

hi-fi news

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& Record Review

Exclusive

MUSIC MASTER

**Clearaudio's massive
'magnetic' LP spinner**



**Wilson's
Duette 2**
New two-way
standmount

GROUP TEST

Valve amps
Glowing tubes
up to £3000

Esoteric K-05
SACD player/DAC

Teac HA-501
Elite headphone amp

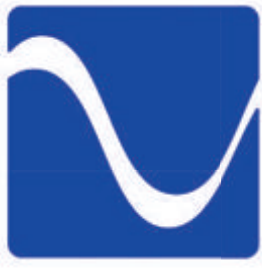
Budget Esoterica
Cambridge Audio Aero 2

**'First look at the
Air Force Two'**
HFN visits TechDAS, p16

• **PLUS** 18 pages of music reviews & features • **VINYL RE-RELEASE** Black Sabbath's *Paranoid* on 180g
• **OPINION** 11 pages of letters and comment • **VINTAGE REVIEW** Philips CD104 CD player from 1984
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RIGHT: Tube amplifiers glow supreme in this month's Group Test. See p39



ABOVE: A new CD transport from Simaudio, complete with DAC and hi-res capable digital inputs. It's a stunner – see p32



VINYL: The enigmatic Sade's *Diamond Life* is this month's Vinyl Icon (p72) while Steve Sutherland relives some tales from the dark side as Black Sabbath's *Paranoid* is reissued as a 180g LP (p70)

RIGHT: *Hi-Fi News & RR* is the exclusive UK representative of EISA's Audio and Home Theatre panels. Paul Miller is EISA's Audio and HT Panel Manager



If audio's 'mass market' is characterised by a sea of me-too, iDevice-friendly but broadly immemorable boom-boxes, then 'real hi-fi' is utterly distinct for its sheer diversity. Only last month we featured the first full technical review of Sony's new digital media player and amplifier while this month sees us celebrate the mighty Master Innovation turntable from Clearaudio alongside a group test of five eclectic but deeply impressive valve amplifiers.

That our shared passion for the highest quality music reproduction covers such a broad technological landscape is a genuine treat for enthusiasts and probably explains much of its attraction. We don't see this sort of diversity in the world of home cinema or photography, even though the latter does share parallels with our insatiable curiosity for vintage equipment.

The difference with high-end hi-fi is that what initially looks like 'vintage technology' – tube amps, belt-driven turntables, moving-coil pick-ups and the like – is still employed today to deliver the very finest sounds on the planet.

Advances are incremental and typically come in component and materials technology: witness the new higher-power KT120 and KT150 output tubes



now finding their way into hi-fi valve amps. These bottles have added real spice to a market for years dominated by the KT88 and EL34 (and, yes, the 300B triode). Indeed there are no fewer than four different output tube types featured in our five-way amplifier test (see p39).

Without new materials, and new extra-powerful permanent magnets in particular, the

'New tube variants have added spice to the valve amp market'

'contactless' drive system that lies at the heart of Clearaudio's turntable would be impossible. The same magnet technology – driven by industry demand for more efficient and lightweight electric motors – also finds its way into modern loudspeakers, improving performance and sensitivity. Which is just one reason why Wilson Audio's Duette 2 standmount is also such a remarkable performer (p28).

PAUL MILLER EDITOR

HI-FI NEWS' EXPERT LINE UP: THE FINEST MINDS IN AUDIO JOURNALISM BRING THEIR EXPERIENCE TO BEAR ON ALL AREAS OF HI-FI & MUSIC



BARRY FOX
Investigative journalist supreme, Barry is the first with news of the latest developments in hi-fi and music technologies



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



KEN KESSLER
is currently our Senior Contributing Editor and almost singularly responsible for the renaissance in valves and 'vintage hi-fi'



KEITH HOWARD
has written about hi-fi for 30 years, and edited *Hi-Fi Answers* for nine. KH performs our speaker and headphone lab tests



STEVE HARRIS
Former Editor of this very title from 1986 through to 2005. A lifetime in audio and a love of jazz makes Steve a goldmine



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



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

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CONTENTS

APRIL 14

VINYL & RECORD REVIEWS

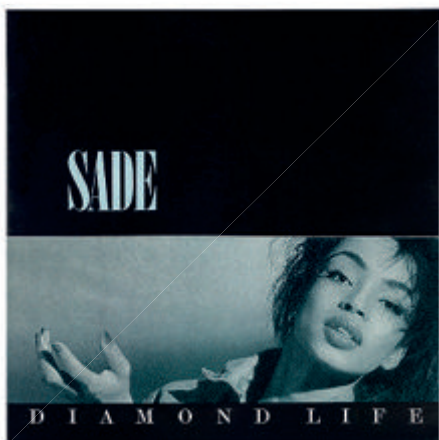
- 68 Vinyl Frontier**
Chris Heard of Classic LPs brings you the best of the new reissues and re-releases on premium vinyl
- 70 Vinyl Release**
Black Sabbath's *Paranoid* album kick-started heavy metal. Now it's on 180g vinyl, Steve Sutherland finds it has lost none of its magic
- 72 Vinyl Icon**
One of the '80s go-to audiophile albums, Sade's debut oozed both sophistication and silky sonics. Chris Heard looks at the recording of *Diamond Life*, now 30 years old
- 78 Classic Rock Venues**
Steve Sutherland continues his tour of the world's iconic rock venues, this month bringing you the story of the UFO Club in London
- 85 Music Reviews**
Our selection of audiophile LP and hi-res downloads reviewed by our specialists alongside the latest rock, jazz and classical albums

DEFINITIVE PRODUCT REVIEWS

- 22 Clearaudio Master Innovation**
Company's Innovation series gains a flagship turntable with tech taken from its ultimate Statement deck



ABOVE: The Revel Performa F206, p50



- 28 Wilson Duette Series 2**
US speaker maker reworks its smallest model so that it gives of its best only when used close to room boundaries
- 32 Simaudio Moon 260D**
Latest CD transport comes with the option of a retro-fittable DAC. The perfect future-proof all-in-one?
- 39 Group Test: £1739-£3100 valve amps**
This month we catch up with developments in the integrated tube amp market as five of the latest models from some of the biggest brands in the business do battle
- 50 Revel Performa F206**
Sleek speaker with a small footprint proves to be an enticing performer and a must-hear, given its price
- 54 Esoteric K-05**
Luxurious SACD player/DAC hopes to make its mark, but is competition from the boutique brands too tough?
- 58 Teac HA-501**
It's quaint-looking and old-school, yet if there's a better £700 headphone amp out there we want to hear it
- 62 Cambridge Audio Aero 2**
Budget speaker breaks the mould with a Balanced Mode Radiator in its little box. Prepare to be amazed...

VINTAGE

- 114 Buying vintage hi-fi**
We continue our series on how to secure the best vintage hi-fi buys with a look at the tricky business of buying secondhand classic loudspeakers
- 120 Vintage Review**
How do the classic components of yesteryear measure up today? We test Philips' CD104 – probably the first CD player to win over audiophiles

NEWS AND OPINION

- 06 News**
Audio Research CD6 with trickle-down tech from CD9, first closed-back 'phone from Audeze, five MCs from Ortofon, Denon's 'hi-res' USB DAC and new TTs from Thorens
- 08 Show Blog**
A double helping of global audio gear this month as Jorge Gonçalves reports from the Portuguese Audio Show and Ken Kessler walks the corridors of Las Vegas's T.H.E. show
- 16 Investigation**
Ken Kessler goes behind the scenes at TechDAS for an exclusive look at the Air Force Two turntable – the follow-up to one of the most talked about decks of the last ten years
- 98 Opinion**
Insider comment on the audio topics of the day from Paul Miller, Barry Fox, Jim Lesurf, Steve Harris and, writing from the US, Barry Willis
- 106 Sound Off**
Your thoughts on our Investigation into hearing aids, hi-fi and the law of diminishing returns, a reader seeks help with 'silent' LP rips, plus which Audio Research amplifier is best?
- 138 Off The Leash**
Would you buy a £5000 valve amp online without hearing it? No, which is why print magazines and hi-fi shows still matter, says Ken Kessler



ABOVE: For our Group Test of £1739-£3100 valve amps, turn to page p39

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Free! Seven audiophile CDs from Chesky See page 82

Audio Research CD6

REPLACING THE CD5 WITH TRICKLE-DOWN TECH FROM THE REF CD9



Along with other high-end manufacturers (including Simaudio, see p32) Audio Research still sees a ready market for new CD players, albeit players equipped with a raft of digital inputs to service alternative

sources (including computer audio). Priced at £8590 the new CD6 is the natural successor to the longstanding CD5 model although its design is rather closer to a 'solid-state' version of ARC's Reference CD9

player [see *HFN* May '13]. Here a FET direct-coupled, servo-controlled analogue output stage replaces the CD9's tubes. The front panel layout is identical to the REF CD9's with dimmable display and three columns of LEDs indicating input and (up)sample rate and fast or slow digital filter options.

Like the CD9, the CD6 utilises quad 24-bit DACs running in mono mode, with two master oscillators serving 44.1/88.2/176.4kHz and 48/96/192kHz sample rates respectively. In addition to the asynchronous USB and S/PDIF digital inputs, the back panel includes two digital outputs (AES/EBU and BNC), single-ended RCA and balanced XLR analogue outputs. A heavyweight alloy IR remote is included. **Audio Research Corp, 0208 971 3909; www.absolutesounds.com**

Audeze breezes in

NEW OPEN AND CLOSED-BACK HEADPHONES

Already famous for its planar magnetic headphones, Audeze has announced two new models – the £1525 open-back LCD-X and £1600 closed-back LCD-XC – which utilise a newly-developed planar transducer made of an even thinner and lighter material. These 'Fazor' elements are unique to the LCD-X and LCD-XC and help guide and manage the flow of sound in the headphone while offering a higher sensitivity (95dB/1mW for the LCD-XC and 96dB/1mW for the open-backed LCD-X). The result, according to Audeze, is 'an improved phase response, greater frequency extension, smoother frequency response and remarkable 3D holographic imaging'. The new transducer is specifically designed to work with a wide variety of preamp sources, including portable players in addition to high-end headphone amplifiers. The load is specified as 22ohm.

Audeze LLC, 01252 702705; www.audeze.com, www.decentaudio.co.uk



HI-FI NEWS' NUGGETS

JUST PEACHY

Peachtree Audio is releasing its novaPre preamp with matching Peachtree220 (220W Class D) power amp, via distributor Anthem AV Solutions in the UK. The novaPre is available in a gloss black finish at £799 and in rosewood and cherry for £849. The Peachtree220 is available in a gloss black finish at £1100 and in rosewood and cherry for £1150. www.peachtreeaudio.co.uk.

IN-AKUSTIK

Hi-Fi Network is introducing the German cable brand In-Akustik to the UK. The brand's range extends from interconnect and speaker cables through to HDMI, Ethernet, antenna and analogue video cables, with different designs and technologies separated into four distinct portfolios. In order of ascending price, these are the Star, Premium, Exzellenz and Referenz ranges. The Referenz LS-603 speaker cable is particularly innovative, comprising six conductors that each have a concentric copper core surrounding a solid dielectric. These individual conductors are insulated with PE and gently twisted around a hollow core. www.hifi-network.com

Fostex with tubes

HEADPHONE AMPS FROM PRO-AUDIO BRAND



SCV, Fostex's UK distributor, has announced a raft of new products from pro-audio marque Fostex. These include the revised CE/RoHS-compliant HP-8AC 32-bit DAC/headphone amp at a new lower price of £1149 and its little brother, the HP-A4 bus-powered USB DAC/headphone amp at £269. Also arriving is the £399 HP-V1 portable headphone amp [pictured, above], an analogue-only hybrid 6N16B-Q tube/op-amp design that boasts up to ten hours use on a single charge of its Lithium Ion battery. The HP-V1 comes with a 10cm length of Hitachi 6N copper stereo mini cable as standard.

SCV Electronics Ltd (SCV Distribution), 03301 222500; www.scvdistribution.co.uk

Denon's hi-res USB DAC

DSD-READY USB DAC WITH AL32 PROCESSING

Boasting the same 'Advanced AL32 processing and 32-bit/192kHz converter' used in Denon's flagship CD/SACD players, the new DA-3000USB DAC offers both line and headphone outputs. The asynchronous USB port is joined by three S/PDIF digital ins. Supported file formats include MP3/MP4, AAC, ALAC, WAV and FLAC HD (up to 24-bit/192kHz) and DSD at 2.8MHz and 5.6MHz resolutions. Price is £329 and the 170x170x55mm case can be positioned horizontally or vertically (via a supplied, clip-on stand). **Denon UK, 02890 279830; www.denon.co.uk**



Ortofon births quintets

FIVE NEW MOVING-COILS FOR ENTHUSIASTS ON ALL BUDGETS

Replacing the Vivo and Rondo ranges, Ortofon's new five-strong Quintet series comprises the Red (£199), Blue (£325), Bronze (£499), Black (£649) and White (£325 – mono). The bodies are moulded from ABS and their aluminium top-plates include threaded mounting holes.

Ortofon A/S Denmark, 01235 511 166; www.henleydesigns.co.uk



Thorens in a spin

NEW TD 206 AND TD 209 TURNTABLES ANNOUNCED

German turntable marque Thorens has launched two new turntables based on its award-winning TD 309 [HFN Jun '10] and both costing £850 in either black, white or red lacquered finishes. Both use a new two-part platter system with an aluminium main platter and black acrylic top, critically decoupled by a thin coated paperboard between. The plinths (square for the TD 206) are precision machined from MDF. The TD 209 is shown below.

UKD Ltd, 01753 652669; www.thorens.com, www.ukd.co.uk



Mulidine, from France

NOVEL TRANSMISSION LINE SPEAKERS NOW IN THE UK

BD Audio is now the exclusive UK supplier of the French Mulidine loudspeaker range. Founded in 1981, Mulidine (a division of Crista Technologies) has built a reputation for designing loudspeakers based on a 'double quarter wave transmission line', the tall cabinets incorporating a series of 'acoustical-mechanical filters'. These filters are not fully absorbent, but act to channel back radiation away from the drive units. The two-way floorstanding range includes the Bagatelle V2 (£1495), the Allegretto V4 (£2495) and the Cadence with ribbon tweeter (£3495). **Crista Tech, 01684 560853; www.bd-audio.co.uk**



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Upcoming Events

IMPORTANT DATES FOR YOUR HI-FI DIARY

- 21-23 FEB** Sound & Vision Show, Marriott City Centre Hotel, Bristol; www.bristolshow.co.uk
- 29-30 MAR** The 15 Audio Show, The Hilton Metropole, Brighton; info@15audio.co.uk
- 10-13 APR** Hi-Fi & High End, Crocus Expo Centre, Moscow, Russia
- 15-18 MAY** High End Show, M.O.C, Munich, Germany; www.highendsociety.de
- 30-01 JUN** T.H.E. Show, Hilton Hotel, Newport Beach, CA, USA

Audioshow, Portugal

Words & pictures: **Jorge Gonçalves**



Held at the Hotel Pestana Palace in Lisbon over three days in November last year, the Portuguese Audio Show saw 25 spaces given over to exhibitors from across the globe.

Behind the scenes in the run-up to the event engineers and representatives of all nationalities spent countless hours tuning, listening and re-tuning systems to ensure they sounded at their very best. And it was work not lost on Portuguese audiophiles, for the

appetite for high quality remains as strong as ever, despite the economic battering the country has suffered over the past years.

Still, this was the place to lose oneself in fine music, to see and listen to products about which we all dream of owning one day and to reacquire ourselves with friends and well-known faces from other audio shows. And, of course, it was an opportunity to enjoy the sheer magnificence of the show's location.

One system that worked supremely well saw a pair of Magico S5 loudspeakers combined with Constellation Audio's Centaur monoblocks, a Constellation Audio Virgo preamp and a Metronome Calypso transport/Metronome C5 Signature DAC.
www.magico.net; www.metronome-technologie.com



Another component to debut at the event was the Nagra HD DAC. There were only two units in existence at the time and information was scarce, but representatives of the company were able to reveal that it employs AK DACs and that it accepts LPCM up to 24-bit/384kHz, plus DSD64 and 128.
www.nagraaudio.com

There was no shortage of visitors to the Linn room where the Klimax Exakt DSM streamer could be heard with Klimax Exakt 350 speakers. Meanwhile, vinyl fans enjoyed a Linn LP12 Limited Edition turntable with Kandik cartridge via a Urika phono stage. www.linn.co.uk



Kronos Audio's Kronos turntable with its twin platters rotating in opposite directions was also a huge hit at the show. Those attending also had the pleasure of hearing the deck's designer, Louis Desjardins, explain the thinking and technological intricacies that went into the making of this truly striking turntable. www.kronosaudio.com

Gryphon Audio Designs wowed visitors with this fabulous system comprising a pair of its Trident II speakers, a Pandora preamp and Mephisto power amp. A Rui Borges turntable from Portuguese manufacturer UNICO was chosen as the analogue source while the digital front-end saw MSB Technology's Diamond DAC used. The room was huge (around 140m²) but the system filled it with sound without breaking a sweat. www.gryphon-audio.dk



This is the Apollon TND turntable from Transrotor. Both arms are SME Vs, the one in the foreground being 12in in length, the other nine inches. Cartridge was a vdH Colibri XPG. www.transrotor.de

Italian brand Aqua is new to the Portuguese market only recently having appointed a distributor. Its La Voce D/A converter is a modular design and comes with the choice of three interchangeable DACs: a Burr-Brown PCM1704, Philips TDA1541A or Analog Devices AD1865. www.aquahifi.com



Interest in headphones is growing so it was no surprise that another star of the show was the new Stax SRS-4710 earspeaker and its energizer. www.stax.co.jp

These stout and sturdy-looking floorstanders are the Tenors from Swedish company Marten Audio's Coltrane series of loudspeakers. Amplification is from VTL in the form of its MB-450 II power amps and TL 7.5 II preamp. As for digital sources, EMM Labs' TSDX CD/SACD transport and DAC2X DAC took it in turns with Auralic's Lumin streamer. www.marten.se



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'T.H.E.' Show 2014: Las Vegas

Words & pictures: Ken Kessler



As always, there were many respected brands involved in this year's T.H.E. show, yet it is difficult to put a positive spin on an event that year after year appears to move further off the radar of showgoers. I attended it on the Friday afternoon of CES week, and at one point, I was the *only* person in the corridor running the length of the main floor.

This is a shame, as there were interesting products to be seen, not least one

of my fave pieces of the new season, darTZeel's integrated amplifier, plus the ever-gorgeous amplifiers from Wavac, a new Zesto model, plenty of turntables and the only stands run by software vendors, who are not allowed to participate in the International CES event. Regardless, it's time for a major rethink.



Made in Switzerland, a speaker with an all-aluminium enclosure, from Stenheim. This is the Alumine 3 Way, which consists of the Alumine 2 Way small monitor, with 6.5in woofer and 1in tweeter, atop the dedicated passive bass system with double port reflex design and custom 203mm polypropylene cone woofer. www.stenhiem.com

The LCH-208 integrated amp from darTZeel offers full digital streaming capability along with four line-level analogue (1 'Zeel' BNC and three RCA) and six digital inputs (USB, RJ45, 2xS/PDIF RCA, 2xToslink), touchscreen, the company's proprietary 'Smart Clock' system, remote via computer or tablet and, says the company, a useful 200W/ch into 8ohm. Weight is 16kg. www.darTZeel.com



'Kid Howard' is Pear Audio's entry-level turntable, with a simpler plinth than the dearer 'Kid Punch' and 'Kid Thomas' [see p13]. This and the 'Kid Punch' have smaller aluminium platters than the 'Kid Thomas'. A separate power supply is offered as an upgrade for all of the Pear Audio turntables. www.pearaudio-analogue.com

It's not often we're treated to a new valve maker that isn't Russian or Chinese, so please welcome RCH Labs of Mound House, Nevada, USA, who showed US-made 6L6s, with 6550s/KT88s to follow. You can't tell much just by looking, of course, but the workmanship bodes well. www.rch-labs.com



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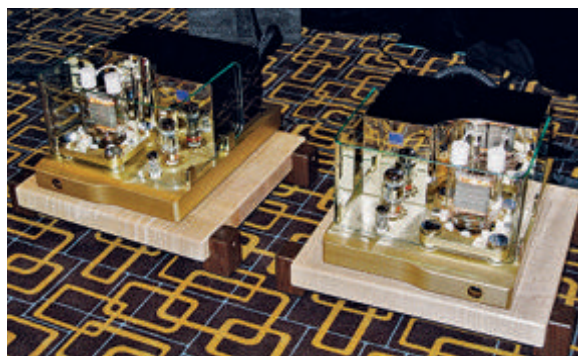
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I could swear I saw the Pearl Evolution speakers in Italy a while ago, but they're so bizarrely photogenic that they'll break up a litany of the usual run of parallel-sided boxes. The design provides a free-standing, enclosureless baffle for the upper frequencies, relegating the bass to its own box, for a three-way D'Appolito arrangement, with a ribbon tweeter between two dome midrange drive units. www.pearlevo.com



Delivering 150W each, the HE-833v2 monoblocks seen here, from Wavac, use the massive 833 direct-heated triode power tube. This surely must be a dream for single-ended triode worshippers, as the substantial output frees them from having to use speakers with 100dB-plus sensitivity. Build quality – and sound – are truly fabulous. www.wavac-audio.jp



Someone urged me to visit this room, said to be hosting a '\$1,000,000 system'. So what? CES was filled with eye-watering price tags. Star was the Perfect 8 'The Force Mk II' glass enclosure speakers with six subwoofers driven by VAC valve gear, fed by a Walker Proscenium Black Diamond V turntable. Sounded fine, by the way. www.perfect8.com

Larsen speakers will recall a certain brand from the past, if you're an old timer like me who remembers Sonab. The Larsen 8 seen here stands 916mm tall and uses reflected sound, designer John Larsen having worked with Stig Carlsson for 16 years until Carlsson's death in 1997. And Carlsson was, of course, Sonab's designer. www.larsenhifi.com



Hard to believe that Diapason is celebrating a quarter-century with this speaker, but here it is, the Adamantes III 25th. The new version has been refined further, and the 'facets' on the cabinet are slightly different, but the precedents remain. Behind it is a new entry-level Diapason, the Neos two-way column with a footprint of only 220x260mm; height is 1030mm. Six finishes are offered. www.diapason-italia.com



One of Tom Fletcher's last designs, the top-of-the-line Pear Audio Blue 'Kid Thomas' deck, with Cornet arm, evolving from his work with Nottingham Audio. Developments include the bearing, plinth, materials and motor arrangement. The Cornet uses a carbon-fibre tube with longitudinal fibres. www.pearaudio-analogue.com



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*- Jonathan Valin, The Absolute Sound,
January 2013*

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*- Paul Miller, Hifi News,
October 2013*

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*- Paul Miller, Hifi News,
June 2013*



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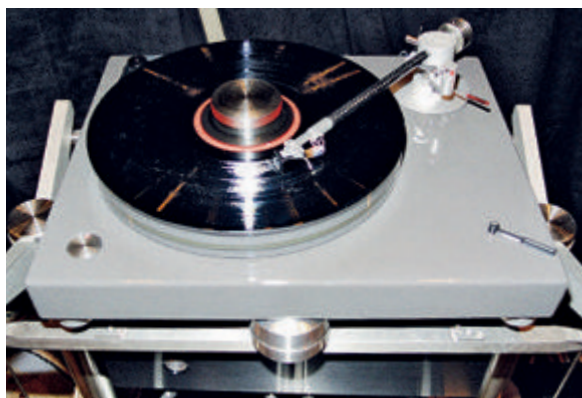
Chapman's T-5 floorstander (US \$4995 per pair) contains a 10in woofer with polyamine fibre cone, 5.25in cone midrange and a 1in silk dome tweeter with sealed rear chamber, the mid and tweeter being on a sloped, time-aligned baffle. Enclosure size is 1022x326x254mm (hwd), and the wood finish seen here is solid cherry. www.chapmanaudiosystems.com

Zesto's BIA 120 is a Class A, ultralinear, dual-mono stereo power amp with autobias, delivering a claimed 60W/ch – a match for the Andros phono stage and Leto preamp. Power supply is built around a custom-made toroidal transformer; valves comprise four KT88s and four gold-pin ECC82Ss. www.zestoaudio.com



Mastersound of Italy's Dueundici (which is Italian for '211') is a luscious integrated valve amp delivering 2x11W – hence the name – from two EL34s driven by two ECC802s in Class A mode. It provides three line-level inputs, an ALPS Blue potentiometer, autobias, no negative feedback. www.mastersoundas.it

Audionet's new DNP, for Digital Network Preamplifier, is compatible with Windows, Linux and Mac operating systems, and works with apps from the usual smart phones. Five analogue (including one balanced) and 13 digital inputs address conventional sources, including WLAN, LAN, USB Audio and S/PDIF, both coaxial and optical. www.audionet.de



The show certainly offered an opportunity to hear some rare combinations. AudioArts demonstrated the Holborne Analog 2 Mk2 turntable with Dural tonearm and MC-1 cartridge through the near-mythical Robert Koda Takumi K-10 preamp, CH Precision A10 stereo amp and Stenheim speakers. www.audioarts.com

Next month

Paul Miller reports from
The Bristol Sound & Vision Show

Feel the Force...

Ken Kessler visits TechDAS for a first look at its Air Force Two turntable

RIGHT: The team at TechDAS (l-r) – Harutoshi Kunugi (Technical Adviser of Stella Inc), Toyoda Keiji (Technical Manager of Stella Inc), Hideaki Nishikawa (CEO of Stella Inc), Motofumi Hirata (Export Manager of Stella Inc)



BELOW: View of the simplified Air Force Two air suspension module. The lower parts count and simplicity are apparent when compared to the photo of the Air Force One suspension assembly (p17, lower right)



When a company is both a major distributor and a manufacturer, its reputation means one thing at home and another abroad. On visiting the Tokyo High End Show last November [see *HFN* Feb '14], I learned that Stella Inc, parent company of TechDAS, is regarded first and foremost as a major distributor, representing such brands as Wilson-Benesch, Constellation,

Vivid Audio, Brinkmann, Graham, Devialet and many others in what must be one of the most discerning markets in the world.

OVERNIGHT SENSATION

That, of course, does not affect us outside of Japan. Instead, we know the company because TechDAS is responsible for one of the most talked-about products of the past ten years: the remarkable Air Force One turntable. It crept in on us surreptitiously, in a static display at the Munich High End Show in 2012, before reaching us for review last year [see *HFN* Jun '13]. Simply put, it has rewritten the rules for high-end turntables, thanks to a combination of its engineering and its construction.

Knowledge of its origins, however, explains that this overnight sensation was 30 or

more years in the making. Its design team, including Technical Adviser Harutoshi Kunugi, Technical Manager Toyoda Keiji and company CEO Hideaki Nishikawa share a common background: Micro-Seiki. Though a brand best remembered by 50-somethings, Micro-Seiki represented in the 1980s the pinnacle of Japanese turntable design, especially

with models such as DQX-1000, able to carry three arms, and the remarkable SX-8000 II, which is most certainly the

granddaddy of the Air Force One, with its outboard motor housing and massive construction.

As noted in our review of the Air Force One, Nishikawa-san joined Stax in 1966, his first taste of the audio business. He stayed there for ten years, developing electrostatic headphones, including the SR-3. His career took a detour into tonearm

'The Air Force One has rewritten the rules for high-end turntables'



LEFT: First glimpse of the Air Force Two (and brochure). This unit is burning-in, and fitted with a Graham Phantom tonearm



design, one of which was the Infinity Black Widow – possibly the first to use carbon fibre, and a remarkable device for carrying high-compliance cartridges, regardless of what some audio critics said about it.

AIR BEARINGS

When Nishikawa-san joined Micro Seiki, he was appointed the Technical Department Manager, then the Sound Business Director. His involvement included the development of electrostatic headphones, designing tonearms and – fortuitously – then working on turntables with air bearings and a vacuum hold-down system.

He stayed for Micro Seiki for 12 years, remarking to *HFN*, 'The representative product from that period is the SX-8000II turntable with air bearing and vacuum system. In fact, the Air Force One

is a compilation of technologies from SX-8000II.' His colleagues from that period are now part of the TechDAS/Stella operation.

TechDAS is an 'own brand' of Stella Inc as opposed to an imported line. All planning and development for TechDAS are managed by Stella Inc. Stella's long experience in high-end audio [see box-out, p19] as a distributor inspired the company's aim to produce superior high-end audio products with worldwide appeal. Buoyed by the rapturous response to its Air Force One, the company wasted no time in creating the Air Force Two. Remarkably, its price is roughly one-third the cost of the Air Force One.

It was always the intention of the designers to create a less costly derivative of their reference model, while preserving all the essential features. Even the performance

is within a whisker of the 'One, though fastidious listeners might hear slightly more profound bass and deeper silences from the dearer player. The key factor in achieving the necessary cost reduction was a fundamental change in the manufacturing process.

The Air Force One's main upper chassis is formed by metal cutting and machining the chassis 'body', while in the Air Force Two, the main section has been produced in aluminium with precision metal casting techniques. This alone represents a significant change in the cost of manufacture.

SOLID ALUMINIUM

To maintain the crucial technologies of air suspension, air bearing and vacuum hold-down, TechDAS developed more cost-effective designs, an oil-damped air suspension, different air pumps and 'feet', although the Air Force Two rests on four pillars while the 'One uses three. The 10kg platter – 9kg lighter than the Air Force One's – is machined from solid aluminium.

In all other respects, the Air Force Two is very much the One's sibling, ➡

BELOW: (Right) photo shows the Air Force One without platter; compare this to the casting of the chassis for the Air Force Two, showing apertures for four pillars (left)



RIGHT: The Air Force One pillar disassembled





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though unusually, the dimensions are slightly larger. The Air Force One has a footprint of 600x450mm while The Air Force Two needs a space of 685x452mm.

Like the 'One, the Air Force Two can accommodate two tonearms, a 9in or 10in tonearm on the right hand side position, and a second 9in, 10in or 12in tonearm can be mounted with an optional extra tonearm base on the rear left hand side. The motor is outboard as are the power supply and air condenser units, and it features the Air Force One's sophisticated electronics and LCD display for ultra-precise speed control with read-outs to two decimal places.

SOPHISTICATED DAC

Although the turntables are the latest – and clearly the most famous – of the company's products, followed by the recently-introduced TDC01 moving-coil cartridge, TechDAS has also been manufacturing a sophisticated DAC for a few years, as well as cables and accessories such as the Disc Stabilizer and the Insulation Base feet for positioning under spikes.

Called the D-7 Supreme, or D-7i Supreme with iPod digital input, the DAC has been improved recently with the redesign of the power supply and casing, which TechDAS believes to play important roles in the overall performance. Amusingly, this is a by-product of their work with metals in the development of the Air Force One, which might be the first time that a DAC was influenced by a turntable.

Using a hybrid chassis clad with a structure of aluminium and brass ➤

ABOVE: A look inside one of the 'TechDAS Air Force Module' air pump assemblies. The box measures 428x240x160mm (wdh) and weighs 10kg

TOP RIGHT: The late Yasuo Nakanishi, who founded RF Enterprises. He and Nishikawa-san transformed Stellavox Japan from being solely a distributor, to Stella Inc, a manufacturer. To the right is shown the Air Force One turntable

ROOTS OF STELLA, TECHDAS AND JAPANESE HIGH-END

Yasuo Nakanishi was the Godfather of high-end audio in Japan. For over 30 years, he discovered and nurtured fledgling brands, taking them to a point where they could enjoy a global reputation. Through his company R F Enterprises, Yasuo distributed some of audio's greatest names.

In the 1970s, his company handled brands such as Audio Research, SAE, Beveridge, and Electro Research. In the 1980s, R F Enterprises was the Japanese distributor for Krell, Apogee, Studer/Revox, Jadis, and Cello. Added to the roster in the 1990s were Acoustic Energy, Audio Alchemy and VAC. A second company, Stellavox Japan, Inc, was established in 1989 to distribute Goldmund, Martin-Logan and Magnepan among others.

It was not easy at first, as Yasuo explained in an interview in 1996, 'There were economical elements. Even SAE had to be sold at much, much higher prices than Japanese products. But like today, Japanese enthusiasts, relative to the amount of money they make, are much more interested in these things than people in other countries.'

The trigger to R F Enterprises' success and therefore the birth of the high-end in Japan was Yasuo's discovery of Mark Levinson Audio Systems in 1974.



'Mark Levinson was instrumental in establishing the concept of the high-end throughout the Seventies. He and I kept talking about new products, designs and things. He did come to Japan quite often in those days. By the late 1970s, we

had a number of different models, including power amps and crossovers that really established this genre we call

high-end. No-one talked about it at the time.

'When I acted as an importer/distributor in Japan for manufacturers overseas, I wanted not merely to import their products to sell but also to try to translate the manufacturers' philosophy. I sometimes feel that the work of an importer/distributor is not unlike that of an art dealer.'

Nakanishi-San passed away on the 4th of June, 2001.

"The work of an importer is not unlike that of an art dealer"





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to control resonance, the main unit is constructed from solid aluminium and sits on three large spiked brass feet. Two frontal spikes are directly connected to the toroidal transformer to quickly remove all minute vibrations.

WOLFSON CHIP

TechDAS supplies it with the newly developed TechDAS Insulation Base, made of super duralumin and DLC. As for the processing, the D-7 Supreme uses a Wolfson WM8741 D/A chip, supporting USB to 192kHz/24-bit. As for operating systems, it copes with most flavours of Windows up to 7, and Mac to OSX 10.6 or later.

In D-7i form, the unit allows direct digital input from an iPod by connecting the USB cable from the Apple device into the front-mounted USB socket. This function allows the user to employ an iPod as a high-end audio player.

Variable pre-output is included as standard equipment, enabling the D-7 to serve as a DAC/preamp, complete with a high-quality headphone amplifier based on a dedicated board and fitted with 1/4in socket. The front panel also features a rotary to select sampling rates.

Its complement of rear panel sockets includes one each of RCA coax, Toslink and USB digital input and an RCA digital output; all are 192kHz/24-bit compatible.

Fixed level analogue outputs include both RCA single-ended and XLR balanced, with the variable output RCA-only. There's also an external BNC clock input to be found.

AIR FORCE THREE?

Spending a day at the TechDAS HQ, I was able to observe the first Air Force Twos being constructed. The workmanship reminded me of, yes, watch manufacturing, with

'I was able to observe the first Twos being constructed'



TOP LEFT: The TechDAS D-7i/192DSD Precision Digital Interface

ABOVE: Pictured explaining the workings of the Air Force Two turntable is Nishikawa-san

uncompromised attention to detail, quality and fit/finish.

If the response to the 'Two is as overwhelming as for the 'One, and the new cartridge finds an audience, there will be other cartridges and turntables in the offing. While Nishikawa-san wouldn't exactly commit, I have a sneaky feeling that an Air Force Three down the road might be even less expensive.

What might provide further down-pricing remains to be seen – the Air Force Two seems as lean as the topology can go. One suspects an unwillingness to sacrifice any of the air suspension or air bearing element, but a smaller model with just one arm fixing and hold-down?

Why is this plausible? Because Micro-Seiki made record decks at every price point. As Nishikawa-san and his team respect and revere their Micro-Seiki heritage, who knows? Maybe Nishikawa-san might even consider creating an all-new, 21st Century Black Widow tonearm? ☺

LEFT: Rear view of the Air Force Two, showing ingress for the air hoses, and a full view of the 12in SME Series V arm

RIGHT: The brand-new TDC-01 moving coil cartridge, with a claimed 0.45mV output



Clearaudio Master Innovation

With this new high-end model, Clearaudio has brought even more of its Statement turntable technology into its Innovation range. So does it really master the music?

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

A turntable can become a shrine, in front of which the audiophile devotee performs arcane rituals, hoping to be rewarded with heavenly music. And turntables have become ever larger and more elaborate, until, when it comes to Clearaudio's top model, the Statement, we are looking at the audio equivalent of a high altar.

While the massive Statement continues as Clearaudio's very top model, below it in the hierarchy comes a new flagship for the main Innovation Series. A spectacular and impressive turntable, especially when mounted on the matching Olymp stand, the Master Innovation visibly justifies its rather grand title.

It's certainly not cheap. In the finish seen here the Master Innovation is priced at £14,500, and there is also an all-black version at £15,400. The 9in Clearaudio Universal arm fitted to our turntable adds £3350, while the Olymp stand is priced at £8000, or £8500 in black.

SANDWICH LAYERS

Clearaudio's first turntable, back in the late 1980s, was the original Reference, with a boomerang-shaped acrylic chassis and a deep acrylic platter similar to those still used today. After many further variations came the supremely rational Solution Series, which allowed buyers who'd started with one of the simpler models the option of upgrading later. The same principle applies to the current Innovation Series.

So the Master Innovation is built up on Clearaudio's familiar, elegant, three-lobed chassis members. There are just rather more of them here than in the other Innovation models – even before you include the Olymp stand. Each member is constructed as a sandwich, with a core of Panzerholz between two sheets of aluminium. Panzerholz translates

as 'armour wood' and is an extremely hard type of multi-laminated plywood, manufactured from beech veneers and synthetic resins under pressure and heat.

Looking like two turntables in one, the Master Innovation is in fact built as two separate units. Its multi-platter arrangement provides for Clearaudio's magnetic contactless drive system, which was introduced in the Statement. The upper section is the turntable proper, with a 70mm-thick acrylic platter sitting on a 15mm stainless steel base platter.

This runs on a Clearaudio Ceramic Magnetic Bearing, in which the platter's weight is supported by the repelling effect of

opposing magnets. The platter effectively floats on a cushion of air, while the journal bearing is in the form of a ceramic shaft, designed to be a perfect fit in a bronze bearing sleeve, this fit being achieved by hand polishing. The magnetic fields are

completely shielded inside the bearing assembly and cannot affect the cartridge.

The CMB bearing shaft is also extended downwards to carry the additional 30mm-thick under-platter.

Set into the lower face of this is a circle of 20 neodymium button magnets, and it forms the driven member in Clearaudio's contactless magnetic drive system. Immediately below, and fitted with an exactly complementary array of 20 magnets in its upper surface, is the 40mm-thick platter belonging to the lower turntable section, forming the driving member of the system.

There is a clear air gap of a few millimetres between the two platters, but they are

'Clearaudio's Master Innovation looks like two turntables in one'



RIGHT: Running on Clearaudio's patented Ceramic Magnetic Bearing magnetic bearing is a 70mm-thick acrylic main platter. The version that comes in a black finish has a softer POM platter, which may give a slightly different sound



MAGNETIC ATTRACTION

Probably the first hi-fi use of opposing magnets for isolation was in Sony's 1981 SW-90 Floating Magnet Sound Base, an accessory for the high-end Esprit series, which embraced those memorable square-coned APM speaker models. Years later, the idea was unwittingly copied by John Jeffries for his Stratosphere turntable. However, Clearaudio's CMB turntable bearing and contactless drive system are among many startling innovations made possible by the high power of today's magnets. In the mid-1970s, disruption of mining in Zaire led to the 'cobalt crisis', making both alnico magnets and the newly developed samarium-cobalt type vastly more expensive to produce. This spurred on research that led to the first neodymium-iron-boron alloy magnet in 1982. Neodymium magnets are now used in countless applications from computer drives to flying toys.

LEFT: While the lower half of its 'double' turntable construction provides Clearaudio's contactless magnetic drive, the optional Olymp stand is built up of four additional chassis

locked together by the attraction between their sets of magnets. So the lower section is in essence a complete turntable, but its function is purely to provide contactless drive to the player system above. Its left hand front chassis pillar carries the DC motor in a special isolating housing, with four blue-LED-lit control buttons for Off (illuminated as long as power is connected), 33.3, 45 and 78rpm.

CONSTANT MONITORING

Speed accuracy is maintained by Clearaudio's Optical Speed Control system. The underside of the platter carries a stroboscope ring, microscopically etched with more than 1500 bars. This is constantly scanned by an infrared sensor mounted on the chassis, which enables the OSC unit to correct the speed on a virtually continuous basis. A set of three small screw trimmers, set into the wood of the chassis under the platter edge, provides independent fine adjustment for each of the three speeds.

While two of the upper turntable's feet have points to locate on the lower unit's pillar tops, the third foot is cloven in a clever bridge design, to clear the motor pulley and belt. The lower unit's three pointed feet mate in turn with the pillars of the Olymp stand, if this is used.

Clearaudio's most expensive arms are tangential or parallel-tracking types but our Master Innovation came with the top pivoted tonearm, the Universal; this beautifully-engineered arm uses miniature ballraces. Ours was the standard 9in arm but there is now also a £3495 12in version. Both can also be supplied with the optional VTA-Lifter, which allows arm height/VTA adjustment during play, when the prices become £3625 and £3770. Four different counterweights are provided, to accommodate cartridges of any weight up to 20g and more.

PRECISION AND WARMTH

Setting-up was very easy and straightforward, although you need to take care in handling because the components are very heavy. For listening I used the excellent Ortofon Cadenza Black cartridge, but I started with the Benz Glider SL, and immediately felt that the Clearaudio turntable really allowed this always enjoyable pick-up to blossom, combining a sense of accuracy and precision with real musical warmth. A great example ➞



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TURNTABLE

NEW DRIVE CONCEPT

First of Clearaudio founder Peter Suchy's children to enter the business was Robert, joining in '91. In charge of exports and marketing, he probably deserves quite a lot of the credit for the company's continuing growth. His brother Patrick has also been with the company for some 15 years, while sister Veronika joined more recently.

Since the late 2000s the Innovation Series has replaced the previous Solution Series with many advances, starting with Clearaudio's patented Ceramic Magnetic Bearing [CMB]. As Robert Suchy explains, 'Right now it is reserved in Europe, but we are working on worldwide protection. The Optical Speed Control does not need patent rights protection, because it is exclusively designed and produced only for us. We introduced this with the Innovation Series.' In fact, the OSC forms part of a new drive concept, with a DC motor built into the main chassis, replacing both the old freestanding single motor and the three-motor system of the Maximum Solution and Master Reference.

As Robert Suchy explains, 'One aspect design-wise was to implant the motor. The second one was the integration of a better drive system, with the DC motor. The decoupling and isolation gave us a lot of headaches, but finally we designed a double isolation cylinder, which has the same ability as a free-standing motor unit. The change to the CMB and the changes of platter weights and optimisation provided a solution that achieved the same effect as three motors.'



ABOVE: A complete new drive system with a single DC motor has neatly replaced the three AC motors of Clearaudio's previous 'side-force-free' belt-drive concepts

of this was the way it put over Joan Armatrading's first album, *Whatever's For Us* [Cube Records HIFLY 12]. Here a full-bodied presence brought out the singer's emotion and the nuances of vulnerability too, seemingly balanced perfectly against the lush instrumental backdrops added by Gus Dudgeon, so that what can seem like bloated over-production became harmonious and thoughtful support.

Possibly the best compliment to this Clearaudio turntable is that it encouraged me to revisit and enjoy a lot of records that hadn't been played recently. I've always felt that Paco de Lucia's 1987 album *Siroco* [Mercury 830 913-1] might somehow have lost something in the translation from the actual Madrid recording to the digital mixing at Wisseloord Studios in Holland. But while the Clearaudio laid bare a somehow rather brittle, tensed-up quality in the recorded sound, at the same time it helped you hear through to the passion and power of the artist and his intentions.

Going back again to the 1970s, with Joni Mitchell's *Ladies Of The Canyon* [Reprise K44085], I felt once again that the Clearaudio turntable and Benz cartridge delivered warmth and richness as well as alluring detail. You had to be captivated by the pretty imagery of 'Morning

Morgantown' before being drawn into the emotional depths of some of the other songs. The big acoustic guitar sounds were just right and the piano didn't become too clattery. The Clearaudio player had a stability and strongly-grounded quality that let the music speak across the decades.

MAGICAL TEXTURES

It seemed that the turntable could keep a sense of proportion, with music of any

scale. It could be both impressive and inviting in orchestral works.

On a 1971 recording of Schubert's 4th and 5th Symphonies [VPO/Kertesz; Decca SXL 6843] the orchestral sound was a delight,

spacious and airy, while the music had its proper drive and momentum. It always seemed ready to give you the rich, magically tangible textures of the Decca sound, and even the LXT mono albums had a great sense of depth perspective.

With Eric Clapton's *Backless* [RSO Deluxe RSD 5001] 'Walk Out In The Rain' displayed a firm and impulsive quality to the electric bass, although the track as a whole did not sound so bass-heavy as it can. Here, the treble was well detailed, revealing the subtleties of cymbal splashes, organ chords and background slide guitar which have been fed into the mix, so that it never ➔

'Even the Decca monos had a good sense of depth perspective'



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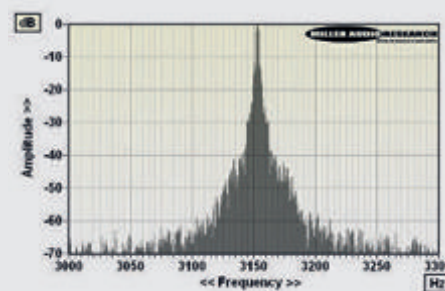
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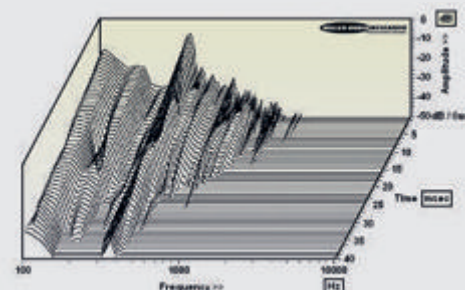
CLEARAUDIO MASTER INNOVATION

Comparisons with Clearaudio's 'directly belt-driven' Innovation deck [HFN Sep '09] are instructive, for this Master Innovation shares the same inverted bearing with a polished sintered bronze insert and ceramic ball for the drive platter while the playback platter is supported and coupled via powerful magnets. The in-groove rumble is almost identical at -70.1dB but the through-bearing rumble (measured at the magnetic bearing) is some 3dB lower at -73.5dB and on a par with the very best turntables we have featured in HFN, including those from SME and TechDAS [see p16]. The sharpness of the main peak in the W&F spectrum [see Graph 1, below] is indicative of the Master Innovation's minimal low-rate drift while both peak wow and peak flutter are <0.02%. This is an excellent result. Power consumption varies from 7W at startup to 4W once stabilised and the 9sec period inbetween reflects the extra inertia of the double platter arrangement featured here.

Clearaudio's partnering Universal tonearm also passed through our lab tests with flying colours. Bearing friction is <10mg in both planes while the cumulative spectral decay plot [Graph 2, below] reveals some housing modes up to 200Hz, one main beam mode at ~350Hz and several lower amplitude harmonics up to around 2kHz. Importantly these modes decay by at least 30dB over the 40msec time window available to the test – this is far from a 'lively' arm and an ideal partner for energetic MCs. Readers are invited to view a full QC Suite report for the Clearaudio Master Innovation turntable and Universal tonearm by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at 5cm/sec (plotted ± 150 Hz, 5Hz per minor division). Absolute speed accuracy can be finely adjusted by the user



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

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.36rpm (+0.09%)
Time to audible stabilisation	9sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.02% / 0.02%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-70.1dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-73.5dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-61.6dB
Power Consumption	4-7W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	479x485x425mm / 58.5kg



ABOVE: Since our picture was taken, Clearaudio's magnetic drive platters have had additional stainless steel elements embedded within them to increase their mass

descended into a grungy mess, but remained almost polite. On 'Watch Out For Lucy' the bass was quite agile yet somehow sounded a little elusive and perhaps not substantial enough. But again the backing details, in this case Marcy Levy's rather de-emphasised background vocals and the twitching little harmonica licks, were clear enough to catch the ear.

PRESENCE AND INTENSITY

With the superb Ortofon Cadenza Black, the rocking sounds of Eric Clapton were tougher and more upfront, with the cartridge displaying the kind of impressively deep, controlled bass that seems to be a strong feature of the whole Cadenza range. Yet there was a tremendous level of detail too, with the fastest guitar chops far back in a complex mix being clearly heard.

On *Backless*, the bass-lines were powerful and the drums quick, while Clapton's vocals had presence and a gritty intensity. This combination really shone on 'Roll It', seeming to revel in Clapton's exuberant display of guitar sonics and particularly his stirring slide guitar sound, driven onwards by a thunderous rhythm.

The Clearaudio/Ortofon combination showed it could do acoustic instruments too. When I put on a 1974 recording of Beethoven's Septet played by the Ensemble of St James [Classics for Pleasure CFP 40059], it was striking to hear the instruments firmly placed in a believable space. A fairly weighty

balance suited this music, with its foundations laid by the double-bass with horn and bassoon above in a warm lower-mid balance, while the treble seemed just incisive enough to give immediacy and pace.

That impressive bass quality came to the fore again on Jennifer Warnes' *Famous Blue Raincoat* [Classic Records/Rock The House RTH5052-1]. On the title track the instruments worked their magic around Warnes' beautiful vocal, while the sax obligato was perfectly placed and even sweet. The classic 'Bird On A Wire' provided a great example of the Clearaudio's ability to produce a huge soundstage with instruments placed wide and deep, while at the same time giving you all the force and vigour of Vinnie Colaiuta's hot drumming. The beat goes on. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Although it lacks the Statement's 'pendulum' chassis system, this model embodies the rest of Clearaudio's signature technical advances, yet is easy to set up and use, with or without the rather expensive stand. Either way it seems that the special bearing and drive system do give it a sound with exceptional detail retrieval, as well as a stable, neutral and open quality that is thoroughly admirable.

Sound Quality: 87%



Wilson Audio Duette Series 2

Wilson Audio's smallest speaker has had a makeover, and the resultant Duette Series 2 is a flabbergasting triumph
 Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Keith Howard**

When the Duette was first launched in 2006, I stymied the manufacturer by acting like a British audiophile.

Conditioning led me to use this two-way speaker – designed for both shelf- or stand-mounting – as a free-space design. I set them up as I have mid-sized two-ways ever since I learned about the importance of positioning. And I loved them, spaced well into the room, despite consciously sacrificing some bass. This time, I was told emphatically that the Duette Series 2 *must* be used close to a wall, whether shelf- or stand-mounted.

The Duette 2 is a thorough revamp of the original, with its aesthetics enhanced by design clues that first appeared in the larger Wilson models. The optional stand, too, is a visual treat, while the Wilson gloss colour palette is so broad that one might not be compelled to order a *custom* hue. But if you wanted, say, a burnt orange to match your Lamborghini, go for it...

In addition to the benefit always present with draconian set-up instructions (the manufacturer can thereby control a product's use in the home to best ensure its performance) the company was able to rid the Duette 2 of some of the complexity caused by the original's more liberal usage. By eliminating this freedom, Wilson's designers could extract greater performance, knowing how the speaker would be installed.

Like the original, the Duette 2 uses the separate Novel crossover, its outboard status increasing the internal volume of the speaker so it still has ample space for an 8in woofer. With the crossover *outside* the enclosure, Wilson was free to fit 'state-of-the-art' inductors, capacitors and other components without worrying about their bulk. Naturally, it also provides electrical and mechanical isolation of the crossover elements. Mounted inside the newly-designed stand, the crossover is

mechanically isolated in its own dedicated enclosure. Wilson used this arrangement to 'manage' the cable, housing it in the pillar. The stand is also said to be more robust than the one it replaces, creating a better 'impedance path' similar to the topology of the larger models, for guiding vibrations away from the main enclosure. The Duette 2 now bolts directly to the stand.

Upgrading the tweeter involved the inclusion of a rear wave chamber, sourced from the Alexia's Convergent Synergy Tweeter [HFN Mar '13]. As an Alexia user, I was struck by the uncanny similarity the two speakers share in the upper treble, especially regarding freedom from sibilance and absolute transparency. This chamber is said to attenuate spurious energy 'generated at the rear of the driver that would otherwise leak out of the acoustically translucent dome'. One benefit is said to be a lower noise floor.

BOUNDARY CONFIGURATION

For the restyled enclosure, Wilson chose to make it entirely from its proprietary X-material, an extremely well damped and ultra-rigid composite, with added bracing. The front baffle was sloped for time alignment, Wilson configuring the Duette 2 for vertical placement only. The front baffle is made from S-material, and tilts back 10°, to align the tweeter and the woofer in the time domain.

Because the Duette 2 is configured solely for near-boundary placement, whether on its stand or on a shelf, the need for two separate resistor and umbilical settings has been eliminated. In the original, this permitted siting out away from walls. Their removal also allowed the designers to concentrate on optimising the

RIGHT: The Duette 2 retains the 'cathedral' look of its predecessor, while wild new colours are offered as standard. The tweeter is similar to that found in the dearer Wilson Alexia



FROM WATT TO DUETTE

While one is tempted to think of the original WATT as the inspiration for the Duette, there is no direct evolutionary path. As soon as the WATT, conceived purely as a small studio monitor, gained a domestic user following, it begged a subwoofer. The speaker spent the rest of its life, after the first couple of versions, paired in almost every situation with the Puppy woofer tower. While all Wilsons bar the Duette are floorstanders, all of them (except for the single-piece Sophia 3) use multiple enclosures – and this *is* traceable to WATT-plus-Puppy.

Duette was a clean-sheet design conceived to be a self-contained two-way, and capable of having performance uncompromised by shelf-mounting. It is clear, however, that the thought which went into the complex design of the optional stand indicates that the Wilson team anticipated floorstanding usage. With the Series 2, Wilson has made the siting requirements more rigid, with proximity to a wall mandatory, and with toe-in determined by the listener's distance from the speaker.

crossover to give excellent time-alignment and linearity with solely near-boundary installations. (Note: there is a separate Novel crossover enclosure for *shelf* placement, as well as 'furniture-friendly' spikes that bolt to the Duette 2 without the stands.)



A GIANT KILLER

While my very first exposure to the Duette 2 was at a hi-fi show in a strange venue, even in such an alien milieu it was clear that the '2' was to the original what a race-prepared car is to its road version. Now don't get me wrong: the '1' is still a terrific speaker, and owners needn't contemplate hemlock. But the transformation is something akin to one of those 'before and after' body-building ads. The Duette has been transformed from a coherent, detailed compact, into a giant killer. Everything about the sound is grander, bolder, more convincingly real.

But equally, it is perpetually disconcerting. You look at a speaker with the dimensions of a 1970s BBC two-way from Rogers or KEF or Spendor, and you hear the mass and scale of something in which Clark Kent could endure a wardrobe change. And that, too, is apt, for the Duette has moved from Clark to Kal-El.

With recordings like the Strypes' retro BritRock on their impressive debut, *Snapshot* [Virgin 3750949], the 'wall of sound' (in the Spectorian sense) is floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall, with an energy level that suggests a sweaty blues bar, circa '66. 'I Can Tell', with guitar

playing that's surely a homage to Wilko Johnson, is deceptively raw, and yet there's real width to the event, the opening just lean enough to offer a hint of air.

But it is not a recording to try the Duette 2's finesse. This shows how a speaker of such compact dimensions can wail it with the best of them. The lead guitar soars almost exactly as it does through the Alexias, while the bottom end is as rich and controlled, if – obviously – not as massive nor as extended. Indeed, so well-defined and 'tuned' is the Duette 2's bass reproduction that many might find it

preferable to a surfeit of bottom octave activity as delivered by larger speaker systems.

Even though the Strypes' playing is raunchy in the precise manner of their heroes from the '60s (although

'Lead guitar soars almost exactly as it does through the Alexias'

I wouldn't swear to them being familiar with The Shadows Of Knight), these teens who were just out of nappies when we were worrying about Y2K eschew inarticulacy, and they deliver lyrics with a clarity that the Duette 2s embraced. It was a vivid display of how the speaker handles textures, as all of the guitar-work behind the vocals is of the fuzz-tone variety.

Track after track delivered a little miracle. Even the 'smallness' of a 1930s recording by George Formby, 'When I'm Cleaning Windows' from the CD of the same name [Retrospective 710357 410420], didn't matter, so pristine was the sound. The attack of his ukulele was reproduced with enough speed and detail to appreciate his masterful – and unique – strumming method.

Moving to the modernity of Joe Brown's version on *The Ukulele Album* [Joe Brown ↗]

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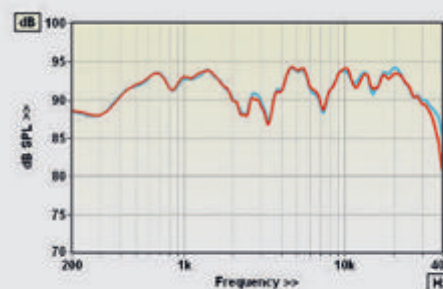


LAB REPORT

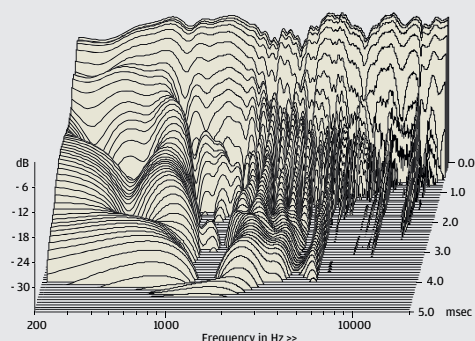
WILSON AUDIO DUETTE SERIES 2

Wilson Audio claims a 92dB sensitivity for the Duette Series 2, which accords very closely with our measured pink noise figure of 91.8dB. Moreover this high sensitivity is achieved without recourse to punishingly low impedance. We measured a minimum impedance modulus of 4.2ohm at 179Hz – close to the specified 4.35ohm minimum at 160Hz – and although the max/min impedance phase angles are quite large the phase is managed in such a way not to result in a low EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance). In fact the EPDR dips to a minimum of 2.0ohm at 100Hz making the latest Duette a more amplifier-friendly load than many mid-market floorstanders, albeit not quite as benign as the Series 1 (minimum EPDR 2.2ohm).

On-axis frequency response, measured at tweeter height [Graph 1, below] is essentially flat in trend from about 500Hz upwards and the fluctuations are reasonably well controlled, giving error figures of $\pm 3.8\text{dB}$ and $\pm 3.5\text{dB}$ respectively for the review pair, 200Hz–20kHz. Both the far-field and near-field responses show a shelving down of output towards low frequency, in accordance with the intended use close to a wall. Pair matching over the same frequency range was excellent at $\pm 0.8\text{dB}$. Bass extension is similar to that of the Series 1 at 43Hz (–6dB re. 200Hz), obtained from a diffraction-corrected near-field measurement. Wilson doesn't quote a crossover frequency to the tweeter but it appears to be, as usual, lower than typical at below 2kHz. Even so the downside of using such a large bass-mid driver is evident in the cumulative spectral decay waterfall [Graph 2] which is dominated in the lower-treble by a closely-packed series of high-Q breakup modes. KH



ABOVE: The Duette 2's forward response is essentially flat in trend but the tweeter crossover is low at ~2kHz



ABOVE: The large bass/mid driver appears to suffer a series of (low treble) breakup modes at ~2-5kHz

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	92.4dB/91.8dB/91.8dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	4.2ohm @ 179Hz 50.6ohm @ 21Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–59° @ 26Hz 42° @ 61Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	$\pm 0.8\text{dB}$
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	43Hz / 34.2kHz/37.3kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.3% / 0.3% / 0.3%
Dimensions (HWD)	470x267x408mm

LEFT: No untidiness here, as the Duette 2 connects to the Novel crossover mounted inside the stand with its own supplied umbilical cable. Note rear-firing port, calculated into the positioning

punch and upper register sparkle. The attack from the Duette 2s was crisp, with no overhang. The vocals coalesced with Hollies-like purity.

JUST A THOUGHT (OR 2)

But there's a question they beg: With prices higher than the 3-way, floorstanding Sophia 3, why buy this instead of the Sophia 3? Both sound unmistakably Wilsonian, but the Duette 2 is lighter of touch, without losing any of the scale. What will perplex you upon your first exposure is the sheer magnitude of the soundstage, the palpability of the bass. It simply has no right to sound so massive, so wholly convincing.

Perhaps the most important virtue of the Duette 2 isn't sonic, but a simple matter of the *trompe l'oeil*: a small speaker on a stand is less visually imposing than a floorstander, even if it occupies the exact same space. But that is too glib.

In practice, the Duette 2 is to be preferred if one either has to employ shelf-mounting, or merely wants it as a future option. I suspect that the Duette 2 also works better in a small room than the Sophia 3, although I used the latter for years in a 12x18ft room with no complaints, and the same space now houses Alexias. The Duette 2, on the other hand, could certainly make life easier if space is an issue. What it never does is let you know you're hearing a small loudspeaker. ☹

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

I have now heard Duette 2 in three different environments, with Ayre, Audio Research and Constellation amps. Each time, it has had me shaking my head, in recognition of how Daryl Wilson and his team seem to have defied the laws of acoustics. This is, without question, the best all-round, most truly satisfying, room-friendly, small speaker of high-end intent I have ever heard. Size, it seems, no longer matters.

Sound Quality: 88%



Records UGCD 008], as well as 'I'll See You In My Dreams', I was able to compare uke-to-recording to gauge the 'realism'. And while my Barnes & Mullins doesn't sound like his Kala, I could ape the uke's strumming the familiar resonances. The Duette 2 put the players in my room!

I felt the hunger for some majestic pop, with a *huge* drum sound. The Wonders' CD single 'That Thing You Do' [Play-Tone Records 664055 2] opens with a fat, bulbous, airy drum attack – I swear you can hear the skins stretching. The intro leads straight into Beatles-esque harmonies and jangly guitars, this track from Tom Hanks' tribute to the wannabe bands oozing

Simaudio Moon Neo 260D

Simaudio has introduced a new CD transport to its series of Moon Nêo components – one that can be fitted with an optional DAC board featuring hi-res-capable inputs

Review: **John Bamford** Lab: **Paul Miller**

We were bowled over by the technical performance and subjective sound quality of Simaudio's Moon 380D standalone DAC [*HFN* Aug '13]. We reviewed it alongside the company's 330A power amplifier, since the 380D can be optionally fitted with a resistive array volume control circuit to negate the need for a preamp in an all-digital system.

The Moon Nêo 260D CD transport (with optional DAC) is a new addition to this Canadian audio company's portfolio, so we were keen to get our hands on it as soon as it arrived on these shores.

ENTIRELY NEW

As mentioned in that 380D/330A review, Simaudio had just announced it was revamping its Moon component line-up. Its new Moon Nêo designs are built into casework with sculpted front panels akin to the aesthetics of the firm's luxurious Evolution Series components. Where many of the Nêo products are re-worked versions of previous Moon components, the 260D 'CD transport' is an entirely new product.

Here we're assessing it as a CD player which, like the majority of players today, features digital inputs for playing additional sources via its digital-to-analogue converter stages. But it is available as a dedicated CD transport with AES/EBU (XLR) and S/PDIF (RCA) outputs, priced £1650. The DAC section is an £800 option that can be retro-fitted by an appointed dealer in the time it takes to enjoy a coffee and a chat about all things hi-fi. Yes, of course it has a 24-bit/192kHz-capable USB input for playing hi-res audio downloads from computer sources. The DAC also sports three S/PDIF inputs: two electrical (RCA) and one optical (Toslink), all of which will accept incoming data up to 24-bit/192kHz. And the DAC's analogue stage has balanced and single-ended outputs.

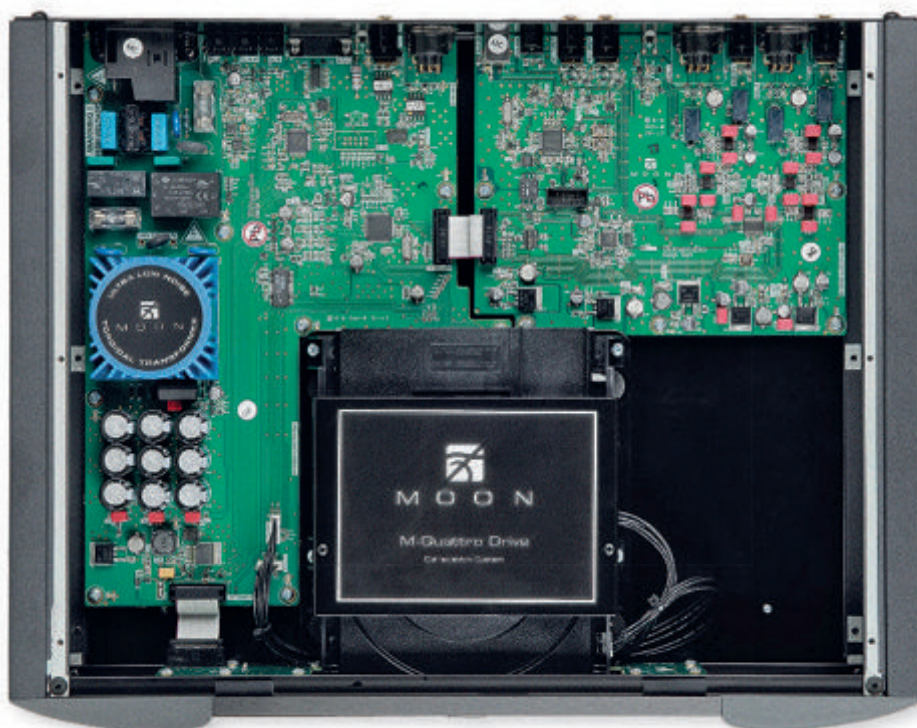
Launched at a point in time when sales of compact discs are certainly waning, the 260D is a carefully considered product introduction from Simaudio [see boxout]. Moreover it replaces three CD player models – the 230, 260 and 360 – from the company's legacy Moon line-up, so it would be fair to say the firm is focusing on quality rather than quantity in today's niche market.

The company is in a strong position to support and service its CD players for many years. While specialist hi-fi manufacturers are finding it increasingly difficult to source dedicated CD mechanisms, Simaudio assembles its own in-house. This is a factor of considerable importance for audio enthusiasts. Even in the unlikely event that the world's major record companies announced they were ceasing all manufacturing of CDs next month, millions of music lovers have CD collections acquired over many years. We're going to want to play them for decades to come.

The mechanism in the 260D transport is decoupled from the player's chassis by a gel-based floating mount that Simaudio calls its M-Quattro suspension. Designed to provide good mechanical grounding while also affording effective isolation from vibration, it's the same mechanism design that Simaudio uses in its Evolution 650 and 750 Reference CD players.

THE DAC BOARD

Meanwhile, the optional DAC board features an alternative 32-bit DAC [see inside shot, below] to the ES9016S Sabre from ESS that's to be found in the costlier outboard 380D. The galvanically isolated asynchronous USB input is the same, however, and uses the XMOS processor interface which the company first employed a couple of years ago for the add-on modules for its 650D and 750D DAC/CD transports. Mac OS provides native support, while Thesycon-sourced drivers for Windows PCs need to be downloaded.



RIGHT: Simaudio's proprietary CD drive system is mounted on a four-point 'M-Quattro gel-based floating suspension'. The 32-bit DAC is a PCM1795 from Burr-Brown (Texas Instruments)



The 260D's multi-segment status display appears a little old-fashioned compared alongside some of today's ultra-cool and sophisticated-looking OLED displays. Moreover the inputs aren't named, so you need to know that to select (for example) the USB input you must scroll through the four inputs to 'd4'. But the display's legends are easy to read – and they do indicate the incoming sampling frequency when using the player's DAC section.

The rear panel has various connectors for external communications. The 260D has an RS-232 port for custom integration/automation and software updates. Next to this are two 'SimLink' in/out mini-jacks for unified control of connected Moon Néo amplifiers. Furthermore if you hook up one of the company's standalone 180-MiND network streamers [*HFN* Aug '13] you can control the 260D (and the volume of a connected amplifier) via an iOS or Android tablet or smartphone. A further mini-jack socket is provided for connecting aftermarket IR remote control receivers.

The supplied handset is a perfunctory plastic affair, however the company does make a swish aluminium back-lit controller (model number FRM 3) priced £399. From UK dealers this is currently available at a discounted price of £195 if purchased at the same time as the 260D. Standard finish for Néo series Moon products is black. They are also available in silver or a 'two-tone'

finish with black faceplates and silver cheeks at no extra cost.

A FAMILY LIKENESS

I described Simaudio's Moon 380D D-to-A converter as sounding even-handed and luxuriously 'comfortable', making for easy-going long-term listening. The new 260D delivers more of the same, its music-making 'rounded' and inviting. Its bass is extended and punchy, while its refined treble quality makes it a great all-rounder for enjoying the majority of a varied digital collection across all musical genres. I was struck by the 260D's exceptional smoothness and civility, and its tonal richness that invited prolonged listening sessions late into the wee small hours during the weeks it was in residence.

It's been a while since I critically compared CD replay with my computer audio source setup: a late-2009 Mac mini running Windows 8 (Boot Camp) and JRiver Media Center playback/file management software. I spent an evening with friends alternately playing CDs in the 260D and comparing rips of the discs. We couldn't reliably discern any subjective difference in sound quality, which certainly made a compelling argument for the validity of a (properly configured) computer rig as

'Cymbal strikes and soft brush strokes shimmer in the air'

ABOVE: To the right of the display lie familiar CD transport keys; on the left, standby and track programming buttons are augmented by an input selector and display on/off controls

an audiophile source component. And the 260D lacks very little in the way of dynamic impact. The tracks 'Fanfare/You Know it' and 'You're Gonna Need Me' from Sheffield Lab's effervescent *Tower Of Power Direct* album [CD-17] were bubbling with energy, the soulful and bluesy big band jazz positively bursting forth from my monitors.

The Moon Néo unit's transparency helped maintain a realistic perspective of the instrumental layout in the deep soundstage, the blasting brass and saxophone trio in the band's line-up sounding believably sharp and vibrant. The drummer's cymbals really do sizzle in this live-in-one-take

audiophile recording, but the 260D's civilised top-end helped keep any undue 'fizz' in check throughout the listening.

I don't want to give the impression that this 260D sounds *overly* smooth and syrupy. The fact that it doesn't appear to glare or sound grainy is perhaps why I found its demeanour relaxed and easy-going. It certainly doesn't lack high-frequency extension, the crashing and extended ringing of cymbals appearing most realistic when listening to excerpts from the 2005 Favoured Nations album *Chamber Works* by drummer virtuoso Terry Bozzio with The Netherlands' Metropole Orchestra. The 260D showed cymbal strikes, drum thwacks and more delicate brush strokes to be shimmering in the air with harmonic complexity and naturally extended decay. The calm demeanour of the DAC also allowed penetration of the more dense arrangements.

Playing 'Chan Chan' from the Ry Cooder-produced *Buena Vista Social Club* featuring the late Cuban pianist Rubén González [World Circuit WCD050] made an even more compelling case ➔

MEETING A NEED

'In product planning meetings we've been considering the design and functionality of the Néo 260D for some considerable time,' says the infectiously enthusiastic John Carroll of Renaissance Audio, Simaudio's UK distributor since 1999. 'We know that CD sales are ever-declining, consumers increasingly downloading music in preference to physical media. But as a consequence this is making the CD a more specialised music carrier – and today's buyers of CD players more discerning than in years gone by.' He has a point. Only an enthusiast with an investment in a very large CD collection would dream of purchasing a new player dedicated solely to CD replay. Says Carroll: 'Taking into account that many enthusiasts might have recently purchased a standalone DAC, or bought an amplifier with a DAC built in, we concluded it made commercial sense to introduce a top-notch CD transport, with an optional DAC board for those requiring an integrated player.'



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CD TRANSPORT/DAC



ABOVE: Simaudio's Nêo 260D has AES/EBU and S/PDIF digital outputs. With optional DAC it gains USB and three S/PDIF inputs, single-ended and balanced analogue outs

for computer audio when using the USB input of the 260D's on-board DAC, since we were able to appreciate the enhanced sound quality of a 24/96 digital transfer alongside a CD-quality 16/44.1 file of this moderately simple analogue recording. *Buena Vista Social Club* was one of the better recordings issued on DVD-Audio by Warner Music Group at the turn of the century; more recently the 24/96 two-channel mix has been available as a download from HDtracks.

The fine transparency of the 260D allowed the superiority of the hi-res version to be clearly obvious. The depth of the soundstage and reverberant acoustic appeared better defined with increased openness and space around individual sounds, especially the voices, while the intelligibility of the bass was much improved too.

STEPPING UP A GEAR

Indeed, the Moon stepped up a gear when playing top-notch hi-res recordings. The acoustic jazz project *Quiet Winter Night* by The Hoff Ensemble, from Norway's audiophile 2L label [2L-087], sounded exquisite. The ensemble was recorded in a church in Oslo – with the aim of creating an intimate sound with the instrumentation and voices. Says 2L's engineer Morten Lindberg: 'The qualities we seek [by recording] in large rooms are not necessarily big reverb, but openness due to the absence of close reflecting walls.'

With a hi-res-capable DAC like the one designed to fit inside Simaudio's 260D, hearing the realistic sound of the drum kit as percussionist Rune Arnesen opens the track 'Stille, stille kommer vi' is enough to make any audiophile's heart-rate quicken. So too is the uncommonly accurate

sound of the piano and trumpet. The best track on the album, the beautifully melodic instrumental 'Blågutten' which contains a delicious contribution by Børge Petersen Øverleir, one of Norway's most in-demand session guitarists, is available as a free 'test' download at resolutions up to 24-bit/352.8kHz from www.2l.no/hires. All hi-fi enthusiasts suitably equipped to play hi-res audio files should have a copy in their digital libraries!

In summary this is a tremendous CD player with a truly excellent D-to-A stage. As its PSU and analogue circuit design is less elaborate than that featured in the 380D standalone DAC it doesn't sound quite as vivid as it's more expensive sibling. But it's certainly a chip off the same block, proving adequately transparent and insightful to reveal the superiority of good recordings, especially when enjoying top-quality advanced resolution recordings played out from a computer.

That it doesn't mercilessly tear apart hot and splashy pop and rock CDs will also be a boon for many listeners. You'll need a system with amplifiers and monitors costing tens of thousands of pounds to warrant something appreciably better. It really is that good. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

It's perhaps a bit too expensive to be termed 'budget esoterica'. I'd call it 'bargain-priced high-end', since it sounds exceptionally refined and detailed, comes in sturdy casework that's extremely well-finished, yet doesn't cost a king's ransom. If you're in the market for a hi-res-capable USB DAC, then, you could plump for the Moon Nêo 260D and simultaneously be acquiring the last CD player you'll ever need.

Sound Quality: 84%

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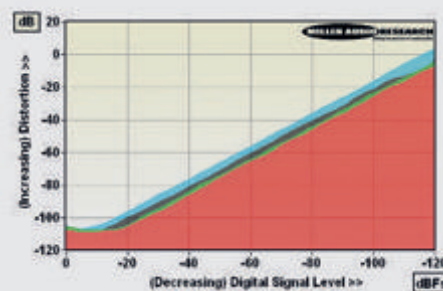


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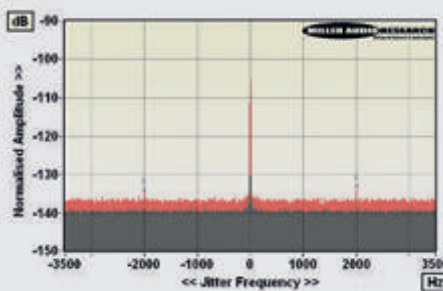
SIMAUDIO MOON NÊO 260D

Marketed as a 'CD transport with optional DAC' the true potential of Simaudio's Nêo 260D is only realised with the latter in tow, upon which it becomes a state-of-the-art USB DAC complete with a legacy CD drive. Both RCA and XLR outputs offer the same 1.96V at 0dBfs, regardless of source, and all three (CD, S/PDIF and USB) provide an equivalent 109dB A-wtd S/N ratio. This is because, as usual, the DAC (a Burr-Brown PCM1795) and analogue output stage are the final arbiters of analogue performance, here dictating the wide 122dB midband stereo separation, the +0.0/-0.12dB response (20Hz-20kHz) and low 0.0004-0.0005% distortion (also 20Hz-20kHz) at 0dBfs. There are fractional differences in distortion at lower digital levels between CD, USB and S/PDIF sources [see Graph 1, below] but it's as well to remember there are *bigger* differences between L and R channels. Of course, only the S/PDIF and USB inputs handle 96kHz and 192kHz media, the respective responses stretching out to -1.4dB/45kHz and -4.9dB/90kHz.

The combination of Simaudio's reclocking and the digital processing embodied within the SRC4321 upsampler/PCM1795 DAC endows the Neo 260D with a jitter reduction that's the equal of the very best onboard converters, regardless of price. Figures below 10psec for 24-bit data at all sample rates (48kHz to 192kHz) are truly exceptional [see Graph 2]. Other numbers, including low-level resolution good to ± 0.1 dB over a 100dB dynamic range are the icing on the digital cake. Readers may download full QC Suite test reports for the Simaudio Moon Nêo 260D's CD, S/PDIF and USB performance by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: THD vs digital level (black, 1kHz at 24-bit/48kHz over S/PDIF; green, 1kHz at 24-bit/48kHz over USB) vs CD (1kHz, black and 20kHz, blue)



ABOVE: High resolution jitter plots using 24-bit/48kHz data (black, S/PDIF input; red, USB input)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	1.96Vrms at 73ohm
A-wtd S/N Ratio (CD / S/PDIF in / USB in)	108.8dB/108.9dB/108.5dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0004% / 0.00025%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0005% / 0.0007%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	+0dB to -0.12/-1.4/-4.9dB
Digital jitter (CD / S/PDIF in / USB in)	115psec / 10psec / 10psec
Resolution @ -100dB (CD / S/PDIF input)	± 0.4 dB / ± 0.1 dB
Power consumption	11W (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD)	429x86x333mm

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

Hi-Fi News



PS AUDIO

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Mr Sheridan, Belfast

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P10

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hi-fine GROUP TEST

For many music lovers the sheer listenability of tube amplifiers means that nothing else will satisfy. This month we lab test and audition five valve integrated models of diverse design

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CANOR TP134	£2495
ICON AUDIO ST60 IIIM KT150 SIG	£3100
MING DA MC34-ASE	£1739
PRIMALUNA DIALOGUE PREMIUM	£2998
XINDAK CS300	£2450



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The magical allure of the thermionic valve remains as strong as ever among many audio designers. Nor are manufacturers simply producing valve amplifiers for their own satisfaction: there are music lovers all around the globe who will listen to nothing else, maintaining that a good tube amp will deliver the sweetest sound you'll ever hear.

Of course, valve amplifiers are niche products and the preserve of dedicated hobbyists, since they are inefficient and require maintenance. Valve life depends on many factors, such as hours of use and the number of on/off cycles. But assuming a few hours' listening every day, you can reckon on replacing the large output tubes every three or four years, so budget accordingly. And don't leave a valve amplifier needlessly powered up for hours on end, or you'll be in for a shock when your electricity bill arrives. Even at idle, most valve amps guzzle nearly as much energy as half a bar of an electric fire.

Chinese manufacturing has lowered the entry cost of ownership in recent years. This month we've put five modestly-priced integrated

models through their paces. And all bar the Canor TP134, which hails from Slovakia, are in fact built in China. The Ming Da MC34-ASE and Xindak CS300 are designs from Chinese brands, while the Icon Audio ST60 MkIIIM KT150 Signature and Primaluna DiaLogue Premium are designed by companies based in the UK and The Netherlands respectively.

OUR SYSTEM AND MUSIC

Each amplifier was auditioned using a carefully set up computer audio source feeding a T+A Elektroakustik DAC 8 digital-to-analogue converter, and easy-to-drive Townshend Sir Galahad speakers. (The loudspeaker/room setup can be seen at www.hifine.co.uk/news/article/meet-the-team-john-bamford/9884.)

We played two high-resolution recordings to assess the amplifiers' transparency and outright ability to reproduce real-world dynamic contrasts. The first was from Norway's 2L label [www.2l.no], a 24-bit/192kHz download of one of its 24-bit/352.8kHz DXD productions: Marianne Thorsen and the Trondheim Soloists playing an *allegro* from Mozart's Violin

Concerto in D, K218. The other was 'Lone Star' by The Carl Verheyen Band from the Rumor Mill DVD-Audio project released in 2005, a 24-bit/96kHz recording produced by Mark Waldrep for his AIX Records label [AIX 83039]. This provides a stern test for any amplifier thanks to the dynamically lifelike sound of Verheyen (best known for his guitar duties in the band Supertramp) playing with Cliff Hugo and Bernie Dresel on bass and drums.

We also listened to tracks ripped from CD, included the opening title song from Shelby Lynne's *Just A Little Lovin'* album [Lost Highway/UMG 60918], an intimate recording that can seemingly put you right in the studio with the musicians if your system is up to the task.

Another 16-bit/44.1kHz track was 'Carousel' from the eponymously-titled *Lifesigns* CD [Esoteric Antenna EANTCD1001], an epic prog-rock extravaganza that's a challenge for any amplifier to reproduce, such is the density of its multi-layered instrumentation. ➤

REVIEWS BY JOHN BAMFORD
LAB TESTS BY PAUL MILLER

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

Canor TP134



Longstanding Slovakian tube specialist Canor is based in Prešov, in a purpose-built factory where it builds everything in-house and has developed a proprietary valve-testing and burn-in methodology. Valves that don't measure up, we're told, are returned to their makers for use in guitar amps and the like.

The company traded for many years as Edgar until changing its brand name to Canor at the end of 2007. It currently makes just two integrated amps and two phono stages, a headphone amp and two CD players with valve output stages.

Under its wrap-over bonnet the ultralinear push-pull TP134 uses a complement of four 12AT7s (ECC81s) and two pairs of EL34 output pentodes. The PCBs are purposely milled to remove unnecessary areas of the circuit board and minimise dielectric loss, in a patented process which Canor says gives its circuit similar characteristics to one hard-wired with air dielectric cables. Volume control is via a relay attenuator, while the amplifier's control electronics are fed from a separate section of the power transformer. The control circuitry is only active when being used. The RCU includes transport controls for any accompanying Canor CD player.

FINE DETAIL RESOLVED

The TP134 was highly praised by our listeners. Hearing the vivid portrayal of the Trondheim Soloists demonstrated the Canor's ability to clearly resolve the natural acoustic

RIGHT: The amp is available in black or silver, the fascia sporting a solitary multi-function knob for input selection and volume control



of the high resolution recording and preserve its fine detail, where some of the others appeared soft and veiled in comparison.

Indeed, its designers seem to have struck an ideal balance which renders plenty of verve and energy to the sound without incurring any harshness or grain by way of penalty. While it didn't sound quite as ballsy and 'grippy' as did the Icon Audio when serving up the dynamic kick drum of The Carl Verheyen Band, it remained commendably fulsome in the bass nonetheless – and sounded deliciously open and airy too.

Where 'Carousel' from *Lifesigns* will have many amplifiers struggling to remain composed-sounding, the TP134 proved adept at separating out the myriad synthesizer and guitar tracks from the dense mix, with a hear-through clarity that only the PrimaLuna could match.

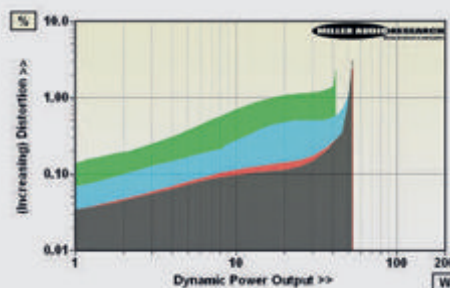
Sound Quality: 86%



ABOVE: Canor's TP134 has five line inputs and a fixed-level 'Tape' output, all on gold-plated RCA sockets. Speaker binding posts provide 4ohm and 8ohm taps

HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

This is a very clean-performing tube amp, suffering minimal hum (unlike others in this test) and offering an impressive 88dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW). Distortion is also low and well managed with just 2nd/3rd harmonics in the spectrum instead of the extended spray witnessed with many other tube amps. Figures as low as 0.03% at 1W to 0.3% at the rated 35W/8ohm are achieved by the TP134 through the midrange with figures at the frequency extremes of 0.05%/0.66% (20Hz, 1W/10W) and 0.09%/0.77% (20kHz, 1W/10W). The practical power output of the TP134, meanwhile, is higher than Canor suggests at a generous 45W 8/4ohm (continuous) and 50W 8/4/2ohm (dynamic), all at just 1% THD. The frequency response is also impressively flat and extended, not unlike that offered by the PrimaLuna, but free of the transformer resonances seen with the Icon Audio and Xindak. Within mere ± 0.05 dB limits it stretches from 5Hz-40kHz into 8ohm (via the 8ohm tap). Output impedance is a uniform 0.75-1ohm. **PM**



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

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	44W / 45W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	51W / 52W / 50W / 40W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.74-1.05ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.02dB to -0.01dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/35W)	59mV / 355mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/35W)	87.9dB / 103.3dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.11-0.77%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	145W / 227W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	435x170x390mm / 22kg

Icon Audio Stereo 60 MkIIIm KT150 Signature

The largest integrated in Icon Audio's wide range of amplifiers, the Stereo 60 MkIIIm had just been revised when we tested it [*HFN* Apr '12]. It began shipping with the (then) new-ish Tung-Sol KT120 tubes and featured improved transformers. Now it has been revised once more, available with the even bigger KT150 Tung-Sol valves manufactured in Russia by New Sensor. And the 'm' in the nomenclature signifies it now includes a (fascia) bias setting meter. Output valve idle current is adjusted via trim pots set into the top plate.

Its Class A front-end employs two 6SL7 triode first stage tubes, with two 6SN7s used as drivers, while the output stage can be switched between ultralinear and triode modes. Internal assembly is entirely point-to-point, the only circuit board being a small one for the remote control to drive the amp's ALPS motorised potentiometer.

The 'stock' 60 IIIm provides the biggest bang for your buck at £2600. However, in this premium-priced 'Signature' version various components have been upgraded by designer David Shaw to include, for example, copper foil in paper caps.

A POWERFUL BASS

This KT150-equipped Signature amp sounded immensely confident and relaxed, delivering the 'richest' and deepest bass performance of all

RIGHT: Front panel has bias meter, standby, tape monitor and ultralinear/triode mode switches. The copper-plated top plate looks great



the amplifiers in this month's test group. The evocative bass pedals in *Lifesigns* were *really* powerful and extended, while the bass and drums in the tracks from Shelby Lynne and Carl Verheyen had impressive punch and drive. But where the Canor and PrimaLuna amplifiers sounded fresh and alive this Stereo 60 Signature sounded a tad thick and lazy. With the hi-res Mozart recording leading edge transients appeared blunted and dynamic shading softened.

In 'Just A Little Lovin' the voice of Shelby Lynne appeared rather unfocused. The holographic imagery of the Stereo 60 we observed last time around seemed to elude this particular Signature sample. It sounded a little more vivid in ultralinear mode than in triode mode but in our test system a bit more sparkle and vibrancy would have been appreciated.

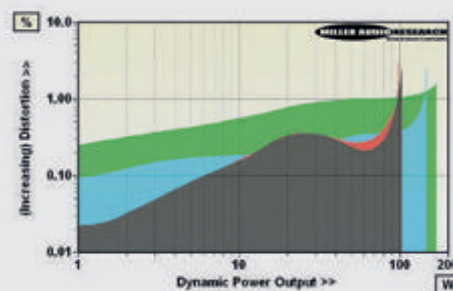
Sound Quality: 75%



ABOVE: Three line inputs – four with the tape monitor loop – are provided. High/low sensitivity switch at rear allows the integrated to be used as a power amplifier

HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

The most substantial amplifier in our test is also the most powerful, although Icon Audio's 85W specification for its Stereo 60 MkIIIm Signature (with KT120 or KT150 output tubes) was only just met on test into both 8/4ohm loads at 2% THD. There's sufficient headroom, however, to accommodate 100W, 100W, 145W and 170W into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads under dynamic conditions [see Graph, below]. Distortion is slightly lower under continuous power at 0.04%/1W to 0.09%/10W and 0.12%/70W (all at 1kHz into 8ohm) while the hefty LDT output transformers keep distortion very low indeed at bass frequencies (0.12%/20Hz/10W). We've seen these output transformers used before [ST40 MkIIIm, *HFN* Mar '13] and the ST60 MkIIIm shares the same low (by tube standards) 0.8-1ohm output impedance, offering an extended response that's flat from 4Hz-20kHz (-0.5dB). The only quibbles with our sample concerned a poorer-than-expected S/N on the left channel (80dB, re. 0dBW) and weak stereo separation of 30dB at high frequencies. **PM**



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

Power output (<2% THD, 8/4ohm)	87W / 85W
Dynamic power (<2% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	100W 100W 145W 170W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.75-1.05ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.05dB to -0.52dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/85W)	115mV / 1075mV (Low sens mode)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/85W)	79.7dB / 99.0dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.023-0.20%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	220W / 413W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	430x230x380mm / 35kg

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Ming Da MC34-ASE 'Dynasty Octet'

Based in Malvern, Ming Da Valve Audio UK was formed in 2011 to distribute amplifiers made in the Meixing Electronics Factory in Guangdong, China. Having made valve amps for over two decades, the factory now produces a vast portfolio of models.

The Dynasty Octet is in fact a special edition (SE) version of its 38W MC34-A entry-level model, benefiting from the Dynasty range's high quality 6mm-thick chassis, uprated JJ EL34 output valves, Ruby preamp valves and Audio Reference coupling capacitors. The company also claims greater levels of power supply smoothing.

It's a handsome chassis, although not family-friendly as its rotary input selector and volume controls are situated on the top plate and close to the hot tubes. Moreover, once its Plexiglas tube cover is fitted you can't access the input selector – and the RCU only governs volume up/down/mute. The Dynasty Octet's twin VU meters can be switched to indicate bias levels, but as adjustment is made internally this is best left to your dealer.

ENGAGING WARMTH

Of all the integrations in this month's test group it was this Dynasty Octet that sounded the most stereotypically 'valve-like', inasmuch as it delivered a noticeably warm and 'gentle' sound [see Lab

RIGHT: Rotary input selector and volume controls are on the top plate and thus inaccessible once the valve cover is in place

Report]. High frequencies were audibly rolled-off, the sizzling and shimmering of the cymbals in 'Just A Little Lovin'' noticeably muted by the Ming Da. Shelby Lynne's close-miked voice sounded overly hooded and 'cupped'. Similarly the effervescent live-in-the-studio recording of guitar wizard Carl Verheyen lost much of its sparkle and realism, the sound richly-smooth and simply too polite to be true-to-life.

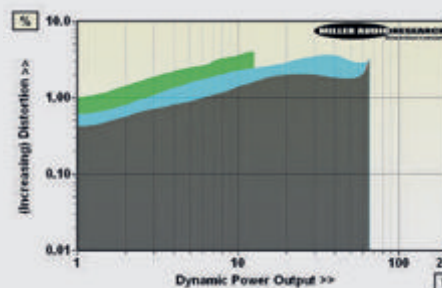
Yet despite its rolled-off treble it remained an engaging listen, serving up a seemingly boundless soundstage with 2L's hi-res Mozart recording. It also sounded bold and colourful playing Lifesigns' 'Carousel', demonstrating fine bass control and articulation while clearly keeping vocal sibilants in check. But if you prefer your music with a crisper edge and more transient realism the Ming Da was bettered by the other amplifiers in the group.

Sound Quality: 68%



HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

While Ming Da rates its latest MC34-A variant at a conservative 38W, the <0.8% distortion is more optimistic. In practice the amplifier is capable of higher power at commensurately higher distortion, ranging from 1W at 0.4% to 10W at 1.9%, 40W at 3% and 60W at a full 4% THD. Our sample had poor L/R (tube?) matching with distortion vs. level and vs. frequency markedly better on the right channel (9.2% THD at 20kHz on the left, 2.2% on the right, for example). Hum and noise was also poorer on the left channel with the A-wtd S/N ratio amounting to 72.4dB and 81.3dB, respectively (re. 0dBW). Stereo separation, ironically, was very good indeed for a tube amp of this price and specification at 75dB (midband) and 63dB/20kHz. Aside from its progressive distortion trend, the real 'character' of the amp will be determined by your choice of loudspeaker, the high 4.6-8.2ohm output impedance influencing the overall amp/speaker system response. Into a flat 8ohm load, the response rolls off quickly in the treble (-1dB/7kHz, -2dB/11kHz, -3dB/14kHz). PM



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

Power output (<3% THD, 8/4ohm)	52W / 50W
Dynamic power (<3% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	60W / 60W / 60W / 10W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	4.6-8.2ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.05 to -5.0dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/38W)	34mV / 210mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/38W)	72.4dB (81.3dB R ch) / 88.2dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	1.68-9.2%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	130W/230W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	410x210x310mm / 18kg

LEFT: Four line level inputs are provided on gold-plated RCA sockets alongside 4 and 8ohm speaker taps using high quality 4mm multi-way binding posts



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PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium



PrimaLuna, established in 2003 in The Netherlands, needs little introduction for regular *hfn* readers, its range of valve audio components built in China offering tremendous value. As its name implies, this version of the DiaLogue Integrated features premium parts such as an ALPS volume control, and uprated resistors and capacitors in critical sections of the signal path. The amplifier's front end is now all 12AU7-based, and it ships fitted with selected EL34 power pentodes.

But as mentioned before in these pages, 'tube rolling' to taste is positively encouraged by PrimaLuna, its amplifiers featuring a proprietary solid-state 'Adaptive Autobias' circuit that requires no user adjustment. On the right side of the chassis is a bias setting switch for EL34 or KT88s. We tested it with the latter.

As with the Canor, the DiaLogue Premium can be operated fully by remote control, its RCU including transport keys for a partnering CD player. The remote handset also includes a button for switching between ultralinear and triode modes on the fly. An optional MM phono board can be pre-installed or added later by your dealer.

IN SHARP FOCUS

As we've observed with other PrimaLuna amps, the DiaLogue Premium Integrated delivered a sharply focused image and appeared impressively composed at both

RIGHT: Rotary controls govern volume and input selection. On the left and right sides are the power and EL34/KT88- KT120 switches



frequency extremes, its sound bursting with detail and texture.

Both of our high-resolution recordings sounded vivid and full of dynamic contrast: Norway's Trondheim Soloists were clearly delineated in a spaciouly wide and deep sound image, while the exuberance of the Carl Verheyen Band's 'Lone Star' was simply exhilarating. Where the Ming Da, Xindak and Icon amplifiers appeared to sweeten the raw liveliness of these recordings, it was the PrimaLuna – and the Canor – which delivered their energy and lifelike transient details intact.

Playing Lifesigns' 'Carousel' the PrimaLuna proved wonderful at separating out the layers of keyboards and guitars. And where it could be criticised for lacking a degree of 'valve-like charm', this could be rectified to some degree by switching to triode mode.

Sound Quality: 80%

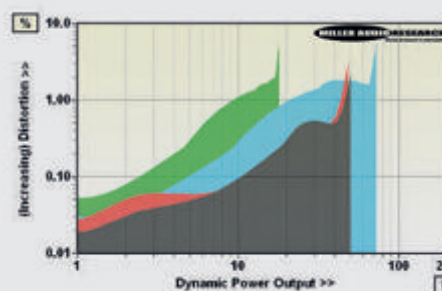


RIGHT: There are five line inputs, a home-theatre pass-through, a useful mono subwoofer output and a ground post in readiness for the optional MM phono stage



HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

Tested in ultralinear mode with KT88 tubes *in situ*, the DiaLogue Premium met its 2x36W specification at just 0.6% THD but continued to offer more power until its true clipping point (closer to 2% in practice here) at 2x45W into 8ohm and 4ohm via the 8 and 4ohm tap, respectively. There's slightly more juice available under dynamic conditions at 50W into 8/4ohm and a full 70W into 2ohm loads, but the increase in distortion between 1W and 30W (0.02% to 0.5%) is marked [see Graph, below]. The 3-4ohm output impedance (8ohm tap) is not as high as with some earlier PrimaLuna amps but it's still high enough to put kinks into its flat (± 0.5 dB) 10Hz-20kHz response with swings in impedance of the attached loudspeaker. This amp offers low-ish noise (84dB A-wtd S/N ratio, re. 0dBW) and a wide stereo separation (82dB midband) but L/R matching could have been better with distortion lower on the left channel (0.06-3.9% vs. 0.30-5.4% at 10W, 20Hz-20kHz). PM



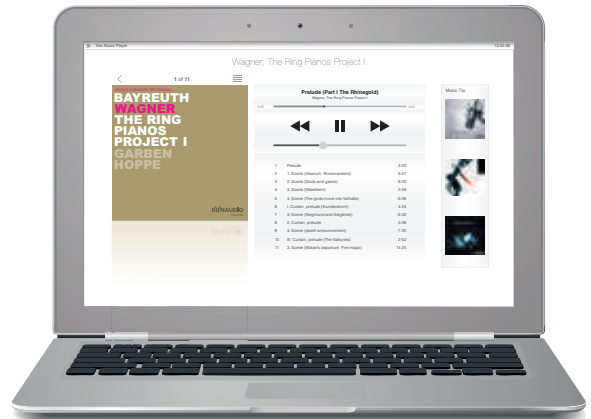
ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm loads (green)

Power output (<2% THD, 8/4ohm)	45W / 45W
Dynamic power (<2% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	50W / 48W / 72W / 18W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	3.05-4.0ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.13dB to +0.55dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/36W)	41mV / 250mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/36W)	83.6dB / 99.2dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.064-3.85%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	180W / 300W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	365x202x390mm / 22.5kg

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Xindak CS300

Pronounced 'Zindak', Xindak audio components are designed and manufactured in Sichuan in the south west of China. The history of the company dates back to 1988, the firm currently producing a massive range of both valve-powered and solid-state audio components.

This pure Class A single-ended triode (SET) integrated is arguably the most esoteric amplifier in Xindak's line-up. Indeed, you might regard the CS300 a power amplifier with a volume control, since it's as minimalist as it could possibly be, with just a solitary single-ended (RCA) line input. If you've more than one source you'll have to add the cost of a switching box – or a passive preamp, perhaps?

The CS300 is beautifully finished for the price, the wood fascia with inset aluminium face plate and wooden volume control adding a touch of *je ne sais quoi*. And it is an SET amplifier using 300Bs – considered by many to be the purest of all valve designs. It employs a 5U4G rectifier tube with a 12AX7 and two 6SN7GT dual-triodes for the input and driver stages. The gain pot is not motorised – it's the only amplifier in this group that doesn't include remote volume control.

A CALMING WARMTH

'Exquisite, mellow, warm and melting' is how Xindak describes the sound of its CS300. Listening to it we'd be inclined to agree. Where the Mozart violin concerto appeared vibrant and brightly-lit via

RIGHT: Toggle switch on the left sets the amplifier into 'warm up' mode for 60 seconds; a second switch activates operation

the PrimaLuna and Canor amplifiers, the Xindak softened the instruments' leading edges somewhat, sounding altogether more easy-going and rounded. The tonal balance was more akin to that of Ming Da's Dynasty Octet and Icon's ST60 MkIII, although when hearing the bass guitar and drum kicks in 'Just A Little Lovin'' and Carl Verheyen's 'Lone Star' it became clear that it didn't possess the Icon's richly-textured and subjectively muscular LF grunt.

The CS300 sounded calm and seductive, its sweet treble quality removing any hint of sibilance in Shelby Lynne's voice. It also threw up a seductively large soundstage – well beyond the boundaries of the loudspeakers – but the image was a little soft-focused. With Lifesigns' 'Carousel' the layering of individual elements was highly praised.

Sound Quality: 75%



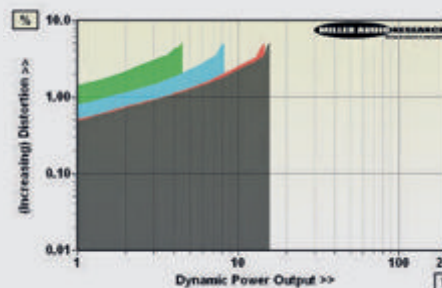
RIGHT: The CS300 has only one line input on RCA phonos, alongside 4 and 8ohm loudspeaker connectors using 4mm multi-way binding posts. All the terminals are gold-plated



hi-fi news
EDITOR'S
CHOICE

HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

As the only single-ended triode amp in our test, the Xindak CS300 is in a low-power class of its own, matching its 10W spec. into 8/4ohm at 2% THD while achieving a full 16-17W into 8/4ohm at the rated 5% distortion under continuous or dynamic conditions [see Graph below]. Designed to be partnered with very sensitive speakers, the CS300 is nonetheless one of the most capable and high performing 300B-based amps we've tested in *HFN*. Overall gain is a sensible +26.6dB (for line-level sources), the A-wtd S/N ratio is a very impressive 93dB (re. 0dBW) while the output impedance is <1ohm over much of the audio range (8ohm tap), only rising above 1ohm below 80Hz. As a result the CS300/speaker system response is more consistent, peaking at +0.5dB at 20Hz and +2dB/20kHz but flat through the midrange (the transformer resonance is at ~45kHz). Distortion obviously increases with level (0.5%/1W to 2%/10W at 1kHz) and with frequency (3.8%/20Hz and 4.8%/20kHz at 2W/8ohm). PM



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

Power output (<5% THD, 8/4ohm)	17W / 16W
Dynamic power (<5% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	16W / 15W / 8W / 5W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	1.63–0.60ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–20kHz)	+0.48dB to +2.1dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/10W)	128mV / 430mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/10W)	93.1dB / 103.1dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, 2W/8ohm)	0.65–4.8%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	190W / 190W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	344x242x483mm / 27kg

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GROUP TEST VERDICT

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

I rather enjoyed listening to Ming Da's MC34-ASE, the 'Dynasty Octet', its smooth and relaxed demeanour every bit the 'sound of valves'. While not worthy of an outright recommendation – most audiophiles will consider its drooping frequency response and consequent 'softening' simply too euphonic – it should certainly be high on your list if you're clamouring for a dose of thermionic romance.

Its construction is robust, with neat point-to-point wiring and a smart satin finish to its heavyweight chassis. Remember, as our Lab Report shows you'll need to match the Dynasty Octet carefully with partnering speakers, due to its high-ish output impedance.

Also designed and built in China, Xindak's CS300 appears to be very well made, built by a company that produces literally everything in-house including its own transformers. This minimalist, low-powered single-ended triode amplifier represents the epitome of 'classic' valve amp design. Many tube lovers consider the 300B to be the sweetest and most musical-sounding valve to have graced the earth. Moreover the price of the CS300, resplendent with wood trimmings, is extremely keen. After

all, two-and-a-half grand is the sort of price one would have paid 20 years ago

for a 300B-equipped SET amplifier. But volume control is manual; the CS300 has only one input; and partnering it with very sensitive loudspeakers will be a prerequisite.

BUILT TO LAST

Against this, the ST60 MkIIIm KT150 from Leicester's Icon Audio is well-featured and impressively powerful.

Designer David Shaw is renowned as a stickler regarding quality control, travelling regularly to China to oversee the manufacturing of his designs, and he's proud of his amplifiers' built-to-last-a-lifetime construction.

This 'Signature' version, which will have been modified with premium-priced components after it arrived at Icon Audio's UK headquarters, didn't measure quite as well as models we've tested in the past, but in the listening tests it certainly packed an impressive punch with its bold, 'meaty' bass performance and luxurious tonality.

The Canor TP134 and PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium Integrated proved difficult to separate in the listening tests, both amplifiers sounding vivid and vibrant, with good dynamic shading and excellent detail

retrieval. If you're new to valves the PrimaLuna would be a logical choice, as the company's proprietary 'Adaptive Autobias' circuit requires no user adjustment even when experimenting with different output tubes. It responds to changes in the temperature, voltage and audio signal, and the ageing of the valves, to maintain optimum performance.

This makes 'tube rolling' as easy and hassle-free as possible.

TOP HONOUR

But in the end, the top honour in this month's

group goes to the Canor TP134, which deserves a higher HFN sound quality rating and costs £500 less than the DiaLogue Premium. This Slovakian-made valve integrated straddled the romanticised view of traditional 'valve-sound' with a more modern, crisp presentation and served up wide and open images of musicians performing in space. Like the PrimaLuna, it provides remote control input switching as well as volume control and it can certainly form the central hub of a high-end hi-fi system that won't break the bank. ☺

'If you are new to valves, the PrimaLuna is a logical choice'



ABOVE: Slovakian Canor TP134 with EL34s, an outstanding, fine-sounding design rated at 35W but capable of 45W



ABOVE: DiaLogue Premium Integrated, another great valve amp from PrimaLuna. Swapping its standard-fit EL34s is easy

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

Revel Performa F206

This stylish new Performa floorstander embodies all the US company's impressive technical heritage

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

Here's a newly-launched speaker in what's fast becoming a familiar format. It's a slim tower with doubled-up small bass units in a slim, boat-tailed cabinet. Finished in wood, gloss black, or in the white gloss you can see here, the Revel F206 costs a not unreasonable £3300 per pair. But there's more to this design than meets the eye.

Unusually, Revel is an American high-end brand owned not by a small private company, but by one of the most powerful corporations in the industry. It was created in the mid-1990s by Harman International, which owned JBL and Infinity but wanted a new high-end domestic speaker brand to complement its Mark Levinson and Lexicon electronics. In the background, Harman's technical resources in acoustics and speaker design were second to none, with the eminent Dr Floyd E Toole as Vice President of acoustic engineering.

To head the Revel design team, Harman appointed Kevin Voecks, who'd made his mark as head of engineering at Snell Acoustics. Voecks had worked with Dr Toole at the National Research Council in Canada when using its facilities in the development of Snell speakers and now welcomed the chance to make good use of the results of Toole's work, and the ongoing research that he and Sean Olive were doing at Harman. The resources at Harman were a speaker designer's dream, 'an embarrassment of riches', as Voecks put it.

Work at Revel focused on designing speakers that would produce accurate musical timbres, and hence greater realism. The starting-point was the acknowledgement that there are three basic components that affect the timbre of sound in the room. One is the direct sound from the loudspeaker. Next come the important first reflections, as the sound bounces off sidewalls, floor and ceiling. The third component is the arrival of later reflections, classed as reverberation.

In the past, manufacturers were often content to produce speakers with an accurate response on-axis. But, by engineering speakers with smooth and closely-controlled *off-axis* responses, Revel could aim for uncoloured first reflections. Along with new measurement regimes, Harman instituted a rigorous approach to listening tests, neatly overcoming the usual practical problems of speaker comparison with its 'position-independent, double-blind' listening test method [see box out].

ALL-NEW DRIVE UNITS

Revel's product line has broadened out since the early days, with the high-end Ultima series followed in 2005 by the original Performa series, at lower cost. Today, the entry-level Concerta range

offers affordable home theatre and two-channel solutions, while the new Performa 3 models come in between these and Ultima. The lineage is clear, but the Performa 3 speakers are

outwardly much slicker than the old ones.

Tall, slim and shapely, the F206 is the smaller of the two Performa 3 floorstanders. Its heavily constructed, well-damped cabinet is topped by a matt-finished rubberised trim piece, while at the bottom its small footprint is only slightly extended by the flared-out base. Underneath are four threaded sockets for the spiked feet supplied. Double-ended, these give the choice of a carpet-piercing point, or a rounded end more suitable for hard floors.

All the drive units are new. The bass is handled by twin 165mm aluminium-coned units, reflex-loaded by the port in the front of the cabinet, flared at both its

RIGHT: The front baffle moulding carries a pair of 165mm bass units, a 130mm midrange and a 25mm dome tweeter that incorporates Revel's latest type of acoustic-lens waveguide. There's a range of cabinet finish options

'The spacey and the shouty bits were handled with equal aplomb'





BEHIND THE CURTAIN

No-one takes listening tests more seriously than Revel. Back in 1996, parent company Harman made a big investment in an installation to help to make accurate and decisive assessments. Ideally, in a comparison test, all speakers should be auditioned in the same position, so Revel had started doing this by laboriously manhandling the speakers each time. But, as Kevin Voecks says, 'The unfortunate reality is that the aural memory is only a matter of seconds. Beyond that, it's a recollection of our impression, it's not a physical honest-to-God memory.' The answer was Harman's pneumatic speaker-mover. Here, up to four sets of speakers are placed on special moving platforms, which can carry them into position in turn within a few seconds. By using a computer to randomise the playing order, and with the speakers hidden by an acoustically-transparent curtain, the listening can also be made to be truly double-blind.

inner and outer ends to minimise dynamic compression and port-generated noise. While the bigger F208 model's back panel carries two sets of terminals for bi-amping, and also has trim controls for both bass and treble level, the F206 lacks these features and is connected via a single pair of gold-plated terminals. But you do get a pair of foam port plugs, which can be used to reduce the low-frequency output if room conditions make this desirable, eg, where the speakers are placed close to walls.

Like the bass units, the 130mm midrange uses an aluminium cone, ribbed for rigidity, and is founded on a cast aluminium chassis to obviate resonances from the frame itself. A high-order crossover network operates at 275Hz and at 2150Hz, where the 25mm aluminium-dome tweeter takes over.

Previous Revel tweeters have used waveguides, but, as Kevin Voecks explains, 'We used a new mathematical model for the waveguide, which is primarily intended to restrict the dispersion at the bottom of its range, to match that of the midrange at the top of its range. We are using relatively small midrange sizes and tweeters that have an enclosed volume large enough to give them a low fundamental resonance, so we can have relatively low crossover points. You put that all together and you get a really nice response far off-axis.

'And that's a fundamental difference between our speakers and those that don't have waveguides. Even if the timbre was optimum in the direct sound without a waveguide, you can still tell there's a tweeter, because there's a discontinuity that's heard.'



TRANSPARENT EASE

So much for the story, but how would the F206 sound in my system? Well, I was immediately impressed by the natural-sounding stereo image provided by the F206. *Entre Cada Palabra* from Marta

Gomez [Chesky JD301] provided a great example of the speaker's ability to create a realistic sense of space. On the opening 'Maria Mulata,' which highlights the reverberant sound of Chesky's big church recording venue, you could really envisage the floor stretching away into the distance. The bass was good, full yet well controlled.

In the midrange, generally, instrumental timbres were reproduced with a transparent ease that often brought freshness to familiar sounds. *Ultimate Mancini* [Concord SACD-1-34-6], recorded in 2004 as a tribute to the late great Hollywood composer, kicks off with a wonderfully polished all-star remake of the classic 'Pink Panther' theme, with saxophonist Plas Johnson coming back after all those decades to re-create his original solo. Now you could appreciate every nuance of Johnson's full-bodied, gritty sax sound, while Gary Burton's vibes really rang out and Joey DeFrancesco's Hammond organ sound was rich and room-filling.

GOOD PERSPECTIVES

Turning to chamber music, and the Mozart Oboe Quartet from *The Art of Janet Craxton* [BBC Records BBC CD 635], I found that the F206 conveyed an excellent sense of perspective and a feeling of the four players grouped in space. The fine detail of string noises and the nuances of expression were being conveyed without exaggeration or confusion. The music came over with a sense of rightness and inner calm, all surely born of Craxton's command of the music and love for it.

It was easy to prove that the F206 could do justice to large-scale classical music too. With the LSO's 2006 Beethoven Fifth Symphony recording with Bernard Haitink [LSO Live, LSO 0590], it gave you the dynamics the music demands with a sense of occasion too. It seemed transparent enough in the mid and treble to capture the subtle echoes of the Barbican Hall ➔



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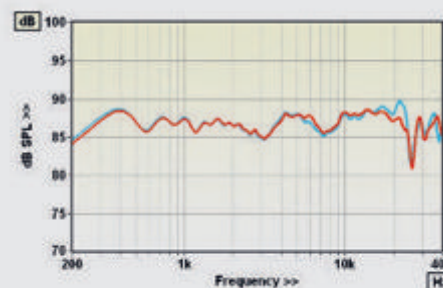
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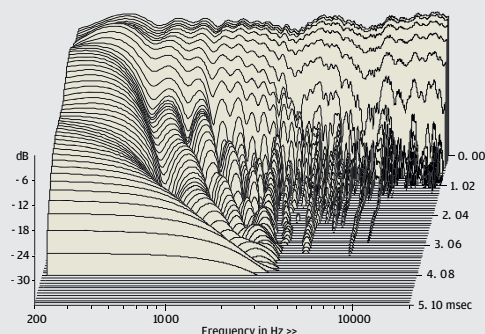
REVEL PERFORMA F206

Revel specifies an 88dB sensitivity for the F206 – a figure justified by our simple average of the FFT data (87.6dB) but not by the IEC-specified pink noise method (87.1dB), which suggests that Revel's figure is about 1dB optimistic. In other words, the F206 has slightly below average sensitivity for a floorstander of its size. Nevertheless quite low impedance has been necessary to secure this figure. Impedance modulus drops to a minimum of 3.5ohm, indicating that the 8ohm nominal specification should be 4ohm, albeit at a high 3.0kHz. As a result the 1.8ohm minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) also occurs at an unusually high frequency of 2.5kHz. This means that the dip to 2.6ohm at 38Hz may be more significant in practice, depending on the frequency spectrum of the music being played.

On-axis frequency response, measured on the tweeter axis, is commendably flat in trend [Graph 1, below] and the low response errors of $\pm 2.0\text{dB}$ and $\pm 2.2\text{dB}$ respectively are first-rate for a passive loudspeaker. The pair matching error of $\pm 1.0\text{dB}$ is a good result too, and over much of the audible frequency range the disparities are even smaller. Bass extension of 56Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz) is typical for this size of floorstander, while ultrasonic output, notwithstanding a narrow notch at 26kHz, extends to above 40kHz. Total harmonic distortion is also low, particularly at 1kHz where the figure obtained was 0.03%, recorded as $<0.1\%$ in the test table. The cumulative spectral decay waterfall [Graph 2] shows fast initial energy decay across the spectrum but with some low-level ridges apparent, indicating the presence of well-controlled resonances. KH



ABOVE: The forward response is essentially flat and very extended into bass and ultrasonic frequencies



ABOVE: Cabinet resonances are generally well controlled as are those associated with the drivers

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	87.6dB/87.1dB/86.9dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.5ohm @ 3.0kHz 9.4ohm @ 1.3kHz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	-37° @ 2.2kHz 21° @ 736Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	$\pm 1.0\text{dB}$
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	56Hz / $>40\text{kHz}$ / $>40\text{kHz}$
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.6% / $<0.1\%$ / $<0.1\%$
Dimensions (HWD)	1051x249x347mm

LEFT: At 28kg, the cabinet is stable enough not to need outrigger feet, and the supplied spikes screw in underneath. There's no provision for bi-wiring, just a single pair of good-quality terminals

an effect that comes from a real transparency and freedom from unwanted artefacts right across the frequency range. 'My Captain' was really gripping, as the F206 seemed to be letting you see beyond the grand indoor space of the studio and into the big, lonely landscape of the South that's dramatically conjured up by the song.

A GREAT BEAT TOO

With *Art Pepper Meets The Rhythm Section* [Contemporary/Original Jazz Classics S7532] I felt the inevitable limitations of the F206's bottom end performance. It didn't quite do bassist Paul Chambers justice in the bowed solo on 'Red Pepper Blues', where you felt there should have been a better sense of the instrument as a whole; and on other passages the bass could become almost monotonous rather than inspiringly tuneful. However, the sound overall was open and detailed here, with an arrestingly crisp and clean quality to the drums and cymbals, and easily enticing enough to keep me listening.

With *Florence And The Machine* and *Lungs* [Island/Moshi Moshi], the F206 was very effective. Real headbangers might want more punch and thwack from that big drum. But the F206 did a fine job on this album, handling the spacey and the shouty bits with equal aplomb, and pushing out a great beat too. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Built for Revel in Indonesia, the F206 offers good value. A neutral presentation with real transparency allows it to convey music with emotion and without fatigue, and it will also tolerate being placed fairly close to walls. Whether playing a simply-recorded vocal or a complex orchestral piece, it seemed able to get to the heart of the music. A must-hear for anyone shopping in this price range.

Sound Quality: 83%



and fast enough to let those big crescendos come through with clarity and freedom from muddle. The bass end was reasonably impressive, too, because although the double-basses could have been more clearly defined they had the right sort of weight, and the timpani were impressive and convincing.

Turning to *Muddy Waters' Folk Singer* [MFSL UDCD 593], I was again impressed by the way the Revel speaker just seemed to let you relax into the music and its ambience,

Esoteric K-05

While considerably cheaper than Esoteric's exotic heavyweight masterpieces the K-05 player/DAC is still an exemplar of traditional high-end Japanese build quality

Review: **John Bamford** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Renowned for its precision-engineered 'VRDS' disc replay mechanisms, Esoteric is the high-end specialist audio brand of Japan's TEAC Corporation. Its current flagship P-02/D-02 transport/DAC combination costs a heady £45,000, rising to an eye-watering £67k if you add the company's G-01 external rubidium clock unit, making it one of the most, er, esoteric multi-box SACD/CD player front-end combos in the world...

The K-05 featured here is a relatively recent addition to Esoteric's K Series of two-channel integrated SACD/CD players, a range that's headed up by the £20k K-01. That model uses the firm's top-of-the-line VRDS-NEO VMK-3.5-20S disc mechanism (employing a separate spindle servo driver circuit), the same as that found in the flagship P-02 transport.

AN IMPRESSIVE MECHANISM

Below the K-01 is a more accessible K-03 model (£11,495) that uses a slightly less elaborate VMK-3.5-10 mechanism, while this latest K-05 features the company's more affordable VRDS-NEO VMK-5, first employed in the P-05/D-05 transport/DAC. This was introduced at the end of '97 when Esoteric celebrated its 20th anniversary.

Designed to deliver performance approaching its top-flight VRDS mechanisms but at reduced cost, it's still an extravagant mechanism by 'regular' standards. In the VMK-5 the VRDS's duralumin clamp is replaced by a reduced-mass platter formed of an aluminium/polycarbonate hybrid. The motor is placed underneath the turntable clamp rather than above, the spindle disconnected to accept the disc while loading.

The 'bridge' component above the turntable and the mechanism's loading tray is formed from a composite of steel and resin that claims to offer high

strength and good self-damping, while the mechanism's axial sliding laser pick-up assembly ensures that, as the lens moves, the laser's optical axis is always positioned in a vertical direction, promising optimal data acquisition, says the company.

Housed in a sturdy case of brushed aluminium and weighing 14kg the K-05 looks and feels every bit a luxurious player, especially when loading a disc and witnessing the silky-smooth action of the disc tray as it glides open and closes. It might be less extravagantly appointed inside and out than its more expensive stablemates, but it still makes many disc players, even quite pricey ones, appear positively agricultural!

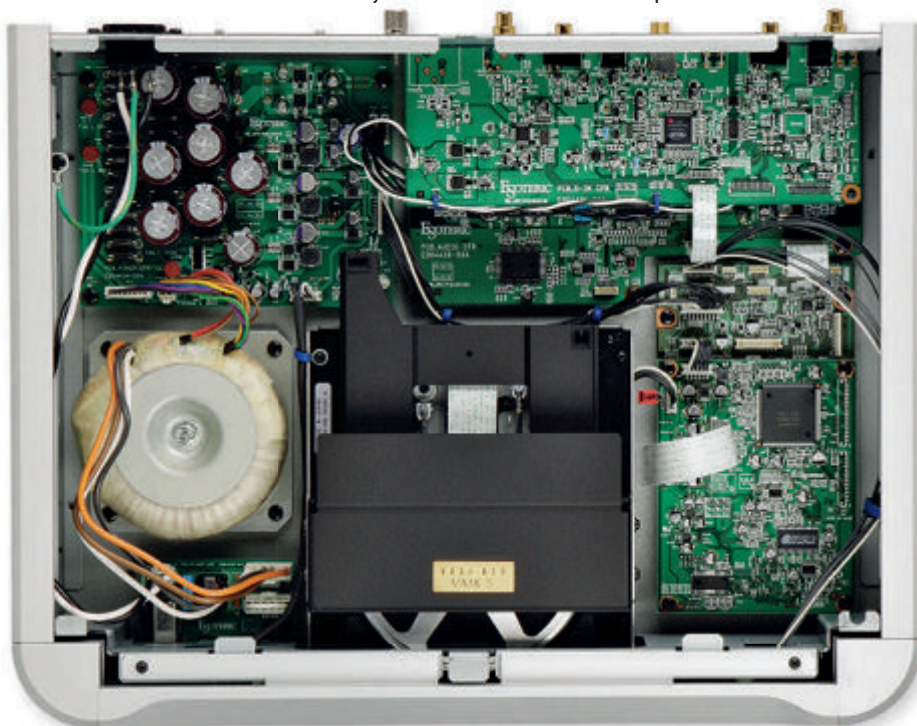
As with the majority of today's disc spinners, the K-05 also functions as a D-to-A converter for other digital sources. At the rear are two 24/192-capable S/PDIF inputs – one electrical (RCA) and one optical (Toslink) – and a USB input for computer audio sources. For asynchronous operation and USB Audio Class 2.0 functionality

drivers must be installed on PCs and Macs, otherwise playback via USB will be restricted to a maximum of 24-bit/96kHz.

A SEMI-PRO FEEL

All the players in the K Series employ Asahi Kasei AK4399 32-bit/8x DAC chipsets (with new digital filter options): eight per channel in the K-01, four per channel in the K-03, and two per channel here in a parallel/differential configuration. The analogue output is fully symmetrical in design layout, while a parallel buffer output configuration is implemented when the player's single-ended RCA outputs are selected via the setup menu.

A volume control (operating in the digital domain) is included, the supplied aluminium IR remote controller featuring centrally positioned left/right (input selection) and up/down (volume) cursor control keys in addition to disc navigation controls and direct track access buttons. Output level can be adjusted from -99dB to 0dB in 1dB steps.



RIGHT: Heavily populated interior is dominated by the VRDS-NEO transport mechanism and substantial linear power supply. Digital board is as large as many CD players' entire PCBs



ABOVE: Mode button on left of fascia switches between disc replay and DAC operation, while pressing it for two seconds accesses the K-05's myriad upsampling and filter settings

As well as determining the brightness and time-out settings for the front panel FL display and selecting fixed or variable output, the K-05's comprehensive setup menu, accessed by holding in the Mode button on the fascia or the setup button on the handset, provides myriad configuration options that tenders it a semi-professional feel. When choosing between the RCA and XLR output connections there are *two* XLR settings in the menu labelled XLR2 and XLR3. This allows you to reverse the polarity of pins 2 and 3, as the AES 'pin-2 hot' industry standard isn't always adhered to by (pre)amplifier manufacturers.

The K-05's voltage-controlled crystal oscillator (VCXO) employs a dedicated power supply and PLL circuit designed to maximise clock stability. When using the DAC's S/PDIF inputs the tolerance can be set between 'normal' and a more narrow frequency variation range for locking onto incoming data. The player/DAC can furthermore be connected to an external 'ultra high precision' master clock unit, and clock parameters can be set for individual inputs. If using the SACD/CD player or the DAC's USB input (in Class 2 asynchronous mode) each can be set to operate via the internal clock or separate master clock in a choice of 'clock sync' or 'direct master

clock link' modes, the latter bypassing the internal PLL circuit.

The K-05 has two S/PDIF digital outputs for using it as a CD transport (Naturally these are muted during SACD replay.) These too can be switched on/off in the setup menu. There are also several upsampling and digital filter options (including a default Off setting since this is an SACD player) which, again, can be individually configured for each input. This will delight inveterate tweekers but may bewilder less experienced users.

During SACD playback the direct stream digital [DSD] signal is routed directly to the DAC. When playing CDs or inputting PCM data from external sources, playback can be set to remain at the original sample rate, 2x, or 4x the sampling frequency. Moreover PCM data can even be converted to DSD before being routed to the AK4399 DACs, a feature common to all models in Esoteric's K Series two-channel players. For PCM signal processing there are two FIR digital filters with a choice of variable or fixed (80kHz) cut-off frequencies and two apodising-type short delay filters,

'There's a cool matter-of-factness about its sonic presentation'

again with a cut-off frequency fixed around 80kHz or varying depending on input sampling frequency [see Lab Report, p57].

SWEETER WITH SACD

After hooking up the K-05 to my Levinson No.383 amplifier using Signal Projects' Hydra interconnects (both XLR and RCA

types to determine any difference between the single-ended and balanced outputs) I experimented with all of the K-05's various playback settings. In default playback mode I found myself *marginally*

preferring the balanced connections.

With good recordings it makes a fine case for SACD in sounding noticeably more open and 'sweeter' than with CD, with a warmer and more relaxed manner about its music-making that many audiophiles will doubtless prefer – describing SACD as sounding 'more analogue' in nature.

But when playing CDs and feeding the DAC's USB input from my computer audio source I discovered that things became less clear-cut, my preferences varying depending on the the K-05's upsampling and digital filter settings. With some recordings (and player/DAC settings) I even found myself preferring the single-ended connections in my system.

Anyone owning a K-05 is bound to spend several weeks constantly swapping and changing between upsampling and digital filter modes, although in my own set-up most of the settings only made subtle subjective differences. Focusing initially on its CD replay I judged the Esoteric to sound tonally neutral, if a little dark and 'grey'. There's a cool matter-of- ➡

CLAMPING THE DISC

The launch of Teac's high-end Esoteric marque in 1987 – and its first P-1/D-1 CD transport/DAC combo – was heralded by the introduction of its Vibration-free Rigid Disc clamping System [VRDS], a CD transport mechanism that supports the entire back surface of a spinning optical disc rather like an upside-down LP platter. This elaborately-engineered mechatronic marvel, designed to minimise vibration in spinning optical media, was aped in the early '90s by Pioneer with its Stable Platter Mechanism, built into affordable CD players. With the advent of DVD media, necessitating significantly increased rotational speeds, Pioneer abandoned its SPM, whereas Esoteric further developed its high-end design – introducing the VRDS-NEO mechanism, incorporated into its X-01 (SACD/CD) and UX-1 (universal DVD-Audio/DVD-Video/SACD/CD) disc players in 2003. Refinements have included improved laser pick-up assemblies and modifications to the motor, spindle, shaft bearings and platter incorporating new composites.

These are a few of our favourite things – favourite because they give so much musical enjoyment

An amazing
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for only £400!
PICO GROUNDING
BLOCKS from
Vertex AQ

When equipment sounds wonderful, is well-built and gives great musical pleasure – then it becomes a favourite. We reckon we are lucky to have a high number of ‘favourites’ in our stable.

The **Aurender W20** streamer is a masterpiece of user-friendliness, the streamer for people unsure about streaming! It is easily loaded with most file types from almost any digital source – high resolution downloads (eg 24/96 and 24/192ks/s), CDs, USB stick and external hard drive – controlled from Aurender’s own user interface running on an iPad.



The display shows current track information. Full details of music stored on the hard drives appear on the iPad with album cover art.

Music is stored on two 3TB hard drives but queued and played from a 240GB flash drive to minimise electrical noise. For further mains isolation, free of glare and haze, power for the audio circuits is drawn from re-chargeable batteries.

Operation is smooth and faultless and sound is gloriously natural and full-bodied, floating behind ‘invisible’ speakers, from performers clearly ‘present’ in your room.

Vertex AQ’s RFI- and vibration-absorption technology now appears in the new and extraordinary **PICO COMPONENT GROUNDING BLOCKS**. “This is one of the best single upgrades I’ve ever made and certainly the most cost-effective one.” said DC of Bristol, speaking of the £400 device.

Supplied with two 1m cables, the Pico is simply connected to unused RCA or XLR sockets on components.



Vibration on circuit boards and electrical ‘noise’ on grounds, or earths – all intermodulating and damaging the music signal – are drawn into the Block to open the sound stage and reveal new drive, emotion and dynamics.

Spiral Groove turntables **SG1.1** and **SG2** and the **Centroid** arm have earned universal praise for their spectacular near-silent operation, retrieving musical information from an inky-black background, thanks to a fundamental re-think of ‘Balanced Force Design’ and fanatical care in controlling energy.



Solid construction ensures that stylus, arm pivot, platter bearing and motor remain in an absolutely fixed relationship, unlike suspended turntables that are perpetually in motion as they attempt to correct for the dynamic forces acting both internally and externally.

Spiral Groove have won several “Product of the Year” awards and comments such as ‘..this may be the best tonearm I’ve heard’ and of the SG2 ‘..it transcends expectations – it’s something special’ both from the US magazine Stereophile.

Kaiser Acoustic’s Chiara standmount speaker projects music with astonishing clarity, openness, scale and bass power while ‘disappearing’ itself, leaving an involving performance hanging in space.

Three separate labyrinths in the integral stand drain vibration from the cabinet, the crossover and the drive units which can then operate freely from a firm foundation, liberated from vibration’s distorting, intermodulating effects.

Praise has been heaped on the Chiara, in the on-line review site The Audio Beat and in the September 2013 issue of hifi+ where Paul Messenger wrote, ‘The bottom line is that this is one of the finest loudspeakers I’ve ever had the pleasure of reviewing.’

The Chias are probably the most musical speaker you’ll ever hear. **You can see why they’re one of our favourites.**



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Digital: Accoustic Arts, Aurender, Bel Canto, dCS, Gamut, Resolution Audio, Vertex AQ dac. **Vinyl:** Aesthetix, Clearaudio, Graham, Spiral Groove, Transfiguration. **Tuners:** Magnum Dynalab. **Amplifiers:** Accoustic Arts, Aesthetix, Bel Canto, CAT, Gamut, Sonneteer, Storm Audio, VTL. **Loudspeakers:** Avalon, Gamut, Kaiser Acoustics, NEAT, Totem. **Cables:** Chord Co., DNM, Nordost, Siltech, Tellurium, Vertex AQ. **Mains:** Aletheia, Vertex AQ. **Supports:** Arcici, Black Ravioli, Hi-Fi Racks, LeadingEdge, Stands Unique, Vertex AQ. **Room acoustics:** LeadingEdge

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SACD PLAYER/DAC



ABOVE: Single-ended and balanced analogue outs flank the K-05's Clock Sync BNC for connecting an external master clock. Has three digital inputs and two outputs

factness about its sonic presentation that initially I found appealing since it always appears calm and 'tidy' when playing good recordings.

It also sounds rich and meaty in the bass. Listening to 'Royals' from Lorde's *Pure Heroine* [Universal Music New Zealand 3751900] I was treated to a thunderous delivery of the recording's pumping low frequencies, firm and controlled so that the song's rhythmic shuffle remained infectious throughout.

But when I referenced familiar audiophile-quality recordings such as Patricia Barber's live *Companion* album [Blue Note/Premonition 2296323], featuring string bass and piano captured in a natural acoustic, I thought the K-05 sounded slightly blurred and dynamically soft, lacking resolution. Altering the player's upsampling modes and switching between its filter settings made little-to-no difference.

It also appeared rather 'sat on', the image perspective less three-dimensional than today's finest D-to-A converters can deliver. T+A's DAC 8 [HFN Oct '12] and Auralic's Vega DAC [HFN Jan '14] fared rather better in this regard when I connected these up and used the Esoteric as a CD transport.

Moving on to Shawn Colvin's *Steady On* [Columbia CK 45209], featuring guest appearances by Suzanne Vega and Bruce Hornsby, in the song 'Shotgun Down The Avalanche' the K-05 similarly lacked immediacy and projection. The almost ghostly setting of the sound image, swimming in studio reverberation effects, once again missed the three-dimensionality that the very best DACs serve up.



And the stop-start conjunction of verse and chorus, the way the instruments punctuate the phrasing and the manner by which subtle shifts in playing pressure accent the song's dynamic phrasing, were all diminished. The K-05 robbed energy from the song.

CONVERSION DISAPPOINTS

Where the K-05's upsampling and filter settings appeared to make barely discernible differences in my system, converting PCM to DSD resulted in a quite markedly different sound. With orchestral material the sound of strings became noticeably darker and more congealed. Leading edges of transients were softened. Music appeared noticeably less vital.

I was disappointed, either when playing CDs or when pushing data into the K-05's USB input from my computer rig. Even when playing 'hot' and raucous rock and pop music of which recording and mastering engineers should be ashamed, I found that the PCM-to-DSD conversion process simply blunted leading edges, robbing music of its animation and vitality. ☹

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Given the high prices commanded by boutique brands for dedicated CD transports, Esoteric's K-05 can be considered good value as a luxurious disc transport alone in the context of a high-end system. It's beautifully engineered and lovely to use. However, as an all-in-one digital front end it's not entirely successful, and the performance of its DAC section is clearly bettered by many of today's latest designs.

Sound Quality: 70%

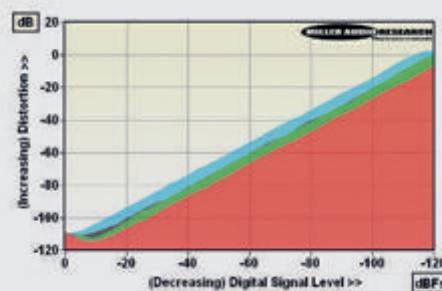


LAB REPORT

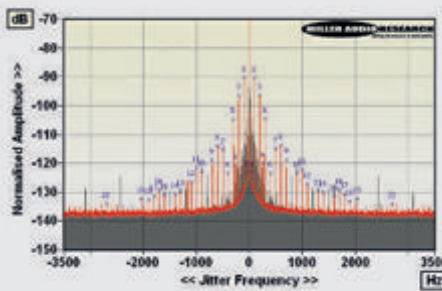
ESOTERIC K-05

This is a highly complex and flexible player/DAC offering excellent *analogue* performance but is undermined by what appears to be unusually high levels of jitter. The maximum analogue output is 2.4V (phase positive) via both single-ended and balanced (XLR) connections, the source impedance just 45ohm. Harmonic distortion is impressively low at ~0.0003-0.0006% from 200Hz-20kHz regardless of SACD, S/PDIF or USB input source [see Graph 1, below]. The 107dB A-wtd S/N ratio would be higher still if the balanced outs ran to 4V. The digital filter can be defeated altogether or switched between FIR1, FIR2, S_DLY1 or S_DLY2 while upconversion/oversampling is either 'original' (native), 2x, 4x or LPCM to DSD. Jitter is unaffected by any of these selections but the rejection of stopband artefacts, transient behaviour and response are all significantly influenced by the digital filter(s). Freq. resps. of FIR1 and S_DLY1 are the same (-0.47dB/20kHz; -2.1dB/45kHz) as are those of FIR2 and S_DLY2 (-3.5dB/20kHz; -4.6dB/45kHz) but their time domain behaviours are very different [see our test reports on-line].

Jitter and/or IM distortion sidebands are sufficiently obvious to be seen on conventional (1kHz/0dBfs etc) distortion tests but the modulating frequencies change with source - 18Hz and 26Hz with CD and SACD while a 100Hz (200Hz, 300Hz, 400Hz...) PSU-related pattern emerges with S/PDIF and USB inputs. In all cases the levels are between 1750-2200psec [see Graph 2, below]. Readers may download full QC Suite test reports for the Esoteric K-05's CD, SACD, S/PDIF and USB performance (including all filter modes) by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: THD vs digital level (black, 1kHz at 24-bit/48kHz over S/PDIF; green, 1kHz at 24-bit/48kHz over USB) vs CD (1kHz, black and 20kHz, blue)



ABOVE: High resolution jitter plots, 24-bit/48kHz inputs (USB, red with markers; SACD, black)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	2.41Vrms at 45-50ohm
A-wtd S/N Ratio (CD / S/PDIF / USB in)	107.1dB/107.0dB/107.0dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.00032% / 0.00023%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.00037% / 0.00064%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz FIR1/FIR2 filter)	+0.0dB to -0.47dB/-3.45dB
Digital jitter (CD / SACD / S/PDIF / USB)	1775/2150/1810/1850psec
Resolution @ -100dB (SACD / S/PDIF)	±0.2dB / ±0.1dB
Power consumption	8W
Dimensions (WHD)	445x131x358mm

Teac HA-501

If you're looking for a bargain headphone amp capable of true high-end sound quality, Teac just answered your prayers with this quaint looking but mighty throwback...

Review: **Keith Howard** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Compared to the largest headphone amplifier I've ever reviewed, the Bryston BHA-1, the Teac HA-501 is almost compact. But it's still chunky enough to dwarf the recently reviewed Meridian Prime [HFN Feb '14] and, unlike the Meridian, it makes little pretence to modern aesthetics. There are, for instance, more visible fasteners on the casework than you can shake a stick at – I counted 39. Rather, the HA-501 is a Japanese product of the old school, with the type of no-nonsense looks that appeal more to male than female eyes and a quality of fit and finish that belies its £700 asking price. For not showing its feminine side, I love it – even if those mock rack handles are perhaps a bit silly.

Were this olde-worlde charm the HA-501's only attraction then its allure would be ephemeral. But it has the power to worm its way into audiophile affections long-term for a more fundamental reason. You can guess what that is but let's respect the established order of business and first describe what the HA-501 comprises before we get on to how well it delivers musical enjoyment.

SITTING SIDE BY SIDE

Teac highlights a number of aspects of the 501's circuit design. First that it operates in Class A, as evinced by the case running warm to the touch in a way that the Meridian Prime does not. Dual mono construction ('Dual Monaural Discrete design' in Teac terminology) is clear when you remove the top plate to reveal two identical circuits side by side on the main PCB. There is a substantial toroidal mains transformer to energise them both which feeds, on a separate board, a shared regulated power supply and contributes to the unit's chunky all-up weight of 4.1kg. Servo circuits control DC offset on the outputs (rather than the old method of

reducing amplifier gain to unity at DC) and the output stage is claimed to deliver up to 1.4W of output power into a 32ohm load, equivalent to almost 7Vrms – enough to drive even the insensitive Audeze LCD-2, for example, to output levels in excess of 122dB SPL per channel [see Lab Report].

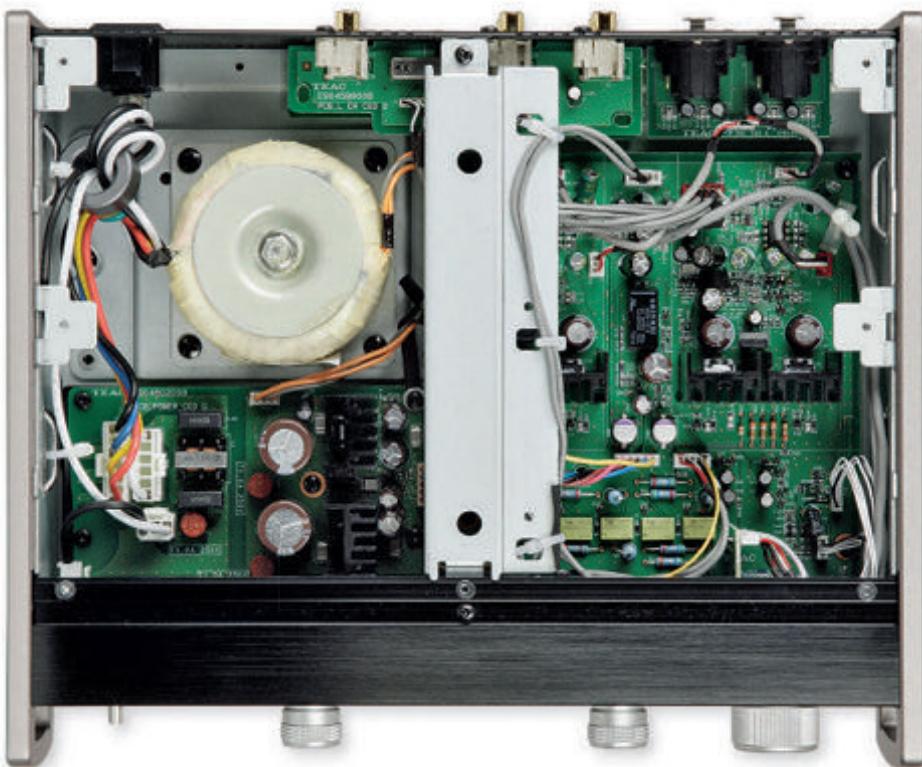
The 501's USP, though, is its five-position damping factor selector located beside the volume control and accompanied by an illuminated 'High • Mid • Low' display, the asterisks demarking the intermediate settings. What this does is vary the output resistance [see box-out], supposedly to suit headphones of differing impedance as well as different listener tastes. The user manual says the sound is 'crisper and livelier' when the damping factor is high and 'calmer and softer' when it is low.

Other features of note on the front panel are an Aux input via mini-jack for connecting personal music players, and an automatic mute circuit, engagement

of which is indicated by a red LED near the volume control. This appears to be an output protection (and perhaps hearing protection) device given that it operates whenever a jack plug is removed from the single ¼in output socket.

To defeat the muting requires that the volume control be turned back to zero – a feature I found annoying as a reviewer, but will possibly be less irksome to a typical owner. A push on the volume control knob or a separate reset push-button – anything that didn't involve the volume setting being changed – would have been more user-friendly.

On the back panel two unbalanced line inputs are provided via phono sockets and a third balanced input via XLRs. The input selector knob on the front panel switches between them, with a fourth position for the Aux socket. To allow the 501 to operate as a simple preamp, unbalanced outputs are also provided via a pair of



RIGHT: A generously sized toroidal mains transformer adds to the HA-501's substantial, weighty feel and feeds a single regulated power supply for both channels



phono sockets. An adjacent three-position sliding switch allows the output to be fixed in level, varied by the volume control or disabled. No suggestion is made in the owner's manual that turning off this output improves sound quality.

THE MESSAGE HITS HOME

And so to the crux of the matter – how the HA-501 sounds. In a word: marvellous. This is the best headphone amplifier I've heard to date for turning that rare trick of never leaving you wanting for resolution – it's as bright and clear as lead crystal glass – while also never sounding relentless or grainy or strained. On the contrary, it delivers a wonderful fluidity of sound full of natural, uncontrived warmth. Mated with a worthy pair of headphones – I mostly used the fine and feisty Sony MDR-MA900 – it serves up private stereo of rare musicality.

Let's air my one gripe at this juncture, so that it doesn't cloud my otherwise unbridled enthusiasm for this product: the damping factor control is a gimmick. Sure, it makes a difference to the sound – of course it would, given that as well as changing damping factor it also alters frequency response and output level – but

why anyone would wish to turn an adroit sounding headphone (like the Sony) into something more fumbling is quite beyond me. If I want music to be 'calm and soft' then I'll play something calm and soft...

Having experimented with the damping factor control and rolled my eyes, I left it set to High and then experimented with switching off the line-level output to see if that had any audible effect. Though I would never claim the difference was night and day I did prefer the sound with the

'The cymbals shimmered as they rarely do over headphones'

output disabled, which was just a smidgen better resolved – and this without anything connected to the output phonos. So I left the line output switched to Off and, confident that the HA-501 was now

optimally configured, sat back to revel in how it makes music when it's not in any way muzzled. Which is to say, gloriously – although you need a hi-res headphone to appreciate its qualities to the full, the Sony being an ideal partner in this respect.

A track I've really been enjoying recently – and I'm no Elvis Presley fan – is 'Love Me Tender' from the SACD of *24 Karat Elvis* (ripped from the disc and converted to 24-bit/88.2kHz PCM using AudioGate). I love it because it is such a fine exemplar


ABOVE: As well as controlling output level the large volume control also operates the automatic mute. The quirky damping factor control is best left on its High setting

of what could be achieved decades ago using recording equipment that would raise derisory giggles from a modern home studio owner. By today's standards it can't be anything but lo-res and yet its musical message hits home with an unalloyed power that no Auto-Tuned pop diva could match, and it demands really high quality replay gear to extract the best from it.

The HA-501 clarified but also schmoozed this track like no other headphone amplifier I've yet heard. That simple acoustic guitar accompaniment sounded utterly believable, the backing singers were minutely delineated while remaining thoroughly human, and Elvis – despite some word fluffs – appeared to be singing personally to the countless young women who would swoon in response. You'd have to be a curmudgeon not to feel the nostalgia washing over you.

SHEER TRANSPARENCY

Another oldie that had new life breathed into it by the HA-501 was Nat 'King' Cole's 'Welcome To The Club', ripped from the Audio Fidelity SACD of the same name and once again converted to 24-bit/88.2kHz using AudioGate. The vocal isn't so 'big' here, sharing the limelight with the Count Basie Orchestra, but again via the HA-501 it evinced just the right combination of analysis and warmth, the overall effect being to make it appear as if the singer had materialised, if not in the room with you, then certainly in that peculiar headphone soundstage inside your head.

A snappy, lively big band sound is essential to the pace and rhythm of this piece but it doesn't take much provocation for the trumpets to transition from bright to harsh. The HA-501 resisted this while still doing full justice to the infectious pulse that contributes so much to making this a memorably enjoyable performance. If you don't experience this wonderful 

DAMPING FACTOR

Moving-coil drive units rely, usually in large part, on electromagnetic damping to control their vibrational behaviour. Lenz's law states that an induced electromotive force – like that caused by a driver's voice coil moving within the magnet gap – gives rise to a current whose magnetic field opposes the original change, and it is this that provides the damping. Maximum damping occurs when the amplifier output resistance is zero, so that the damping current is limited solely by the resistance of the voice coil. (It is possible to contrive negative output resistance, but this is rarely done.) Output resistance can be specified directly in ohms or indirectly in terms of damping factor, the ratio of load resistance to source resistance (which includes cabling resistance as well as the output resistance of the amplifier). So high damping factor equates to low source resistance. But changes in amplifier output resistance don't just affect damping; if the load impedance varies with frequency – as in most loudspeakers and headphones – then it also introduces variations in frequency response.

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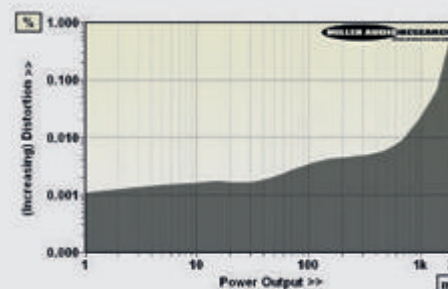
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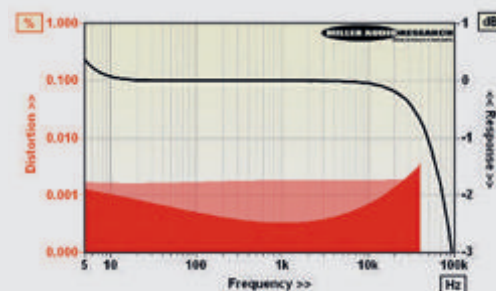
TEAC HA-501

This is the most powerful and, arguably, the most capable 'analogue-only' headphone amp we've measured so far. Rated at 1400mW (1.4W) into 32ohm, the HA-501 achieved 2215mW (2.2W) into our 25ohm test load with a maximum output voltage capability in excess of 10V into 47kohm. The full +8.5dB gain is more than sufficient and there's enough headroom to accommodate inputs up to 6V via its balanced XLR connections. The MUSES 8920 op-amp(s) used to drive the headphone output are very robust and levels of feedback are not excessive so any increase in distortion versus level is gradual (0.001%/1mW; 0.003%/100mW; 0.025%/1W) under load rather than abrupt at clipping [see Graph 1, below]. Moreover, distortion versus frequency has been engineered to remain very consistent under load (0.0015-0.0018%, 20Hz-20kHz at 40mW into 25ohm), presenting a uniform 'colour' [see shaded red trace, Graph 2, below].

The specific values of Teac's High, Mid and Low damping options rather depends on the impedance of the attached 'phone but the respective output impedances are, once again, almost unvarying with frequency at 1.2ohm, 2.0ohm and 5.8ohm from 20Hz-20kHz. The response in High damping mode rolls very gently away at HF to -0.2dB/20kHz and -3.4dB/100kHz but there's an unusual near-DC peak of +1dB/3Hz and +3dB/2Hz just becoming visible on Graph 2, below. Noise is exceptionally low, incidentally, with an A-wtd S/N ratio of 92.8dB re. 0dBV. Readers are invited to view a comprehensive QC Suite test report for Teac's HA-501 headphone preamp by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Continuous power output versus distortion (up to 1% THD) into 25ohm 'headphone' load



ABOVE: Frequency response (black) from 5Hz-100kHz into 25ohm and distortion versus frequency (red, 1V; shaded, 40mW) from 5Hz-40kHz

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output (re. 1% THD into 47kohm)	>10V
Max. power output (re. 1% THD into 25ohm)	2215mW
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	1.2ohm / 2.0ohm / 5.8ohm
Maximum gain	+8.5dB
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV)	92.8dB
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz/25ohm)	+0.01dB to -0.19dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 40mW)	0.0015-0.0018%
Power consumption	15W
Dimensions (WHD)	290x81x244mm



ABOVE: Two unbalanced inputs on phono sockets are complemented by a balanced input on XLRs. Fixed- or variable-level unbalanced output on phonos enables the HA-501 to operate as a simple preamp but for ultimate sound quality is best disabled

amalgam of transparency and tonal equanimity when listening to the HA-501 then look to your headphones: they will be them letting the side down, not the Teac preamplifier.

Given the HA-501's ability to establish as convincing a stereo image as you'll ever hear from headphones without electronic trickery (if then), I was intrigued to discover whether in combination with the Sony 'phones it might change my mind about Chesky's Binaural+. I was less than knocked out with *Dr Chesky's Sensational, Fantastic, And Simply Amazing Binaural Sound Show* [see HFN Mar '13], none of which generated an externalised image for me. Well, it proved beyond even the HA-501 to contrive an epiphany – the soundstage remained steadfastly internal – but it did help me appreciate anew the fine underlying quality of Chesky's sound.

AUDIO CHAMELEON

While I don't read others' reviews of products that come before me – so as not to be influenced, even subconsciously – I do read others' reviews as a source of potential news on good recordings to add to my collection. Which is how I came to acquire Public Enemy's 'Harder Than You Think' and Calvin Harris's 'Sweet Nothing', which I'd seen used to reach quite different conclusions about a headphone that I hadn't liked. I tried both here, and it was an edifying experience, although not about the Teac.

All I learnt – as if I didn't know it – is that music with dynamic range of only a few decibels will never alert you to the special qualities of the HA-501. It will do that stuff at a canter: choose test material that hasn't been dynamically flattened and with something approaching a

spacious stereo image, then you'll hear its magic.

For instance, like the 24-bit/96kHz download of Fred Simon's 'Poetspeak', a naturally distanced NaimLabel recording of a jazz piano trio. This can sound a little soft, particularly when the piano opens proceedings, but with true hi-res replay equipment it soon emerges that the piano portrayal is natural and unexaggerated, the percussion sound of a quality you rarely hear in typical close-miked recordings and the double-bass a really good test of evenness of bass response and lack of boom or hangover. The HA-501 lapped it all up: the cymbals shimmered as they rarely do over headphones and the double-bass was even and adroit in a way that you will hardly ever hear from loudspeakers. It was bliss.

Which is not to say, lest you misunderstand me, that the HA-501 doesn't do hard-hitting – I listened to the 24/176.4 download of 'Jumpin' Jack Flash' and, believe me, it does. As you'd expect of a true audio chameleon, it's invisible whatever the musical circumstances. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

If there's a better £700 headphone amplifier, I want to hear it. The HA-501 is one of those rare products that emerges from left field with no reputation or expectation attached and blows you away with its sheer rightness. Forget its retro looks and concentrate instead on its magical blend of resolution and uncontrived warmth. With the right headphone, the HA-501 delivers a true high-end sound.

Sound Quality: 86%



Cambridge Audio Aero 2

Don't be fooled by the anodyne exterior. Behind its sober grille is a small loudspeaker that's engineered in a radically different way from other budget rivals...

Review: **Nick Tate** Lab: **Keith Howard**

Most seasoned observers would characterise cheap, small speakers as 'much of a muchness'. It's a section of the market not traditionally known for innovative, blue-skies thinking. If one wants to find examples of imaginative answers to the problem of making high quality sound from small electrical signals, budget boxes aren't where you would look first!

So it's more than a little surprising to find that this £350 speaker looks – on first inspection – more bland than most of its competitors. It seems, not to put too fine a point on it, like an average 1990s product: the sort Mission would have been running rings around in dealers' dem rooms.

OUT OF THE ORDINARY

But remove the grille and you find something out of the ordinary. In place of its rivals' standard-issue soft dome tweeter is a Balanced Mode Radiator – something you won't find in any other budget box. Conventional two-ways have a tweeter to cover the high frequencies, and a mid/bass driver to take care of the rest. The problem comes between around

2-3kHz, where the two units intersect. There's a crossover to gently attenuate one driver as the other takes over; but in passive designs particularly, the response is never as flat as you'd hope, and the phase not as even. Worse still, this happens where the ear is most sensitive – the range of the human voice, which of course is what we spend most of our time listening to.

If you were going to cross two drivers over, this is the last place you'd want to do it – which was precisely what inspired Cambridge Audio's speaker supremo Dominic Baker to look to BMRs.

The Aero 2 has a 165mm bass unit, and bass is all it does. It isn't a mid/bass driver, because according to the designer, it runs from 50Hz to 250Hz, rather than the 2kHz or so you'd normally expect. The

46mm BMR then, is in effect a mid/treble unit, running all the way up to 20kHz and beyond from that 250Hz starting point. This takes the crossover point way below the place where our hearing is most sensitive. It also lets the designer use a bespoke bass driver, rather than one that's also purposed to work in the midband too.

CUSTOM BENEFITS

It's a double benefit, and it's all possible thanks to the use of the BMR. Baker says this gives far superior dispersion too. The BMR is the latest fourth generation unit, and like the bass driver has been custom-made for the Aero 2; the drivers have been designed around the speaker, rather than the reverse. Like all Cambridge Audio products, the units are made in China at Cambridge Audio's own facility.

Dr Graham Bank, inventor of the BMR and co-founder of Cotswold Sound Systems, has worked closely with Baker on the project. The

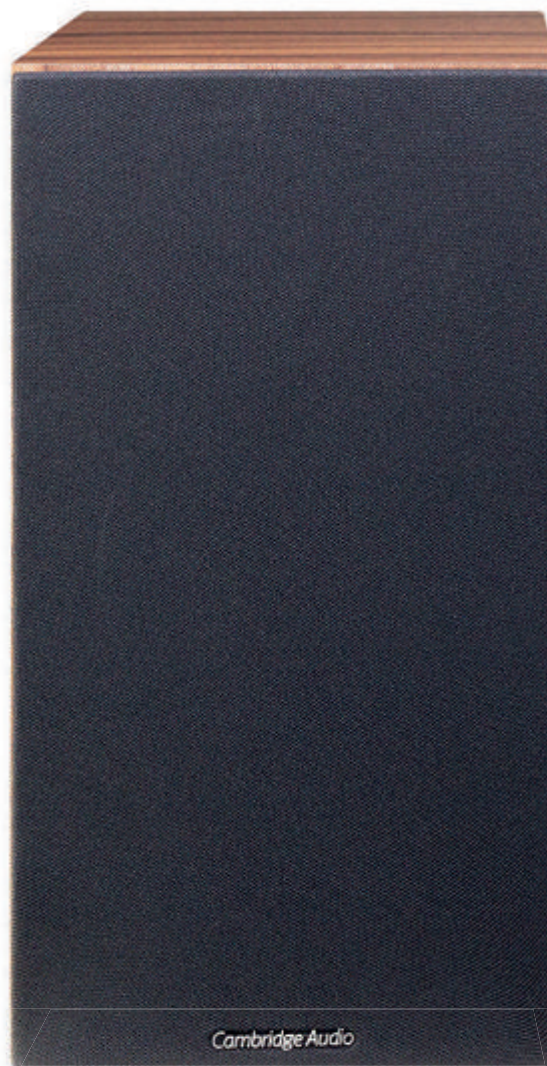
Aero 2's new generation BMR has twice the excursion of the original design, and is far more linear in the higher frequencies, it is claimed.

The crossover is a simple affair, with just three passive components. For the BMR, one single capacitor feeds it, which Baker says gives a 4th order acoustic alignment. This marries up to a 2nd order electrical low-pass filter for the bass unit.

RIGHT: Hidden behind the grille is a 165mm paper bass driver and – uniquely in this market sector – a 46mm combined tweeter and midrange BMR

Low frequencies need a light and stiff drive unit cone to work best, and the Aero 2 (unusually at this price) uses paper. Baker has spent a long period of time playing with different cone materials but now thinks a well-developed paper formulation is best. Things become more prosaic when you get to the cabinet. The designer contends that fancy, swoopy sides are more about style than sonics, so the Aero 2 gets a classic rectangular box. It's reasonably well braced and certainly

'Cue up some
thunderous Scritti
Politti and the
Aero 2 vanishes'



decently damped, but wins no prizes for the beauty of its vinyl wrap finish or overall aesthetics. Still, it does betoken Cambridge Audio's characteristic no-nonsense approach, and the single-wire speaker terminals underline this further. Dominic Baker believes the cost/benefit ratio of bi-wiring your system isn't good enough to justify bi-wirable binding posts. 'Just buy better speaker cable', he says.

THE MORE YOU LISTEN...

Drop the needle on a really fine LP recording of Beethoven's 'Pastoral' Symphony [BPO/Karajan – DG SLPM 138 805], and you soon realise that the Aero 2 sounds dramatically different from its contemporaries. Indeed, the very first time you set ears on it, you'll likely find it an anti-climax, because it lacks the bite and the boom of price-rivals such as the Acoustic Energy AE401. This is emphatically *not* the sort of speaker that jumps out at you and grabs your attention, and as a

BMR BASICS

Although originating with NXT (now HiWave), the BMR (Balanced Mode Radiator) – patented in 2005 – is not a circular form of DML (distributed mode loudspeaker, the technical term for an NXT/HiWave panel). It is something quite different and, for audiophiles, significantly more exciting. Despite using a deliberately resonant flat diaphragm, on-axis it appears to behave like an ideal piston, moving as a rigid whole, without breakup modes. The crucial difference is that whereas a true piston becomes increasingly directional – begins to 'beam' its output – above the frequency at which its circumference equals the wavelength in air, a BMR does not. It maintains its off-axis output significantly better, thereby obviating one of the classic conundrums of loudspeaker design. Concentric weights precisely positioned on the back face of the diaphragm are key to this: they ensure that its axisymmetric resonance modes generate zero acoustic contribution on-axis, whereas off-axis they act to bolster output. KH

result of this I'd expect it to underperform at dealer dems where lots of other designs are heard in quick succession.

Fascinatingly though, the more you listen, the more you realise something is missing – namely all the nasties that normally come with speakers at this price level. Rather like a good electrostatic panel loudspeaker, it's very self-effacing. There's no stinging treble and booming bass; rather you're immediately greeted with an even, seamless sound that's totally devoid of the phase inconsistencies that plague so many other small loudspeakers.

You are left wondering why the treble is so smooth and sweet, when often it's quite the reverse, or why the bass is solid but doesn't boom like disco has just come back and the Bee Gees are Number One again. However, when you've got past its lack of coloration, you find you can hone in on the music much better, because you're listening to far less of the *speaker's* sound.

Cue up some thunderous Scritti Politti from the mid-'80s and the Aero vanishes like no other speaker near its price. Suddenly you're drawn into that thick arpeggiated synth bassline, over which singer Green Gartside's voice floats silkily on 'Perfect Way' [Virgin 25VC-1028]. There's still a good deal of punch from the Linn drums, and the electronic hi-hats glisten with a wonderful sense of speed. But it's as if they've been left alone to get on with things, rather than having to go through an additional effects processor.

IT'S FULL OF LIFE

There's no sibilance to vocals, and there's a sense of effortlessness in the bass, which bounces along in an unusually unstrained way for a speaker of this size. Despite the BMR lacking a sharpness that accentuates leading edges of notes, the music still sounds both vivid and full of life.

The overall effect then is of a mature-sounding loudspeaker that just doesn't sound 'cheap'. If you were to close your eyes and forget about the styling and cabinet finish you wouldn't be surprised if someone told you it cost well over twice the price. This speaker has an innate rightness to it that makes it far easier to listen to than most rivals. It flows along in a fluid, musical way, showing far fewer signs of stress when called upon to play loudly.

Indeed, in some ways, it's more like that rarest of beasts, a three-way standmount. Herbie Hancock's *Maiden Voyage* [Blue Note BST 84195] proved wonderfully expansive, the Aero 2 setting up a cavernous recorded acoustic inside which instruments were placed accurately. Cymbals were smooth yet metallic sounding, piano was rich and sonorous and the tenor sax came over as a large, lustrous instrument full of texture and body.

Bass is good too, but when you push this speaker hard, this is where it falters. ➔





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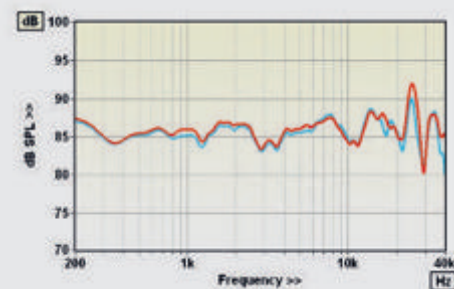
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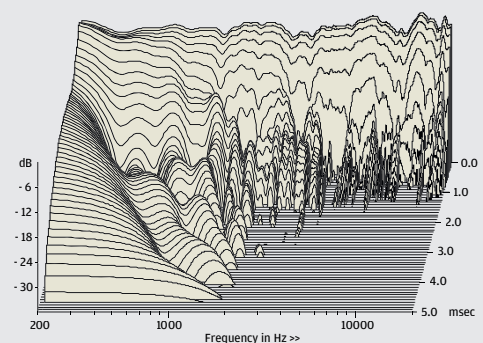
CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AERO 2

Cambridge Audio claims 90dB sensitivity for the Aero 2, a specification that bears little relation to our measured pink noise figure of 85.9dB, which is much more in line with expectations for a standmount of this size. The 8ohm nominal impedance is unreliable too given that our measured minimum modulus of 3.4ohm indicates a 4ohm rating is more appropriate. Because impedance phase angles are quite large at low frequencies, the EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) falls to 1.6ohm at 98Hz and 1.9ohm at 171Hz, making the Aero 2 a moderately challenging amplifier load overall – particularly for budget amplifiers – although at higher frequencies the BMR driver is substantially resistive.

Forward response, measured on the axis of the BMR unit [Graph 1, below], is essentially flat in trend with small enough departures for the response errors to be ± 2.5 dB and ± 2.8 dB respectively for the review pair (200Hz–20kHz) – excellent figures for a passive speaker, let alone one at this low price level. Pair matching wasn't so outstanding at ± 1.6 dB over the same frequency range but below 15kHz the matching was much tighter. Bass extension of 57Hz (–6dB re. 200Hz) matches that of many floorstanders and helps explain the modest sensitivity but the diffraction-corrected near-field measurement showed the upper bass to be peaked up by about 4dB at 100Hz. Ultrasonic output from the BMR is uneven but reaches to above 40kHz. The cumulative spectral decay waterfall [Graph 2, below] shows a fast initial energy decay but with what are probably bass/mid unit breakup modes visible in the low treble. KH



ABOVE: Forward response is very flat in trend and reaches above 40kHz thanks to the HF BMR driver



ABOVE: Cabinet looks well enough controlled but some bass/mid modes are visible in the mid-treble

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	86.4dB/85.9dB/85.7dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.4ohm @ 138Hz 21.7ohm @ 29Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–58° @ 86Hz 40° @ 207Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	± 1.6 dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	57Hz / >40kHz/>40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	1.1% / 0.3% / 0.2%
Dimensions (HWD)	370x203x311mm

LEFT: Designer Dominic Baker doesn't advocate bi-wiring, believing you get the finest sound by spending your money on a single run of better quality cable

what a stronger, stiffer cabinet could do with these fine drive units.

As it stands however, the Aero 2 is cracking value for £350. You'll not get a finer all-round performance at the price if you're looking for a mature, grown-up sound that lets you dig down into the mix and enjoy it, rather than being assaulted by boom and tizz. Its seamlessness is uncanny, its transparency superb and the box throws images out with ease and confidence.

There is one last caveat (though not a criticism), which is that you will need a decently powerful amplifier to get the best out of this speaker, as the Aero's actual sensitivity is a bit lower than that quoted [see Lab Report].

Cambridge Audio's own integrated amplifiers are excellent, and you should also consider Creek's fine Evolution 50A [see *HFN* May '13].

Indeed, the Aero 2 is the sort of speaker that deserves to live happily on the end of a really good source and amplifier – in which case it just gets better and better. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

If there is such a thing as 'budget esoterica', then it is surely epitomised by Cambridge Audio's Aero 2 standmount speaker. It displays a far more couth, civilised and polished performance than its price would suggest – you just don't expect this much from a £350 box. With so few flaws and so much to love, this little loudspeaker just gets on with the job of making music in an enjoyable yet inoffensive way.

Sound Quality: 82%



The sheer smoothness and evenness of the Aero 2 means you can turn a pair of them up quite a lot louder than many less couth rivals. At this point however, you begin to hear the cabinet make its presence felt slightly, as there are limits to what a 6.8kg fibreboard box can do.

CRACKING VALUE

In an ideal world, the cabinet would be thicker and better braced. Indeed, there's the sense the Aero 2 is two great drive units in search of a box that's worthy of them.

Of course, the need to keep the price down to £350 has precluded this, but it would be fascinating to hear a more solidly dressed version that cost a couple of hundred pounds more, like Q Acoustics' Concept idea.

Turn up the wick on 4hero's 'Give In' [Raw Canvas RCRC02] and this little loudspeaker sounds superb, with loads of power, punch and a wonderfully creamy texture to vocals and strings – but still you wonder



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Vinyl Frontier

BEHIND THE MUSIC WITH HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW

This month **Chris Heard** dips into Reggae, discovers *The Correct Use Of Soap*, gauges his *Appetite For Destruction* and ponders some strangely English traits

By the time Island Records released the slickly-produced *Exodus* in June 1977, Bob Marley was well on his way to becoming an international superstar – a rock star, effectively ‘the Mick Jagger of reggae’ as *Village Voice* magazine had understandably tried to pigeonhole him a couple of years earlier. Marley’s transformation from charismatic but shambling Kingston-roots-poet to global peace symbol had been taking shape ever since The Wailers performed a series of incendiary live concerts in the UK in 1975, culminating in a show at London’s Lyceum Theatre in July that sent his reputation into the stratosphere (as heard on the album *Bob Marley And The Wailers Live*, one of the few truly great live albums).

For me, *Exodus* marks the moment when the Marley story reached its zenith: a near-perfect distillation of melodic pop music, tightly-played, sparsely produced songs and Rasta spirituality that transcended cultures, creeds and colours in an age when barriers were being broken down between black and white youth on the streets of Notting Hill (*de facto* Marley’s home in exile). Joy and love pour from the grooves of the LP, whose second side must surely rank as one of rock’s most accomplished ‘B’ sides, made up of some of the most life-affirming music in Marley’s canon (in order): ‘Jamming’, ‘Waiting In Vain’, ‘Turn Your Lights Down Low’, ‘Three Little Birds’ and ‘One Love/People Get Ready’.

Phew! It’s like one long, contented 20-minute ride on a fairground carousel with someone you love – upbeat and never



➔ Magazine’s 1980 release appealed to ‘bookish, literary types’

too candyfloss-sweet, a sumptuous dessert to side one’s meatier, more strident course of roots ideology, homegrown politics and Rastafari consciousness (*Natural Mystic*, *The Heathen*, and *Exodus* itself, written after an attempt on Marley’s life in Jamaica the previous year). *Exodus*, one of only a handful of truly great reggae albums for rock lovers, is out on Universal’s Back To Black 180g reissue label.

GOLDEN AGE OF REGGAE

Before Marley hit his peak, the reggae artist with the most apparent potential for crossover success was always Jimmy Cliff, star of the 1972 exploitation movie *The Harder They Come*, which boasts a lively soundtrack featuring Cliff and others. This is the sound of the golden age of pure reggae, from 1967-1972, which gave the wider world a taste of Cliff’s easy-skanking title track along with two of his best compositions, ‘Many Rivers To Cross’ and ‘You Can Get It If You Really Want’.

Highlights on this tough-talking soundtrack also include The Maytals’ ‘Pressure Drop’ (later reworked into a live favourite by The Clash); ‘Rivers of Babylon’ by The Melodians; and Desmond Dekker’s ska-drenched ‘007 (Shanty Town)’.

Another Island reissue on Back To Black, this remastered vinyl evokes both nostalgia for what was a developing breed of Blaxploitation cinema and its associated artwork (tailor-made for the gatefold LP format) and a sense of appreciation that this beautifully



➔ *The Harder They Come*, soundtrack from a Jimmy Cliff movie from 1972

CHRIS HEARD

Chris Heard is a music journalist and a vinyl fanatic. He runs an online record store, Classic LPs, specialising in vinyl reissues and new releases, and a physical shop, Carnival Records, purveying 10,000-plus records amid the splendour of the Malvern Hills. Visit www.classiclp.co.uk and www.carnivalrecords.co.uk.



cultivated, cultured music is available again, for a new audience to hear it as it was meant to sound.

A LATHER FOR BOOKWORMS

Perhaps a lesser-known post-punk gem, Magazine’s *The Correct Use Of Soap* was the band’s third album which contains a couple of songwriter Howard Devoto’s most engaging compositions in ‘A Song From Under The Floorboards’ (a notable Morrissey live staple) and the estimable ‘Sweetheart Contract’. When the record was released to little fanfare by Virgin in May 1980 in its textured brown sleeve bearing minimal, modernist graphics, it spoke eloquently to a new age of confident DIY aesthetics that appealed to bookish, literary types and would (much later) find a natural home in the noughties math-rock of Franz Ferdinand and The Foals.

Magazine were never really designed to move the masses or rock the establishment, but the dry, clean sonic lines of *The Correct Use Of Soap*, crystallised by the playing of guitarist John McGeogh, were every bit as important to the rumbling subculture of the early ‘80s as some of their more demonstrative peers (step forward The Cure and others). Relatively unremarkable at the time to those of us not in the know, *The Correct Use* symbolises a clutch of broadly underrated new wave LPs whose stature has grown in the album-phobic iTunes age – one in which a record as spikily fresh as this might be heralded as a work of understated genius.

BRUTAL AND ANIMALISTIC

While some of The Velvet Underground’s more experimental works may be anathema to many audiophiles, the power and durability of their most affecting music matters more to me than any arguments over shoddy engineering here and there, or a poorly-positioned microphone. So it is with *White Light/White Heat*, the band’s second album from 1968 that pretty much invented David Bowie in his pomp, and



➔ Redesigned G N' R sleeve replaced a 'robot rapist' themed artwork

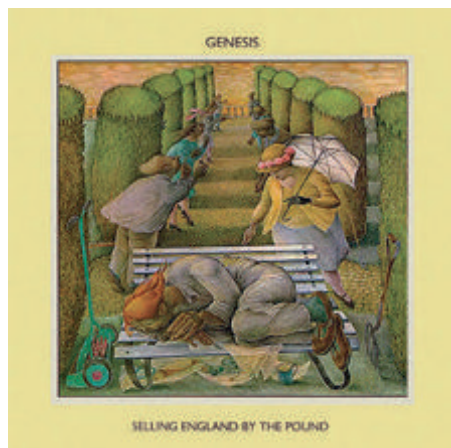
fired up the imaginations of most of the thinking musical visionaries of the early to mid-'70s and beyond.

Described by violist John Cale as 'rabid' and 'consciously anti-beauty', *White Light* is more stark, brutal and animalistic even than its celebrated predecessor (*The Velvet Underground & Nico*), offering little light and a good deal of shade with songs about sex ('Here She Comes Now'), drugs ('White Light/White Heat') and, naturally, a failed lobotomy performed on a trans-gender woman ('Lady Godiva's Operation'). The music can be dissonant and discordant ('I Heard Her Call My Name'), song structures ground-breaking (the lengthy spoken word passages on 'The Gift') and ultimately just downright mesmerising, as in the climactic frenzy of 'Sister Ray', the 17m epic that remains both terrifyingly fresh and almost – but never quite – entirely unlistenable.

The tightrope between avant-garde high art and career suicide that Lou Reed and his not-so-merry band walked on *White Light* is, some 45 years later, one of the most precarious and visceral experiences any true rock music lover can encounter.

REPROBATE REFLECTIONS

As Geffen Records unleashed Guns N' Roses' first full-length long-player to a grateful world in July 1987, Axl Rose set out his stall with characteristic self-aggrandisement. 'I



➔ Genesis' fifth studio album has a 'special appeal' to English whimsy

BOB MARLEY & THE WAILERS



➔ *Exodus* from Bob Marley (1977) finds him 'at a zenith ... A melodic distillation that transcended cultures'

want this to be the biggest-selling debut album from a rock act ever,' he said. And – well, what do you know – it seems his wish was pretty much fulfilled, with *Appetite* selling 15m copies in four years.

Aided by the radio-friendly magnificence of 'Paradise City' and 'Sweet Child O' Mine', the album reached the top of the Billboard charts and convinced critics and fans alike with its irresistible mix of vintage Aerosmith and The Stones, blended with the spirit of The Sex Pistols and the street-punk life that the band really did live at the time in downtown LA.

Indeed, much of the material held up a mirror to their more reprobate tendencies: 'Nightrain' referenced a cheap potent wine; 'My Michelle' recounted the drug habits of a band associate; 'Mr Brownstone' is a dark hymn to heroin. 'People were very afraid of this band,' said A&R woman Teresa Ensenat, and as if to underline the point, G N' R dressed their first album inside a notoriously violent and sexist sleeve (later withdrawn in favour of a band cross-and-skulls image). None of this would matter, though, and we wouldn't still be wanting to listen to this record now if it weren't that the songs on *Appetite For Destruction* are very, very good indeed.

SELLING ENGLAND

In the Jurassic landscape of British prog rock, two of the biggest flesh-ripping dinosaurs in all of the park were Genesis

and Yes, bands which helped to define an era of bell-bottom denim and facial hair, classically-trained musicians, student grants and 12-minute bass solos.

The classic Peter Gabriel-period Genesis fan's album of choice is *Selling England By The Pound* [Universal Back To Black], the band's fifth studio LP from October

1973 which included that rarest of things: a 1970s Genesis single, and a great one at that – 'I Know What I Like (In Your Wardrobe)'. Alongside tracks such as 'The Firth Of Fifth' and 'The Battle Of Epping Forest', the

album at its best conjured a sort of *Alice In Wonderland* quality that has seen it favoured among some latter-day disciples of those singularly English artistic traits, whimsy and eccentricity.

Yes's second album from 1970, *Time And A Word*, is from the pre-Steve Howe years and features Peter Banks on guitar (he left the fold as tensions grew with singer Jon Anderson over the use of live orchestration on most of the songs). The record may lack the fully-realised self-assurance of the group's middle-period works of grandeur such as *Relayer* and *Close To The Edge*, but it nevertheless gives a tantalising taste of some of the richly complex musicality that lay ahead. ☺

'Guns N' Roses?
"People were
very afraid of
this band"'

Vinyl Release

BEHIND THE MUSIC WITH HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW

Black Sabbath *Paranoid*

Released in 1970, the band's second LP was one of the first ever heavy metal albums. **Steve Sutherland** pops in his ear plugs for a re-listen as it's reissued on 180g vinyl

So we're sitting in the lobby of my favourite hotel, the Sunset Marquis in West Hollywood, when this dude walks past carrying a leather attaché case. He's pure Los Angeles – sharp suit, cowboy boots, greying pony-tail, a tattoo peeking out from under his shirt cuff. We watch as he strolls through the inner lobby doors towards the pool where he sits himself at a sunny poolside table, sets his case carefully down and proceeds to dial someone on his cell phone.

Some five minutes later, another guy appears from the doors which lead to the lift at the other side of the pool. As he steps out of the shadows into the light we notice he has shoulder-length hair dyed very black to match his shirt, jeans and boots. He's pretty skinny, wears round, tinted shades, sports a short black goatee beard and, beneath all this black, looks translucently pale and not a little sinister. There is a large, heavy-looking silver crucifix hanging round his neck which catches and reflects the light in blinding flashes as he walks.

A few seconds later he sits himself down, shakes hands with our pony-tailed pal and they get down to business. They're

too far off for us to eavesdrop on their conversation but it doesn't take long for ol' pony-tail to pop his case onto the table and start to unzip it in, it must be said, quite a furtive manner. So of course, this being the Sunset Marquis, one of the most rock 'n' roll hotels in the world, we're thinking, 'What's in the case? Little baggies of cocaine? Big fat wads of 100 dollar bills? Photos of the blackmail variety?'

We strain our eyes to get a glimpse when, to our great disappointment, pony-tail produces, with a bit of a flourish, what appears to be a little square fragment of black cloth. Crucifix takes it, runs it between thumb and middle finger, holds it up to the light, then hands it back to pony-tail shaking his head.

Pony-tail puts it down on the table and produces another fragment. It too is black. Crucifix takes it, runs it between thumb and middle finger, holds it up to the light, then once again shakes his head and hands it back. Pony-tail produces a third

STEVE SUTHERLAND

Steve edited NME from 1992-2000, the Britpop years, launching NME.com and reviving the NME Awards. Previously he was Assistant Editor on Melody Maker. Among his many adventures he has been physically threatened by Axl Rose, hung out awhile with Jerry Garcia and had a drink or two with Keith Richards...



piece, also black. Crucifix does the same, hands it back. Pony-tail produces another. Then another. Both black. Crucifix appears dissatisfied and, if we're not imagining it, more than a mite irritated.

Pony-tail is in the process of producing a sixth piece of material, to the naked eye no more nor less black than the others, when a sudden gust of wind whips all the fragments of material off the table and into the pool where they float, perfectly black,

upon the azure blue surface of the water. Crucifix stands up and stalks off, a cartoon thunder cloud hanging over his head. Pony-tail looks at a loss as to how – or even if he's going to bother – to

retrieve his bits from the pool.

And we can't help laughing because Crucifix is none other than Tony Iommi, the guv'nor guitarist of Black Sabbath and if ever there was a scenario to encapsulate the scary absurdity that defines the mighty Sabs, we have surely just witnessed it.

This is in the late '90s. For three decades the band have been peddling their recipe of the dark, deadly serious founded on the utterly daft and the album we're here to talk about, *Paranoid*, was the one that set them on their way to hellish immortality.

COMICAL YET COLOSSAL

Paranoid was the Birmingham band's second album. Produced by Rodger Bain, who'd done the first one, it sort of stumbled upon the formula – which would henceforth be christened Heavy Metal – that they and so very many others continue to successfully market to this very day.

I guess you could say the gist of it is as follows: lyrically ridiculous yet musically threatening, ostensibly dumb yet sonically devastating, comical and yet simultaneously colossal. Take the track 'Iron Man'. It was initially called 'Iron Bloke' because singer Ozzy Osbourne thought the riff Iommi had come up with sounded

'Ozzy Osbourne
admitted he had no
idea what the word
paranoid meant'



Warner Bros promo shot of Black Sabbath, which appeared in press ads in 1970 (l-r): Geezer Butler (bass), Tony Iommi (guitar), Bill Ward (drums) and singer Ozzy Osbourne



➔ Priced £24.99, the 180g re-release of Black Sabbath's *Paranoid* is available online from www.analogueseduction.net

like, 'a big iron bloke walking about'. Enter bassist Geezer Butler, the band's nominal wordsmith, who took the notion and ran with it, creating a clumsy sci-fi scenario about a chap who goes to the future, sees doom and destruction, comes back clad in iron and, frustrated at mankind's unwillingness to avert the apocalypse, sets about bringing it on himself.

COLD FEET

Then there's 'War Pigs' – which is what the album was going to be called until the record company got cold feet over what the pro-Vietnam lobby might think. For the track was, indeed, authored by Geezer in heartfelt but naïve protest against the bigwigs – politicians and owners of big corporations – who profit from sending the rest of us out there to become cannon fodder. 'Hand Of Doom', too, was composed with a purpose – to depict the utter degradation experienced by soldiers who had become addicted to heroin while serving abroad.



©ADAM BIELAWSKI

➔ Toni Iommi pictured on stage in 2009 with side-project band Heaven & Hell



Geezer, it must be said, was and is no Shakespeare though, and matters reached their most comical when the band realised they needed one more track to fill the album and the bassist rattled out a little something called 'Paranoid', which was performed with dead-eyed concentration by singer Ozzy Osbourne, who read the lyrics from a piece of paper and subsequently admitted he had no idea what the word paranoid meant.

CHART HIT

Not that any of this really mattered as title track 'Paranoid' – knocked out in 25 minutes – became the band's biggest hit (number 4 in the UK charts). It wasn't what it said that sold it to the kids. It was what it freaking *sounded like*. Ozzy was simply born blessed – or cursed, whichever way you want to look at it – with one of those voices that could make the recipe for blancmange sound demonic; a nasty, guttural, harsh drawly whine.

But the album's crowning glory is really down to Mr Iommi and his heavy, heavy monster sound. In a previous life he's been a sheet metal worker and had lost the tips of his right hand middle and ring fingers in a factory accident. Iommi played guitar left-handed so this was potentially curtains until a mate played him a Django Reinhardt record; the jazzster unquestionably awesome despite the fact that a fire

had rendered two of his digits unusable. Iommi duly fashioned some thimbles which enabled him to continue guitar but made the bending of strings a bit tricky. So he tuned his instrument down to make it easier to play which also happened to produce the sludgy, monolithic sound that became the Sabs' trademark and which first reared its beautifully ugly head on the *Paranoid* album.

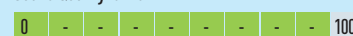
Massive Neanderthal riffs is what we love about the Sabs and in *Paranoid* they did it so totally badass, no-one has ever come anywhere near it since. ☺

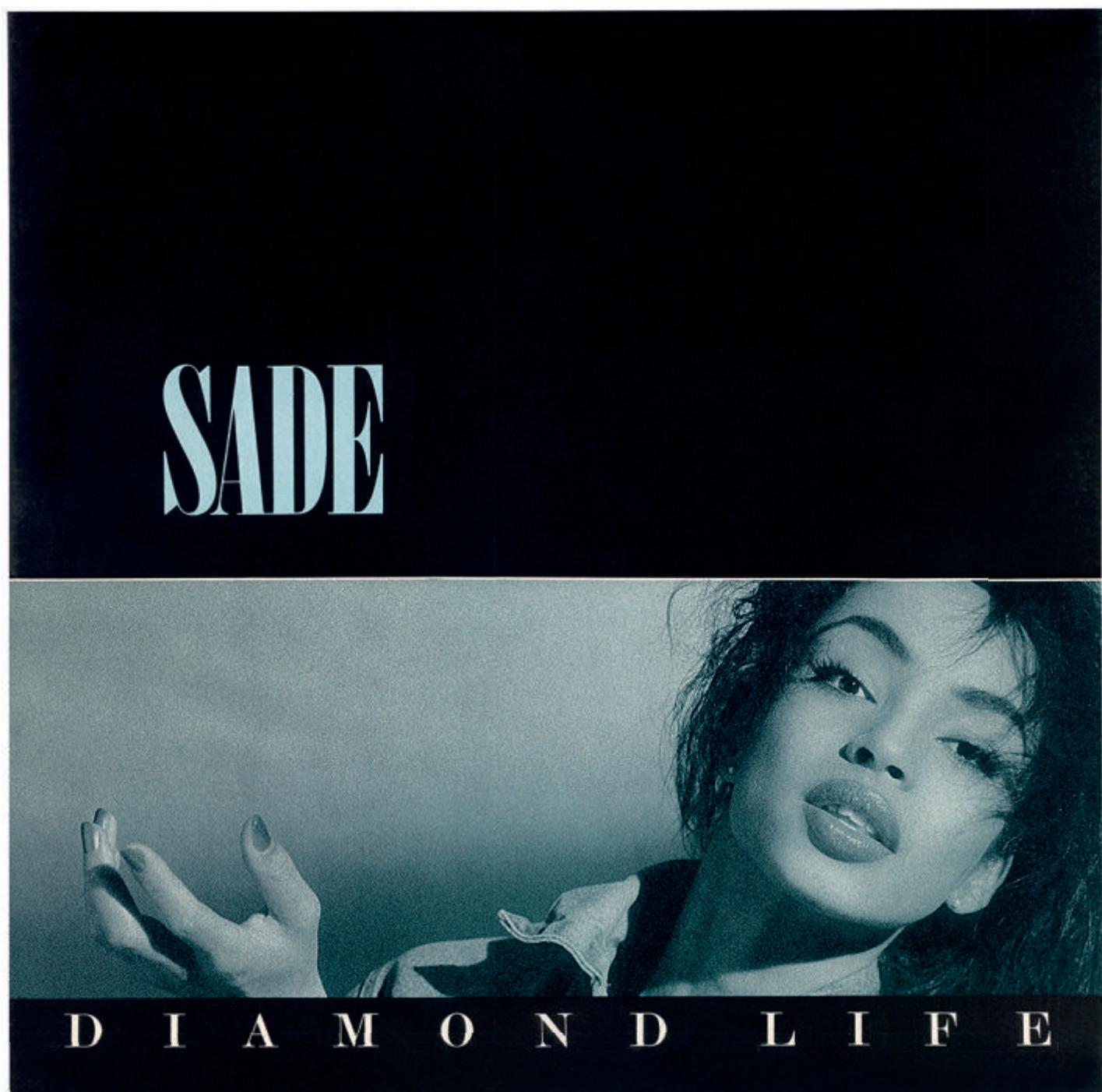
RE-RELEASE VERDICT

Pressed on durable-looking 180g vinyl, mastered from the original analogue tapes and packaged in a gatefold sleeve with high quality cover art, our copy of this Rhino reissue proved to be very quiet across all eight tracks, making it a fine overall package at the price.

As for the production, there's bags of slam on offer, especially when it comes to the drums, while the distorted guitars really kick out of the mix. All in all, Rhino appears to have achieved an accurate reproduction of the original LP. HFN

Sound Quality: 87%





Sade *Diamond Life*

Sade's debut LP didn't just pave the way for chart-friendly MOR soul-lite from the likes of Terence Trent D'Arby and Simply Red, it quickly became a go-to album for audiophiles wanting to hear their systems at their best. Yet no record company wanted to release it...

Words: **Chris Heard**

With its classy sleeve exuding glamour and sensuality, Sade's

Diamond Life seemed to epitomise all that was cool and aspirational about Britain in the mid 1980s.

Released in July 1984 as Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government cemented its second term in office, the album's smoky jazz and cocktail-bar aura were widely seen to embody some of the more materialistic impulses of the age.

When the silky sophistication of tracks such as 'Smooth Operator', 'Your Love Is King', 'Hang On To Your Love' and 'When Am I Going To Make A Living' was combined with Sade's sultry *Vogue*-friendly beauty, everything fell into place for an artist who appeared to define the zeitgeist.

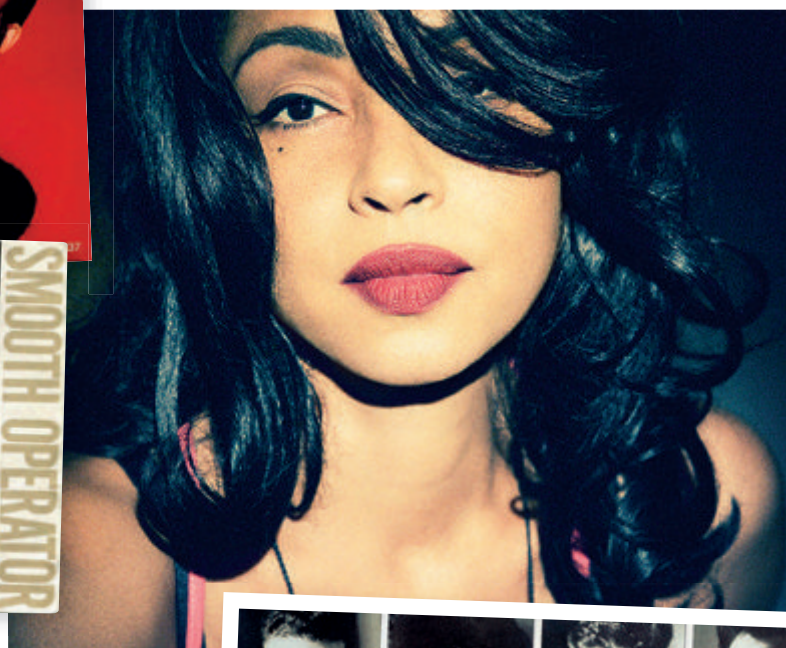
In dining rooms furnished with Habitat lamps and adorned with Athena posters, *Diamond Life* became the soundtrack of choice for dinner parties everywhere, as conspicuous consumption became a new pursuit among the burgeoning middle classes.

POSTER GIRL

But while *Diamond Life* was as much a part of the 1980s as City boys in red braces, council house sales and Asti Spumante, Sade is reluctant to be seen as a poster girl for the yuppie era.

'With my family history, that really irks me,' says the famously reclusive singer, a half-Nigerian immigrant who was given a socialist upbringing in the East of England. 'And it so annoyed me at the time, when we were secretly giving money we didn't even have yet to Arthur Scargill and the striking miners.'

'If the music didn't outshine the image, it just wasn't being listened to in the right way'



➔ The first (top) and final singles to be taken from the LP and the singer pictured in a 2012 press shot

➔ The band (l-r): Stuart Matthewman, Sade Adu, Andrew Hale and Paul S Denman

➔ Live on stage at the SAP-Arena in Mannheim, Germany in 2011



Sade doesn't have to worry about money any more. She has a fortune estimated at about £30m, and is Britain's most successful female solo singer of all time, selling more than 50 million albums – a remarkable fact given that she is relatively little known in the UK outside of the stardom she enjoyed with *Diamond Life* nearly 30 years ago (the vast majority of her acclaim has been won in the US).

Sade (the band was named after its charismatic vocalist) had formed as a soul outfit in London a year or so earlier, emerging from a Latin-influenced group called Pride and based around a group of friends from Hull – Stuart Matthewman on guitar and sax; Paul Spencer Denman on bass; and Andrew Hale on keyboards (together with Paul Cooke on drums).

Sade herself – born Helen Folasade Adu in Ibadan, Nigeria, the daughter of an English district nurse and a Nigerian university teacher – was a former model who became



a singer via clothes-making and art college (she was a student at St Martins in central London).

Raised for the most part by her grandparents near the Essex-Suffolk

border, Sade moved to London and would end up living in a squat in a disused fire station with an outdoor bathroom, shared briefly

with her then-boyfriend, the style journalist Robert Elms.

'She would end up living in a squat in a disused fire station'

BLAZE OF COLOUR

London in the early 1980s was a time when style and culture combined in a blaze of colour centred on the New Romantic movement and *The Face* magazine. This visually-vibrant *milieu* perfectly suited Sade's Camden jazz-inflected blend of R'n'B and pop, becoming part of an emerging scene that included acts such as Animal ☞

VINYL ICONS

PRODUCTION NOTES

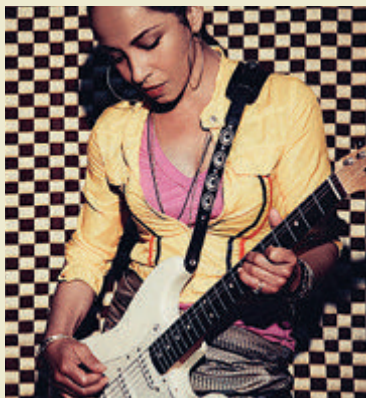
With *Diamond Life*'s apparently effortlessly polished sound, you might be forgiven for thinking that the band were old hands in the studio. But when producer Robin Millar first met them in 1983, they had never been anywhere near a proper mixing desk.

The group had some rough, homemade four-track demos of 'Your Love Is King' and 'Smooth Operator', but the consensus was that it sounded like a funk band playing free jazz. 'It was basic, but the songs were good – and then there was that voice,' said Millar. 'I've always thought there are certain voices that make people feel better... and when I heard Sade I felt she really had it.'

The band were booked into London's Power Plant Studios for a week, basing the melodies on the use of piano and Fender Rhodes (without computers). Demos were taken to record companies, but each one turned them down saying the tracks were too long and jazzy.

'They said, "don't you know what's happening? Everything is electronic drums now. Tears For Fears, Depeche Mode",' Millar recalled. 'This was a bit of a blow, because when we played them to people who came by the studio we'd get a fantastic reaction.'

A PR stunt, which was organised in conjunction with *The Face* magazine and centred on Sade's exotic looks and charismatic presence, provided a turnaround in the band's fortunes. Suddenly, everyone wanted to sign them. Fifteen tracks were recorded in six weeks, including versions previously rejected by all and sundry. *Diamond Life* went to number two in the UK album charts and eventually sold 10m copies worldwide.



Nightlife, Working Week and Latin Quarter, among others.

Diamond Life demonstrated the essential quality of Sade's songwriting abilities – her gently bruised tales of lost love ('Frankie's First Affair', 'Cherry Pie', 'I Will Be Your Friend') struck a timeless chord with listeners, while her ear for a melody and the band's laid-back grooves gave the material an easy-going pop sheen.

HOSTILITY AT HOME

Then there was her singing style. Soft and husky, raw yet sensitive, she came on like a Billie Holiday character (albeit one who had spent her childhood climbing trees in East Anglia). But there were those who questioned her limitations as

a vocalist – not in the US particularly, where her records still sell by the bucketload, but nearer to home.

'It can be very hostile, England,' Sade said in a rare 2010 interview. 'Not just to me, to everybody. England's like a sour old auntie. You go and stay with her, although she criticises you and doesn't treat you right, even when you're doing your best. But you keep loving her in a certain way. And then you die. Those bitches always outlive you!'

While her first choice in life was not music, Sade was a big fan of US soul singers Donny Hathaway and Bill Withers, and being a black singer in a largely white soul band gave the group some kudos. 'I didn't have any confidence as a singer, but found that I liked writing songs,' she said.

'Whatever anybody might say about me, when I feel the warmth we get back from the audiences,

particularly in America, I think it's worth all the bull****. I actually prefer singing live now. I feel much more comfortable than I did. I used to be a bit frozen and worried about my vocal performance, as if I hadn't learned the language properly.'

Record company talent scouts were bowled over watching her live, solo performances of 'Smooth Operator', and the band were signed to Epic Records in 1983. From that moment on Sade enjoyed a reputation for fierce loyalty, working for the label only on condition that it hired her bandmates as well as

her. Earnings from recording and live work have always been an even four-way split, and the group is perceived as being a

tight-knit unit under the control of a matriarch who revels in the nickname of 'Auntie Sade'.

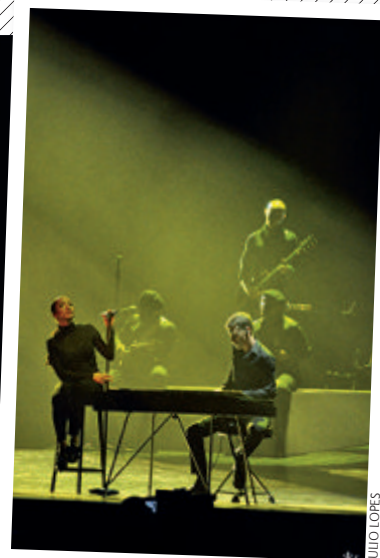
None of the others has ever said a bad word against their 'Shard'.

INSTANT HIT

Diamond Life was an instant hit in the UK, released following the success of two hit singles, 'Your Love Is King' and 'When Am I Going To Make A Living'.

Its top-five placing in the US would mark the beginning of a long, mutual Transatlantic love affair, which shows no signs of abating.

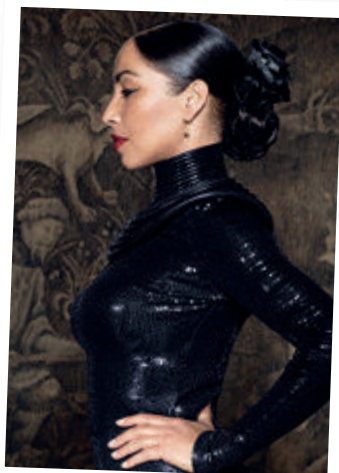
She is feted among American rappers, from Snoop Dogg to Kanye West and Lil Wayne; her slinky, understated R'n'B



After a hiatus of 18 years, Sade set off on a 160-date tour in 2011, taking in the US, Canada, Europe, South America and Australia. Here she's pictured on stage in Brazil in October of that year

Posing for a recent promo shot with a white guitar

A DVD called *Bring Me Home Live 2011* has footage from Sade's 2011 UK tour dates



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Alternate Format Discography



SEAN LOVES

➔ A change of costume during a 2011 performance in Brazil

being seen as the embodiment of class and sophistication among the hip-hop elite.

Her 2000 album *Lovers Rock* sold nearly 4m copies in the US, while her dressing rooms have been festooned with flowers from admirers including the world's greatest living soul diva, Aretha Franklin – no small compliment for the product of a broken home who, despite her fortune, lives in relative modesty in the Gloucestershire countryside.

TABLOID DISTRUST

As well as her legendary need for privacy – close friends have nicknamed her Howie after the US recluse Howard Hughes – Sade's on-stage appearances and recording schedules are also few and far between (she has done just one tour in 14 years and released six albums).

By and large she refuses to do the media interviews and promotional duties regarded as necessary in order to push her records, but behind the enigmatic image, friends and confidantes speak of a friendly, funny and relaxed individual.

Speaking about her distrust of tabloid reporters and critics, she said: 'I came to think that the tape machines the journalists used would just scramble what you say, like a liquidiser. There's a mentality that if something seems so simple, there must be something funny going on.'

Much of her disdain for the media appears to stem from the consistent coverage of her as 'this sophisticated lifestyle accessory' from the time of *Diamond Life* and beyond.

Learning that the LP's success and its attendant fame amounted to 'not the sweet, rosy thing anybody expects', she acted to withdraw.

'Artistically I have high aspirations,' she says. 'I don't want to do anything less than the best I can do.' ☺



ORIGINAL LP

Diamond Life hit UK shops on July the 16th, 1984, and US stores seven months later on February the 23rd, 1985. Released in Britain on Epic Records [EPC 26044], and in the US on its sister label Portrait, the album looked and sounded like little else at the time, as the New Romantic era faded and chart music evolved towards the electronic pop of artists such as Yazoo and The Pet Shop Boys. Instead, the record offered a visual throwback to the cool, sophisticated be-bop jazz covers of the 1950s, while designer Graham Smith's sleeve owed a debt, perhaps, to Otis Redding's *Otis Blue* and the look of some of the hipper 1960s R'n'B albums.

The LP's distinctive sound was realised by producer Robin Millar (Big Country, Fine Young Cannibals, Everything But the Girl), who conquered blindness to become known as The Original Smooth Operator.

This gatefold sleeve LP found a natural home at Epic, a US label owned by Sony which had begun life as a jazz imprint some 30 years earlier. Due to its enormous success and multi-million sales, the original vinyl pressing is in plentiful supply and can be acquired with ease online or at record outlets in decent condition for just four or five pounds.

ORIGINAL CD

The album's vinyl release coincided with the emergence of the new Compact Disc format, so that digital versions of the album were on sale simultaneously. Indeed Philips, which pioneered the CD, and other labels must have been secretly delighted at the timing of the record, which acted as a great promotional device: a modern, sexy album which showcased the sonic attributes and compact

aesthetics of this exciting new medium. Issued in the UK as Epic 481178 2, the CD also received an early release in Japan, in December 1984 [32.8P-61] as well as Germany and the US.

Even at the time of the CD's release, Epic had wanted to send a few tracks to the US for some 'cool' mixes from the likes of Quincy Jones, but Sade herself steadfastly refused, saying the album was exactly how she wanted it.

Later, US hip-hop giants such as Jay-Z and the Neptunes paid their own respects to the singer by reworking some of her tunes.

CASSETTE/REISSUES

Spain and the Netherlands were among the first territories to release the album on tape [40-26044], a still-thriving format that would also see it issued the following year in the US and Canada (on chrome tape); in Yugoslavia on the Zagreb-based Suzy imprint; and unofficially in Indonesia as Pan Audio 9041 (complete with a couple of Everything But The Girl tracks!). In fact, the spreading popularity of the album over the next two or three years saw it getting a licensing foothold in nations not traditionally associated with record manufacturing – for instance, Turkey [Uzelli cassette 26044, B.02, 1987] and the German Democratic Republic (ie, the former Communist East Germany) on Amiga, a former sub-label of Deutsche Schallplatten Berlin founded shortly after the Second World War.

Meanwhile, vinyl versions were appearing in Mexico [LNS-17458], Peru [SE 3374] and even Nigeria [BFR 39581], as this British-made soul-jazz classic went on to sell 10m copies around the globe.

REMASTERED/JAPANESE CDS

At the turn of the Millennium, *Diamond Life* was given its first comprehensive remastering at Sterling Sound in New York, courtesy of Tom Coyne, known for his work throughout the 1980s on R'n'B and dance-flavoured records who has become one of the most respected mastering engineers in black music in the US.

Similar releases followed in the UK and Europe (some containing stickers bearing the legend: 'Sade.

Remastered 2000'), and five years later a Japanese remaster [MHCP 603] was on the market, too.

Citing the album's continued scope for re-invention, producer Robin Millar says he is grateful that a device such as Auto-Tune did not exist at the time. 'One of the things that makes a string section sound so great is that they're all playing with a slightly different sound, pitch and timing,' he says. 'If you tune them all up they sound smaller and thinner. Sinatra used to sing slightly flat all the time, and so did Sade – that's what gave her that melancholic sound.'

Japan produced two further remastered issues – a high-quality Blu-specCD in 2009 [MHCP 603]; and in 2013 as an item marketed as Blu-specCD2.



AUDIOPHILE VINYL

Last year saw the release of a 180 gram LP on Audio Fidelity Records [AFZLP 089] in a gatefold sleeve. Made at the RTI plant in Camarillo, California, it was mastered by Kevin Gray at CoHearent Audio.

A lesser pressing appeared on the Music On Vinyl imprint, Sony's favoured vinyl partner while a US Portrait 180 gram pressing also exists, although reports of the quality tend to vary.

Despite its myriad formats, *Diamond Life* is an album that demands to be heard on vinyl – a record to be played all the way through, and as classy and timeless as the format itself.



The UFO Club, *London W1*

The reasons for its success led ultimately to its downfall, the club closing its doors less than a year after it opened them. **Steve Sutherland** continues his tour of the world's legendary live music venues with a trip back in time to the UFO in central London

The weekend starts here! is what the makers of ITV's fabulous pop show *Ready Steady Go!* told their avid viewers early every Friday night in the early 1960s, just when the UK started swinging. And that, indeed, was the way it was until things took a turn for the weird at the end of '66, the show coming off the air in December, the self-same month that a mover and shaker in the London underground scene called John 'Hoppy' Hopkins and a young American music nerd called Joe Boyd launched UFO, the place where, if you were in with the in-crowd, the weekend *really* took off.

Housed in the Blarney Club, an old Irish dancehall under the Gala Berkeley Cinema in the basement of 31 Tottenham Court Road, UFO was arguably the most happening club London's infamous nightlife had ever seen. The action kicked off around 10.30pm – music was banned before then because it interfered with the movies being shown upstairs – and wound up around 6am, when the tubes began running to take people home: the seven-and-a-half hours most conveniently about the same length of time it took many of the club's clientele to go up and come down off an acid trip.



KEN ROE



↑ The Blarney Club pictured in the 1960s. The entrance to UFO was through a door below the 'Blarney' sign. To the right is the venue as it looks today

↗ Club ad from the February 1967 issue of *International Times*

← UFO club co-owner, Joe Boyd, in 2008

From the start, UFO was more than just any old gig. Bands played, sure, but they showed lots of movies too – old Charlie Chaplin or Marilyn Monroe ones, and freakier Andy Warhol ones too. Mad professors like Jack Henry Moore, Dermot Harvey, Jack Bracelin, Mark Boyle and Joan Hills did wonderful things with glass slides, coloured liquids and lights, producing visual extravaganzas every bit as absorbing and groundbreaking as their hippie counterparts in the ballrooms of Summer Of Love San Francisco.

NO ALCOHOL

Macrobiotic grub was on sale, there were stalls selling underground newspapers like IT (*International Times*) and there was no bar so alcohol tended not to be the crowd's stimulant of choice. Posters were provided by Haphash & The Coloured Coat, a partnership of Michael English and Nigel Haymouth which captured the essence of

London's pop-art scene, and admission was 10s (50p in today's money) – a bargain from whichever wonky angle you looked at it.

UFO debuted on the 23rd of December 1966, advertised as UFO Presents Nite Tripper, and the inaugural acts were Soft Machine, a bunch of jazz-loving experimentalists from the Canterbury region who named themselves after a William Burroughs book, and The Pink Floyd, a group of ex-architecture students from Cambridge who were embracing free-form, spaced-out psychedelia with some gusto.

Fronted by a saucer-eyed guitarist called Syd Barrett who would go so Billy bonkers within two years that his pals would have to ditch him, the Floyd would play for hours on end while the lightshows transformed their sets into mind-boggling multimedia experiences.

The Floyd and Soft Machine were pretty much the house bands in the club's early days, playing separately or on the same bill for the first few months until, eventually, notable others interrupted their residency. The Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band, a satirical bunch of merry pranksters fronted by a crazed ginger posho



Original poster for UFO by Hapshash & The Coloured Coat for a Pink Floyd appearance on July the 28th, 1967

Pink Floyd, who played on the club's opening night

Also on stage at the club regularly were Robin Williamson (left) and Mike Heron of The Incredible String Band

The Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band pose for a United Artists press shot with Vivian Stanshall, second from right

Procol Harum, who played at the UFO in June 1967



called Vivian Stanshall, performed in early February 1967, and just over a month later, the equally nutty Arthur Brown took to the stage with his Crazy World. Arthur would soon terrify the nation's TV audience, appearing on *Top Of The Pops* with a burning cauldron perched atop his head, screaming 'Fire' – one of the spookiest numbers ever to torment the BBC charts.

SOCIAL DEVIANTS

Other UFO regulars included The Social Deviants, featuring Mick Farren, a feisty fellow who plied his various trades as novelist, journalist, singer and club doorman with true anti-establishment zeal. More of Mick later. The Graham Bond Organisation also played, fronted by the troubled keyboard player who gave the band its name. Sadly, some say in fear of the devil, he chucked himself under a tube train at Finsbury Park station in '74 to put an end to it all.

The Incredible String Band, the awesomely talented aristocrats of psych-folk, also weaved their magic there, club co-owner Joe Boyd eventually producing *5000 Spirits*



Or The Layers Of The Onion, Wee Tam & The Big Huge, The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter and other gems that made up the cream of their much-treasured long-playing output.

If one night stood out from all these groovy goings-on, it was the 9th of June when a band who actually came from just down the road in Richmond but appeared to have arrived in a puff of coloured smoke from nowhere, charmed the UFO audience with a Bach-enthused ditty called 'A Whiter Shade Of Pale'.

CELEBRITY CROWD

Arguably the anthem of The Summer Of Love, Procol Harum attracted a celebrity crowd to the club including The Who's Pete Townshend (a regular) and Beatle Paul McCartney who, on another occasion, got himself a nasty case of temporary tinnitus by standing too near the speakers while Soft Machine played.

The Harum's support that night were The Smoke, all the way from York, whose sole claim to fame was that their spiffing 'My Friend Jack (Eats Sugarlumps)' was considered such a fiendish exhortation to

gobble LSD that not only was it banned by the BBC but denounced in Harold Wilson's parliament.

Others who soundtracked the

capitol's most switched-on crowd were Geordie blues belter Eric Burdon, who was in the process of shedding one Animals line-up for another, R&B pioneers The Pretty Things, whose *SF Sorrow* is often claimed as the first concept album ever, Yardbird Jeff Beck doing his solo thing, The Move, who liked to smash up TVs on stage, and Family, the underground heroes from Leicester whose naughty exploits were scandalously fictionalised in the Jenny Fabian novel *Groupie*. ➤

'Pink Floyd and Soft Machine were the main house bands'

CLASSIC VENUES



Dantalian's Chariot also did their bit, fronted by jazz keyboardist Zoot Money and featuring future member of The Police, Andy Summers, on guitar. The Chariot were kinda the perfect UFO band – they performed in kaftans and white robes, had all their instruments painted white to reflect the light show, and made a great psychedelic single, 'Madman Running Through The Fields', which only the cognoscenti bought.

TOMORROW COMES

But once the Floyd had moved on to bigger gigs the club's house band were Tomorrow featuring future Yes guitarist Steve Howe, drummer John 'Twink' Alder, who went on to form The Pink Fairies, and handsome singer Keith West, who had his moment in the public spotlight as a solo artist with his rendering of Mark Wirtz's 'Excerpt From A Teenage Opera'.

Tomorrow were exactly where it was at in '67, their first single, 'My White Bicycle', a big underground hit (when Joe Boyd published his autobiography, he called it *White Bicycles – Making Music In The Sixties*) and their second, 'Revolution', pre-dating The Beatles' song of the same name by a year.

Hip radio DJ John Peel was a big Tomorrow fan and played them a lot



Peel session, broadcast on the 21st of September that year.

The seeds of the club's demise lay, characteristically enough, in a spontaneous action that occurred on Friday the 30th of June. Rolling Stones Mick Jagger and Keith Richards had just been banged up after police had raided a druggy party at Keith's country house, Redlands, following a tip-off from the *News Of The World*. The paper was acting out of malice after Mick had threatened to sue them over

a story they'd run about his drug-taking. It was a clear case of mistaken identity. They'd nailed the wrong Stone; the blitzed-out band

member who'd blabbed in a bar was the ill-fated guitarist, Brian Jones.

The draconian sentences handed down to Mick'n'Keef had prompted a bunch of militants, long-hairs and Stones fans to demonstrate outside the *News Of The World* offices in Bouverie Street, just off Fleet Street, on the evening of the 29th and, although the two Stones were now out on bail, feelings were still running high. Hoppy, who'd been busted himself the same month and described by the ill-named Judge Friend as 'a pest to society', had

on his Perfumed Garden show, the band recording the first ever John

visited Keith Richards in the cells and he arranged, with Mick Farren, to use the UFO PA to urge the club's members to embark on a second spontaneous demo.

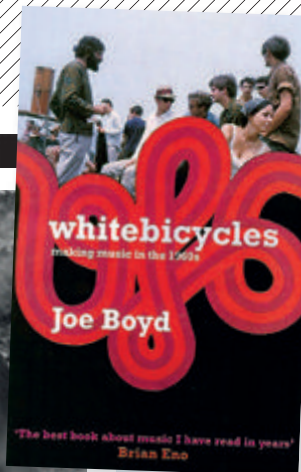
And so it was that at around midnight, the clubbers exited the Blarney, snaked their way down to Eros in Piccadilly Circus, then marched on the *NOTW* offices where the cops were waiting for them. Hoppy's girlfriend Suzy Creamcheese, was arrested, The Who's drummer, Keith 'The Loon' Moon, handed out homemade cardboard 'Free Mick & Keith' placards from his Bentley parked nearby, and Mick Farren got pretty badly duffed over.

CLUB EXPOSÉ

The battle weary eventually returned to UFO where they tended to their wounds while Tomorrow launched into a particularly ferocious version of the aforementioned 'Revolution'.

It didn't take long for the *News Of The World* to retaliate and its UFO exposé, packed with the same sordid formula of sex and drugs that saw it through the many decades until its demise, spooked Mr Gannon, the Blarney's owner, and he kicked UFO out into the street.

It staggered off to the Roundhouse in Camden for a while, but its perfect moment had already passed into legend. ☺



Joe Boyd's *White Bicycles – Making Music In The Sixties* is sold on Amazon UK

Kevin Ayers, Robert Wyatt and Mike Ratledge of Soft Machine. Inset ad is for a June appearance with Arthur Brown and The People Blues Band, who took to the stage at 4:30am

The Move, with a clean-shaven Roy Wood far left

Jeff Beck, who played a solo gig on September the 29th 1967



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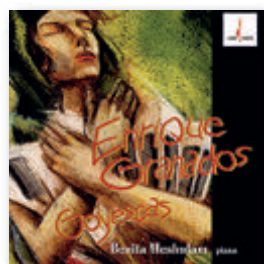
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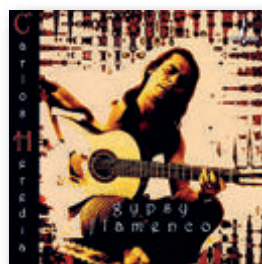
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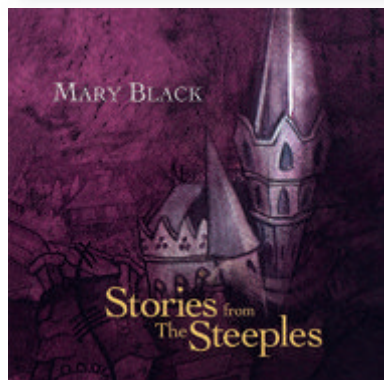
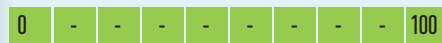
The Band

Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-419 (180g vinyl)

Yes, this received '90%' last month for the SACD, but the vinyl is something else. To recap, The Band's eponymous sophomore LP, from 1969, is – for many – the finest thing they ever did.

Then again, The Band's practice sessions are better than 99% of the world's musicians could hope to match. Here we have stunning examples of Americana-via-Canada as 'The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down', 'Rag Mama Rag', 'Up On Cripple Creek' – what am I talking about? Every single one of the dozen tracks is a treasure, this album responsible for doing more to sire alt.rock and roots music than any other. With a first-state US pressing, you will hear differences, but I think many will prefer this vibrant reissue. *KK*

Sound Quality: 92%



MARY BLACK

Stories From The Steeples

Pure Pleasure PPAN 015 (180g vinyl)

Black's first recording in six years rewards the faithful who cherish her uncanny ability to sound contemporary despite being inextricably a part of the Irish folk tradition. Its strengths are the impeccable musicianship and seductive sound, somehow managing to be polite and genteel, without ever becoming cloying. The atmosphere she creates is mournful – I did say 'Irish folk tradition', right? – but songs like 'Fifi The Flea' and 'The Night Is On Our Side' lighten up the mood. Three superstar duets, with Imelda May, Finbar Furey and the legendary Janis Ian, add a sense of occasion to an event Black's followers would celebrate regardless. *KK*

Sound Quality: 87%



LYNYRD SKYNYRD

Second Helping

Analogue Productions APP-413 (180g vinyl)

MoFi may have the rest of their catalogue, but Chad Kassem's coup is grabbing this album, the band's second, from 1974. Why? Because it kicks off with their anthem, the inimitable, riff-driven, majestic 'Sweet Home Alabama' – one of the greatest air-guitar/road trip songs ever. By this time, the band was a mite slicker but just as unapologetically Confederate-with-a-capital-'C' as on their debut. The opener does overshadow the rest, but the album serves up what the LP title promises in 'The Needle And The Spoon', which sounds like 'Sweet Home Alabama II'. Musically, this nestles alongside Little Feat and The Allman Brothers Band – deservedly high praise. *KK*

Sound Quality: 87%



SAVOY BROWN

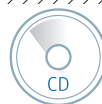
Blue Matter

Decca Deram 375 065-9 (180g vinyl)

Never appreciated as much here as in the USA, Savoy Brown was part of the British Blues Revival, but always seemed to be treated as also-rans compared to Fleetwood Mac, Mayall's Bluesbreakers and others who earned more 'respect' back home. Perhaps it's because they worked the US gig circuit with a vengeance, where they became part of a cadre that included Humble Pie, Judas Priest and other bands that could boogie and/or fill Yankee stadia. This characteristic mix of studio and live recordings from 1969, however, features enough hard-core blueswork, with sinuous guitar playing and soulful vocals, to warrant a reassessment. They're still out there, gigging away. *KK*

Sound Quality: 83%





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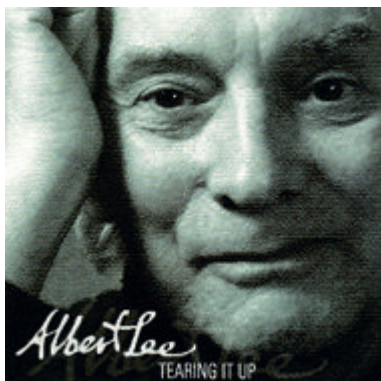
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ALBERT LEE Tearing It Up

AIX 85054 (Blu-ray)

One of the UK's greatest guitarists, in a live-in-the-studio video, no-overdubs, a bona fide audiophile extravaganza. First, the music: stupendous yet low-keyed country-flavoured rock, Lee nodding to his role as a one-time member of The Crickets ('Rock Around With Ollie Vee'), plenty of Gram Parsons/Everlys reverence (a gorgeous 'Sleepless Nights') and even a cover of the old Heads, Hands & Feet track, 'Country Boy'. If you love Chet Atkins or Mark Knopfler in finger-pickin' mode, this will thrill you. As for the audiophile element, you can choose 5.1 Dolby TrueHD mixes from the stage or the audience, a mix of the two, or 96kHz/24-bit PCM in stereo. **KK**

Sound Quality: 90%



YES Close To The Edge

AudioFidelity AFZ147 (gold SACD hybrid)

After the 12-album box set, this disc's arrival may seem an anti-climax – but not if you love SACD. Fans know that it has been reissued at least ten times in myriad formats; this lacks bonus material, just the three tracks from the 1972 LP. But the 38-minute playing time tells you, depending on your intellectual leanings, that it is either (as critics agree) a true prog rock milestone, or a pile of self-indulgent guano best digested with hallucinogens. You know how I feel about this musical equivalent of Tourette's, and I miss the Yes of the first few albums. But, damn, the sound is spectacular! So, can anyone recommend a wine that gives the same buzz as pot? **KK**

Sound Quality: 88%



VARIOUS MoFi Collection 2

Mobile Fidelity SACD-S2 (gold SACD)

One hopes that this series continues as long as *Now That's What I Call Music*: it's a great way both to experience SACD and sample a catalogue with a one-off purchase, instead of gambling on discs with audiophile prices. Again, MoFi has produced a sampler with superb tunes, no fillers – nine here, running to 38 minutes – including 'China Grove' by The Doobie Brothers, Foghat's 'Slow Ride', 'Feels Like The First Time' by Foreigner, The Pretenders' 'Back On The Chain Gang' and songs from Rickie Lee Jones, Gram Parsons, Ray Charles, Los Lobos and – my personal fave – Marshall Crenshaw's classic, 'Someday Someway'. So, in rock terms, something for everyone. Thanks, guys! **KK**

Sound Quality: 89%

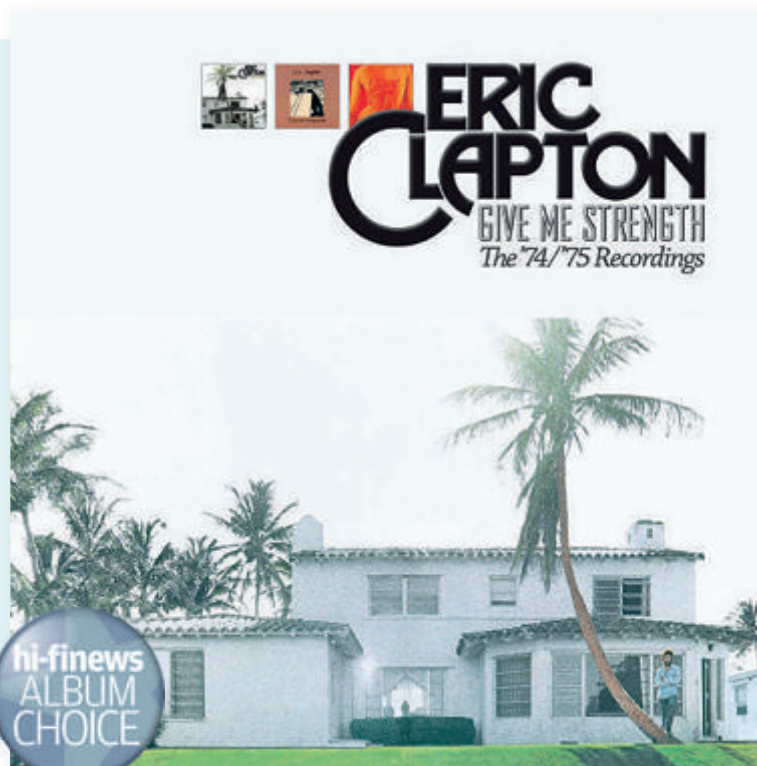
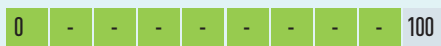


ERIC CLAPTON Give Me Strength

Polydor 0602537545940 (five CDs +1 Blu-ray Audio disc)

After the deluxe *Layla*, fans have another feast bordering on the gluttonous. Unusually, it may be the first time a rock artist's complete output from a specific period has been packaged this way: extended versions of **461 Ocean Boulevard**, *There's One In Every Crowd* and the live *EC Was Here* on three CDs; CDs of his sessions with the late Freddie King and live tracks from the period; plus the two studio albums also offered in Blu-ray Audio – this year's thing – with **461** in 5.1 surround and both in period quadraphonic! Best remembered as his comeback years, the music is the now-familiar blues-plus-roots-rock, the sound is superb, the extras a joy. Also on LP and in a 2CD set, but devotees will want this. **KK**

Sound Quality: 90%





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JUNE IN THE FIELDS



JUNE IN THE FIELDS

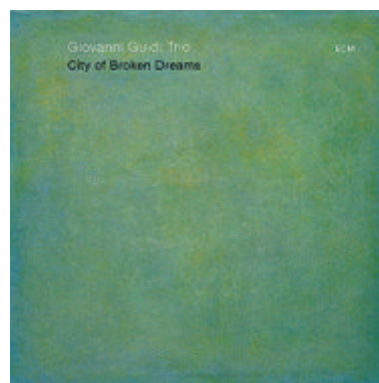
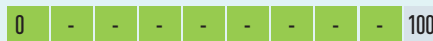
June In The Fields (192kHz/24-bit; FLAC/DSD64)

www.hiresaudio.com; Fidelio FACD044

This collection of chilled-out country/folk songs by the curiously-named June In The Fields duo of composer Jean-Michel Renaud (guitar/vocal) and singer Mélissa Brouillette hails from Canada's Fidelio Musique audiophile label. Visit a hi-fi show in North America and you might bump into recording engineer René LaFlamme – who runs Fidelio Musique in Montreal – demonstrating his recordings promoted with the tag line: 'We capture the feeling...'. This is an intimate set, the duo

accompanied on tracks such as 'Andaman Sea' and 'Summer Road' by Sebastien Saliceti on double-bass to flesh out the sparse arrangements. The vocals in particular have been beautifully captured by LaFlamme's all-tube mic and preamplifier set-up to produce a 'charming' sound that's exceedingly cosy and seductive, if a tad lacking air and space. A pleasing debut outing from this Canadian folk duo. *JB*

Sound Quality: 84%



GIOVANNI GUIDI TRIO

City Of Broken Dreams (48kHz/24-bit; FLAC/ALAC)

www.hiresaudio.com; ECM 2274

Still in his 20s, acclaimed pianist Giovanni Guidi is regarded as one of the most original and inventive pianists on the Italian jazz scene. While he accompanied trumpeter Enrico Rava on his ECM albums *Tribe* and the live *On The Dancefloor* this is his first album for the label as a band leader, where his creatively daring improvisations are shared with American bassist Thomas Morgan and Portuguese drummer João Lobo. 'The Forbidden Zone' demonstrates Guidi's talent for creating sublimely haunting atmospheres, its meditative melody achingly beautiful in its apparent simplicity. And 'Just One More Time', in which the bass and drums are given space to work out, highlights the recording's splendidly natural feeling of musicians performing in a room. Highly recommended for fans of progressive jazz that pushes the boundaries of a traditional acoustic trio. *JB*

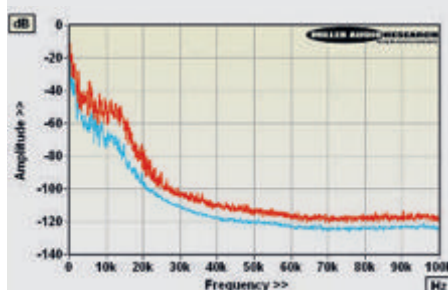
Sound Quality: 82%



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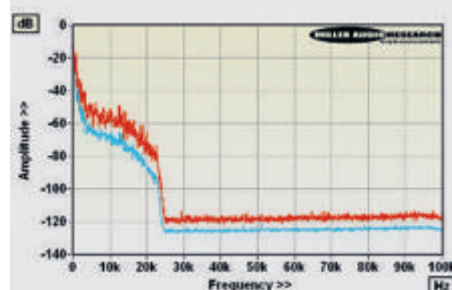
Following our Investigation feature [*HFN*, Jun '11] where we examined the claimed quality of high-resolution downloads, *Hi-Fi News & Record Review* is now measuring the true sample rate and bit-depth of the HD music downloads reviewed on these pages. These unique reviews will be a regular source of information for those seeking new and re-mastered recordings offered at high sample rates and with the promise of delivering the very best sound quality. (Note: asterisk in headings denotes technical reservation explained below.) PM

LAB REPORT



Recorded direct to analogue tape with no pitch correction or mixing, the bandwidth of this 192kHz/24-bit digitisation is necessarily slightly limited (a 96kHz transfer would have captured no less). But it's very pure indeed. PM

LAB REPORT



While Giovanni's piano rarely stretches above 8kHz, the 'space' between 5-20kHz is generously occupied by João Lobo's percussion as here in trk 9 *Ocean View*. Percussion and bass feeds are slightly 'noisier' than the piano's. PM



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AYO

Ticket To The World (96kHz/24-bit; FLAC)*

www.hiresaudio.com; Universal/Mercury 3748573

Nigerian-German singer-songwriter Joy Olanumibo Ogunmakin – stage name Ayo – has enjoyed considerable success in Europe since her 2007 debut album *Joyful* and its follow-up *Gravity At Last*, both produced by renowned American sound engineer Jay Newland. This is her fourth studio album, produced and mixed by Newland once again, containing both the original version of her 2013 single 'Fire' and its subsequent remix featuring Congolese-French rapper Youssoupha [see Lab Report]. As usual her songs cover a mix of styles from reggae and rap to the country-esque 'Justice' and the beautiful ballad 'Fallin' that bears comparison with Joan Armatrading at her most heartfelt. Standout tracks such as 'Teach Love' and 'Complain' showcase the album's superior recording quality, with the backing instruments separated across a believable soundstage. *JB*

Sound Quality: 80%



MOZART/BEETHOVEN

Piano Concerto K491/Piano Concerto 3; Yevgeny Sudbin, Minneapolis SO/Osmo Vänskä (96kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

www.eclassical.com; BIS BIS-1978

I don't think these two C-minor concertos have been coupled on records before, in spite of obvious connections. As if to stress these, the Mozart is given a Beethovenian vigour and scale – not inappropriately. For K491 Sudbin offers his own cadenzas: in (i) reminiscent of Lvb's cadenza for K466. These are quite stylish if indulgently long, but it's a shame he introduces such fanciful textual elaborations in (ii), from 6m 15s to 7m 06s – especially given his sensitivity to timing and phrasing in the Beethoven slow movement (the piano is a Steinway D). Vänskä's Oct '13 resignation from the Minneapolis Orchestra, at the time bogged down in labour disputes, means that BIS's Beethoven Concertos project (we've already had No.4 and the *Emperor*) will continue with the Tapiola Sinfonietta. *CB*

Sound Quality: 80%



BIRTH OF THE SYMPHONY

Handel to Haydn; Academy of Ancient Music/ Richard Egarr (96kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

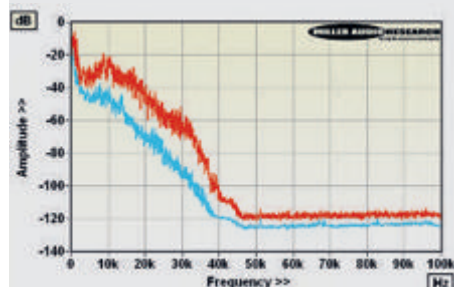
www.hiresaudio.com; AAM Records AAM 001

Produced/engineered by Philip Hobbs in Sept '11, for AAM Records' first release, this programme takes us from the *Sinfonia* from Handel's *Saul* to Haydn's F-minor Symphony 49, 'La Passione', via works by FX Richter, Stamitz and Mozart: the remarkable K16 – written when he was eight! There's a related documentary at www.aam.co.uk/birthofthesymphony where Egarr and leader Pavlo Beznosiuk describe the pieces and their salient features (such as the 'busy' bowing in the Stamitz opening *Presto*) intercut with film from concert performance – the two natural horns are quite a sight. The lively acoustic of St Jude on the Hill, London, adds a complementary bloom to the sound of this small authentic instruments orchestra; the playing is energetic, with flowing slow movements and wide contrasts, *piano* to *forte*. *CB*

Sound Quality: 80%

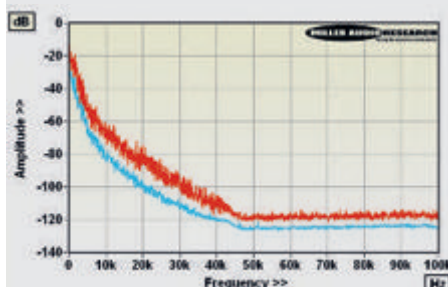


LAB REPORT



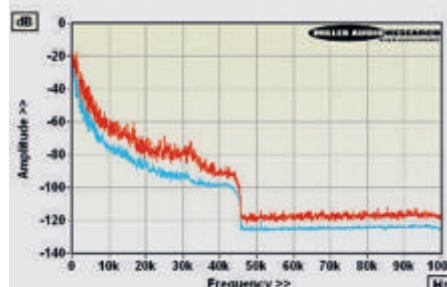
Tracks 7 ('Who') and 16 ('Fire' remix) are upsampled 44.1kHz (CD) content while the remainder are true 96kHz files. Whether the ultrasonic 'energy' here is music or distortion from downstream compression/limiting is uncertain. *PM*

LAB REPORT



Although this coupling is available on SACD (stereo and 5.0), the original recording was sampled off Neumann mics at 96kHz and this is the file offered here. The *Allegro* movements have genuine widebandwidth content. *PM*

LAB REPORT



No details were provided but the levels of noise suggest this was originally an analogue recording (or the mic preamps, perhaps?). Otherwise this is a true, uncompressed 96kHz/24-bit rendering with peaks rarely exceeding -6dBfs. *PM*



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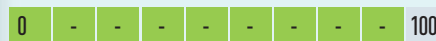
THE WAR ON DRUGS

Lost In The Dream

Secretly Canadian SC310

On the first two albums, Philadelphia's War On Drugs was largely just mainman Adam Granduciel, but since then he's played live so much that he's started to conceive his songs with his touring band in mind. As a result, *Lost In The Dream* displays the benefits and disadvantages of delegating elements of the sound to other musicians. The downside is that Granduciel's uniquely quirky take on songwriting is often submerged, but the organic sound of a working band gives this outing a fresh immediacy. The result, unexpectedly, often sounds like Bob Dylan backed by Dire Straits, but Granduciel is a smart enough composer to avoid mere pastiche. Rich in lyrical imagery, this is great stuff. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 90%



PAUL RODGERS

The Royal Sessions

429 Records FTN17976

A potential marriage made in heaven has ended up as an unsatisfactory fling. Paul Rodgers, frontman of Free and Bad Company, is blessed with a great voice and a lifelong love of Memphis soul. Recording ten genre classics in Royal Studios – home of the legendary Hi Records – should have been a breeze but Rodgers has forgotten that the joy of the originals was often their concise simplicity. There are several competent tracks, but too often he stretches 3m originals up to six minutes and over-emotes disastrously. The worst? In 'Walk On By', re-imagined as a 1970s Philly-soul epic, he ad libs 'You put the hurt on me, you socked it to me Mama'. Nufsed. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 81%



THE RED PINE TIMBER COMPANY

Different Lonesome

Red Pine Records RCD001

This is the latest incarnation of Gavin JD Munro, a prolific, capable songsmith whose 30-year career has taken him through combos including Rain Dogs, Neverglades, Wolftrain, Red Bus and most recently, Southpaw. As ever, it's rootsy Americana (via Perth, Scotland) and the eight-piece band delivers a convincing approximation of the sounds you might hear in a smoky Texas bar, via some sturdy murder ballads, boozy ruminations and tales of duplicitous women. The inclusion of a horn section, a fiddle and excellent backing vocalist Katie Whittaker, broadens their textural palette but Munro sadly lack the originality that could make them special. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 85%



MT WARNING

Midnight Set

Mount Warning Music MTWCD04P

MT Warning, a collaboration between Australian singer-songwriter Mikey Bee and film-maker Taylor Steel, has delivered a thoughtful concept album as its debut. Notionally, the songs illustrate one man's journey through life, but they can just as easily be enjoyed as intelligent rock whose brooding, introspective quality elevates this duo above the pack. 'Forward Miles', with its haunting vocal chant and optimistic lyric, is beautifully constructed and switches moods from contemplative to triumphant via transitions as natural as real-life mood swings. Melodic, life-affirming and emotionally stirring, this is a damn fine start to, hopefully, a very long career. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 85%



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STEVE GADD

Gadditude

Challenge Records BFM77055

If the line-up here seems familiar, that's because the Steve Gadd Band heard here has also travelled the world as James Taylor's band. Composer and keyboard master Larry Goldings has worked with Tracy Chapman, Norah Jones and many other stars, trumpeter Walt Fowler played with Zappa and Johnny 'Guitar' Watson in the 1970s, while guitarist Michael Landau and bassist Jimmy Johnson have impressive credits too. Playing for their own pleasure, they relax into many different styles, covering Keith Jarrett's 'Country' and 'The Windup' and Abdullah Ibrahim's 'The Mountain', then inventing an oniony groove 'Green Foam'. Great fun, and SQ too. *SH*

Sound Quality: 80%



RALPH ALESSI

Baida

ECM 3725304

For his ECM debut, the virtuoso trumpeter reconvened a quartet that first appeared on some tracks of his 2002 album *This Against That* and on all of *Cognitive Dissonance* in 2010. He'd worked before with bassist Drew Gress and drummer Nasheet Waits, but the final link was pianist Jason Moran who, Alessi says, knew how to orchestrate his compositions 'in an improvised way'. Recorded at Avatar Studios in New York, this is music of astonishing rhythmic precision, yet with a sense of ease and completeness, helped by a gorgeous, glossy studio sound that's as beguiling as Alessi's constantly surprising melodies. It just gets more accessible each time you listen. *SH*

Sound Quality: 85%



MAX ROACH QUINTET

Lausanne 1960 Part I

TCB 02352

Later in 1960, Roach would record his epochal *Freedom Now Suite*, but this clean mono recording from the Swiss radio archives captures him with his excellent piano-less quintet. You can find material from other venues on the tour, but these performances are released for the first time. In the front line are the great trumpeter Tommy Turrentine with his more famous brother Stanley, on fabulous form here. Roach is a guiding presence, even on 'Prelude' where he doesn't play, but then on 'Night In Tunisia' he comes in and drives like a hot desert wind. Incredibly, this is the 35th title in a seemingly endless series, yet it's a gem. And Part II is still to come. *SH*

Sound Quality: 80%



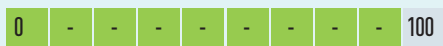
DANILO PÉREZ

Panama 500

Mack Avenue MAC1075

Though the title refers to Balbao's arrival in 1513, the Panamanian-born pianist's musical exposition of his country's history starts further back, with the culture of the indigenous Guna people. We hear Pérez with his colleagues from the long-established Wayne Shorter Quartet, bass player John Patitucci and drummer Brian Blade, but many other musicians are involved. There are lyrical contributions from violin and cello, Panamanian percussion from Milagros Blades and Ricarte Villareal, and a group of Guna musicians who provide percussion, chants and narrations. This dramatic opus will take hold of you, striking home from the first notes with passion, virtuosity and commitment. Listen first and the story will follow. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%



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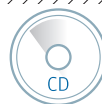
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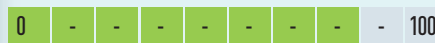
BRAHMS

Symphonies 1-4; Tragic and Academic Festival Overtures; Haydn Variations; 2 Intermezzi; Liebeslieder-Walzer, etc
Leipzig Gewandhausorchester/Riccardo Chailly

Decca 478 5344 (three discs); 96kHz/24-bit download at Linn Records

There's a whiff of Brechtian alienation about these Chailly interpretations, where he seeks to clear the accretions of 'tradition'. Inner parts come to the fore but they can be like looking at bright mosaic pieces in closeup – the *Haydn Variations* are an extreme example. So why a 'choice' album? For the rare pieces on CD3, where Chailly suddenly charms with the nine *Liebeslieder* waltzes; and where we can hear Brahms's earlier slow movement for Symphony 1 (also a part of the Mackerras/Telarc cycle). The sheer quality of the current Leipzig orchestra is pretty breathtaking. It certainly puts Masur's 1970s Philips set in the shade. **CB**

Sound Quality: 80%



BEETHOVEN

Piano Sonatas (Vol.2): Opp.22-53; Andante favori
Jean-Efflam Bavouzet

Chandos CHAN 10798(3) (three discs); download up to 96kHz/24-bit

This second box takes us up to the *Waldstein*, via the *Moonlight*, *Pastorale*, *Tempest*, two 'Sonates faciles', et al: 11 sonatas in all plus the *Andante (favori)* WoO.57. Bavouzet brings his personal elegance to the music and with his consummate technical ease might be seen as the 'Gallic Friedrich Gulda' – although in his first Decca cycle, at least, the Austrian pianist sounded more 'inside' the music. Bavouzet's playing suggests a certain detachment, even if he seems to be enjoying all these sonatas. The piano is a Steinway D and the sound, from Pottin Hall, Suffolk, is very good. **CB**

Sound Quality: 75%



HAYDN/BEETHOVEN/MOZART

Symphony 55; Piano Concerto 4/Symphony 39
Nikita Magaloff, BPO/Rudolf Kempe

Testament SBT 1492 (mono)

The rather thick mono recording cannot dim the sparkle of this 1962 Salzburg Festival concert. Further testament (pun optional) to Kempe's artistry, it brings two new works to his discography, adding a second Haydn symphony, 'The Schoolmaster', and the Beethoven concerto (there's already an RPO Mozart 39 on this label). Perhaps Magaloff's adroit, idiomatic playing is the one surprise here: he's mostly remembered for his fine Stravinsky Decca coupling with Ansermet and a poorly received big Chopin Philips box. It's good to have this guest engagement with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra on CD. **CB**

Sound Quality: 80%



MAHLER

Symphony 1
Chicago SO/Carlo Maria Giulini

Hi-Q Records HIQLP035

Mahler's First Symphony (which Karajan found 'too Jewish' and Klemperer also rejected) was one of only three Mahler works conducted by the fastidious Giulini – along with the Ninth [DG/Speakers Corner] and *Das Lied von der Erde*. This 1971 Medinah Temple recording [EMI ASD 2722] was produced by Christopher Bishop with engineer Carson Taylor – the sound has a very solid bass. Giulini's finely balanced performance is stately, sober, and in the difficult finale even rugged. This comes off well. But his obvious reverence for the music robs it of parody in (iii) and vernal freshness in the opening movement. **CB**

Sound Quality: 70%





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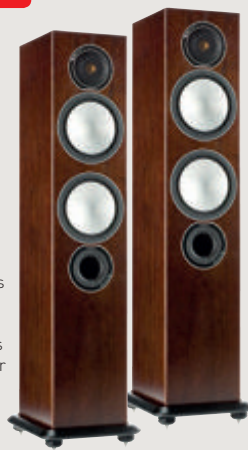
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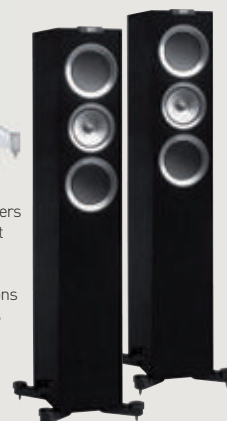
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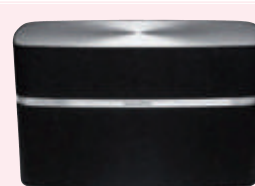
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Paul Miller Editor

Technician and writer on all things audio for some 30 years, Paul Miller took over the editor's chair in 2006. He invented the QC Suite, used across the audio industry

A little bit of madness

If you thought the days of audio add-ons promising improved sound without a shred of scientific evidence as proof were now behind us, then you'd be mistaken. As **Paul Miller** recently found out

Many enthusiasts still rue the day the digital revolution began and, surprising to some perhaps, it's a view with which I have some sympathy. CD not only ushered in an era of instant musical gratification but it also heralded a progressively hands-off approach to hi-fi replay. Before CD we were not only immersed in the ritual of spinning LPs but also fascinated by the arcane arts of turntable set-up and optimisation.

It was the era of the guru but it was also the era of snake oil. And if it's one thing I don't miss, it's the bad old days of pseudo-scientific claptrap conceived to persuade the open-minded but susceptible audiophile into trading cash for imaginary gains in performance.

It's just human nature that, having just shelled out hundreds of pounds on a magic brush, a bottle of holy water or a strip of sticky blobs to dot about the listening room, few consumers are likely to admit they've made a

foolish mistake. After all, if we think we can hear a difference then that's surely good enough. The fact that leaving the room and returning with a cup of tea, adjusting the central heating or spraying some air freshener into the atmosphere is just as likely to invoke a change in sound quality is neither here nor there. But that's the power of suggestion...

BEYOND THE FRINGE

These sorts of fringe accessories are very much harder to get away with in today's world of highly engineered hi-fi. I'm not talking about cables here, though we've all been exposed to some pretty fanciful claims for lengths of copper wire. I'm thinking about the *objets d'art* of audio, not directly in the signal path but somehow imbued with mystical powers

that influence its flow and perception. I really thought this sort of thing had gone the way of the dodo.

NOT AN AMPLIFIER

However, a recent and thoroughly unexpected experience at this year's CES proved a rude reawakening. I was photographing a very large pair of loudspeakers when my attention was drawn to a couple of diminutive silver boxes sitting on the floor next to each cabinet. If these were power amplifiers then surely they were a Class D design of some description that I'd not seen

before. But no. Instead, I was informed, these were mains power distribution blocks, plugged into the wall socket but otherwise left untethered to any of the partnering equipment. The real power amplifiers were

actually some yards away, packed into an equipment rack alongside a raft of sources and software.

MILDLY SINISTER

So far so puzzling. I could accept that some active hunk of electronics plugged into the same mains supply as the rest of the system *might* impact on the overall sound but then this was a hotel environment and there were countless bits of kit plugged into every available outlet in every room along the corridor.

But then events took a turn for the mildly sinister as I was invited into hi-fi's netherworld where the precise position of these boxes in the room could influence the sound of the system. Something to do with a radiated field that interacted with the magnetic environment of the



ABOVE: Are unproven audio 'fringe accessories' much harder to sell in today's world of highly engineered hi-fi?

loudspeakers. And here's me thinking we had legislation to deal with this sort of interference. Now the proprietor's expression darkened as I was informed that these exquisite subtleties could only be appreciated in a 'truly high-end system' and, by unspoken implication, by listeners far more receptive than this dullard who stood before him.

Any pretence of rational explanation was abandoned and my presence in the room was clearly surplus to requirements. You just had to believe in this stuff. To the evident frustration of my temporary host, I was clearly not sufficiently susceptible. Did I say that? I meant sensitive.

For numerous reasons I'm not naming names and while I've little interest in perpetuating this creed with the oxygen of publicity, neither do I have a problem accepting other enthusiasts' belief systems. However, I *do* object to my (professional) requirements for straightforward explanations being met with thinly-disguised disdain. Is this how a hi-fi customer would be treated in similar circumstances? I seriously hope not, because it was this very attitude that damaged the credibility of our industry as a whole, back in the day. ☹

'Events took a turn as I was invited into hi-fi's netherworld'



Barry Fox Technology journalist

Barry Fox trained in electronics with the RAF and worked as a patent agent, but he gave that up to enter journalism. He is one of the world's top technology writers

Talking DJ

Barry Fox hears the government's latest announcements regarding digital radio as a recent advertising campaign fails to impress one BBC Radio DJ. Then there's talk of a new DAB chip...

Trade body Digital Radio UK has been running radio, TV and cinema adverts that feature a 'soulman' puppet, with Barry White-style voice, who wants to 'spread the luv' for DAB. If you are among those who wonder about the meaning and value of these adverts, then you would have enjoyed the closing moments of the Go Digital conference held at the BBC's New Broadcasting House near the end of last year.

BBC DJ presenter Simon Mayo had been called up on stage as a special guest to see the latest D Love advert.

'I hate those commercials,' Mayo burst out. 'I absolutely loathe them. They are patronising and I don't know what their message is supposed to be.'

To the obvious surprise of those who dreamed up the D Love campaign, Mayo's outburst brought spontaneous applause from many in the conference audience who have plainly been too polite to volunteer their feelings.

MORE BAD NEWS

The event had kicked off with more bad news for the DAB pack. Communications Minister Ed Vaizey has now abandoned government plans to switch off analogue radio in 2015, and can now only guardedly hope for 2020.

'We set ourselves a series of benchmarks,' Vaizey explained. 'Digital listening should be at 50%. Listening via digital – all platforms including DAB radio, digital TV and computer – is currently 35.6%. Coverage needs to match FM coverage for all stations moving from analogue. We are not there yet. Now is not the time to switch over.'

'Cars are the intractable problem,' Ed Vaizey went on, admitting what a

succession of previous government and industry policy-makers has naively failed to recognise: 20% of all radio listening is done in cars and 90% of the 30 million cars already on the road in the UK cannot receive DAB digital radio.

The fact that 41% of new cars now have DAB can't solve the intractable problem of 30 million cars, vans and trucks that will mostly never be upgraded – largely because the manufacturers cut corners with cheap aerial wiring that relies on an AM/FM signal boost from an active aerial that filters out the DAB band.

The best Minister Ed Vaizey can now promise is that 'a lot of people say 2020'.

But as Steve Holebrook, who heads Arqiva's transmitter network reminded, the way to ensure FM cover 'equivalence' is to set a firm switch-over date.

Here the UK could learn from the US, where the government drove analogue TV switch-off by giving TV viewers two \$40 coupons each to (almost) pay for analogue-to-digital set-top boxes. Also it was made illegal to sell analogue-only TVs and tuners.

If the UK government really wants to shut down AM and FM and sell the frequencies, then it should start a coupon scheme for DAB radio purchase and car conversion. Making it compulsory for all couponed radios to be DAB+ capable would prime the transition from DAB to DAB+ (as standard in Germany). If the FM frequencies are not worth selling, then

they could be left free for radio.

During the conference I asked Ed Vaizey whether he had considered adopting the US coupon policy for UK radio.

'We will look at it as we get close,' he replied. 'We first want to provide the opportunity to convert.'

A new scheme, due to be implemented this year, will oblige manufacturers of

'Ed Vaizey has now abandoned plans to switch off analogue radio in 2015'



ABOVE: Digital Radio UK's 'Spread the love' ad has split opinion as to its effectiveness

DAB radios to have them tested by a Government-approved facility, and carry a Digital Tick to signify compliance with the DAB specification and have DAB+ included. But Minister Vaizey could give no clear reassurance on how the Tick scheme will be policed to stop the sale of untested sub-spec radios by fly-by-night companies.

A NEW CHIP

On a more upbeat note Sir Hossein Yassaie, CEO of Imagination Technologies, confirmed that Imagination has been working with UK chip-maker Frontier Silicon to produce a chip that copes with all digital radio standards, anywhere in the world.

'And power drain is low so it will work in mobiles,' Yassaie told me.

The chip gives the radio display a unified service list of all broadcasts in all formats, available for reception.

Antony Sethill, CEO of Frontier Silicon, said that finished samples will go to radio manufacturers in two to three months. ☺



Barry Willis

Journalist for top American audio-video publications

While his main interest is high-end audio, Barry Willis also writes about the culinary industry, visual art and theatre for a huge variety of US newspapers and magazines

Digital antidote

As music lovers can we be overwhelmed by too much detail? After witnessing 'Ultra Definition' TV **Barry Willis** wonders if the appeal of analogue playback lies in its inherently imprecise output

Prominent among the Google glasses, driverless cars, and 'reality augmentation' devices that debuted at the 2014 Consumer Electronics Show were 4K video displays – bright, dazzling, and with far greater resolving power than commonplace high definition screens. Here and there were 8K displays with still more resolution, so new that no manufacturer wanted to be the first to quote a retail price.

The buzz was intense, even though there's no native content to feed these wonders, and won't be for a long time. 'Ultra Definition' video is a classic example of a fundamental fact of human nature: if anything seems possible, we'll try to achieve it – especially if it's a more impressive version of something already well known. It's also a fundamental fact of human nature that, often contrary to logic, we equate more with better, and seldom know when to say 'enough'.

LONG TERM VIEW

Ultra Definition may stun viewers during walk-by appraisals, but how will it play in the long run? Some curmudgeonly observers have noted the strong possibility that with prolonged viewing, its excruciating detail and super-saturated colour will prove tiring or even irritating.

This has certainly been the case for music fans. Digital technology's dynamics and detail would have been impossible for most listeners during the analogue era, yet it's common for people to say that they listen less often to music now than they did then, or that music has become background for other activities rather than a pursuit in itself. We are in the midst of a 'digititis' pandemic, one that many music fans

RIGHT: For hip 20- and 30-somethings, Polaroid cameras and old typewriters are among much sought-after analogue devices – for the same reasons old turntables and tape decks are coveted



are coping with by rediscovering analogue playback – vinyl records, open reel tape, and even cassettes.

In discussing the benefits of analogue, experts and enthusiasts speak rapturously of its 'infinite resolution' – a weighty, scientific-sounding, and comically meaningless term – as a reason for its superiority over digital. Mastering engineer Doug Sax did exactly that in a seminar at CES 2014, stating that analogue's 'infinite resolution' is the reason young listeners are attracted to vinyl, and that as a natural extension of this they will ultimately embrace high-resolution digital.

This sort of thinking misses the whole point of what makes analogue so comfortable: imprecision, not exactitude. Analogue records and tapes

don't resolve ultimate details. They let details fade gently into a background of random noise, like the way a live symphony plays into a sea of random noise generated by even the most respectful audience.

Surface noise, wear-induced grunge, and tape hiss provide a kind of sonic antidote against the astringency of too much detail. Analogue playback as it's

commonly known outside mastering studios doesn't mean exact recreation of recordings so much as approximation, a suggestion of something that happened some time ago.

Suggestions are easier to live with over time. Compare an impressionist painting of a cityscape with a photo-realistic depiction of the same scene – the same information conveyed in vastly different ways. The photo realistic painting astounds with its excruciating detail, but the unfocused impressionist painting engages more of your imagination, while demanding less of your attention.

RETURNING ENERGY

Given a choice, most art lovers would hang the impressionist piece in their homes. The photo realist piece sucks energy from viewers; the impressionist piece gently gives it back.

To understand fully the analogue revival, audio gurus would do well to pay attention to other artefacts popular among 20- and 30-somethings: typewriters and Polaroid cameras that are sought after for the mechanical ingenuity that went into their creation – and for their charmingly imprecise output.

As Korean-American writer Chang-rae Lee has said about owning real books, 'people crave physicality over virtuality'. ☺

'In discussing the benefits of analogue, experts speak of its "infinite resolution"'



Jim Lesurf Science Journalist

Jim Lesurf has spent a lifetime in audio, both as an engineer at UK hi-fi company Armstrong and reader in Physics and Electronics at St Andrew's University

Out of The Shadows

Why is it that some music endures while other recordings are now forgotten? Is it all to do with emotion or is it because some pieces straddle neat musical genres? **Jim Lesurf** looks for answers

Back in the early 1960s, I was often in the front room listening to the radio, or discs being played on a Danette record player. Before 'Love Me Do' appeared I would be strumming an old tennis racquet and trying to do a 'Shadows Walk'. Like so many others, I welcomed The Beatles and their ground-breaking music. So it's no surprise to find that we are now still listening to, and talking about, The Beatles 50 years later.

As a child I took for granted that what was great then would go on being great. I didn't see music as being 'fashionable', just something to be enjoyed. But what is it that sees some music endure while other music fades, becoming an embarrassment or dismissed with a joke?

YOU HAD TO BE THERE...

OK, some music only endures by being enjoyed by a small group of enthusiasts. Sometimes, perhaps, because of its associations with events in a person's history. Sometimes because one particular style or artist hits the spot for a particular listener. I still think The Shadows are good and listen to them just as often as I do The Beatles. Although it seems clear that they aren't on the radar for most music fans these days. Maybe you had to be there at the time with a tennis racquet to be able to enjoy it, despite John Lennon rating them so highly.

But why do some musicians and performances stand out and endure? I started wondering about this again while listening to Beethoven symphonies performed by Barenboim and his West-Eastern Divan Orchestra. They have a life and vitality that gripped me, and I kept hearing parts of them in my head

'The Beethoven symphonies had the same 'mental hook' as good pop music'



ABOVE: The Shadows on CD from 1991 and on 180g vinyl for this 2013 double LP release

for days afterwards. They had the same 'mental hook' as good pop music.

A couple of decades ago classical music was dominated by old, well-established, orchestras. But since then we've had the shock of the new. The best known example was the first, truly stunning, appearance at the Proms by Gustavo Dudamel and the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra. But there

are other examples of fresh 'young' orchestras who shook up what had become a fairly predictable scene. Musicians also seem now to have overcome previous obsessions with 'period performance'

and 'note perfect when recording', which at times produced academic respectability rather than 'music to the max'.

Performers who endure do tend to have the ability to make music that moves the listener. But there are others, perhaps just as good, whose reputation fades. Sometimes they're sneered at or patronised as being 'out of date'. Others are simply forgotten. One of the Proms I enjoyed most in recent years was a 2007 concert that

mixed music and dance, and alternated between Campra and Rameau and 'busk aid' from South Africa. From a Requiem Mass to a Gumbboot Dance this was one of the most enjoyable live concerts I've ever seen and heard.

Yet, it now seems as though no-one else saw this concert or even knows that it took place! Why? Is this because the performance couldn't easily be compressed into a low-bitrate MP3 download lasting five minutes? Or is it because the nature of the concert didn't fit one of the neat mental boxes into which people consign musical genres?

POWER TO MOVE

Listening to Barenboim/WEDO or Dudamel/SBYO I get the same feeling as when I listen to old recordings conducted by John Barbirolli. That here it is the music that matters, and that those playing are really enjoying making music.

For whatever reasons, much good music, like that from The Shadows, now rarely gets taken seriously. But listen to their early 1960s recordings on a good audio system and the music still has the power to move your feet, and have you looking around for your tennis racquet! ☺



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status for option with stands



Raidho X-1

The latest speaker from Raidho Acoustics, the X-1, is an elegant and compact stand-mount mini monitor. It is built with the Raidho ribbon tweeter and a newly designed ceramic mid bass driver with neodymium based magnet system. Designed for the average listening room and particularly great for studio work or near field monitoring. Available with or without the stands



Steve Harris Contributing Editor

Steve Harris edited *Hi-Fi News* between 1986 and 2005. He loves jazz, blues music, vinyl and vintage hi-fi and anything that makes good music come to life

Best of both worlds

Recently, Unilet organised an event many would think an anachronism these days. This saw classic albums played on high-end digital and analogue systems simultaneously. **Steve Harris** was there

It's hard to believe that the compact disc has been with us for 30 years now, and it's difficult to remember what the world was like when it arrived, before the internet, before MP3. At that point, it was vinyl that had been around for 30 years, and it was in the doldrums. Video and home computers were getting consumers' attention and making records look very old-fashioned until, shiny and new, the CD successfully replaced the LP as the record industry's primary distribution format.

No-one would have bet on the idea that turntables and vinyl record sales could ever start growing again. Then again, no-one at that time could have foreseen the revolution that downloading would bring.

VINYL PREFERRED

Yet somehow, vinyl refused to die. Finding they still had the choice, many people continued to find that they preferred it to CD. Despite the mass of printed words and thousands of internet pages devoted to the question, we still don't know exactly why. So we have the seeming anachronism of analogue hi-fi, living on and growing, side-by-side with digital media.

Nobody these days thinks that there's any point in conducting blind listening test comparisons of CD and LP. You are always really listening to two different complete record/replay chains, and the detectable noise of the LP makes it pointless anyway.

Many years ago, though, results actually were published of a listening test study which showed that consumers couldn't hear a difference.

This isn't so surprising. We know from the world of advertising that consumers



ABOVE: The Unilet showroom after the event, with the KEF Blade speakers to the right

can't tell margarine from butter. In America back in the early 1980s, a majority of consumers taking the 'Pepsi Challenge' did prefer Pepsi to Coke, but this was only because Pepsi was sweeter. And what you chose on a quick sip might not be what you'd like to drink every day.

Recently, leading hi-fi retailer Unilet put on a special weekend event, 'the Unilet digital analogue challenge', which would 'enable music lovers to listen to the very best of both worlds and make their own minds up'.

A high-end digital system, with Chord electronics and KEF's Blade speakers, was set up in Unilet's showroom, and in the biggest listening room upstairs there was a high-end analogue

system, using the Vertere RG1 record player and PMC's MB2SE speakers.

Classic rock albums were played at set times on both systems simultaneously, 'to enable visitors to judge which one wins the challenge for them'.

Well, after listening to part of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side Of The Moon* in the showroom, I went up to listen to the rest of it on the Vertere and the big PMC monitors. You might think it was just the

comfort of the armchairs in that cosy upstairs listening room, but I have to admit that I didn't manage to get down again. I just stayed there, listening happily to Supertramp's *Crime Of The Century* and other stuff.

And I can truthfully say that this was one of the very best analogue system demonstrations I have ever heard. Unilet had put on a good show, even if the reason that we love vinyl is still more of a mystery than the American public's preference for Pepsi back in the 1980s.

VITAL INGREDIENT

Things might have been different for Pepsi if the tests had been carried out before 1904, in the days when Coca-Cola was still made with coca leaves. It's a tribute to marketing that the product has carried on, seemingly forever, even though its original vital ingredient has been removed.

Let's hope that the same won't apply to vinyl records. We may enjoy the sound of vinyl, but if it turns out that we're listening to an LP that was cut just using a CD as the master, the whole thing becomes a nonsense. The vital ingredient here, surely, is a genuine analogue master recording. Without that we're just fooling ourselves and, you might say, just drinking sugared water. ☺

'This was one of the very best analogue system demos I have ever heard'

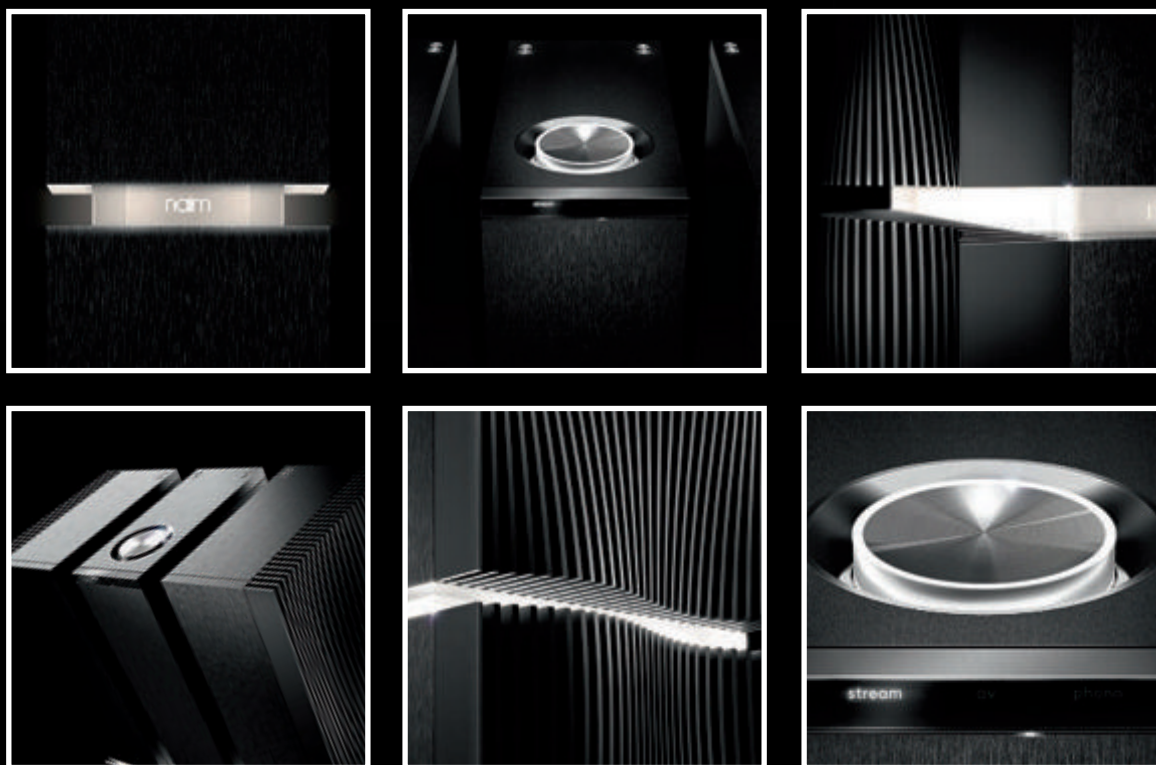


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YOUR VIEWS

Sound Off!

Correspondents express their own opinions, not those of *Hi-Fi News*. We reserve the right to edit letters for publication. Correspondents using e-mail are asked to give their full postal address (which won't be published). Letters seeking advice will be answered in print on our Sound Off pages, but due to time constraints we regret we're unable to answer questions on buying items of hi-fi or any other hi-fi queries by telephone, post or via e-mail.

DIMINISHING RETURNS IS THERE A SWEET-SPOT WHEN BUYING HI-FI?

Reading Michael Foley's letter in the March Sound Off pages in which he detailed how he assembled a great sounding system for little money set me thinking. At what price level do we see diminishing returns set in?

My belief has always been that when it comes to overall sound quality, good quality cables offer more than 98% of the performance that even the best cables achieve.

As for turntables, because there is a cartridge and interconnect cable involved I would have to say that a solid, well designed turntable would run to several thousand dollars. But \$5k, \$10k or more? Why? Cosmetics, exotic materials used, exclusivity?

In short, do you believe a system can be assembled for \$5k to \$10k that delivers more than 90% of the results achievable by any system at any price?

Jimmy Kostelidis, Canada

Steve Harris replies: You talk about cheap cables, for example, offering '98%' of what the best ones give you, but it would be pretty hard to pin down what that might mean, even if you are

talking about measured results, let alone subjective impressions. So it's equally hard to quantify a specific point where the fabled 'diminishing returns' actually set in.

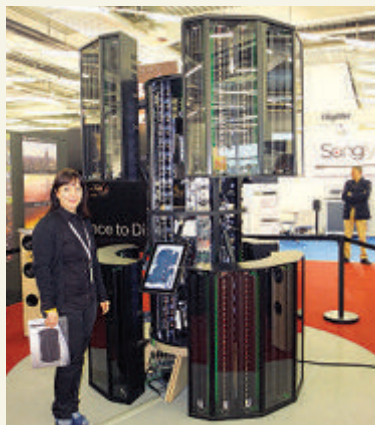
Many turntable designers over the years have tried to make us understand the astonishing level of precision that's needed for the turntable, arm and cartridge to read musical information that is recorded as groove modulations in the order of microns or even less.

Back in the 1970s, E B Mayer of the Boston Audio Society came up with a telling illustration of the dimensions involved. If the record-playing system could be scaled up so that one micron became one inch, he said, a midband signal of 1kHz at a typical level represented by a recorded velocity of 5cm/sec would produce a peak-to-peak stylus excursion of 16in. A 50Hz bass note at 10dB higher level would mean a peak-to-peak movement of 10ft 6in. But on this scale, the stylus would be around 30ft high, attached to a cartridge 2000ft long and suspended on an arm whose pivot was around four miles away.

So it's obvious that improving the precision of the working parts, way beyond what can be seen with the naked eye or sensed by the touch, ought to be worthwhile. And such engineering is bound to be expensive.

Despite all this, a cheaply-made turntable with sloppy bearings and quite gross measured failings can play records in a way that is recognisable as music, and may even be really enjoyable until it's compared with something better.

Fortunately, though, there are at least one or two manufacturers of low-cost products who really do put most of the cost into the bits that matter rather than the cosmetics, to produce something that will sound a lot better than a flashy good-looker.



ABOVE: This amp from Italy's Opera Only costs €1.5m. Still, it *can* drive six channels

Send in your views to:
Sound Off, Hi-Fi News, AVTech Media Ltd,
PO Box 718, Orpington, BR6 1AP or
email your views to: letters@hifinews.com –
please use 'Sound Off' in your subject field

Advice on ARC upgrade needed

WHICH AUDIO REFERENCE AMPS SHOULD I CHOOSE?

I have a nice little system at home. I have the choice of Goldmund Studio and Project 10.1 turntables, various tonearms and cartridges to experiment with, a PS Audio Phono preamp, an Esoteric P05/D05 SACD transport and DAC, a pair of Mark Levinson 436 monoblocks and Duntech Sovereign and Sonus faber Cremona and Auditor loudspeakers.

However, I now have a problem. I have just inserted an Audio Research SP14 preamplifier into the system and am completely blown away. The air, life, tone, soundstage depth and width is stunning. Now I am seriously wondering what an ARC REF3 preamp and a pair of ARC REF210 monoblocks will do to my system. Or worse, an ARC REF5SE pre and some new ARC monos.

For many years I have read about how good Audio Research gear can be. For just as many years I have heard Ken Kessler sing their virtues in the pages of *Hi-Fi News*. But I did not think for



ABOVE: The ARC REF75 power amp from *HFN* Nov '12

one moment that a simple secondhand ARC SP14 would make that much difference to the sound of my system and my enjoyment of music.

It has, and now I am questioning how far I take this ARC adventure. Will a step up to the recent Reference gear really give me the gains in performance now hinted at?

Justyn Peters, Australia

Ken Kessler replies: I can only guide you in this way: I purchased the review REF5SE preamp and a REF75 stereo power amp, thus putting my money where my ears are. Yes, I also use other products, but these are my 'bucket list' components. And while stating this will aggravate every other manufacturer, they must accept that even reviewers are allowed to own specific components without compromising their neutrality.

I still lust after Nagra components, an EMT phono stage, Wavac amps, Air Tight amps, a darTZeel integrated, etc, etc, but 47 years in hi-fi have led me here. If you can find some secondhand REF gear within your budget, go for it.

Ultimate analogue sound

IT'S REEL-TO-REEL, RECKONS ONE READER, AND IT'S OUT THERE IF YOU KNOW WHERE TO LOOK

So we now all live in the digital age, an age of zeros and ones, where everything is controlled by microprocessors and each day brings a new technology to encourage us to part with our hard-earned cash, whether it's for the latest mobile phone, palm computer or laptop, not to mention SACDs, DVD-As and music servers, now with files stored on multiple Terabyte hard-drives.

So it comes as a surprise to hear that the CD, as we know it, may well be phased out within a decade as sales drop in the face of the popularity of MP3s and music downloaded from the internet.

Yet a paradox is at play here. When CD arrived in the 1980s, the humble vinyl LP was said to be in its death throes. When CD-R and CD-RW appeared, the same was said about compact cassettes. Yet now, along with this drop in the sales of CDs, comes an increase in the sales of vinyl LPs! Both new and secondhand. Why, when the playing of a CD or MP3 file is so fuss-free and easy?

One only has to hear a good quality vinyl LP pressing played on a good turntable to understand this sudden interest in vinyl. Even the best MP3 player can't rival an LP when it comes to sheer sound quality. I would even go as far to say that the same holds true for CD and SACD players.

Yet to play an LP is to undertake a time-honoured and meticulous ritual that only begins with lifting the dust cover from the turntable itself. The stylus must also be examined for dust, the delicate LP must be carefully removed from its inner sleeve and checked, perhaps a puck needs to be placed over the record deck's central spindle and then the speed of the turntable may need to be adjusted to ensure the platter is spinning at precisely 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ rpm. Only then can one bow to the 'Great God Analogue' and lower the stylus gently into the groove, the amplifier volume turned up to your desired listening level.

Is it all worth it? From a lover not just of analogue FM, vinyl, compact cassette and reel-to-reel but SACD and CD too, the answer is a most definite yes. A good vinyl-based



THE TASCAM MS-16 FOR THOSE WHO'VE HEARD IT ALL BEFORE.

The Tascam MS-16 is a professional 16-track reel-to-reel tape deck. It features a built-in mixer with 16 channels, each with its own volume control and pan pot. The deck also has a built-in equalizer and a built-in compressor. It is a true professional-grade machine, and it's a great choice for anyone who wants to record high-quality audio.

ABOVE: Original ad from June 1985 for the professional 16-track Tascam MS16 deck

system can run circles around (no pun intended) even the best digital music system.

Is there anything better than a vinyl LP? Yes, there is, provided you can lay your hands on an analogue Studer 810 professional mastering reel-to-reel deck, a 16-track analogue 1in Tascam MS-16 reel-to-reel machine, or a Sony APR-5003 professional studio analogue mastering deck. To my ears, these offer the ultimate in recorded analogue sound. Sadly, good examples of these decks are fast becoming thin on the ground, but they are still available if you know where to look!

It is my experience that there has been a resurgence in interest in the buying of serious secondhand reel-to-reel machines, with models from Fostex, Revox and the legendary Studers, now highly covetable. But one thing's for sure: analogue is alive and doing very well, indeed.

John Ellis, via email

Patrick Fraser replies: I don't think anyone here at *HFN* would argue with those sentiments Martyn, though sadly few of us have the space to house a full-blown professional Studer or Tascam machine! Nonetheless, keep your eyes peeled for our May issue in which we'll be bringing you a comprehensive guide to buying vintage reel-to-reel consumer decks.

8

Lanes On Your Entertainment Superhighway



RJ/E Forest



RJ/E Cinnamon



RJ/E Vodka



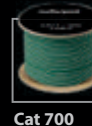
RJ/E Diamond



Cat 600 Pearl



Cat 700 Pearl



Cat 700 Forest



Cat 700 Carbon

Since its origins in the early 1980's, Ethernet, and the Local Area Network (LAN) systems it enables, has become the copper plumbing of the digital age. Originally deployed only over coaxial cable, the Ethernet protocols (IEEE 802.3) now also apply to fibre-optic and "Category" (Cat 5, 5e, 6, 6e, 7) cables. These 8-conductor (4 twisted pairs) Cat cables are the 8 lanes which stream or transport your digital entertainment to equipment a foot away or several rooms away.

AudioQuest refers to its pre-terminated leading-edge Cat 7 cables as the RJ/E Series ... RJ for the RJ45 connector standard to the application, and E for Ethernet. For AudioQuest, the highest Cat 7 standard (with all 4 pairs using correctly differentiated twist rates and individually shielded) is only the solid foundation to which AQ then adds better materials and unique-to-AQ additional technologies.

The particulars of the RJ45 connectors have also received extreme attention. The plugs used on the Vodka and Diamond models (and available for use with bulk Cat 700 models), feature a unique patented transition-compensating system which reduces reflections caused by the impedance mismatch where 4 twisted pairs meet a straight line of 8 plug contacts.

What does this all mean? Simple ... better sound!

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Pixies review turns to dust

'I CAN DO BETTER!' DECLARES EXASPERATED READER ON READING KK'S CONCLUSIONS

For years I have read Ken Kessler's pieces with a mix of admiration, amusement and exasperation. His 'review' of the MoFi SACD release of The Pixies' *Trompe Le Monde* [HFN Feb '14] is in the latter category.

I know Ken doesn't like The Pixies but this is a remastered re-release and so is aimed at existing fans. The least I would expect is a comparison of the MoFi disc with previous releases and an indication as to whether it's an improvement or not.

Ken simply uses the review as an excuse to re-visit his musical dislikes. Here's a suggestion for you: ask Mr Kessler to send me his review copy of *Trompe Le Monde* and I'll do you a review, comparing it to the standard CD release sitting on my shelves.

Go on! I dare you...

David Dallard, via email



ABOVE: 'Atonal cacophany' – KK's verdict

Ken Kessler replies: Thanks for taking the trouble to write Mike, but I am afraid I am going to disappoint you yet again. I used to be a Pixies fan so have the original disc on my shelves. Nice try, though!

No sound with LP rips

WHY CAN'T I HEAR FILES RIPPED FROM VINYL AT 192kHz WHEN REPLAYED VIA DEVIALET?

My interest in hi-fi has been reawakened with the advent of digital components and the availability of hi-res recordings. It all started with the purchase of a Devialet D-Premier amp and has led to a new computer with an E-MU 1212 soundcard. This was to enable me to transfer vinyl to disc. I use Sony's Sound Forge Pro 11 editing software and so far have been successful in making both DVD-Audio and Blu-ray Audio discs at 24-bit 96kHz resolution.

What caught my attention was a comment by Paul Miller in the March Sound Off pages in response to the letter from Richard Dibden that 'the [Devialet] 170 can be used to rip LPs at 192kHz'. My aim has been to record my LPs at 24/192 to SF Pro 11 so that they can be edited. While I can make the recording, when it

comes to playback I get no sound. Each element is designed and setup to operate at this level, but I cannot get anything on playback.

Any ideas why this should be so? Thanks for your enthusiasm and your fine magazine.

Mike Turner, via email

Paul Miller replies: It is possible to use the Devialet 170 to 'rip' LPs as the amp samples all its analogue inputs (including MM/MC phono) at 192kHz which can then be accessed via its digital output and patched through to a partnering computer. However, the S/PDIF input on your Creative E-MU 1212M soundcard is only specified to 96kHz although the AES/EBU and ADAT digital I/O ports support 24-bit/192kHz. Depending on version, only the AES/EBU connection on your original D-Premier will support 24-bit/192kHz.



ABOVE: Rear of the Devialet 170 showing USB/Ethernet ins and S/PDIF and AES/EBU outs

WIRELESS FRONTIER?



Not only are wires still very much the lowest-distortion highest-performance way to send both analog and digital audio information, but when it comes to sending power, "wireless" is just a nifty science project, not part of a home entertainment rig.

The challenge of not adding distortion as AC power goes from the wall to the electronics, and the challenge of not adding distortion as audio power is sent to a loudspeaker, are almost the same. The amount of energy transferred through these cables, and the size of the associated magnetic fields, puts them in a different class from all other audio and video cables.

Speaker cables need to maintain perfect integrity across the audio band and then some, while AC cables only have to try to be perfect in a narrower band. AC cable design is therefore a subset of speaker cable design because AC cables are subject to almost all the same distortion mechanisms, and benefit from almost all the same damage minimizing techniques.

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Hearing aids: your reactions

WE LOOKED AT WHY HEARING AIDS DISAPPOINT SO MANY AUDIOPHILES, AND YOU RESPONDED...

Keith Howard's Investigation into hearing aids in the March issue was long overdue. As a teenager, my ears could hear frequencies in excess of 20kHz. I guess like many *HFN* readers, the decline in my hearing performance has been inversely proportional to my audio budget. Now I have a fairly decent audio system – I think.

I want to continue enjoying live and recorded music in later life, so when listening to very loud and potentially damaging live music I wear musicians' earplugs. These can be purchased quite inexpensively on eBay. They do much more than just plug the ears – they provide a contoured reduction in dB, which still allows one to hear details.

Before reading Keith's article I had concluded that my best audio option for the future would be to retire to a detached house, well away from other properties, where I could play my music very loudly indeed from inside a big Man Cave. Even so, I will probably need hearing appliances of some sort.

Keith's article showed there are ways forward. I was interested by the headphone option he described. I recently stumbled across Phonak, a Swiss company that specialises in hearing systems. In fact, I purchased a pair of Audéo PFE1 22 Perfect Fit in-ear headphones for use on the train. These are a pretty decent low-distortion balanced-armature design and come with several sizes of foam tips to suit different sized lugholes. They have the added and, in my view, significant advantage of using interchangeable filters, which can be swapped to tune the frequency response.

The pre-fitted and supplied filters sounded all wrong to me, but Phonak's

green filters, which boosted bass frequencies, were just right.

Above all, I had the satisfaction of fiddling and tweaking the things. After all, I am an audiophile!

John Auckland, via email

Like many of your older readers, I have hearing loss in the higher frequencies. At first I thought my speakers' tweeters were faulty but after having difficulty following conversations I made an appointment with an audiologist. Now I am using a hearing aid from Widex called the Fusion [see www.widex.co.uk]. This has a special music program, and I am glad I bought it. I can now hear the soft details in music and the higher frequencies of hi-hats and fine snare drum rolls.

Still, it is important to try different brands. I tried five and found a lot of differences between them. At around 4000 Euros the good hearing aids are not cheap, but are worth the price if they enable you to appreciate your expensive hi-fi system more fully once more.

Hans Dokman, Holland

I am 72 years old, and have been a hi-fi enthusiast for about two-thirds of my lifetime. The sound quality of my high-end system is extremely good. However, while I appreciate what I am hearing – with the assistance of a pair of NHS-provided Oticon Spirit Zest hearing aids – I know that I am unable to experience its full sonic benefit.

I don't think privately supplied hearing aids, which are always being hyped in the national press, offer any great improvement over the NHS product. A number of my acquaintances, having spent sizeable sums of money on private commercial devices, have told me that these were simply not worth the financial outlay and in all cases have reverted to NHS aids.

There may well be validity in Keith Howard's contention that the services of audiologists who understand the requirements of the aurally challenged music lover could offer a way forward, but this would be entirely dependent upon the availability of such skilled professionals. They may well exist in the private sector, but I have my doubts that much help of that nature is likely to be



ABOVE: Keith Howard looks at why hearing aids and hi-fi don't mix in *Hi-Fi News* Mar '14

forthcoming for those of us who have to rely upon the National Health Service.

Recently a good friend of mine (who happens to be a hi-fi service engineer) was told by his local NHS audiologist that Oticon behind-the-ear hearing aids, the default provision of the National Health Service, are now regarded as obsolete, and he was fitted with a pair of in-ear devices. He tells me these offer a noticeable improvement. However, when I made enquiries about getting hold of a pair I was told that there are no plans to introduce the product in my area of the country.

My personal solution is to use headphones. I experimented with a pair of Sennheiser RS10 closed-back models, firstly using them with my NHS hearing aid and then without. In the first instance, the sound was acceptable but definitely tinny – not unlike the sound of a 1960s tranny as described by one reader in *Sound Off*. With the hearing aids removed, the sound via the Sennheisers was much improved. To my (admittedly) faulty ears, everything was much smoother and more natural sounding while bass delivery was good.

J Boyd, via email

Keith Howard replies: As someone who is not hearing impaired I wrote this piece as an 'outsider', so I'm gratified to see so many *Hi-Fi News* readers responding with personal experiences. I hope we'll hear from more of you. Mr Boyd is right: for meticulous setup of a complex hearing aid you almost certainly need to look outside the NHS. I've heard that in NHS clinics many of the configuration options are left at their default settings, so aids aren't even optimised for speech, let alone music.



ABOVE: The Audéo PFE1 22 Perfect Fit in-ear headphones cost £149 from Amazon.co.uk

Bargain pro cassette decks

EX-PROFESSIONAL MACHINES CAN MAKE FINE HOME RECORDERS TOO, BUT DO YOUR RESEARCH

I read with interest your recent article on classic cassette decks. Little mention was made of Denon models, but the Arcam used the drive mechanism of course.

I own a professional Denon DN-790R, which I purchased from a duplicating company. It owned ten of them and was changing over to CD duplication. When released, the '790R cost £499 plus VAT. Mine cost me £105 plus carriage, had seen very little use and was in superb condition.

I owned a Nakamichi at the time I bought the '790R, so I knew how good cassette recording and replay could be. The Denon outperformed the Nakamichi, which I then sold for £99.

Cassette recording isn't dead and good vintage machines are still giving excellent service to their owners.

Martyn Miles, via email

Tim Jarman replies: Denon's connection with the Japanese state broadcasting organisation (NHK) helped raise its



ABOVE: The DN-790R offered three heads and balanced XLR input and output sockets

profile and credibility and some of its cassette decks (like your DN-790R) are very well regarded. However, some of the company's models have a rather wayward playback response, so it pays to remember this if choosing a Denon deck for general home use.

The usefulness of a good cassette deck should not be underestimated. The applications are many and range from archiving and preserving precious LPs to time-shifting FM broadcasts. All tasks are performed entirely in the analogue domain – well away from the invasive scrutiny of the internet.

Wrong arm tactics?

SAME DECK, DIFFERENT ARMS – A PLOY OR A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY?

The STST Motus II turntable pictured on the cover of the January 2014 edition had what looked like an SME tonearm fitted. The review of the turntable inside the magazine showed the deck with the Vertex arm. It would

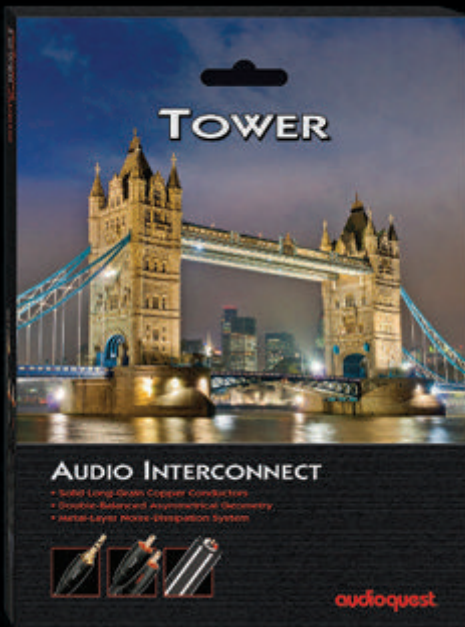
have been good to have had the two arms compared in the review. Or was there a reason for this mismatch?

Mike Bickley, via email

Paul Miller replies: Well spotted Mike! In fact the SME-equipped deck was photographed for our cover prior to our Windsor Hi-Fi Show and returned afterwards for review partnered with STST's own arm. It was this single-brand combo that featured in the review proper.



ABOVE & LEFT: The Motus II as shown inside the magazine and on the cover



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£2090 each



Vintage loudspeakers

Buying speakers is always tricky but when it comes to vintage models not only is the choice bewildering, other factors come into play. So let **Adam Smith** be your guide...

It was in 1924 that Chester Rice and Edward Kellog patented the direct radiator moving-coil loudspeaker drive unit. While other technologies have attempted to muscle in on the action with varying degrees of success, the drive units found in the vast majority of loudspeakers on the market today are still based on the very same technology the pair outlined 90 years ago. Of course, materials have grown more high-tech, driver shapes and sizes have changed and computers have aided designers in attaining the sort of performance that Rice and Kellog could only have dreamed of. But the basic principle remains the same.

HUGE RANGE

One result of these many decades of development is that there is a huge range of loudspeakers of all shapes and sizes to consider when assembling a vintage system. For the purposes of this feature, however, the story really begins in the 1960s when the increasing adoption of stereo led to the development of freestanding loudspeakers.

Many audiophiles of the pre-stereo era purchased drive units which they then housed in radiogram-style cabinets, sideboards and even the walls of rooms where convenience was the sole determining factor. But the move to

RIGHT: The corner reflex cabinet was one of the enclosures recommended by Tannoy as being 'suitable for high quality Phonograph and Radio reproducing systems'. The Corner York was one of the first complete assemblies offered by the company. To the right is shown a Tannoy Monitor Black driver and below, an original Japanese ad for the Gold driver

BELOW: The driver of a modern Tannoy speaker (in this case, the Kensington) bears a strong resemblance to the original Monitor Black. Materials have improved and the design has been fine-tuned over the years



two channels necessitated optimal loudspeaker positioning, which was much easier with freestanding enclosures. Of course, fine designs of this type existed previously, such as Voigt's Domestic Corner Horn and Quad's Ribbon loudspeaker, but the fact that these models were developed and sold when mono was the only option means that finding pairs of such examples on the secondhand market today can be very difficult. As for matched pairs, this can be nigh on impossible.

TOP TANNOYS

One of the most successful companies to bridge the gap between individual drive units and complete loudspeaker assemblies was Tannoy. Its Dual Concentric drive unit was developed in 1946 by engineer Ronnie Rackham and the 15in Monitor Black was the first model to hit the market. This was duly developed into a bewildering range of Monitor Red, Silver and Gold models of many different sizes, but in the mid 1960s the company released the Lancaster free-standing cabinet and the York corner cabinet, which both used the 15in Monitor Red drive unit. The flagship Monitor Gold came a little later, with its natural home being the mighty Autograph cabinet.

Tannoy loudspeakers have a huge following among vintage audio enthusiasts and it is not difficult to understand why when you hear a pair in good working order. They have a sound all of their own, with excellent imagery being just one of their strengths.

Most original speakers are serviceable by specialist companies and replacement surrounds and cones for many models are available, making them a viable secondhand proposition. Prices tend to be high for original models in good condition but there are plenty about, so choice is not an issue.

Back on the other side of the Atlantic, developments in loudspeaker cabinet design





were also underway during hi-fi's formative years and one of the most notable resulted in the Acoustic Suspension loudspeaker, developed by Henry Kloss and Edgar Villchur at Acoustic Research. This type of loudspeaker meant that smaller cabinets could be used that would also deliver good bass response. The result was the AR-1, released in the mid 1950s, followed by the AR-3 in 1958, which employed the AR-1's 12in bass driver in conjunction with the first commercially available dome midrange driver and tweeter.

The AR-3 was regarded as one of the finest loudspeakers of its era and, thanks to its groundbreaking design, can more than hold its own today. The drivers are generally robust provided they are not overdriven and a pair in good condition can sound superb when suitably partnered.

MIGHTY MAXIM

The acoustic suspension design became very popular in the 1960s and 1970s and spawned many successful models. Perhaps one of the most important back in the UK was the original Goodmans Maxim of 1965, which can be regarded as the first mini-monitor to bring true high fidelity performance to a cabinet that could be sat on an upturned hand (but only just – they're surprisingly heavy!). Even the BBC evaluated an early pair and judged the performance to be 'adequate for a number of applications in which high sound levels are unnecessary'.

While it's true the speaker lacks any meaningful amount of deep



ABOVE LEFT: The AR Pi One is the speaker that superseded the AR-3. It featured the same basic technology but added room boundary adjustment controls. It is very rare today

ABOVE: The AR-3 built upon the AR-1 Acoustic Suspension concept, adding a midrange dome unit to the 12in bass driver and dome tweeter

BELOW: The original tiny tot with the big heart – the Goodmans Maxim mini-monitor, which appeared in 1965

bass and requires more than a modicum of power to perform at its best, the original Maxim is a remarkable loudspeaker even by modern standards and prices continue to rise. Its driver surrounds are not made of foam so have good longevity, but the plastic edging of the tweeter cone has a tendency to come unstuck from the chassis, so check this carefully if you're considering buying a pair.

LEAK SANDWICH

At this time, work was continuing not only on cabinet design but also on the materials from which drive units were made. Paper had always been popular due to its cheapness, lightness and relatively benign break-up behaviour but 1961 saw a breakthrough when Leak introduced its 'Sandwich' loudspeaker cone, developed by Don Barlow. This saw a layer of polystyrene sandwiched between

'To hear a good pair of Leak 3090s is a magnificent experience'



BEFORE YOU BUY...

The biggest killer of old loudspeakers is 'foam rot' – the breaking down of the foam ring that supports the cone at its periphery. Replacement rings are available from many sources at very reasonable prices and fitting them is not difficult, although several companies will do the job for you if you prefer. Note that continuing to use a loudspeaker with a rotten surround is likely to damage the voice coil so beware of 'they still sound fine' when buying!

Also remember that component and wire quality has improved greatly since the 1960s and benefits may be wrought by re-wiring and replacing crossover components in old loudspeakers, particularly the capacitors.

two layers of aluminium which conferred exceptional rigidity upon the cone without affecting strength or adding undue mass.

The first complete Leak Sandwich loudspeaker used a 13in bass driver of this construction allied to a 3in high frequency driver, and even today the speakers deliver a delightful, if somewhat soft

and unfocused listening experience. Cloth driver surrounds mean no foam rot and although the drivers can 'sag' after many years' use, resulting in a rubbing voice coil, the magnet on these early drivers was bolted on, so a steady hand can loosen the whole motor assembly and adjust it to compensate.

The range of loudspeakers using the Sandwich technology grew and diversified during the 1960s and 1970s to culminate in the mighty Leak 3090. This utilised a 15in Sandwich bass driver in a transmission line, plus two Sandwich midrange drivers and an Isodynamic ribbon tweeter. They're huge, not exactly elegant, the tweeters are somewhat fragile and they need plenty of power to drive them but

BUYING VINTAGE



to hear a good pair of 3090s is a magnificent experience and possibly the ultimate expression of the teak vastness of 1970s loudspeakers!

Sadly, relatively few pairs were made and they are quite rare.

However, their predecessor, the Leak 2075, is very similar, more common and can be bought more cheaply. These also perform well

but their Mylar dome tweeter is an altogether less civilised proposition. Using modern capacitors in the crossover does bring noticeable

improvements in this area, however.

As mentioned, over the years a number of other technologies have tried to rob the moving-coil drive unit of its crown and one of the most successful has been the electrostatic loudspeaker. The Quad Electrostatic Loudspeaker of 1957 (subsequently known as the ESL-57)

'There is very little reason not to snap up a pair of Quad ESL-63s'

was the first successful model and this was replaced by the ESL-63 in the early 1980s.

While the original ESL is a fine performer, it does have limitations when it comes to power handling and bass output due to the use of different panels to cover different areas of the frequency range.

THINK DIFFERENT

The ESL-63 takes a different approach, using multiple concentric rings through which the audio signal passes from inner to outer, with suitable delays applied electronically. The net result is that the loudspeaker generates an image with similar properties to that of a point-source located behind the panel. This in turn gives a phase-coherent signal and an absence of treble 'beaming' due to the large area involved. Further improvements mean that the ESL-63 is also more tolerant of being overdriven, thanks to a better protection circuit.

Despite this, the ESL-63 has a tendency to be overlooked in

favour of its more famous predecessor, or the even more technologically advanced models like the ESL-989 that came after. As a result,

prices are not as high as might be expected, especially for the quality of sound on offer.

Quad still offers full service facilities for this model, so there is very little reason not to snap up a pair of ESL-63s if you fancy experiencing the sound of an electrostatic loudspeaker.



ABOVE: The Leak Sandwich and its 'mini' variant (right). The mini used an oval bass/midrange driver in a more compact cabinet

FAR LEFT: A cutaway of the full-size Sandwich model shows the cone construction, plus the fixing of the driver magnet to the rear panel

BELOW LEFT: The very first panel design – the Quad Electrostatic from 1957

BELOW: Quad's ESL-63 took the electrostatic concept a level higher while Magneplan's MG-1 (right) was another alternative to the traditional loudspeaker

Other panel loudspeakers have also met with considerable success over the years and one of the most interesting was the planar loudspeaker developed by Jim Winey of Magneplan in 1969.

This design took the form of a large number of thin conductive wires on a Mylar panel suspended in a magnetic field arising from a vertical array of magnets. The whole sheet moves in a similar manner to that of a conventional loudspeaker unit but the wires are directly attached to the radiating surface and the loudspeaker behaves as a dipole. In other words, like an electrostatic but without the need for the high voltages.

RIBBON TWEETERS

The company's first loudspeaker of this type was the MG-1 of 1976 and development has continued to the present day. The benefits of such designs are similar to those of electrostatics, namely superb imagery and coherence, but Magneplan also added ribbon tweeters to many of its later models to improve treble response. Deep bass can also be an issue due to ⇨



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BUYING VINTAGE

the sheer size of panel needed if this is to be achieved.

Despite this, original MG-1s can perform very well indeed and have a dedicated following. Tweeter fuses can blow giving rise to a dullness in sound and the exposed aluminium wires on the drive panel can corrode and break. These can be repaired, however, albeit with patience and a steady pair of hands.

CELESTION'S STAR

As the industry moved into the 1980s, cabinets shrank once more and designers continued to experiment with driver construction and cabinet configuration.

The likes of the Epos ES14, with its plastic-coned bass/midrange driver and metal dome tweeter, provided a recipe that would endure throughout the 'flat-earth' years of the decade. However, the speaker that stood head and shoulders above the rest was made by Celestion and called the SL6.

This speaker marked the first major use of laser interferometry to analyse drive unit behaviour and was also the first loudspeaker to feature a copper metal dome tweeter. This was followed by the SL600 with its 'honeycomb' cabinet made of Aerolam. The result were loudspeakers with outstanding clarity and class-leading dynamics.



Unfortunately, both designs were difficult to drive, had no deep bass to speak of and a surprising lack of crispness at the top end, treble rolling off quite early due to the weight of the copper tweeter dome.

Later variants of both models saw aluminium used for the tweeter dome, which alleviated the treble issues while the superb dipole SL6000 subwoofer was introduced to add extra bass. The latter remains

a much sought-after classic in its own right (it works well with Quad ESL-63s, too!) but, despite their advanced design, sonically the SL6 and SL600 remain truly 'Marmite' loudspeakers: you'll either love them or hate them!

GOING ACTIVE

A final mention should be given to active loudspeakers. Although companies like ARC, JPW and Linn marketed versions of their models in the early 1980s that could be driven by amplifiers equipped with suitable electronic crossovers, the only companies to dedicate themselves fully to active operation were Meridian and Bang & Olufsen.

The former's M1 loudspeaker of 1978 was an undoubted statement of intent and was followed by smaller designs such as the M2 and M3, plus even more impressive flagships such as the M100. Reliability of all these models is excellent and they still sound superb today. Only rarity and price conspire against the keen buyer. ☺

ABOVE: The Celestion SL6 of 1982 made novel use of plastic and copper in its construction, plus computer-driven laser measurement techniques in its design. It made the cover of the February 1982 issue of *HFN* with a review inside by Trevor Attewell

LEFT: The Meridian M1 was the company's first loudspeaker and brought active operation to the mainstream market. Hidden beneath its somewhat monolithic exterior is a bass driver with a rear-mounted Auxiliary Bass Radiator, an ITT dome midrange and a KEF dome tweeter. The amplifier and electronic crossover box sit on a shelf in the base of the speaker behind the grille



ALSO CONSIDER...

BBC LS3/5A: Famous mini broadcast monitor made by many manufacturers including Rogers, KEF and Goodmans. Has a unique blend of strengths, some of which remain unsurpassed even today.

IMF Professional Monitor: A big 1970s bruiser with a KEF B139 bass driver in a transmission line. Super bass and a big, relaxed presentation.

Apogee Scintilla: Fine-sounding full-size ribbon panel design but dubbed the 'amp killer' by many due to its 1ohm minimum electrical load. Make sure your amplifier is up to the task.



B&W 801: One of the best passive studio monitoring speakers ever [pictured above], Discontinued during the company's last upgrade of the 800 series to 'Diamond' status. Greatly missed!

TDL Reference Standard: Produced some of the lowest and finest bass to be heard from any domestic loudspeaker. Very big and very rare.

Mission 767: Unassuming looks hide first-class design giving a fabulous sound. Make sure they come with their Cyrus 2-based 'LFAU' bass tuning/amp unit.

Monitor Audio R352: Affordable 1980s large standmount. Matching stands not the best sonically but they just don't look right sat on anything else!
Goodmans Maxim 2: Budget '80s bookshelf design that is absurdly good for something that originally cost £70.

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Philips CD104

Keenly priced and perhaps the first player to be taken seriously by audiophiles, this robust player from Philips is still coveted today. But how does it *really* measure up? Review: **Tim Jarman** Lab: **Paul Miller**

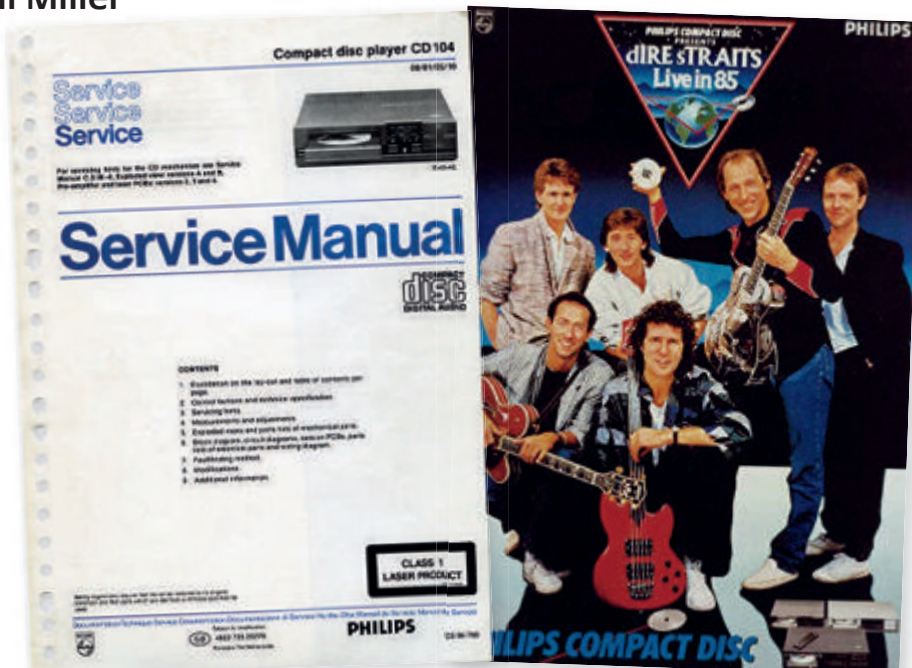
The CD104 marks the point at which the Compact Disc format gained maturity in the European market. After the unusual styling of the CD100 [see *HFN* Oct '11] and the rather over-engineered loading mechanism used for the CD300 and CD303 [see *HFN* Nov '13], the CD104 showed that CD player design had now settled on a basic form factor and was ready to progress from being a technological novelty to a useful consumer product.

Competitive pricing and class leading audio performance had given Philips a dominant position in the UK digital audio market and the CD104, which could be had for around £300, was hugely popular. Released in 1984 and current until 1986, it was the first CD player that many audiophiles bought.

ALMOST PERFECT

Philips put a great deal of effort into marketing the player, even sponsoring the Dire Straits 'Live in 85' tour under the Compact Disc banner. The band's album *Brothers In Arms* was the first pop album to be recorded and mixed entirely in the digital domain, giving it the top DDD classification in the old CD ranking scheme. This album (and a CD104 to play it on) was an essential purchase for the switched-on music lover in the mid-1980s.

The design of the CD104 combined the best aspects of Sony's CDP-101 and the previous early Philips players into one almost perfect machine. Sony's machine was unique among the first generation of players in being a small black box with all



ABOVE: Original CD104 service manual (left) and an ad for Dire Straits' 'Live in 85' tour, which Philips sponsored; the company worked closely with the band at the time of the player's release

the controls on the front and a motorised drawer to load the disc horizontally. This was the format the public took to, so this became the basic template for the CD104.

As well as the drawer, size, colouring and basic layout of the CDP-101, the CD104 also borrowed the clear and simple VFD track time readout from the Sony (Philips has previously used a row of green LEDs to show which track was playing) and the idea of flush-fitting controls.

At the rear of the machine, a protruding black heat sink was also reminiscent of the

Sony, although unlike its partners in the development of the CD format, Philips had managed to house the mains transformer within the confines of the main cabinet.

From existing Philips practice came the single beam swing-arm laser unit, the 4x oversampling digital filter, the twin 14-bit DACs (one per channel, when Japanese practice was to use a single DAC shared between the two) and impressively sturdy construction methods.

AN INNOVATION

As with the CD100, the CD104 was built on a pressure die-cast frame onto which all the major assemblies were attached, rigidly in the case of the electronics and compliantly on rubber bushes in the case of the transport. The parameters of the analogue stages were shared with the CD100, as was the set of four SAA7000



LEFT: A full width version of the player was released in 1985. Dubbed the CD304 it offered remote control, though sales of this iteration failed to rival those of the original CD104



series integrated circuits that made up the decoder. An innovation was the use of double-sided printed circuit boards, where the power and signal connections were made on one side and the various grounding points were on the other. The aim here was to establish a coherent ground plane in a bid to avoid unwanted grounding loops within the machine.

This would have been a success were it not for the fact that the designers chose to use small rivets to connect the two sides together. These proved to be unreliable in service and were the main reason for CD104s to stop working.

The player was widely distributed, not just as a Philips product but under many other famous names too. The Marantz version was the CD-34, which in most cases was identical save for some Japanese-built examples that were shipped with different PCBs, assembled without the troublesome rivets. If only the Belgian factory that produced machines for Europe had followed suit!

Mission marketed a thinly re-styled variant with a lightly revised analogue stage known as the DAD 7000, whereas B&O really went to town, putting the PCBs and CDM1 transport of the CD104 into the chassis casting of the CD100 to create the

Beogram CDX, its first CD player to reach the market. At the other end of the scale, some early Amstrad CD midi systems used a CD104 chassis. Though now not desirable in themselves they are an excellent source of spare parts and can often be acquired very cheaply indeed.

LATER VERSIONS

The original CD104 was grey in colour and had a slightly rough finish to its top cover, onto which a Compact Disc logo was screen printed in one corner. In 1985 the re-styled CD104B was released. This was black and featured tidied-up fascia graphics and no writing on the top. There were no technical differences of any real importance between the two versions.

A full-width variant with remote control, the CD304, also joined the Philips range in 1985 and the matching FA141 amplifier and F9430 speakers were also offered by the company. Neither sold particularly well in the UK, despite both being of a fairly reasonable specification.

Another choice was the F440 package system, which included an amplifier, a tuner, a cassette deck and a drawer-loading turntable along with a rather indifferent pair of loudspeakers. This is still

ABOVE: The CD104, in this case the later CD104B with its neater fascia graphics, still looks clean and modern. Well built and user friendly, its design has stood the test of time

encountered from time to time, although a CD player of the calibre of the CD104 deserves better frankly.

There was no need to use the matching Philips kit though, for as the advertisements repeatedly stated, a Philips CD player would work with any existing equipment (provided a line level input able to handle the 2V output of the CD104 was available). This remains the case today, and although the tethered signal cable isn't something one sees on source components anymore (despite the fact that it removes at least one potentially noise-inducing mechanical interface – expect a revival any time soon!) it is at least terminated with standard-sized RCA-type connectors.

The CD104's signal cable is substantially thicker than that supplied with the CD303 and is soldered directly to the PCB inside, despite there being a plug-in connector fitted in the relevant position. In these days of interconnect cables thick enough to moor an ocean liner with, the early Philips

BELOW: Brochure (left) shows the CD104 with its rarely seen matching amp and speakers. To the right is the Mission DAD 7000, a mildly tweaked British-badged variant of the CD104



VINTAGE HI-FI

RIGHT: A look inside the CD104 shows the sturdy loading mechanism on the left while the copper-clad servo PCB is located to the right. The 14x4 oversampler/DAC is beneath the latter

machines are often criticised for having thin wiring attached. Philips was clearly worried about this almost 30 years ago...

Ergonomically the CD104 is well planned and easy to operate. To the left of the fascia is a four-way rocker plate, which is used for play, search and pause. Strangely this operates in exactly the same manner as an interface fitted to the B&O 4000 turntable, released a decade previously. No doubt Philips was aware of this groundbreaking design.

The only quirk is that the 'back' key skips to the previous track rather than playing the current one again. To do this, one must press 'play'. It all makes sense of course; it's just different to how these controls work on the majority of modern machines.

TIM LISTENS

I was keen to try and replicate a 'first CD experience' with the CD104 so obtained an early issue of Dire Straits' *Brothers In Arms* [Vertigo 824499-2] as my first disc to listen to. With the player hooked up to a Cyrus 6A amplifier driving Monitor Audio PL100 loudspeakers, straight away it was abundantly clear what all the fuss was about: sparkling highs, clean, tight bass and a silent background. And all at the touch of a button. These things would have been out of the reach of all but the very best record decks at the time the player hit the market.

'Sade's vocals on Diamond Life were beyond reproach'

Good as they are, the 6A and the PL100s are not really up to a serious 'Money For Nothing' session so instead I picked the sparser, plaintive 'Your Latest

Trick' with which to assess the player.

Despite technical similarities, the CD104 has a slightly different character to the previous CD303. It is tighter, drier and all together more modern-sounding, although still unmistakably a Philips 14x4. The 'Philips sound' of this period is characterised by treble with a satin-like sheen and a tubby bass, both

of which were clearly audible as the track progressed. The main part of the song is carried by a sax line backed by muted cymbals, both of which the Philips rendered in a highly appealing manner. Old Philips players tend to have a slightly diffuse top-end coupled with a midband warmth and, sure enough, this is how things proceeded. Knopfler's vocals sat well in the mix, sounding neither strident nor lost behind other sounds.

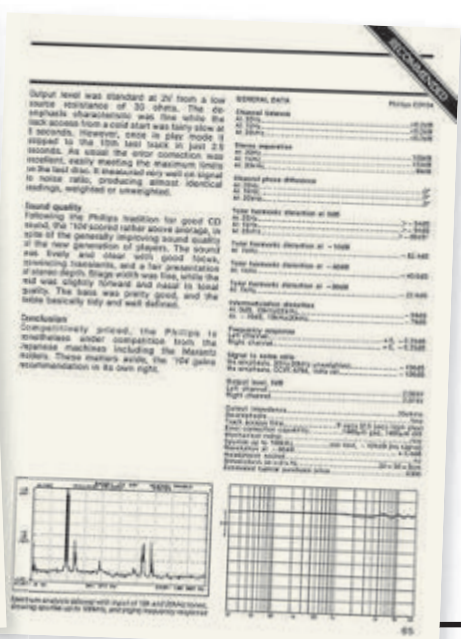
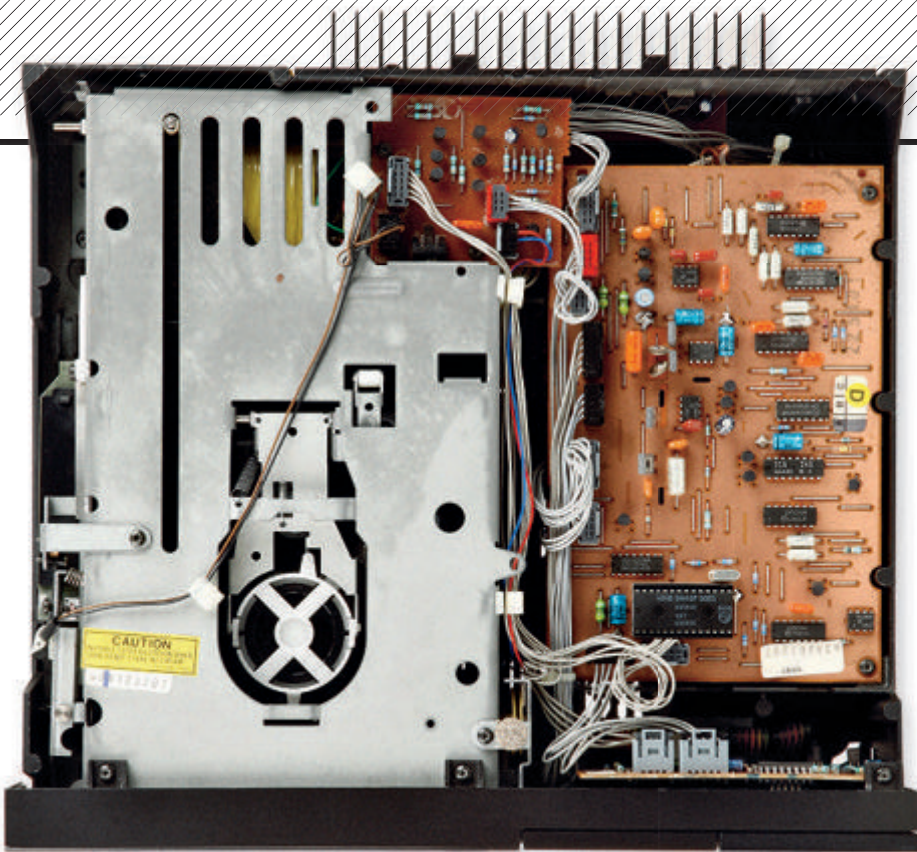
TIGHTER BASS

One could argue that *Brothers In Arms* may have been produced with the then-current Philips CD player range in mind and plays to the CD104's strengths. So it was time to feed the player a wider range of material.

From the throbbing electronica of Kraftwerk's *Trans-Europe Express* [CDP 7 46473 2] to Paul Simon's *Surprise* [WB 9362-49982-2], the tighter bass the CD104 offers over the previous models resulted in a different presentation overall. Some will prefer its greater ability to separate various different sounds in the mix while others may miss the fullness and richness of the preceding players' sound, but either way the results satisfy, as is so often the case with Philips players.

Rounding off the listening session with *Diamond Life* [CDEPC 26044], Sade's debut album [see p72], the saxophone on 'Frankie's First Affair' was full-toned ☞

LEFT: The CD104 earns a recommendation in *Hi-Fi Choice* from 1985. Some of the Japanese rivals were bigger and glitzier, but the sober CD104 was always considered a top performer



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HIQLP038
Munrow & Marriner:
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Whilst Sir Neville Marriner, a veritable national treasure, who turns 90 on 15 April 2014, provides stylish accompaniments with the Academy's modern instruments, the star of this album is the late David Munrow, who did so much to popularize early music and its instruments.

In the original November 1974 review in the GRAMOPHONE enthused about the "brilliance of Munrow's playing" and advised: "Anyone who admires the skill and the vivacious musicianship of David Munrow ought to try this attractive disc."



HIQLP039
Elgar: Enigma Variations
Philharmonia Orchestra
Sir John Barbirolli

Sir John Barbirolli was a personal friend of the composer, having been a cellist in the orchestra at the premiere of Elgar's Cello Concerto in 1919, he enjoyed a close rapport with the composer, winning his praise for his performances of the Introduction and Allegro for Strings.

The November 1963 GRAMOPHONE review was ecstatic: "...It is an absolutely outstanding performance, captured by the recording people as near to perfection as possible. I have never before heard so much beautiful detail so clearly".

ALSO AVAILABLE

HIQLP002
Grieg: Music From Peer Gynt

HIQLP003
Holst: The Planets

HIQLP004
Mendelssohn/Bruch:
Violin Concertos

HIQLP005
English String Music:
Elgar & Vaughan Williams

HIQLP006
Beethoven: Triple Concerto

HIQLP007
Tchaikovsky: 1812 Overture

HIQLP008
Carl Orff: Carmina Burana

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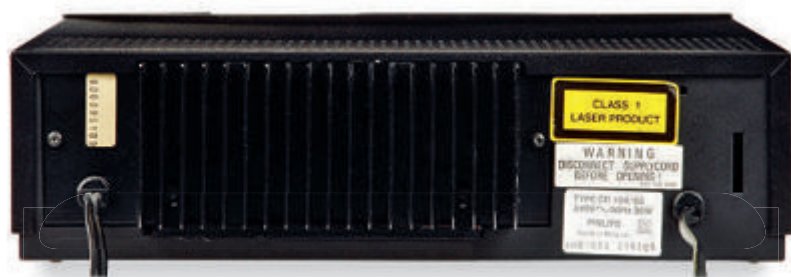
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VINTAGE HI-FI

LAB REPORT

PHILIPS CD104 (Vintage)



ABOVE: Simple rear panel with tethered mains and signal cables. The large heatsink is for the linear voltage regulators – there are no noisy switchmode circuits here

and rich, as one would expect. Only an element of softness in the percussion hinted at a weakness. The vocals, however, were beyond reproach. It's no surprise that these machines are still popular.

FAULTS AND REMEDIES

Finding a CD104 is easy because they were sold in huge numbers and, some 30 years on, the survival rate is good. There's no need to settle for a scruffy or otherwise second-rate example. Laser failures are not commonplace, but can happen. The nature of the Philips single-beam pick-up system means that an inability to read the disc's TOC is the main symptom of a failed laser. Skipping and jumping of tracks tends to indicate other problems.

Before writing a machine off, it is wise to check that all the PCB rivets have been replaced with solid-wire connections and that this has been done to a good standard. One symptom of rivet failure can look a lot like a worn out laser to the unwary. Other symptoms include

seemingly normal playback on the time readout but no sound, although defective voltage regulators can also result in this effect.

The CDM1 transport used does not suffer with the 'lazy' spindle motor problem that can trouble the CDM0 mechanism (as found in the earlier Philips players) but it is still worth re-lubricating the motor during an overhaul. Unlike the CDM0 type, it comes apart easily to facilitate this.

Loss of one channel happens either when the signal cable breaks (normally round the egress on the rear panel) or when one of the reed relays in the de-emphasis circuit becomes defective. Replacements for the latter are still obtainable. Distorted sound after a period of playback can point to problems with the digital filter.

Finally, the drawer can become difficult to open if the belt that drives it wears. At first this can look daunting to replace, but it's actually quite straightforward if the complete tray assembly is removed first. The 'Walkman'-sized belt kits that are widely distributed contain a replacement of the correct size. ☺



ABOVE: Original ad trumpets the sound quality and durability of Philips' players

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

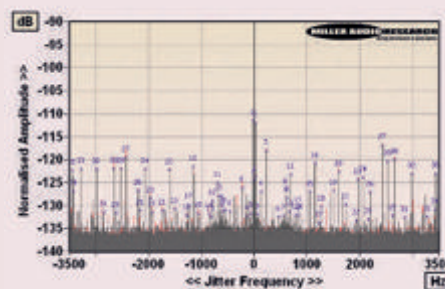
The CD104 offers a fine blend of vintage and modern virtues and is no slouch when it comes to sound quality either, offering a taut, well-sorted presentation that many will find highly appealing. Still hugely popular and with plenty of used examples available on the secondhand market, it is an ideal way to add a CD player to a vintage system. Just remember: there is no reason to settle for a second-rate used sample.

Sound Quality: 85%

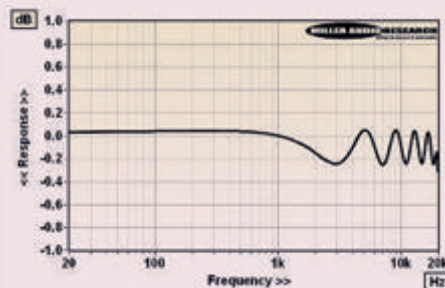


Bearing in mind the common platform shared by Philips' CD303 [HFN Nov '13] and the inaugural CD100 [HFN Oct '11], comparisons between all three of these platforms are inevitable. This vintage CD trio was based on the seminal SAA7030/TDA1540 14-bit/4x oversampling chipset which typically offered a better low-level resolution (+1.5dB over a 90-100dB dynamic range) than the 16-bit DACs employed in their Far Eastern competition. There are two TDA1540 DACs in this player, one for each channel, but stereo separation is not especially wide at 62-68dB (20Hz-20kHz). Similarly, the limited number of taps and truncation of the impulse in its (relatively) archaic SAA7030 FIR digital filter may still have offered a reasonable 52dB suppression of aliasing images and a frequency response just -0.5dB down at 20kHz (-0.75dB/20kHz with pre-emphasised CDs) but it also produced in-band ripples amounting to 0.25dB [see Graph 2, below]. The filter is still phase-linear but today's upsamplers offer vanishingly low ripple.

Distortion is also low for a 14-bit architecture, and comparable to that achieved by the CD303, at 0.0011%/0dB, 0.009%/-30dB and 1%/-60dB. Harmonic distortion is lower in the CD104 at the highest frequencies than in either the CD100 or CD303, however, at 0.0034% (20kHz/0dBfs) and 0.007% (20kHz/-30dBfs). Furthermore the CD104 offers a 1dB improvement in A-wtd S/N (105.7dB) over the CD303 and 2dB over the CD100 while digital jitter is at least 150psec lower at 240psec although, as Graph 1 illustrates, the spectrum is highly complex and populated with low-level digital noise. Readers may compare the QC Suite test report for Philips' CD104 with our samples of the CD303 and CD100 by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'Download' button. PM



ABOVE: High resolution jitter spectrum showing sidebands and digital noise (16-bit/44.1kHz data)



ABOVE: Impulse frequency response showing the substantial filter ripple common to early CD players

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level / Impedance	2.12Vrms at 66-115ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio	105.7dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0011% / 0.0092%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0034% / 0.0070%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.05dB to -0.51dB
Digital jitter	240psec
Resolution @ -90dB/-100dB	+1.5dB / +1.5dB
Power consumption	18W
Dimensions (WHD)	320x86x300mm

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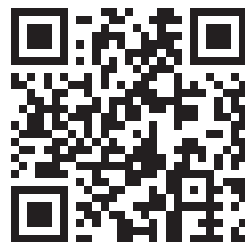
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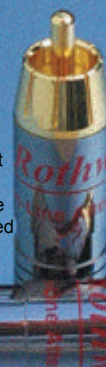


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LAST WORD

OFF THE LEASH!

KEN KESSLER TELLS IT LIKE IT IS...

What do hi-fi shows and print magazines have to offer us these days? Quite a lot, says **Ken Kessler**...

Trying to explain the importance of hi-fi shows both to those who 'know' our world and to those who don't know a thing about high-end audio is simple: shows are all we have. I do not have the figures for the mortality rate of high-end retailers, but they are now so few in number that there exist major urban centres that cannot boast a single outlet for audio separates of any type, let alone audiophile-grade products.

NOTHING TO BUY

Last December, I visited a major 'consumer electronics' chain to buy a computer for my son. I could not find one product that would qualify as 'hi-fi', in a store that remains the most well-known in this country. The best it could muster were iPod docks so vile that to use scatological adjectives would be to insult waste products. Simple fact: if you can't find the stuff to buy, then you, er, won't buy. And it had nothing to sell to music lovers.

OK, OK, so online purchases now rule, but who ever bought a £5000 valve amp online, without seeing/hearing/playing with it? If that's too heady, who in their right mind would buy a pair of £400 speakers without giving them a listen?

It stands to reason, then, that those of us who do not live within any reasonable proximity to a high-end retailer need to

hear the stuff somewhere. (Can you imagine what it must be like in America's sparsely-populated 'fly-over states'?)

Hi-fi shows still serve that purpose but they are, alas, no longer so healthy as to attract even a symbolic number of exhibitors, let alone visitors. Gone are the days of shows with 200+ rooms, aside from the trade-only CES in Las Vegas and the open-to-the-public Munich High End Show. With Italy's TOP Audio now in limbo, about which I'm in mourning, I'm hard-pressed to name any other shows aside from the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest in Denver that feature enough exhibitors to suggest to a visitor that he or she has seen a representative slice of what the market can offer. While bemoaning the loss of TOP Audio (temporarily, I hope), I was

contacted by an Italian distributor who alerted me to a show to be held in Bari, in Italy, possibly in March.

Leaving aside the city's fearsome reputation as being more dangerous than

Naples, it sounds like it will be small, purely regional but a show nonetheless.

As time is precious, I have restricted myself these past few years to covering only shows that I feel will offer enough new products to fill a report in these pages. Of course, I'm happy to schlep down to Bari if only to quaff some Negroamaro on home turf. It will, however, be intriguing to

see who attends a show for outrageously expensive audio gear, in what is arguably the most impoverished part of Italy.

At this point, I have no idea what the show will be like. There are plenty of small events these days, including the Sound of the Valve's shows in Milan and/or Rome, shows all over the USA, Scandinavia and eastern Europe, one in Moscow I'm told is reminiscent of the days when the UK could fill three floors of a hotel with specialty hi-fi, and shows in Asia still seem to be buoyant.

TRUSTED INFORMATION

I tell you this not to depress you, but to commiserate. Not everyone in the UK lives within the M25, or in an enlightened area where some brave soul still manages to keep a high-end hi-fi shop open. On the other hand, the diminishing number of both retailers and shows strengthens the case for print hi-fi magazines, which surely must now have an air about them not dissimilar to snail-mail back in the days when phone calls cost a fortune. And the web didn't exist.

Why the distinction between print and web magazines? Simple: print titles have to obey the laws of libel, and tend to employ actual writers with experience. Too many websites – not *all* of them, so back off, geeks – are examples of the worst of modern truisms: that any schmuck with a mouse can disseminate with a click ill-informed opinions and vindictive bile that would never get past a print publisher's lawyers. Try suing someone with an ISP in Chechnya.

Whether or not I am yet another schmuck with a mouse remains to be seen, as I am on the cusp of launching my own archival site, but I hope not. As I recently learned, upon signing on as Editor-at-Large with the watch magazine *Revolution*, I was told I was hired not just for my experience as a watch writer, but because the CEO is an audiophile who has been reading my stuff 'in *Hi-Fi News* for 30 years.'

Thus our conversation veered quickly from horological topics to 'Should I hang on to my Krell EVOs?', from a man who, moments before, betrayed no audiophile tendency. Singapore-based, he still heeds the siren call of stupendous hi-fi. Perhaps I'll find a way to attend *his* local high-end show. ☺


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