. VK 50SE	£4500
MIT Matrix HD23	£690
MIT Matrix HD12	£350
Accuphase DG38	£3500
Gryphon Diablo	£4900
Classe Audio CA 2300	£2950
Vitus SS010	£4990
PAB (Pro Audio Bono) SE AVP	£490
Nordost Visnu Power Cables	£290
Krell FPB 750mcx (upgraded from 650m)	£7490
Musical Fidelity KW250s	£2899
Ubiq Audio Model 1	£9990
Horning Eufrodite mk4/5	£4990
Clear Audio Solution + RB300	£690
Vitus Andromeda	£790
Chord Company (The) Sarum Super Aray 1m rca	£1390

### POWER AMPLIFIERS

Aesthetix Atlas Mono Blocks	£9990
Ayre Acoustic V-5XE	£1990
B.A.T. VK 50SE	£4500
B.A.T. VK-255 SE	£3700
BMC Audio CS2 Integrated/Power Amplifier NEW	£5495
BMC Audio M2 Monoblocks NEW	£10990
Chord Electronics Symphonic MC phono stage	£1875
Classe Audio CA 2300	£2950
Conrad Johnson Prem 8A monoblocks	£4950
Crimson Electronics 640 E3 Monoblocks NEW	£3399

Gryphon Antileon	£5990
Halbro DM 88 Monoblocks	£24950
Karan Acoustics KA M2000	£22990
Krell FPB 400CX	£4490
Krell FPB 750mcx (upgraded from 650m)	£7490
Lamm Lamm M1.1	£6990
Linn Klimax Solos	£8995
Luxman M800A stereo power	£8990
Mark Levinson No 532H NEW	£7500
Mark Levinson No 532H stereo power amp	£4995
Mark Levinson No. 532	£9990
McIntosh MC203	£3950
McIntosh MC275 (2 Available)	£4250
Naim Audio Nap 180	£600
Naim Audio Nait 3	£320
Pathos InPower	£4990
Plinius SA 250mkIV	£3495
Sony TIAN R1 monoblocks	£8990
Soulution Audio 711 upgraded from 710	£29990
Tom Evans Linear A NEW	£4750
Tube Technology Genesis Monoblocks	£1390
VTL MB 450-III Signature Monoblocks NEW	£18500
Welborne Labs DRD45	£1490

### PRE AMPLIFIERS

Audible Illusions Modulus 3A	£2250
Audio Research LS2	£850
B.A.T. VK-53 SE	£8240
BMC Audio DAC1PreHR NEW	£3990
Boulder 1010 Pre	£6950
C.A.T. SL1 Ultimate	£7295
Cary SLP 98L	£2295
Concordant Exquisite + Exclusive	£1150
Crimson Electronics 710 Pre Amp NEW	£3995
Gryphon Sonata Allegro	£5490
Jadis JPL	£1700
Krell Evolution 202	£3990
Krell KCT	£2495
Linn Klimax Kontrol	£4250
Luxman 8C00F	£8990
Mark Levinson No 326s NEW	£8170
Mark Levinson No 380	£1790
McIntosh C2500	£4500
Naim Audio HiCap	£325
Naim Audio HiCap	£295
Naim Audio HiCap	£275
Sony TAE 900	£2990
Tom Evans The Vibe pre & Pulse power supply	£2750
Unison Research CSP	£995
Viola Labs Spirito II	£19990
VTL TL 6.5 Signature Series II Line Pre NEW	£12750

### LOUDSPEAKERS

Alon Phalanx	£4990
ATC SCM300AT based custom model	£8550
Audio Acoustics FUNDAMENTAL K2	£5995
Auroral A1 MK	£445
Avalon Indra	£11500
Avalon Time	£42500

B&W Matrix 800	£5990
Beauhorn B2.2 Revelation	£1800
Diapason Adamantes 3	£2490
Diapason Adamantes 3 25th Anniversary	£2490
Diapason Astera	£3990
Dynaudio Confidence C2	£4250
Focal JM Lab Grande Utopia III EM	£121999
Focal JM Lab Scala v2 Utopia 3-way	£13990
Focal JM Lab Stella Utopia III EM	£47990
Focal JM Lab Maestro Utopia 3	£16990
Gamut S5	£9490
Genesis Technologies 5.3	£7500
Hansen Audio Emperor	£32500
Horning Eufrodite mk4/5	£4990
con Audio MFV3 piano black	£490
Infinity Kappa 9	£1590
JBL 250 II	£2890
KEF Muon	£85000
Krell resolution 3	£2700
Martin Logan Summit	£3990
Martin Logan Logos Centre	£590
Quad 2905 (serviced 11/2014)	£2490
Revel Ultima Salon 2	£8500
Revel Ultima Studio 2 NEW	£8490
Rockport Technologies Mira	£4500
Ruark Rapsody	£200
Sonus Faber Amati Homage	£7990
Sonus Faber Amati Anniversario GR	£11990
Spendor A3	£600
Titan 3Way	£1295
Townshend Audio Maximum Supertweeters	£790
Ubiq Audio Model 1	£9990
wharfedale 1950's Corner Horns	£6990
Wilson Audio Watt Puppy 7	£6750
Wilson Audio Maxx 3	£49500
Wilson Audio WATT Puppy 7	£5990

### CD PLAYERS AND DACS

Accuphase DP500	£2250
Aesthetix Romulus CD	£2750
Arcam rDAC + Squeeze	£250
Audio Aero Capitol Reference MKII	£1790
Audio Aero Capitol Signature	£3300
Audio Aero La Fontaine	£17500
Ayon Skylla II	£2490
BMC Audio BDCD1.1 Belt Drive CD Player NEW	£3795
BMC Audio PureDAC NEW	£1550
Compand CDA822	£550
Krell Evolution 525	£4990
Mark Levinson No 31.5 Reference CD Transport	£2990
Mark Levinson No 512 CD/SACD NEW	£12255
Mark Levinson 512 CD/SACD	£5990
Mark Levinson No 31 & 30.5 Transp/Dac	£7450
McIntosh MCD 550	£3800
Micro Seiki CDM2	£1290
MICROMEGA Microdac	£245
Moon 300D	£850
Moon Electronic Supernova CD	£1990

Musical Fidelity M6 CD	£899
Naim Audio cdx 2	£1680
Perreaux DP32	£1475
Plinius CD Player101	£2400
Primare BD32	£3500
Primare DC31	£600
Proced CDP CD/HD/CD player	£995
Proced PDP 2 D to A Converter	£350
PS Audio DirectStream DAC	£3250
Vitus SCD 025	£8900
Wadia 3811	£3490

### TURNABLES / ARMS / CARTRIDGES & PHONO STAGES

Aesthetix IO Eclipse	£15590
Audio Research PH8 black	£3890
BMC Audio MCCI Phono MC NEW	£2590
Boulder MM/MC Phono stage & psu	£1795
Cello Cartridge	£4000
Clear Audio da Vinci V2	£2890
Clear Audio Insider Gold	£500
Clear Audio Solution + RB300	£690
DaVinciAudio Labs Reference Gandeza Cartridge	£2790
Dr. Feickert Analogue Woodpecker 2 (Rosewood)	£1790
Dr. Feickert Analogue NG High-Precision Cartridge Alignment Tool	£149
Esoteric E 03 Phono stage (mm/mc)	£2990
Gale GT2101 Turntable	£7990
Heed Zene	£390
Jan Allaerts MC1B mk1	£1495
Koetsu Black Goldline	£890
Koetsu Black Goldline	£1500
Kuzma Stabi (wood) & Ref psu	£1990
LFD MC1 Phono	£490
Linn LP12	£1500
Linn Sondek LP12, Ittok, Majik PSU	£3500
Rosewood	£3500
McCormack Micro Phono Drive	£390
Oracle Delphi MKIV/V (modified)	£1290
Origin Live Digital Stylus Force Gauge	£65
Ortofon RS 309D 12	£1490
Pink Triangle Export/ Zeta	£1495
SME 3009 Series II Improved	£350
SME 312s NEW	£2050
SME Model 20/12A NEW	£11567
SME Model 30/12A NEW	£23950
SME Series V Gold plated arm	£2990
SME Model 10A turntable	£4490
SME Model 20/3A NEW	£8990
SME Model 30/2A	£8790
SME Series V-12 NEW	£3668
Sumiko Pearwood Celebration II NEW	£1190
Thales Simplicity II	£4990
Tom Evans The Groove Plus mkII NEW	£4990
Tri-Planar MK Ull	£2890
Wheaton Tri-Planar MK IV	£1795

### INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS

Analog Domain Audio GmbH Isis M75D NEW	£17500
Audio Note Meishu	£4000
Audiolab 8200 CDQ	£650

Audiolab 8000A	£130
Devialet 120	£2990
Gryphon Diablo	£4900
Icon Audio Stereo 40se	£450
Lizard Wizard Audio	£495
Primare i22 with inbuilt DAC	£1100
Vitus SS010	£4990

### CABLES

Analysis Plus Solo Crystal Oval 8-shotgun	£890
BMC Audio PureUSB Cable 2 & 5 m NEW	£210
Cardas Audio Golden cross tone arm cable	£250
Chord Company (The) Sarum Super Aray 1m rca	£1390
DNM Speaker & interconnect	£600
Kubala Sosna Anticipation	£190
MIT Matrix HD 12	£350
MIT Matrix HD23	£690
MIT MH 750 10ft pair	£450
NBS Audio Signature II AES/EBU	£395
Nordost blue heaven	£330
Nordost Visnu Power Cables	£290
Nordost Blue Heaven 3m Bi Amp	£350
Nordost Heimdall	£300
Nordost Valhalla 1m XLR	£1290
SHUNYATA RESEARCH King Cobra Power 20A	£1290
SHUNYATA RESEARCH King Cobra Power Cable 13A	£1290
TelluriumQ 2x 3m Graphite Speaker Cable	£1800
TelluriumQ Black Speaker 1.1m pair NEW	£130
TelluriumQ Ultra Black 2m Speaker	£750
TelluriumQ Ultra Black 3m Speaker	£1250
Transparent Audio Reference interconnect with MM technology	£1650
Transparent Audio Reference XL 1.25m XLR	£1200
Transparent Audio Reference MM2	£1895
Transparent Audio Reference Speaker Bi-Cable with MM technology	£2495
Transparent Audio Reference XL SS 12ft/ spades	£1990
Vertex AQ Mini moncayo links	£275
Vitus Andromeda	£790

### POWER CABLES

Nordost Visnu Power Cables	£290
SHUNYATA RESEARCH King Cobra Power 20A	£1290
SHUNYATA RESEARCH King Cobra Power Cable 13A	£1290
Vitus Andromeda	£790

### ACCESSORIES

Audience AdeptResponse AR12 (8x UK sockets)	£2750
Elevators (set of 7)	£195
Icon Audio BA3 Valve buffer stage	£500
LP Storage Boxes Record Storage	£95
Sennheiser HD800 Headphones	£800
Sonus Faber Guarneri Homage 2x Bass drivers + 1 Tweeter	£1290

[www.choice-hifi.com](http://www.choice-hifi.com)

Email [info@choice-hifi.com](mailto:info@choice-hifi.com)

Telephone 020 8392 1959 / 07768 720456

**STOCKIST OF** Audio Note **Audio Physic** Aurosal Burmester **Cat** Clear Audio **Denon** Graham Tonearms **JM Lab** Lexicon  
**Monitor Audio** Nad **Ortofon** **Panasonic** Parasound **Pioneer** Plinius **Primare** Project **Revel** Roksan **SME** Tom Evans Townshend  
**Velodyne** Yba **Mark Levinson** TelluriumQ **VTL** Acapella **Estelon** T+A **Entreq** Stillpoints **B.M.C. Audio GmbH**  
Analogue Domain Audio **Ubiq Audio** **JBL** **Exogal** **ATC** **Melco** Shun Mook Audio **Transfiguration** Avalon **Kiseki** **AND MANY OTHERS**

# Audio Research Reference Phono 3 phono stage

by Alan Sircom

**L**aunched at the tail end of last year, the Reference Phono 3 phono stage by Audio Research marks a significant change in the company, and it's not just cosmetic. The new Audio Research reflects the changes in the audio market, as we move further from products that are sublime on the inside only, to products that take every aspect of the design and build process seriously.

The Reference Phono 3 is a perfect example of that change in stance. It needs no back story and makes no apologies for itself, being extremely well made inside and out. There are little design touches in the Reference Phono 3 that combine to make this a far more acceptable product to a wider audience, losing the 'lab gear' look of previous

models. In fairness, the Reference series has been steadily improved inside and out for several years, but if you compare this 2016 model with the original Reference Phono made at the turn of the century, the toggle-switches, rattling case, and contrasting slimline grab-handles have all been replaced, making the product look more like it belongs in the home, not the test-bench. It's strange how powerful this change is, because the Reference models of a decade and a half ago seemed timeless, yet look old-fashioned by today's standards.

Of course, the big industrial design change is the move to that central black panel and large, softer-touch buttons. This harks back to very early Audio Research designs and first re-appeared in the G-Series line. It filtered through to the Reference range last year, and this year – with the Foundation series – it looks set to be a root-and-branch design change through the whole ARC line-up. Personally, I think it a marked improvement on what went before, even though I liked what went before.

Any product bearing the 'Reference' name in Audio Research has some big shoes to fill, but arguably none bigger than the Reference Phono 2 SE this new model replaces. The 'Ref 2' and 'Ref 2SE' were some of the most highly praised and keenly sought after top-notch phono stages on record,



and was in direct lineage to the cost-no-object Reference Phono 10 two box model. The Phono 3 doesn't exactly tear up the rule book and start again, and ostensibly the layout is similar even if the design has changed. The row of six push buttons to navigate through every part of the ARC's extensive menu system and the large green vacuum fluorescent dot matrix display panel remain 'effectively' unchanged, as do the five levels of loading and the 71dB of active gain used in cartridge matching. This is a better thing than it first seems because the original navigation system was already easy to drive, and the near infinite level of cartridge matching remains state-of-the-art.

Like its predecessor, the Reference Phono 3 is underpinned by an extremely sophisticated logic control (extremely sophisticated for a valve phono stage, that is – this isn't International Space Station grade stuff). You can adjust every parameter through a menu tree, from the amount of time the Reference Phono 3 will run before switching to standby, through gain settings, valve operational life, display brightness, and EQ. Depending on your take on the whole phono equalisation debate, however, this menu system might be completely upside down – I know of collectors who have gone through their LPs and mark whether they are best played through RIAA, Columbia, Decca, or one of several lesser known equalisation curves. The Reference Phono 3 offers the listener the option of scrolling through the Big Three – RIAA, Columbia, and Decca – but you'll need to run through all five main pages of the menu system to get to these. Listeners who change valves once every 2,000-4,000 hours, who never adjust the display brightness or standby settings, and who use the same cartridge month in, month out – but who might change EQ curves once or twice in a listening session – have to tab through a lot of pages to get there. Fortunately, the remote obviates all this, as it has one-touch access to curves, loading, and even tube hours.

I'm trying to sit on the fence deliberately here, because the equalisation arguments rage long and hard. For my part, I have a handful of older LPs (mostly Deccas) that seem to benefit from changing tone curve, and as a consequence the placement of EQ at the 'coffee and liqueurs' page of the menu seems wholly appropriate. No doubt others will get exercised over the same thing. Regardless, I'm pleased there are alternate tone curves on the Reference Phono 3 (as there were on its predecessor), and when called upon, they work extremely well; as in fairness they did on the Reference Phono 2 that went before.

The change from Ref 2 to Ref 3 comes in the guise of two additional 6H30 valves in the analogue stage (now bringing the total number of 6H30 valves in the Ref 3 to seven – six in the analogue stage – plus a solid-state rectifier and a 6550 in the power supply). These two additional valves do not replace the input FETs introduced in the Reference 2, they just add linearity to the analogue stage. Although an oversimplification, that basically means the power supply stage is effectively half of a mono valve power amplifier in its







*“This is a balance, but it’s both a dynamic one, and one that will appeal to many, many listeners.”*

gently warming up in a corner, 600 hours of active record playing). You could easily be talking a year of record playing before the amplifier comes on song. As I left the keys to my time machine in 1789, and this review isn’t beamed back from mid next year, there is still some room for improvement in the sound of the Reference Phono 3.

That sound combines the texture, soundstage spaciousness, and richness of valve phono stages with the detail and silent backgrounds of solid state. This is a balance, but it’s both a dynamic one, and one that will appeal to many, many listeners. This sense of balance makes for a presentation that is extremely realistic, irrespective of the music played. Of course, the more live and acoustic the recording, the more ‘real’ it sounds, but even an old 45rpm 12” single of ‘Two Tribes’ by Frankie Goes To Hollywood [ZTT] sounded ‘realistic’. In fact, this Trevor Horn throwing a studio at a remix is jaw-dropping on the least impressive audio equipment, but here it sounded unfeasibly dynamic, rich, and impressive. Listen to this dance-music-meets-1980s-paranoia masterpiece through a system worthy of the Reference Phono 3 and you’ll be left gasping by the end of the piece. Switch back to more traditionally audiophile-chummy, dynamic recordings like Tennstedt’s powerful version of Mahler’s Third Symphony [EMI], and you’ll be in the same state. This is not LP replay for the casual user; it’s for protracted musical sessions and enjoyment red in tooth and claw.

The Reference Phono 3 also always seems to have reserves in the tank. This doesn’t mean it never gets out of low gear, more that it is entirely unflappable. You might not think of a phono stage in terms of its musical robustness, but once you have

- own right, dedicated to feeding the three 6H30 valves for each channel. For a phono stage, that is heroic amounts of clean power delivery.

The transatlantic design team (electronics from Plymouth, in Minnesota, USA, product design from Vicenza, in Veneto, Italy) has come up with something more than just a nice case. In moving away from Audio Research’s classic design lines, the chassis has developed some elegant aluminium side panels that look great, but aren’t just for show: they help dissipate heat and resonance away from the all-important internals.

A cynical reading of the Reference Phono 3 would be “two more tubes and a nicer case. Is that it?” But, as ever with such things, the real-world take on this is that the Phono 3 is redesigned from first principles, incorporating the best elements of the Reference Phono 2 rather than simply ‘cloning’ its predecessor. In fact, the Reference Phono 3 is more like a synthesis of what Audio Research has learned from the rest of its Reference range, distilled into one big phono stage. Those two additional valves help linearity in a manner akin to that discovered in the Reference 10 and Reference 6 preamps.

Having a phono stage that is built like a power amplifier does have a short-term downside. It takes forever to run in. Whether it’s those Teflon capacitors (there are a lot of those) or the tubes bedding in or simply some mystery X factor that means the amp needs time to get used to its environment, but as with previous Audio Research products – and especially those in the Reference line – this takes hundreds of hours to come truly on song. It sounds good to excellent out of the box, but keeps on improving for the next few hundred hours (Audio Research itself suggests 600 hours... and not 600 hours of it

$$\Sigma \left( \begin{array}{l} \text{future proof +} \\ \text{benchmark performance +} \\ \text{superlative sound} \end{array} \right) = \text{Rossini}$$



### Future Proof

We are pioneers who are constantly developing new technologies to improve the quality of reproduced sound. Our unique approach to product design means that Rossini can anticipate and support new formats and innovations in audio.



### Benchmark Performance

Every *dCS* product must meet the extraordinarily exacting standards demanded by our military heritage. As a result Rossini delivers levels of consistency and reliability like no other.



### Superlative Sound

When you listen to Rossini our state of the art technology, manufacturing effort and rigorous testing combine to create a magical experience that perfectly recreates every last emotional nuance of whatever music you choose to listen to.

When you listen to Rossini from *dCS* you will believe that the world has stopped and there is...

## ONLY THE MUSIC

*dCS*  
ONLY THE MUSIC

*“While few phono stages sound ‘arthritic’, when listening to the Reference Phono 3, one gets an underlying sense of agility.”*

- experienced the authority of an phono amplifier (and let’s be clear on this, the Reference Phono 3 should be classed an ‘amplifier’ not a ‘stage’), its hard to look back at less robust designs.

Yet for all that unflappability, there’s one key word that effectively sums up the defining characteristic of the Reference Phono 3: agile. While few phono stages sound ‘arthritic’, when listening to the Reference Phono 3, one gets an underlying sense of agility. It reacts to the most subtle changes in timbre, tone, or dynamics without the least concern, and to such an extent it makes many rivals seem slightly ponderous. More interestingly, the handful of phono stages that match the Reference Phono 3’s agility often do so by sounding ‘twitchy’ in comparison. ‘A Night In Tunisia’ from Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers’ *A Night At Birdland Vol 1* [Blue Note] is a perfect example of what this phono stage does so well. The opening drum and percussion passages are full of subtle textures and dynamics, then the rest of the band kicks in like a whirlwind. The Reference Phono 3 tracks these changes perfectly and deftly, with outstanding (here comes that word again) agility.

Here’s the thing. There are some who take the whole ‘user adjustable EQ curves’ aspect as intrinsic to a good phono stage. There are some who insist on absolute adjustability of cartridge loading as key to good phono reproduction. There are some who demand a low noise floor from their benchmark phono stages. Even in high-end audio’s thermosphere (the one beyond the one beyond the stratosphere, populated by aurora, meteorites, and ballistic missiles), typically you might have to make do with a ‘two out of three ain’t bad’ approach to phono stage design. The Reference Phono 3 is that rare exception that ticks all the boxes: it is quiet, it is almost infinitely adjustable, and it does come with a profusion of EQ options. However, what makes the Reference Phono 3 really shine is that if you are simply a ‘fit and forget’ kind of listener, who will never delve deep into listening out for the optimum loading for each channel of a cartridge, and who will never, ever play anything other than the standard RIAA curve, the Reference Phono 3 still has much to offer, in sound quality terms.

The term ‘reference’ still has meaning for Audio Research, and it doesn’t use the term lightly. The Reference Phono 3 is a true reference point in turntable replay, as it extracts a remarkable amount of information from the cartridge, and yet plays it in a manner that invites you to listen to more and more albums. Those hundreds of hours of run-in will never be viewed as a chore, more as a pleasure, unveiling both what your records are capable of and just how much better your Reference Phono 3 gets. And those hundreds of hours will pass quickly, too. From a position of not firing the ejector seat on my own career at least, there can be no ‘best’ in high-end audio, but the Audio Research Reference Phono 3 is one of those rare devices that gets closer to ‘best’ than most. Highly recommended. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Hybrid phono stage

**Tube Complement:** (6)-6H30P dual triodes, plus (1 each) 6550WE and 6H30P in power supply

**Controls:** Six Push Buttons: Power, Menu, Option, Enter, Input, Mute

**Inputs:** 2× RCA stereo pair, earth tag, RS232 comms

**Outputs:** Balanced XLR pair, single-ended RCA pair

**Frequency Response:** ±2 dB of RIAA, 10 Hz to 60kHz; 3 dB points below 0.3Hz and above 300 kHz

**Distortion:** Less than .002% at 1.0V RMS 1kHz output

**Gain:** Selectable 51 dB (Low) and 73 dB (High) at 1kHz BAL; 45 dB (Low) and 67 dB (High) at 1kHz SE. (MC and MM compatible)

**Input Impedance:** 47k Ohms and 100 pF SE. Selectable loads: 1000, 500, 200, 100, 50 Ohms, and Custom

**Output Impedance:** 400 ohms Balanced, 200 ohms SE. Recommended load 50k-100k Ohms and 100 pF. (10k Ohms minimum and 2000 pF maximum)

**Phono Equalization:** (selectable) RIAA, Columbia, and Decca

**Dimensions (W×H×D):** 48×19.8×41.9cm. Handles extend 4 cm forward of the front panel

**Weight:** 16.6 kg

**Price:** £11,998

**Manufactured by:** Audio Research Corporation

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

**Distributed in the UK by:** Absolute Sounds Ltd

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

**Tel:** +44(0)208 971 3903





# ONDIVA<sup>TM</sup>

'The nicest loudspeaker you'll ever hear'  
'easy to drive, easy to listen to, easy to love'

*Alan Sircom, Hi-Fi+, issue 124*



MADE IN SWITZERLAND

*Alan Sircom, Hi-Fi+ further states:*

'plays like a large, full-range speaker'  
'room-filling, with a sense of scale that  
borders on the uncanny, and is a delight to hear'

The 'solidity of the image within that soundstage'  
and the effortless handling of the most demanding transients  
must be heard to be believed.

Those who have heard it want to trade in their floorstanders.

**ensemble<sup>®</sup>**

ENSEMBLE AG, PO Box 215, 4147 AESCH, Switzerland ☎ +41 61 461 9191 📠 +41 61 461 9325

[www.ensembleexperience.com](http://www.ensembleexperience.com)



## Bowers & Wilkins 803 D3

by Jason Kennedy

**M**ost loudspeaker companies tend to take an evolutionary approach to product development; they use the same basic design and refine it over time, a bit like a BMW 3 Series car. This is what B&W has been doing with its 800 series since the Nautilus design came about in 1998. That was the point when the cabinets went from being square to rounded, and the Nautilus 'head' was introduced. There have been three iterations of that model, the main change being the gradual introduction of a diamond tweeter across the entire range, starting back in 2005. For the latest D3 800 series models, there has been a ground up revision of pretty much every element of the various models. In fact, the only parts that have carried over from the previous range are the diamond dome itself and the cable terminals, which is good because they were (and are) rather nice.

At a glance, the D3 models look very much like their predecessors, especially the 802, but take a closer look and you'll see that they are slimmer, deeper, and proportionally different. The 'head' is smaller in diameter, but longer and less tapered. Perhaps most significantly, the driver it holds is no longer yellow Kevlar but silver 'Continuum', a proprietary material that has been in R&D for several years waiting patiently for the new generation models. The head itself is no longer made of Marlan, but cast in aluminium for greater stiffness where it matters. You wouldn't think that something as solid as synthetic stone could be vibrated by a relatively small drive unit, but it turns out that Marlan is not very stiff at 2kHz, which is bang in the midrange so crucial to this application. This, like most of the changes made for D3, is a means of reducing cabinet vibration and results in a 'quieter' loudspeaker that adds less of its own character to the music.

The cabinets are still made of curved plywood but, and this is strangely not obvious, the curve has been reversed. The bass drivers have to be mounted on aluminium rings to make this work and the open 'end' of the U-section woodwork is now covered with a full height aluminium heatsink that holds the crossovers and terminals. Internally the matrix structure that gives the cabinet rigidity has fewer parts but is made from plywood that's much beefier than the MDF it replaces, they also feature metal parts to provide maximum rigidity at the point where the drivers are fixed. In the past, Bowers &

Wilkins has used computer modelling to design its drive units; for D3 this technology has been used on the cabinet as well and this is why the designs have changed so much. The new 'Turbine' head is smaller and wider at the back for stiffness; it's made from a single aluminium casting and has internal bracing in the form of radial fins. To stop it ringing, the whole thing is damped with TPE (thermoplastic polymers), as used in modern Kango breakers.

The change of colour and name of the midrange driver is fairly significant as well; apparently they have been working on Continuum since 2007, but couldn't get consistent enough results for the 2010 800 series revision. The company now has a patent pending on it. It's a woven material like Kevlar, but is damped on the back; apparently this makes the midrange faster, has lower noise, and better self-damping. More critical is that Kevlar is anisotropic; its performance depends on the direction of weave. I recall Bowers & Wilkins mentioning that driver orientation is critical and this must be why.

The bass drivers are no longer Rohacell, but consist of carbon fibre skins over a syntactic foam core that the company is calling 'Aerofoil'. Unlike pretty well any other driver these cones are thicker in the middle than at the in- and outside. This stiffens the cone while keeping weight down and helps to push the first break-up mode to between 400 and 550Hz. The tweeter is still a diamond dome, but it has a new motor assembly, and it sits in a milled aluminium pod that's shorter than it used to be. It now has a permanent grille to protect the very fragile diamond dome and avoid the thousand pound cost of having it replaced. Apparently, R&D spent many hours sweating over the precise nature of the grille frets or holes, in order to find a design that did not compromise the sound.

I mentioned at the beginning that appearances haven't changed that much at first glance, but in the case of the 803, that isn't true. The last example of this model did not have a separate 'head', but had the midrange in the same enclosure as three rather than two bass drivers, with only the tweeter pod outside the box. For the new range Bowers & Wilkins have seen fit to make the 803 more like an 802; in fact, it is essentially a compact version of that model with a smaller Turbine head containing a 130mm Continuum mid above two 180mm bass drivers. The 802 on the other hand has a 152mm mid and 203mm bass drivers. The odd thing is that

the old 802 Diamond weighed only 10 kilos more than the new 803 D3; the price was very similar, too. The company even claims that the new 803 sounds better than the previous 802, and as I used three generations of that model over many years I can confirm that they aren't wrong; this thing is a proper 'OMG' loudspeaker.

Set up is facilitated by built in rollers that help move the 65 kilo weight of each speaker into place. A set of burly spikes lurk under the plinth and can be screwed down once you have found the optimal position: alternatively leave the spikes locked away and put the speakers on isolation bases for better results.

I'm told that the 803 D3s sound best when bi-wired, but as I have just the one set of Townshend Isolda DCT speaker cable, the supplied bridging cables were connected to get signal to both halves of the crossover; at least they're not bars or plates. From there on in, these speakers were a revelation: all that R&D work has resulted in a supremely articulate and transparent loudspeaker that exposed unexpected details on virtually everything I played. Steve Pearce from Bowers & Wilkins' R&D team, who brought the 803s over, likes to play loud – rather louder than me – but it was thrilling to hear such a visceral and at the same time clean sound. The low end coming off of an NAP 250 DR was almost physical. I discovered later that more could be achieved with more power, but the result with only 80 Watts was still an experience. Several albums demanded to be played, including one from Sonny Boy Williamson whose voice, blues harp, and finger clicks were delivered with a realism that belied the age of the recording. It has to be said that this speaker delivers on a visceral level with uncanny calm; that is, they produce a very strong, wide bandwidth sound but stop and start as effortlessly as a compact monitor. Very few speakers can reproduce the power of the double bass on Patricia Barber's 'Company' [*Modern Cool*, Premonition] without blurring the finger work. You need a grippy amplifier to achieve this but I have one of those in the ATC P1.

I didn't mention it before but this is a ported speaker; the port points down at the base so you don't see it and it's so well tuned that you don't hear it either. As a long time transmission line user, I have grown sensitized to port character, but couldn't detect any extra bloom to the bass with the 803 D3. What was







*“If there is a hint of three-dimensionality to be found, you will know all about it.”*

► easy to hear is supremely articulate, precise, and yet musically fluent sound quality with a range of sources and amplifiers, but this level of transparency means that the less able partnering equipment is very easy to identify. It made abundantly clear that networked digital sources are more musically engaging than USB connected ones for instance, the Primare PRE60 reviewed last month proving its worth with ease in this respect. Herbie Hancock’s version of ‘Ain’t Necessarily So’ [Gershwin’s *World*, Verve] sounded fabulously open, the sound totally escapes the cabinets and oozes tonal depth across the board while remaining taut and coherent. It’s rare to find a speaker that does bass extension, tonal richness and finesse alongside great timing but the 803 is such a speaker. This comes down to an uncanny degree of low level resolution, a result of all the work that was done to stop the cabinet and drive units from vibrating and masking the signal.

Music reproduction is a forgiving science, even a crude loudspeaker will sound tolerable with most material at average listening levels because the distortions are usually harmonious, meaning they blend in with the signal. But, at the same time very few loudspeakers fool you into thinking that you are hearing the real thing; by reducing the sort of colorations that the majority of loudspeakers add to the sound Bowers & Wilkins has succeeded in making a speaker that gets very close. You need a great recording and replay chain for this to work of course, one that eschews character for neutrality, and does equally as much to keep noise to a minimum, but these exist and this speaker will tell you which ones are doing it the best. I have banged on about the Townshend Allegri passive controller before because I can’t find a better preamplifier and this was proved by comparing it with alternatives through this speaker and confirmed when I discovered that they use the same thing at Bowers & Wilkins R&D dept.

What makes the 803 D3 particularly appealing is the substance that it finds in every recording. If there is the hint of three-dimensionality to be found, you will know all about it. The shape and scale of imaging is precisely rendered, but without any hint of grain or brightness: it’s definition without tears, or the potential for long term listening fatigue. It also picks apart recordings in such a way that you better understand the way they have been made and the ideas behind the music. On Laura Marling’s ‘Friends’ [Once I Was An Eagle, Virgin] ►

# ALTAIR

## Wireless Streaming DAC

ALTAIR is a perfect single-box music source for your modern HiFi system. It has 15 input sources including play music in Quad-rate DSD/DXD format through home WiFi network; TIDAL, Qobuz integration, AirPlay, Bluetooth and RoonReady.



AURALIC LIMITED | 声韵音响

1F, Building No.7, 1A Chaoqian Road, Beijing, 102200, China

163 E Compton Blvd, Gardena CA 90248, United States

<http://www.auralic.com> [info@auralic.com](mailto:info@auralic.com) TEL : +86-(0)10-57325784





► the voice is spectacularly real and the multiple layers of guitar opened up and laid bare to reveal the distinct influence of Jimmy Page in his *Led Zeppelin III* period. You can play such music quietly or at medium levels, but there is a strong urge to wind up the wick. This is largely because there is so little distortion and thus barely any discomfort involved in playing louder. I guess this is the reason why there are bigger models in the range; larger drivers usually equate to higher potential sound pressure and if you have a big room or a big appetite for volume that would be a tempting proposition.

The 803 D3 is a spectacularly good loudspeaker; play anything you know and it will deliver more of the low level detail, more of the physical scale, and more of the heart that the musician(s) who created it put in. You need a reasonable amount of good quality power to induce the speaker to do this and the best source and control equipment that you can find, but so long as the hardware can communicate the important things this B&W will deliver the goods. I've said it before but it warrants repeating: if this speaker had a boutique brand on it you'd have to pay two or three times the price to get this degree of transparency, control, vanishing coloration, and outright musical thrill power. But there are no boutique brands with Bowers & Wilkins' research facilities, so the chances are you will only find serious competition from a few of the larger loudspeaker companies. Even then you will have a long, hard search to find anything that comes close at the price. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** three-way, four-driver, floorstanding speaker with reflex loaded enclosure

**Driver complement:** One 25mm diamond dome tweeter; one 130mm Continuum cone FST midrange driver; two 180mm Aerofoil cone bass drivers

**Crossover frequencies:** not specified.

**Frequency response:** 19Hz – 28kHz

**Impedance:** 8 Ohms nominal/3 Ohms minimum

**Sensitivity:** 90dB/W/m

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 1160 × 334 × 498mm

**Weight:** 65.5kg/each

**Finishes:** Piano gloss black, satin white, Rosenuit

**Price:** £12,495/pair

**Manufacturer:** Bowers & Wilkins

**Tel:** 0800 232 1513

**URL:** [www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk](http://www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk)



## High End Cable

[www.hiendcable.co.uk](http://www.hiendcable.co.uk)

Please call Dave Jackson on 01775 761880

### BRANDS

Acoustic Systems  
Analysis Plus  
Ansuz Acoustics  
Atacama  
Audience  
Bel Canto  
Chord Company  
Furutech  
Isotek  
Inakustik  
JEFF ROWLAND Design Group  
Nordost Corporation  
Norma Audio Electronics  
Quantum QRT  
Raidho Acoustics  
Scansonic  
StereoLab  
STAX earspeakers  
Telos Caps  
Townshend Audio

### POWER

Audience adeptResponse  
Audience Install Cable  
IsoTek  
Isol-8  
Quantum Qx2 & Qx4  
QBase  
Qv2 & Qk1  
Power supply upgrading  
Sparkz

### Hi-Fi

Atacama Hi-fi Racks  
Audience speakers  
Raidho Acoustics Speakers  
Raidho Rack  
Bel Canto Electronics  
JEFF ROWLAND Design Group  
Norma Audio Electronics  
Scansonic Speakers  
STAX headphones

### DE-COUPLING

CableSpike  
Cable Lift  
Darkz  
MiG's  
Panda Feet  
Sort Füt & Sort Kones

### MORE

Firewire  
USB Cables  
Digital cables  
Optical cables  
HDMI  
ipod cables  
dCS Owners cable upgrades  
DIN cables  
Jumpers  
Sub woofer cables  
Auric Illuminator  
ECO  
Enhancement CDs  
Fuse upgrades  
Telos caps

### TWEAKS

Room Tuning Resonators

## There is a reason we are called High End Cable

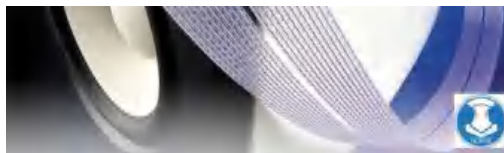


Nordost's Supreme Reference Cable Range is the culmination of more than two decades of research and development, achievements and even further advancements in the hi-fi audio industry. The original Odin Cables redefined sound reproduction by utilizing the most progressive scientific techniques of their time, truly recreating music as the art form it is intended to be. Odin 2 transcends the sonic boundaries set by its predecessor to realise a result that was never before thought possible. Nordost's ultimate achievement and the apex of cable design allows sound systems to disappear, leaving listeners with every aspect of a live performance to appear in their place. Both families in our Supreme Reference Cable Range will bolster high end sound systems to new levels and allow listeners to finally enjoy the unattainable sound that they have been searching for. We take in quality Hi-fi cables in as part exchange when up grading to O2.



...the outcome of using the Valhalla 2 is truly prodigious. Everything instantly improved as a result of this dynamically unconstrained cable. It was easy to detect that the Valhalla lowered the noise floor, and that the bass notes became more defined and stygian... In other words, the bennies were evident across the sonic spectrum, in ways both large and small.

Jacob Heilbrunn writes in the July/Aug 2015 'The Absolute Sound'



Norse Series 2 represents another evolution in Nordost's cable technology – and a step change in performance in this mid price range. By combining the proven benefits of MMF construction with the latest developments in the mechanical tuning and optimization of conductors, topology and termination, Nordost's designers have achieved a significant breakthrough in cable performance. By adopting the same clear family structure first used with the Leif Series, the new range not only covers all the bases, from AC cables to dedicated designs for source, interconnect and speaker signal transfer, three distinct performance levels make it even easier for dealers and end-users to prioritize system functionality without compromising overall cable coherence.



Nordost's entry level cable ranges are perfect examples of quality cabling set at an affordable price range. The Leif family uses scientifically proven methods and technology derived from the development of their Valhalla and Odin ranges and applies their basic principles to create cables which evoke dynamic, low-loss and realistic performances from even modest components and Loudspeakers. Leif cables are constructed using silver-plated, OFC solid core conductors, which form the basis of Nordost's great sound. The conductors are then treated with Nordost's innovative precision FEP extrusion process, where each conductor is individually enclosed in FEP insulation. This technique greatly reduces the dielectric properties of the cables in order to increase signal speeds and accuracy in signal transfer.

We take in quality Hi-fi cables in as part exchange when up grading, please call Dave on 01775 761880

# Soulution 520 preamplifier

by Alan Sircom

**T**he full-function preamplifier has become something of a rarity, especially in the high-end, but Soulution's 520 preamplifier – central to the company's more 'attainably priced' range – sports an exceptionally capable moving coil phono stage in its single chassis. While this isn't a preamp that bristles with inputs (phono stage aside, it has two balanced, and two single-ended inputs) and doesn't sport anything close to a DAC, the minimalist 520 is still remarkably flexible by today's standards.

Like the more upscale 725 line-stage, Soulution designed the 520 preamp to be an extremely wide bandwidth design – it's only 3dB down at 1MHz – and places great emphasis on ultra-fast response times as a result. While we are not a measurement led magazine in any respect, a product claimed to sport a frequency response ruler flat to 200kHz, with less than -120dB of cross-talk and distortion so low, the analyser's self-noise is more significant, deserves to be taken seriously.

The Soulution 520 achieves these figures by taking everything extremely seriously. Separate power supplies are used for the digital logic circuits and the amplifier stages, but these supplies are further fed through a multi-stage filter network, and the logic and amplifier stages are independently shielded to reduce the possibility of interference. The volume control is an 80 step, 1dB per step, precision foil resistor array instead of a potentiometer. This is selected via precision relays, but where most audio companies would ask the user to put up with the clicking of those relays, Soulution parallels a programmable gain amplifier as a separate volume path to function while the volume control is activated. Once the correct volume is set, this amplifier decouples itself from the signal path and the selected resistor pair kick in.

The MC phono stage has no gain adjustment (on the grounds that the 520 is quiet enough to accommodate the lowest gain cartridges without hitting the noise floor of the preamplifier), but impedance is set at the rear panel, using a

series of DIP switches between the left and right channel MC inputs. The input ranges from 20Ω to 1kΩ in seven steps.

For a preamplifier that basically has one large knob and three small buttons on the front panel (the upper of which is reserved for 'mute' only, the lower being the power button), it's surprisingly configurable. You can preset which source to start on, name those sources, the start-up volume level, the maximum and minimum volume levels, balance, screen brightness, activate ground lift (if there is hum), even whether there is a surround input and its optimum volume level. As the remote is passcode-bonded to the preamp, you might also need to reenter the remote's ID, and that option is also on the front panel menu. Surprisingly, given the relatively limited range of input devices on the front panel used for menu diving (essentially the 'prog' button, pressing the volume knob, and turning the volume knob), navigating the options on offer is surprisingly easy, and the preamplifier with its big, friendly red LED readout is soon up and running.

Soulution is unfazed by whether the end user chooses balanced or single-ended connections between devices, although it recommends using the 520 with balanced designs for long cable runs. The 520 is inherently single-ended in design, and runs pseudo-balanced (rather than the other way round) so if you can follow the RCA route, so much the better. But not that much better, because the balanced pathway is remarkably close to the single-ended line, and with a 10Ω output impedance, virtually any cable made to practical lengths and any amplifier will partner the 520 perfectly. In other words, Soulution's suggestion of cable architecture is more down to the company's obsessive nature than any noticeable sonic benefit. And, unlike sorting your cornflakes by size before eating them, this kind of obsessive nature seems entirely beneficial.

This has to be read carefully, but Soulution is one of the least well-named brands in audio. The name suggests 'soul' and this is not the preamplifier for someone wanting something syrupy, soulful, and magical. Instead, this is the ►

*“Soulution's suggestion of cable architecture is more down to the company's obsessive nature than any noticeable sonic benefit.”*





*“The Soulution concept is an attempt to limit the artificial colouring and flavouring that seems to represent the modern ‘high-end’.”*

► preamplifier for those seeking absolute realism, accuracy, and honesty. The ‘soul’ of this preamplifier is the soul of a musicologist or a tonmeister. This is the preamplifier for the person who is constantly berating the audio world for forgetting the term ‘hi-fi’ meant ‘high fidelity’ and demands a faithful reproduction of what is on the recording. In other words, there is no ‘soul’ in the Soulution... and that’s how it should be. If you misread this as a disguised insult, think about what the alternative actually means: you might want a bit of added seasoning to your music – some more ‘soul’ even – but what you add is also detracting from what was on the recording. The Soulution concept is an attempt to limit the artificial colouring and flavouring that seems to represent modern ‘high-end’.

That realism is not an easy thing to parse at first. It might show up components elsewhere in the signal chain. It doesn’t suffer musical fools gladly. And, perhaps most importantly, it might take time for the listener to come to terms with the lack of realism from what the Soulution 520 replaced. Some will listen and walk away, preferring their music with added sweeteners. Others will listen and walk away, only to return some time later having discovered the more realistic path is the right one after all.

In a way, however, Soulution is on the same path to musical realism that all the best of the best are taking, and the subtle variations between this preamp and the handful of similarly world-class designs out there are, in many cases, converging. Nevertheless, there is still a hint of accent in most audio devices, where the Soulution 520 seems to go for complete neutrality.

This neutrality makes the Soulution 520 both incredibly difficult and, paradoxically incredibly easy to write about. Part of the difficult part comes down to the way you have to waterboard the English language to express what it does, or rather what it doesn’t do. What you hear when trying to evaluate the Soulution 520 – more than perhaps anything this side of a passive preamplifier or maybe the late, lamented Pink Triangle Pip preamp – is the sound of other things. The detail levels are as good as the source component and as accurate as the power amplifier and loudspeakers will allow. The dynamic range is that of the recording, tempered through the medium of other equipment. The soundstage is defined by the recording and the speakers. Just when you think you

have a handle on what the Soulution is doing sonically, you play another recording and the goal-posts shift again. It’s a seeming contradiction that a preamplifier that exemplifies the ‘straight wire with gain’ concept of a perfect amplifier is densely packed with componentry, but that is precisely how the 520 behaves.

Once again mangling the English language, the Soulution 520 is impressively unimpressive in performance. It adds practically nothing and subtracts practically nothing from the sound – even the outstanding, aforementioned Pip had its limits, and its bass didn’t quite extend down to the lowest registers, giving its neutrality a ‘stark’ quality if you partnered it with full-range designs. This makes pulling out musical examples almost pointless, because it simply reproduces the sound of the recording. And the way you can best determine this is the toughest test of all; listening to the way different recordings sound, rather than picking out individual aspects of a single recording. A different studio, a different engineer at the faders, different playing dynamics of session guitarists... moving from one recording to the next highlights just how accurate the Soulution 520 really is, because each difference is easy to pick up. Couple this with a Roon-ready source with all its music searching properties and you’ll not only be shown which recordings, say, Steve Gadd drummed on, but you’ll clearly hear when it’s Gadd playing and when it’s someone like Jim Keltner or Hal Blaine. You’ll know which studios use reverb chambers, which used springs, plates, or electronic reverbs, and the difference between an electronic reverb and a plug-in. These are subtle nuances, I grant you, but the kinds of subtlety that only come through when a product gets fully out of the way, and that’s precisely what the Soulution 520 does so well, both through its line stages and through that whisper-silent, excellent on-board phono stage.

With great power comes great responsibility, according to Spiderman’s Uncle Ben. And the Soulution 520 wields great power in audio. The great responsibility comes in with its care and feeding. Play a good recording and you’ll hear why it’s good; play a bad one and you might want to put out a contract on the producer. It’s unfortunate that we live in a time with so much good equipment and so many bad recordings, but the Soulution 520 takes few prisoners in the Loudness war. Compression is particularly vexatious to a preamplifier as ►

v i t u s **VA** a u d i o



"..the Vitus Audio RI-100 has carved out a unique segment in the high end — what could be termed "entry-level elite." It currently has few challengers, and none that I have yet heard can surpass it. An alpha amp if ever there was one."  
*The Absolute Sound April 2013*

"The RI-100 is capable of extracting the highest highs and most dynamic lows and pretty much everything in between"  
*The Absolute Sound Editor's Choice 2014*

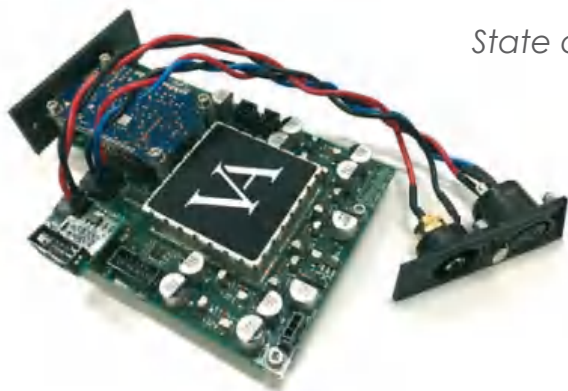
"The RI-100 is without compromise from any possible perspective or listening criteria"  
*Positive Feedback December 2013*



## The **Vitus Audio RI-100**

Reference Integrated Amplifier - now with optional onboard DAC

*State of the Art design. State of the Art performance.*



Featuring 4 digital inputs - USB, S/PDIF, AES/EBU and Toslink - the new RI-100 DAC module is a sensational introduction, for both sound quality and value for money. Without a single extra cable, or an inch of rack space, this upgrade provides the legendary Vitus Audio qualities, and will surely exceed all expectations.

Available factory fitted and as retrofit for existing owners.  
£2000



Distributed by  
**KOG AUDIO**

[www.kogaudio.com](http://www.kogaudio.com)  
[info@kogaudio.com](mailto:info@kogaudio.com)  
024 7722 0650

[www.vitusaudio.com](http://www.vitusaudio.com)



- fundamentally open and honest as the 520, and it lays such tracks bare. Fortunately, the worst excesses of bad sound seem behind us now, but a 20 year legacy of ‘everything louder than everything else’ recordings are rendered hard to listen through the 520. It’s not the preamp’s fault, but you have been warned!

The reason why many audiophiles bemoan the lack of good preamplifiers in comparison to similarly good sources, amplifiers, and loudspeakers, is that the preamplifier seems the one device that can make the system sound ‘grey’, ‘electronic’ and ‘artificial’. The other devices have their own imprint on the sound, but these can often be forgiven or even forgotten, but that fundamental ‘electronic-y’ sound comes into play, the overall performance is always compromised by that. This is part of the reason for the call of the passive preamp – no electronics, no electronics hash sound, no electronic-y sound. However, hope springs eternal for the active preamplifier that doesn’t append its own electronic-y character to music. No active preamplifier truly escapes this problem, but the Soulution 520 does get pretty close. In absolute terms, of the three strikes against active preamplifiers, the 520 does exceptionally well in reducing the ‘electronic’ and ‘artificial’ sound, and is very good at minimising that ‘grey’ presentation. But in relative terms, these characteristics are noticeable primarily by the absence, and we’re making room for the 700 series preamplifier to improve on the 520’s lot.

If there is a character to the 520 – and I stress the ‘if’ – it is a slight increase in image scale. There is a tendency for such things to be blown out of proportion in the reading of

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** full-function, solid-state preamplifier

**Inputs:** 1× RCA pair (MC-only phono), 2× RCA pair, 2× XLR pair (line), proprietary Link system, RS232

**Outputs:** 1× RCA pair, 1× XLR pair, proprietary Link system

**Input impedance:** 3kΩ (RCA/XLR), adjustable 20Ω–1kΩ (phono)

**Output gain:** –83dB to +16dB (unbalanced), –89dB to +10dB (XLR)

**Output impedance:** 10Ω (RCA/XLR)

**Frequency response:** 0Hz–800kHz

**THD+N:** <0.001%

**S/N Ratio:** >120dB

**Crosstalk:** <120dB

**Dimensions (W×H×D):** 44.2×14.3×44.8cm

**Weight:** 20kg

**Price:** £15,000

**Manufactured by:** Soulution Audio

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

**Distributed in the UK by:** Select Audio

**URL:** [www.select-audio.co.uk](http://www.select-audio.co.uk)

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

them, and “a slight increase in image scale” quickly becomes “the attack of the 50ft singer”. What this has instead is a sense of scale that is underpinned by extremely powerful bass; not overblown, fat bass, but bass with as clear a sense of purpose and honesty as the sound further up the midrange and treble. I don’t want to describe this as ‘grip’ because that implies a sense of control over the music the 520 simply refuses to add character in so obvious a manner. Instead it’s just honest bass delivered with the same sense of calm order and complete accuracy as heard throughout the rest of the frequency range. This does give the overall staging a more ‘majestic’ sense of presence that increases the size of the soundstage slightly.

If all of this is reading like the Soulution 520 is the best preamplifier I have ever tested, then it’s because it comes pretty damn close. I’m putting this up there with the handful of top preamplifiers I have ever heard, in with a very select few peers. Each has a different take on what it takes to be the best, and the Soulution’s sheer fidelity to what is on the recording is at once exhilarating, refreshing, and at times unnerving. But also extremely highly recommended. +





# Get *closer* to the music!

Our goal is to provide you with a pure music listening experience that evokes the deepest emotions and brings you closer than ever to the music. At the same time, we believe that such high end products don't have to be outrageously priced.

**TeddyPardo**  
HIGH END AUDIO



Our product range includes: DACs | Amplifiers | Speakers | Cables | Power Supplies  
For more details visit our web site [www.teddypardo.com](http://www.teddypardo.com)



SCANSONIC

AUDIO ANALOGUE  
soundpleasure

DECENTAUDIO.CO.UK



TEL: 05602 054669

EMAIL: INFO@DECENTAUDIO.CO.UK

AUDIO ANALOGUE - KRONOS AUDIO - MAGNEPAN - RIVA AUDIO - SC



*Transfiguration*

**KRONOS**  
TIME FOR MUSIC®



**DECENT AUDIO**  
SOUND DISTRIBUTION

ANSONIC - TRANSGURATION - USHER - VAN DEN HUL - VELA AUDIO



# McIntosh C52/MC301

by Jason Kennedy

McIntosh has been around for so long that it must be viewed in the home market in much the same way that the British view Quad. Both have been around seemingly forever and have a reputation for no-nonsense, solidly built equipment that stands the test of time. McIntosh, however, does seem to have weathered the changing market conditions of the recent past with more of its ethos intact than its British counterpart. In no small part, this comes down to McIntosh's unique and classic livery setting the brand's products apart from all other audio equipment. The C52 preamp and MC301 mono power amps are part of a timeless design brief that remains unchanging for good reason – it's still extremely popular the world over.

The C52 is a battleship of a preamplifier; it's big, heavy, and festooned with knobs and switches. Despite a personal tendency toward aesthetic minimalism, you can't help but fall under the spell of the wonderful excess of this component's front panel, complete with VU meters and eight tone controls for the 'analog equalizer'. It may have a classic design, but the C52 is no museum piece. Instead, this is a modern preamplifier that comes with all the latest bells and whistles,

including an onboard digital to analogue converter and an MM/MC phono stage, plus all the connectivity you could want... and then some. The back panel almost resembles an AV amplifier, except that there are none of the video inputs you'd expect. Instead there are balanced and single ended in- and outputs, a phalanx of 12v triggers, and a herd of control connections for full integration into multiroom systems. McIntosh has taken the term 'comprehensively equipped' and run with it, for maximum flexibility and future proofing.

The built-in DAC, for example, is DSD capable up to DSD256 (and DXD 384kHz). It has five S/PDIF inputs plus USB, and McIntosh supplies a driver and USB control panel software for Windows machines, acknowledging that Macintosh (no relation) computers do not require this. McIntosh also makes an SACD/CD transport that can output DSD (MCT 450) to the C52's MCT multipin input, which puts it in a very select group of audio companies.

Inputs are displayed on a dot matrix panel, alongside volume level expressed as a percentage – an unusual but more user-friendly approach than the commonly used 'minus' dB figures where zero is maximum. Every input can be named with up to 10 characters and there are various trim settings



that can be applied to each; these include whether or not the VU meters are illuminated, gain, balance, mono and/or stereo, equalizer on or off, etc. In the case of the MC phono input, you use the trim control to choose a preferred impedance setting. 'Comprehensive' barely scratches the surface.

All these inputs and the four sets of outputs are configurable if you have the inclination, and there must be enough XLR and high quality RCA sockets on the back for pretty well any eventuality. The popularity of headphones is presumably behind the quarter inch jack output that offers HXD, a method of "improving sound localization for headphone listening", which is an attempt at creating the space and placement found with loudspeakers. The list goes on a bit longer but you probably have the idea by now, the C52 is not big for its own sake but in order to accommodate all that socketry and all those controls. I only have a few ergonomic gripes; the equalizer kicks in at turn on unless you have told the chosen input you don't want it to and the remote is a system device that doesn't cover the set up features as far as I can tell. It also has separate buttons for on and off, which foxed me!

The MC301 is a monoblock power amplifier in what for McIntosh is a slim chassis, it's still 15cm tall, but that's not

the problem; the issue is the weight. This is a 30 plus kilo amplifier which, even for a 300 watter, seems extreme, but given McIntosh's 'built for the long game' stance is perhaps not unexpected. Unusually, McIntosh solid-state amps have both mains and output transformers, or autoformers, which McIntosh uses to connect two fully differential amplifiers, so it's a dual balanced design that avoids the more conventional approach of bridging. McIntosh reasons that if you want an amplifier that is going to deliver 300 watts into any load without going outside its 'safe operation area' then the tapped output approach is the only way to do this.

The MC301 is specified to deliver the same power into each of these outputs and to carry on doing so for decades, which is reassuring. I used the old 'listen and see what gives' approach to selecting the best output for Bowers & Wilkins 803 D3 loudspeakers, for example. This turned out to be the four ohm output, as the eight ohm option sounded a lot more expansive and delivered oodles of reverb, but seemed a little brash compared with the four ohm setting. This had a more relaxed and natural balance with clean, smooth leading edges, and tight but extended bass. Given the three ohm minimum impedance of the speaker, I didn't try the two ohm option. ▶



► The MC301 has both balanced and single-ended in- and outputs, the latter can be used to connect your stack of power amps to a single preamp, if you have the muscle to build the stack, and a floor that can take it. A 'Wattmeter' on the front tells you just how much power is being delivered at any given time, but is easy to defeat with a button on the front panel.

Listening commenced with the MC301s hooked up to a Townshend Allegri controller and the aforementioned loudspeakers, a combination that produced powerful and dynamic results with the Vivace from Barenboim's Symphony No.7 in A, Op.92 [*Beethoven For All*, 24/96, Decca]. There is plenty of grip available but little or no sense of the edginess that can often accompany serious power; this meant that the scale of the music and its power to charm was obvious, and that the work on the tympani did not go unnoticed. The bass is in proportion to the rest of the range but it has more control than your average power amplifier. Those 300 Watts are clearly doing what's necessary even 'where higher power output levels are not needed'. It's a fluent and encouraging sound that makes it very easy to enjoy the music without being kept on the edge of your seat, so much so that I spent some time exploring the rest of this set and got into the heavy weather of the 9th for the first time in a long while.

These are not the fastest amplifiers around, and pacey rock like ZZ Top could have more tension, but if you want the music to wash over you the MC301 does a very appealing job, one that makes listening very easy. They are transparent to what comes before them as well; changing source proved that their dynamic capabilities are very much at the mercy of what's coming down the line. Adding the C52 to the mix and using the same single ended interconnects brings a warming and smoothing quality to the sound that doesn't get in the

way of detail or the easy flow of the power amps; if anything it enhances this. The pairing digs out some fabulous low end energy on a number of pieces including 'Naono' from Alva Noto and Ryuichi Sakamoto's beautiful *Summvs* [Raster-Noton] where waves of subtly differentiated low notes roll out of the system. This reflects a tonal balance that is a shade darker than average, which seems to work with electronic music as well as it does with orchestral. On Jeff Beck's *Live at Ronnie Scott's* [Eagle Records] there is lots of stage depth but not quite as much of the reverb that you usually get alongside a slight sense of thickening, but this does nothing to get in the way of the performance even though the degree of compression in the recording is laid bare.

The source for those pieces was a Melco N1A connected by Vertere HB USB cable to the C52's DAC. Going over to the analogue inputs, using a CAD CAT PC transport with the CAD 1543 MkII DAC enhanced results quite significantly. Revealing a lot of what's so special about the CAD pairing by letting you hear right into pieces like Ryan Adams and the Cardinals live version of 'Hallelujah' (on a remarkably good unofficial recording). The scale is obvious, but so is a sense of being there in the audience; this combined with the immediacy of the performance makes for a full immersion sonic experience. Another great live recording in the studio sense is Muddy Waters' 'My Home is in the Delta' from the ancient but superb release *Folk Singer* [Chess]. This sounds a bit more sumptuous than usual and the tape hiss is less obvious, something that could probably be exposed with the tone controls if you felt the need. I tried them with a far more crude live recording, this time of the Drive By Truckers, where the kick drum was on the loud side and the guitars sounded a little bit raw. Trying the various controls it was possible ►







VIVID *audio*

## GIYA G2

Full, lively and  
unfatiguing sound





► to make the balance a bit more civilised, but hard to do so without losing the atmosphere and sweat that someone in the audience had managed to capture. If you have music that is less than sweetly balanced, it's nice to have the option to dial out any nasties that get in the way of enjoying the stuff.

Moving from RCAs between C52 and MC301s to less exotically connected XLRs brought a degree of dryness to the sound that reduced the somewhat overly smooth sound via the single ended connection. The easy listenability remained as did the McIntosh's ability to draw you into the music; detail went down a little, but this could be restored with a better balanced cable no doubt. The relaxed pacing of this pairing is more to north American than British tastes I suspect and there were times when I yearned for a bit more immediacy and speed, but equally there were plenty of others where I found that I had listened to a whole album without thinking about the sound, which ultimately should be the aim of audio equipment. The system is not an end in itself, but a conduit to music, and the better it is the more you want to listen. With the McIntosh you do. Especially if it's Beck singing 'Heart is a Drum' [*Morning Phase*, Capitol], this always sounds big and expansive, but these amps keep it articulate, tuneful, and let it flow really nicely.

The phono stage is also rather good, with enough gain for a low output MC (Transfiguration Proteus) which is not always the case with preamps. I played 'Niger Mambo' by Randy Weston [*African Cookbook*, Pure Pleasure], a 1962 recording that can sound a little thin on some systems but here it engaged the feet as well as the heart and once again the nature of the recording did not get in the way.

I have to admit that – from a distance, at least – McIntosh never seemed like my kind of audio: those big blue VU meters, and the chrome on black finish, don't suit my minimalist outlook on product design. But, McIntosh predates audio minimalism and will be there when minimalism gets washed away: a company doesn't become a hugely popular choice for decades without establishing what really matters in audio, and these amplifiers deliver it in spades. If you want a system that encourages you to indulge in the music rather than the sound it makes, this comes strongly recommended. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Solid state preamplifier/DAC with fully complementary circuitry.

**Analogue inputs:** Three pairs of balanced inputs (via XLR connectors), four pairs of single-ended inputs (via RCA jacks), MM and MC inputs (via RCA jacks)

**Analogue outputs:** Three pairs of balanced outputs, three pairs of single-ended outputs, one pair of single-ended line outputs, 6.3mm headphone output

**Input impedance balanced/unbalanced:** 44kOhms/22kOhms

**Output impedance:** not specified

**Bandwidth:** +0, –0.5dB from 20Hz to 20,000Hz, +0, –3dB from 10Hz to 100,000Hz

**Gain:** 15dB

**Distortion THD:** 0.003%

**Signal to Noise Ratio:** 100dB

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 194 × 445 × 447mm

**Weight:** 12.5kg

**Price:** £6,995

### MC301

**Type:** solid stage mono power amplifier

**Analogue inputs:** One pair of balanced inputs (via XLR connectors), one of pair single ended inputs (via RCA jacks)

**Analogue outputs:** Three pairs of speaker taps (via 5-way binding posts), One pair of balanced outputs (via XLR connectors), one of pair single ended outputs (via RCA jacks)

**Power output:** 300Wpc @ 2, 4, 8, or 16 Ohms

**Bandwidth:** 20Hz – 20kHz

**Sensitivity:** not specified

**Distortion THD:** 0.005%

**Signal to Noise Ratio:** 120dB balanced, 118dB unbalanced

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 152 × 445 × 508mm

**Weight:** 30.4kg

**Price:** £10,995 each

**Manufacturer:** McIntosh Laboratory Inc.

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

**UK Distributor:** Jordan Acoustics

**Tel:** +44 (0)1202 911 886

If your hi-fi dealer loves vinyl,  
he will play it on a VPI Prime.

**Don't settle for second best.**







CELEBRATING  
**25**  
YEARS


OF AMERICAN INNOVATION

NÖRDOST  
EST. 1991

NÖRDOST

MAKING THE CONNECTION

Distributed by Atacama Audio

T. 01455 283251 E. [post@atacama-audio.co.uk](mailto:post@atacama-audio.co.uk) [www.nordost-cables.co.uk](http://www.nordost-cables.co.uk) Made in USA 

# Fono Acustica Virtuoso loudspeaker cables

by Alan Sircom

In a way, the most obvious part of the Virtuoso loudspeaker cable is probably going to be the pivotal aspect of how Fono Acustica's top cable is received.

The cable's terminations, in particular the ornately tooled silver-plated copper barrels that form the cable's connector bodies, are either going to be praised or dismissed for bringing a touch of baroque style to the otherwise minimalist world of audio. While these distinctive connectors polarise opinion, Virtuoso is so much more than the sum of its plugs.

In fact, everything in the Virtuoso cable is made to the same uncompromising level as the connector bodies, and that's reflected in the price. Materials sourced in the design come from the best possible sources, and the level of hand-built detail that goes into the construction and design practically redefines 'meticulous'. It's essentially a solid-core design, using special and proprietary silver/gold alloy conductors sourced from a Canadian supplier. The conductors are hand-wrapped in carbon filaments before being inserted into loose, silicon insulation tubes wrapped in a cotton mix jacket containing conductive filaments that act as shielding. It's all about controlling and dissipating energy, but far from the unwieldy, python-like, inflexible designs often seen at the super high-end, that energy dissipation occurs thanks to the Virtuoso's soft, flexible, and relatively lightweight construction.

Then, of course, there are those speaker terminals. The Virtuoso connectors are based on Oyaide hardware, but the plug bodies are larger in diameter and made from

silver-plated copper, which is mechanically tuned. The spades are machined from solid blocks of that Canadian-sourced silver-gold alloy, and include a hinge to optimise the cable dressing without undermining the integrity of the mechanical contact.

In fact, the construction of these cables, though excellent, is immaterial. It's the end result that counts. Virtuoso are cables born out of passion, and you can hear that in the end result. These are truly bespoke products for people who share the designer's passion, both for music and for detail: the sort of people who insist on just the right weight and shade of Bemberg lining on the inside facings of a waistcoat even though it will never be seen by anyone except the tailor and the wearer.

The Virtuoso loudspeaker cables exhibit a degree of integrity and balance that is very thin on the audio ground, except at the highest level. This isn't immediately identifiable, because we are so used to a less ordered sound, but on spending time – even a very short time – with the Virtuoso cables, you begin to hear just how disordered most systems sounds are, and just how much more there is to offer when everything sounds more aligned. This begins by instantly hearing greater musical texture and presence from the instruments within a recording, backed up by a powerful sense ▶



*"Everything in the Virtuoso cable is made to the same uncompromising level."*





# The Future of Integrated Amplifiers

INTRODUCING THE MARK LEVINSON® N° 585



Unsurpassed analogue performance combines with proprietary advanced digital capabilities and a flexible system configuration to give the N° 585 the power, performance and capability to accurately reproduce source material to new levels of realism. With patented Clari-Fi™ technology and a dedicated subwoofer output, the N° 585 proves that the future of integrated amplifiers has already arrived.

mark  
levinson®  
by HARMAN  
marklevinson.com





► of solidity. This all gives a sense of musical expression, which gives the music both colour and shape. You hear the inner detail, the structure, and the subtle dynamic cues that separate real musical skill from Auto-Tuned ‘talent’, but you can do this with many systems. What Virtuoso brings is a sense of folding all these diverse audio aspects into a sonic gestalt, making a result that gets just that bit closer to the intent of the artist, the engineer, and even the composer.

To most, that reads like pretentious twaddle, but anyone who has spent quality time with Fono Acustica’s Virtuoso is likely nodding along in agreement. They will know that – even in a market as contended as the super high-end cable world – there are cables that seem as if they focus the listener’s attention upon a specific aspect of the musical whole, and some that zone in on the musical whole at the expense of some of the more subtle details, but precious few that are level-headed enough to deliver the complete picture and the individual aspects of that whole. That’s a heady wine!

The listening test is quick to resolve, but this needs some nuancing. Virtuoso’s more holistic approach to musical replay is easy to hear and just as easy to understand, but some might miss this in thinking it a less ‘immediate’ cable than its rivals. There are other cables at this level that deliver a seemingly more punchy, upbeat, or forward presentation, and that can be more immediately seductive. Virtuoso doesn’t go for that immediacy, instead making a more refined and deft sound with staying power. I think if you are receptive to a level-headed presentation at the outset, Virtuoso will charm you almost immediately. If not, give it a little more listening; if you find yourself happily drawn into the music rather than its technicalities, Virtuoso is probably your kind of cable.

Ultimately even in the most well-balanced component, there are aspects of the performance that benefit slightly less well than others. In other words, in a straight fight between Fono Acustica Virtuoso and something like Nordost’s latest Odin, the overall order of the former trades blows with the greater detail of the latter. In truth, both share about 99% of the journey, and it’s that last seemingly trifling scintilla of performance we are talking about. But, as Michelangelo once said, “trifles make perfection, and perfection is no trifle”. Although what a pizza-addicted masked tortoise with anger-management issues has to do with an English sherry-laced layered dessert (or the pursuit of audiophile excellence) is unclear.

On looks alone, Fono Acustica’s Virtuoso would be worthy of audio’s top table, but the cable has the sonics to match the visuals, too. Many aficionados of high-performance cable have stuck with the same brands for years, while others change cables on a regular basis. Both now have a new name to call on, and while the price of admission is extremely high, Virtuoso also comes highly recommended for those in pursuit of the best of the best. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

**Conductor type:** silver/gold alloy, solid core

**Number of conductors per cable:** Four

**Cable diameter:** 18mm

**Connector diameter:** 21mm

**Minimum insertion distance:** 40mm

**All Virtuoso speaker cables available as single wire configuration only**

**Terminals:** Spade terminals as standard – 4mm available to order

**Length:** 1.0m, 1.5m, 2.0m, 2.5m lengths as standard – other lengths to order

**Price:** from €27,500

**Manufactured by:** Fono Acustica

**URL:** [www.fono-acustica.com](http://www.fono-acustica.com)



# EarPlay



## HEGEL H160 - audio amplifier with AirPlay and dlna-streaming

The new integrated amplifier from Hegel is one of the most versatile and well sounding music reproducers on the market. It enables you to connect all kinds of analogue or digital sources, even streaming with Apple AirPlay or DLNA - and uses Hegel's proprietary technology to make AirPlay and DLNA streaming sound better than you thought possible.

The H160 is a virtual power house, with 2\*150 watts and a very stable design. This might be the only high end piece of electronics you need in your system.



Derby:  
Edinburgh:  
Kent:  
London:

Musicraft  
Loud & Clear  
Igloo Audio  
Sonata Hifi

Hegel:

[www.hegel.com](http://www.hegel.com)



# DS Audio DS-W1 Optical Cartridge and Equalizer

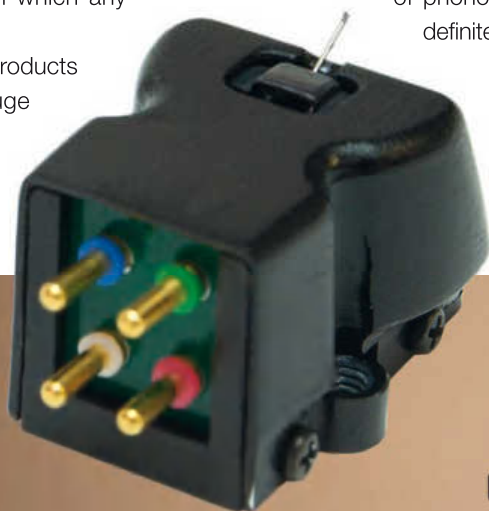
by Roy Gregory

**D**espite the total dominance of electro-magnetic pick-up technology – be it fixed or moving-coil in nature – there has always been a steady stream of alternative offerings or variations on the theme when it comes to extracting a meaningful signal from the squiggly grooves embedded in the surface of LP records. It's not too hard to understand why, given the all too audible flaws inherent in and challenges presented by both moving-magnet and moving-coil designs. Throw in the essential mechanical crudity of the process and it's hardly surprising that designers and end-users alike crave a more sophisticated and elegant solution. Yet, such is the dominant nature of these 'conventional' designs that they totally define the context in which any alternative is viewed or judged.

On the most obvious level, products like the Soundsmith Strain Gauge cartridges or the subject of this review, the DS Audio DS-W1 optical cartridge, dispense with

the requirement for (and cost of) a conventional RIAA/phono-stage – the necessary functionality being included in the price of the cartridge. That doesn't just muddy the water: depending on whether you have a pre-amp with a built-in phono-stage, you already own the phono-stage of your dreams, how much you paid for the phono-stage you already have, whether it's salable (should you want to sell it), or whether you actually own any sort of phono-stage at all, the real cost of owning such a device might vary dramatically – along with the competition against which you might compare it.

But like I said, that's just the most obvious example. Start to examine DS Audio's DS-W1 in any detail and even a rudimentary understanding when it comes to the mechanics of phono replay should indicate that this cartridge is definitely swimming against the analogue stream. In a world seemingly obsessed with ever longer tonearms and the low-compliance cartridges they demand, the DS-W1 is both light and lively, weighing in at a mere 6.5g and with a compliance of 15cu vertically and 25cu ►



## Audiodesksysteme PRO Vinyl Cleaner



**The new PRO version** of this world renown ultrasonic LP cleaner  
**Improved mechanical designs:** better drive motor, ceramic bearing pump and additional drying process

**Low energy ultrasonic generator** for maximum cleaning efficiency  
**Contactless cleaning** that removes more dirt than conventional suction methods

**Ultra clean LPs** produce a larger soundstage, have more detail, and reduce stylus wear

**New colour options** available in addition to standard grey: black, white and red

Please see our website for further details

info@audioconsultants.co.uk  
4 Zephyr House Calleva Park Aldermaston Berkshire RG7 8JN UK  
AC/95

## ProAc Response DB-1 loudspeaker



**The new compact Response speaker** that creates a large sound stage normally associated with bigger cabinets

**New long throw bass driver** producing high quality, extended and dynamic bass

**Mid range and high frequencies** that are sweet and extended with no hint of harshness

**Low colouration cabinet design** made from different thicknesses of HDF damped with bituminous polymers

**New crossover design** giving a flatter response at high levels and precise imaging

Standard veneers £1900; premium veneers £2100

info@audioconsultants.co.uk  
4 Zephyr House Calleva Park Aldermaston Berkshire RG7 8JN UK  
AC/94



*“Instead of a set of coils or a magnet on the end of that cantilever, there is a tiny plate with an even tinier slot cut in it.”*

► laterally. That suggests that you’ll need the sort of lightweight arm that has long faded from fashion if you want to avoid resonance issues and actually benefit from the DS Audio’s advantages. Right about now you are probably wondering just what those advantages might be and what could possibly make them worth the bother and brain-ache of building them into your system? Which makes it time to discuss what makes the DS-W1 so different – and so special.

Don’t let the ‘optical’ in the DS Audio’s title deceive you. The DS-W1 uses an entirely conventional Shibata stylus and boron cantilever to trace the record’s groove. However, instead of a set of coils or a magnet on the other end of that cantilever, there is a tiny plate with an even tinier slot cut in it. The matching PSU/equalizer box powers a tiny LED beam that shines through that slot, a photo-electric cell measuring how and by how much the movement of the cantilever causes the slot to occlude the beam. The result is a device with an incredibly low moving mass and a lightweight reading system – which helps explain why the DS-W1, a fully clad cartridge, is lighter than most naked designs. It also produces an amplitude proportional output, as opposed to the velocity proportional output of conventional electro-magnetic designs. This means that, at least in theory, it suffers from neither the pre-emphasis

of high-frequencies nor the slowing of low frequencies that afflicts those conventional designs, as well as making the task of the matching equalizer considerably easier.

Open the large box in which it arrives and the DS-W1 itself is remarkably nondescript, with a simple matt black body that is neither particularly distinctive nor decorative. The solid block of the equally black energizer/equalizer matches the cartridge’s plain-Jane looks, and its beautifully finished casework sat on four adjustable spiked feet, complete with shoes if you need them. There’s a front-panel on-off switch and one set of inputs and two sets of outputs on the rear, all via single-ended RCA sockets. Why two sets of outputs? Partly because the DS-W1 reads low-frequency signals rather more accurately than most electro-magnetic cartridges, one set offers subsonic filtering with a roll-off starting at 50Hz, while the other goes lower, to 35Hz before tapering. Which you use will depend on your turntable, system, and situation. I used the full-bandwidth output without issues, although that’s partly because of the lengths I went to when it came to choosing a matching tonearm.

With its low mass and ‘interesting’ compliance, the DS-W1 is seriously picky when it comes to tonearms. Do the sums and you quickly realize that the average 9” tonearm (Linn, SME, ►





► Rega, Graham et al.) offers an effective mass of around 11g resulting in a fundamental resonance of around 7.5Hz – which is distinctly borderline. For a theoretically ideal 10Hz you'd need an arm like the ultra-light SME III or original Mission 774 – both around 5g effective mass. Instead, I opted for the 9.1g AMG 9W2, which nudges the fundamental resonance back to a shade over 8Hz, safely within the comfort zone. That might not sound like much of a difference, but believe me, you can hear it instantly in the solid presence and stability it brings to the sound. Of course, you could use tonearm damping, but in a cartridge that is itself essentially un-damped, the downsides are all too audible. It's another indicator that this cartridge isn't just different; it behaves differently too.

As soon as you start to set it up, it becomes apparent that the DS-W1 is super-sensitive to VTF and VTA/SRA (or tracking force and arm-height if you must). From the first moment the stylus hits the groove you can't miss how quick and clean it is, completely free of overshoot or exaggeration. But it would be easy to conclude that it is either thin and lightweight (if you have the VTA wrong), or has a lumpy, detached bass (wrong VTF or wrong tonearm). Nor does it respond in a gradual, progressive manner to adjustment. Instead it's either wrong or it's right, with little or no margin for error, and with increments that are too small to measure. But patience is the name of the game: get the right VTF, the right VTA, and the right tonearm and this thing sings! It also lights up. Indeed, one reason that the DS-W1 has attracted quite so much attention is the illuminated red strip that graces its nose as soon as it's powered up, leading the US distributor to dub it "The Nightrider". But there's much more to this cartridge than just a fancy lightshow.

Despite being one of the most exacting audio devices I've ever set-up, the DS-W1 is truly worth the effort. It's tempting to try and equate its performance to other cartridges: it's also a mistake. To understand just how good the DS-W1 really is you need to also appreciate that it's fundamentally different, both in operation and presentation. By eliminating the electro-magnetic generator from the pick up, DS Audio has totally changed the way a cartridge delivers music. It has not only created a lower moving mass, but altered its natural mechanical resonant behavior and sonic thumbprint, too. Throw in the absence of electro-magnetic damping and you have a transducer that is lightning fast AND ultra responsive. The result is musical reproduction from LP that's as devoid of baggage and padding as it is astonishingly linear, as unforced and unexaggerated as it is natural in terms of tonality and perspective. Which might just be a recipe for sounding bland, except that the DS-W1's astonishing speed and unfettered dynamics (micro and macro) give it that breath of intimacy that

brings music and musicians vividly to life; helped by the total absence of grain, within the notes themselves, or the spaces between them.

Never have I heard a cartridge that can capture instrumental textures or vocal nuance, the skin of a drum and the air inside it, or the rasp of bow on strings as naturally and effortlessly as this. This isn't the spot-lit presentation and bouncy bass of a typical high-end moving-coil: it is something altogether more delicate, more subtle, and (if you get it right) more real. The DS-W1 doesn't pump up the drama or fatten up the bottom end. Instead it allows musicians and recordings to speak for themselves, in voices that are at once recognizable and authoritative. Its attack and pace give bass transients natural impact, and shorn of false weight and emphasis, its timing is sure-footed and agile.

If there's a better cartridge for playing baroque or small ensemble music (classical, jazz or pop) I've yet to find it: if there's a more believable cartridge when it comes to vocal reproduction, solo or choral, I've yet to hear it. Which makes DS Audio's DS-W1 pretty special. There are cartridges with bigger names, cartridges with bigger sounds, cartridges that deliver more drama, and cartridges that also perform their own brand of transductive magic – but they all cost more than the DS Audio, especially when you take the phono-stage into account. Having said that, you might be trading your existing phono-stage for a new arm if you want to really hear what the DS-W1 can do: it's well worth considering, 'cos this cartridge really is that good. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Phono cartridge with optical reading

**Cantilever:** Boron Rod

**Stylus Profile:** Shibata

**Weight:** 6.5g

**Tracking Force:** 1.5g

**Compliance:** 15cu vertical, 25cu horizontal

**Output:** 500mV (from matching PSU/equalizer)

**Price:** £6,250

**Manufactured by:** DS Audio

**URL:** [www.ds-audio-w.biz](http://www.ds-audio-w.biz)

**UK Distributor:** Sound Foundations

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

**Tel:** +44(0)118 981 4238

# SERIES V~12

MAGNESIUM TONE-ARM

Based on the multi-award winning Series V pick-up arm, the Series V~12 incorporates the same design and engineering that have made SME a byword for excellence. Coherent musical control is held over the entire frequency range in terms of tonal quality, stability and stereo imaging. Startling dynamic range, neutrality, structurally inert, the Series V~12 embodies every worthwhile feature in a pick-up arm. The 12 inch tone-arm is pressure die-cast in magnesium complete with an integrated headshell to eliminate tone-arm resonances in the audio spectrum and offers a 27% reduction in maximum angular error distortion over 9 inch models. Listening; the benefits of minimal tracking error and harmonic distortion are clearly revealed.



# SME

*“The best pick-up arm in the world”*





**ROCKY MOUNTAIN  
INTERNATIONAL  
AUDIO FEST**

FEATURING:




**RMAF Entry Level Room Series:  
\$500, \$1,000, \$1,500,  
\$2,500 and \$5,000**

**Oct. 7-9, 2016**  
Denver, Colorado  
[www.audiofest.net](http://www.audiofest.net)

# hi-fi+

Want regular updates  
on the hottest audio  
products?

Sign up to our  
weekly newsletter!

Go to [hifiplus.com](http://hifiplus.com)  
to sign up today



# Audio Alchemy DDP-1, PS-5 and PDA-1

by Alan Sircom

**T**hose of us with long audio memories might recall Audio Alchemy. Back in the mid nineties, Audio Alchemy was the main protagonist in providing no-nonsense, low-cost DACs in basic boxes. At a time when DACs were relatively rare – and many of those on the market back then cost five figures – Audio Alchemy set out its store as the Loyal Opposition, providing upgradable high-performance audio at low cost. Fast forward to the mid teens and Audio Alchemy is back, still providing upgradable, high-performance audio at low cost. OK, so in the intervening years, the build got a lot better and the price rose accordingly, but they are still giant killing products at prices that don't leave your wallet gasping for air.

The range is small, but growing. It comprises a combination DAC, line preamplifier, and headphone amplifier (the DDP-1) with its optional power supply (the PS-5) and a stereo power amplifier (the PDA-1). There is also a mono version of the power amp – called, perhaps unsurprisingly, the PDA-1M – and a new PPA-1 MM/MC phono stage, which can also be driven from one of two outputs on the PS-5. We tested the DDP-1, PS-5, and stereo PDA-1. Both preamp/DAC and phono stage come supplied with 9v in-line (wall-wart) power supplies, which should be removed when upgrading to the PS-5, and both products can be driven by

the same PS-5. In short, you could get the full five box stack (phono stage, pre/DAC, power supply, and mono amps) and still have something small and light enough to carry. In the gravitationally-challenged world of high-end audio, that's almost enough to seal the deal.

It's odd that in every other walk of consumer electronics, things shrink over time. Granted TV screens are getting larger by the year, but the technology itself is now thinner and lighter (and cheaper) than ever. Cameras, phones, games consoles, tablets, laptops, and the rest have all shrunk in size and weight – and often price – while improving performance. The same can happen in audio electronics, too, were it not for the massive amount of inertia built into many aspects of the audio world. We still seem to measure the quality of an amplifier by its size, weight, and price – “if it doesn't have an inch-thick front panel and a transformer the size of a crash helmet, it's not high-end!” Audio Alchemy has long since ‘politely’ disagreed with this inverted sizism, and lets its products speak for themselves in sound quality terms. As someone who occasionally lives on a diet of painkillers and NSAIDs after trying to lift one too many power amplifiers that weigh as much as a car engine, the idea of high-end electronics you can carry under your arm without dislocating your shoulder in the process is deeply attractive. ▶





*“The secret to the DPA-1 is a clever hybrid combination of Class A input stage coupled with a Class D output stage.”*

► The DDP-1 (short for Digital Decoding Preamp) combines a DSD-ready XMOS digital signal processing chipset (fed from a large selection of digital inputs, including I<sup>2</sup>S and AES/EBU), a small two RCA, one XLR line stage, RCA and XLR outputs for a power amp, and a good, solid 3.5mm headphone jack socket. It's designed to be easy to operate, with a combination of front panel controls and display, coupled with a remote control. It's also designed to be very 'now' without being so future proofed it forgot the past: there is *presently* no CD player in the Audio Alchemy line-up (that's a clue for future products), but if you own one with a digital output of any description, you will get the two to talk to one another. There is no provision for streaming, however; computer audio is dealt with through USB. The XMOS chipset, the DSP, the FGPA, and the microcontroller, however, are all inherently upgradable and should a new format that runs along USB or other lines necessitate a firmware upgrade, it's easy to do.

The DDP-1 is powered as standard with a plug-top 9V power supply. This can be swapped out for the PS-5 power supply, either at the point of purchase or as an upgrade. The PS-5 is an extremely simple device from the outside, with two separate 5-pin DIN sockets for driving two Audio Alchemy components (currently the DDP-1 and the new PPA-1 phono stage not tested here). It is also designed to fit snugly close

to the DDP-1 or the PPA-1, which might be the only blemish in the functionality of the Audio Alchemy products: the PS-5 is 'handed' (again... *presently*) and designed to sit to the right of the DDP-1, but the power supply socket is on the other side of the preamp, necessitating a longer DIN-DIN cable. In use, when the PS-5 is installed and the 9V power supplies removed, the PS-5 is designed to run constantly, and you should only use the power button on the DDP-1 for putting the device to standby. There is also an auto-off triggering cable connecting the DDP-1 to the DPA-1, so when you power the DPA-1 up or down, the DDP-1 will follow suit.

The secret to the DPA-1 (Digital Power Amplifier) is a clever hybrid combination of Class A input stage (complete with its own transformer-coupled power supply) coupled with a Class D output stage. This allows the DPA-1 to deliver a healthy 125 watts into eight ohms (and 200 watts into four ohms), with the sonorous qualities of Class A and the cool-running of Class D. Those who think the 'D' in Class D stands for 'demonisation' (and there are a lot of them) will probably start sharpening their pitchforks at this point, but the chances are you won't notice the Class D status until you are told of it. The review samples arrived fully run in, so there's no way of determining whether they need a period of burning in, but the trio of devices seem remarkably unfussy. ►



# CANARY AUDIO®

---

*Unveiling the sounds that nature intended...*

*Handcrafted in California, USA*

## KD-2000



Tube DSD DAC  
Dual ESS Sabre ES9018 Chipset

## CD-300



Tube CD Player

## M600



300B Monoblock Amplifiers  
50 Watts per channel

## CA-339MK-II



300B Monoblock Amplifiers  
50 Watts per channel

## M608



EL34 Integrated Amplifier  
38 Watts per channel

## C630



Tube Preamplifier

Visit us online at <http://www.canaryaudio.com>  
Dealer & Distributor Inquires Welcome

Available in UK at Definitive Audio  
<http://www.definitiveaudio.co.uk>

# DS Audio



The Audio Consultants  
Reading, RG7 8JN  
0118 9819891  
[audioconsultants.co.uk](http://audioconsultants.co.uk)

Cool Gales  
Bath, BA6 2LU  
01225 478400  
[coolgales.com](http://coolgales.com)

MCRU  
Huddersfield, HD1 4SB  
01484 540561  
[mcru.co.uk](http://mcru.co.uk)

sound fo  ndations  
[www. soundfowndations.co.uk](http://www.soundfowndations.co.uk)

Contact  
0118 9814238  
[info@soundfowndations.co.uk](mailto:info@soundfowndations.co.uk)



► I could rattle off a list of speakers this system shone with, but the easy way of summing this process up is to say simply “almost all of ‘em”. OK, I’m fairly certain there is someone out there with a loudspeaker that looks at a power amplifier as some kind of low impedance target practice who might beg to differ. However, the great joy of the Audio Alchemy concept is finding an amplifier that never acts as impediment to great sound no matter how far up the loudspeaker ladder you climb. In reality, no-one is going to partner an amplifier that costs this little with a loudspeaker that costs north of £100,000, but that probably says more about people’s ideas of system matching than any limitations on the Audio Alchemy’s part. I’ve heard Audio Alchemy driving loudspeakers that cost almost 20x as much as the electronics and sounding sublime in the process. My Wilson Duette S2’s are not a particularly punishing load for an amplifier, and the speaker’s demands are more about quality than quantity, but even so the Audio Alchemy system proved a natural and perfect partner. I mean a “why look further?” perfect partner. Plus, if you need more firepower, there’s always the monoblocks.

I don’t want to overstress the hi-fi attributes of this system, in case people get the wrong idea and start ascribing audiophile sensibilities to a system that is considerably more flexible than that. Yes, the Audio Alchemy system does all that midband transparency, top-end fluidity, bottom-end heft, all the micro-dynamic, and timbral shading that draw audiophiles moth-like to equipment, but the reality is so much more than that.

The first point to note is the DDP-1 is the star of the show. With (preferably) or without the PS-5, this processor-meets-line-stage-meets-headphone-amp is the real deal. It has uncanny detail resolution at the price, it plays music with an infectious sense of rhythm, and it manages to tick all the right audiophile ‘limpid pools of pellucidity’ boxes while sounding like a device you might just want to live with when you aren’t

playing well-recorded nose-flute albums. It has all the insight and soundstaging properties needed to dig deep into albums like Gregory Porter’s *Liquid Spirit* [Blue Note] both from a sound and musical quality perspective, but it also never loses sight of the fact music is supposed to be entertaining. Adding the PS-5 gives the sound more separation (both space around the instruments and ‘around the notes’) and gives a sense of greater cohesiveness in both the playing and the sounds of the recording itself. It’s well worth owning... in fact, it’s well worth owning after you buy the DDP-1. Here’s why, you get the enjoyment of the ‘wow!’ factor twice over, once when you buy the DDP-1 and once later when you upgrade it. Although if you are a headphone user, the PS-5 is almost a mandatory upgrade, as it gives the built-in headphone amp a significant boost from ‘good’ to ‘outstanding.’

The DPA-1 is not along for the ride; it’s an exciting, detailed, and exceptionally powerful amplifier in its own right. It has great bottom end drive, a clean and open midrange and an extended treble without exaggeration. It’s also the perfect partner for the DDP-1. It gives nothing away to rivals, too. I imagine most will sell as part of a complete Audio Alchemy package, but it deserves to be taken seriously in its own right as an excellent standalone stereo amp.

In absolute terms, the Audio Alchemy package is not quite as micro-dynamically adept or as detailed as some of the best. Nor is it capable of the kind of absolute fidelity to the sound of some of the products listed earlier in this issue. But this comparison only occurs because the Audio Alchemy is so good it invites comparison with products that might cost many times more. That a preamp that costs under £2,000 is not quite as good as one costing more than seven times as much is expected; the fact the DDP-1 gets as close as it does, and brings a DAC and a fine headphone amplifier to the party too is amazing. ►





► And party is an operative word here. You can't help but smile when listening to this system, because it makes music fun again. Let's focus on one aspect of the performance. Hell, let's focus on the whole six-pack, because this is the kind of amplifier that goes well with beer, BBQ, and playing music loud. It can do subtle and refined very well, but when something's this much fun, you can't help reaching for John Grant's 'Pale Green Ghosts' from the album of the same name [Bella Union] and playing it loud, then doing the same with something really rocky instead of electronica. Pretty soon, either AC/DC or ZZ Top are involved, beer is spilled, and someone winds up handcuffed to a gurney. Again.

The sign of a good design team is consistency. There are great single-minded designers who come up with the world's best preamp (for example) but everything else from their pen fails to achieve the same greatness. Here, you could take almost any individual component (except the power supply, of course) and put it up against the competition and it will at the very least match the performance of its peers. In many cases, it will improve upon the sound of those rivals, occasionally by no small measure. The whole is not intrinsically better than the sum of the parts, but it all works well together and the individual components are so good, why bother seeking out alternatives?

There are two ways of looking at the term 'high-end audio'. One is intrinsically locked to the price – if it ain't 'spendy', it ain't high-end! The other is more about the performance. Products are high-end by intent rather than by sticker, and it's here where Audio Alchemy's DDP-1, PS-5, and DPA-1 score so highly. We've all used clichés like "punches above its weight" or "giant killer" a lot in audio, but these terms are richly deserved here. This range is so exciting, so intrinsically 'right' sounding, and so much damn fun you can't help but like it a lot. And something this right helps legitimise Class D in the minds of sceptical audiophiles who have been told if it isn't hot and heavy, it isn't any good. In short, the Audio Alchemy components are all true high-end equipment that just forgot to be heavy and expensive. Very highly recommended! +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### DDP-1 DAC/preamp/headphone amp

Analog Inputs: stereo XLR, 2 stereo RCA

Digital inputs: USB, AES/EBU, 2 RCA coaxial, 2 Toslink optical, I<sup>2</sup>S, auxiliary USB for firmware updates

Outputs: Stereo XLR and RCA, 3.5mm headphone jack, 12-volt DC trigger

Frequency response:  $\pm 0.1$  dB, 10 Hz to 80 kHz

Nominal THD+N (1 volt): <0.001%

Signal-to-noise ratio (1 kHz): 103 dB unweighted

Headphone amp output: 1 watt at 32  $\Omega$

Maximum digital input sampling rate/bit depth:

32-bit/216kHz on PCM, 2.82 Mbps (DSD64) on DSD

Digital filter profiles: Linear phase, fast roll-off, Linear phase, slow roll-off, Minimum phase, fast roll-off, Minimum phase, slow roll-off (apodizing)

Dimensions (W×H×D): 26.7×7.6×29.5cm

Weight: 3.6 kg

Price: £1,695

### PS5 power supply

Voltage output:  $\pm 20$  VDC analogue, +12 VDC for digital

Total supply capacitance: 40,000 microfarads

Output: 2× multipin connector

Dimensions (W×H×D): 14×9×29.5cm

Weight: 4.1 kg

Price: £495

### DPA-1 stereo power amplifier

Inputs: stereo XLR, stereo RCA, IEC power, 3.5mm trigger

Outputs: Five-way binding posts

Power output/channel (0.1% THD+N, 1 kHz): 125 watts into 8 $\Omega$ , 200 watts into 4 $\Omega$

Frequency response:  $\pm 0.25$  dB, 20 Hz to 20 kHz

Nominal THD+N (1 watt into 8 $\Omega$ ): 0.05%

Signal-to-noise ratio (1 kHz): 100 dB unweighted

Dimensions (W×H×D): 26.7×7.6×29.5cm

Weight: 7.3 kg

Price: £1,695

Manufactured by: Audio Alchemy

URL: [www.audioalchemy.com](http://www.audioalchemy.com)

Distributed by: Symmetry

URL: [www.symmetry-systems.co.uk](http://www.symmetry-systems.co.uk)

Tel: +44(0)1727 865488



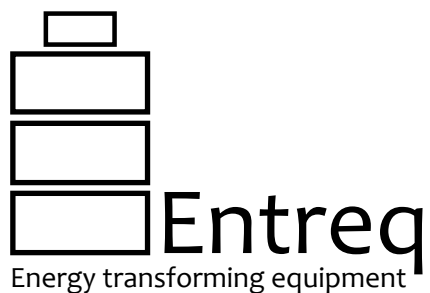
## **SOPRA, REVEAL THE INVISIBLE**

Combining twenty years of engineering heritage from Focal's flagship Utopia loudspeaker range with innovative new technologies in a stylish and compact design, the new Sopra N°2 will reveal the true essence of your music.

With three major innovations and two patents – the Neutral Inductance Circuit, the Tuned Mass Damper midrange suspension, and the Infinite Horn Loading housing for its Beryllium tweeter – Sopra brings unprecedented technical ingenuity and matchless performance, thrilling the senses like never before. The longing for exceptional speakers in your living room is over.

Visit [www.focal.com](http://www.focal.com) to discover more.





#### ENTREQ STOCKISTS

**Acoustic Arts** ... ( Bedfordshire )... [www.acousticarts.co.uk](http://www.acousticarts.co.uk) ... 01582 485316

**Audio Destination** ... ( Devon ) ... [www.audiodeestination.co.uk](http://www.audiodeestination.co.uk) ... 01884 243584

**Brian and Trevors** ... ( Manchester ) ... [www.brianandtrevors.com](http://www.brianandtrevors.com) ... 0161 7664837

**Future Shop** ... ( London ) ... [www.futureshop.co.uk](http://www.futureshop.co.uk) ... 0208 905 1555

**Lotus HiFi** ... ( London ) ... [www.lotus340r.net](http://www.lotus340r.net) ... 07887 852513

**Martins HiFi** ... ( Norfolk ) ... [www.martinshifi.co.uk](http://www.martinshifi.co.uk) ... 01603 627010

**Midland Audio Exchange** ... ( Worcestershire ) ... [www.midlandaudiox-change.co.uk](http://www.midlandaudiox-change.co.uk) ... 01562 731100

**Oxford Audio Consultants** ... ( Oxford ) ... [www.oxfordaudio.co.uk](http://www.oxfordaudio.co.uk) ... 01865 790879

**Rayleigh Hifi** ... ( Essex ) ... [www.rayleighhifi.com](http://www.rayleighhifi.com) ... 01268 779762

**Sonic Synergy** ... ( London ) ... [www.sonicsynergy.co.uk](http://www.sonicsynergy.co.uk) ... 07946 577374

**Sonic Synergy** ... ( Swansea ) ... [www.sonicsynergy.co.uk](http://www.sonicsynergy.co.uk) ... 07971 849474

**Studio AV** ... ( Berkshire ) ... [www.studioav.co.uk](http://www.studioav.co.uk) ... 01753 863300



## Introducing Athena

Nature is the best constructor !

That's why at Entreq we try to build in the same way . The result is a natural sound and a flow in the music that is seldom heard . The Athena HiFi Rack is the result of more than 8 years of development . It not only controls unwanted physical or parasitic vibration but also high frequency noise and electronic /electrical magnetic type field effects . Like all Entreq product the Athena employs a grounding point ; this allows the unwanted interference to be removed from the system and directed to one of Entreq's Ground stations . Athena is built on a modular system and can be configured for most electronics .

Prices start from £1350 - £6000

For more information please see the Entreq website or ask you nearest stockist for a demonstration.

[www.entreq.co.uk](http://www.entreq.co.uk)

[info@entreq.co.uk](mailto:info@entreq.co.uk)

01234 924242

07800 610301



## Entreq Grounding

### Innovation

Entreq have been pioneering signal grounding since 1999 . Over the past 16 years they have established an understanding and a level of knowledge in this unique field that up until recently no other audio or electronics manufacturer had either taken time to explore , understand or even deem worthy of research . This puts Entreq in the enviable position , certainly in the audio industry , of being the leader rather than the follower in this arena .

### Ground Box

Something to establish is that Entreq's use of the term Ground does not directly relate to or mean 'Primary Earth' i.e. what you would understand as your 'Protective Earth' for your mains electricity . Entreq Ground Boxes are not designed to substitute or replace the protective ground found in your home . The function of the Entreq Ground Box is to present itself as an attractive destination for high frequency noise , stray voltages and the various issues induced by magnetic field effects . This pollution is littered across the system and is always present . Different systems attract , generate and produce different levels and types of noise ! **This is why Entreq offer a selection of Ground Boxes to suit every system and budget .**

### Get Connected

You now need to connect your Ground Box to your equipment !

Establishing a connection to your hifi system with an Entreq Grounding Box couldn't be simpler . Entreq make a range of Ground Cables called Ertha Cables that attach to any free and available connection on any product connected to your system . Connections currently catered for include : RCA , XLR , USB , BNC and RJ45 . On the other end of the Ertha Cable is a spade termination that attaches to the Ground Box itself . As per the Ground Boxes these Ertha cables come in a range of levels ; offering the end user the ability to closely match the right combination of both Ground Box and Ertha Cable to obtain optimal performance .

Generally the key component to Ground first is often the product at the centre or hub of your system , whether that is your Pre-amplifier, Integrated amplifier or Dac/pre . Next you should consider a source component ; either your CD player / DAC , Streamer , Phono stage etc .

Once connected to your system the improvements are usually noticeable within minutes however the grounding process will continue to evolve . After approximately 24 hours you will in most cases have obtained the optimal result . It is not uncommon to hear continual Improvements up to and beyond 72 hours !

Please feel free to visit : [www.entreq.com](http://www.entreq.com) for further information on Entreq .

Please find a list of experienced UK Dealers : <http://www.entreq.co.uk/dealers.html>

*This is not Voodoo or Black Magic it is primarily an in depth understanding of Physics , magnetic field technology and the experience of combining these disciplines .*

***In service to the music - Entreq***

DACS MADE FOR THE MUSIC YOU HAVE,  
NOT THE MUSIC YOU HAVE TO BUY.



BIFROST MULTIBIT \$599



GUNGNIR MULTIBIT \$1249



YGGDRASIL \$2299

You'll be amazed what's hiding in your "lowly" 16/44.1 music when you play it on a Schiit multibit DAC. Forget your stress about costly "unicorn" formats\* and fully experience *the music you already love*.

\*Got high res? No problem. Our multibit DACs play that too...and it sounds great!



SCHIIT

[WWW.SCHIIT.COM](http://WWW.SCHIIT.COM)

# Teddy Pardo i80a integrated amplifier

by Chris Thomas

**T**he Teddy Pardo amplifiers have been steadily gaining some traction, often among lovers of Naim Audio equipment, for some time. This is evidenced by their increasing presence as topics on the audio forums. They are treading the path already travelled many years ago by Naim, Exposure, and Nytech, to name but three. Teddy began building power supplies for use with Naim from his base in Israel some time ago and these were later followed up with amplifier designs whose performance, it seems to me, are closely related to the profoundly solid-state sound of Naim themselves and in particular, the older designs. The Naimees on the forums picked up on them and began citing them as an interesting alternative reminiscent of the original and much-loved chrome-bumper Naim sound. A style of sound that has all but vanished as Naim themselves have moved on over the years.

For anyone who has been round the block several times with Naim equipment, as I have, it takes but a few moments of listening before the comparisons become evident. There

is a drive, speed, and sharpness to the way those classic amps still go about their business that is unmistakable. They are, as Naim have always been, direct communicators with immediacy and explicit detail at the core of their musical point of view. Grip and control with sharp and dramatic transients are just a few of the things that give them their sonic signature. It's a powerful and compelling view too. But more of that later.

The i80a is a chunky, slimline, integrated amplifier with 80 watts per channel. It is based on both the company's PR1 and the ST60 separates, with which it shares boards and modules. One of the main design philosophies is short signal runs and a large regulated power supply. It cannot be supplemented with one of Teddy's stand alone power supplies, which he manufactures for use with Naim preamplifiers. Externally it is rather minimalist and follows the stripped-down, functional rather than beautiful design features of the early Naim amps, being bolted together from sheets of black aluminium. The front panel has both an input selector and a volume control, both of which are particularly basic feeling but





*“There’s nothing like a bit of tonal complexity and harmonic warmth to lure me beyond the bare bones and into the music.”*

► do the job. The small remote control allows for volume control and muting and but, again, is rather basic in design and in my listening room had too narrow an acceptance angle to be a total success. The connectors, on the other hand, are very nice WBTs. The RCA inputs and the speaker terminations are all excellent. There are four line inputs, an out socket and one home theatre bypass pair, too.

The Teddy Pardo has the appearance of one of those amplifiers where all the money has been spent internally and I can only endorse that approach but, without wanting to get too precious about its appearance and finish. This will appeal to those who eschew many other current designs as allocating too much of their hard-earned money on surface ‘frills’. This is a design for the ‘no frills’ crowd.

You are going to need to allow this amplifier a fair bit of time before forming any opinions as to its performance. Make no real judgements until a week has passed. It immediately strikes you as being strong and driving, yet with the Focal Diablos there was certainly too much high frequency energy, which strayed into a touch of brittleness. This ‘cool’ balance made the amplifier seem a little impersonal and this continued for a few hours until I could detect some heat getting into the

side sinks. Then it started to ease out and after a few days became a lot more involving to listen to.

There’s nothing like a bit of tonal complexity and harmonic warmth to lure me beyond the bare bones and into the music. For amplifiers like the i80a to stretch their performance envelope into these areas without losing their sense of presence and control makes for an attractive blend of attributes. This amplifier kicks and kicks hard, with exemplary control and speed. It can produce and swing powerful transients with ease and the longer you listen to it, the more musically accomplished and balanced it becomes. It’s not so much the leading edge of the transient that is beguiling, but the speed with which it can lose energy too.

As I said about the Spectral amplifiers all those years ago, it imposes itself on the dynamic elements of the music and yet leaves no trace of its work to smear or confuse what happens next. In other words, it is properly dynamic and fast with great recovery speed and this extends from the big to the small, where after several hours of use, it convinces. I always admire amplifiers that can kick you in the stomach while blowing gently across your cheek and the i80a goes some way along this road. ►





# 50 YEARS OF audio-T

While many of our competitors have chosen to focus on home cinema and TV, at Audio T we've never lost sight of our roots... set down in music reproduction over 50 years ago. We sell home cinema, of course, combined with a range of 2 channel brands that is second to none, see below.

All our stores have enthusiastic and knowledgeable staff with a comfortable demonstration room. We can deliver and install systems for you and we are always happy to live up to our Price Promise. So if you love music and want a system that will make you listen to more, you know where to come.

There are now many new ways to get the music out of your system and we can guide you through them. From turntables, to CD players to computers, streamers and wireless loudspeakers it's a potential minefield but one that gives you more possibilities than ever...

**Brentwood**  
01277 264730

**Cardiff**  
029 20228565

**Manchester**  
0161 839 8869

**Preston**  
01772 883958

**Swansea**  
01792 474608

**Brighton**  
01273 609431

**Cheltenham**  
01242 583960

**Oxford**  
01865 765961

**Reading**  
0118 958 5463

**Swindon**  
01793 538222

**Bristol**  
01179 264975

**Enfield**  
020 8367 3132

**Portsmouth**  
023 9266 3604

**Southampton**  
023 8025 2827

**MUSIC AT HOME 2016**

Pick up your free copy in-store or order from our website

## Buy Now, Pay in 10 Months Time\*

*\*Subject to status, ask in-store for details.*

We sell Anthem, Arcam, Audiolab, Audioquest, B&W, Bryston, Chord Company, Chord Electronics, Cyrus, Denon, Dynaudio, Focal, Grado, Hi-Fi Racks, JVC, KEF, Kudos, Linn, Marantz, Michell, Monitor Audio, Naim, Onkyo, Optoma, Panasonic, Pioneer, PMC, ProAc, Project, PSB, QED, Quad, Quadraspire, Rega, REL, Roksan, Rotel, Ruark, Sennheiser, Sonos, Sony (Projectors), Spendor, Totem, Unison Research, Wharfedale, Yamaha and more. See our website for a complete list.

*Not all brands are available in every shop so please check our website before travelling.*

**[www.audio-t.co.uk](http://www.audio-t.co.uk)**

*“I do believe that speed and rhythmic articulation are mandatory in any quality amplifier and the i80a certainly has this in abundance.”*

► Tonally, I could never quite shake off the fact that it is a touch bright, then again the Beryllium tweeters of the Diablo are slightly ‘hot’, so this doesn’t really surprise me that much. This extends through its bandwidth in fact and leaves female vocalists too forward in the mix and with a bit of an edge. But, to some extent this does ease with time and use and you do get used to it. I should also add that the rest of the system and its installation is also going to have its say where this is concerned so I wouldn’t want to make too much of it considering the variables involved. Some people love this presentation too.

If you like your music served up with a healthy dose of what has become known as ‘PRaT’ (Pace, Rhythm and Timing), then you are going to admire this amplifier. Personally I am no advocate of this particular description, but I do believe that speed and rhythmic articulation are mandatory in any quality amplifier and the i80a certainly has this in abundance. The fact that it has the ability to deliver ‘PRaT’ into real speaker loads was made clear when I tried it with a pair of the superb Estelon XC stand mount speakers. These £15k beauties have a more benevolent tonal balance than the Diablo, but their ceramic driver compliment and advanced interior cabinet design endows them with enormous potential. Yet they are also ruthless at showing inadequate amplification. I wouldn’t necessarily advocate using a £2k integrated with them to be honest but, as they were newly set-up as part of a much more expensive system, why not?

The grip and control from Teddy’s amp is certainly impressive. Threads of bass that wander through the music are always sharply in focus and although pitch definition at lower frequencies is exposed by the Estelon, the sense of rhythmic shifts and emphases are always interesting and give the amplifier an agility and suppleness that I think will appeal to a lot of people. The slightly chill wind of tonality that blows through the music never quite goes though although the amp is super organised generally and when called upon, uses its not inconsiderable power precisely and with real emphasis and weight.

Overall this is a fine sounding amplifier with a flavour and musical approach that is both focussed and articulate. I didn’t find it particularly refined in comparison to some of the newer

Naim Nait models I have heard lately but I imagine that this the very thing that will attract those that find today’s amplifiers a little safe. While I wouldn’t exactly describe its performance as visceral, it does plug you straight into the musical flow and is ‘to the point’ rhythmically.

Teddy Pardo’s amplifier design is something special, especially for those who prefer the sound of classic ‘chrome bumper’ Naim to its modern counterpart. Far from being a hindrance, the basic design of the exterior of the i80a helps cement that ‘old school’ appeal to some audio enthusiasts. While most people today want something more reflecting modern product design aesthetics, the Teddy Pardos of this world work a niche that doesn’t care about a nicer case or a better set of knobs, but prize an amplifier for its sound quality first and foremost. There might be a happy balance, however; somewhere between the i80a’s harking back to the 1980s product design and models that max out on ‘bling’. The question is, however, if Teddy Pardo brought the i80a’s aesthetics and build into the 21st Century, would it continue to appeal to the same target market? I somehow doubt it.

I like the sound though, and ultimately that is what matters in an amplifier. There’s no question that the i80a is an interesting device to listen to music through. If you look at the current crop of amplifiers as having too much style and not enough substance, and especially if you wish the Earth was a little bit flatter, check out the Teddy Pardo i80a. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Integrated amplifier

**Inputs:** 4 × line RCA, 1 × Home Theatre

**Outputs:** 1 set of WBT speaker terminals

**Power:** 80 watts into 4–8 ohms

**Dimensions:** 9 × 33 × 43 cm (H×W×D)

**Price:** £2,035

**Manufacturer:** Teddy Pardo

Hod Hasharon, Israel

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



# THE EXPLORER

The Explorer represents the evolution of portable audio, and our refusal to accept the limitations of digital audio. Smartphones, with their mediocre DACs, integrated, noise-prone circuitry and lossy files, just don't do justice to the emotion behind our favorite music — that's why we've carefully crafted the Explorer using nothing but the highest quality components to recreate a portable listening experience that's as close to real vinyl as it gets on-the-go.

**Genuine Wood** — Every Explorer is crafted from solid blocks of real hardwood, ensuring a timeless, one-of-a-kind design.

**Authentic Sound** — TI Burr Brown PCM1792 DAC and TPA6120A2 amp section recreate a rich, smooth, unusually spacious listening experience.

**Connected** — WiFi and Bluetooth connectivity allow use of apps, streaming services, and cutting-edge peripherals.

**TIDAL** — Every Explorer comes with a free three month trial of TIDAL HiFi, giving you unlimited access to 40 million CD-quality tracks via streaming and locally stored audio.



GET READY FOR SOMETHING DIFFERENT

Echobox is a company founded and run by music lovers and audio geeks who believe that most portable audio gear is either low quality or overpriced, and we want to help audiophiles step into the digital age. We know that people who truly love their music are never satisfied with "good enough," and listening on-the-go should be no exception.

As a company, we believe in the power of music to change the world for the better. That's why we donate 1% of all company profits to charities that use music to make the world a better place.

Find us on [www.echoboxaudio.com](http://www.echoboxaudio.com).

"WE HAVE CREATED  
A MONSTER"

# D-4.1

The Raidho Acoustics D-4.1 is created on the laurels of the highly acclaimed Raidho D-5. We have given it our best to integrate that highest possible qualities in a compared to D-5 smaller package. the driver complement with 4 bass drivers, two 4" midranges and the Raidho tweeter has created a monster of a speaker, truly full range and with an impact and refinement second to none.

The D-4.1 is a true 3-way Raidho Diamond Driver loudspeaker, it extreme performer for those who cherris their music and enjoy setting up their system for the very best performance.



**Raidho** acoustics

Find a list of Raidho dealers at:  
[www.raidho.dk](http://www.raidho.dk)

Meet us at facebook:  
[www.facebook.com/RaidhoAcoustics](https://www.facebook.com/RaidhoAcoustics)



# Roksan Pug arm and VSC phono stage/PSU

by Alan Sircom

**T**he Roksan Xerxes is a known quantity, in part because it's been around since the 1980s. It might have undergone several changes over the years, and in fact bears scant resemblance to the original deck, but the basics are well documented. In early days, the Xerxes featured a range of arms, but over the years Roksan developed three exceptionally good arms in their own right; the baby Nima, the mid-range Tabriz, and the up-market Artemiz.

Unfortunately, time took its toll on the Tabriz and now the Artemiz. Not in sound quality terms – both were always full of star quality, but key components within the arms are no longer available, which spells the end of the line for both. Spares will still be available for the longest time, but Roksan needed a replacement. Enter... the Pug.

The Pug is perhaps the best named product in audio, because the way the headshell fits onto the cigar-tube thick carbon-fibre arm-tube gives it the appearance of a stubby but loveable pug dog. The three-point, tungsten-carbide ball-and-cup bearing arrangement, the use of solid aluminium and brass components, and the high-grade Cardas wiring all speak to the good character of the arm, but its sophisticated screw-in counterweights within a fixed counterweight section, and its ability to adjust VTA and azimuth with ease, all make this an arm for fit-and-forget and inveterate tweaking types.

If the Pug looks broadly familiar, it's because the arm shares a lot of the same design DNA with The Wand, from New Zealand based Design Build Listen. In fact, although the two share a lot of common design elements, few parts are actually shared between the two arms, and where The Wand is a little, er, DIY in outlook, the Pug is easy to set-up and as tweaky or as non-tweaky as you want it.

The Pug is priced as a Tabriz replacement. In fact, it's good enough to replace the the Artemiz tonearm, too (which is notionally still available in tiny numbers, and is a good £1,000 more than the Pug). As such I requested it with Roksan's top Shiraz cartridge moving coil instead of the Corus Black moving magnet photographed, which you might expect partnering an arm like the Pug. The Shiraz is a tough challenge for the Pug,



*“The Pug is priced as a Tabriz replacement. In fact, it’s good enough to replace the Artemiz tonearm, too.”*



*“The ‘one box to rule them all’ VSC combines reference speed control and phono stage in a single chassis, but with an upgradable power supply.”*

► because any hint of brightness or zing in the performance will be laid out in absolute detail by the EMT-derived top cartridge.

The Shiraz has a reputation for being a wonderful tracking cartridge, but that means it is only as good as the arm letting it do all that tracking, and the Pug scored very highly here. The two acid tests here are something dynamic (a recent reissue of Louis Prima’s *The Wildest* [Columbia]) and something that used to be dynamic (an old and worn Decca version of the 1812 Overture, where all the cannon fire has been worn out through decades of being played on poor cartridges). The Shiraz is one of the few cartridges that can play both with equanimity without having to set the downforce light enough to compensate for Prima’s Vegas dance band with the entertainment set to maximum, or heavy enough not to mistrack those years of damage in trying to play an LP sporting heavy ordinance. But, such things are only possible if the arm plays its part perfectly, and the Pug does just that.

More importantly than the sheer mechanical precision of the Pug, its most important sonic element is its ability to give every note a sense of precise musical space and harmonic structure, without any hint of one instrument ‘leaking’ into the other. There is a fine sense of separation here, but without ‘isolation’ (the instruments work together as a cohesive whole, but individual instruments are easy to place in space): this is of paramount importance when dealing with recordings

like ‘Radio Silence’ from the Neil Cowley Trio album of the same name [Naim Label, 180g LP]. This 2010 slice of new British jazz is complex and demands good equipment to best investigate its charms. The Pug gives you a sense of a trio working together, but also the ability to focus in on the playing of each member of that trio as the music progresses. This is something that is second nature in a live event, but does not translate in anything like the same depth, to the recorded space. The Pug helps restore the balance, especially in the all-important midrange.

Where the Pug shows its limits against the ultra arms is in that architectural sense of deep bass foundations you can hear on the best of the best, but coming back down to earth, the Pug has an advantage here: there are arms in broadly its price range that have a more powerful bass, but they sound ‘stodgy’. I’d happily trade what the Pug does over arms that try to emulate the really big hitters, and fall short in the process. This is forgivable because of the reasonable price, and the really clever design that extends right down to the arm rest; this is magnetic, rather than a basic ‘seat’.

The other major change to the Roksan Xerxes platform is a series of the improvements to the power supply box, announced last year. Designed to fit inside the standard Caspian M2 housing, Roksan launched the RPM power supply and speed control, the fully switchable gain RPP ►



# Two worlds collide.



## NAC-N 272 Streaming Preamplifier

The point at which the worlds of digital and analogue engineering collide, creating a new breed of streaming product. Hand-crafted in Salisbury, England to take you beyond sound, for a completely immersive music experience.

The 272 combines an all-analogue Naim preamplifier with high-resolution UPnP™ high-res streaming, TIDAL, Spotify® Connect, Bluetooth® (aptX), DAB/FM/iRadio, multiple wired inputs, full multiroom capability and app control for your iOS or Android device.

For full specifications and to find your nearest Naim retailer visit [naimaudio.com](http://naimaudio.com).



## Go Deeper



► reference phono stage, and the VSC, or Vinyl System Control. The 'one box to rule them all' VSC combines reference speed control and phono stage in a single chassis, but with an upgradable power supply: one power supply shared between the two sections, separate ones for the speed controller and phono stage. This last can be supplied at time of purchase or as a retrofit upgrade. The captive power supply lead runs from the back of the RPM or VSC, but a pair of conventional out-rigger wires and phono inputs are used to hook the deck to the phono stage. There is a cost saving of £350 in putting the phono stage and PSU in the same box. There are two options, the VSC with a shared PSU, or the VSC2, which brings a separate power feed to both sections (this can be retrofitted). Finally, there is one more update to the Xerxes; the plinth and subchassis are now available in a striking piano gloss white.

The VSC is not a marriage of convenience, although it does bring PSU and phono stage in one box. It's more a meeting of minds, the RPM managing to make the Xerxes (already an accurate record spinner) that bit more precise and thus capable of excellent note attack and release, coupled with a whisper-quiet phono stage that is flexible enough to cope with almost any real-world cartridge, and has that distinctive Roksan balance of honesty and musicality with plenty of detail, but not the attendant 'impressive' sheen. The phono stage is the easiest to evaluate in the system as you can just by-pass it and move to another model. In so doing, the RPP section shows itself to be an excellent performer; not as inviting as the Audio Research Reference Phono 3 reviewed elsewhere in this issue, not as warm as our benchmark Pass Labs XP-25, or not as ultimately detailed as our other reference phono stage, RCM Audio's TheRIAA. But here's the thing; the phono stage in the VSC was very close to keeping up with these top-flight phono stages, despite the price differential (each one of these top phono stages costs about as much as the whole Roksan turntable, arm, cartridge, power supply, and phono stage rig), and in each case managed to carve out its own signature that was almost the perfect balance point between the three aforementioned designs.

The Roksan Xerxes platform has been a constant in the audio firmament for several decades, so you could be forgiven for thinking the product was fully mature and development was in the past. You'd be wrong, with the VSC you get a more precise sounding turntable and a truly reference-grade phono stage in one Caspian-sized box. And – wait for it – the Pug is no dog, too. It's a fine tonearm in perfect balance with the rest of the deck, cartridge, and power supply. The Xerxes remains a world-class deck and, in its full-spec guise, comes very highly recommended. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

### VSC

#### Phono stage section

Gain Settings: MM = 40.6dB @ 1kHz

MC 1 = 56dB @ 1kHz

MC 2 = 65.5dB @ 1kHz

S/N Ratio: MM = >89dB AWTD (ref. 5.0 mV)

MC 1 = >79dB AWTD (ref. 5.0 mV)

MC 2 = >70dB AWTD (ref. 5.0mV)

Overload Margin: 26dB

THD +N: <0.01%

Output Impedance: <50Ω

Voltage Supply: Requires +26, 0, -26 Vdc (internal DS1.5 power supply)

#### Turntable PSU section

Output Voltage (33rpm): 16V rms

Output Voltage (45 rpm): 16V rms

Phase: 0° and 90°

DC Offset: <10mV

THD + N: <0.1%

Output Impedance: <0.1Ω

Voltage Supply: Requires +26, 0, -26 Vdc (internal DS1.5 power supply)

Price: £3,000 (VSC); £3,250 (VSC2)

### The Pug tonearm

Effective Length: 240mm

Overhang: 17.5mm

Headshell Offset Angle: 22.9°

Effective Mass: 14g

Mounting Hole Diameter: 23mm (28mm max.)

Armboard Thickness: 19mm (nominal)

Recommended Cartridge Weights: 5 – 9.5g

Recommended Tracking Force: 1.2 – 3g

Price: £1,375

Manufactured by: Roksan Ltd

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

Distributed in the UK by: Henley Designs Ltd

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

Tel: +44(0)1235 511166



# ENGINEERED BY PROFESSIONALS. COVETED BY CONNOISSEURS.

Introducing NADAC, the network attached DAC that delivers the excellence of the recording studio, into the home environment for the most discerning audiophile.

Developed by Merging Technologies - the world's foremost manufacturer of high-resolution digital audio recording systems, NADAC allows listeners to finally enjoy master quality recordings at home, with the same equipment with which it has been recorded and mastered.

With the introduction of RAVENNA networked audio, supporting all file formats and sample rates from 44.1kHz - 384kHz PCM, DSD 64, 128 and 256, we have totally transformed the performance that can be delivered in the comfort of your home.

Distributed in the UK by  
**emerging**  
T: 0118 402 5090

QUAD-DSD256  
**DSD**  
Direct Stream Digital



**MERGING + NADAC**  
NETWORK ATTACHED DIGITAL TO ANALOGUE CONVERTER

[nadac.merging.com](http://nadac.merging.com)

## "The Best Tonearm I've heard" HI FI WORLD



### Conqueror MK3C Tonearm Review Comments

Perfect 10 award "The most addictive product I've heard"  
AUDIO 10 (USA)

"For me Origin Live in the analogue sector is the discovery of the year! ..."  
IMAGE HI FI (Germany)

"The biggest improvement I've made in 25 years of listening to music and lots of exchanges of hi-fi stuff!! ...breath-taking, big new level! It's like coming to Nirvana".  
OWNER COMMENT- FERDINAND ROEHRIG

Tonearm of the Year Award HI FI WORLD

Most wanted component award STEREO TIMES (USA)

Best sound at the show award KLANGBILDER (Vienna)

Tonearm performance influences the sound of your system much more than you might expect.

Origin Live arms embody advanced ideas. These enable even lower arms in our range to astonish users with significant improvements over highly regarded brands costing over 4 times the price.

You may be skeptical, so we offer a 3 week money back guarantee should you be anything but delighted.

To start enjoying an entirely new level of performance see website below.

Email: [originlive@originlive.com](mailto:originlive@originlive.com)

Website: [www.originlive.com](http://www.originlive.com)

Phone: +44(0)2380 578877



## COMPETITION

# WIN a stunning Synergistic Research Atmosphere Level 2 power cord worth \$1,995!

**H**i-Fi+ has teamed up with US audio enhancement pioneers Synergistic Research to bring you the latest in its power cord technology, Atmosphere. Synergistic Research has developed ground-breaking actively shielded cables for years, creating an electronic barrier through which no radio frequency interference can penetrate, but the technology required multiple shielding cables and an external power supply, which put the concept out of reach to many, until now.

Synergistic Research's new power cords, developed under the Atmosphere banner, feature three grades of

increasingly sophisticated shielding technology, from the passive Level 1 right up to the Level 3 designs, which are custom shielded for their specific task.

We've picked out an Atmosphere Level 2 power cord to highlight what Synergistic Research is achieving, because the end user need not specify the particular use of the cable. However, the Atmosphere Level 2 power cord features the company's active shield biasing, plus a UEF (Uniform Energy Field) conditioner, all built into the California made power cord. One lucky winner will discover just how important active shielding is to their power thanks to our outstanding competition prize. +



### Competition Question

What does UEF stand for?

- A. Unified Epicyclic Factor
- B. Universal Energy Focus
- C. Uniform Energy Field

To answer, please visit Synergistic Research's dedicated competition page <http://www.synergisticresearch.com/hifi-giveaway-enter-now/> Alternatively, send your answer on a postcard (including your name, address, and contact details) to Synergistic Research Competition, Synergistic Research Inc. 17401 Armstrong Ave., Suite 102, Irvine, CA 92614, USA. The competition closes on August 4th 2016.

### Competition Rules

The competition will run from June 2nd 2016 until August 4th 2016. The competition is open to entries from around the world, 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.

# Audiomat Aria Amplifier

by Roy Gregory

Some things just work and one of them is the 25-30Watt, push-pull Class A tube amp, based around single pairs of EL34 output tubes. It's a topology that's been around since the year dot – well, since serious stereo systems first emerged – and while I've yet to discover an example that disappoints, a few have delivered truly spectacular results. My very first really serious, high-end amps were a pair of Jadis JA30s (still going strong); perhaps the archetypical example of the breed. Audiomat's Aria is neither as ambitious as its French compatriots, nor as expensive, but for many of us, the upside of that is that it is both more affordable and in addition, rather more versatile. For starters, as an integrated amp it doesn't require an expensive line-stage to go with it and secondly,

being some three-decades younger than the JA30s it also carries a few modern niceties, like a remote control.

Housed in a simple, closed-box, bent metal chassis, the Aria nonetheless manages to be both stylish and individual, the large silver volume and source select knobs offering a pleasing contrast to the black casework, the acrylic front-panel offering a darkened window that offers a glimpse of the glow beyond. It's a welcome contrast to some of the gaudier models typically emanating from the Far East. Look inside – something you'll need to do in order to install the output tubes – and you discover a neatly laid out interior, with the substantial power supply and output transformers arranged behind the single PCB carrying the audio circuit. Inputs and AC connection are kept separate, located on opposite sides ▶





*“Don’t be tempted to start a bit of impromptu tube-rolling using standard EL34s – it will be a short-lived and costly exercise.”*

► of the rear panel, the sort of simple but effective housekeeping that is the hallmark of this carefully considered design. Other less than obvious examples (unless you actually read the manual!) are the fact that Input One is wired with higher quality cable, intended to be used for your primary source. The IEC input is marked for AC polarity and yes you should pay attention to it. There are three conical feet on the underside of the chassis and Audiomat strongly recommend that you avoid placing the amp on metal or glass supporting surfaces: like I said, all good, sensible stuff. One other thing to bear in mind is that the 30Watt rated output is justified (over the more usual 25Watts Class A from a pair of EL34s) by the use of EL34L tubes, running at a higher grid voltage – so don’t be tempted to start a bit of impromptu tube-rolling using standard EL34s – it will be a short-lived and costly exercise.

The big issue with the 25 or 30Watt Class A amplifier used to be choosing a matching speaker, but over the years, generally increasing efficiency and easier speaker loads, partly driven by the home cinema market, means that isn’t the challenge it once was. With the 91dB/8 Ohm Focal Sopra No. 2 in-house, I needed to look no further than that. Indeed,

if I had an issue with the match it is that I could have done with more travel on the volume control so that it was working further up its range. That aside, this was definitely a happy marriage, while the various Living Voice Auditorium models or the Audioplan designs also distributed by Ikon Audio Consultants, would be other excellent options. Audiomat warns of extended burn-in times for both the amplifier and the tubes – and it’s not wrong. I ran the amp constantly for over a week before it settled down to a sweetly consistent performance. Nor is that a linear progression, with one period around the 50-hour mark where it started to sound distinctly glassy and hard. Thankfully that soon passed and the sound opened out, the stage gained air and the tonality grew richer, warmer and more natural. In fact, if this amp has a single over-riding quality it is the natural warmth and immediacy of its presentation – with the emphasis on “natural”. The Aria is never overly warm, rounded, or mellifluous, but it is harmonically correct, devoid of glare and hardness, and possessing of a remarkable sweetness that nevertheless manages to avoid blunting its musically incisive sense of bite and flow. Play Sol Gabetta’s three-disc set, *Il Progetto Vivaldi* ►



# CLONEY

AUDIO  
HOME ENTERTAINMENT

## PREMIER VALVE AMPLIFIERS FROM JADIS OF FRANCE



ARCA • AUDIO RESEARCH • B&W • CAYIN • CLASSE  
CLEARAUDIO COPLAND • CYRUS • DEVIALET • JADIS  
KHARMA • KOETSU KRELL • LAVARDIN • LEBEN • MARTIN  
LOGAN • MERIDIAN • NAIM NORDOST • PRIMA LUNA  
PRIMARE • QUAD • RAIDHO • REGA • SME SONUS FABER  
SPENDOR • STAX • SUMIKO • SYSTEM AUDIO • VAN DEN HUL  
WILSON AUDIO AND MANY MORE.



**THE BEST ADVICE, HOME INSTALLATION AND  
AFTER SALES SERVICE IN IRELAND - SINCE 1966.**

55 Main Street, Blackrock, Co. Dublin, Ireland.  
T: +353 1 28 88 477 [www.cloneyaudio.com](http://www.cloneyaudio.com)



**Now open at Tower Records,  
Dawson St, Dublin 2\***  
T: +353 1 68 75 954

\*Tower Records carries a selection of our product range.

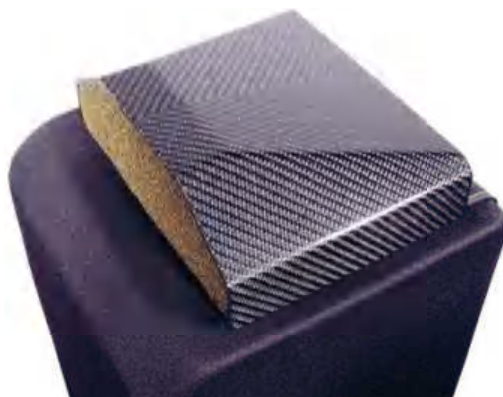
**If you really  
enjoy your music**

## MonoPulse

**Custom built loudspeakers**

Total timing accuracy for holographic  
realism and soundstage

Our customers are musicians  
and engineers



[monopulse.co.uk](http://monopulse.co.uk)

SEE,  
HEAR  
& FEEL  
THE DIFFERENCE...

studio 

We offer some of the finest music  
reproduction systems available  
on the market today, from  
entry level to elite brands.

Our range of products has  
been carefully chosen  
to ensure exceptional  
performance, reliability  
and value for money.

Simply contact us for  
more information.

**Number one  
dCS Dealer  
in the UK  
for the  
fourth year  
running**



As seen at



A specialty high-end  
audio event organised by  
the passionate audiophiles

44 High Street, Eton, Berkshire, SL4 6BL. Tel: 01753 863300  
[www.studioav.co.uk](http://www.studioav.co.uk) [sales@studioav.co.uk](mailto:sales@studioav.co.uk)  
[@studioAVtd](https://twitter.com/studioAVtd) [eton.studioAV](https://facebook.com/eton.studioAV)

*“From its understated exterior to its natural, unexaggerated, and unimpeded musical coherence, the Audiomat Aria is a keeper.”*

- (Sony 888750 35952) and the Aria not only effortlessly picks the different bands on Discs 1 and 2, it perfectly captures the two different acoustics too, along with Gabetta's muscular grasp of structure and the tonal and textural differences between the two distinct instruments she uses on Disc 3. This is the sort of incidental detail that adds so much to the vitality in the playing and the recording and which helps make a system listenable and keep it that way.

One thing I particularly like about the Aria is its remote control, objects that (as regular readers will know) I usually despise and rarely if ever use. The Audiomat handset is nicely proportioned, milled from solid aluminium with a sensibly textured finish and despite the material, not too heavy. More importantly it limits its functionality to volume and mute – but best of all, it offers two sets of latched volume controls, one for the “normal” range of adjustment and a second for “précis” or finer increments. Given the Aria's input sensitivity that was a boon. Get the level just right and the music has presence, body and texture, an unimpeded sense of forward momentum and uninhibited dynamic range.

What that input sensitivity does allow is the use of the Aria with lower efficiency speakers. With that in mind I reached straight for Spondor's brilliant, miniature D1, its 85dB sensitivity offset by its easy load and limited low-frequency extension. Despite my expectations, I wasn't quite ready for just how remarkably successful this combination was. The amplifier's easy, engaging, expressive quality and sense of musical momentum dovetailed perfectly with the Spondors' fluid rhythmic qualities and natural sense of colour, acoustic, and presence. Voices were life-size, full of nuance and body, while drums had a satisfying solidity that utterly belied the size of the speakers and the paltry paper power of the amp. Driving the Spondors, the Aria took on an extra feeling of purpose and forward motion, although whether the explanation for that is as simple as running the volume control further up its range it's impossible to say. Whatever the reason, the results are exceptional, both sonically and musically, suggesting that as comfortable as the Audiomat amp is with today's compact floor-standers, many will consider its natural home to be in smaller systems or at least with smaller speakers, where it adds an impressive sense of weight, presence, and scale to proceedings.

The flood of imported tube amps heading Westward from points East places the Audiomat Aria in a difficult position. On paper it looks expensive compared to the competition, especially when you take the power output into consideration. But look a little closer at the thoughtful execution and care and attention to detail, the distinctly French appearance and the neat internal layout: Then listen to just how subtle and unforced, musically engaging, and expressive this amplifier is and you'll quickly appreciate just why it's worth the extra investment. Far from looking expensive, it suddenly looks just like the sonic and musical bargain that it is. From its understated exterior to its natural, unexaggerated, and unimpeded musical coherence, the Audiomat Aria is a keeper, a long-term solution in a world full of short-term fixes and buyer's remorse. Paired with an appropriate speaker (and that field is pretty wide) it has the ability to simply get out of the way, to let the performers and the performance speak for itself, a quality that promises years of musical satisfaction. There are sound reasons why 30Watt Class A tube amps have always delivered the musical goods. The Audiomat Aria is both a timely reminder of that fact and another excellent and – perhaps most importantly – remarkably cost effective example of the breed. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Class A integrated tube amp

**Valve Complement:** 3× ECC83, 4× EL34L

**Rated Output:** 30 Watts per channel

**Inputs:** 5× line-level RCA

**Outputs:** Pre-out and tape out

4 Ohm and 8 Ohm speaker taps

**Dimensions (W×H×D):** 445 × 180 × 380mm

**Weight:** 26kg

**Price:** £3,495

**UK Distributor:** Ikon Audio Consultants

**Tel:** +44(0)7956 476299

**email:** info@IkonAudioConsultants.com

**www:** www.IkonAudioConsultants.com



# Graham AUDIO

## LS5/9 BBC LICENSED MONITOR LOUDSPEAKERS

**"The Studio in your living room. The Graham Audio LS5/9 resets the bar for two way speakers... Buy once, buy for life."**

Jan-Erik Nordoen (Son & Image Magazine)



Birch Ply Cabinet • Hand Upholstered Internally • Magnetic Grille Cover  
'Diaphnaton' VOLT Mid/Bass Translucent Driver • Trafolyte EQ Plate  
Aluminium Tweeter Guard • Original British Design  
Handcrafted in Great Britain with all British/European Components  
Available in Cherry and Rosewood



ENGLISH HIGH FIDELITY  
clarity by design

**THE LS5/9. ACCURATE, TRANSPARENT AUDIO REPRODUCTION**  
Call: 0044(0)1626 361168 [www.grahamaudio.co.uk](http://www.grahamaudio.co.uk)



All discrete components and pure Class A circuitry, pre-amplifier outputs.



AK4490 32-bit DAC chipset, unique 3x clock and flat noise floor up to 200kHz.



Patented 'current mode' headphone amplifier with 4-pin xlr balanced output.



Beautifully engineered 10mm aluminium body panels, finished in 'space grey'

### QUESTYLE'S CMA600I HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER DAC & PREAMP

PCM 32 bit / 384 kHz - Quad-DSD256 / 12.4 MHz

CLASS LEADING  
PERFORMANCE COSTS  
LESS THAN YOU THINK



[www.scvdistribution.co.uk](http://www.scvdistribution.co.uk)

Distributed exclusively in the UK by SCV Distribution.  
Please call for your nearest dealer on 03301 222500



Questyle  
Audio Engineering

## VIBRATION DISTORTION

in your cables can spoil your pleasure of music

### Black Rhodium Cables with Vibration Stabilisers

Will reduce vibration distortion in your music

The Graham Nalty Vibration Stabiliser minimizes mechanical vibrations in your cables by mass damping. It is extremely effective in reducing audible distortion and bringing greater realism to your music.



" Greater spaciousness around each instrument  
that helps me to appreciate that the orchestra is  
composed of a number of individual instruments "

HI-FI CHOICE



#### DISCOVER BLACK RHODIUM CABLES

Go to [www.blackrhodium.co.uk](http://www.blackrhodium.co.uk) and download our new  
High End Cable Brochure or visit your nearest Black Rhodium Dealer now.

# URL For Sale

[www.HighEndAudio.com](http://www.HighEndAudio.com)

Send Enquiry To [Info@HighEndAudio.com](mailto:Info@HighEndAudio.com)

# Sennheiser HD 630VB headphones

by Alan Sircom

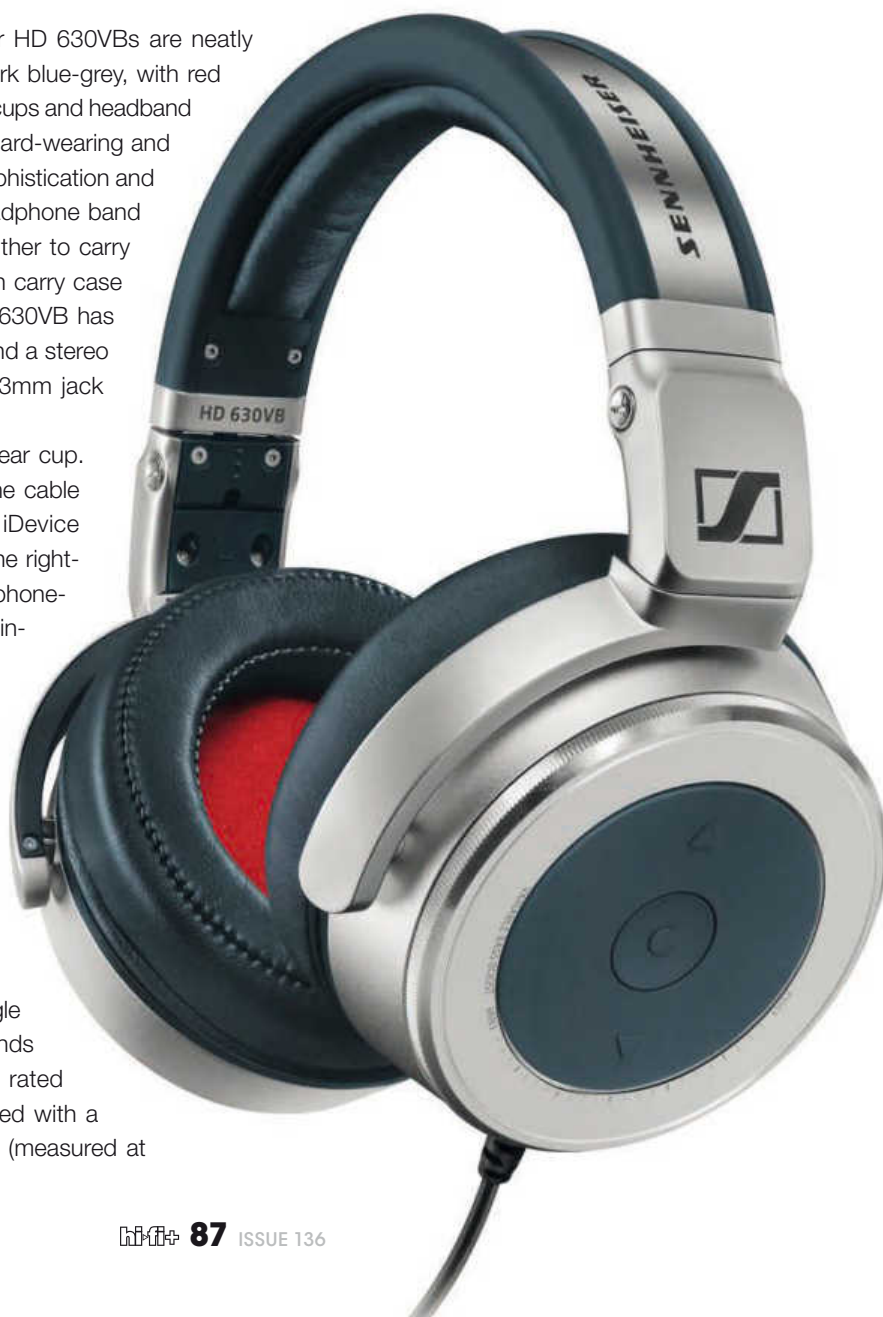
**T**he top HD range from Sennheiser is the brand's home audiophile range, but the pivotal word is 'home'. Open backed designs that need good upstream amps and DACs to drive them, the HD 500, HD 600, and HD 800 series are not really models for travelling and commuting: I do know someone who travels with a Chord Hugo powering a pair of HD 800, but he uses that rig in the hotel room rather than in transit. The HD 630VB is the exception – it's every bit a part of the HD range, but folds away, comes in a travel case, and even includes an in-line microphone.

The rounded, closed-back, over ear HD 630VBs are neatly finished in (mostly brushed) silver and dark blue-grey, with red contrasting cloth inside the ear-cups. The cups and headband are high-grade 'pleather', which is both hard-wearing and not aromatic. The overall look is one of sophistication and elegance, aided by the single gimbal headphone band connector. It's not a heavy headphone either to carry or wear, although the large black cake-tin carry case does add bulk to the package. The HD 630VB has a captive lead (with in-line microphone) and a stereo 3.5mm TRS jack plug (a mini-jack to 6.3mm jack plug adaptor is supplied in the case).

The business end is all on the right ear cup. There is a little switch marked 'I/G' by the cable strain-relief, to switch between Apple iDevice and Google Android use. The centre of the right-hand ear-cup is given over to track and phone-handling options normally assigned to an in-line pod. This means volume adjustment, track handling, and call handling can be assigned bigger and more easy to use buttons than the tiny ones on a cable pod. It also allows listeners to access Siri and Assistant voice commands. The captive cable is mostly very good at eliminating conduction noise, although the cable around the microphone is itself slightly microphonic.

The HD 630VB is based around a single transducer said to be able to deliver sounds from 10Hz to 42kHz. The headphone is rated at an impedance of 23Ω, which – coupled with a suggested 114dB sound pressure rating (measured at

1kHz and at 1Vrms) – means the Android/Apple implementation isn't just for show and the headphones will comfortably work straight from a phone. The 50Hz bass end of the frequency response features a +5dB boost or a -5dB cut, thanks to the variable bass controller, on the rim of the right hand



*“The HD 630VB sits somewhere closer to the HD 600 than it does the Momentum series. It really does live up to the ‘HD on the move’ concept.”*

- ear-cup. This is infinitely adjustable, although there are marks on the side of the ear-cup denoting 12 steps above or below ‘flat’.

I have to admit starting out with some puritanical bias against the Sennheiser HD 630VB, simply due to that suffix. “It can’t be as good as the fixed bass versions,” ran the prejudice, “simply because it doesn’t have fixed bass”. In fact, all that comes down to bias without any real-world basis. In outright performance terms, the HD 630VB sits somewhere closer to the HD 600 than it does the Momentum series. It really does live up to the ‘HD on the move’ concept.

There are three ways of looking at the VB suffix of the HD 630VB, all good and all relevant. You can think of it as the perfect way of tailoring bass to suit the listener, the bass to suit the environment, or as a systematic desensitisation program for Beats users. The bass of the HD 600 series Sennheiser sometimes get criticism from both sides; some find it a little too ‘audiophile’ and bass light, yet paradoxically some audiophiles find it too bold and strong in the bass. The variable bass system allows listeners to adjust the bottom end to suit and, unless turned to the maximum setting, it never impacts further up the frequency range. This also helps tame some more bass-wayward recordings, although thinking of the VB system as a tone control isn’t that smart. I’ve found that in noisy environments (the London Underground, for example) bass is slightly more likely to be swamped than midrange or treble, because of the degree of isolation offered by the HD 630VB is so good. The VB system offers some compensation, allowing the listener to retain the good bass of the headphone in less than accommodating environments.

Then there is the bass-heavy deprogramming option. Despite performance to the contrary, bass-oriented headphones remain popular with many listeners, but they are regularly sold more on looks than on sound, and some people who like good sound end up going down this big-bass sideline. The VB can be used to wean people off overpowering bass; start with the bass control at ‘Max’, then gradually reduce the setting to more accurate levels. After some slow, methodical bass reduction, try your older headphones, and discover just how awful they always sounded.

The great thing here though is the headphone’s bass is mostly subtle and well controlled. It is slightly more bass-oriented than its stay-at-home siblings, but bass is more of an accent than a feature, and best of all this bass system never impinges on the midrange and top, even at its most bass-heavy setting. As such, adjustment is more about balancing bass ‘texture’ to suit the surroundings and the listener. In fact, it’s more about bringing genuine HD 600 series performance to the open road, train carriage, or aircraft cabin. It’s not a closed back design that sounds like an open-backed headphone, but it gets surprisingly close.

There’s not a lot with which to find fault here. The use of a captive headphone lead seems a bit odd in today’s market. I’d prefer something more immediately replaceable, if only to prevent breakage. But that’s splitting hairs –

when you think not only what the HD 630VB does, but also how effortlessly it does it, you can’t help but be impressed.

The HD 630VB is a welcome addition to the Sennheiser line. The sound quality is somewhere between good Momentum and HD models, retaining the closed-back isolation of the former with much of the transparency of the latter, together with a (for the most part) limited and sophisticated bass tailoring, and the ease of driving that puts it on the end of iPhones, Androids, and DAPs. That makes it a high-end Sennheiser headphone that goes with you everywhere, and that is an easy headphone to recommend. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Circumaural, dynamic, closed back headphones with variable bass control

**Ear coupling:** Circumaural

**Transducer principle:** Dynamic, closed

**Frequency Response:** 10–42,000 Hz

**Impedance:** 23Ω

**Sound Pressure Level:**

114dB (1 kHz/1V<sub>rm</sub>)

**Total harmonic distortion:**

<0.08% (1kHz, 100dB)

**Bass Boost:** +/- 5dB at 50 Hz

**Contact pressure:** 5.5 ~ 6.8N

**Weight (headphones excluding cable):** 400g

**Accessories include:** carry bag and 3.5mm to 6.3mm adapter

**Price:** £399.95

**Manufactured by:** Sennheiser

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

**Tel (UK only):** 0333 240 8185



## COMPETITION

# WIN a multi award winning Plato media system from Entotem, worth up to £3,300!

**U**K manufacturer Entotem, have offered a Plato media system worth up to £3,300 for a lucky *Hi-Fi+* reader to win in our exclusive competition.

The Plato media system is a music and video server/streamer, with an integrated amplifier and built in MM/MC phono stage. This enables users to effortlessly record and archive their LPs, CDs and cassette tapes into high-resolution 24bit/192kHz to its internal 2TB hard drive. Gracenote lookup integration provides fully automated tagging of album artwork and track data.

*Hi-Fi+* expert Jason Kennedy reviewed the Plato media system in issue 131 and concluded, "The sheer flexibility of Plato is remarkable, and its use of the Android platform is genuinely ground breaking in the audio field."...as one lucky winner will soon find out!

Entotem Ltd is a high technology hi-fi and home entertainment manufacturer based in Derby with R&D facilities in Newbury, Berkshire. Entotem's award winning product Plato, is manufactured exclusively in the UK and offers an full 'All in One' audio/video solution. Powered by a bespoke Android OS, your digital music and imported video collections can be streamed to other connected devices on a home network, and to multiple rooms simultaneously. +



### Competition Question

What is the capacity of the on-board hard drive of the full Plato unit?

- A. 2GB
- B. 2TB
- C. 2MB

To answer, please visit Entotem's dedicated competition page <http://www.platoentertainment.com/hifi-competition> Alternatively, send your answer on a postcard (including your name, address, and contact details) to Plato Competition, Entotem, Suite 3, Acorn Place, Alfreton Road, Derby, DE21 4AS. The competition closes on July, 7th 2016.

### Competition Rules

The competition will run from June, 2nd 2016 until July, 7th 2016. The competition is open to **UK residents only**. Multiple, automated or bulk entries will be disqualified. The winner will be chosen at random from all valid entries, and 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.

*\*The lucky winner can choose from a Plato (with the amplifier), Plato Pre or Plato Lite - whatever suits their requirements and can decide the paint finish - either Satin or High Gloss.*

# SUBSCRIBE

# hi-fi+



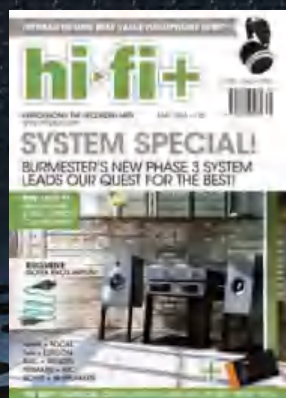
1 YEAR  
SUBSCRIPTION

Save  
16%

2 YEAR  
SUBSCRIPTION

Save  
25%

In order to ensure prompt arrival of your copy of hi-fi+, it is best to take out a subscription. This lasts for a year (12 issues) and means that your magazine is delivered to your doorstep as soon as it is published. You never miss an issue again!



www.hifiplus.com



# SUBSCRIPTION RATES

UK, Western Europe & Rest of the World

## ONE YEAR SUBSCRIPTION /12 ISSUES

Within the UK	£50
Western Europe, USA & Canada	£60
Rest of the World	£80

## TWO YEAR SUBSCRIPTION/24 ISSUES

Within the UK	£90
Western Europe, USA & Canada	£105
Rest of the World	£140

## SPECIAL OFFER

Save 16% (1 year subscription)

Save 25% (2 year subscription)



TO SUBSCRIBE COMPLETE THIS FORM BELOW AND RETURN TO:

### HI-FI+ SUBSCRIPTIONS

Unit 8 The Old Silk Mill,  
Brook Street, Tring,  
Hertfordshire, HP23 5EF, UK

or call: +44 (0) 1442 820580  
or email: [hifiplus@webscribe.co.uk](mailto:hifiplus@webscribe.co.uk)  
via the web: [www.hifiplus.com](http://www.hifiplus.com)

I would like my subscription to start from **current** issue/**next** issue  
(please delete as appropriate)

One year ☐ Two years ☐

### ABOUT YOU:

Title \_\_\_\_\_

Forename \_\_\_\_\_

Surname \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Country \_\_\_\_\_

Post code/Zip code \_\_\_\_\_

Daytime Tel \_\_\_\_\_

### PAYMENT:

UK ☐ Europe, USA & Canada ☐ Rest of World ☐

Cheques made payable to Absolute Multimedia UK Ltd.

Visa ☐ Mastercard ☐

Card no

Expiry date

3 digit security number

Switch ☐

Card no

Expiry date

3 digit security number

Direct Debit ☐



Originators Identification No

Instruction to your Bank or Building Society to pay Direct Debits

Name(s) of account holder(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Bank/Building Society account number

Branch sort code

Name and full postal address of your Bank or Building Society branch.

To: The Manager

Bank/Building Society

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Country \_\_\_\_\_

Post code/Zip code \_\_\_\_\_

**Instruction to your Bank or Building Society.** Please pay Webscribe Ltd Direct Debits from the account detailed in this instruction subject to the safeguards assured by the Direct Debit Guarantee. I understand that the instruction may remain with Webscribe Ltd and, if so details will be passed electronically to my Bank/Building Society.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Bank and Building Societies may not accept Direct Debit instructions for some types of account

### The Direct Debit Guarantee



This Guarantee is offered by all Banks and Building Societies that take part in the Direct Debit scheme. The efficiency and security of the Scheme is monitored and protected by your own bank or Building Society • If there are any changes to the amount, date or frequency of your Direct Debit Webscribe Ltd will notify you 10 working days in advance of your account being debited or as otherwise agreed. If you request Webscribe Ltd to collect a payment, confirmation of the amount and date will be given to you at the time of the request • If an error is made in the payment of your Direct Debit, by Webscribe Ltd or your bank or building society you are entitled to a full and immediate refund of the amount paid from your bank or building society. • If you receive a refund you are not entitled to, you must pay it back when Webscribe Ltd asks you to. • You can cancel a Direct Debit at any time by simply contacting your bank or building society. Written confirmation may be required. Please also notify us.

# Synergistic Research feature part 2

by Alan Sircom

Last month, we discussed the first of a two-part feature on Synergistic Research's innovative system tuning components. At that point, we began by discussing the company's Unified Energy Field system. The next step was to go 'active' with products like the company's grounding system, its Tranquillity Base UEF active platforms, and its Atmosphere tuning system.

Also, as discussed in the last issue, although Synergistic Research follows the same observational and empirical lines of product development found throughout audio, the company's epistemic foundations do not rest easy with those strongly welded to a "if you couldn't measure it when I was at school, it doesn't exist" world-view. Audio is a broad church, however...

To recap, last month we went 'passive', with Synergistic's Unified Energy Field panels and pads in key places around the room, followed closely by the company's High

Frequency Transducers placed in key points on the loudspeakers, and finally the Black Box low frequency 'stabilizer' placed between the loudspeakers. All of these devices worked, all set up the system for some more hard-core tuning, and none of them needed to be plugged into a wall. That all changes this month.

The first stage in the 'active' component set is the grounding system. The core of this is a small black and copper block about the size of a large harmonica case (I never did quite get over that Bob Dylan obsession), and can be supplied with one of two types of grounding cables to match Synergistic's ranges (we went with the High Definition versions). Plug the grounding block into a spare earthed socket (in the UK, that means 'a spare socket') and then systematically plug any devices in your system into the grounding block (Synergistic provides a range of 4mm, spade, RCA plug, and miscellaneous other connections to ground almost anything). Do not use this to replace conventional AC earthing or to replace a ground wire used between a turntable and phono stage.

This effectively creates a floating star-earth configuration, running parallel to any AC grounding or LP requirements. In fairness, Synergistic is not the only game in town here, and Audioplan, Entreq, Shunyata Research, Tripoint, and Vertex AQ (among others) all make some variation on the same floating star-earth concept and many find this an important exercise in lowering the noise floor of a system. Nevertheless, in the context of an all-Synergistic tuning protocol (which might ultimately include everything in the system and around ►





# Audiomat Audioplan SymphonicLine



Affordable audio excellence from world class brands exclusively available in the UK from

**Ikon Audio**  
**Consultants**

t: 07956 476 299

e: [info@IkonAudioConsultants.com](mailto:info@IkonAudioConsultants.com)

w: [www.IkonAudioConsultants.com](http://www.IkonAudioConsultants.com)

a: Ipswich, Suffolk, United Kingdom

Hi-Fi  
Sales,  
Repairs &  
Upgrades

We have moved to new, much larger premises, allowing us to offer some of the most exciting facilities with everything required for the discerning audiophile and music lover under one roof, and with our own free parking you can relax and enjoy some of the finest equipment at your leisure

Three  
demonstration  
rooms

Carefully  
selected  
wide range of  
equipment &  
accessories

Featuring  
*The*  
*Vicious*  
*Squirrel*  
Record  
Shop

Have a  
brew in  
our own  
*Cafe Deco*

For more details, including the showroom opening times and details of our special events please call 01296 422 224 or visit

[www.decoaudio.com](http://www.decoaudio.com)

Deco Audio, Kempson Close, Aylesbury HP19 8UQ

**DECO**  
**AUDIO**



### ▶ The Colorado Symphony Orchestra

The United States full-time professional orchestra, the Colorado Symphony embraces a tradition of musical excellence by presenting a diverse array of symphonic performances throughout the year. Originally established in 1989 as the successor to the Denver Symphony, the Colorado Symphony performs in Boettcher Concert Hall and throughout the Front Range, presenting outstanding education and outreach programs, as well as Masterworks, Pops, Holiday, Family, and the exciting new Inside the Score and Symphony on the Rocks series that have attracted a historic level of first-time concertgoers. By presenting music that is both timeless and inspiring, while taking risks with new musical collaborations and interactive concerts, the Colorado Symphony is attracting more diverse and younger audiences than ever before. The increasing popularity of Colorado Symphony concerts as well as a strong fan-following have not only affirmed the artistic excellence of the orchestra, but also reflects the Symphony's relevance to its Colorado community and deep rooted enthusiasm for symphonic music felt by so many individuals across the region.

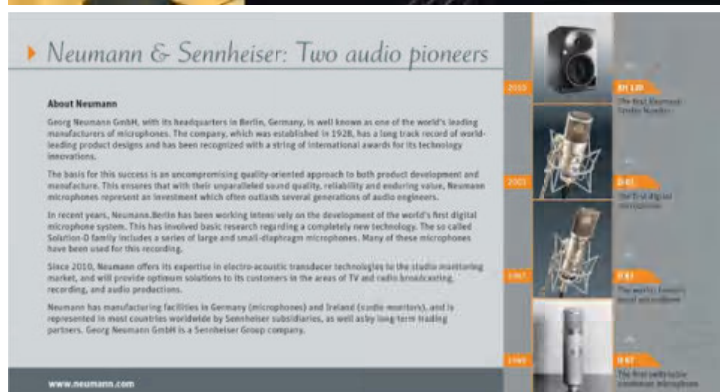
### ▶ From the producers point of view

The idea of this CD production is to use an entire microphone set-up of digital state-of-the-art microphones for a classical symphony orchestra recording. All microphones which we have used for this music production are regular products from the new digital product lines of Neumann (Solution-D) and Sennheiser (MKH digital).

The selection of these classical pieces of music are a variety of emotional streams from world famous composers such as Mozart, Brahms, Bach, Beethoven and many more. This series of recordings has been made during some rehearsal days of the Colorado Symphony. It is mainly made for technical demo purposes in terms of practical usability of our digital microphone technology in the field of recording and arts.

My special thanks go to the Colorado Symphony Orchestra consisting of such wonderful musicians; their Resident Conductor Scott O'Neill, to my entire team in the control room and in administration of this project – and to my friend and main mixing engineer, Mr. Mike Pappas, who was and is a highly professional help and technical advisor for all digital recordings.

I also want to thank my friends Tim Schwieger and my Grammy Award winning sound engineer Duke Markos for their contribution to my recording project in Denver, Colorado.



### ▶ Neumann & Sennheiser: Two audio pioneers

#### About Neumann

Georg Neumann GmbH, with its headquarters in Berlin, Germany, is well known as one of the world's leading manufacturers of microphones. The company, which was established in 1928, has a long track record of world-leading product designs and has been recognised with a string of international awards for its technology innovations.

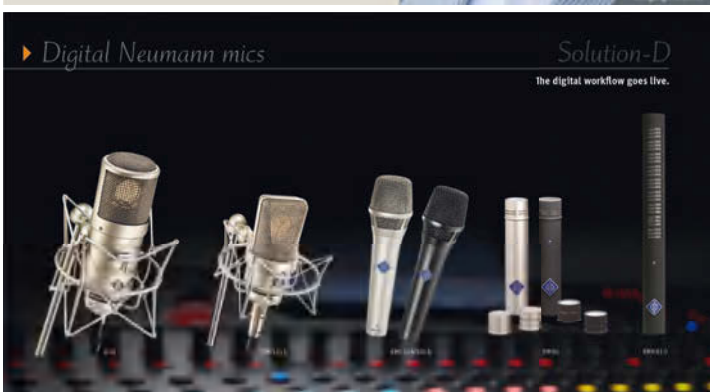
The basis for this success is an uncompromising quality-oriented approach to both product development and manufacture. This ensures that with their unparalleled sound quality, reliability and enduring value, Neumann microphones represent an investment which often outlasts several generations of audio engineers.

In recent years, Neumann Berlin has been working intensively on the development of the world's first digital microphone system. This has involved basic research regarding a completely new technology. The so called Solution-D family includes a series of large and small-diaphragm microphones. Many of these microphones have been used for this recording.

Since 2010, Neumann offers its expertise in electro-acoustic transducer technologies to the studio mastering market, and will provide optimum solutions to its customers in the areas of TV and radio broadcasting, recording, and audio productions.

Neumann has manufacturing facilities in Germany (microphones) and Ireland (studio monitors), and is represented in most countries worldwide by Sennheiser subsidiaries, as well as by long term trading partners. Georg Neumann GmbH is a Sennheiser Group company.

[www.neumann.com](http://www.neumann.com)

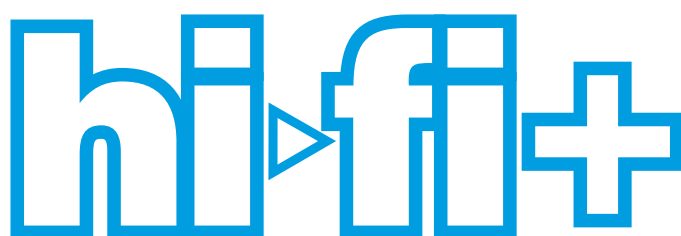


### ▶ Digital Neumann mics

### Solution-D

The digital workflow goes live.

# AVAILABLE EXCLUSIVELY FROM



We at Hi-Fi+ are proud and excited to bring you the new *True Classics* double CD, priced at £17.99 +p&p.

**T**his deluxe recording features 18 of the best known classical works, beautifully played by the Colorado Symphony and conducted by Scott O'Neill. They have also been recorded to highlight the best sound quality, thanks to the work of producer Wolfgang Fraissinet, who – being CEO

of audio engineering experts Neumann – probably knows more about microphones than almost anyone else in the business. This must have double CD in its exclusive presentation case is perfect for any music lover or audiophile.

**To purchase please visit [www.hifiusplusstore.com](http://www.hifiusplusstore.com)**



*“Atmosphere is a single active tower, which works on higher frequency RF than is usually covered by most audio treatments.”*

- ▶ the system apart from the system), it makes sense to use the Synergistic grounding system alongside the other devices. It certainly made a difference in our test room, making the system seem more organic sounding, more focused, with a bigger soundstage, and a significant reduction in low level hash. The Entreq products ultimately bring yet more hash-removal to the system, but the Entreq system is larger, heavier, and more expensive. Synergistic's floating earth system is a good place to start, at least, and many will not feel the need to move beyond this system.

The Tranquillity Base UEF platforms are active units, a nine-layer acrylic and aluminium platform with built-in mechanical isolation, resonance control, and – where the powered part comes into play – electromagnetic interference reduction. The Tranquillity Base UEF is a ‘one-size fits all’ update on the previous three grades of Tranquillity Base, you can tune the platform with the company's UEF Tuning Circuit, which replace the Enigma Tuning Bullets in the previous versions. Although the effects of the mechanical isolation and resonance control are immediate, the EM reduction takes up to 72 hours to permeate through the device resting on the platform.

I don't like reviews based on names or properties of a thing (“this silver cable is bright and shiny”) but sometimes the name just fits. And the Tranquillity Base UEF is one such product. It's a base for a device that seems to calm that device down. Not in a ‘medicated’ manner, just more tranquil; the noise floor drops and the product's presentation gets less overtly ‘electronic’ sounding. Although in the continuum of Synergistic's tuning pattern, the Tranquillity Base UEF comes close to the end of the process, I feel it's one of the most marked changes of the system. Of course, part of the reason that it is so significant is thanks to the ‘organisational’ skills of the products that precede the Tranquillity Base UEF, and I suspect the benefits these platforms bring wouldn't be so profound were they the first step in the chain, but even so, this brings the system up several notches, seemingly irrespective of component.

By now we are ready for Synergistic Research's ‘WTF’ moment. Having applied a lot of dots, blobs, panels, boxes, platforms, and grounding blocks to the system, finally, now out comes Atmosphere, the Atmosphere tuning module, and the iPad app that works with this. Atmosphere is a single active tower, which works on higher frequency RF than is usually covered by most audio treatments, paradoxically by building an extreme-low frequency (7.83Hz) resonator in the room (this is the Atmosphere tower). Then by effectively ‘directing’ this Schumann frequency in room (thanks to the tuning module, controlled by the iPad app), the listener can apply one of several ‘scenes’ (Amplified, Ethereal, Expansive, Holographic, In My Listening Room), which can be further adjusted through a series of sliders on the app itself.

These scenes in use are not far removed from DSP modes on a home theatre amplifier, although without the obvious processing effects. This is more ▶





## GUIDE TO DIGITAL AUDIO ELECTRONICS

Download your **FREE** guide to  
digital audio electronics now!



[www.hifiplus.com/buyers\\_guides/](http://www.hifiplus.com/buyers_guides/)



## PRICES AND CONTACT DETAILS

### Prices

UEF Acoustic Panels: \$549 for a 4 pack

UEF Acoustic Dots: \$195 for a 5 pack

HFT: \$299 for a 5 pack

Black Box: \$1995 each

Grounding block: \$595 each

High-Resolution Grounding cables:  
\$395 each

Tranquility Base UEF: \$2,250 each

Atmosphere: \$2,495 each

Atmosphere Tuning Module: \$495 each

### Manufactured by:

Synergistic Research, Inc.

URL: [www.synergisticresearch.com](http://www.synergisticresearch.com)

Tel: Within the United States:

+1 (800) 578-6489

Outside the United States:

+1 (949) 476-0000

Distributed in the UK by: Electromod

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

Tel: +44 (0)1494 956558

► like you have moved into a different position in the room, or into a different, yet equally musically attractive, space. What's telling about this system is its consistency. You can adjust the scenes through the iPad app behind the back of a listener, restart the track, and the listener will – over the course of the next 30 seconds or so – move forward 'into' the music and listen more intensely with the 'Amplified', 'Holographic', and 'In My Listening Room' settings, or sit back and relax with the music with the 'Ethereal' and 'Expansive' scenes. Change nothing and the same listener will stay in the same position. They will almost always ask 'did you change something?' within that same 30 second time-frame too, in a way they simply won't if you leave the system untouched.

Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.

There is a distinct order to these tuning devices that seems best followed closely. Begin with the UEF Acoustic panels and dots, then add the HFTs, then the Black Box bass 'sorter outer', as discussed last month. Then add the grounding block, connecting it to all the active electronics in the system, adding the Tranquility Base UEF, grounding them to the blocks, too. And then finally, the Atmosphere system takes the basic Synergistic concept to new levels. You can approach this system from any starting place in theory, and I suspect that many will begin with the Tranquility Bases, regardless: no matter how much we might think of tuning as a complete room and system oriented concept, most still start with things that are either in the system or somehow make physical contact with the system, and platforms are easier to hide under components than trying to sneak a wall full of panels, pads, and dots past the domestic searchlight. However the best order is the one suggested. That way, you get the right level of change in the right order.

It's almost incorrect to consider this equipment 'tuning', although with Atmosphere there is a component of adjusting the settings of the tuning system on the fly to best suit your music and your mood. Instead, what a lot of this equipment does is act like a time machine, casting you back to a period when audio sounded good because we didn't swim in a sea of radio frequency and electromagnetic interference. With the current increase in local Wi-Fi usage (I currently register 15 different wireless routers broadcasting within 30m of where I sit... and I'm not sitting in a Wi-Fi hot zone), this constant noise passing through our audio systems is potentially undermining every piece of music we play, and Synergistic Research is trying to redress the balance. True, open minded audio investigators will find a lot to love here! +



# hi-fi+ website

The Hi-Fi Plus website is the go-to URL for all the best the magazine has to offer and more, including news, reviews, features, show reports, all the latest music, and even some unique made-for-the-net features too. Plus, it's the perfect place to subscribe to the magazine, obtain back issues and lots, lots more.

It's all your eyes and ears need!



www.hifiplus.com



# the audiobarn

ESSEX HERTFORDSHIRE LONDON



*'The Audiobarn is an impressive place in which to demo hi-fi equipment, and I was impressed with the comfortable, intimate feel of the venue in amongst a very relaxed rural setting.'*

Matthew T

*'I really can't remember a more pleasurable audition – it was great to be given as long as we wanted, to just listen to music without any pressure.'*

Kristian W

01279 454 860  
[www.theaudiobarn.co.uk](http://www.theaudiobarn.co.uk)

# Oranges & Lemons

*of Battersea*

Hi-Fi & Streaming  
Home Cinema  
Multi-Room



020 7924 2040

61-63 Webbs Road London SW11 6RX

[www.oandlhifi.co.uk](http://www.oandlhifi.co.uk)



clarity

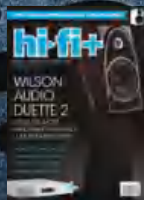
## That's German Engineering!

**WBT**  
wbt.de



# hi-fi+

## BACK ISSUES!



**Complete your collection**

Read previous reviews of the UK's best loved audio magazine

**POSTAGE & PACKING**

UK: £1/Magazine

Europe: £3/Magazine

Rest of World: £5/Magazine

UK orders are sent by Parcel Post, please allow 2 weeks for delivery.

Overseas orders are sent by air mail.

# ORDER TODAY!

[www.hifiplus.com](http://www.hifiplus.com)



# MEET YOUR DEALER

## Choice Hi-Fi

**C**hoice Hi-Fi is a perfect example of the new wave of audio supplier, eschewing the conventional dealership for a more personal and domestic approach. Customers can pick and choose from the company's extensive range of new and 'pre-loved' audio equipment in an environment more like the end user's than any store. Featuring a range of top-class audio products from old and new, Choice Hi-Fi works out of its Richmond-upon-Thames premises, to give a sense of real domestic products in a real domestic environment.

There are good points and bad points to this way of working, and it seems Choice Hi-Fi has addressed many of them head on. We think the company has a fascinating insight into the next phase of home audio retail, so we spoke to company top-dog Alain Abensur on how audio business is changing.

### **What brands/products do you stock?**

Choice Hi-Fi is unique in that we carry established and well respected brands such as SME, Avalon, Mark Levinson, Primare, Revel, Townshend Audio, Bel Canto, Furutech, Stillpoints, Entreq, TelluriumQ, VTL, and Tom Evans, as well as lesser known but equally capable newer up-and-coming brands such as B.M.C Audio, Analog Domain, Ubiquitous Audio, Melco, and Exogal. In addition to this we are perhaps best known for having a huge and diverse range of

used equipment; right now for example we have pieces from Krell, Jeff Rowland, Classe, Koetsu, Dan D'Agostino, Clearaudio and many more.

We believe this marriage of new and used equipment allows us to offer our customers complete and cost effective solutions to their hi-fi needs.

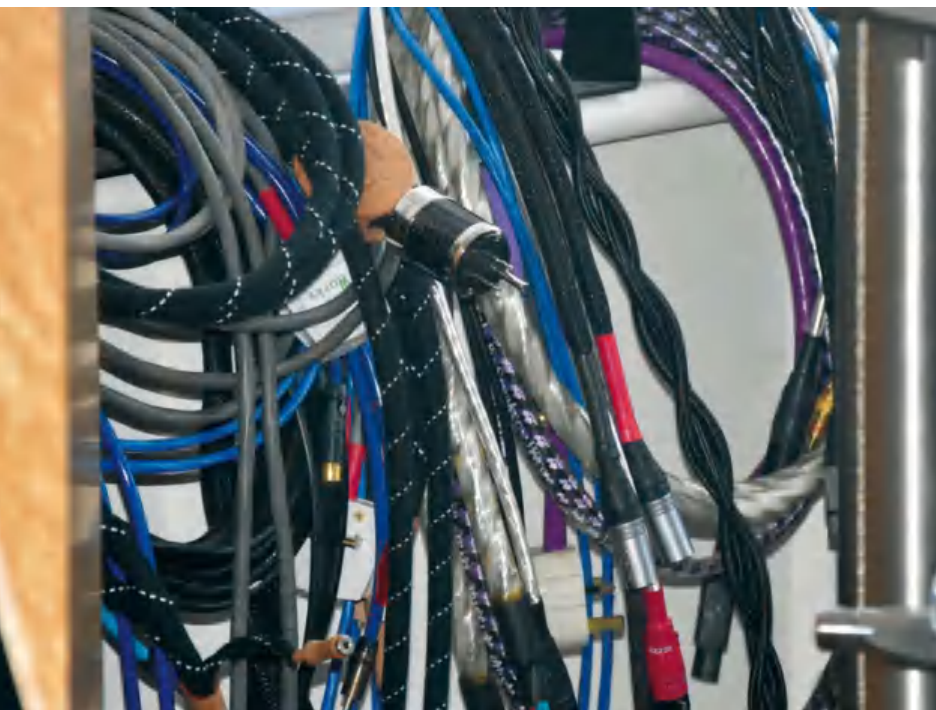
We also offer to undertake third party sales, selling our customers products to fellow enthusiasts that want the same level of service, peace of mind, and support without resorting to vagaries of eBay and the like. More on this later, perhaps!

### **What inspired you to get into the industry?**

For me it was simply a passion for music and a love of hi-fi. Having come from an engineering background (primarily in automated machinery) ▶







*“To love music is to be passionate and I ask people to ‘feel’ rather than ‘think’ their way to their next purchase.”*

I have my own personal favourite recordings, ranging from Gorillaz *Plastic Beach* to Kari Bremnes *Gate Ved Gate* and from Arturo Delmoni *Songs My Mother Taught Me* to Beethoven's *Symphony No.9*, with much in between. At the end of the day though there is no substitute for listening to your own music when evaluating a system, and that's precisely what I encourage customers to do.

**What is the best piece of advice you can give to someone who is looking to improve/upgrade their system?**

To love music is to be passionate and I ask people to ‘feel’ rather than ‘think’ their way to their next purchase. Buying or upgrading audio equipment is often an emotional decision and is fraught with many conflicting factors, not least the cost. So it is hard to be sure you are making the right decision. Always ask yourself first and foremost, how is this component or whole system making me feel. Once that question is answered, the rest falls into place much more easily. The finer nuances of voicing, detail, dynamics, soundstage, etc. almost answer themselves.

There's one more important aspect to this. The old adage that “People Buy People First” is as true in our industry as in any other., but is often forgotten both by dealers and by customers in search of a bargain at all costs. The key is to find a dealer that you can relate to, from whom you can learn, and with whom you can further your quest. System building is an evolutionary process; it grows and evolves as we grow and evolve and as circumstances and technologies change.

▶ and hydro/pneumatics). I was first inspired to design a turntable based on those technologies (but that's another story).

By the late 1980's engineering was on its knees in the UK and I was debating in which direction to take my career. Then as now it was hard to find a dealer that would a) take in a part exchange and b) that was not locked in to a narrow range of brands. In other words who offered real CHOICE. So the upgrade process was a slow and laborious one. It was the unduly painful experience of upgrading my LP12/ Naim system and the search for alternatives that provided the inspiration.

Leaving the world of engineering behind I started Choice Hi-Fi with the major differentiating principals: that I would welcome trade-ins, sell both new and used equipment, and therefore not limit the brands I offer.

High end audio is built to last so this marriage of new and used as well as the willingness to take trade-ins allows my customers to have access to a level of equipment whose quality and performance is far beyond that which their budget would otherwise allow. In short, my customers enjoy far more bang for their buck and the upgrading process is kept simple as I handle both ends of the transaction. It also means that over the years I have gained first hand experience of almost all brands as well as a deep understanding of the synergy between products both old and new.

**What music do you listen to when doing a demo?**

By and large, an audio system ought to be ubiquitous, meaning it should be equally at home with classical music as with grunge. The reality, however, is that some speakers tend to be better suited to one genre or another, although most attempt to be at home with all.

# TAS book Volume Two Now Available!!

**SPECIAL PRICE  
FOR HI-FI+  
UK READERS**

More than a mere collection of resumé's, Volume Two: Electronics puts the evolution of high-performance audio into historical context with insightful essays, informative interviews, and expert commentary by the TAS writing team and industry luminaries.

We bring you the inside stories of the industry's most fabled engineers, how they started their companies and developed the technologies behind their signature products.

Find out intriguing facts and insights that span nearly a century of amplification:

- What were the reasons for the explosion of creativity in the early 1970s?
- Why did the vacuum tube—all but forgotten for nearly a decade—make such a spectacular comeback?
- How do the world's most famous amplifier designers view their art and contributions to the high end?
- The answers are all here in Volume Two of the Illustrated History.

**These epic books are essential for all audio enthusiasts**



**Special price for UK Hi-Fi+ readers: £89.99 plus P&P**  
**Or purchase both volumes for £160 plus P&P**  
**FOR UK SALES PLEASE CALL 01425 655255**



*“Our industry has always been led by innovators.”*

into the UK. Each of the men behind those products had a clear vision of the best way to implement their respective technologies.

For Focal, it was the D’Appolito design and inverted dome tweeter which was capable of producing some stunning detail and dynamics albeit at some cost in the early days! Boulder was all about the unique gain stage with a then unrivalled build quality capable of enormous control and dynamic swing. And Alon was all about the open baffle design with an electrostatic style sound stage – deep, airy, and tangible. Those three manufacturers more than any others for me broke new ground and therefore influenced my understanding of what good hifi was capable of.

#### **How has the Internet affected your business and do you sell online?**

The Internet is a double-edged sword. We all know what a wonderful resource it can be. On the other hand it can give credence to opinions and ideas that are unfounded and based on hearsay and conjecture that spread like a game of ‘Chinese Whispers’ (‘Telephone’), and end up far from the truth.

Many sites now allow users to buy and sell their items online.

Long distance, arms length selling is here to stay. However, I much prefer the one-to-one interaction with customers where you can gain a real understanding of their needs not to mention the friendships you develop and the music you discover along the way.

In short, the need for good audio dealers is stronger today than at any time in the past, because when you are parting with your hard-earned cash, there is no substitute for coalface experience, especially when combined with service, support, peace of mind, and long-term relationship. +

#### **► Where do you see the industry going?**

I’m generally very optimistic. Our industry has always been led by innovators and I believe this will continue to be the case in the future. These innovators often become trendsetters and so each era has tended to have a “style” of sound, and a focus in certain areas; think of Spikes, cables, bi-wiring, power conditioners, mains cables grounding, and isolation.

I believe there will be an increasingly holistic approach to system building taking into account all of the above as we gain a better understanding of the their influences.

Entry-level products continue to get better as filter-down technologies get implemented. However, the gap between these and true high-end system will remain.

Differing technologies and implementations will ensure we continue to have diverse offerings, each with its own colour allowing manufacturers to differentiate themselves from one another.

Computer technology will continue to give ever-higher Bit and Sample rates interpolating the waveform to the nth degree but until we have a breakthrough in our understanding of psychoacoustics and precise algorithms for how the brain interprets sound, with a transducer to match, then the steps will continue to be small incremental ones.

There is and I believe will continue to be a dichotomy between those that want a hi-fi system but need it to be invisible and those who may have the luxury of a dedicated room or at least for whom the system takes centre stage.

We are not a one size fits all industry.

#### **Who or what has been your biggest influence?**

I can best answer that by products and their designers. In the 90s we were responsible for introducing Focal (then JMLab), Alon (now Nola), and Boulder



# AS ANALOGUE SEDUCTION *where music is our passion*



Analogue Seduction are dedicated towards two channel Hi-Fi, specialising in vinyl replay.

As well as our on-line shop we have dedicated demonstration retail facilities based in Peterborough, Cambridgeshire and we can offer our customers home demonstrations.

We stock the finest in amplification, analogue, digital replay and speakers. We also specialise in a cable termination and cable burn in service.

Please visit our website [www.analogueseduction.net](http://www.analogueseduction.net) to browse or purchase products that are not easily available elsewhere.

New vinyl records now stocked

Tel: +44 (0)1733 350878

Analogue Seduction, The Manor House, Manor View, Whittlesey, Peterborough, Cambridgeshire, PE7 1TF

## You say "Control Freak" like it's a bad thing.

GIK Acoustics treatments absorb more sound than any product on the market. We provide customers cost effective solutions to make every space sound its best. Acoustic panels, bass traps and diffusers direct to customers worldwide. Visit our website for more information and for free acoustic advice.

**GIK ACOUSTICS MAKES YOUR ROOM SOUND BETTER.**

**hi-fi+**  
ACCESSORY OF THE YEAR  
2016

**GIK Acoustics** [gikacoustics.co.uk](http://gikacoustics.co.uk)  
Solutions. Innovations. Quality. +44 (0) 20 7558 8976

**stereophile**  
PRESENTS  
**500**  
RECOMMENDED COMPONENTS

"...the Bespoke sang more sweetly, more colorfully and, above all, more forcefully"

- Art Dudley, Stereophile, October 2015

**- THE -  
BESPOKE AUDIO CO**

Exceptional audio products, made by hand in England, to your specification, delivered to you for your pleasure and guaranteed for life.  
The Bespoke Audio Company - we suit you.

[thebespokeaudiocompany.com](http://thebespokeaudiocompany.com)

## TRUE SPATIAL CLARITY

"DISCOVER THE FULL THREE-DIMENSIONAL SOUNDSTAGE IN YOUR MUSIC"

**The IsoAcoustics Aperta** stand effectively removes unwanted resonance and vibration feeding back into your speaker.

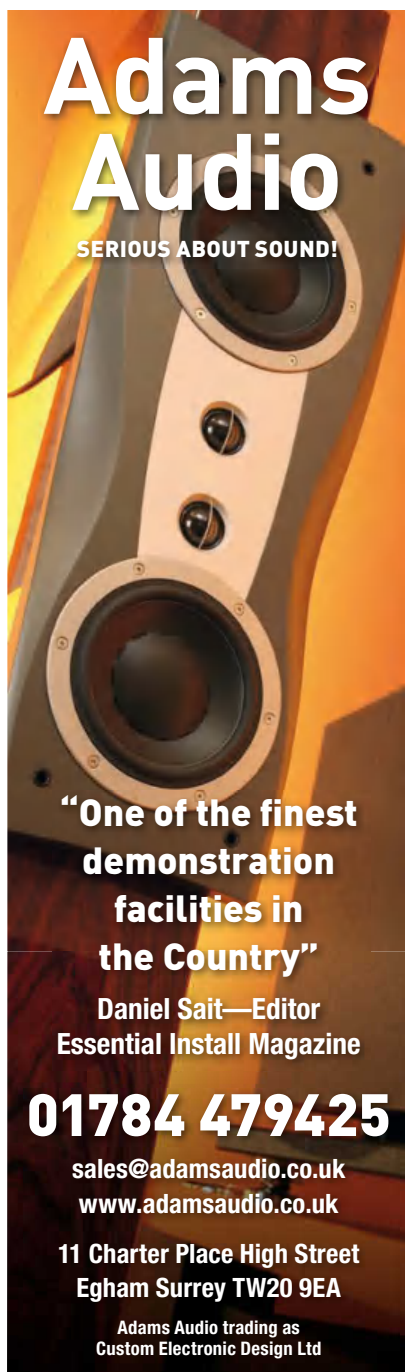
The result? A true Three-dimensional soundstage in your music, with defined low frequencies, without smear, and enhanced mid-range clarity.

Currently available in 155 and 200mm sizes, suitable for all types of speaker and electronics isolation.

**ISOACOUSTICS**  
Sound quality by design

**HI-FI WORLD**  
OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

**scv** [www.scvdistribution.co.uk](http://www.scvdistribution.co.uk)  
Distributed exclusive in the UK by SCV Distribution.  
Please call for your nearest dealer on 03301 222500



# Adams Audio

**SERIOUS ABOUT SOUND!**

**"One of the finest demonstration facilities in the Country"**

Daniel Sait—Editor  
Essential Install Magazine

**01784 479425**

sales@adamsaudio.co.uk  
www.adamsaudio.co.uk

11 Charter Place High Street  
Egham Surrey TW20 9EA

Adams Audio trading as  
Custom Electronic Design Ltd



## Basically Sound

All About The Music

Digital & Analogue Audio Specialists

**01362 820800**

enquires@basicallysound.co.uk  
www.basicallysound.co.uk



## BD AUDIO

Malvern, Worcestershire

**01684 560853**

www.bd-audio.co.uk  
info@bd-audio.co.uk

## booplith

*"Finally, a new and advanced plinth upgrade reveals more recorded detail from any Linn LP12 and a transformational musical performance."*



booplith LP12 performance upgrades and installation

**www.brianandtrevors.com**

info@brianandtrevors.com +44 (0) 161 765 4837




## choice HI-FI

Hi-Fi Exceeding Expectations  
"where dreams meet reality"

**The HiFi Exchange**  
New and Used HiFi

Tel: +44 (0)20 8392 1959  
Mob: +44 (0)7768 720 456  
www.choice-hifi.com info@choice-hifi.com



## criterion audio

Criterion Audio is a premium hi-fi dealer in Cambridge.

From vinyl and valves to the latest in streaming and headphones, we can help you find the perfect system to suit your budget and needs.

www.criterionaudio.com  
info@criterionaudio.com  
01223 233730



## DB HIFI

SUFFOLK

01379 873451  
WWW.DBHIFI.CO.UK

## divine audio

AnalogueWorks  
Anti-Cables  
Croft Acoustics  
EgglestonWorks  
KLE Innovations  
London  
Lounge Audio  
Rogue Audio  
Soundsmith

www.divineaudio.co.uk  
01536 762211 tim@divineaudio.co.uk



## hifi lounge

here to listen...

Visit us in the Beautiful  
Bedfordshire Countryside  
for all your Hi-Fi needs

**www.hifilounge.co.uk**

**01767 448121**

**www.highendheadphones.co.uk**



Uk's only dedicated  
demo facility for  
high-end  
headphones

**highend headphones**  
closer to the music...



**Midland**Audioxchange

The Old Chapel, Forge Lane, Belbroughton, DY9 9TD

Tel: 01562 731100

[www.midlandaudiox-change.co.uk](http://www.midlandaudiox-change.co.uk)

[sales@midlandaudiox-change.co.uk](mailto:sales@midlandaudiox-change.co.uk)

hifisound

Stockton on Tees...the North's  
hotbed of audio delights

- |               |                  |                   |
|---------------|------------------|-------------------|
| • Anatek      | • Koetsu         | • Sonus Faber     |
| • Audeze      | • Kronos Audio   | • Stax            |
| • Chord       | • Lyra           | • Sugden          |
| • Clearaudio  | • Michell        | • Transfiguration |
| • Dynavector  | • Magneplanar    | • Unison Research |
| • EAR         | • Naim           | • Usher Audio     |
| • Esoteric    | • Nordost        | • & many more     |
| • Focal JMLab | • Notts Analogue |                   |
| • Funk        | • Pathos         |                   |
| • Grado       | • SME            |                   |

t: 01642 267012 w: [hifisound.co.uk](http://hifisound.co.uk)

e: [simon@hifisound.co.uk](mailto:simon@hifisound.co.uk)

**Infidelity**  
INDECENTLY GOOD HI-FI

**Buying hi-fi should be a delight.**

If choosing your new hi-fi in a civilised and relaxed atmosphere from a well-chosen selection of genuine performance equipment appeals, then we are for you. Bring along your own records or CDs, we'll provide the coffee, and hear the difference we can make.

9 High Street, Hampton Wick,  
Kingston upon Thames, Surrey KT1 4DA

Telephone: 0208-943 3530



Open: 10am - 6pm, Tues - Sat (inclusive)



**istereos.co.uk**  
sound & vision

**Visit  
our new  
website**

[istereos@hotmail.com](mailto:istereos@hotmail.com) 01206731236  
inside Hatfields Furnishers Peartree Rd  
Colchester CO3 0LA

O'Brien HiFi

Enjoying Music Together  
For 50 Years

020 8946 1528

[www.obrienhifi.com](http://www.obrienhifi.com)

Wimbledon London

**rayleigh... sound & vision**  
Smart home technology

Superb range of world-class hi-fi  
on demonstration.

Rayleigh, Essex SS6 7EA  
01268 779762

[rayleigh@rayleighhifi.com](mailto:rayleigh@rayleighhifi.com)

[www.rayleighhifi.com](http://www.rayleighhifi.com)

Stores also at Chelmsford and Southend

**6 Audio**

01403 713125 | 07950 274224

[info@sixaudio.co.uk](mailto:info@sixaudio.co.uk)

[www.sixaudio.co.uk](http://www.sixaudio.co.uk)

Partridge Green, West Sussex

**SONATA**  
high-fidelity

**APPLAUSE**

west hampstead london  
0330 111 5653 [www.sonatahifi.com](http://www.sonatahifi.com)

**studio AV**

One of the UK's  
TOP 5 High-End  
Hi-Fi dealers

[www.studioav.co.uk](http://www.studioav.co.uk)

01753 863300

**Your ad  
could be  
here!**

Tel: +44 (0) 1425 655255

Mobile: +44 (0) 7900 252975

Email: [tom@hifiplus.com](mailto:tom@hifiplus.com)



# Reveals Even Greater LP12 Performance.



Booplinth's advanced low mass, one piece plinth design is the fundamental performance upgrade for any LP12 regardless of age or specification. The random structure of bamboo grass and air in every booplinth diminishes signal pollution all the way to the stylus tip, revealing hidden recorded detail, greater clarity and a more musical performance traditional wooden plinth constructions simply cannot deliver. Booplinth reveals even greater LP12 performance because you hear more of the recording and less of the plinth.

The Booplinth Company  
**booplinth**  
reveals greater LP12 performance  
 sales@booplinth.com www.booplinth.com +44 (0)161 766 4837

See booplinth website for colour options, buying booplinth, current dealer list and where to demonstrate and buy booplinth upgrade.

booplinth is a registered trademark and registered design of brianandtrevors

Dealer enquiries welcome.

## hi-fi+ ADVERTISING INDEX

6 Audio ..... 106	DB HiFi..... 106	Ikon Audio..... 93	Raidho Acoustics..... 74
Absolute Sounds ..... OBC	DCS Ltd ..... 25	Infidelity..... 107	Rayleigh Hi-Fi..... 107
Adams Audio ..... 106	Decent Audio ..... 40 & 41	istereos.co.uk..... 107	Renaissance Audio ..... 47
Analogue Seduction..... 105	Divine Audio..... 106	Karma-AV..... 50	RMAF..... 58
Audio T ..... 71	Echobox..... 73	KEF ..... 7	Schiit..... 68
Audiofreaks..... 12	Emerging Ltd ..... 79	Kog Audio ..... 19 & 37	SCV London..... 85 & 105
Auralic..... 31	Enjoythemusic.com..... 86	Midland Audio Xchange.. 107	Select..... IFC
Basically Sound and Vision ..... 106	Ensemble..... 27	Monopulse..... 83	SME Ltd..... 57
BD-Audio Ltd ..... 106	Entreq UK Ltd ..... 66 & 67	Naim ..... 77	Sonata Hi-Fi..... 107
Black Rhodium ..... 86	Focal ..... 65	Nordost Corporation..... 48	Sound Fowndations..... 62
Brian & Trevor's..... 106 & 108	GIK Acoustics ..... 105	Note Audio ..... 93	studioAV Ltd..... 83 & 107
Canary Audio ..... 61	Graham Audio..... 85	NuNu Distribution..... 15	Teddy Pardo ..... 39
Choice HiFi ..... 21 & 106	Hegel ..... 52	O'Brien Hi Fi..... 107	The Audio Barn ..... 99
Cloney Audio..... 83	HiFi Sound ..... 106	OPPO Digital UK Ltd..... 11	The Audio Consultants..... 54
Criterion Audio ..... 106	High End Cable..... 33	Oranges and Lemons ..... 99	The Bespoke Audio Company ..... 105
Crystal Cable BV..... 2	Highend Headphone Shop/ HiFi Lounge..... 106	Origin Live..... 79	The Chord Company ..... IBC
		Padood ..... 5	Vivid Audio UK Ltd ..... 45

# 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:*

**JD** – Jeremy Davies

**DD** – Dennis D Davis

**JK** – Jason Kennedy

	CD		120g LP
	Gold CD		150g LP
	HD CD		180g LP
	XR CD		200g LP
	Double Disc		10" LP
	DVD		Availability As S/H LP
	SACD		Vinyl Double Album
	Hybrid SACD		45 RPM
	Multi-Channel		Download
			High-Res Download

## MUSIC REVIEW / CONTEMPORARY



### b'lieve i'm goin down...

Kurt Vile

Matador

Kurt Vile continues the great American tradition of the troubadour singer/songwriter. Vile plays all manner of stringed and keyed instruments including banjo, farfisa organ, Wurlitzer, piano, and resonator guitar, but is clearly an acoustic guitar player at heart. On this album Vile is joined by key members of the Violators: Rob Laakso on bass, percussion, and occasional synth; Kyle Spence on drums and percussion; and Jesse Tribovich on guitars. This core is augmented by drummer Stella Morgawa, Farmer Dave Scher on keys and lapsteel, and there's even some brass on a couple of tracks courtesy of Creston Spiers. This diversity of musicians and instruments makes for a rich tonal palette and one which Vile does a great job of corralling into some great arrangements. None of the dozen tracks is particularly complex, but they usually manage to sound new and interesting albeit largely within the rock tradition. The recordings were made at almost as many studios as there are tracks, which might explain why the relatively open sound of some tracks contrasts with a generally dark balance on the majority.

What makes this album essential is Vile himself; he has a way with words and tunes that puts him in the top few per cent of musicians in the field. He is generally pretty downbeat, but the album has got some catchy

tunes on it though; the opener 'Pretty Pimpin' is a killer – a song you just want to play over and over. OK, so it's about an out of body experience as seen in the bathroom mirror, but it's the groove that gets you.

Ultimately the songs on *b'lieve* are very human and reflect the lack of certainty that surrounds us. Which is not to say this album or Vile for that matter brings you down; quite the opposite, in fact, especially on the final number 'Wild Imagination' with its beautiful backing vocals and the refrain "give it some time". This is pure West Coast mellow with added tone. The song is about laughter and lovers and you can't help falling for its innate charm. In many ways Vile's writing is poetic; its meanings are not obvious and they may not even exist, but that doesn't stop them from communicating feelings in an intelligible way. Ultimately they make you feel good, which is no bad thing.

Talking to Rolling Stone, Vile described *b'lieve i'm goin down...* as "KV's *Night Life*—it's my sequel to Donald Fagen's *The Nightfly*", which shows he has a sense of humour as well as a grasp of music beyond what you might expect, but don't go expecting anything like *Nightfly*. Vile's music is almost the opposite of the precisely honed, crisply recorded sound that Fagen perfected on his first solo outing; it has heart. **JK**

RECORDING  
MUSIC



**Nashville Skyline****Bob Dylan**

Mobile Fidelity MFSL2-424



At the time, the year 1969 seemed the embodiment of everything promised by the counterculture movement. In retrospect, much of that was only visible in the rear view mirror: Cream called it quits and released *Goodbye* in January of 1969. Jimi Hendrix released three of the era's defining albums in 1967 and 1968, but released nothing in 1969 (and, like Janis Joplin, he was gone by the end of 1970). While the times were certainly still changing, the changes were ringing up in unexpected ways. It was obvious that Dylan was moving on, and moving on fast. Dylan's *The Times They are a-Changin'* was released in January 1964 and by October of that year, singing at New York's Philharmonic Hall, he already seemed tired of the song (*Live* 1964; Audio Fidelity AFZ5 230). Anyone watching Dylan's 1965 UK concert tour knew how really changed he was becoming. At every turn, Dylan's fans had to be dragged kicking and screaming, complaining that their counterculture hero refused to continue churning out the same old stuff. In July 1965 at the Newport Folk Festival, and again in May 1966 at a concert at the Manchester Free Trade Hall, disruptive fans, objecting to his switch from acoustic to electric music, established just how shallow the gene pool could be. Somehow that controversy faded away and by the time of 1966's *Blonde On Blonde*, Dylan could do no harm. One could

hardly walk down the street of a cold weather clime without seeing at least one person aping the brown jacket/long check scarf fashion statement of that album. Country music had started to creep into *Blonde On Blonde*, although it took an astute observer to spot it blended in with the wild poetry. Country music made a bigger statement in *John Wesley Harding*, but the enigmatic lyrics blended that tendency to pure Dylan—an acoustic Dylan rightfully fawned over by critics. *Then came Nashville Skyline* where Dylan not only smiles on the front cover photo, takes on country music head on, but also croons like a country singer! Many critics of the time were troubled by the fact that Dylan was singing pretty instead of waxing poetic about the social upheavals of the day. During a period of assassinations, race riots, political trickery, and the continuing war in Vietnam, Dylan was singing "I'll be your baby tonight." But on the whole, the contemporary critical opinion was highly favourable and critics and fans could not miss the fact that the album contained some of Dylan's most beautiful love songs. "Tonight I'll be Staying Here with You", "Lay Lady Lay" and "One More Night" are each imbued with humanity tempered by Dylan's wit and gift for word play and enigma. Whatever controversy existed upon the album's release in 1969 has given way to recognition of *Nashville Skyline* as one of Dylan's masterpieces.

Recorded in February 1969 in Columbia's Nashville Studios, Dylan was backed with a veteran Nashville

band, and was accompanied on "Girl From The North Country" by Johnny Cash. The recording engineers, Charlie Bragg and Neil Wilburn, were Cash veterans and while the results are quite good, they cannot match some of the best recordings Columbia was achieving in its New York studios during the late 1960s. That said, the vocals have a tube-sounding richness and jump out of the speakers at you with dynamics to spare. The album sold very well, helped along by a Dylan appearance on the Johnny Cash show, so original pressings are relatively common. Released in 1981 as part of Columbia's half speed vinyl program, in 2003 on a hybrid SACD, by Sundazed in 2007, and in several Columbia/Sony reissues, none of these versions competes with the sound of an original pressing (and a couple are near dreadful).

So how does this new mastering stack up to its predecessors? When *Nashville Skyline* came out, I liked it so much I returned to the record store and purchased a safety copy. My first copy started to develop a little noise about five years ago, so I finally broke out copy two. Until this excellent 45-RPM reissue, nothing improved on those originals. This new mastering finally adds body to the guitars, tightens up the sound of the voices, and adds a little depth to a fairly flat recording. This smashing success was well worth the 47-year wait! **DD**

**RECORDING**  
**MUSIC**







### JS Bach: Complete Sonatas and Partitas (BWV 1001–1006)

Markku Luolajan-Mikkola (cello)

Linn Records CKD 548

This fine recording of the six Partitas and Sonatas is a rarity since these works are well known as pieces for solo violin. But, in accordance with conventions with which Bach himself adopted, these suites and sonatas have been lovingly transcribed by the celebrated baroque cellist, Markku Luolajan-Mikkola, for his instrument. In the transcription the works have been transposed down an octave and a fifth to enable the cello double, triple, and quadruple stopping that these pieces require. The three Sonatas follow the church sonata pattern, and each one has a fugue as its second movement, which are the dramatic and emotional core of the Sonatas, while the Partitas include dance forms, – sarabandes, gigues and chaconnes.

The musicality of Luolajan-Mikkola's performance commands respect as does the sheer dexterity of his playing, especially in his magisterial account, for example, of the Presto in the Partita No 1 in E minor (transcribed from the original key in B minor). It is such an exuberant display that we are left almost breathless with excitement, only to be brought seamlessly to the contrasting plangency of the Sarabande – a kind of palate cleanser before returning to the extraordinary polyphonic effects of the Tempe di Borea and its Double which brings that Partita to its close.

In the second Partita in G minor, the courtliness of the opening movement gives way to the running figure of the Corrente, which in this essay in contrasts brings us to a station of stillness in a measured Sarabande. And having got our breath back we are soon back on track again with the wit of a fast moving jig. An epic and unutterably beautiful Ciaccona (or Chaconne – which surpasses in duration the previous four movements combined) pulls out all the double stops as it rounds off this Partita. This Chaconne must be one of the greatest works ever written for solo violin, and its transference to the solo baroque cello does the work no disservice.

The third Partita in A major is the last work in this set of Partitas and Sonatas, and its Prelude was used by Bach again in at least two of his Cantatas, while the well known Gavotte en Rondeau is familiar to us as a standalone piece often accompanying radio and TV programmes.

Sonata No 1 in C minor (originally G minor) begins with a solemn Adagio which leads into a magnificent Fugue. Writing a fugue for a single line instrument is extraordinary – but Bach is the master of the art of fugue and Luolajan-Mikkola is a consummate master of the technical challenges which such fugal writing presents. The contrasting Siciliana creates a reflective mood before plunging into a relentlessly energetic Presto played again with unerring articulation and dexterity until the movement brings the Sonata to its perfect cadence.

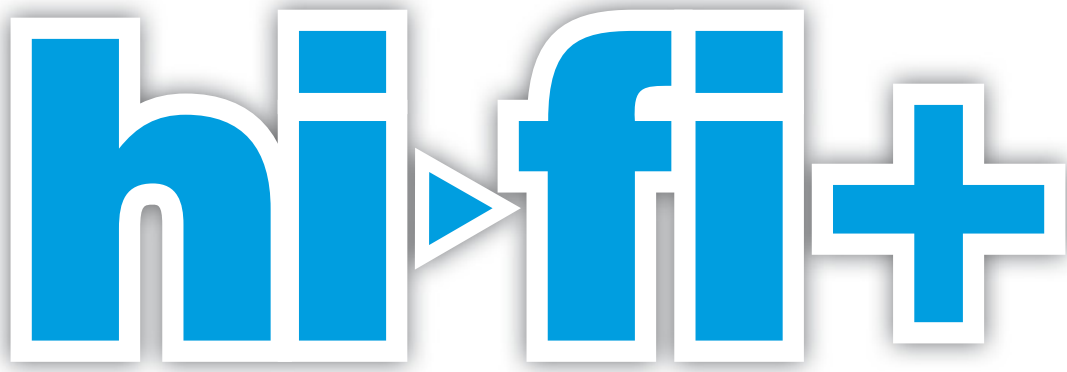
In the second Sonata in D minor, the improvisatory Grave leads into a Fugue where Bach's inventiveness flows between the fugal episodes. The Andante has the melody flowing over a repeated pedal note ostinato, and the Sonata concludes with a perpetual motion Allegro with the light and shade of the movement enhanced by echo effects which L-M's deft playing demonstrates to great advantage.

The third Sonata in C minor (originally in G minor) plumbs the darker landscape of minor key reflectiveness in its opening Adagio, with its pulsating, questioning ostinato. The lengthy fugal movement which follows continues the interrogative vein of this Sonata until it blossoms into exuberant exercises which display the upper register of the cello. The expressive loveliness of the Largo to which this performance gives due weight with nicely judged rubato and portamento, leads us into the finely-fingered helter skelter of the final Presto – all the more vital thanks to the almost visceral directness of the baroque instrument.

This is a recording to be recommended. The recording quality is outstanding, too; the ambience of St Catherine's Church in Karjaa, Finland where it was recorded matches the quality of the interpretation and the performance of these great works. **JD**

RECORDING  
MUSIC





# Next issue

## Personal audio special!

Audio is changing fast, and nowhere faster than in the personal 'space'. We at *Hi-Fi+* have long been a champion of headphones, headphone amps, and DACs, so we're devoting the next issue to this exciting new world. Exclusive: we look at the excellent new Stax SR-L700 electrostatic 'earspeaker', headphones from Final, HiFiMAN, and Kennerton, an exclusive look at the new Trilogy 932 headphone amp... the list goes on and on!



## Plus:

Vivid's Giya G4 loudspeakers, Rothwell Audio's Signature One phono stage, Riva's striking Riva S bluetooth stereo/mono speaker system, plus lots more!

HI-FI+ ISSUE 137 ON SALE JULY 7, 2016 (UK) AUGUST 4, 2016 (US)

THE  
**CHORD**<sup>TM</sup>  
COMPANY

ChordMusic

**ChordMusic is available for demonstration  
at the following retailers:**

Acoustica, Cheshire  
[www.acoustica.co.uk](http://www.acoustica.co.uk)

Brian & Trevors, Greater Manchester  
[www.brianandtrevors.com](http://www.brianandtrevors.com)

Cool Gales, Somerset  
[www.coolgales.com](http://www.coolgales.com)

Cymbiosis, Leicestershire  
[www.cymbiosis.com](http://www.cymbiosis.com)

KJ West One, London  
[www.kjwestone.co.uk](http://www.kjwestone.co.uk)

Loud & Clear, Glasgow  
[www.loud-clear.co.uk](http://www.loud-clear.co.uk)

Martins Hi-Fi, Norfolk  
[www.martinshifi.co.uk](http://www.martinshifi.co.uk)

Oxford Audio Consultants, Oxfordshire  
[www.oxfordaudio.co.uk](http://www.oxfordaudio.co.uk)

Sonority Design, West Midlands  
[www.sonoritydesign.co.uk](http://www.sonoritydesign.co.uk)

Unilet Sound & Vision, Surrey  
[www.unilet.net](http://www.unilet.net)

The Chord Company Ltd  
Chord Company House, Millsway Centre  
Amesbury SP4 7RX, UK  
[sales@chord.co.uk](mailto:sales@chord.co.uk)  
+44(0)1980 625700

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

## ChordMusic

Our latest and most revelatory product. The distillation of over 30 years of designing cables. Where others might open a window, ChordMusic kicks the door down and lets you wander into an extraordinary musical landscape.

ChordMusic has been developed using Taylon® - a new and groundbreaking, phase-stable insulation material and features the same Super ARAY technology as our award winning Sarum cables.

ChordMusic cables can turn your favourite recordings into performances.

THE  
**CHORD**<sup>TM</sup>  
COMPANY

Designing & hand building



in England since 1985



# SOMETHING IN THE WAY SHE SOUNDS...



"This makes for the perfect 'now' loudspeaker...  
Highly recommended!"

*Magico S1, Hi-Fi+*

"This is the most important loudspeaker I've  
ever sat in front of..."

*Magico Q1, Hi-Fi+*

"Simply exemplary... Its complete  
performance reaches massively beyond its  
price"

*Magico S5, Hi-Fi Critic*

"The Q7 is the single most impressive product  
- in any category - that I've come across in  
more than 23 years of full-time reviewing"

*Magico Q7, The Absolute Sound*

"If there's a parallel to the Bugatti Veyron  
in the audio world, surely it is the Ultimate  
loudspeaker system from Magico"

*Magico Ultimate,  
The Absolute Sound*

 **absolute sounds ltd.**

International Distributors & Consultants of Specialised Hi-End Audio & Video Systems

58 Durham Road, London, SW20 0TW T: +44 (0)20 89 71 39 09

W: [www.absolutesounds.com](http://www.absolutesounds.com) E: [info@absolutesounds.com](mailto:info@absolutesounds.com)

