

# hi-fi news

& Record Review

## GOLDEN SOUNDS

Wilson Audio speakers  
make beautiful music

Chapter Sonnet-S

High-end CD plus hi-rez DAC



'Hi-fi will never be  
the same again!' p16

SRM Athena SE

Spin your vinyl in style



Group Test: £40 headphones  
Superb sounds at bargain prices



**PINK FLOYD**  
Piper at the Gates of Dawn

### AWARDS

#### EISA 2010-2011

Revealed: This year's very  
best hi-fi and home theatre



• **PLUS** 13 pages of music features • **VINYL RE-RELEASE** Kate Bush's *Hounds of Love* on LP  
• **AUDIO MILESTONES** SME 3009 series tonearms • **HI-FI @ HOME** Esoterica in South Ealing  
• **VINTAGE** Leak Stereo 30 reviewed • **READERS' CLASSIFIEDS** Scores of hi-fi bargains

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# MUSICAL FIDELITY

## M6PRE

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Outstanding technical performance.

## M6PRX

260wpc. Dual mono. High current. Choke regulated.  
Outstanding technical performance.







**ABOVE:** Don't discount the low cost headphone as a lost cause. Our Group Test reveals some audiophile bargains to be had at just £20

**LEFT:** The iconic 'biaxial' Dynavector tonearm, in its latest guise as the DV 507MKII, tested on p60



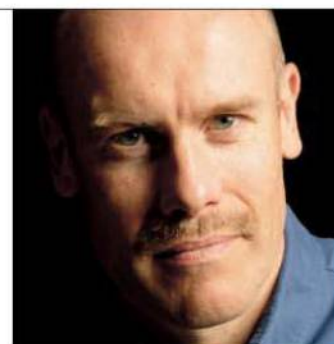
**VINYL:** Pink Floyd's *Piper...* is our Vinyl Icon (p70) while we re-evaluate Kate Bush's re-released *Hounds of Love* LP on p68

Our regular Vintage Review and Audio Milestone features are a reminder of times past when Blighty really did rule the audio waves. Years before Far Eastern brands had the industrial muscle to dominate the world market, home-grown hi-fi companies including Leak and SME – both featured in this issue – would reach across whole continents with products that truly defined their era.

SME, thankfully, is still with us but no-one is suggesting that its flagship Series IV and V tonearms are produced in anything like the numbers of its iconic 3009 [see p114]. The plain truth is that, while the world continues to shrink, both national boundaries and stereotypes are becoming progressively more transparent.

Specialist audio companies in the UK are now competing ever more directly on the world stage with their counterparts from France, Germany and Italy, for example, in addition to established high-end brands from the US, Canada and Japan.

A brief trawl through our back issues reveals some exquisitely engineered audio separates from Focal, Triangle, Cabasse, Devialet, Clearaudio and Sonus faber, to name but a few European brands. More importantly, these products



have not been tuned to some outdated notion of French, German or Italian (*etc*) taste. It really seems as if audiophiles from all countries are coalescing towards a more harmonious and unified goal of superb sound quality. This notion has also rubbed off on the Far Eastern giants that tempt us with their ready supply of affordable audio

## 'The EISA Awards are revealed exclusively in *Hi-Fi News*'

electronics and flat panel TVs, very few now 'tweaked' to suit specific European demographics.

Which brings us neatly to this year's EISA Awards, revealed exclusively in *Hi-Fi News* as the UK panel member of this prestigious European organisation [see p10]. Among the winners for the 2010-2011 season are many well-reviewed products from these very pages. I wonder, are we at the heart of Europe after all?

**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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HI-FI NEWS

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HI-FI CHOICE

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HI-FI WORLD

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[www.soundfoundations.co.uk](http://www.soundfoundations.co.uk) [www.isoteksystems.com](http://www.isoteksystems.com)

*"The whole auditioning process took about 30 seconds. Play a piece of music on GII Mini Sub. Play it again on Aquarius and wonder why you were so attached to the GII Mini Sub." "Very highly recommended"*

HI-FI PLUS, ISSUE 68,



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VISION



SIGMAS



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# Reprieve for FM radio

ANALOGUE SWITCH OFF NOW TO DEPEND ON 'CONTENT, COVERAGE AND CARS'



Leading DAB radio producers Pure and Roberts have recently launched sets, Pure with its DAB/FM Evoke-1S Marshall (above) and Roberts with the FM/AM Classic 997



of a commitment to provide more DAB spectrum to the BBC, so that bit rates can be raised on the main networks sufficiently to provide comparable audio quality to FM, means that for quality-conscious listeners there remains no incentive to switch.

'Thus, the industry's plan to force a switchover to a low quality DAB service seems, for the moment at least, to have been frustrated.'

Following our Investigation feature last month, fears of a national-station FM switch-off as early as 2015 have receded. Meanwhile, support for commercial DAB looked to be weakened by News International's closure of its internet radio show, SunTalk, on the 15th of July. A possible national DAB launch was abandoned, reportedly, as not commercially viable. Commercial DAB broadcasting has been in the doldrums since Channel 4 scrapped its ambitious 4 Digital DAB network plan in October 2008.

Announcing the Government's Digital Action Plan in a speech on the 8th of July, Communications Minister Ed Vaizey said 'We will not switch over until the vast majority of listeners have voluntarily adopted digital radio over analogue.'

He went on, 'We will not switch over to digital until digital coverage matches FM. And we will not switch off FM. FM will remain a platform for small local and community radio for as long as these services want it.'

'Switchover in 2015 remains a target we aspire to, but for which a lot more work needs to be done before we can make it a cast-iron commitment.'

The minister neatly outlined the 'barriers' to switchover as three 'C's'. 'Content' needed to be improved, with 'more 6 Musics'; 'Coverage' needed to

match that of FM; and as for 'Cars', he intended to 'meet with the major car manufacturers shortly and will re-affirm our view that digital radio should be standard in all cars by the end of 2013.'

Essentially, there is nothing new in the Digital Action Plan, as switchover was already set to be conditional on coverage matching FM and on digital sources accounting for 50% of total listening.

But Ed Vaizey said 'consumers, not government, through their listening habits and purchasing decisions will ultimately determine whether a switchover to digital can happen.' And his use of the word 'whether' rather than 'when' seemed to acknowledge that the 50% digital listening target might never be reached.

The *Mirror* web news headlined the speech as a 'U-Turn' saying, '... 120 million radios have been saved... the Government has bowed to pressure, meaning people will be able to carry on using traditional sets for the foreseeable future.'

## REALITY CHECK

Broadcast expert Alwyn Seeds of UCL told *Hi-Fi News*, 'The minister is bringing a welcome breath of reality to the DAB switchover plans, which may lead to their being edged into the long grass.'

'Moreover, the confirmation that DAB+ will not be introduced and the absence

## DIGITAL RESPONSE

But leading DAB setmakers Pure and Roberts still welcomed the Digital Action Plan. Pure's general manager Paul Smith said the announcement 'gives much needed clarity... it allows us to push ahead our digital radio plans with certainty.'

More equivocally, Roberts Radio's Owen Watters said 'although Roberts is in full support of the planned migration, there is still a very healthy analogue demand in the UK and so, for these consumers, the recent announcement will be gratefully received.'

He added, 'We are glad to see that the motor car is higher up the agenda... there are 30 million cars on the UK's roads; [most] don't have a workable solution.'

While Roberts launched two new FM/MW/LW radios with a press release headed 'Analogue is alive and kicking,' Pure has made efforts to address the 'car' issue, with Halfords stores offering the Pure Highway car DAB adaptor at £100.

But Pure's latest launch is a 'resurrection', a revision of its Evoke Marshall DAB radio, styled after the famous guitar amps. Priced £119.99, the Pure Evoke-1S Marshall comes with ChargePak technology to give 24 hours use between battery charges, 30 presets, an aux input for iPod or MP3 player and USB port to load software changes. And it also has FM.



# Audiolab's new generation

TWO NEW CD PLAYERS HERALD THE ARRIVAL OF A NEW AUDIOLAB RANGE

Featuring the same '32-bit' ESS DAC technology used some very high-end players (including models from Simaudio and Chapter Audio reviewed in *HFN*), Audiolab's new entries seem remarkably well-priced at £700 and £900. These are the 8200CD and 8200CDQ,

respectively, both models including a range of S/PDIF and USB digital inputs to supplement the playback of CDs. Both also offer a choice of four digital filter options, trading roll-off against transient performance.

The costlier 8200CDQ version is distinguished by its

fully-featured on-board Class A preamp which brings an additional three analogue inputs to bear. These inputs remain in the analogue domain from volume control through to the balanced (XLR) outputs.

**IAG, 01480 447700;**  
**www.audiolab.co.uk**



## HI-FI NEWS' NUGGETS

### HI-FI STORES MERGE

Depending upon the outcome of a period of joint marketing and purchasing, the Audio T and Sevenoaks Sound & Vision retail stores will merge. A spokesman for the two groups said 'we intend to capitalise on both the Sevenoaks S&V and Audio T names as well as our combined 50+ store coverage as a springboard for future expansion.' See [www.ssav.com](http://www.ssav.com) and [www.audio-t.co.uk](http://www.audio-t.co.uk)

### ROKSAN LAUNCH

A brand new range of products has been announced from Roksan Audio beginning with the M2 Series Caspian integrated amplifier and CD player this summer. A new M2 series power amplifier will appear in October with both phono stage and line-level preamps becoming available at the end of the year. See [www.roksan.co.uk](http://www.roksan.co.uk) for more details.

## Electrocompaniet amp

CLASSIC INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER GETS A MKII REVAMP

A bigger power supply and twice the number of output devices in its power amp stage – just two of the major revisions Electrocompaniet has specified for the mkII version of its popular ECI-5 integrated amplifier. Now rated at 2x120W and offering a total of six inputs (two balanced through XLRs), the ECI-5 mkII also features a new and larger display. Electrocompaniet is Norway's largest producer of high quality hi-fi gear and the ECI-5 mkII is priced at €3790. The Fjord, pictured below, is not included.

**Electrocompaniet, 0208 893 5835; www.electrocompaniet.com**



## Avid Pulsus phono stage

TRICKLE DOWN TECHNOLOGY FROM AVID'S PULSARE PHONO

Inspired by the performance of its flagship Pulsare phono stage [see *HFN*, Aug '10], Avid's engineers have designed a more affordable version, dubbed the Pulsus, pitched at £1000. The flexibility of switchable gain and input loading is retained with +48dB, +60dB and +70dB options together with 100ohm to 47kohm loading on offer for all MC and MM pick-ups.

Like the Pulsare, the Pulsus is fed from an outboard and

separately screened power supply which promises very low levels of noise. The Pulsus's casework is not as massive as that specified for the flagship model but at 3kg the two boxes are hardly insubstantial. Circuit design is single-ended, rather than balanced throughout like the Pulsare, but the use of high-end components is retained.

**Avid, 01480 457300;**  
**www.avidhifi.co.uk**







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## Crystal Acoustics BPT

UPDATED STANDMOUNT AND FLOORSTANDER

Tall, thin 5.1 channel speaker packages are nothing new but this £600 BPT system from Greek manufacturer Crystal Acoustics has a trick up its collective sleeve(s). Each of the floorstanders is a dipole with pairs of 75mm bass/mid drivers mounted fore and aft in an attempt to provide 'a widely dispersed soundfield that immerses the listener in movies or music.' The matching THX-10SUBt subwoofer features a 10in woofer and 120W amp. **Crystal Acoustics Ltd, 0208 133 7066; [www.crystallaudiovideo.com](http://www.crystallaudiovideo.com)**



## Marantz flagship AV amp

'1kW' OF POWER PROMISED FROM MULTICHANNEL AMP

Boasting full compatibility with 3D TV, vTuner Internet radio and all the Dolby and DTS HD Audio standards, the £1400 SR7005 AV receiver is Marantz's latest multimedia flagship. SHARC processors handle all audio decoding plus Audyssey's proprietary 'MultEQ XT Pro' room equalisation facility while

a built-in digital media player accesses and streams music content stored on a home network, whether from PC or NAS drive. A beefy power supply supports Marantz's seven internal amplifiers, each rated at 125W/8ohm.

**Marantz, 02890 279839 [www.marantz.co.uk](http://www.marantz.co.uk)**



## NAT Audio Signature

BATTERIES ARE INCLUDED IN NEW VALVE PHONO AMPLIFIER

NAT Audio's £5633 Signature phono stage employs a battery PSU for its six 6N23P-EV military-spec tubes, promising very low

noise. The MC input features Jensen step-up transformers. **Alternative Audio, 01984 624242; [www.nataudio.com](http://www.nataudio.com)**



## Furutech USB DAC

ALPHA DESIGN LABS SPIN OFF FROM FURUTECH

The first product of Furutech's 'second brand' ADL is the £395 GT40 USB DAC complete with rotary volume control and, as an unexpected feature, a MM/MC phono preamp. The GT40 includes a 'low-latency'

USB 2.0 driver that supports both playback and recording at 24-bit/96kHz, including archiving LPs to hard disk. **Sound Foundations, 01276 501 392; [www.soundfoundations.co.uk](http://www.soundfoundations.co.uk)**



## HI-FI NEWS? JUST ASK...

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## Upcoming Events

IMPORTANT DATES FOR YOUR HI-FI DIARY

- |                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| <b>3-8 SEPT</b>   | IFA 2010, Berlin Messe, Germany<br><a href="http://www.ifa-berlin.de">www.ifa-berlin.de</a>                            |
| <b>25-26 SEPT</b> | Audio Show 2010, Silverstone, <a href="http://www.chestergroup.org">www.chestergroup.org</a>                           |
| <b>10 OCT</b>     | Audiojumble, Angel Leisure Centre, Tonbridge, Kent<br><a href="http://www.audiojumble.co.uk">www.audiojumble.co.uk</a> |
| <b>16-17 OCT</b>  | Sound & Vision Manchester 2010<br><a href="http://www.manchestershow.co.uk">www.manchestershow.co.uk</a>               |



# EISA

EUROPEAN IMAGING AND  
SOUND ASSOCIATION

## EUROPEAN AUDIO AND HOME THEATRE PRODUCTS OF THE YEAR 2010-2011

**Hi-Fi News is the  
exclusive UK  
representative for the  
Audio & Home Theatre  
Panel within EISA**

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

**W**elcome to the EISA Awards for 2010-2011. Back in 1982 when the European Imaging and Sound Association was first formed, the world and Europe were smaller places. Manufacturers would habitually produce regional versions of their hi-fi and TV equipment to suit national tastes while many specialist brands would never be enjoyed outside of their own countries.

How times have changed. Over 30 years on and the handful of member magazines that represented EISA has swollen to over 50 from as far afield as France, Portugal, Germany,

Spain, Scandinavia and the new Russian republics in the East. *Hi-Fi News* represents EISA's far western border and sits on both the Audio and Home Theatre Panels alongside sister publication *Amateur Photographer* on the Photo Panel.

From the EISA Convention held in May through to the final General Meeting in June, member magazines pool their combined experience to arrive at a consensus of the very best in sound and vision products available across Europe. And these Awards are typically agreed upon with amicable efficiency as the increasingly fluid

movement of both mass market and specialised audiophile equipment has blurred national stereotypes across the continent. Enthusiasts, it seems, are only interested in achieving the very best sound and picture quality, regardless of their home nation.

A brief excursion through any issue of *Hi-Fi News* reflects the new 'borderless' reality of our hobby with truly state-of-the-art products now available in the UK from both established and new specialists across Europe. Pages 12 and 16, for example, feature Award-winning products that were premiered on front covers of *Hi-Fi News* earlier this year.

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** Delegates from 50 magazines receive exclusive product presentations at the EISA Convention; we have ladies too – Åsa Warne from Sweden's *Ljud & Bild*; the Ed complete with 3D specs at a Panasonic seminar; the EISA Audio Panel gets down to business at the General Meeting





**European 2-Channel System 2010-2011**  
**Denon DCD-1510 AE/PMA-1510 AE**

Only just released, this combination of SACD player and integrated amplifier sets new standards in the mid-priced market. Like its highly successful predecessor, the amp is both packed with features and fine-tuned to improve sound quality even further. The disc player, on the other hand, is an almost completely new design, which redefines performance at this price. It features a high quality transport, two mains transformers and is fully compatible with MP3 and WAV files whether stored on CD, a USB-drive or an iPod/iPhone. What's more, the latter can be controlled via the player's remote handset while the display shows track information. This Denon duo is now the cost effective solution for the demanding listener.

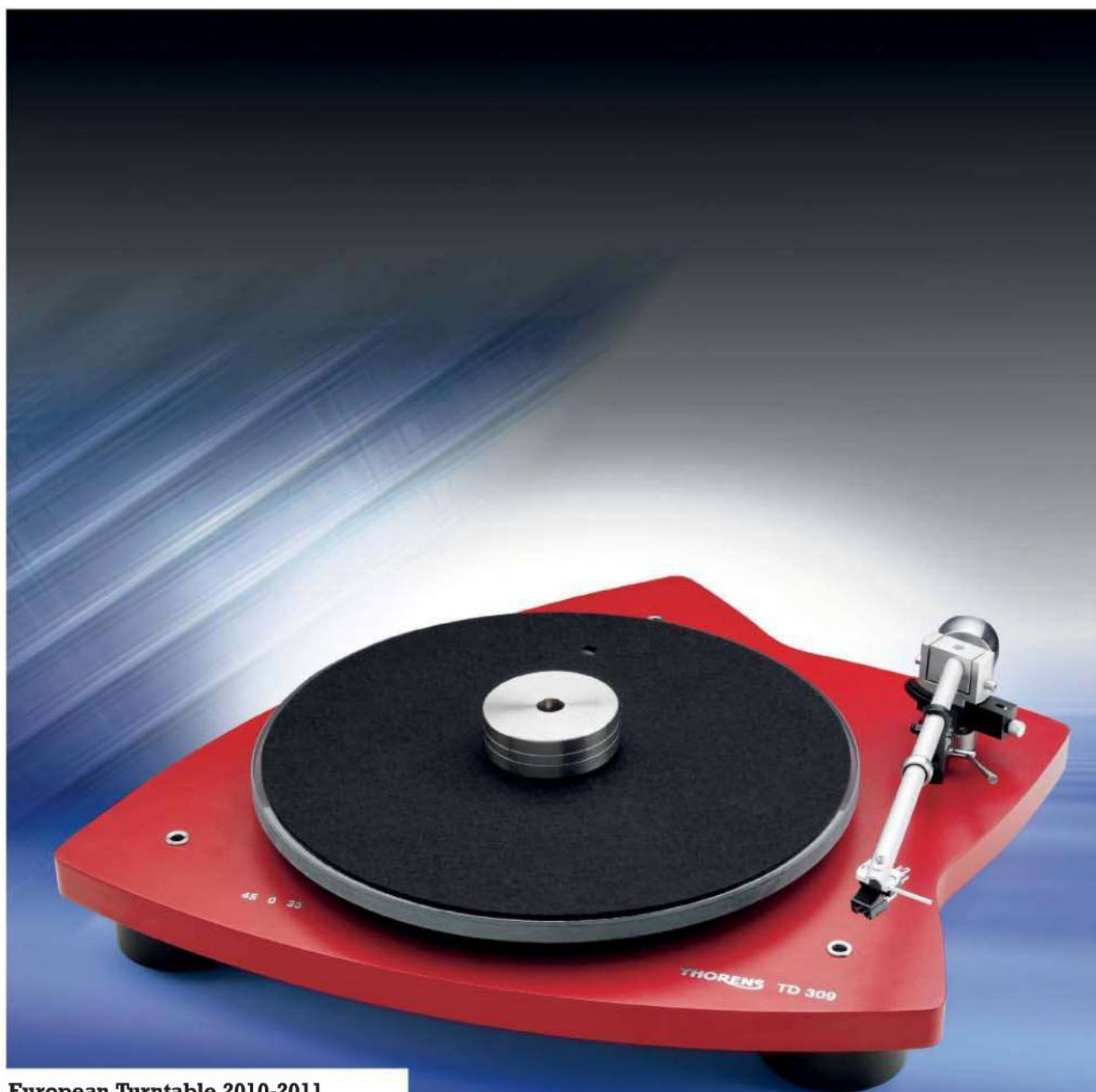
2-CHANNEL SYSTEM





**EISA**EUROPEAN IMAGING AND  
SOUND ASSOCIATION**EISA AWARDS 2010-2011**

TURN'TABLE

**European Turntable 2010-2011**  
**Thorens TD 309**

This eye-catching turntable is clearly the most novel design to emerge from Thorens in the last decade. Employing a sprung suspension and separately decoupled motor, this two-speed deck also comes complete with Thorens' own TP92 tonearm and MM pick-up cartridge. It is ready within minutes of unpacking and offers more than a glimpse into the world of the glorious 'vinyl sound', which is growing in popularity among general consumers and audiophiles alike. The TD 309 is a stylish and affordable passport into the realm of the vinyl LP.





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## MUSICALITY WITH ATTITUDE



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With an elegant new darker colour scheme and silk mat surface this IKONic series is honouring, both the IKON-heritage as well as new listeners' ears, eyes, and minds.



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[www.dali-speakers.com](http://www.dali-speakers.com)



**EISA**EUROPEAN IMAGING AND  
SOUND ASSOCIATION**EISA AWARDS 2010-2011**

LOUDSPEAKER

**European Loudspeaker 2010-2011**  
**Dali Ikon 6 MK2**

Thanks to a comprehensive list of improvements, the second edition of Dali's well-reviewed Ikon Series of speakers represents much more than a subtle update. Valorized drivers, an enhanced finish, stronger enclosure construction and a completely new crossover network ensure a sound that towers over similarly priced rivals. The hybrid tweeter module provides a treble that is wonderfully smooth while the shape of the enclosure assists in a presentation that is both clear and wide. Add in a rich, sturdy bass, a natural-sounding midrange, high sensitivity and its relatively easy amplifier load and Danish company's Ikon 6 MK2 is a deserving winner.

**Best  
Product**  
2010-2011**LOUDSPEAKER**

Dali Ikon 6 MK2



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**EISA**EUROPEAN IMAGING AND  
SOUND ASSOCIATION**EISA AWARDS 2010-2011**

HIGH-END AUDIO

**European High-End Audio  
2010-2011****Devialet D-Premier**

From France comes the most innovative and advanced amplifier to emerge on the hi-fi scene in years. Its striking industrial design conceals a patented hybrid of analogue and digital technologies that deliver stunning audio and technical performance. A host of user-configurable inputs are included while its distinctive (radio frequency) tabletop remote allows the amplifier to be controlled without it being in line-of-sight. Proprietary Wi-Fi and two HDMI sockets are also included to service future upgrades, including using the D-Premier as a transparent HDMI-repeater between a source and a TV. To hear this amplifier is to enjoy stereo music like never before as it carves a truly memorable performance into the very air itself. Hi-fi will never be the same again!

**Best  
Product  
2010-2011****HIGH-END AUDIO**

Devialet D-Premier



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**Black1Black**



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SOUND ASSOCIATION**EISA AWARDS 2010-2011**

HIGH-END LOUDSPEAKER

**European High-End  
Loudspeaker 2010-2011  
B&W 805 Diamond**

B&W's classic 805 standmount loudspeaker gets the 'Diamond' makeover with new Nautilus-loaded tweeters, a revised crossover and an entirely new matrix-inspired cabinet design. This compact speaker is available in three beautiful finishes – cherrywood, rosenut and piano gloss black – that reflect its status as a true luxury product. As the voice of a top quality hi-fi system, and without dominating the furniture in your living room, the B&W 805 Diamond offers a highly refined and beguiling sound that's hard to resist.

**Best  
Product  
2010-2011****HIGH-END LOUDSPEAKER****B&W 805 Diamond**



### European Compact System 2010-2011 Philips Streamium MCi900

If you're in the market for a compact system that pretty much does it all then the MCi900 is it. This latest Streamium Wi-Fi solution, complete with SoundSphere speakers, will play DVD and DivX movie files, FLAC and WAV music files and offers UPnP capability to stream MP3 music from a PC. You can also play soundfiles to its USB-connected, additional 160GB hard drive, while Ethernet or Wi-Fi connection allows you to have access to internet audio. The partnering aluminium SoundSphere speakers are driven from a 2x50W Class D amplifier and combine an upward-firing bass/mid unit with a separate tweeter, housed in an overhanging 'teardrop'. The broad directionality of these novel speakers helps deliver a deep and wide sound into every corner of your room.



COMPACT SYSTEM

SOUND STATION

### European Sound Station 2010-2011 Pioneer XW-NAC3

This compact and well-designed gadget sports no fewer than two docks that accommodate both iPods and iPhones. With its special shuffle function you can mix the libraries from two combined iPod/iPhones for a whole night of exciting entertainment! The XW-NAC3 includes Bluetooth capability together with a technology called 'Sound Retriever AIR' that attempts to restore much of the audio quality before compression and transmission. There's also a USB input for playback of popular formats including MP3, AAC, WMA, WAV, FLAC and LPCM. Furthermore, you can connect to thousands of internet radio channels from all over the world.







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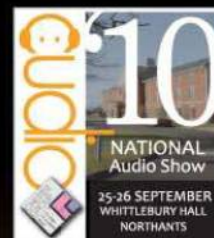
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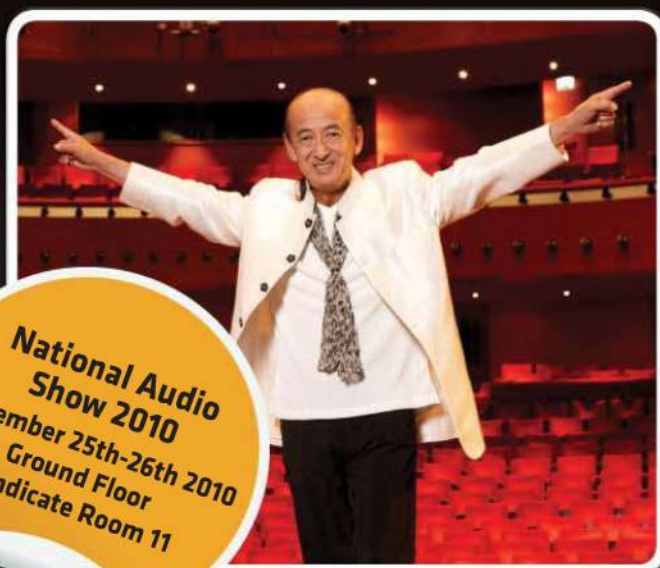
## Major Event Announcement



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This is the first time that this **exclusive event** has been performed in the UK. Having won critical acclaim in Hong Kong, this is a unique opportunity to experience what can only be described as **'State-of-the-art high resolution SACD multi-channel audio'**.

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**National Audio  
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Amplified via 3 'cascaded' Marantz PM11-S2 stereo integrated amplifiers, the PM11-S2 was designed around the **Legendary Series SC-7 Pre-amplifier** and **MA-9 monoblocks**. Not only does it have similar circuitry but it also keeps the 'cascade' feature, which allows up to 6 pre-amplifiers to be cascaded giving 12 channels!



## Speakers

Wilson Benesch Trinity satellites will be deployed to achieve both the **wide bandwidth data** and lightning fast transient response of the **Marantz Integrated amplifiers**. **Infrasonic sound** to be delivered by the **patented Wilson Benesch Torus infrasonic generator**.

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11.00am  
12.15pm  
1.30pm  
2.45pm  
4.00pm

Sunday 26th  
12.00pm  
1.15pm  
2.30pm





**EISA**EUROPEAN IMAGING AND  
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HOME THEATRE RECEIVER

**European HT Receiver 2010-2011****Onkyo TX-SR608**

Onkyo is successfully redefining the facilities, power and performance for 'entry level' AV receivers with its feature-packed TX-SR608. Its host of inputs are headlined by no fewer than six 3D-compatible HDMI 1.4a connections while the on-board decoding supports the latest HD-audio formats from Dolby and DTS. Video upscaling to 1080p is provided along with a host of Audyssey processing modes. The seven internal power amplifiers are rated at a full 100W each to deliver a truly immersive home cinema experience while Onkyo's careful analogue engineering also ensures the TX-SR608 sings with conventional stereo music.





**European HT Loudspeaker 2010-2011****Harman Kardon HKTS 60BQ/230**

This 5.1 home theatre speaker system combines fine sound with stylish design, with each of the components making up this package boasting a luxurious, high gloss finish. The five satellite speakers convince with a clear, realistic and dynamic sound that ensures movie dialogue is easy to follow just as background detail is allowed to develop a tremendous sense of atmosphere. Rich in technology, the dual flat-panel midrange drivers in HK's satellite and centre speakers reduce distortion and unwanted reflections. The subwoofer has adjustable volume and phase and includes an 8in driver and 200W-rated amplifier, delivering an impressively deep bass from such a compact cabinet.



HOME THEATRE LOUDSPEAKER



**European HT High-End 2010-2011****Krell S-1200u/S-1500**

When cost is no object and the pursuit of the ultimate home theatre sound is the overriding goal, Krell has a mouth-watering solution in its fabulous S-1200u AV processor and S-1500 multichannel power amplifier. The 7.1 channel processor provides decoding for all Dolby and DTS HD audio formats through its fully balanced outputs, the 'u' version also offering upscaling of analogue video content to 1080p digital video from its HDMI 1.3 output. This stunning AV processor is complemented by Krell's modular S-1500 power amplifier which offers 3, 5, 6 or 7x150W outputs from a deceptively compact enclosure. Its features tick all the boxes for the high-end cinephile while its Krell heritage ensures a broad, deep and immensely powerful multichannel sound that sets the standard for cinema in the home.



**Best  
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2010-2011

**HT HIGH-END**

Krell S-1200u/S-1500



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HOME THEATRE SUBWOOFER/SOUNDBAR

**European Soundbar 2010-2011  
Panasonic SC-HTB500**

Televisions may be getting thinner by the year but this makes the engineering of their integral, flat loudspeakers all the more difficult and explains the rise of the 'Soundbar'. Panasonic's SC-HTB500 solution is aimed at owners of flat panel TVs sized 42in and above and is easily installed and connected, requiring just one HDMI cable. The HDMI input is 3D compatible and includes an Audio Return Channel and Pass Thru feature. Panasonic's bamboo cone speakers and 'Clear-Mode' dialog feature helps this Soundbar achieve a crisp and attractively full-bodied sound. Match it with the included wireless active subwoofer for a highly stylish solution.

**EISA  
AWARD****Best  
Product  
2010-2011****HT SOUNDBAR**

Panasonic SC-HTB500

**European HT Subwoofer 2010-2011  
PSB SubSeries 500**

Whatever loudspeakers you currently own, all but the very largest could not fail to be assisted by the PSB SubSeries 500 subwoofer. With capacity in hand to play those all-important low frequencies down to 20Hz, its 12in low frequency driver sports a diaphragm made of woven fiberglass, powered by an amplifier able to kick out a claimed 500W and dynamic peaks of 1500W. Still compact and space-saving, the sound of this subwoofer is clean, unusually controlled, tight and distortion free. It is not just a fantastic addition to any home theatre system but the ideal solution to reinforce your high quality hi-fi system, too.

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AWARD****Best  
Product  
2010-2011****HT SUBWOOFER**

PSB SubSeries 500





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**Best  
Product  
2010-2011**

**HT SYSTEM**

Philips HTS9520



### European HT System 2010-2011 Philips HTS9520

Key to Philips' HTS9520 are its novel satellite speakers, each comprising multiple drivers. The lower cabinet features two side-firing units which act as dipoles while the top cabinet utilises a conventional bass/treble arrangement. These are driven from Class D amplifiers in the HTS9520's main DVD/BD player, which also includes custom DSP to further enhance the system's surround sound. With a subwoofer providing a solid foundation for the midrange and treble, the result is a sound that surrounds you in new and exciting ways! An attractive and fine sounding system, this product is ready for both 3D TV and offers wireless access to your home server.

### European HT Compact System 2010-2011 LG HB45E

Finding a 2.1 system home theatre system that is both compact and great sounding is not the easiest of tasks. However, with its slim and stylish HB45E, LG sets the benchmark for sound per pound and versatility, combining BD Live 2.0, an iPod/iPhone docking station plus compatibility with USB, DLNA and CIFS. The system has inputs for multiple sources, including NTFS hard drives, and will process DivX HD and MKV files. The satellite speakers generate a spacious sound in a range of different environments while the powerful subwoofer never threatens to upset the overall balance of the music. Offering a world of fun and possibilities, this smart, compact multi-purpose system will also prove a hit with gamers.



**EISA  
AWARD**

**Best  
Product  
2010-2011**

**HT COMPACT SYSTEM**

LG HB45E

**EISA  
AWARD**

**Best  
Product  
2010-2011**

**BLU-RAY PLAYER**

Samsung BD-C8900/8900S



### European Blu-ray Player 2010-2011 Samsung BD-C8900/8900S

The Samsung BD-C8900 delivers extraordinarily high picture quality from Blu-ray discs to any of today's HD displays, even when reproducing 3D. The ultra-fast start up time when loading a disc is extremely impressive. But this product is much more than just a Blu-ray player: the versatile source unit also delivers great audio and pictures from an integrated HDTV cable or satellite tuner ('S'-version) and allows up to 136 hours recording of HD programme material to an internal 500GB hard disk drive as well. The BD-C8900 is equipped with a CI+ slot, built-in Wi-Fi, Internet-TV and USB playback, adding great flexibility and streaming services to its excellent performance. The UK-model BD-C8900M has an incorporated DVB-T2 tuner.



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### European Video Projector 2010-2011 SIM2 Grand Cinema Mico 50

The home theatre enthusiast will love it: the SIM2 Grand Cinema Mico offers amazing picture quality with near perfect colours and an amazing black level due its 'Dynamic Black' feature. This single Chip DLP projector is based on a new high quality technology that uses RGB LEDs with a lifetime of 30,000 hours as a light source. The usual mechanical rotating colour wheel is no longer needed inside the optical engine. LED technology delivers instant power-up and down coupled with high picture quality lasting for many years without discernable degradation. By removing the need to purchase replacement mercury-based lamps, the Mico 50 not only earns green credentials but also saves you money. A range of high quality zoom lenses brings further flexibility to this maintenance-free, high picture quality, low noise offering.

### European 3D Solution 2010-2011 Samsung UE46C8000 + HT-C6930W

Looking for an exciting 3D home theatre including 7.1 sound? The superslim Samsung UE46C8000 is equipped to bring the fascinating world of 3D into your living room. Full HD, 3D-quality and 2D to 3D conversion are impeccable and convincing; its super slim design underlines the superior class of faithful colours and deep black delivered by advanced LED technology. This Media-Centre-TV is equipped with HD-Tuners and Internet-TV allows users to install applications from Samsung's App Store, sharing and streaming all kind of media via the home network, including USB-recording and a Skype video phone feature. Great sound is achieved in combination with Samsung's HT-C6930W 7.1 system that includes a 3D-capable Blu-ray player and powerful amplifiers, wireless rear speakers and automatic sound calibration via a microphone.



### European Green TV 2010-2011 Philips 42PFL6805

In its quest for energy efficiency, the Philips 42PFL6805 reaches an all time low consuming just 40 Watts in eco-mode. The set demonstrates a holistic approach to eco-design, evident in many details such as the unorthodox product architecture, solar-powered remote control, double-function stand and wall-mount and an e-manual. The cherry on the cake is the clever use of a rather small, partly recycled aluminium panel which covers all electronics instead of the total back cover that is used by its competition.



**VIDEO PANEL AWARDS 2010-2011**

WINNING PRODUCTS
EUROPEAN BEST VALUE LCD-TV 2010-2011
EUROPEAN LCD-TV 2010-2011
EUROPEAN 3D-LCD TV 2010-2011
EUROPEAN 3D-PLASMA TV 2010-2011
EUROPEAN CAMCORDER 2010-2011
EUROPEAN FAMILY CAMCORDER 2010-2011
EUROPEAN HIGH-END CAMCORDER 2010-2011
EUROPEAN TV INNOVATION 2010-2011
LG 42LE5300
Philips 46PFL9705
Sony BRAVIA KDL-52HX903
Panasonic TX-P50VT20
Panasonic HDC-TM700
Canon LEGRIA HF M31
Sony HDR-AX2000E
Sharp Quattron RGBY Technology

**IN-CAR ELECTRONICS AWARDS 2010-2011**

WINNING PRODUCTS
EUROPEAN IN-CAR HEAD UNIT 2010-2011
EUROPEAN IN-CAR A/V HEAD UNIT 2010-2011
EUROPEAN IN-CAR NAVI-MEDIA SYSTEM 2010-2011
EUROPEAN IN-CAR AMPLIFIER 2010-2011
EUROPEAN IN-CAR SPEAKER SYSTEM 2010-2011
EUROPEAN IN-CAR SUBWOOFER 2010-2011
EUROPEAN IN-CAR INTEGRATION 2010-2011
EUROPEAN IN-CAR HIGH-END COMPONENT 2010-2011
Kenwood KIV-700
Sony XAV-70BT
Pioneer AVIC-F20BT
Mosconi Gladen AS 100.4
Audison Voce AV K6
Pioneer TS-SW3001
JBL MS-8
Bewith Confidence Bianco Fuji

**PHOTO PANEL AWARDS 2010-2011**

WINNING PRODUCTS
EUROPEAN PROFESSIONAL CAMERA 2010-2011
EUROPEAN CAMERA 2010-2011
EUROPEAN MICRO SYSTEM CAMERA 2010-2011
EUROPEAN MULTIMEDIA CAMERA 2010-2011
EUROPEAN COMPACT CAMERA 2010-2011
EUROPEAN SUPER ZOOM CAMERA 2010-2011
EUROPEAN ALL-WEATHER COMPACT CAMERA 2010-2011
EUROPEAN ADVANCED COMPACT CAMERA 2010-2011
EUROPEAN TRAVEL COMPACT CAMERA 2010-2011
EUROPEAN PROFESSIONAL LENS 2010-2011
EUROPEAN LENS 2010-2011
EUROPEAN ZOOM LENS 2010-2011
EUROPEAN MICRO SYSTEM LENS 2010-2011
EUROPEAN PRINTER 2010-2011
EUROPEAN PHOTO SOFTWARE 2010-2011
Nikon D3S
Canon EOS 7D
Sony Alpha NEX-5
Panasonic Lumix DMC-G2
Sony Cyber-shot DSC-HX5V
Fujifilm FinePix HS10
Olympus µ Tough-8010
Samsung EX1
Panasonic Lumix DMC-TZ10
Nikon AF-S Nikkor 300mm F2.8G ED VR II
Sigma 17-70mm F2.8-4 DC Macro OS HSM
Tamron SP70-300mm F4-5.6 Di VC USD
Olympus M.Zuiko Digital ED 9-18mm F4-5.6
Epson Stylus PRO 3880
Apple Aperture 3

**MOBILE DEVICES PANEL AWARDS 2010-2011**

WINNING PRODUCTS
EUROPEAN SOCIAL MEDIA PHONE 2010-2011
EUROPEAN SMARTPHONE 2010-2011
EUROPEAN MOBILE PHONE 2010-2011
EUROPEAN PORTABLE NAVIGATION DEVICE 2010-2011
EUROPEAN MOBILE HEADPHONES 2010-2011
EUROPEAN TABLET 2010-2011
Samsung Wave GT-S8500
Samsung Galaxy S GT-i9000
Sony Ericsson Xperia X10 mini
Garmin Nüvi 3790t
Beyerdynamic T 50 p
Apple iPad

**GREEN AWARDS 2010-2011**

WINNING PRODUCTS
EUROPEAN GREEN-TV 2010-2011
EUROPEAN GREEN MOBILE PHONE 2010-2011
PHILIPS 42PFL6805
LG GD510



# Wilson Audio Sophia 3 (£16,990)

Sasha technology has trickled down to the Sophia. Is the Sophia 3 Wilson Audio's 'easiest' speaker yet?  
 Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Keith Howard**

Since the early 1980s, Wilson Audio has produced speakers as physically small as the Duette and the original WATT, not just behemoths such as the Alexandria. It has been my good fortune to have heard almost every model, either at shows, at the Wilson listening room in Provo, Utah or in friends' homes. And there's a reason why I have used the smaller Wilsons as my primary reference for 25 years or so: they allow me to listen *into* the recording.

Unlike most, though, I don't necessarily believe that the progression from smallest model to largest should incite an automatic desire to follow that ascent. I have been perfectly happy with the WATT Puppy sequence from 1-7 because they suit my room. I repeat: they match the Kessler listening area to perfection. And while I'm certain that some crafty soul

could find a way to convince a pair of Alexandrias to work in my 12x18ft chamber, I wouldn't want to be faced with something that so dominated my field of vision. So, as a result of swearing by the horses-for-courses approach, I have been a Sophia user for a couple of years [see *HFN*, May '09].

Eh? A step down from WATT Puppy to Sophia? To understand this, you have to think like a reviewer whose system changes weekly. While there's absolutely no such thing as a 'universal' component in the truest sense, there are those which are generous with the way they interact with other items. WATT Puppies can be ornery. They can make mincemeat of amplifiers. Conversely, Sophias don't make such demands. They simply make my life

easier. I can even run 'em with a £700 Croft. I love them to bits, however much I fantasise about Sashas.

## SOPHIA LORE

But Sophia Series 2 was due for a refresher. As Wilson sees it, the company has – since the '2 first appeared – moved ahead quite radically with its driver technology. Because Wilson is a firm believer in the trickle-down process, it was time for Sophia 2 to share in the tweeter developed for MAXX Series 3 and used in Sasha W/P. This 1in inverted titanium dome tweeter employs techniques conceived to reduce back-wave reflections that might

propagate through the diaphragm, in turn adding noise and distortion.

When it comes to the midband, Sophia 3 enjoys a simplified version of the driver found

'The Sophia 3 offers virtual home cinema without a screen'

in the Alexandria X2 Series 2, MAXX and Sasha, closing the sonic gap between them. As the midrange is the critical speaker in any three-way, it goes some way toward achieving one of Dave Wilson's stated goals for the '3: to provide such an instantly appealing and satisfying sound so that customers won't automatically consider it 'inferior' to its dearer siblings. [See boxout, p34.]

What this Sophia user felt, though, was an even more profound gain involving the lowest octaves. Along with other modifications, the

**RIGHT:** Three all-new drivers in a vertical line, including a 10in aluminium cone woofer, a 7in cellulose/paper pulp mid and a 1in inverted titanium dome tweeter







new woofer sports a magnet structure twice the size of the Sophia 2's, retaining only its predecessor's voice coil and cone. Describing the sonic gains finds me at a loss for words, despite Wilson providing its own list that includes 'the overall impact, speed, agility and linearity.' What that inventory doesn't include is the transformation of the physical presence of the bass in one's room, with breathtakingly life-like textures and realistic scale.

It's not simply the drivers that ring in the changes. The crossover has been completely reworked, benefiting from Wilson's sophisticated computer modelling, while the enclosure – made of its 'X-material' – has been re-shaped, with special attention paid to the slope of the upper baffle. This provides the time alignment for the mid and treble, an obsession at Wilson.

Hardware includes wheels underneath for use during positioning, which are then replaced with superb adjustable spikes. The only other tweaking is best left for the installer: the Sophia contains changeable resistors to 'tune' the mid and treble output, and which protect the drivers. These have been relocated from the bottom of the enclosure on the '2, to a more-accessible panel on the rear.

As Sophias 2s were already in place, I simply moved them and positioned the 3s in the same spots. Only marginal adjustments took place over the listening period. I should add, however, that the '3s need a running-in period – Wilson's Peter McGrath

suggests fairly robust levels rather than merely leaving them on over night with soft music. They just got better and better. One suspects that, like LS3/5As, this running-in is like the maturing of a fine wine: they'll continue to mature for the years.

### **MAGIC BOX**

For the listening sessions I fed the Wilsons from an EAT Forte S turntable with a Blue Angel cartridge in the Pro-Ject arm and Linn LP12/Ekos/Arkiv, connected to an Audio Research PH-5 phono stage. Amplification consisted of an Audio Research Ref 5 driving either Quad II-eighty monoblocks or McIntosh's C2200, while digital arrived via a Marantz CD-12 and Musical Fidelity kW DM25 DAC/transport. Wiring was Kimber Select and Yter throughout. And, blessed be, it sounded magical from the first notes I heard.

They were provided by Keb' Mo', because it was the nearest disc to the players and I was eager to hear in my room what I'd only tasted at shows. But it turned out to be a wise choice: a superior recording with a varied complement of instruments, textured vocals, slithery Dobro and some of the most fluid bass you'll ever hear. But you have to try some transposition if I'm to convey the scale of the shock which it provided.

Think of a time when (or if) you replaced an audio component with its Mk II version. Perhaps you upgraded an LP12 from one stage to another, or had an amp re-valved with superior tubes. If the upgrade

### **FRESH WILSONIA**

Wilson's Peter McGrath told me that the company has settled into a less feverish groove when it comes to new models. Instead, the new releases are more considered, relative the rest of the catalogue. In the past year, only two truly new models appeared, the most important being the Sasha W/P, a complete reworking of Wilson's most iconic, influential and best-selling model: the WATT Puppy. More surprising – to them as well as us – is Polaris, conceived as a centre channel, but one that's so good, it has revived a much-missed form: a high-end loudspeaker that *doesn't* stand taller than the listener. So you might buy one, two, three or five.



## LOUDSPEAKER

was worth the re-badging of the model, it should have been startling, not subtle. For the move from Sophia 2 to 3, I am tempted to put it on the same level as that of the last of the WATT Puppies to the Sasha W/P. Staff at Wilson may scratch their heads at my astonishment, and even my presumptuousness at daring to deem the changes as of the same degree, but the effect they had on me was identical to my first exposure to Sashas.

For this to happen, a certain amount of familiarity is required. The music was, of course, beyond familiar, and I'm sure many of you are heartily sick of me using it constantly. My experience of the smaller Wilsons is a matter of record, too. Yet I can liken the scale of the evolution in terms of other products: Leica M4 camera to M6, the generational leaps between Porsche Turbos. And yet it was unmistakably a Sophia, with all that entails.

### GENTLE GIANT

For me, the Sophia differs from its dearer siblings in terms of gentility, without giving up too many of their virtues. They do not force the listener to sit there like a student in a Dickensian classroom. As Keb' Mo' demonstrates, the Sophia 3 can retrieve detail with precision almost as 'macro' as the Sasha's, while the soundstage and all of its proportions are simply an exact scale replica of the huge floostanders. And still the voice of Keb' Mo' – whom I've stood next to in a lift and know is seriously tall – hovered above the 104cm Sophias,



as if in the room. I'd hazard a guess that the Sophia 3 created a perfect  $\frac{5}{8}$ ths-scale model of the Alexandria's sound spread – an apt reduction for my room, a perfect fit.

This is not a qualitative reduction, but quantitative, adhering again and again to Dave Wilson's desire to create a more cost-effective floorstander which does not constantly remind its owner that there are dearer models in the family. Perhaps the most accurate analogy takes us back to cars: I have yet to hear of a Porsche Boxster owner who lays awake at night wishing it was a 911 in his drive.

Despite lacking the movable top section of the Sasha, the Sophia still delivers the correct time alignment, even though its fixed nature means that it must be a

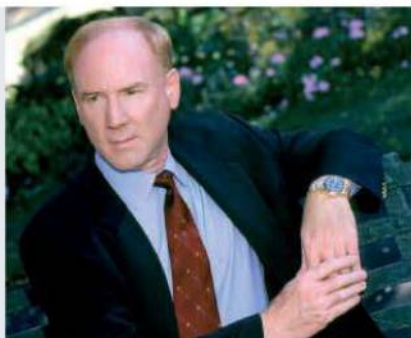
**ABOVE:** Next to the lower of the two rear ports is something new: a plate providing access to the user-changeable tuning resistors previously located underneath the speaker

carefully calculated compromise. You can, of course, raise or lower the front or rear spikes to alter the tilt. With the speaker set perfectly level – the top is angled, so I determined this by the bottom plate – I was able to do a direct comparison with the '2, and even this appears to have improved. There is simply no smearing to be detected. The transients are faultless, the speed and decay reminding me so much of the Sasha that I can believe there are, indeed, Wilson devotees who can afford either, but who opt for the Sophia.

### DAVE WILSON SPEAKS

Dave Wilson wants the Sophia to be 'a congenial speaker, one that would mate easily with other equipment.' This is not to say that the Sophia doesn't respond to the minutiae of high-end gear, but it certainly isn't dependent on a half-kilowatt of power to work well. If in the past Dave might have been horrified to hear this, he's pleased to acknowledge that – by design! – the Sophia is far from being fussy about placement-to-the-millimetre.

'I've always wanted the Sophia to be an accessible product that provides a level of performance which is instantly recognisable as high-end. I don't want the listener to sit there thinking, "they're not as good as Sashas." It's only when you put them side by side that you detect how, for example, the time coherence is better.' With the transition from '2 to '3, Dave has eschewed upgrade paths that sometimes exist between two generations. 'All that remains from Sophia 2 are the woofer's voice coil and cone. The rest is all-new. As much as we'd like to provide an upgrade path, it's an unavoidable truth that over the life of a speaker, you reach a point in the architecture where you need to change the cabinet shape and not only the drivers and crossover for meaningful gains.' 'Meaningful'? That's understatement.



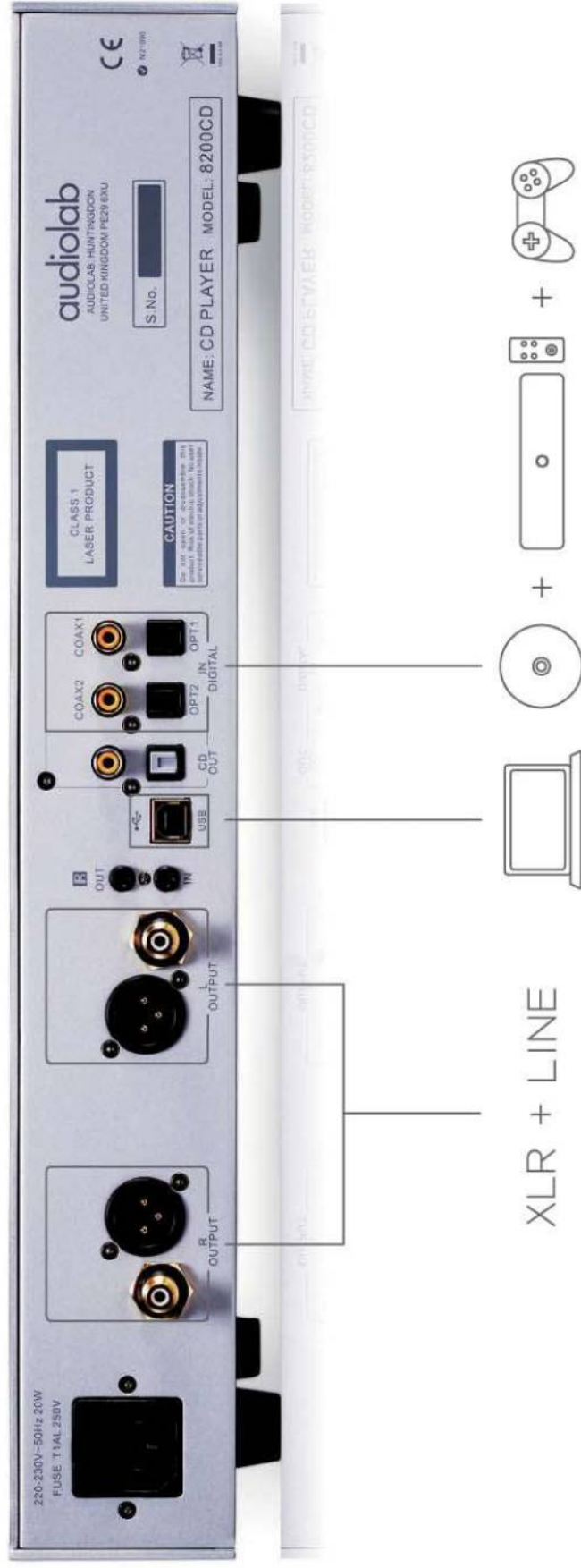
### PEERLESS PERFORMER

Contrasting sounds further strengthened my belief that the Sophia remains peerless as an egalitarian design. On one hand were 1960s/1970s recordings from Rick Nelson, during his country period. 'Garden Party' is just about the only track that people recall from his post-teen idol years, but the gentle material he recorded was captured sympathetically, paving the way for the Eagles. His voice, pleasant but never powerful, can be swamped by the backing band. Sophia retained his presence front-and-centre, with absolutely complementary levels, which is how one imagined it was meant to sound.

Utterly alien to this is the first CD in Tom Waits' 2006 triple disc epic, *Orphans*. If it's possible to blend the blues, 'Cleveland Industrial' and gospel, if Dr John had a baby with Throbbing Gristle, this is it. What Waits feeds us is an aural landscape somewhere between *fin de siècle* sleaze/romance and post-nuclear holocaust urban decay. In defiance of all that is logical, ☺



# CHECK OUT THAT REAR



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## LOUDSPEAKER

## LAB REPORT

### WILSON AUDIO SOPHIA 3 (£16,990)

Wilson claims 87dB sensitivity for the Sophia 3, which is 2dB less than for its predecessor. This accords well with our measurement of 87.2dB on pink noise, about 1dB better than we achieved with the Sophia 2. Note that this is from 300Hz-20kHz rather than the usual 200Hz-20kHz because the Sophia 3 was too heavy to lift off the floor, making the measurement window shorter. Although one of the stated aims for the Sophia 3 is that it be suited to use with a wide range of amplification, it still presents a quite testing load. We measured a minimum modulus of 3.0ohm at 108Hz (Wilson specifies 3.1ohm at 98Hz) and a minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance), which takes into account impedance phase angle, of 1.6ohm at 69Hz. So the Sophia 3 is no pussy cat – although neither is it a monster.

On-axis frequency response errors at 1m, measured at tweeter height over the same frequency range, were a little higher than for the Sophia 2 at  $\pm 5.6$ dB and  $\pm 5.7$ dB respectively but pair matching was tighter at a fine  $\pm 0.9$ dB. Principal feature of the response [see Graph 1, below] is a shelving down of about 2dB in the presence band, which was not present in the Sophia 2. Diffraction-corrected near-field measurement recorded an impressive -6dB frequency of 33Hz (re. 200Hz), precluding any need of a subwoofer for most users. At the other frequency extreme, though, output falls away rapidly above the tweeter's low, ~20kHz breakup resonance. The cumulative spectral decay waterfall [Graph 2, below] is notably clean – more so than the Sophia 2's – suggesting that Wilson's new cabinet has helped suppress structural resonance. KH



**ABOVE:** No bi-wiring here, just a stout pair of custom-made terminals, which can be tightened securely with a supplied hex tool. Badge clearly states 4ohm impedance!

the refined, genteel, even demure Sophia suddenly turns into a wanton trollop. In fishnet stockings.

Atonal, clanging percussion, Waits' growling vocals, greasy harmonica placed way in the background, dirty guitar licks stage left, that wonderful, papery sound that suggests a drum kit in need of re-skinning but the drummer can't afford it: this is virtual home cinema without a screen. Waits himself would appreciate a pair of Sophias, if he ever felt like re-creating in his listening room what he did on tour three decades ago: stage set that could have been lifted from a play by Tennessee Williams.

### TEAR DOWN THE WALL

This is what high-end audio is all about: a listener's transcendent involvement with the musical event. For a truly believable experience of an event being *reproduced* rather than heard live as it happened, the listener must be transported from the synthetic arrangement of sitting in a room far removed from the hall or studio where the music was recorded, to the event itself. The Sophia offers what is surely the aural equivalent of Diderot's Fourth Wall, the indefinable barrier between listener and the music, removed by virtue of an absence of artifice, plus the disappearance of any imaginary haze or unwanted atmosphere between speaker and ear.

Currently suffering an unquenchable thirst for country

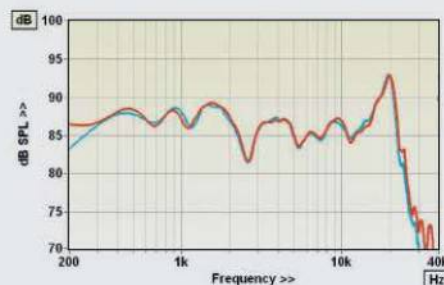
music, I overindulged in Lefty Frizzell, the Judds, Juice Newton, Tennessee Ernie Ford and Chet Atkins. These performers run the gamut of vocal types, from the *basso profundo* of Ford, to redneck nasality, to the crystalline warbling of the distaff members of this collective. Slapped bass, slide guitar. Mono to stereo. Atkins' take of 'Mister Sandman' is a lavishly liquid feast of the guitar as a substitute for vocals. The Sophia caressed them, respected them with the same equanimity shown to Waits' *film noir* look at life. Every contrast was highlighted, yet kept in proportion. In effect, the Sophias embodied in their sound what David Wilson values above nearly all other manufacturers' standards: authenticity. ☺

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

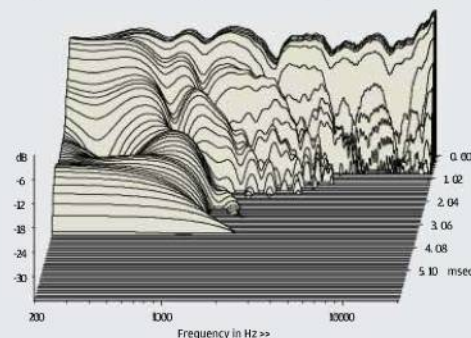
A Wilson user for over two decades, I'm used to the leaps between incarnations. Just as Sasha shocked listeners in 2009, so does the third Sophia represent a disproportionate jump. Sophia 2s remain magnificent; I could live with them for the rest of my days. But the gains in bass authenticity and presence, the impact of the extreme treble and the overall coherence of the '3 are simply dazzling. A major coup indeed.

Sound Quality: 89%

0 - - - - - 100



**ABOVE:** The Sophia 3 has a slight presence dip missing with the '2 but pair matching is better



**ABOVE:** Waterfall indicates that Wilson's improved cabinet design has further minimised resonances

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	87.8dB/87.2dB/86.8dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.0ohm @ 108Hz 12.8ohm @ 20kHz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	-47° @ 52Hz 31° @ 491Hz
Pair matching (300Hz–20kHz)	$\pm 0.9$ dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	33Hz   24.5kHz/24.6kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.2%   2.5%   0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	1045x346x481mm



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*Ken Kessler Review – Hi-Fi News, March 2009*

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magazine

Definition DC10T

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# TANNOY



# hi-fine GROUP TEST

Five headphones at highly affordable prices and many from pedigree names in the world of quality cans. So is there an audio gem or two to be found among their ranks? We find out...

## HEADPHONES £30-£49

### TESTED THIS MONTH

AUDIO-TECHNICA ATH-ES3	£49
GOLDRING DR50	£40
SENNHEISER PX 100-II	£43
SKULLCANDY LOWRIDER	£40
SONY MDR-V300	£30



Cutting-edge gear, cherry-picked by the *Hi-Fi News* editor



The pinnacle of sound quality within its peer group



Great sound, great value and a cut above its rivals

• CD PLAYERS • TURNTABLES • CARTRIDGES • HEADPHONES • AMPLIFIERS • AM/FM TUNERS • SPEAKERS •

**W**e all like a bargain, and if it's one that breathes life into recorded music then so much the better. In the good old, bad old days of *Hi-Fi Answers* (we're talking the 1980s here if you were still in short trousers) we used to have a regular review feature in the magazine grandly styled Budget Esoterica. It did exactly as advertised: identify inexpensive hi-fi equipment which punched above its weight, thereby offering the impecunious audiophile a glimpse of the sunlit uplands above and beyond.

#### SEARCH FOR A STAR...

Since we established 'proper' headphone testing in *Hi-Fi News* we've reviewed the whole gamut of headphones from moderately priced to 'how much?!', with one obvious exception – the bargain basement. So here, in the spirit of Budget Esoterica, we look at a selection of headphones, from a variety of well known marques, that will cost you less than a tank of petrol, particularly at online prices. They have no pretensions to greatness but maybe hidden among

them there's something a bit special for the price – a headphone that will give the average £100 model, say, a poke in the eye. That, in the vernacular, would be a result.

Of course, at this end of the market many headphones are compact models intended primarily for use with iPods or other personal music players. To that end, many in this review fold flat and have only short connecting cables.

Four of the five models are supra-aural (on-ear) designs rather than circumaural, the traditional style of headphone where the earpads surround the pinna to make an effective seal to the head. But that doesn't mean that they won't suit a more static listening environment, where their light weight and low clamping force may be just as welcome for long listening sessions in the dead of night.

For assessing their sound quality I used ancillary equipment of a different stratum entirely. Replay was from Wave files on the hard disk of a Mac mini using the Foobar player in kernel streaming mode under Windows XP to drive the S/PDIF output of an RME Fireface

800 FireWire audio interface. This fed a Naim DAC with XPS external power supply and thence a Lehmann Black Cube headphone amplifier. In the context of this system the cost of all the headphones in this group is a drop in the ocean – even if you add them together.

#### MUSIC USED

I chose four pieces of music for the formal listening comparisons. First, the opening couple of minutes of Stravinsky's spiky, restless *The Soldier's Tale* (remastered 24/96 download from High Definition Tape Transfers). Second, the relaxed, atmospheric 'Blessed Feet' from the Tord Gustavsen Trio's *Being There* [ECM 2017]. Third, the punchy 'Annie's Yellow Bag' from Gwyneth Herbert's *All The Ghosts* [naimcd135]. And last, for the first time in one of my headphone reviews, one of Mike Skeet's binaural recordings: the opening track 'Satin Doll' from the Mike Hatchard Trio's *The Standard Bearer* [Binaural Jazz Label BJJ 023].

REVIEWS & LAB TESTS  
BY KEITH HOWARD

• CD PLAYERS • TURNTABLES • CARTRIDGES • HEADPHONES • AMPLIFIERS • AM/FM TUNERS • SPEAKERS •



# Audio-Technica ATH-ES3 (£49)

If I were to call the ATH-ES3 the best looking headphone of this bunch – indeed, one of the classiest looking compact headphones on sale – I doubt that there would be many dissenters. It's A-T's use of anodised aluminium capsule skins that lends a luminosity to the appearance and leaves all the others in this test – and I include the distinctive but grungily styled Skullcandy – looking Plain Janes by comparison. As well as the pictured blue, capsules are available in white, black, pink or green, allowing you to colour coordinate with your iPod.

Clearly intended primarily for use on the move, the ATH-ES3 has a thin connecting cable only 1.2m long, so if you want to use it with a hi-fi system you'll almost certainly need an extension cable to reach the hot seat, and perhaps a 1/4in jack adaptor too. But for the peripatetic listener the capsules fold flat and a faux leather carrying pouch helps keep these lookers in pristine condition. As well as being the lightest 'phones here at a mere 69g including cable, the A-Ts also press only lightly on the ears so are comfortable for extended periods.

## IN YOUR FACE...

Pundits often talk of a trademark Audio-Technica sound but that's balderdash. The ATH-ES3 has a tonal

**RIGHT:** Anodised aluminium capsules set the ATH-ES3 apart and these are available in a spectrum of five colours

balance nothing like that of my beloved ATH-AD700, for instance. Whereas the latter has a laidback tonal balance the ATH-ES3 is in your face, bright to a fault. Not to mince words, it's horrid.

On 'Satin Doll' the piano sound was very lean and lacking in warmth, the cymbals were extremely tizzy and although the acoustic bass was clean enough it was just too recessed. I summarised the experience in a single word in my notes: harsh.

'Annie's Yellow Bag' fared no better. The opening bass and drum riff lacked both weight and punch and all the percussion, both drums and cymbals, had an unnatural high frequency emphasis. Gwyneth Herbert's vocal cut like a bandsaw, making me reach quickly to turn down the volume.

By now I knew what to expect from *The Soldier's Tale*: a scratchy violin sound lacking in body tones, ear-splittingly harsh trumpet and spitchy percussion. All told, not a pleasant experience.

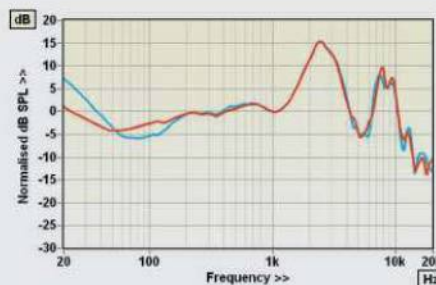
Sound Quality: 60%

0 - - - - - 100



## HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

One of the most sensitive models of the group, the ATH-ES3 is easily capable of generating high sound pressure levels from personal audio players. Most notable feature of the frequency response [shown for both channels in the graph below] is the large peak between 2kHz and 3kHz which, together with the secondary peak between 7kHz and 10kHz, no doubt accounts for this headphone's excessively forward tonal balance. Note the very close capsule matching, however, these being averaged measurements obtained from five separate fittings of the capsules on the artificial ear. The increased disparity below 200Hz principally reflects the difficulty of achieving a consistent seal to the KEMAR test pinna – a problem experienced with all the headphones here. Bass output increases over the last octave or so but the 100Hz distortion level is modest. KH



Graph: Uncorrected freq. resps. (L/R) from artificial ear

Sensitivity (SPL at 1kHz for 1V rms input)	119dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	33.2 ohm @ 3.6kHz 52.5 ohm @ 113Hz
Capsule matching (100Hz-10kHz)	±2.9dB
LF extension (-6dB ref. 200Hz)	<20Hz
Distortion 100Hz/1kHz (for 90dB SPL)	0.6% / <0.1%
Weight (inc cable and 0.125in connector)	69g



**ABOVE:** Both capsules can be rotated through 90° allowing the ATH-ES3 to be folded flat and inserted in a supplied faux leather carrying pouch



# Goldring DR50 (£40)

To those of us of advanced years the Goldring name will forever be associated with turntables and pick-up cartridges. Yet more recently the company has carved a successful niche for itself in the headphone market, earning some very positive reviews in the process. None of which can be explained away by any overt pandering to the fashion conscious consumer.

On the contrary, Goldring's range of four headphones, of which the DR50 is the cheapest (there is also an earphone), look much like headphones of my youth, 40 years ago. Yes, the quality and curvaceousness of the plastic mouldings is thoroughly contemporary but the circumaural capsules and wide padded headband are in marked contrast to the other, more compact models here. I doubt that this headphone would ever be labelled cool.

Much of this is explained by the DR50 clearly being intended for use at home, not on the road. This is good in that it is supplied with a 3m connecting lead (detachable from the headset); less good in that it's by some margin the heaviest here and clamps the ears with a gusto you may find becomes uncomfortable after 20 minutes or so of wear.

## ALWAYS TUNEFUL

After the grizzly Audio-Technica, the DR50 came as balm to battered

**RIGHT:** Chunkily constructed, the DR50 is much heavier than the other designs in this group as a consequence

ears. Which is not to say that its sound is bland and smoothed over, far from it. In fact this headphone has a forthright, engaging character whose most notable features are strong bass and occasional over-exuberance in the treble frequencies.

Piano sound was much more natural on 'Satin Doll' and the acoustic bass, though certainly weighty, was not overly dominant and always tuneful. The strong bass was also immediately apparent in the opening bars of 'Annie's Yellow Bag' – perhaps a little too strong for this track to have quite the rhythmic pulse it should – as was the crisp drum sound and mostly well controlled vocal sibilants.

The percussion intro of 'Blessed Feet' fared well too and the big, warm piano sound and weighty bass were just as they should be.

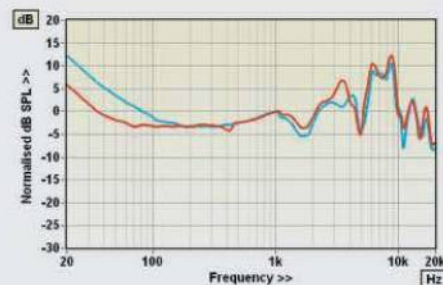
There was occasionally a little too much trumpet rasp in *The Soldier's Tale*, and the challenging percussion of this recording was sometimes overly tizzy. But overall tonal balance was pretty good, with both the violin and woodwind enjoying a much more natural sound.

Sound Quality: 80%



## HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

Although the DR50 is the least sensitive model here by some margin, that's unlikely to be of practical significance given that it's probably not going to be used with a personal audio player on a noisy tube train. Its frequency response [shown for both channels in the graph below] certainly isn't textbook, with lower output than usually considered ideal between 1kHz and 3kHz and too much energy in the octave 5kHz to 10kHz. Capsule matching is tight over the range 200Hz to 1kHz but deteriorates between 1kHz and 4kHz – an area of the spectrum not usually prone to ear coupling disparities, as demonstrated by others in this test which retain much tighter matching here. Below 200Hz the results are again affected by sealing irregularities but it's clear that output rises inexorably below 100Hz. Distortion at 100Hz is a little disappointing. KH



Graph below: Uncorrected freq. resps. (L/R) from artificial ear

<b>Sensitivity</b> (SPL at 1kHz for 1V rms input)	111dB
<b>Impedance modulus min/max</b> (20Hz-20kHz)	34.4 ohm @ 1.8kHz 38.2 ohm @ 111Hz
<b>Capsule matching</b> (100Hz-10kHz)	±4.1dB
<b>LF extension</b> (-6dB ref. 200Hz)	<20Hz
<b>Distortion 100Hz/1kHz</b> (for 90dB SPL)	1.8% / <0.1%
<b>Weight</b> (inc cable and 0.125in connector)	298g



**ABOVE:** While the capsules are narrower than in many other circumaural 'phones, they're still wide enough to accommodate most ears. No folding flat here...



# Sennheiser PX 100-II (£43)

hi-finews  
HIGHLY  
COMMENDED

Whereas the ATH-ES3 epitomises fresh modern product design, the mark II version of Sennheiser's well regarded PX 100 – an obvious competitor – looks positively staid, with a worthy but unimaginative *mien*. Almost as light as the A-T, it folds into a smaller, if fatter, carrying pouch and so is even better adapted to spending at least some of its working life itinerantly.

The upside when the PX 100-II is used with a domestic hi-fi system instead is that you barely know you're wearing it. Not only is it anorexically light – if not quite as light as the A-T – it also presses its foam earpads gently against your pinnae: sufficiently to prevent a shake of the head causing any displacement but no more. You may find your ears getting warmer more quickly, though, than with the other supra-aural models here, which have open rather than flat earpads.

The downside is that the Sennheiser has only a short, 1.2m cable so you will probably require an extension plus ¼in jack adaptor.

## WELL CONTROLLED

If the PX 100-II's appearance is prosaic, its sound quality definitely is not – although it is characterised by a certain reserve. On 'Satin Doll'

**RIGHT:** One of the lightest models here, the PX 100-II nevertheless gives the impression it's pretty tough

there was good piano tone, strong bass and a slightly reticent cymbal sound. Overall the delivery lacked the Goldring's *joie de vivre* but was clearly something you could listen to for hours on end without fatigue.

The opening bass notes on 'Annie's Yellow Bag' were a bit odd somehow – my notes ask 'Too much upper bass?' – but both the vocal and percussion were very clean albeit, again, a tad reserved.

On 'Blessed Feet' I again noted a bass problem, manifested on this occasion by something odd about the pitch of the opening bass drum beats. The double bass was also not as clear, agile or authoritative as with the Goldring, and the piano sound, although as big as it should be, was somehow a little remote.

For *The Soldier's Tale* I wrote: 'A place for everything and everything in its place.' All the instruments were spatially well controlled and the trumpet and percussion sound elicited no wincing. There was, though, just a little lack of presence and excitement.

Sound Quality: 74%

0 - - - - - 100

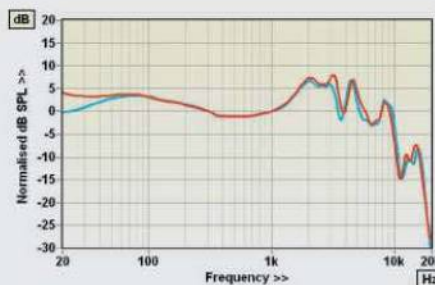


**ABOVE:** Capsule movement is limited but the fitment of spectacle-like hinges in the headband allows the PX 100-II to be folded into a very small carrying pouch



## HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

Sennheiser headphones usually measure well and there is nothing in the PX 100-II's results to buck the trend. The frequency response [see graph below], is notably well controlled between 1kHz and 10kHz and is consistent with a diffuse-field approach to design. The upturn in the response below 400Hz is only modest and not followed by the marked increase in output over the lowest octaves seen elsewhere here, with the Goldring in particular. Capsule matching is commendably tight from 90Hz up to 1.5kHz, with only moderate disparities thereafter. Ignore the divergence below 90Hz which is again caused by inconsistent sealing to the artificial ear in the process of removing and replacing each capsule to generate an average of five measurements. The sophistication of Sennheiser's motor design is reflected in the low 100Hz distortion figure. KH



Graph: Uncorrected freq. resps. (L/R) from artificial ear

Sensitivity (SPL at 1kHz for 1V rms input)	117dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	34.6 ohm @ 1.1kHz 64.3 ohm @ 59Hz
Capsule matching (100Hz-10kHz)	±4.1dB
LF extension (-6dB ref. 200Hz)	<20Hz
Distortion 100Hz/1kHz (for 90dB SPL)	0.3% / <0.1%
Weight (inc cable and 0.125in connector)	75g



# Skullcandy Lowrider (£40)

**S**kullcandy is a relative newcomer to the headphone business. Its target audience is the youth and young adult market in particular – hence product names like Skullcrushers and its claim to make ‘the sickest Headphones, Earbuds, and iPod Docks.’

In the case of the light blue Lowriders provided for this review (there’s a range of other colours available) the bad taste stretches to the manufacturer’s name being printed in large Gothic capitals across the headband, and spider web patterning on the inside of the capsules. Haute couture they ain’t – but then you may have no intention of wearing them in public.

Impedance modulus is the most constant with frequency of this group, so the Lowrider is well adapted for use with signal sources having high output resistance. The thin connecting cable, terminated in a mini-jack plug, is just 1.2m long so you will probably require an extension lead to use this headphone with a hi-fi system. You may well also need a mini-jack to 1/4in jack adaptor.

## **FORWARD MARCH**

To my surprise, given the Lowrider’s intended customer profile, it doesn’t attempt to make a virtue

**RIGHT:** Skullcandy styling is not for the squeamish but there are more tasteful colour options than this

of excessive bass weight. In fact it’s clean but a little reticent here and there’s a shortfall in upper treble output too, which all told leaves the sound dominated by the upper midrange and lower treble. Or to put it another way, forward.

‘Satin Doll’ demonstrated this very clearly. The overly percussive piano sound verged towards the hard, with an obvious lack of natural warmth, the acoustic bass was agile but not as powerfully rendered as by either the Goldring or Sennheiser models in this group and the cymbals were reticent.

‘Annie’s Yellow Bag’ demonstrated that despite being forward the upper midrange lacks clarity, so the heightened sense of transparency you might expect from the skewed tonal balance isn’t forthcoming.

Meanwhile, on *The Soldiers Tale* the trumpets shouted, contributing to an edgy sound overall even though the ‘hot’ percussion was tamed by the lack of upper treble. Again there was a lack of resolution despite the tonal imbalance.

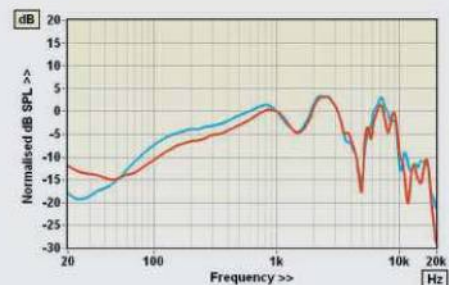
Sound Quality: 65%

0 - - - - - 100



## **HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT**

Although the Lowrider achieves high sensitivity at 1kHz this is not a good reflection of its perceived sensitivity because, as the frequency responses show [see graph below], it is notably lacking in output both above and below this frequency. The usual peak between 2kHz and 3kHz barely materialises and is followed by an octave-wide notch between 3kHz and 6kHz. Below 1kHz the trend is relentlessly downward except for a recovery at the lowest bass frequencies. The disparity in capsule responses below 100Hz can be accounted for by inconsistent sealing to the artificial ear, whereas poor capsule matching from there up to 1kHz suggests quality control in manufacture could be tighter. Above 1kHz the matching is much better. As the Lowrider had to be driven significantly harder to achieve 90dB SPL at 100Hz, the distortion figure is fair. KH



Graph: Uncorrected freq. resps. (L/R) from artificial ear

<b>Sensitivity</b> (SPL at 1kHz for 1V rms input)	119dB
<b>Impedance modulus min/max</b> (20Hz–20kHz)	32.9 ohm @ 1.4kHz 37.0 ohm @ 83Hz
<b>Capsule matching</b> (100Hz–10kHz)	±3.6dB
<b>LF extension</b> (–6dB ref. 200Hz)	77Hz
<b>Distortion 100Hz/1kHz</b> (for 90dB SPL)	1.0% / <0.1%
<b>Weight</b> (inc cable and 0.125in connector)	136g



**ABOVE:** Each capsule swivels through 90° and folds up into the headband, allowing the Lowrider to be packed flat. Spider web motif is inside the capsules



# Sony MDR-V300 (£30)

Sony sells more headphones than any other company in the UK by a large margin and its range of models is bewildering. This one has the DJ market at least partly in mind and hence incorporates a feature that you and I are unlikely to consider a must-have: each capsule can be reversed so that only the other channel is used for monitoring. I suppose that could be useful, mind you, if you're staying up late awaiting the sound of your teenager's key in the front door...

Because of its DJ aspirations, the MDR-V300 has one of the longest connecting cables here at 3m. It is also provided with a mini-jack to 1/4in jack adaptor, to facilitate its use with 'serious' equipment. Although the smaller jack allows this headphone to be used with personal music players, the capsules fold up into the headband and the high sensitivity ensures you'll easily achieve sufficient sound pressure level. No carrying pouch is included for keeping it safe on the move.

The neodymium-iron-boron magnets help keep the MDR-V300's weight low and, combined with the modest clamping force of the supra-aural earpads, ensure that these 'phones are fairly comfortable to wear long-term.



## DOMINANT BASS?

On Sony's website the MDR-V300 appears in the category 'Extra

**RIGHT:** Lightweight Sonys, despite their compactness, put a design emphasis on powerful bass reproduction

bass and DJ', which tells you what to expect when it comes to this headphone's low frequency performance. However, on 'Satin Doll' – while the double-bass was certainly robust – the bass output didn't seem excessive.

More obvious was a lack of presence to the overall sound and a thickening of piano textures on fortés. The bass drum at the opening of 'Annie's Yellow Bag' was oddly modulated – the pitch seemed to wobble – and this time the bass was unquestionably excessive, smearing this track's essential rhythmic pulse. Gwyneth Herbert's vocal was also thickened and the drum sound lacked crispness.

On 'Blessed Feet' the bass drum and bass guitar together rather overwhelmed proceedings, the big piano sound appearing homogenised.

The less than explicit quality was in some respects a bonus with *The Soldier's Tale*, the Sony mostly sidestepping the harshness of the Audio-Technica or Skullcandy, but trumpet and percussion sometimes elicited what sounded like high frequency distortion.

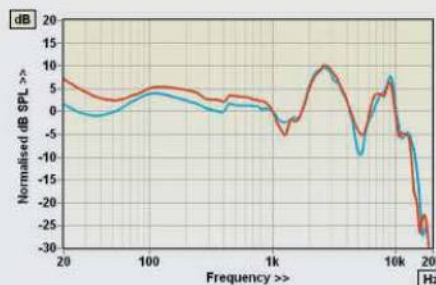
Sound Quality: 69%

0 - - - - - 100



## HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

A sensitivity figure of 120dB SPL for 1V input at 1kHz makes the MDR-V300 the most sensitive model in this test, if only by a small amount. Key features of the frequency response are a more modest peak between 2kHz and 3kHz than seen in the Audio-Technica followed by an all too common second kick-up in output between 6kHz and 10kHz. Below 1kHz there's a gentle upward trend followed by the start of a roll-off below 100Hz before the response turns up again over the bottom octave or so. Capsule matching from 1.6kHz to over 4kHz is good but below 1kHz there is a significant disparity which analysis of the individual responses used to generate the average suggests is not the result of coupling irregularities to the artificial ear but of less than assiduous driver matching during manufacture. Low 100Hz distortion indicates good motor design. KH



Graph: Uncorrected freq. resps. (L/R) from artificial ear

Sensitivity (SPL at 1kHz for 1V rms input)	120dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	27.5 ohm @ 20Hz 36.0 ohm @ 115Hz
Capsule matching (100Hz-10kHz)	±3.8dB
LF extension (-6dB ref. 200Hz)	<20Hz
Distortion 100Hz/1kHz (for 90dB SPL)	0.5% / <0.1%
Weight (inc cable and 0.125in connector)	146g



**ABOVE:** No carrying pouch is provided and the capsules don't swivel flat but their yokes do fold upwards into the headband to save on carrying or storage space





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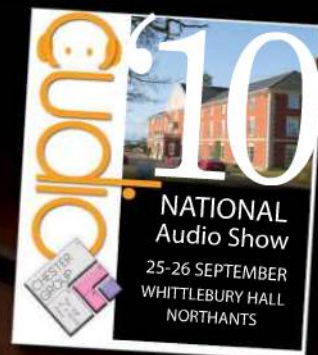
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# GROUP TEST VERDICT

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Is any of these headphones a genuine, shout it from the rooftops giant-killer? In the final reckoning those contestants with the most extreme tonal balances are first to fall by the wayside: the Skullcandy Lowrider for its upper midrange/lower treble emphasis and the Audio-Technica ATH-ES3 because its lower-treble excess makes it sound way too forward, even though its low frequency response is better maintained.

One thing in the Skullcandy's favour is that its near-constant impedance versus frequency ensures that its frequency response is largely immune to changes in source resistance – but that is little crumb of comfort given that its tonal balance is awry to begin with.

The Audio-Technica is more tastefully styled but also sounds badly, if differently, out of kilter because of its tonal imbalance.

## THE SONY, TOO...

With its dominant bass the Sony MDR-V300 is far from being tonally neutral either but its overall balance is much more acceptable than that of either the Skullcandy or Audio-Technica. Without its predilection for low frequencies it might mount a more credible challenge to the Sennheiser but unless you are bass addicted to the point that little else matters you will likely, as I did, soon find the extra bass bloom added to almost everything a little tiresome.

A loudspeaker with this tonal balance would be a lot worse, mind you, and the Sony redeems itself somewhat by being mostly agile and tuneful in its favoured octaves. But there's no escaping the fact that it skews instrumental timbres.

And then there were two, either of which might make a valid claim on your cash depending on circumstances. The decision between them depends principally on your intended usage.

If you want a pair of headphones that will serve as well on the move with a personal music player as they will at home with your hi-fi system then the Sennheiser PX 100-II is the obvious choice. It's extremely light, folds up smaller than any other model here and is provided with a carrying pouch. Yet it still sounds good enough for you not to feel short-changed when the key requirement is quality of sound.

The versatile Sennheiser may not be the last word in clarity but it is tonally well balanced, sufficiently informative to hold your

attention, and will be fatigue-free over long listening sessions. You will probably need an extension for its short connecting lead, though, and/or a 1/4in jack adaptor. It's a pity that neither is supplied.

## CLEAR WINNER

The Goldring, by contrast, was never intended to be used on the hoof, as you can tell just by looking at it. It's a headphone of the old school: circumaural albeit open-backed, relatively heavy and will only fold with the assistance of a sledgehammer. Trying to fit it into a pocket or carrying it around with your iPod is unthinkable.

But the payback for this lack of adaptability is that the DR50 is comfortably the best sounding headphone here.

Not the most comfortable to wear, sadly, because it puts your head in a vice, and not supplied with the 1/4in jack adaptor that it so obviously should have. But it combines a pretty even tonal balance with the best resolution and musical insight on offer within this group.

Even if you pay full whack for the Goldring DR50, it represents remarkable value for money. ☺

'Even if you pay full whack, it's remarkable value for money'

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• CD PLAYERS • TURNTABLES • CARTRIDGES • **HEADPHONES** • AMPLIFIERS •



# Leema Pyxis/Hydra II (£3995/£3495)

For those who revel in sophistication, Leema's Pyxis/Hydra II pre/power combination marries hardcore audiophilia with 21st Century savvy – USB and phono!

Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

**W**orthy of the cover of our April 2009 issue, Leema's Pyxis stereo preamplifier was auditioned with nearly £18k's worth of massive Altair IV monoblocks. Considering that a Pyxis costs less than half the price of a single Altair IV, it begged to be gauged with one of Leema's other models, something closer to it pound-wise. As the Hydra had just been refined to Hydra II status, and its price is within £500 of the Pyxis', it was a natural pairing if ever we saw one.

Vulgar talk of money does have a point: the two units, with a saving of £500 if bought together, are priced in the lower reaches of the high-end, so they're certainly not 'mid-priced'. This places the British brand in a face-off with numerous global competitors as well as the best of the home-grown solid-state crop: Musical Fidelity, Chapter, Chord, Naim, Roksan, *ad infinitum*. But Leema components have a few tricks up their all-metal sleeves to distinguish them from even this august company, executed with such boldness that it just may be the UK brand to watch.

## FEATURE PACKED

The Pyxis is a sturdy, handsomely-styled preamp which, in the best modern fashion, can be used with all manner of amplifiers despite a plethora of Leema-only features. Pyxis provides both fully-balanced and single-ended analogue operation, with extensive custom-install/home cinema-friendly settings and sockets. Its price is further ameliorated by the inclusion of digital ins and outs, including USB and S/PDIF in both directions, so the Pyxis is able to accommodate all of your digital sources and feed a computer for archiving.

Pure analogue is not neglected: for another £500, the Pyxis can be supplied

with an onboard phono section (based on Leema's £3k Agena). It can accept two turntables and both MM and MC cartridges, and host both single-ended and balanced-output phono stages with their own dedicated selector switches.

Remote control, individually configurable inputs, selectable balanced or single-ended CD, AV Direct setting, tape and tuner inputs, individual adjustment of gain, bass and treble for each input, separate record and monitor for each input, mono and phase inversion (blessedly available from the remote), EQ defeat, front panel 3.5mm headphone and MP3 sockets – nothing has been left out. You can even choose between silver or black anodised aluminium faceplates. It's a lot of kit for the money.

This time, we're trying it with the company's Hydra II stereo power amplifier, which is housed in the same size chassis as the 440x110x330mm (whd) Pyxis. Although they're not in the same series – Pyxis comes from the Reference range while Hydra is part of the mid-level Constellation catalogue – nothing indicated anything other than sibling DNA.

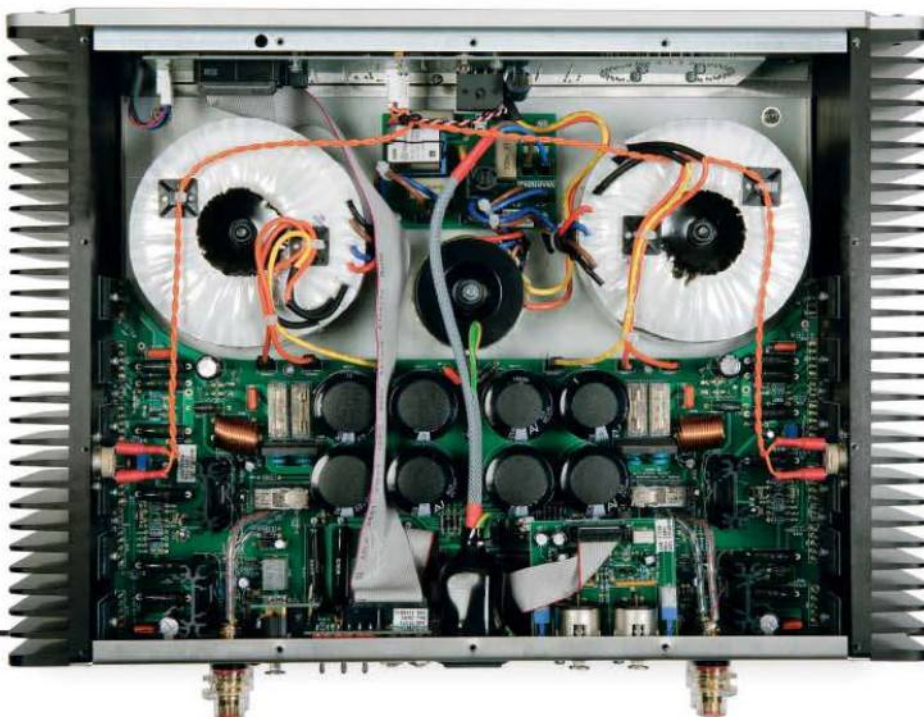
According to Leema, the Mk II benefits from the Altair IV monoblock via the trickle-down effect. Leema takes power supplies seriously, so the Hydra II contains two massive toroidal transformers to power each channel, plus a third dedicated solely to the control circuitry. Leema also highlights the low output impedance of the output stage and high current capability; none of my speakers could fluster the Hydra II.

## RIFE WITH SOCKETS

What will baffle or delight most users is their first glimpse of the back. Instead of just the usual minimalist layout of a pair of speaker terminals and either/or XLRs and phonos for inputs, the Hydra II is configured to operate, via rear-panel connections and a series of micro-size toggle switches, as a stereo amplifier, a mono amplifier, or as a two-channel amplifier designated as left or right for bi-amping. It also offers throughput and slave set-ups for just about any multichannel or multi-room package.

Enabling all of this is the company's 'Leema's Intelligent Protocol System' (aka LIPS). Connected by a directional

**RIGHT:** Inside the Hydra II are two massive toroidal transformers, minimal wiring and ample heat-sinkage along the sides while build is worthy of a true high-end amp







wire with colour-coded mini-jacks, the system allows greater control over partnered Leema components, including its CD players. [See boxout, below.] So, in addition to the above applications, LIPS adds fixed or variable gain to each configuration, making this just about as flexible a power amp as you could want, should you ever wish to stray from conventional, fixed gain stereo with volume control from the preamp.

That was how I used it, though in fully-balanced mode. Leema states that this amplifier is a 150W unit [see Lab Report, p50], which promised ample power for anything I might try. They fed Wilson Sophia 2 and Sonus faber Auditor Elipsa speakers, with sources including the Linn LP12 with Ekos arm and Arkiv cartridge, and the Marantz CD-12/DAC-12 CD player/DAC in balanced mode.

## POWER AND PUNCH

Not knowing how many hours of playback each of these components had served, I can only assume that they were

burned-in properly by the time they reached me: they sounded great from the start, and changed not at all over a week's heavy usage. Once I figured out how to connect them correctly – I got stuck in setup mode! – the initial burst of the remastered CD of the Rolling Stones' *Exile On Main Street* exhibited power and punch, with no exacerbation of the material's inherent rawness.

I sat there bemused, because the silky twang of 'Sweet Virginia' sounded so valve-like that my preconceptions were eroded instantaneously: this pairing suffers nothing in the way of exaggerated solid-state-itis. Any tendency to enhance Jagger's occasionally comedic twang – yes, the man's a genius, but his I-was-actually-born-a-slave-in-Alabama cod-drawl can sometimes grate – was resisted, and there was no unnecessary metallic jangle to the slithery guitar work. What some

*'The Leemas spread the sound in a seamless array'*

**ABOVE:** Minimalists, beware: the Leemas provide a cool light show when various operations are accessed. The volume setting is visible from across the room

listeners might find captivating is the Leema's ability to juggle bottom-octave textures, especially when Watts' drums were sounding (deliberately) papery and dry, while Wyman's bass was loping along with almost alcoholic abandon.

If the above sounds like it was written under the influence of the same drugs used in the graveyard sequence in *Easy Rider*, it's down to that particular album being a conundrum: tight and sloppy at the same time. It could

have been re-recorded by Little Feat and only the vocals would give it away.

So, to better test the Leemas and their abilities to sound in-your-room real, I turned to the best-sounding material I've heard in years: Acoustic Sounds' 45rpm, 2LP version of Nat 'King' Cole's *Love Is The Thing*.

Taken from 53-year-old three-track masters, the sessions stand-up as a herald of all that stereo could offer a mono world, with air, openness and a sense of space and presence that no mono recording can ever convey, no matter how much I want to support the incarcerated Mr Spector. Whether played through the small Sonus fabers or the ample Sophias, the Leemas spread the sound across the room in a seamless array in front of, behind and *around* ➤

## LIPS SERVICE

Among the unusual acronyms found on the Leemas' backsides is LIPS, or 'Leema's Intelligent Protocol System'. As with other manufacturers' dedicated inter-component comms systems, LIPS enables two or more Leema models to provide features like automatic switch-on, facilities to operate multiple amplifiers as slave amps in surround sound or multi-room systems, control for bi- or tri-amping and other user-friendly actions. The Pyxis will, for example, power down the unneeded centre and rear channels when playing a stereo CD through a 5.1 system. With Leema's top models, LIPS2 also provides something extra: a LIPS2-enabled pre/power combo benefits from the preamp sending a full level audio signal to the amp at all times, with the volume and balance adjusted within the Hydra II using control signals from the Pyxis, for a better signal-to-noise ratio.



## PRE/POWER AMPLIFIER

## LAB REPORT

### LEEMA PYXIS/HYDRA II (£3995/£3495)



**ABOVE:** Don't let ego preclude reading the owner's manuals as both Leemas feature proprietary sockets, with toggles to select between input/output options. KK was unable to operate it until he studied the Pyxis' booklet!

the speakers. This combination sounds 'huge' in the dimensional, rather than colloquial sense, able to differentiate between analogue and digital sources with a neutrality so cohesive and non-committal that even the most cloth-eared of listeners would hear the differences.

And, yes, I did A/B vinyl and CD, with the NKC masterpiece, Keb' Mo's *Peace... Back By Popular Demand*, the aforementioned Rolling Stones epic (remastered CD vs original and reissued vinyl pressings), the Cars' *Shake It Up* and some Little Feat treasures.

### PERFECT BLISS

This, however, is about the Leemas, not LP-vs-CD. I dwell on it only to emphasise that the Leema system is blissfully revealing of subtlety and detail, yet in a non-oppressive manner that many might not associate with cutting-edge transistorised electronics. Never did I feel robbed of any information, especially spatial clues. Equally, not once did I feel the cut of too much sibilance, nor a sensation of clinical sterility.

When called upon to be nasty, as with the Stones, the Leemas could be as brutal as certain powerhouses at double the price. When asked to behave, with delicate material, out came their Sunday best. The units' handling of the sublime vocals on early-to-mid-period Doobie Brothers, from the recent MoFi reissues, came so close to my all-valve reference combination of Audio Research REF 5 and Quad II-eighty monoblocks that I had to struggle

to pinpoint the differences. So what did distinguish the bargain Leemas from higher-priced, be-tubed rivals?

With everything optimised, you could point to a trace less back-to-front stage depth on the Nat 'King' Cole recordings, a barely detectable edge to the Cars' more synthetic moments. Certainly, as evidenced when I tried the units separately, the Pyxis is the drier-sounding of the two, the Hydra II possibly being responsible for making the overall sound that much warmer, more human.

As for the Hydra II's worth, relative to a preamp we previously viewed with behemoth monoblocks, be in no doubt this amp has grunt galore, real kick as manifested especially in revealing the tautness of drumskins, an immunity to clipping in normal circumstances, and an aura of authority that allows it to stand up to its big brother. ☺

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

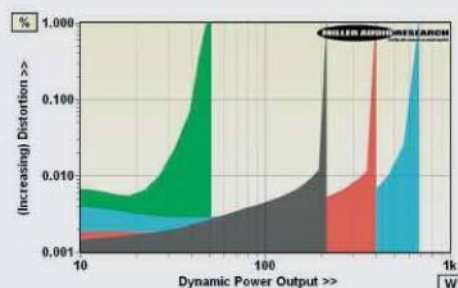
Although I'd had limited exposure to Leema products in the past, I wasn't prepared for the sheer worthiness, competence, ergonomic intelligence and 'more-ish' sound this pair delivers. Whether silky Nat 'King' Cole Capitol recordings or Bad Company via CD, the performance was neutral and uncolored, yet as involving as a tube set-up. Leema's simply doing something so right.

Sound Quality: 84%

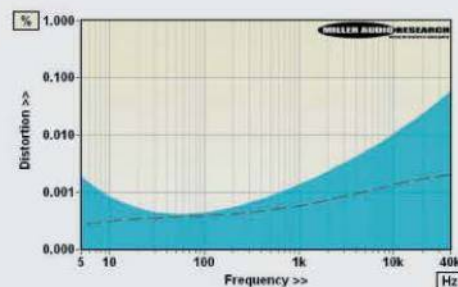


Regular readers might care to refer back to *HFN*, April '09 where the Pyxis preamp shared a cover with Leema's huge Altair IV monoblock power amps. The impressive performance of this balanced preamp remains unchanged from the low 0.0004% midrange distortion, wide 92.3dB A-wtd S/N ratio and exceptionally flat response (just  $\pm 0.02$ dB from 5Hz-100kHz). It's the perfect partner for the Hydra II which, like other Leema power amps, has a slightly higher 'white' noise floor (yielding an A-wtd S/N of 82.2dB re. 0dBV) and a sensibly tailored HF response, rolling almost inconspicuously away to  $-0.1$ dB/20kHz and  $-2.1$ dB/100kHz. As a pair, the Hydra II has the higher distortion [see Graph 2 for a comparison] although figures of 0.0004-0.001% from 20Hz-1kHz at 10W/8ohm are not 'high' by any stretch of the imagination.

Leema specifies the Hydra II at an unusually precise 148W/8ohm and 285W/4ohm, a pointless exercise bearing in mind it actually achieves far closer to 175W and 390W, respectively, up to 1% THD. Leema could change its rating to 150W and 300W and still have a margin of safety. Under dynamic conditions, the beefy power supply sustains 215W/8ohm, 400W/4ohm and a full 670W/2ohm (or 18.3A) although its in-house protection limits output into lower impedances (which it views as a short or fault) to around 50W. Either way, this is a low-coloration powerhouse of a pair. Readers are invited to view comprehensive QC Suite test reports for Leema's Pyxis preamp and new Hydra II power amp by navigating to [www.hifinews.co.uk](http://www.hifinews.co.uk) and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



**ABOVE:** Dynamic power output vs. distortion into 8ohm (black), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Note protection at 1ohm



**ABOVE:** Distortion vs. frequency from 5Hz to 40kHz for Hydra II at 10W/8ohm (blue trace) vs. Pyxis preamp at 0dBV/60kohm (black, dashed trace)

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	175W / 390W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	215W / 400W / 670W / 51W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.041-0.11ohm
Freq. resp. (pre/power, 20Hz-100kHz)	-0.0 to +0.0dB/-0.1 to -2.15dB
Input sensitivity (pre/power)	98mV (0dBV)/113mV (0dBW)
A-wtd S/N ratio (pre/power)	92.3dB (0dBV)/82.2dB (0dBW)
Distortion (pre/power, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.0004-0.002%/0.0005-0.02%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	54W/496W
Dimensions (WHD, pre/power)	440x110x330/440x110x330mm



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# SRM Athena SE (£699)

Resplendent in graphite grey acrylic and gold detailing, this new British-made record player is keenly priced while offering various upgrade options for vinyl enthusiasts

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

**G**ood hi-fi, truly great components, tend to cost a fortune. This is especially true of specialist products, hand assembled by small companies that do not have economies of scale in manufacture. What a pleasure it is, then, to find a record player from a small company that offers good performance, plenty of upgrade options for enthusiasts and which doesn't cost the price of a family car.

Based in Biggleswade, Bedfordshire, SRM Tech was founded eight years ago by Stuart Michell [see 'Analogue Addictions' box, opposite]. And – no – before you ask, he is not related to the late John Michell, founder of Michell Engineering that has been making record players for 40 years. The surname is purely coincidental.

Among a portfolio of accessories and upgrade tweaks for turntables and tonearms that can be seen on the company's website is SRM's Arezzo record player, which enjoys a fine reputation. The Arezzo has been joined this summer by this new Athena model, which is similar in construction but a tad more affordable thanks to the use of a two-level rather than three-level plinth and less elaborate sub platter, bearing assembly and motor isolation arrangement.

A few words about SRM's pricing. The Athena is available starting at £599, this 'SE' version commanding a £100 premium for its handsome graphite grey finish. Such is the cost of coloured acrylic. Included in the price is a Moth Mk1 (a re-badged Rega RB250) tonearm. You can add £35 for the Moth Mk3 or £260 for Moth 700 tonearm options if desired. Also included with the Athena is SRM Tech's proprietary 'spongy' platter mat, itself available as a £50 accessory for other decks.

Our review sample arrived with one of the Athena's upgrade options: the 'Jet Black isolation platform and MegaCover set' priced £249. SRM sells a variety of

acrylic platforms incorporating Sorbothane feet designed to afford a degree of vibration isolation for audio components dubbed 'Silent Stage'. Designer Stuart Michell describes the Athena's Jet Black platform option as a cross between the company's Silent Stage 3 and Silent Stage Rega. While it adds considerably to the cost of the record player it proved to be a worthwhile upgrade (see later), moreover the price includes a five-sided clear acrylic box – the MegaCover – to place over the deck and keep dust at bay when the turntable is not in use.

## TALK THE TORQUE

The bottom section of Athena's plinth that houses the motor has downward facing spikes that sit on indented discs. The motor is the same Premotec high-torque AC synchronous unit used in the company's Arezzo, powered by a wall wart power supply while the deck's on/off switch is in a separate little box – in-line with the power cable – designed to be parked next to the turntable. A considerably more chunky 'High Current Power Supply' is a further upgrade option for the Athena

at £349 but this was not auditioned. The top section of the plinth, which has downward-facing metal pegs that locate into Sorbothane grommets atop the lower section, support the bearing housing and tonearm. The Athena's sub platter is a Rega unit, modified with damping material and an additional thin polymer disc between the sub platter and the main platter.

The platter can be upgraded too by the way, to the Arezzo's 19mm-thick two-part platter (this is two Athena platters, faced off and bonded together). Price is £79 on an 'exchange' basis and is claimed to offer increased bass weight and definition.

Drive from the motor is via two short square section belts running in V-shaped grooves in the aluminium pulley. There is very little decoupling between motor and sub platter, the belts having been kept deliberately short and tight to minimise springiness. As there is no electronic speed switching provided, I should point out that having to remove the platter and reposition two belts might drive you bonkers if you have a substantial collection of 45rpm records that you like to play on a regular basis.

**RIGHT:** Resting on a sub platter, the single piece main platter is made of 10mm-thick acrylic, topped with a spongy mat. Arm is a Moth Mk1







Our photographs show the deck sitting on its optional Jet Black isolation platform with Sorbothane domes underneath to provide increased isolation from external vibration. The review sample came fitted with an Ortofon 2M Red cartridge. This is an £80 moving-magnet tipped with an elliptical diamond and was used for the majority of the listening into a Sensor Prelude phono stage made by RCM Audio.

## VIBRANT AND AUTHORITATIVE

While it might not weigh an awful lot this record player is no lightweight in its performance. Costing a fraction of the price of high-end models such as the Avid Acutus uber-turntable currently residing in my system [see *HFN*, Sep '10] and my vintage Rock Reference/Excalibur player with its fluid-filled front end damping trough, the SRM Athena nevertheless sounds vibrant and authoritative. It delivers fine results with rock music and large orchestral works alike.

From the crashing *fortissimos* of the grand power chords in Dire Straits' 'Private Investigations' from *Love Over Gold* [Vertigo 6359109] to the plaintive *pianissimos* of Mark Knopfler's acoustic guitar strings elsewhere during the track, the Athena makes a most creditworthy

stab at delivering the wide dynamic swings in the recording. But like all lightweight decks its performance is affected considerably by the manner in which it is supported. Sited on the top shelf of a four-tier Quadraspire equipment rack, there was an appreciable difference in bass control and clarity when adding the accompanying Jet Black isolation platform.

Trying the turntable with and without this extra base takes barely a few seconds, especially when a friend provides an extra pair of hands to help with a speedy A/B comparison. With the base in situ the propulsive bass wallops in 'Private Investigations' had greater subjective 'punch', a reduction in overhang and bloom affording increased clarity. Seemingly with more control over all frequencies the sound image was much easier to hear into, a masking 'halo' effect removed from the upper bass and midrange. For the price of a dozen or so records it adds a thoroughly worthwhile improvement in performance in terms of detail resolution. OK, given the cost of the Athena the Jet Black platform's price isn't trivial, but as it includes the

*'It's expression of tone colours is particularly satisfying to hear'*

**ABOVE:** Polished acrylic with gold or silver (optional) metal detailing is arresting. Deck is seen here on its 'Jet Black' isolation platform

acrylic dustcover – an essential accessory for any record player – I consider it certainly worth the money. All further listening was done with the platform under the deck, making the record player's price £948 plus cartridge.

What makes the Athena particularly satisfying to listen to is its expression of tone colours. On a rather worn copy of Kate Bush's *Never For Ever* LP [EMI, EMA 794] the plucked and strummed strings of mandolin and balalaika were crystal clear behind the dominant vocals despite the record's 30-year vintage. The

sensitive touches on the fretless bass were painted beautifully within the atmospheric sound image of 'Babooshka', the album's opening track, being rich in texture and reverberation all the way down to the brief silences that follow each bass note's fading away onto the mix.

Meanwhile, RCA's 1960 recording of Rimsky-Korsakov's 'Scheherazade' performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under Fritz Reiner [Chesky Records re-master, RC4] sounded open and airy, the image of Chicago's Orchestra Hall spread beyond the boundaries of the loudspeakers to great affect. Avoiding an over-dramatised 'Technicolor' balance the Athena sounds realistically neutral, with vivid shading between dark and light in holographic recordings such as this classic cut. Both clarity and intelligibility were tremendous here.

To deliver in a satisfying manner the 'punch' and rhythm of Johnny Guitar Watson's *A Real Mother* [DJM Records, G]

## ANALOGUE ADDICTIONS

'I've been an LP lover for over 40 years,' enthuses SRM Tech's proprietor Stuart Michell, '...and don't mind admitting that I'm something of a compulsive tweaker, having spent years experimenting and modifying designs in order to wring the best sound possible from record players.'

It was the opening up of the web and its concomitant shop window to the world that spurred Stuart to start his own business in 2002. 'My various upgrade kits for Thorens, Linn and Rega turntables proved extremely popular among vinyl enthusiasts, so much so that I eventually found myself wondering why on earth I don't design and manufacture my own record player'. His first Arezzo model appeared around three years ago, the result of listening to countless prototypes employing various materials for the chassis, platter and motor pulley.



## TURNTABLE



**ABOVE:** The Rega/Moth tonearm cable is dressed against the subchassis via a P-clip while the power cable for the AC synchronous motor enters from the other side

DJF 20505] requires an ability to reproduce both dynamic weight and power in the lower midrange and upper bass while remaining unfazed by the high modulation level in the groove caused by Watson's propulsive, bass line. Given its price point it's hard to believe that the Athena can pump out as much dynamic contrast and detail as it does, digging deeply into the funk of the subsonic Moog bass.

Watson's 'voice box' vocal treatment remained lucid throughout, and even when the resonant guitar solo lets rip during the album's classic title track a lack of compression kept the backing instruments intelligible. All the subtleties of Watson's staccato left-hand technique came through, with no loss of detail to the accompanying blasts of trumpet and trombone in the background.

### EXPLICIT TO A FAULT?

What's there to criticise about the Athena's presentation? At the risk of becoming a bore (as I know I'm always going on about it), nearly 30 years of listening to CDs has made me intolerant of surface noise from vinyl playback. While the Athena is mellifluous and easygoing in its music making, its vivid and explicit nature means it is not particularly good at disguising the 'grunge' of badly worn records. I'm intolerant of speed fluctuation too – but have no complaint whatsoever here, the turntable demonstrating firm pitch stability and always sounding both stable and assured.

Designer Stuart Michell says the Athena is good enough to demonstrate the significant improvement gains to be had from using a high quality MC cartridge. I substituted the supplied Ortofon

2M Red with one of Ortofon's ruby cantilever'd Cadenza Blue MCs – at £1025 costing more than the entire turntable/arm/platform+cover combo – and the added refinement was easily heard. The Cadenza Blue has a sweet character that portrays upper frequencies in a natural and relaxing way, no less fast or crisp and yet seemingly less 'peaky'. And surface ticks and pops do become less irritating when the deck is fitted with a more refined cartridge.

We audiophiles often use the term 'fast' to describe a product's ability to handle transients and contrasts well. Regardless of how complex a recording, the Athena makes it easy to hear into the mix and to follow a particular part within the sound image. I hesitate to call the Athena 'musical' or a 'music-lover's turntable' because it implies a lack of resolution or dynamic verve, which is certainly not the case here. The deck sounds articulate and communicative, delivering a blend of sonic attributes that makes listening to vinyl highly involving late into the wee small hours. ☺

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Thanks to its crisp, focused sound the Athena SE delivers enthralling music. And its fine pitch stability puts many more costly turntables to shame. It looks handsome in its graphite grey finish though remember that identical performance is available for £100 less if you settle for the 'non-SE' model made of clear acrylic. Keenly priced, there's little not to like apart from the lack of electronic speed switching.

Sound Quality: 78%

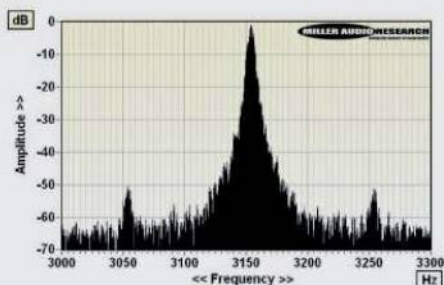


## LAB REPORT

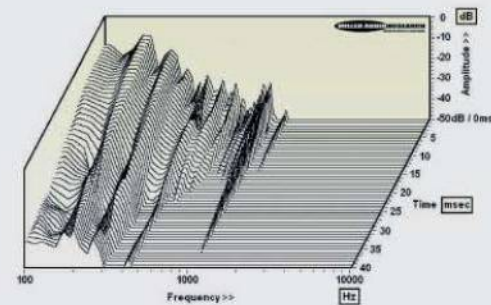
### SRM ATHENA SE (£699)

Compared to many of the turntables featured in these pages the Athena SE is certainly no heavyweight, but SRM has used this to some advantage. The 10mm acrylic platter is brought quickly up to speed by a relatively powerful synchronous AC motor whose 'duo belt' and double pulley are sufficiently tolerated to deliver an impressive 33.37rpm speed accuracy right out of the box [see Graph 1, below]. That's a speed error of just +0.12% which, as motors only slow with age, can only get more accurate with time! The same graph also illustrates the Athena's impressively low 0.02% wow although higher rate speed variations at  $\pm 50\text{Hz}$  push flutter up to a respectable 0.04%. These 50Hz sidebands are a clue to the Athena's only Achilles' heel – its use of plastics in the subchassis and platter do little to screen AC noise from the integral motor. This, and the simple PTFE/ball bearing assembly lift rumble to  $-63.5\text{dB}$  (DIN B wtd, re. cartridge output at 5cm/sec) which is some 10dB poorer than the very best the high-end has to offer.

SRM fits the Athena with a Rega-based Moth Mk1 tonearm whose resonance modes are depicted below [see Graph 2]. Like the top Rega RB1000 model [HFN, July '10] this arm has its main tube modes between 200-300Hz although these are broader, lower-Q resonances. The very sharp resonance noted at 600Hz from the RB1000 is missing here – the Moth Mk1 has a cluster of 'softer-looking' modes through the midrange instead. Readers are invited to view a full QC Suite report for the SRM Athena SE turntable by navigating to [www.hifinews.co.uk](http://www.hifinews.co.uk) and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



**ABOVE:** Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at 5cm/sec (plotted  $\pm 150\text{Hz}$ , 5Hz per minor division). Speed accuracy is good but note  $\pm 50\text{Hz}$  flutter sidebands



**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	33.37rpm (+0.12%)
Time to audible stabilisation	3sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.02% / 0.04%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	$-63.0\text{dB}$
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	$-63.5\text{dB}$
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	$-42.3\text{dB}$
Power Consumption	2W
Dimensions (WHD)	410x125x350mm



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# Chapter Audio Sonnet-S (£6895)

Every one of its products has a literary title, so will the Sonnet-S with its massive power supply, custom clock and digital filter prove to be as lyrical as its name suggests?

Review & Lab: **Paul Miller**

It is no longer sufficient to offer a mere CD player, or even a CD/SACD player when time comes to tempt the well-heeled and digitally-inclined audiophile. Instead, the modern disc spinner must also service a wide range of alternative and necessarily higher resolution digital sources. Machines like the Chapter Audio Sonnet-S featured here are better described as flexible outboard DACs equipped with a mechanism to support the 16-bit granddaddy of all 5in discs. The CD player is dead, long live the CD player.

Of course, Chapter is not alone in hedging its digital bets – Cambridge Audio was one of the first to offer a digital input on its CD players with the relatively affordable Azur 840C. Chapter's Sonnet-S is somewhat less affordable at £6895 but then this unashamedly high-end player does implement a version of the '32-bit' ESS Technology DAC we first saw in Simaudio's £7950 750D [HFN, July '10].

## HE 'AINT HEAVY

Chapter's industrial design is clearly hewn from the brute force school of audio engineering, its thick alloy casework loaded down even further by the huge 800VA toroid within [see inside shot, below right]. Similarly, the top-loading transport seems to have been inspired by an industrial centrifuge, complete with huge alloy lid to prevent its contents from spiralling towards the ceiling. Of course, the magnetic disc clamp, visible in our main shot is more than sufficient to keep any CD under control.

Under the 'bonnet', itself an interference fit with the case, lies the silicon heart of the machine. Here Chapter has deployed a single '28-bit' ES9008 ESS chip, using its modulator and DAC sections but skipping the front-end for a digital filter of its own design. This 4009-tap, three-stage FIR filter is implemented on a Motorola DSP chip and features a cut-off directly at  $F_s/2$  (that's 22.05kHz for CD). There's nothing especially fancy about this filter – it's a fairly conventional brickwall design but set, according to Chapter's design philosophy, slightly lower than

off-the-shelf filters. The upshot is that it sacrifices just a hint of top-end extension to ensure there's no chance of any aliasing distortions reaching the audioband.

Chapter's digital volume control, accessible by spinning the right hand dial, is also executed in this filter stage and offers a full 132dB range in 0.5dB steps. Situated directly adjacent to this filter and DAC on the PCB is Chapter's custom master clock. This is based around an avionics crystal but successfully pressed into service outside of the usual oven (thermally controlled) environment.

## MENU OPTIONS

While Chapter has endeavoured to keep its fascia as uncluttered as possible, the Sonnet can also be controlled by a Universal Electronics Nevo Q50SL rechargeable learning remote, pre-programmed with Chapter's IR code. This top quality handset is not included as part of the package but is offered at Nevo's standard selling price of £600. Personally, I would like to have seen a freebie out-of-the-box remote included with this player.

With a bit of practice you can still navigate your way around the Sonnet's unusual menu using just its two illuminated spin-and-click controls. Unusual? Frankly yes, for I've never encountered a player that requires you to pre-select CD de-emphasis before playing such a disc. Granted, there are precious few pre-emphasised CDs on the market but none actually tells you so on the packaging. Ordinarily a

pre-emp flag is automatically detected by the CD player and the correction applied in the DAC. This is included in the ESS DAC but in the same DSP stage that Chapter has bypassed, which explains the need for the manual 'fix'. So if a disc sounds uncommonly bright, try selecting the de-emphasis option.

There are other features aimed at its four S/PDIF and single USB digital inputs. You can pre-select the incoming 'data word length' (16-bit, 20-bit or 24-bit) for example. This eases the processing overhead, but is unnecessary housekeeping in my view – I'd leave it set to 24-bit at all times. Arguably its most obscure feature is the 'DAC Modulator Mode', adjustable between 6 and 8-bits. This represents a trade-off between the S/N achieved in the audioband against the level of unwanted ultrasonic noise. The higher the quantisation 'width' the better the audio S/N of the Sonnet-S even if this means more ultrasonic noise being pumped into the partnering amplifier. Teamed with any well-designed amplifier, the 8-bit option should be your default choice.

**RIGHT:** The Sonnet's PSU is bigger than most amplifiers! The DAC and clock are housed under screening cans (right)







Finally, there's a 'Quality' setting loosely associated with the source of the digital input. The various Low, Medium and High Quality standards address the ESS chip, fine-tuning the selectivity of its phase-locked loop and ability to accommodate variations in the clock accuracy of the incoming data. You may need to set this to Low or Medium for a noisy USB output from a laptop but for all S/PDIF sources, High should be your default.

Of course, while there's some crossover in technology with the Simaudio 750D, the *sound* of both products is determined as much by their respective choice and philosophy of analogue engineering. Chapter has its 800VA transformer as part of a low impedance power supply solution that includes a proprietary DC balancing circuit to minimise hum and noise. The balanced Class A analogue output stage features no fewer than 11 very low noise 'super regulated' power supplies feeding a selected mix of Burr-Brown, Analog Devices and National Semiconductor op-amps to achieve its 'house sound'.

While I am typically suspicious of any commentator who claims to have 'warmed to the sound' of a new product over a week or so (it's the ears, not the

electronics...) I did leave the Sonnet-S powered up for a day before listening, as it takes this long for the warmth of the internals to seep through the mass of its vast alloy casement.



#### SAMPLING THE SONNET

While the Devialet D-Premier amplifier [HFN, April '10 and this issue p24] is my preferred choice for digital sources, products offering an analogue output, like the Sonnet-S, are best kept 'analogue'. So I listened to this player using its own volume control and via balanced TEO cables, through two channels of Krell's very capable S-1500 amplifier.

With the vast majority of source material, CD and external, this control was used within 10-20dB of its maximum to generate realistic peak SPLs from my B&W DM802s, keeping the signal path as short as possible while optimising the available dynamic range of Chapter's DSP. If your speakers or power amplifier are much more sensitive, and you're going to be using plenty of genuine 24-bit recordings, then it might be preferable to run the player at full

**ABOVE:** Track skip, volume control, bit depth, sample rate and other functions are all navigated using these two twist-and-push rotary controls. Takes a bit of getting used to...

output and insert a preamp inbetween. In my 'direct' setup the Sonnet-S was almost perfectly matched for level and delivered a supremely relaxed but dynamically capable performance for my trouble.

One of the first CDs to disappear into the Sonnet's top-loading transport was Philip Clemo's *The Rooms* [ACA001], a haunting mix of string quartet with sax, guitar, hammond organ and piano that succeeded in encapsulating the equally broad capabilities of the

'The CD player is dead, long live the CD player'

player itself. This fabulously atmospheric recording oozes an uncanny poise between what might appear, on browsing the sleeve, a disparate collection of acoustic and electronic instruments.

And this poise, this clear depiction of macro and micro dynamics, of deep solid bass and sweet but cleanly extended treble is shared by the Sonnet-S.

This is my kind of 'hi-fi': equipment that offers a tangible sense of performance in the void around the speakers. No strain, no exaggeration and no edgy emphasis to fool the unwary with a short burst of musical fireworks. This player is a stayer, its liquid smooth sound engineered to have you listening long into the wee small hours, night after night.

It was during one of these sessions that the Sonnet-S helped me discover Lori Lieberman's *Gun Metal Sky* [Drive On Records 115115-09], an equally elegant arrangement of strings, piano, percussion and, of course, her distinctive and eloquent vocals. The Sonnet placed each of these

#### CHAPTER AND VERSE

Having cut their teeth at Chord Electronics, the team that is Chapter Audio set up their own company over ten years ago with the 'Chapter Two' power amplifier as the inaugural product. Back in 2005, Chapter won a *Hi-Fi News* 'best power amplifier' Award for the Couplet, an early analogue Class D design. The intervening period has seen Chapter develop two product ranges, the 'Hardback' and 'Reference' series. The Sonnet-S, its only CD player, hails from the Hardback range along with stereo integrated, pre and power amplifiers. The top-end (read extreme-end) range plays host to the 400W stereo, 1kW stereo and 1kW mono 'Qube' power amplifiers. So what of future? A TACT Millennium/NAD M2-style true digital Class D amplifier is on the horizon along with an 800W valve-based Class D amp which, Chapter suggests, 'should blow people's minds'.



## CD PLAYER/DAC



**ABOVE:** Four 192kHz-capable S/PDIF digital inputs are provided alongside both single-ended and balanced XLR outputs. A USB input is also included but no AES/EBU

performers into the room with a deft hand, the soft buzz of the trumpet uninterrupted by the greater clarity and impact of piano, recorded more forward in the mix along with the close but not cloyingly intimate quality of her voice. Once again, the Sonnet-S betrayed its innate sense of balance, yielding just enough of the spotlight to illuminate each area of the performance without squeezing another into the shadows.

Just in case the Sonnet was lulling me into a false sense of security I tempted fate by loading a blast from my concert-going past – the live recording of Rainbow's anthemic 'Catch The Rainbow', recently re-released as part of the band's *Anthology 1975-1983*. I'd be remiss if I did not pass comment on the necessarily restricted dynamic range, and especially the headroom, available from the master tapes but far from the crushingly disappointing mêlée of Powell's potent drum sound and Dio's searing vocals I had experienced with lesser players, here they were all extracted with a surprising sensitivity, along with Blackmore's legendary fretwork and some tape hiss. Not as good as being there, but a damn close second and little short of miraculous given the quality of the original recording...

### FABULOUS FLAC

So what of the modern era of high resolution digital audio? My preferred source on such occasions is the digital output of a Linn Majik DS, connected over a local network to a huge 24-bit NAS archive, the combination governed by a software interface on my laptop. Visitors to our demo at this year's Bristol Hi-Fi Show will have seen and heard this front-end first hand!

Optimally configured, the sound of the Sonnet-as-DAC with a true

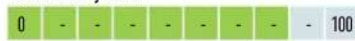
96kHz/24-bit recording like Claire Martin's *Too Darn Hot!* is quite exceptional – a tight drum sound, incisive piano and brassy percussion plus that breathy vocal presence, all laid onto a canvas of impenetrable black velvet. The sound is sober but wholly sympathetic to the mood of the performance. Sure enough, I'd would like to have heard a little greater projection into the room, but the soundstage is not squashed, simply deeper than it is forward. It's worth noting that the extra bit-depth of 44.1kHz/24-bit FLAC versions of Barb Jung's *Waterloo Sunset* offer a tangible advantage over their 44.1kHz/16-bit disc-based cousins, the extra dynamic range realised in deeper, more resonant drum tails, punchier percussion and a little extra expression in those sultry vocals.

I would also suggest that the player's bass extension is subjectively 'healthier' in DAC mode, so you should resolve any hint of flabbiness in either amplifier or speaker before attempting a home demonstration of this substantive CD machine. ☺

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

There are very few high-end CD players being launched these days and those that are do not limit themselves to supporting the 5in disc alone. The smart money, and I include Chapter's Sonnet-S in this definition, is hedging its bets by offering something closer to a CD-playing outboard DAC. The novelty of a new converter technology also ripens the mix, adding extra appeal and flexibility for the progressive audiophile.

Sound Quality: 80%



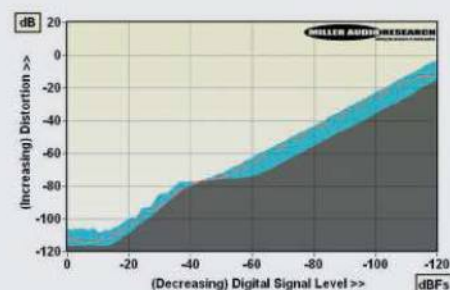
## LAB REPORT

### CHAPTER AUDIO SONNET-S (£6895)

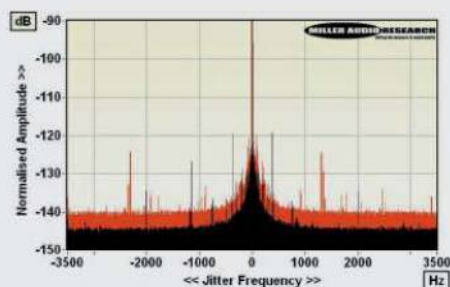
Regular readers might care to compare the plots of distortion vs. digital level [Graph 1, below] with the same from our review of the Simaudio Moon 750D [July '10]. The 'knee' between -40dB and -60dB at 1kHz and ripples evident at 20kHz are a fingerprint of the ESS Technology ES9008/18 DACs used in these players, albeit with custom clocking solutions and bespoke balanced analogue filters and output stages in each. The two products share the same vanishingly low distortion through the midrange, although Chapter's analogue stage keeps this to an incredibly low 0.0003% at 20kHz (extreme treble) and 0.0004% at 20Hz (bass) where the Moon 'jumped' to 0.003%. The Sonnet-S also has a higher 3.84V balanced output with a drive-any-cable source impedance of <0.5ohm. The A-wtd S/N ratio is necessarily higher too – a full 115dB.

Naturally, the frequency response(s) of both players are subtly different because they employ their own filters, the Chapter proving slightly flatter with CD and 48kHz sources but with a slightly more pronounced HF rolloff with 96kHz inputs (-1.2dB at 45kHz). The custom clock/jitter reduction regimes produce different results with Simaudio having the edge here [compare the respective Graph 2s, plotted on the same scale] although 45psec vs. 4psec is hardly night and day. Chapter needs to erase those low-rate display-related spikes if it's to achieve 0psec perfection!

Readers are invited to view comprehensive QC Suite test reports for the Chapter Audio Sonnet-S CD player and DAC by navigating to [www.hifinews.co.uk](http://www.hifinews.co.uk) and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



**ABOVE:** Distortion versus digital signal level over a 120dB dynamic range using 24-bit data at 1kHz (black) and 20kHz (blue); CD/1kHz data (red dash)



**ABOVE:** High resolution jitter plot, 48kHz/24-bit data (black spectrum) and 96kHz/24-bit data (red)

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum Output Level (Balanced)	3.84Vrms at <0.5ohm
A-wtd S/N Ratio	115.0dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.00015% / 0.0018%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFS)	0.0003%
Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.0dB to -0.04dB
Digital jitter (CD/24-bit digital in)	126psec / 45psec
Resolution @ -100dB	±0.1dB
Power consumption	21W
Dimensions (WHD)	390x108x300mm



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# Dynavector DV 507MKII (£3495)

This iconic design looks like no other tonearm on the market, the result of fresh 'out-of-the-box' thinking from a Japanese specialist in analogue replay

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

**F**ew would argue that Dynavector's DV 507 is the most exotic of tonearms. Spot one in action at a hi-fi show and it's guaranteed to have a gaggle of enthusiastic vinyl hedonists pouring all over it, admiring the intricacies of its eclectic design. Every bit an audio icon, Dynavector's striking arm design dates back many years. The first DV 501 tonearm looked much like this one, but as if fashioned from a kit of Meccano parts compared with the immaculately constructed '507 we have here. Later came a DV 505 model, better finished and incorporating spring-loaded downforce... but still with a utilitarian thread-and-weight anti-skate system.

The first DV 507 – just like this one, really – dates from 1984. Hard to believe it's approaching 30 years old. It was introduced during the height of Western audiophiles' predilection for lightweight, suspended-subchassis turntables to which the massive Dynavector – looking like a prop from a futuristic Robocop movie – was wholly inappropriate. It weighs 1380g (just over 3lb), almost twice as much as today's chunky SME V. So while developing a cult following with Japanese audiophiles who owned solid, direct drive decks, the DV 507 was rarely seen on these shores

and considered altogether outlandish and somewhat bizarre.

OK, so it still looks bizarre today when viewed alongside 'traditional' tonearms, like a whacky contraption dreamt up by Wallace & Gromit. Further refined and at last constructed with a level of precision and quality of finish that a watchmaker would be proud of, the '507MKII was introduced eight years ago. Yet how often have you seen it featured in a hi-fi magazine? That's how rare and exclusive this arm is.

## THRILL OF IT ALL

I was thrilled to have the opportunity to play with one, fitted to the 'monster' Avid Acutus turntable currently taking pride of place in my system [see review in last month's *HFN*, the Acutus fitted with SME's Series V tonearm].

The design is highly considered, although sceptics regard it an elaboration too far. Dubbed a 'bi-axis inertia control tonearm' it is in effect two arms in one. The main arm beam has a high effective mass and moves only horizontally, and the headshell/cartridge attaches to a short, stubby low-mass 'sub-arm' that moves only in the vertical direction. The intention is to hold the cartridge rigidly at audio frequencies, especially at low frequencies and high groove excursions, while the low vertical effective mass of

the sub-arm is designed to provide good performance when riding warped/rippled discs. What appear to be counterweights swung out to the right are nothing of the sort. They're a pair of neodymium magnets fixed in position, while a 'swing plate' passes through a gap between them as the arm describes an arc across the platter – a zero contact 'electro-magnetic damping system' intended to reduce resonance.

There are some lovely design touches.

When you park the arm a concealed magnet gently 'snaps' it into the arm rest. No cheap 'n' nasty flip-over plastic clips here! The cueing action is exquisite too, with just the right amount of damping.

Accurate cueing is a breeze.

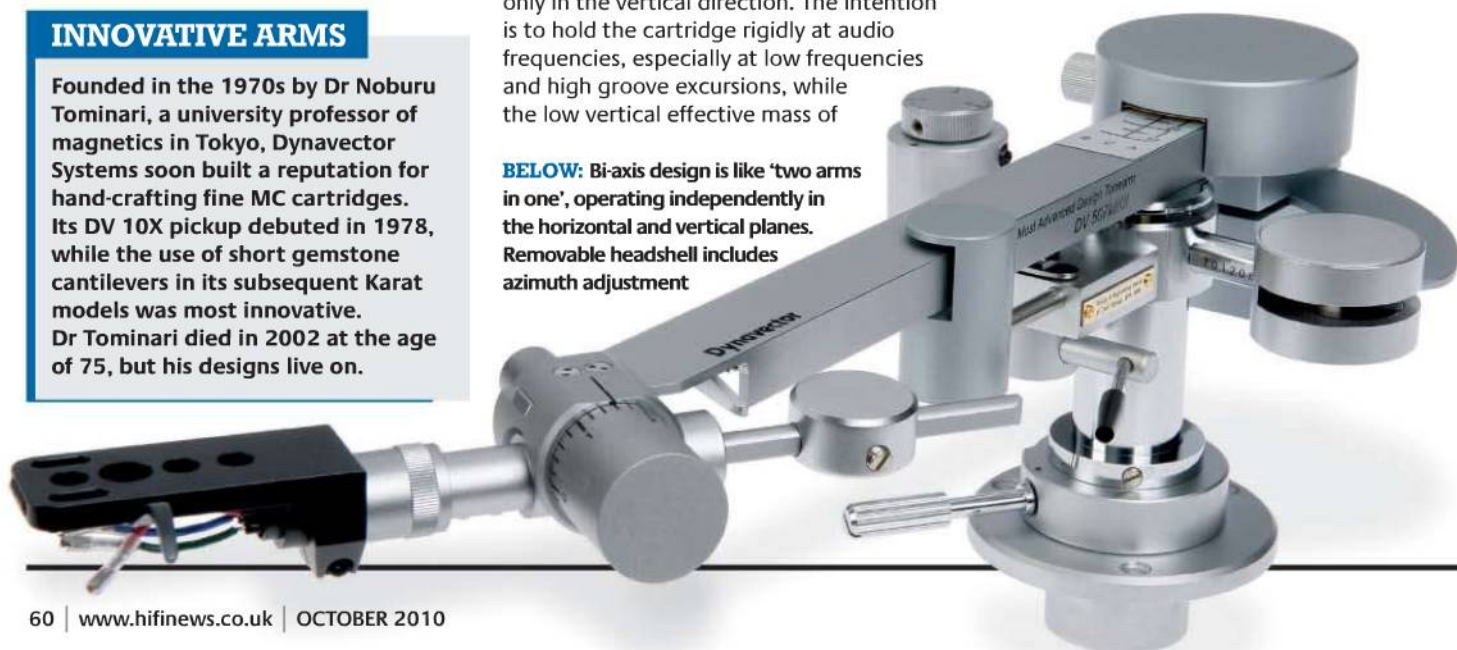
Bias adjustment and vertical tracking angle can be adjusted on-the-fly should you want to fine-tune settings by ear, the '507MKII having quite the best VTA adjuster I've ever used. This is just as well when you consider that due to the main arm beam being fixed in the vertical plane and the cartridge's vertical pivot point being, ahem, at arm's length, any misalignment of VTA is magnified

*'The Dynavector is ideal for a diet of electronica and synth pop'*

## INNOVATIVE ARMS

Founded in the 1970s by Dr Noburu Tominari, a university professor of magnetics in Tokyo, Dynavector Systems soon built a reputation for hand-crafting fine MC cartridges. Its DV 10X pickup debuted in 1978, while the use of short gemstone cantilevers in its subsequent Karat models was most innovative. Dr Tominari died in 2002 at the age of 75, but his designs live on.

**BELOW:** Bi-axis design is like 'two arms in one', operating independently in the horizontal and vertical planes. Removable headshell includes azimuth adjustment







**ABOVE:** Positioning of main counterweight is dependent on total mass of cartridge/headshell. Sub arm is dynamically balanced, with three counterweights supplied

considerably, making accurate adjustment hyper-critical.

### **BUT STILL FABULOUS...**

Lucky me, I get to experience music using all manner of esoteric gear. I've been privileged to have been 'playing' in my work for 30 years. It's a tad disappointing, then, that the exotic, eclectic, iconic DV 507MKII isn't mind-blowingly revelatory in its audio reproduction, because to see it in action is to want it to be the best sounding arm in the world.

Truth is, if your system is 'full range', in a good-sized listening room where you can reproduce serious bass and create life-size images of musicians performing for your personal pleasure, you will hear that the '507 doesn't quite match the best available today. But that's not to say it isn't fabulous.

Using Ortofon's ruby-cantilever'd Cadenza Blue moving-coil the sound was open and spacious and highly engaging, the title track of Miles Davis' 1986 *Tutu* album [Warner 925 490-1] sounding pleasantly sweet despite the recording's vivid electronic 'edge'. But it didn't have the razor-sharp, guttural bass 'oomph' I'm accustomed to and Davis's trumpet blasts lacked that last degree of speed and attack. And on Talk Talk's *The Colour Of Spring* [EMI EMC 3506] the percussion lacked 'zing' and Danny Thompson's deft acoustic bass work appeared blurred during the energetic 'Happiness Is Easy'.

Remember, I'd been living with the big, meaty Acutus for a few weeks and I'd just substituted an SME Series V for the DV 507MKII. Had I heard the Dynavector in isolation I wouldn't have been disappointed, especially as its tonal character is utterly 'analogue'. With the harder-edged track 'Life's What

You Make It' – compressed, as it was the album's hit single – the '507 ameliorated the apparent clipping of singer Mark Hollis's vocal lead, while the children's school choir during the song's 'break' sounded pleasingly ethereal. But heard back-to-back with the SME the loss of 'grip' and resolution was apparent.

In some ways the Dynavector might be considered ideal for listening to a diet of electronica and synth pop/rock, but while it scores highly on gentility, it lacks a degree of punch and drive with synthesized bass compared with the very best tonearms available today.

Peer at our photograph opposite and you'll see a miniature brass plate adjacent to the cueing lever. The inscription boasts of the arm's Design & Engineering Awards from past CES trade conventions. Distributor Pear Audio recalls the plates on the first DV 507MKII samples marking a commemorative tribute to Dynavector's founder, Dr Tominari, who had passed away just before the MKII came to market. They should return to that. It is a design masterpiece. ☺

### **HI-FI NEWS VERDICT**

The iconic DV 507MKII is capable of providing great music given a heavy, stable turntable on which to reside. Good value for money? No, not in terms of 'sound-per-pound' it isn't. An SME Series IV or V will outperform it for less cost, with greater information retrieval and noticeably better bass control if you've a big, full-range system. But it's lovely to use and you'll be proud to be in an exclusive owners' club.

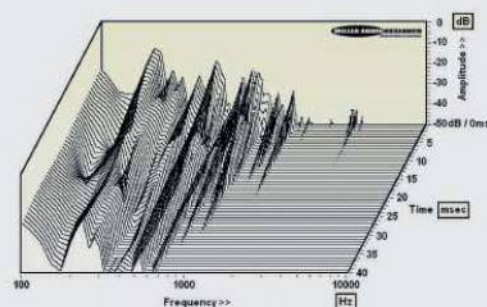
Sound Quality: 75%



## **LAB REPORT**

### **DYNAVECTOR DV 507MKII (£3495)**

It is easy to become dismayed by the visual complexity of the DV 507MKII, but its engineering is extremely elegant. The design may be broken into two principal components: a massive main beam (more RSJ than armtube) that defines the arm's horizontal movement and a smaller vestigial arm pivoted in the vertical plane just a few cm from the stylus. Despite the heavy 15g headshell, the close proximity to this pivot helps reduce the effective mass to less than 10g (with a low <10mg friction) and ensure excellent tracking of warped records at the expense of exaggerated VTA errors. The effective mass in the horizontal plane is huge – close to 60g by my calculation – pushing arm/cartridge resonances down to very, very low frequencies even with low compliance pick-ups. Provided this falls between the sub-1Hz oscillation of an eccentric groove and the lowest audio signal cut into said groove, then this magnetically-damped structure should hold the pick-up as rigidly as a linear-tracker. There's no 'tube resonance' in the waterfall plot [below] but the main beam still 'bends' around 200Hz, leaving other components to bend and/or twist up to around 2kHz. Readers are invited to view a full QC Suite report for the Dynavector DV 507MKII tonearm by navigating to [www.hifinews.co.uk](http://www.hifinews.co.uk) and clicking on the red 'download' button. **PM**



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

### **HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS**

<b>Bearing / bias type</b>	Bi-axial / Internal spring
<b>Effective mass (vertical/lateral) / length</b>	<10g/60g / 306mm
<b>Offset angle / overhang</b>	21.5 degrees / 15mm
<b>Friction (vertical/lateral)</b>	<10mg / 30mg
<b>Downforce accuracy (at 2g)</b>	~5%
<b>Cartridge weight/compliance range</b>	4-25g / 5-25cu
<b>Net weight</b>	1380g





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# Musical Fidelity M1 DAC (£399)

Outboard DACs are back in fashion – and this new model from Musical Fidelity with a comprehensive suite of inputs and outputs is designed to take the spotlight

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

**T**hanks to the ubiquity of computer audio, the market is now awash with all manner of affordable DACs sporting USB inputs, including Musical Fidelity's excellent £160 V-DAC. But the V-DAC is in a compact utilitarian 'hideaway' box powered by a plug top 'wall wart' power supply, whereas the new M1 DAC has real audiophile pretensions.

Using 24-bit Delta-Sigma dual differential DACs with upsampling to 192kHz, it features an AES/EBU balanced input (XLR socket) and a pair of XLR balanced outputs for hooking up to appropriately equipped high-end amplifiers, as well as a pair of singled-ended RCA output sockets. Also included at the rear are two S/PDIF inputs – one RCA coaxial and one Toslink optical – and a B-type USB input socket. A push button selector on the fascia is used to cycle through the four inputs.

While the M1 is capable of handing input data up to 24-bit/192kHz, don't get too excited. Its USB input is limited to 16-bit/48kHz, so it is not a cheap alternative to 'professional audio' type DACs with high-speed USB and/or FireWire interfaces. Audio enthusiasts building a collection of hi-res recordings on their PCs' HDDs will have to dig deeper for considerably more expensive



**ABOVE:** Blue LEDs on the fascia indicate which input is selected and the incoming data sample rate, while a green LED indicates 192kHz upsampling

alternatives. Note also that the front panel LED indicating 192kHz upsampling is a little superfluous as the M1's upsampling can't be switched in and out.

*'Both sharp and lucid, the M1 DAC sounds highly polished'*

## NEW LIFE

The M1 DAC's explicit sound should certainly breathe new life into ageing CD players. I fed its coaxial input from a Pioneer DV-868AVI universal player – which is in fact no bad CD player, but with a tendency to sound 'slow' in the bass – and enjoyed a much more agile, upbeat delivery. The acoustic bass introduction to Diana Krall's 'My Love Is' from *Love Scenes* [Impulse IMP12342] displayed crisper transients with less blurring of the edges, together with a more descriptive texture that was more sophisticated. Both sharp and lucid, the M1 sounds highly polished.

I've mentioned before my prized collection of copy master DATs made by audiophile engineer Tony Faulkner 25 years ago. The M1 locked on to the 96kHz

balanced digital output of my Pioneer D9601 'HS-DAT' professional DAT recorder (Faulkner was first in the queue to buy a couple of D9601s when recording at 96kHz was in its infancy) and the sound was deliciously holographic. I was listening to intimate studio 'first takes' of the soulful jazz crooner Joe Williams, the instruments in his backing orchestra beautifully spot-lit by the M1 DAC's sprightly and vivid demeanour. Talk about looking through the recording studio's control room window...

Finally, out of sheer curiosity, I hooked up the MF to the optical S/PDIF output of a Sky TV receiver. The DAC transformed the sound. The orchestra during a BBC Proms concert marking the 80th birthday of the American composer Stephen Sondheim, now sounded full-bodied and vibrant. ☺

## HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum Output Level/Impedance	3.96Vrms / 46ohm
A-wtd S/N Ratio	114.1dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0018% / 0.0005%
Distortion (20kHz, 0dBfs)	0.0013%
Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.03dB to +0.13dB (48kHz Fs)
Digital jitter (24-bit; 48kHz/96kHz)	36psec / 38psec
Resolution @ -100dB	±0.1dB
Power consumption	4W
Dimensions (WHD)	220x100x300mm

## HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

If the CD source in your system is letting the side down, but the cost of upgrading to something much more serious is prohibitive, this new M1 DAC could be just what you need. It delivers distinguished audio, with superb detail retrieval and a broad, deep soundstage. Moreover you'll have the benefit of gaining extra digital inputs for other sources – such as that rough-sounding TV set top box, perhaps.

Sound Quality: 80%





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**Clearaudio Innovation Wood**  
turntable, £6250

With mag bearing, speed control. "A superb way of playing vinyl that never draws attention to itself." (*Hi-Fi World*) **ON DEM**



**Transfiguration Orpheus L**  
cartridge, £3400

New 1 Ohm internal impedance version. "Totally natural rendition of music." (*Hi-Fi News*) **ON DEM**



**Graham Phantom II**  
tonearm, £3550

Interchangeable armtubes. "A masterpiece of craftsmanship and design savvy." (*The Absolute Sound*) **ON DEM**



**Scheu Laufwerk 2** turntable, £4350

Massive 80 mm platter, Papst motor. "Reference quality...reference quality looks." (*TNTAudio.com*) **ON DEM**



**Zyx R-100 Fuji**  
cartridge, £1450

High-purity crystal copper coils. Supremely lucid, precise, transparent.



**SME V** tonearm, £2180

The all-time classic. "Perhaps the last great flowering of the tonearm designer's art." (*Hi-Fi News*) **ON DEM**



**Michell Gyro SE** turntable, £1135

The classic John Michell design. "Should appeal to anyone looking for a high-end deck." (*Hi-Fi News*)



**Lyra Delos** cartridge, £895

Replaces Argo i. A new standard for mid-range low-output moving coils. **ON DEM**



**Clearaudio Unify** tonearm, £1360

Phenomenal unipivot, available in carbon-fibre and wood versions, 9, 10, 12, and 14 inch lengths.



**Pro-Ject Xpression III** turntable, £435

Gloss black base, acrylic platter. "Better imaging, better ambience and dynamics." (*Hi-Fi News*)



**Sumiko Blue Point Special EVO III**  
cartridge, £239

A favourite high-output moving coil. "A big helping of moving-coil goodness." (*The Absolute Sound*)



**Thomas Schick** tonearm, £995

"The question is no longer *Will this stand alongside my other, more expensive tonearms?* but, rather, *Do I really need more than this?*" (*Stereophile*) **ON DEM**

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**Keith Monks Omni Mk VII** record cleaning machine, £3295

Cleans all size records. "If you're looking for the best, well, here it is." (*Stereophile*)



**Aesthetix Rhea** phono stage, £3900

Ten valve design. "A sense of palpability and immediacy that recalls the magic of live music." (*The Absolute Sound*) **ON DEM**



**Eclipse TD-712z Mk II** speakers, £5295

Now available in piano black. "More life-like and cohesive than just about anything you can buy." (*What Hi-Fi?*) **ON DEM**



**Loricraft PRC3** record cleaning machine, £1395

The standard for serious vinylphiles. "Even brand new, sealed records benefit." (*PositiveFeedback.com*)



**Leema Acoustics Agena** phono stage, £2995

Reference unit with two inputs, fully adjustable. Integral DAC with USB port. **ON DEM**



**Esoteric X-05** SACD/CD player, £4495

Awesome one-box unit. "There aren't enough superlatives to describe this machine." (*The Absolute Sound*) **ON DEM**



**VPI 16.5** record cleaning machine, £575

Our most popular budget unit. "An essential component." (*Hi-Fi+*)



**Whest PS.30RDT** phono stage, £2799

Dual transformer, dual mono. "A brilliant all round design." (*Hi-Fi World*) **ON DEM**



**Stax SR-007 II SE Omega System** headphones and amp, £3195

Hand-selected valves. "If I have to go through life with only one of the Stax amps, give me the tubed SRM-007t." (*Stereophile*) **ON DEM**



**Record Research Lab** record cleaning fluids, £19.95

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**Pro-Ject Tube Box II** phono stage, £310

Great valve unit. Budget version of acclaimed Pro-Ject Tube Box SE.



**Nordost Red Dawn** cabling, from £275

Superb price/performance. "Cleanest, quickest and most natural wires I've yet to hear." (*SoundStage.com*)

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# Vinyl Frontier

BEHIND THE MUSIC WITH HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW

It's *The Wicker Man*, a new take on Mahler, 'indie royalty' in a dark mood, and Jeff Buckley live for **Chris Heard** this month, not to mention Faust and the Dap-Kings

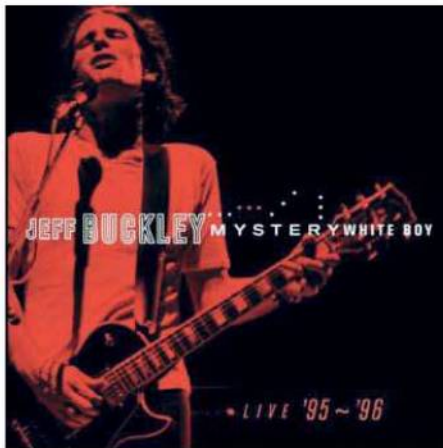
**T**he summer release schedule is always slow but as we move towards the third quarter we can expect to see some more tantalising titles coming our way.

There's a treat for fans of vintage Elvis Costello, as the finest of his early albums, *This Year's Model*, is given Mobile Fidelity's gold-standard makeover. Costello rode in on the crest of the new wave, snarling and sneering for his publicity photos as the world demanded. In reality he was a practised pub-rocking muso with a Gram Parsons fixation and a diverse record collection, sharing more common ground with Richard Thompson than Richard Hell. This, his second album from 1978, is an altogether more accomplished affair than his sonically spartan debut *My Aim Is True* (also on MFSL), and punk's tightest backing band The Attractions are let loose for the first time across a wealth of pacy, thoughtful power-pop material, including the singles 'Pump It Up' and '(I Don't Want To Go To) Chelsea'.

Angry enough to woo the disaffected yet imbued with a songcraft denied to most of Costello's contemporaries, *This Year's Model* provided hard evidence of the lyrical dexterity, blistering cynicism and political savvy that would set him apart from the pack, on tracks such as 'Lip Service', 'The Beat' and 'Night Rally'. Songs about girls and fascism never sounded so damn good. Meanwhile, on the breathless 'Lipstick Vogue', couplets such as 'Sometimes I think that love is just a tumour/you've got to cut it out', or 'You



➔ *The Faust Tapes* has dazzling rear cover artwork by Bridget Riley



➔ Jeff Buckley in concert, 1995-6, a compilation from DAT tapes

say I've got no feelings/this is a good way to kill them', demonstrated his early gift for a pun, long before the clever wordplay turned into self-parody. One interesting footnote: the US had taken immediately to the geeky bespectacled rocker pictured pigeon-toed on the cover of *My Aim Is True*, but Americans tended to like their punk to sound, well, *American* (think The Cars, The Knack), so both 'Chelsea' and 'Night Rally' were pulled from the original US release of *This Year's Model* in favour of 'Radio Radio'. [For more, see KK's review, p76.]

## KRAUTROCK COMPILATION

*The Faust Tapes*, one of the most thrillingly original albums from the Kosmiche Rock era, was re-released on ReR Records in July. Faust became one of the best-known Krautrock bands after signing to Virgin Records in the 1970s. Their third album, from 1973, was effectively a cut-and-paste compilation combining excerpts from some of their many hours of private studio recordings which had not been meant for public consumption.

Devoid of a tracklisting and featuring a sleeve compiled from black-and-white press cuttings, it looked and sounded like nothing else, splicing together disparate elements in a series of sharp edits to create an experimental sound collage from the Kraut avant-garde. Primitive blues, synth-rock, neo-classical and pop strands came together in a cohesive and satisfying whole. In a marketing ploy designed to promote the band as widely

## CHRIS HEARD

Chris Heard is co-owner of Classic LPs, one of the UK's biggest in-stock retailers of vinyl re-issues and new releases. With his wife Rachel, he also runs Three Black Feathers Records, the UK's newest audiophile vinyl label. See [www.classiclp.co.uk](http://www.classiclp.co.uk) and [www.threeblackfeathers.co.uk](http://www.threeblackfeathers.co.uk) for more information on the online store and the label.



as possible, Virgin boss Richard Branson retailed the album at 48p, the price of a single, and the plan worked: it reputedly sold up to 100,000 copies, and it remains many fans' favourite. But it never officially charted because its low price made it ineligible! The reissue perfectly suits the 12in format, reproducing the original artwork with its dizzying Bridget Riley op-art work on the reverse side.

## JEFF BUCKLEY ON TOUR

A Music On Vinyl reissue, *Mystery White Boy* captures Jeff Buckley on stage in 1995-96 during a tour supporting *Grace* (the only 'proper' studio album of his sadly short career). The high-quality recording does a good job in attempting to distil Buckley's gunslinger-troubadour spirit and his exceptional talent as a vocalist and live performer, with arresting takes of 'Mojo Pin', 'Last Goodbye' and 'Lilac Wine', as well as a cover of Alex Chilton's 'Kanga-Roo' and a climactic nine-minute medley segueing his definitive version of Leonard Cohen's 'Hallelujah' into The Smiths' 'I Know It's Over' – how very Jeff Buckley! The album was released in 2000, compiled from DAT recordings, after Buckley's mother Mary Guibert began documenting the unfinished and unreleased moments of his career to satisfy the clamour from fans – a process that would also provide the world with *Sketches (For My Sweetheart The Drunk)* and *Songs To No One*.

Listening to these songs again a decade on, it seems clear that Buckley's emergence prepared the ground for a new age of introspective artistry at the hands of Coldplay and Radiohead (and the less appealing James Blunt/James Morrison-Keane axis). Songwriters have come and gone since 1997, but none has replicated that indefinable star-quality that made Buckley the Nick Drake of his generation.

## PEER GROUP PROJECT

Featuring a stellar cast of guests including Suzanne Vega, Iggy Pop, The Pixies' Black Francis and Gruff Rhys from Super





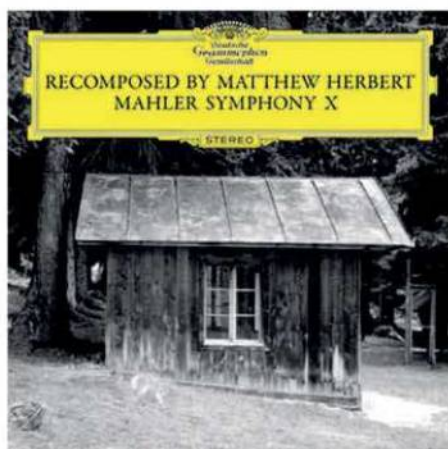
➔ For soul fans: Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings' *I Learned The Hard Way*

Furry Animals, *Dark Night Of The Soul* [Parlophone] is an ambitious collaboration between producer Danger Mouse (Gorillaz, Beck, Black Keys) and the indie-Americana darlings Sparklehorse (aka the late Mark Linkous). A beautiful, haunting album exploring dark themes such as war, death, pain and dreams, it features contributions from director David Lynch, both in photographic imagery and in the form of two songs, as well as tracks recorded by Strokes singer Julian Casablancas and The Cardigans' Nina Persson.

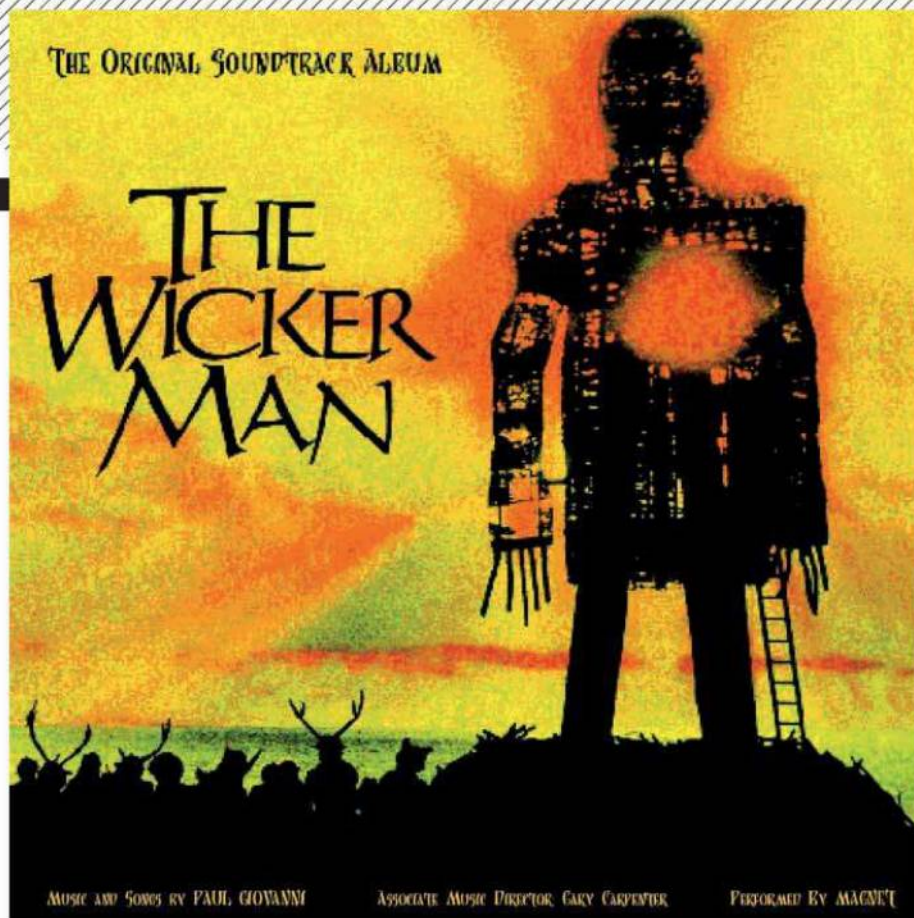
And the roll call of US indie/alt.country royalty goes on... The Shins, Grandaddy, Vic Chesnutt, The Flaming Lips – you get the picture. This has the distinct feel of a project that no-one within this high-calibre peer group would have dreamed of turning down. Following Linkous' recent death the project was delayed but is now released as a fitting memorial to the singer. Choose from a gatefold heavyweight double LP or a limited luxury vinyl box set with the David Lynch photo booklet.

## SOULFUL SHARON

Soul fans – you probably know of Sharon Jones & The Dap-Kings already. If you don't, and you like your soul in the classic vein of '60s/'70s artists such as Mavis Staples, Al Green, Aretha Franklin and James Brown, you are urged to give



➔ Mahler's composing hut – his 10th Symphony has been reworked



them a try. The Dap-Kings, house band at Brooklyn-based Daptone Records, will perfectly complement your treasured analogue hardware with their philosophy of shunning digital recording methods in favour of using old-school equipment and instrumentation from the golden age of soul and funk. *I Learned The Hard Way* [Daptone] is their fourth album, produced by Bosco Mann and recorded on an Ampex eight-track tape machine by Gabriel Roth. It sounds warm and spontaneous, reminiscent of the atmosphere created at the Muscle Shoals and Stax studios, bringing in elements of Philly-soul and the vocal power of Sam Cooke and Tina Turner along the way.

An exciting live act, the Dap-Kings have been acclaimed for their gritty studio recordings and sold 150,000 copies of their debut album. It's little wonder that *Blues & Soul* magazine, the genre's specialist publication, gave a 10/10 rating, calling it 'raw, powerful and swathed in lushness'.

## CULT SOUNDTRACK

*The Wicker Man*, one of the consistently best selling cult-movie soundtracks to be issued on LP, has another repressing from Music On Vinyl. Composed and performed by Paul Giovanni and Magnet, it boasts a series of largely mellow, acoustic songs, often with a mildly unsettling undercurrent, perfectly capturing the eerie and otherworldly nature of the 1973 movie.

➔ 'Love it or hate it' – the soundtrack album for the 1973 cult movie *The Wicker Man* gets another reissue

The record's essential weirdness placed it at the heart of the 'acid folk' resurgence alongside early '70s acts such as Mellow Candle, Heron and Trader Horne.

*The Wicker Man* first resurfaced on vinyl during the mid-1990s as one of the earliest releases on the much-loved Trunk Records label and has since become a £50+ collectors' item. The first incarnation of the Simply Vinyl reissue imprint continued

to be put out well into the noughties, so this is effectively the third reissue. Like the film, you will either love or hate it.

'Virgin boss Richard Branson retailed the album at 48p'

## TENTH FINISHED

Finally, one that intrigues us and leaves

us salivating somewhat. Matthew Herbert, the British dance producer who has worked with Björk, Moloko and REM, has recomposed Gustav Mahler's unfinished Symphony 10 for release by DG. The album marks the 150th anniversary of Mahler's birth this year (and the 100th anniversary of his death in 2011). One of the more intellectually curious individuals on the experimental electronica scene, Herbert has consistently expanded his boundaries, performing live on stage with his own big band, and we anticipate his interpretation of Mahler's last masterwork as a highlight of the classical vinyl calendar. ☺



# Vinyl Release

BEHIND THE MUSIC WITH HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW

## Kate Bush: *Hounds Of Love*

Released in 1985, the singer's fifth studio album went straight to No 1. **Steve Sutherland** remembers a smoky encounter with the star, now the LP is out on 180g vinyl

One of the many great things about working for a music magazine is the opportunity it occasionally affords to go and meet the readers in the hallowed name of research. And so it was, a few years back now, that the editor of *Uncut*, Allan Jones and I, found ourselves in the front room of a semi-detached in Slough or Staines or somesuch being regaled with anecdotes by half a dozen blokes who'll never again see the sunny side of 40.

'I had that David Bowie in the back of my cab once,' said a geezer who was probably called Derek. 'Nice chap. Very small. Extremely polite. A good tipper. We talked about boxing as I remember.'

'Well,' said the bloke sitting next to him. 'I chatted up that Kate Bush once.'

The room, which had been a-hum with bonhomie, fell deadly silent. And we all, every man Jack of us, stared at the speaker with awe and no little suspicion. 'Straight up,' he continued. 'She was standing at the bar in this nightclub in Watford.'

Watford? Really? Wow!

'Yeah, reckon I could have pulled her

too but the missus was sitting outside in the van.'

Incredible I know. But I can top that. I too met that Kate Bush once, when I was working for the weekly music paper that used to be the *Melody Maker* and guess what she said?

'You have a lovely energy...'

I swear to God that's what she said. 'You have a lovely energy...'

The minx. Just about made my year.

### SMOKE 'N' SLACKS

I'd wanted to meet Kate Bush because, like every other red-blooded male on the planet, I fancied the pants off her. But there was another reason: she was – still is when she can be arsed – one of the few bona fide geniuses working in the largely formulaic field which we lazily refer to as pop music. And I had come to worship at the altar of her talent. She burst into the posh Regency suite of Durrant's

### 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...



Hotel in the West End of London, a little flushed and sweaty, apologising profusely for keeping me waiting.

'I just had to have a fag,' she pleaded, dogging the guilty B&H butt into the ashtray. 'I was just *dying* for one.'

And there you have her. Ms Kate Bush – everything you ever thought she'd be... and yet, at the same time, a small and perfectly formed bundle of the unexpected. I'm kinda shocked that she smokes, our ethereal fairy princess, and kinda taken aback that she's sensibly styled by M&S – blouse, slacks, navy socks, no shoes – rather than Laura Ashley – y'know,

satin, chiffon and ballet shoes.

She laughs (and when she laughs, her cheeks dimple like a Disney chipmunk): 'I think

'When she laughs her cheeks dimple like a Disney chipmunk'

most people tend to think of me as the weird 'Wuthering Heights' singer – that is definitely the image that's stuck with most people. Which I find extraordinary because... well, it's so long ago.'

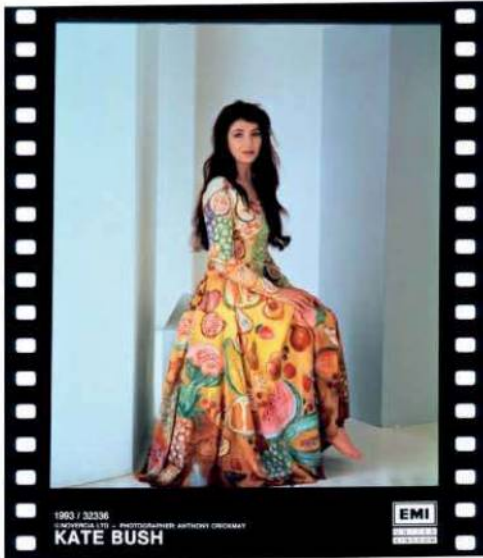
### SONGS AND SOUNDS

Eleven years to be precise, since she fluttered freakily all over *Top Of The Pops*. Nowadays, as I said, she's a whole different kind of genius; a genius who's managed to create a whole new language within which to express her, and our, deepest emotions.

And when she's in over her head and well out of her depth, she abandons words as we know them, and she emits... well, I tell her, this is too crude a term but... well, the only word I can think of for it is *noises*.

The breathy 'ummm's, the throaty 'ooooh's, the gushing 'wow's – attempts, like I guess all the best soul singers, to merge words and music, meaning and sound into a new lexicon of feeling.

'Well,' she says, staring momentarily at her navy socks. 'I think that's a lovely thing to say. Really lovely. And, yes, often



The singer pictured in 1989 (left), four years after the release of *Hounds Of Love*, and in 1993 (right) promoting her critically acclaimed *Red Shoes* album





➔ Priced £29.99, the 180g re-release of *Hounds Of Love* is available mail order from [www.classiclps.co.uk](http://www.classiclps.co.uk)

words are sounds for me. I get a sound and I throw it in a song and I can't turn it into a word later because it's actually stated itself too strongly as a sound.

'Do you know what I mean?'

### SIMPLY MUSIC

I do. I really do, because Kate Bush is one of the rare ones, instinctively unconstrained by cliché or expectation. She'll use synthesisers, harps, uilleann pipes, heavy metal guitars, reggae rhythms, Aboriginal chants, Rolf Harris... whatever it takes to express what she's after and, in the process, she's created a new, sort of music beyond categorisation which isn't... anything. It's just music.

And stuff like that... well, it opens your ears and enriches your life.

'Well,' she says, blushing. 'That's lovely. I think that's fantastic. What a really nice thing to say... wonderful... absolutely wonderful because I think this is really what music is – a continual process of people experimenting, taking this and that and putting them together. All these experimental marriages. And when they work, I think that's such an important step because then they've created a new music which goes on to evolve.'

'And if it doesn't work, that's absolutely fine too... I suppose I'd like to think that, as long as I really care about making music, there will always be people out there who want to hear music that is cared for.'

The record we're here to celebrate, *Hounds Of Love*, is widely regarded as

Kate's best album. Recorded between 1983 and 1985, at the 48-track studio she'd installed in the barn at her parents' house, Wickham Farm, in Welling, it's an album of two halves.

Side one, entitled 'Hounds Of Love', features all the songs you'll instantly remember. There's 'Running Up That Hill', the song that was originally called 'A Deal With God' until EMI freaked out fearing some sort of religious backlash.

Built around a chunky Fairlight throb, it's a bold plea for the impossible; for Kate and her lover to swap genders for a day to see how the other feels. Then there's 'Big Sky', another impossible plea, this time to recapture the innocence of childhood.

And who could forget 'Cloudbusting', the biography in song of Wilhelm Reich, the visionary scientist who could make it rain and who was banged up by the American authorities on a trumped up charge; the one that was accompanied by the video starring Donald Sutherland as Reich and Kate as his son?

Plus, of course, the title track, all about the terror of being trapped by love, designed to a beat like the pulsing heart of a panic-stricken victim being pursued by a predatory beast.

### BEHIND THE GRAIL

Side Two is darker. Called 'The Ninth Wave' after a passage taken from the poet Tennyson's 1869 opus *The Holy Grail*, it's made up of seven thematically connected pieces in which, blimey, all sorts of things

happen including, amidst the whirr of helicopter blades, the singer being cast adrift at sea and a witch being drowned. Strange, mesmeric stuff it is; absolutely unique and utterly brilliant.

Reviewing the album on its release, *NME*'s Jane Solanas called it 'erotic', said Kate's voice 'drips with sex', declared her a 'genius' and claimed *Hounds Of Love* as 'the best album of the year'.

It's a brilliant review of a truly great album and I can't better the conclusion so I won't even try.

'You may now all go and kiss the sleeve,' wrote Ms Solanas. 'I have...'

Oh hang on. Did I tell you she said I have a lovely energy? ☺

Kate Bush



*Hounds Of Love*

### RE-RELEASE VERDICT

This limited edition re-issue has been remastered by Steve Hoffman. Hoffman is known for his purist approach that sees him avoid the use of equalization and noise reduction in pursuit of the sound of the original master tape and the results make this a must-have release. The distinction between Bush's creative blend of synthetic and natural sounds is now more apparent, the precision of her vocal style, with its distinctive diction, is laid bare, and the soundstage is downright cavernous. And all on 'marble'-coloured vinyl, too! HFN

Sound Quality: 89%

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## Pink Floyd *Piper At The Gates...*

A set of quintessentially English songs peopled by dwarves and fairies drifting through a twisted sonic landscape of electronic noises and stuttering guitars... perhaps it was little wonder Pink Floyd's debut was ignored in America. But the rest, as they say, is history...

Words: **Johnny Black**



It's writ large in pop history that The Beatles spent the spring of 1967 recording their classic *Sgt Pepper... album* in EMI's Abbey Road Studio 2. It's less well-documented, but arguably more remarkable, that Pink Floyd were just along the corridor creating the first masterpiece of British psychedelia, *The Piper At The Gates Of Dawn*.

Having started out as The Pink Floyd Blues Band, this unassuming Cambridge quartet had been turned on to the potential of psychedelic music by their manager, Peter Jenner, who had spent time in San Francisco grooving (as one did in those days) to The Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane. Jenner came back to England and famously told Pink Floyd's leader Syd Barrett about 'My Little Red Book', a song played by the Los Angeles cult band Love.

'I just hummed the main riff. Syd picked up his guitar and followed what I was humming, chord-wise.'

By trying to imitate this strange music which he had never heard, Barrett inadvertently created the first uniquely Floydian classic.

'That chord pattern,' says Jenner, 'became his main riff for the track "Interstellar Overdrive".'

A sprawling spacey instrumental with a mesmeric descending chord structure it would ultimately become the centrepiece of *Piper...*

## ACID DAYS

Barrett, whose typical day in early 1967 started with LSD-laced coffee, went on to write almost the entire



**➔** Pink Floyd pictured in 1967, the year they recorded *Piper...* – (l-r) Rick Wright, Roger Waters, Nick Mason, Syd Barrett

**↙** Shots of the band – and lyrics – from the booklet that came with the 1994 re-mastered CD version of the album

album in this revolutionary style before his chemical enhancements rendered him, in bassist Roger Waters' words, 'murder to live and work with.'

Work on tracks for the album started on February 21, with producer Joe Boyd at Sound Techniques Studio in Chelsea, London. The first song recorded was 'Matilda Mother', whose lyrics Barrett 'borrowed' from three of the poems in Hilaire Belloc's 1907 volume *Cautionary Tales For Children*. However, when Belloc's estate was asked for permission to re-use his words, it was refused. Barrett eventually ended up re-writing the lyric and re-recording the track at Abbey Road on June 7.

Even then the song wasn't complete. On June 29, 1967, EMI's in-house producer Norman Smith decided that the song's instrumental section was too long so he chopped out 50 seconds, a cut which remains plainly audible at 1m 59s into the track. Not surprising, perhaps, when we remember that editing in those days was executed with brass scissors, to ensure the sound on tape was not affected by magnetic fields.

On February 27 the band laid down a version of 'Interstellar Overdrive' at Sound Techniques with Joe Boyd at the controls. The next day, however, the band signed to EMI for a £5000 advance.

'EMI was a very conservative, old-fashioned company,' remembers

Boyd, 'and they wanted their groups to record in their studios with their in-house producers.'

Sure enough, Boyd was unceremoniously dumped. Andrew King, the band's co-manager has admitted, 'the alacrity with which Peter [Peter Jenner] and I left Joe standing was shameless.'

By March 15, Pink Floyd and EMI's Norman Smith were at Abbey Road, working on a shorter version of 'Interstellar Overdrive' and 'Chapter 24', a Barrett song with words derived directly from 'Chapter 24' of the 5000-year-old Chinese *Book Of Changes*, the I Ching. (No copyright problems there, then.)

However unhinged Barrett was becoming, the album was already shaping up to be a milestone in rock history. 'What stunned me most,' remembers King, 'was that on stage the Floyd were very rambling and shambolic but, in the studio, Syd constructed things like "Chapter 24", which was not just beautifully shaped and elegant but also startlingly original.'

## 'Working with Syd in the studio was sheer hell'

## BEND ME YOUR EARS

Abbey Road staff engineer Peter Bown remembers his shock at hearing the ear-bending volume at which they rehearsed 'Interstellar Overdrive'. 'I thought, "How the f\*\*k are we going to get this on tape?" I had certainly never heard anything quite like it and I don't think I ever did again. It was very exciting.'





## VINYL ICONS

### PRODUCTION NOTES

Work on the album started at Sound Techniques, Old Church Street, Chelsea. One of the first independent recording studios in the UK, much of the equipment, including the four-track recorder, was built from scratch or scavenged from pre-existing parts.

What little cash owners Geoff Frost and John Wood had when they opened the studio in 1964 went on buying an EMI limiter, two Altec compressors and several high-end microphones including Neumann 67s, KM56s, KM54s, AKG D19s and an RCA ribbon.

In his book *Inside Out* [Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004] drummer Nick Mason recalls the veneered walnut finish and 'incredible bass punch' of its 5ft-tall 'state of the art Tannoy Red speakers'. Mason also recalls, 'we recorded bass and drums on one track, guitar and the trembly Farfisa Duo keyboard on two other tracks.' Effects were added 'as these three tracks were bumped down onto a fourth,' leaving guitar and vocals to be added as overdubs before the final mix was put down onto a mono master tape.

Good as Sound Techniques was, most of the album was completed at Abbey Road's Studio 3. EMI engineer Peter Bown, more used to musicians with rather more finesse, recalls that, 'Syd's guitar was always a problem because he would not keep still and was always fiddling with his sound. He used to go and kick his echo box every now and then, just because he liked the sound it made. We wrecked four very expensive microphones that first night. They got louder and louder until everything was overloading and the mics just gave up the ghost.'

This was also an era in which pop music was clearly regarded as inferior to classical. The Floyd's co-manager, Andrew King, has revealed, for example, that Studio 3's 4-track recorder 'had this knob on one side which you pushed one way and it said "Pop". You pushed it the other way, it said "Classical". What it did was alter the logarithmic curve on the faders, so that you could do more subtle changes of level if it was set on "Classical" than you could on "Pop".'



➔ Syd Barrett's first guitar – a 1963 Harmony Sovereign acoustic – which he used on the album



Speaking of this track, Jenner has said, 'they played it twice, one version recorded straight on top of the other. They double-tracked the whole track. Why? Well it sounds pretty f\*\*king weird doesn't it? That big sound and all those hammering drums.'

Barrett at this point was intensely creative, the undeniable leader of Pink Floyd, but his immersion in acid-culture was already damaging his relationships in the real world. 'Working with Syd was sheer hell,' remembered Norman Smith. 'I don't think I left a single Floyd session without a splitting headache. Syd never seemed to have any enthusiasm for anything. He would be singing a song and I'd call him into the control room to give a few instructions, then he'd go back out and not even sing the first part the same, let alone the bit I'd been talking about.'

### MARCHING AHEAD

Nevertheless, March 20 seems to have been a productive day, with work going ahead on bassist Roger Waters' first recorded composition, the abrasive 'Take Up Thy Stethoscope And Walk', the decidedly jazzy group-composed instrumental 'Pow R Toc H', plus two more Barrett originals, 'The Gnome'

(based on Frodo's journey in *Lord Of The Rings*) and 'The Scarecrow'. Once again, though, Norman Smith later took issue with Waters' 'Stethoscope...' and hacked out part of the freaky instrumental.

### RATS 'N' CATS

All through this period, Pink Floyd continued to play live gigs around the country but they were back in Abbey Road on April 11, starting work on 'Astronomy Domine' and 'Percy The Ratcatcher', later re-named 'Lucifer Sam'. The distorted voice heard at the start of 'Astronomy Domine' is Peter Jenner, reading astrological star signs and astronomical facts from an astronomy atlas, through a megaphone. 'Lucifer Sam', it appears, was Barrett's Siamese cat.

After a few more live gigs, one of Barrett's most enduringly charming and bizarre creations, 'Bike', was started on April 18. The nearest thing to a love

song he ever wrote, 'Bike' is said to be addressed to his girlfriend Jenny Spires, and finds him offering to share with her his most precious possessions – a bike, a cloak and pet mouse. 'Flaming', another of Syd's evocations of a seemingly golden childhood, was started on June 7 and completed during final mixing sessions on the 29th, more or less completing the album.

The usurped Joe Boyd ran into Barrett at the UFO club around this time. Boyd had always been

➔ The Crazy Diamond himself pictured in 1969, a year after it was announced officially that he was no longer a member of Pink Floyd. He embarked upon a brief solo career, releasing two solo albums, *The Madcap Laughs* and *Barrett*

'I looked in Syd's eye... it was like somebody had pulled the blinds'



➔ The 'trembly' Farfisa Duo' keyboard used on the album, pictured when it was shown at Pink Floyd's *Interstellar* Exhibition in Paris in 2003



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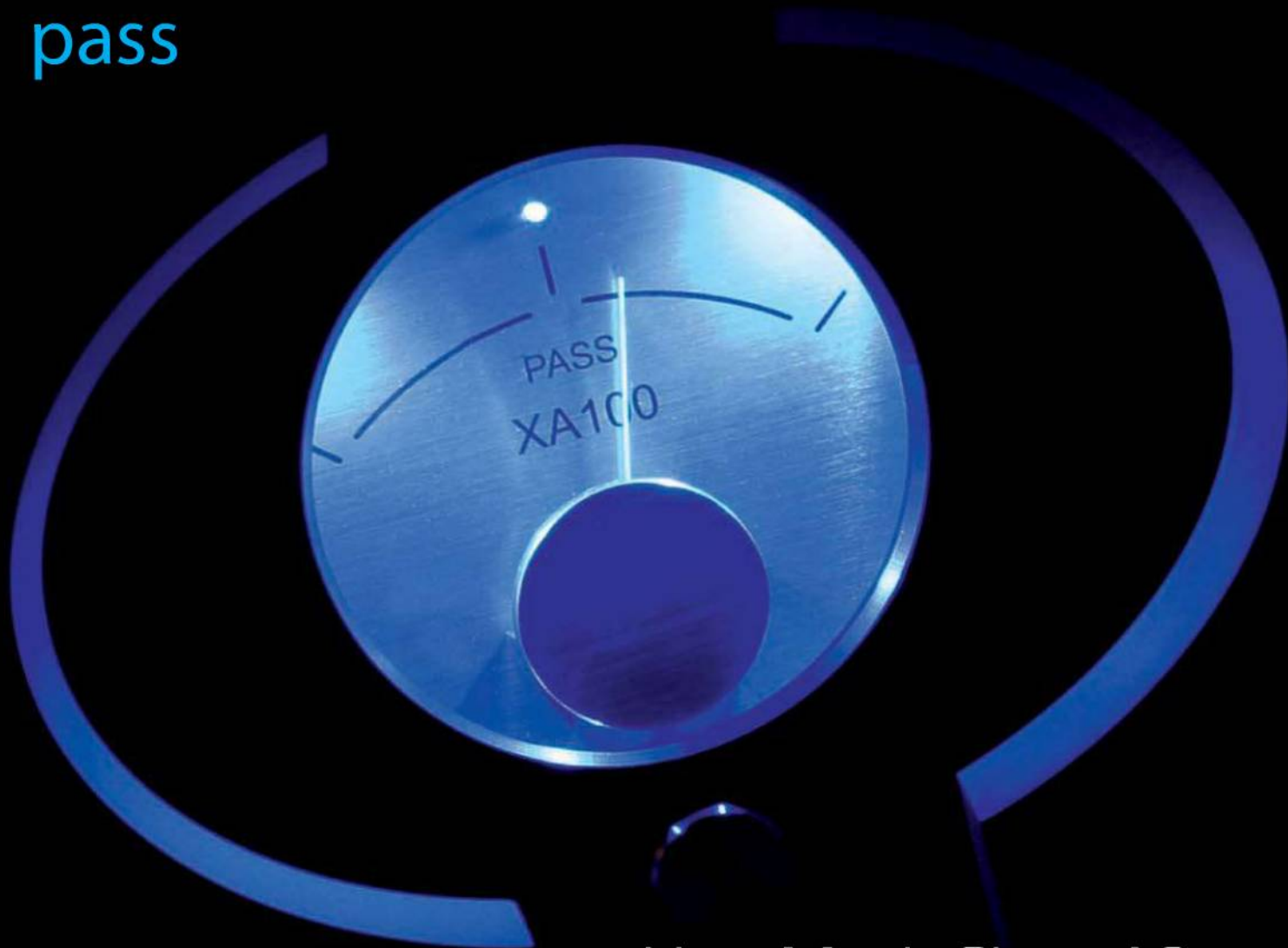
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# Alternate Format Discography



Barrett's trademark mirrored Fender Squire electric guitar

struck by the glint in Syd's eye, an impish twinkle that spoke of a mind ever alert, always agile. That night, however, 'I looked right in his eye and there was no twinkle. No glint. It was like somebody had pulled the blinds, you know? Nobody home.'

Syd never quite returned to normality and had to quit Pink Floyd soon after, incapable of functioning properly as a band member. After a failed attempt to establish a solo career, he returned home to Cambridge and lived out of the public eye, dying peacefully in 2006.

## HISTORY MADE

The final master tape of *The Piper At The Gates Of Dawn*, its name drawn from Kenneth Graham's *The Wind In The Willows*, was delivered to EMI Records on July 18, and hit the shops on August 5.

The album that launched Pink Floyd's career peaked at No 6 in the UK and made no impact whatsoever in America but is now recognised as a breakthrough.

'If ever there was a record that marks a period of music history, *Piper At The Gates Of Dawn*, with Syd's songs, is absolutely part of it,' reckons Nick Mason. 'It's something that we never discovered again.'



### ORIGINAL UK LP (1967)

*Piper...* was released by EMI in both mono [SX 6157] and stereo [SCX 6157] on August 5, 1967. This was never going to be a flagship release in terms of sound quality, largely because the band and producer Norman Smith were operating at the limits of what 4-track recording was capable of, trying to push back sonic boundaries with equipment that was not yet up to the task.

The recording does have a certain chunky, rough-hewn charm, however, and the splendour of its array of bizarre noises and sound effects remains a delight to this day.

### ORIGINAL US LP (1967)

Released by Capitol Records' subsidiary Tower [ST 5093], on October 26, 1967, this version omits 'Astronomy Domine', 'Flamingo' and 'Bike' but adds the single, 'See Emily Play'. Released to coincide with the band's first American live appearance at The Fillmore, San Francisco, it also radically changes the running order of the tracks, for no very obvious reason.

### 8-TRACK (1977)

We can't tie down a precise date for this clunky old cartridge [8X SCX 6157], but it was an official EMI UK release, originally issued in a clear soft plastic case with a wrap-around cover inside. It must have sold tolerably well because it was re-issued in a cardboard sleeve with the tape inserted from one end.

Bizarrely, because of the four-sided nature of 8-tracks, 'Interstellar Overdrive' is broken up over sides three and four.

### FRENCH RE-ISSUE (1978)

The first re-issue on vinyl [2C 064-04292] after the initial 1967 releases seems to have

appeared courtesy of Pathe Marconi/EMI in France, but is effectively a duplicate of the original releases.

### UK - LP AND CASSETTE RE-ISSUE (1983)

This version of *Piper...* was re-marketed via EMI's budget price Fame label in 1983 on vinyl, and also on a cassette where, to make the tracks conveniently fit the standard tape length, the running order was slightly changed.



### FIRST CD VERSIONS (1987)

EMI's first CD version [CDP 7 46384 2] was a respectable sounding transfer of the original album. The American CD on Capitol (but with the same catalogue number) represented the first US issue of the original UK album with its complete track listing in the right order.

### RE-MASTERED CD (1994)

Re-mastered vinyl and CD versions [7243 8 31261 2 5/CDEM 1073] appeared in 1994, with the re-mastering carried out by the redoubtable Doug Sax of Hollywood's The Mastering Lab.

The improved separation that resulted meant that weird sound effects and instruments which had previously merged were now more discernible as individual elements in the mix. Whether or not this was a good thing depends on how you like your psychedelic soup.

### MONO RE-MASTERED LIMITED EDITION (1997)

If ever an album really didn't want to be in mono, *Piper At The Gates Of Dawn* is it. Nonetheless, EMI trundled out this limited edition 30th anniversary special vinyl and CD edition [7243 8 59857 2 0, CDEM 1110] in a hefty digipack with 3D box art and four picture cards, presumably in a desperate attempt to give fans a reason to

buy it. The vinyl also came as a gatefold sleeve option [7243 8 59857 1 3].

### JAPANESE MINI LP FORMAT (2001)

You've just got to love those Japanese. Yes, this is a faithfully reproduced mini-LP styled non-remastered CD version from Toshiba EMI [TOCP-65731].

### BRAZILIAN PICTURE DISC (2006)

The less said about the sound quality on this utterly predictable EMI Odeon picture disc [7 031064 429201] the better.

### GREEN VINYL (2006)

Issued in the UK by EMI [CX 6157]. Don't ask.

### DOUBLE CD BOX (2007)

This two-disc 40th anniversary edition [50999 503923 2 2] featured the whole album very nicely re-mastered by James Guthrie and Joel Plante.

One result of all of the re-mastered versions is that Norman Smith's original edits are more clunkily evident than ever. There are, as they say, some things men are not meant to know. Or, for that matter, hear...

### TRIPLE CD BOX (2007)

Hot on the heels of the 40th anniversary double-CD package came this three-CD box [50999 5 03919 2 9] adding Guthrie's re-masters of the band's 1967 singles and previously unreleased and rare bonus tracks to the mono and stereo mixes of the original album. The packaging, as expected from longtime Floyd collaborator Storm Thorgerson, is lush, and includes an eight-page reproduction of one of Syd Barrett's notebooks. To date, this is arguably the best version of *Piper At The Gates Of Dawn* on the market.







COMPACT DISC



SUPRAUDIO



DVD



BLU-RAY



VINYL



DOWNLOAD



### DIUNNA GREENLEAF

Direct-To-Disc

Analogue Productions APO 008 (direct-to-disc LP)

For those in need of some distaff R&B amidst the incredible male performers captured live by Chad Kassem & Co, Texan songstress Greenleaf and her band Blue Mercy exhibit precisely the kind of fire and grit that exemplifies the great blues and (southern) soul belters of the 1960s and 1970s. Greenleaf acknowledges gospel inspiration and cites Koko Taylor and Aretha Franklin amongst her muses, so you can expect and do receive earthy, powerful interpretations of five tracks that suffer no sonic restraint. If the modernity of the recording's crystal clarity jars with what is a genre of elderly vintage, think of this as you would a b/w movie filmed in high-def. This is shake your booty stuff. I think I'm in love. *KK*

Sound Quality: 88%



### ELVIS COSTELLO

This Year's Model

Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-330 (180g vinyl)

There's a strong case for regarding this as EC's best album – if not of his entire career, which is too varied and complex, then surely of his early years. The magic ingredient was the arrival of the band that would accompany him through his strongest period, his most sympathetic backing of all: the butt-kicking Attractions, who injected enough adrenalin into these Nick Lowe-produced sessions to yield an embarrassment of riches – 'Pump It Up', 'Radio Radio', 'Lipstick Vogue' and eight more acidic tracks. It's ignoble to suggest that Costello was maturing: he arrived fully formed and in no need of assistance. It was like giving a great F1 driver a faster car. *KK*

Sound Quality: 87%



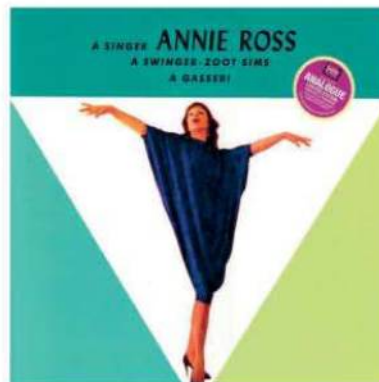
### DRUIDS OF STONEHENGE

Creation

Sundazed LP5331 (180g vinyl)

Sundazed continues to plough a furrow that only a few other reissue labels dare, that of all-but-forgotten psychedelia. This time they've unearthed an ultra-obscure album by a band that might have been little more than a footnote, for once having included Elliott Randall in its ranks. But they produced one of those deliriously gloomy/druggy, proto-Goth sets that mix freakish originals with unusual covers: Love's 'Signed DC', Dylan's 'It's All Over Now, Baby Blue' and even a Screamin' Jay Hawkins track. The mix shows their eclecticism, but the best aspect of *Creation* – unlike too much from this genre which deserves to be forgotten – is that the music is terrific. *KK*

Sound Quality: 84%



### ANNIE ROSS & ZOOT SIMS

A Gasser!

Pure Pleasure PPAN WP1285 (180g vinyl)

Ms Ross, exactly 80 years old on the day that I'm writing this, is one of the UK's best-kept secrets: jazz aficionados who know their onions appreciate that she is one of the best interpreters of standards in the business, so this set from World Pacific back in 1959 – featuring Zoot Sims on sax – ranks with any 'Great American Songbook' you can imagine. The stance here differs from her more famous work as part of Lambert, Hicks & Ross, the crack sextet (with a touch of big-band class provided by Mel Lewis on drums) accenting her vocals with uncanny precision. It may be a half-century old, but it can teach a few tricks to today's crop of wannabees. Mesmerising. *KK*

Sound Quality: 83%







COMPACT DISC



SUPRAUDIO



DVD



BLU-RAY



VINYL



DOWNLOAD



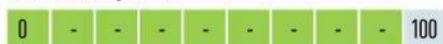
### DOOBIE BROTHERS

Takin' It To The Streets

Mobile Fidelity UDSACD2043 (SACD)

After a run of smash hit LPs, the Doobies had no trouble maintaining a winning streak in 1976 because this, their sixth release, was also their first with the man who would kick everything up a notch and strengthen its sound in a highly distinctive manner: vocalist Michael McDonald. There were always signs that the group had hidden blue-eyed soul leanings and MM's presence, along with that of another Steely Dan refugee, Jeff 'Skunk' Baxter, ensured that the increasing levels of sophistication would render the band an AOR/FM staple. Classy, and not as far removed from 'Dan as you might imagine, in case you've always hungered for more from that outfit. *KK*

Sound Quality: 87%



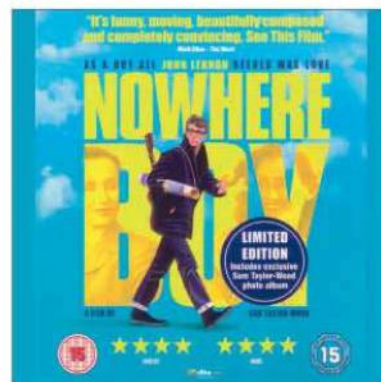
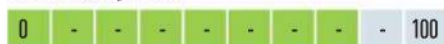
### J GEILS BAND

Winterland, San Francisco 5/11/77

Wolfgang's Vault (FLAC download)

Not that I needed reminding that the J Geils Band was one of the best live acts I'd ever enjoyed, this nearly two-hour long set from the *Monkey Island* period is the 200-proof, real deal. Frontman Peter Wolf demonstrated the showmanship that enabled him to work an audience; harpmeister Magic Dick and axemaster Geils were on top form; and the remainder of the band constituted the tightest rhythm section north of Memphis. They ran through their most famous material, including a raunchy take on the Supremes' 'Where Did Our Love Go', while a peppering of instrumentals leave no doubt this was the best house party/bar band ever. *KK*

Sound Quality: 80%

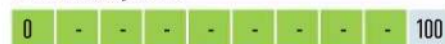


### NOWHERE BOY

Icon Films ICON70200 (Blu-ray)

Not one but two recent biopics of John Lennon have taxed the patience of the hardcore, but the consensus is that this beats BBC4's *Lennon Naked* hands down, despite Christopher Eccleston's uncanny, note-perfect, award-worthy portrayal in the latter. This covers Lennon's pre-Hamburg youth, so the two form a natural pairing (or a chronological trilogy, with *Backbeat* in the middle), but the depth and sensitivity of this entry strikes the viewer as somehow more authentic. All three suffer the sort of anachronistic details that will have the fanboys' knickers in a twist, and they also beg the real need for fictional accounts of events so recent, but this one is perhaps worth a viewing for its cinematic value. *KK*

Sound Quality: 83%



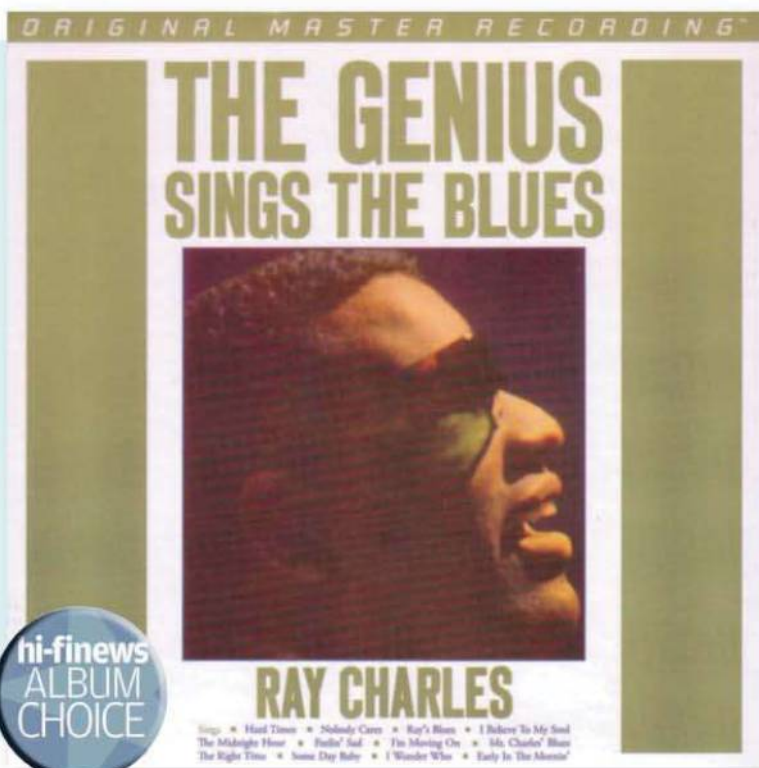
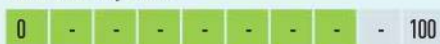
### RAY CHARLES

The Genius Sings the Blues

Mobile Fidelity UDSACD2049 (SACD, mono)

Yes, a *mono SACD*, as if to remind us that it's sound quality rather than multichannel capability which keeps this much under-appreciated format alive. Although this is hardly the best-sounding recording Charles ever issued, musically it's one of his milestones, showing absolute mastery of yet another genre. Instead of re-interpreting hoary old chestnuts, Charles recorded seven originals to complement five standards, showing that he could not only sing the blues, he could also write them. The sound is uptown, not rural, suggesting that he could have carved out as big a career in the blues – had he so desired – as Bobby Bland, Jimmy Witherspoon or any of the other more urbane practitioners. *KK*

Sound Quality: 75%







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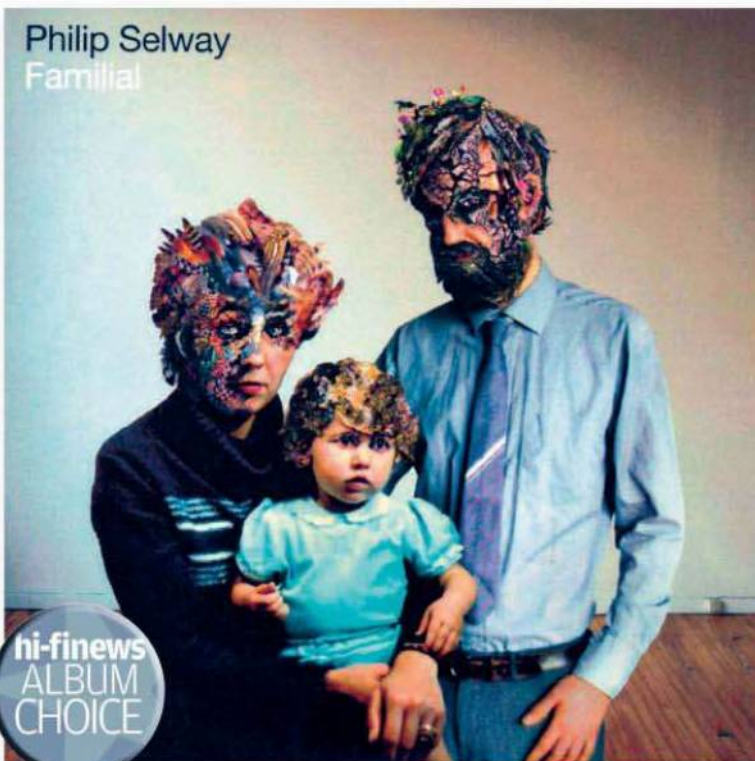


VINYL



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### Philip Selway Familial



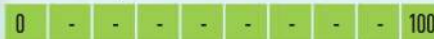
#### PHILIP SELWAY

Familial

Bella Union Bellac250

Few artefacts set off my poo detectors as fast as solo albums by drummers from famous bands. Happily, in the case of Radiohead's Phil Selway, drums are not what *Familial* is about. Right from the fragile opener, 'By Some Miracle' – an acoustic number – it's obvious Selway is a proper songwriter, every bit as interested in melody, texture and lyrics as he is in beats. Indeed, the album's percussive pulse is very subtle indeed, being beautifully integrated and imaginative throughout the set. The death of his mother in 2006 gave him the impetus to express his feelings here, and the quiet intensity and intelligence of tracks like 'Falling' and 'Broken Promises' augurs well for the follow-up. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 96%



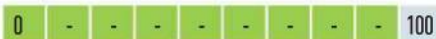
#### DELTA SPIRIT

History From Below

Decca 6190982

Fresh (well, relatively fresh) out of San Diego, California, comes the ace second album by this spirited, soulful Americana quintet who subtly combine elements of straightforward Jayhawky country rock with hints of the experimental tendencies of Wilco. Known for their use of unconventional instrumentation, including trash-can lids, orchestral bass drums, drones and quirky choirs, Delta Spirit are blessed with a belter of a vocalist in former busker Matthew Vasquez, but the whole band is tight as all get out and the songs demand that you sing along after just a couple of listens. So that's my in-car listening sorted until the last of the summer sun is gone. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 90%



#### TOM PETTY AND THE HEARTBREAKERS

Mojo

Reprise 9362 49668 0 (CD, also 180g vinyl and Blu-ray)

I fondly remember the thrill of hearing the band's eponymous 1976 debut album, so I wished for something a little more exciting from their first reunion in eight years. Petty has attempted to get back to his roots by writing a bunch of blues and r'n'b flavoured songs but, although things start well with the punchy 'Jefferson Jericho Blues', a drift towards pastiche sets in fast and there's a lack of energy that no amount of laidback finesse can replace. 'Candy', for example, is entertaining but insubstantial, just another reworking of the venerable Memphis riff with Petty overdoing his down home vocal. More passion and a little less journeyman cool would be welcome here. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 75%



#### MENOMENA

Mines

City Slang/Cooperative Slang 744234

This Portland, Oregon, trio have released three albums prior to *Mines* and, I'm ashamed to say, I haven't heard any of them. That's all going to change though, because this is a corker. At first listen, *Mines* might seem a bit angular and disjointed, so may I suggest that you start your listening experience with the most instantly mind-obliterating *tour de force*, 'Oh Pretty Boy, You're Such A Big Boy'. With its triphammer percussion, melodramatic keyboard riff, mood switches and powerhouse vocal surges, it's one of the album's several stratospheric high points. If that appeals, you'll probably find that the whole thing just gets better with every play. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 88%





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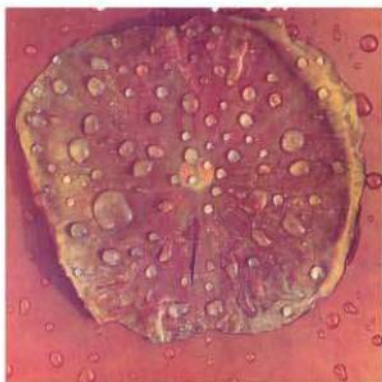
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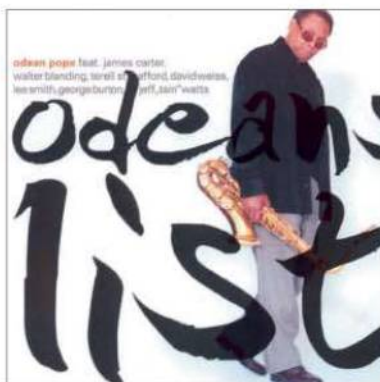
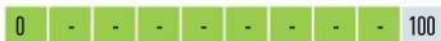
### DON ELLIS

Haiku

MPS 441132

Virtuoso trumpeter, bandleader and composer Don Ellis produced wild, noisy and innovative big band sounds and wrote the music for *The French Connection*. He recorded his seminal *Electric Bath* for Columbia, but in 1973 turned to the high-quality German jazz label MPS to release *Soaring*, following up with *Haiku*. Inspired by a set of ten Haiku poems, the music has a film-score lushness, with a string orchestra added to a core jazz group which included pianist Milcho Leviev and bassist Ray Brown. Lovingly remastered (using 24-bit/88.2kHz in preference to 96kHz, for example) this CD is pressed with black surfaces, to make it look like an LP. It sounds spectacular. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%



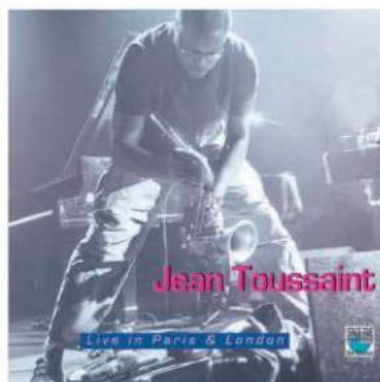
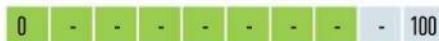
### ODEAN POPE

Odean's List

In+Out Records IOR CD77102

Still possibly best known for his work with the late Max Roach, here the muscular tenor player has assembled his own absolutely stellar octet. While Wynton Marsalis alumnus Walter Blanding brings in a wily, fluid tenor, James Carter adds a stirring and gutsy baritone sax, and the ebullient trumpets are David Weiss and Terell Stafford. Behind pianist George Burton and bassist Lee Smith is the drive of Jeff 'Tain' Watts. This line-up produces some wonderfully buoyant ensemble playing, not least on a stomping, pedal-point opener that sounds a bit like the start of Janáček's *Sinfonietta*. This exciting, stimulating music might really wake up your hi-fi system. *SH*

Sound Quality: 80%



### JEAN TOUSSAINT

Live In Paris & London

Space Time Records BG2928

A live album can be special, even if it's not quite the complete concert you expect. This one takes four numbers cut in late 2004 at the Sunside club in Paris and artfully stirs in three 2009 tracks from London's 606 Club. It was in '87, after four years with Art Blakey, that an assignment at the Guildhall School brought Toussaint to the UK, and he never went back. His quartet here includes the distinctive British pianist Andrew McCormack, while guitarist Jerome Barde contributes nice solos to two of the Paris tracks. Back in London, Benet McClean takes over the piano to set off a whole box of Monkish fireworks on the closing track, 'Round Midnight'. *SH*

Sound Quality: 85%



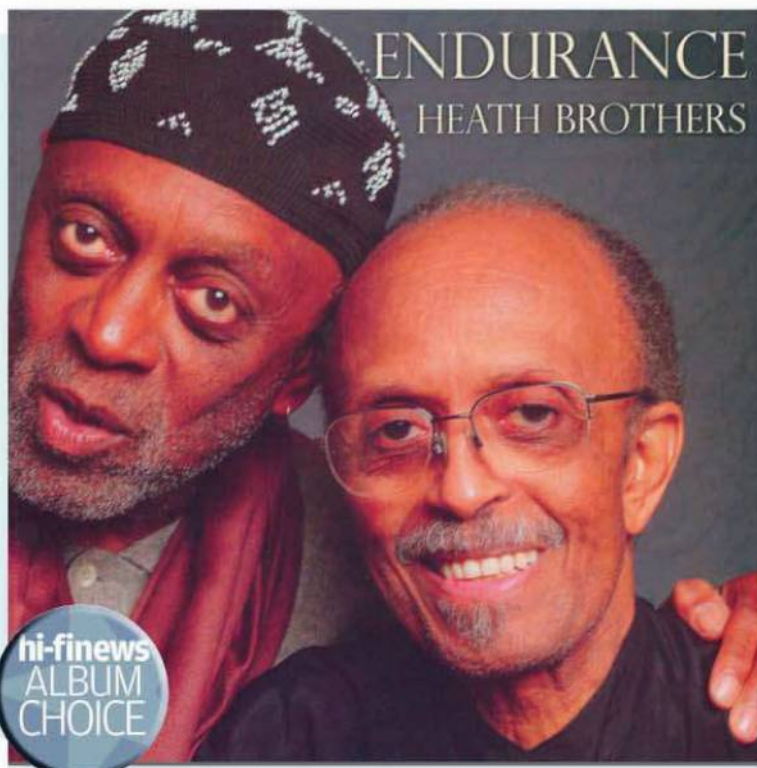
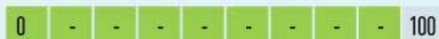
### HEATH BROTHERS

Endurance

Jazz Legacy Productions JLP0901004

After long pursuit of their separate careers, the three Heath Brothers first played under that name in 1975. Percy Heath, the MJQ's revered bass player, died in 2005, and so the younger brothers, saxophonist Jimmy and drummer Albert 'Tootie' Heath, dedicated *Endurance* to his memory. With the youthful Jeb Patton on piano and David Wong on bass they get things moving on the restless chords of 'Changes'. Later, an evocative 'Autumn In New York' seems to waltz gently in 4/4, and then Jimmy is beautifully reflective in 'Ballad From Leadership Suite', which he wrote for the inauguration of a Howard University president in 1996. This is music with calmness, depth and wisdom in it, as well as a honed and polished craft. *SH*

Sound Quality: 85%







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## SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphony 8  
RLPO/Vasily Petrenko

Naxos 8.572392

Of course, Vasily Petrenko is far too young to have lived through the Stalinist repressions which informed interpreters like Sanderling, Barshai or Mravinsky but to say that he pitches in is an understatement. I do feel the third movement could have had even greater force at a reduced tempo, but for overall tension this surpasses previous RLPO instalments in this Naxos series. Antiphonal exchanges in the second scherzo are rhythmically precise and the various solos throughout have real quality. And Petrenko obviously has the skill of gearing a complete performance to a climactic point – in this case the final coda, those flickering embers which leave no easy resolution. **CB**

Sound Quality: 90%



## BARTÓK

Music for strings, percussion and celesta; Divertimento for strings; Hungarian Sketches Hungarian National Philharmonic Orch/Zoltán Kocsis

Hungaroton HSACD 32510 (SACD hybrid)

Having recorded the concertos and complete piano solo works, Zoltán Kocsis continues to be the torch-bearer for Bartók's music. And with his native orchestra everything sounds thoroughly idiomatic (whereas, for instance, fellow-Hungarian Solti's Bartók had a personalised gloss) and full of gusto. The Hungaroton production offers clear separation and a wide soundstage, though this is accompanied by slight stridency in the *Divertimento* finale. The hapless drunkard in the fourth of the transcribed *Hungarian Sketches* should make listeners smile. **CB**

Sound Quality: 70%



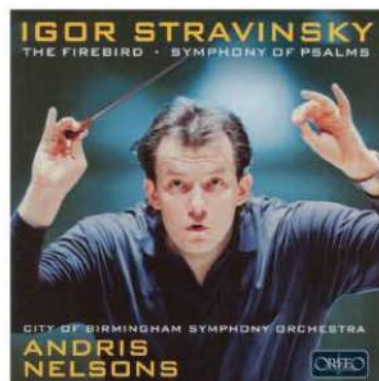
## LPO/SIR ADRIAN BOULT

The 1956 Nixa-Westminster Stereo Recordings

First Hand Records FHR 06 (three discs; part mono)

This retrospective – with Britten's *Four Sea Interludes*, *Young Person's Guide* in two versions; Elgar's *Cockaigne Overture*, *Falstaff* and Symphony 2; and Walton's Symphony 1 – is almost entirely sourced from 1956 Westminster/Nixa stereo tapes. The one exception, an alternative *YPG* without narration, is taken from LP; the mono has Boult narrating. There's a huge difference between the Walton here and Somm's transfer from an inferior Pye LP reissue [*HFN* May '10] – you'd hardly dream it was the same performance. Sound from the Walthamstow Hall is extraordinarily vivid and the Elgar *Falstaff* and Second Symphony are musically superb. **CB**

Sound Quality: 75%



## STRAVINSKY

The Firebird (1910); Symphony of Psalms CBSO & Chorus/Andris Nelsons

Orfeo C 804 101A

This offers a very different kind of listening experience from the classic Mercury *Firebird* with LSO/Dorati. There both sound and performance are upfront, confrontational (albeit exciting); Nelsons goes in for subtlety with soft playing that's almost inaudible – the subject-matter is unmistakable with the 'fluttery' textures he achieves. The sound has an altogether more natural concert hall perspective too. Evidently performed with a very large chorus, the *Symphony* makes a complete contrast: taking us away from Stravinsky's colourful Diaghilev period to a 1930 Koussevitzky commission with Latin texts and austere orchestration. **CB**

Sound Quality: 87%





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Whether it was the portable record player bought for him as a child or his first stereo set-up sourced from Lasky's, hi-fi has always been the way for this month's reader to connect with his passion for music. And as that passion has intensified, so Tony's system has grown with it. **Steve Harris** met him...

Sometimes hi-fi can become a solitary passion, but for Tony it has always been a sociable one. Developing his system has involved a lot of listening in the company of fellow enthusiasts. And he loves to share his enjoyment with friends and family.

Tony got his very first record player as a child in Sicily, where he lived until he was 11 years old.

'I must have been nine or ten. Knowing that I loved music, my aunt bought me a portable record player, which only played 45s. It had a slot like a CD player, and you pushed the 45 in. It ran on eight large-size batteries, and it went through these really quickly. You could carry it like a briefcase, and it would still play without jumping.

'And I was thinking, how did they get the needle to stay in the groove? It was only when it broke, and I tried to repair it, that I found out that the thing was held on to the record by a spring. So I was thinking, gosh, the damage that must be doing to the record! But that was my very first sound. Then cassettes came out and little portable players.'

Tony came to England with his parents in 1967. In Italy he would have listened to the likes of Gianni

Morandi and Claudio Villa, but now he was regularly tuning in to *Pick Of The Pops* on Radio 1.

'Instead of buying the records, you could record from the radio, though of course, they would speak over the music, and they'd never play the record all the way through. But I also used to listen to the record player we had at school. The first single I ever bought in England was Desmond Dekker, "The Israelites".

'And I thought, I've got to get a stereo at home. My neighbour was making stereo sets out of car cassettes. You could just buy a cheap car cassette player, connect it to a transformer to go from 240V to 12V, and make a cheap pair of speakers out of wood.

'We had to drill holes in the wood to let the sound out, because in those days it was unfashionable to see the actual speaker cones. And that was my first stereo, connected with bell wire!'

### LASKY'S, LEAK AND LINN

Once Tony started work, he thought he'd better get himself something more serious.

'I went to Lasky's at Clapham Junction. I bought myself a Sony tape deck, which was unbelievable, Castle speakers, and an amplifier



called Monotone I think. I bought them on the never-never, and I was paying back something like four or five shillings a week.

'Then I met a friend called Steve Hugh, who was heavily into hi-fi, and he was really the guy who started me off. We had sessions at his house, listening to his Leak 3020 speakers.

'And they were fantastic! I couldn't wait for his next upgrade, when I'd be able to buy them from him! A lot of my hi-fi purchases came from Steve's cast-offs as he continued to go up and up. I ended up getting his Sony PS-X70 turntable, which was very good. I've only just recently sold that to someone else.

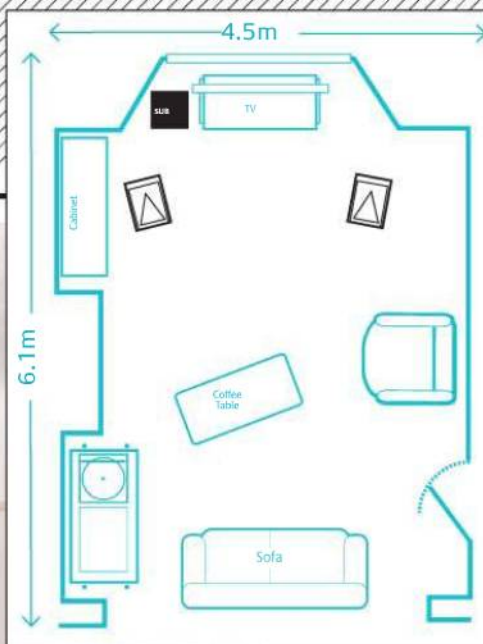
'There's one story I must tell. I was infatuated with the sound of these Leak 3020s, and the turntable, and I'd just met my wife-to-be, who is now my ex-wife. I'd just learnt how

**FAR RIGHT  
INSET:**  
Sharing the  
system – Tony  
with girlfriend  
Nicola

**RIGHT:** Just  
part of Tony's  
vinyl collection.  
His LPs, CDs  
and DVDs are  
neatly housed  
in custom-built  
cabinets in the  
dining room  
area







## MUSIC ROOM

At one time Tony's evolving system was constrained by being in a smaller room, but now that he has painstakingly installed it in the spacious through lounge seen here, the sound is as big and expansive as you could want, and Tony is able to indulge in really spectacular bass sounds. It might seem surprising to see the Wilson speakers sitting on Townshend Seismic sinks, but they really do produce extremely deep and clean bass. With a projector and pull-down screen as well as the TV, the system can be great on music videos too. It's a set-up that wows non-audiophile visitors.



'My neighbour was making stereo sets out of car cassette players with cheap speakers made out of wood. That was my first stereo'

fantastic Pink Floyd were. And I fell in love with *Wish You Were Here* and particularly the track "Shine On You Crazy Diamond".

'When I listened to that song, I would close my eyes and conjure up all sorts of images. I tried this on her. I said, "I'll play you this track and I want you to close your eyes and tell me what you can see!"

'But she thought I was an absolute idiot. I should have known then that the marriage was never going to work!

'My system improved gradually. But I had nobody else to share it with until I met my greatest friend

really, Harold Olins, a photographer. He really introduced me to the high end. He had Wilson speakers and Mark Levinson stuff.

'I somehow ended up with his old turntable, which was a classic, an old Linn LP12 with a Garrott Decca London cartridge and a Breuer arm.

### BIGGEST MISTAKE

'At the time I had reasonable amplification, I had an Audiolab 8000C and a pair of 8000P monoblocks. But I couldn't make this thing work properly! In fact, my Sony sounded better. Anyway, in my business as a heating engineer I met

a lot of customers. And one of them, Mike, had a Naim system. I somehow let something slip about the LP12, and he said he'd like to listen to it.

'So I took it there, and we listened. I'll never forget it. We played a track called "Aquamarine", on the Santana album *Marathon*. And as soon as he put it on, the system just came alive, and he was, well, lost for words. He just went upstairs and got me the money!

'I'm quite happy with the turntable I've got today. But if you like, that was the biggest mistake of my life. I'd been using the built-in phono stage in my preamp, and it ➔

**ABOVE:** Wilson speakers are driven by one of two Omak Jewel One valve amps under the TV. The other drives the Sonus faber Solo centre speaker for AV. A Sony LCD projector and Mission M7DS rear speakers are mounted above the through-lounge arch



## HI-FI @ HOME

hadn't been compatible. But with his Naim system, for some reason, it was a match made in heaven.

'Anyway, I progressed with CD for a while. I got a Copland CD player, which was very good, and I had a pair of Sonus faber Concerto speakers. And it made quite a reasonable noise!

'But being involved with Harold was infectious, because every time we'd get together, we'd be testing equipment. And I must say also, we were dealing with all sorts of dealers who were happy to let us try things.

'Harold and his friend Martin would have equipment over the weekend just to test, and we would get together over a cup of tea. Of course, by that time I'd started buying *Hi-Fi News*. And the more you read, the more enthusiastic you get!

### ALL IN ONE

'Eventually, 5.1 home cinema came out. I thought, I've got to get it all in one system, I can't have too much stuff. Look at it now, though!

'Then I had the opportunity of getting a top-end DVD and CD player and a preamp that could double as a cinema processor, by Proceed. It was all balanced. So I thought, if I get the Proceed player and AVP processor, I can use CD to a certain standard, DVD to a certain standard, and all I needed was the amplification and speakers.

'And all that was OK, until I heard the dCS system at Harold's. Oh, dear me! Good as the Proceed was,

it was like chalk and cheese. It was Harold who introduced me to Rav of dCS, which by the way is a fantastic company, very caring.'

'But the biggest influence in my upgrading, without exception, is Derek Congram of HMF Audio. His service is second to none. Many times he would come over with

Bob, his driver, who sadly is no longer with us. They were both ex gas engineers, so we got on well to start with! We used to talk about gas water heaters,

and the old days of the conversion from town gas to natural gas!

'They used to come over, bring some equipment. And I would get all my friends, Harold, Martin, Paul who's now moved up north. We would form an opinion, whether it was worth buying, chew it over, and at the end we'd make a decision.

'Everything that I've bought has been with that in mind. All the cables have been supplied by Derek. Bit by bit, because you can't afford all the Siltech in one go!

'Derek fitted a Sumiko Blue Point Special; it sounded unbelievable...'

ABOVE: The Oracle Delphi V turntable with SME V arm and Lyra Helikon SL cartridge

BELOW LEFT: CD replay is via dCS Verdi and Elgar Plus, with Purcell upsampler and Verona clock unit. Beneath is an Ayre DVD and Sony Blu-ray player. The rack by Townshend custom built to Tony's specifications

BELOW: REL T3 sub, used only for AV – along with a Sonus faber Solo Centre and Mission M7DS rears

'And I've gone back to vinyl. At first I used my old trusted Sony turntable, brought it down from the loft. I said to Derek, "Can you fix this up, just put a standard cartridge on it?" And he fitted a Sumiko Blue Point Special on it. And it sounded unbelievable, it was immediately on a par with the CD.

### ORACLE SPEAKS...

'So at that point, I started buying vinyl again. And this was when I met Steven Carr, in his Vivante days, when he was based in Hampton Wick. I remember popping up there certain afternoons, and he would introduce me to different music, as more and more 180g albums started coming out.

'But Derek said, "You ought to do something about that turntable! If you can afford it, get an Oracle." So we got the Oracle Delphi V with an SME V arm, and put the Blue Point Special on it.

'Straight away, the sound was just amazing. All of a sudden, now my vinyl was really sounding better than my CDs. And then he said, "Well, when you can afford it, put a proper cartridge on there!" G





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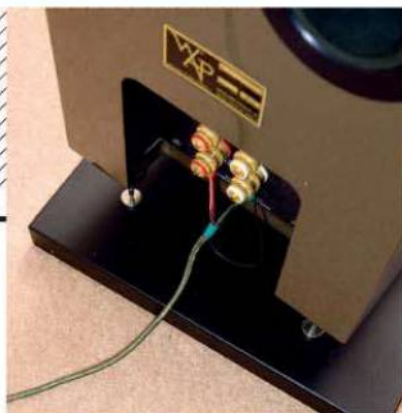
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'So we ended up getting the Lyra Helikon SL. And I'll never forget the first time we played *War of The Worlds*, and it was the voice of Richard Burton that came in the first track. And I thought, "He's in the room!" Then we started playing music, and it was soon evident that vinyl was again going to be predominant in my life.

'I went through a couple of preamps, but eventually I ended up with the Jeff Rowland Coherence and also got the dedicated phono stage (the Cadence) that is matched to the preamp. And I really felt that I'd arrived! But now I wanted my CD to sound better again! The Proceed had started having some problems. Nigel Crump of Symmetry Systems and his engineer Mark did everything they could, but in the end they kindly replaced it with the Ayre DVD player.

'But by that time I'd got fed up with the Proceed and bought the dCS Verdi and the cheaper dCS DAC, the Delius. So I'd got the CD sorted out anyway.'

### A TALE FROM ITALY...

Later the Delius would be replaced by an Elgar Plus, along with a Purcell upsampler and Verona external clock. Now, the Ayre is used primarily as a DVD player.

'But if I can go back to the story of the speakers, I just wanted to mention a dealer in Palermo in Sicily. The shop was called HyperFi and the owner is Giuseppe Scardamaglia, a great friend of Franco Serblin of Sonus faber. And thanks to him I've enjoyed many Sonus faber speakers – Concertinos, Concertos, the Guarneris.

'Hearing the Guarneris there, that was the demonstration that made the biggest impact on me. Maybe it was because I was on holiday, I was relaxed, I don't know. But I simply had to have a pair!

'And I had them for a long time. They were unbelievable, apart from the fact that they were a little bit difficult to



**ABOVE:**  
Accuphase  
DS-1200 unit  
below two-box  
Jeff Rowland  
Coherence  
preamp and  
Cadence  
phono stage

**TOP LEFT  
& BELOW:**  
Audio Tekne  
cable is used  
with Wilson  
System 5.1

drive. But that didn't bother me, because I had a small room at that time and it was OK.

'Even, so I was still convinced that the Wilson speakers made a better noise. The Wilsons were very detailed and true to the performer. The Sonus fabers, if I can use one word, were graceful. Deliciously smooth, involving, and with quite a punch. But graceful! Obviously, they were made to play violins.

'And in fact I've got several CDs of recordings that were made on Guarneri violins, which I played on the Guarneris! They came from the Italian company Catalogo Sonoro.

'But when I heard the Wilsons, and I knew that I was about to move the system into a bigger room, I traded the Guarneris in for the Wilsons.'

By this time, Tony had replaced his long-serving Audioblab pre-/power combination with something more exotic.

'When I met Harold, he told me he'd gone through several American amps, but that eventually he'd got fed up with them. And he said, "I've got this little gem called an Omak. It's not much to look at, but the sound is everything!"

'He'd got it from Derek Congram. So I asked to audition one. Now, I'd thought the Audioblab

## HI-FI @ HOME

monoblocks were the last word, but when I put this on with the Guarneris, it was like a match made in heaven. "Graceful" wasn't the word. And straight away it was, well I need one of these!

### RACKED TO THE MAX

'When I moved the system to the room it's in now. I wanted a stand that could take all the equipment. I talked to Max Townshend, and he said "I can make anything you want!" And he did, as you can see. Unbelievable. I absolutely love the stand he made. And it works, sound-wise. So when I wanted to put the power amps at the other end, under the TV, he made the other one. He worked out a way of doing it so that the equipment was suspended on springs, but not the TV.

'I must also thank my friend Martin Ashdown, who worked countless hours with the cables, running them under the floor in conduits, keeping everything as neat as possible.'

And for Tony, all the work and expense has been well worth it.

'You have to know your equipment and know what it

*'The Omak with the Guarneris was a match made in heaven'*

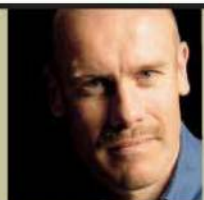
can do. Putting your equipment together, I believe, is a balance. You've got to trust your ears. Dealers will try to sell you this and that, but at the end of the day, your ears are the ones which will make your choice, and tell you how you feel.

'I think that if music is your passion, music provided by hi-fi should really move you. And if it moves you, then you've satisfied one of your passions in life.

'There are all sorts of hobby interests. But how can you beat sitting down at home, in the comfort of your own surroundings, playing the music that you love most?'







## Paul Miller Editor

Technician and writer on all things audio for over 25 years, Paul Miller took over the editor's chair in 2006. He invented the QC Suite, used across the audio industry

# Viva la Musique Mécanique

In centuries past, folk still hankered after 'music on demand' and their solutions were typically ingenious. **Paul Miller** takes us into the pre-history of audio, decades before today's vintage hi-fi

**M**usic reproduction as we know it today was born with the first phonograph cylinder players from the late 1870s. Based on the work of pioneers including Frank Lambert, Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell, the consumer cylinder player remained available up to the late 1920s when it was finally overwhelmed by the competing gramophone disc solution invented by Emile Berliner in 1887.

Both the cylinder and original gramophone discs were primitive 'storage solutions' but they still represented a major signpost on the road to modern-day hi-fi. Crucially, these were the first commercially successful attempts to directly represent and store the musical waveform in analogue form.

## THE DAWN OF AUDIO

Centuries before Bell, Edison and others began experimenting with cylinders, the closest our ancestral hi-fi buffs had to music on demand was supplied by rather costly 'musical automatica' – the automated playing of acoustic instruments. The origins of the automated orchestra may be traced back as far as the 9th century before reaching something of a technological peak in the early 1900s.

The sophisticated engineering of these pneumatic and electromagnetically-

driven organs, stringed and brass instruments ultimately pushed them into the cul-de-sac of mere curiosity once the cylinder and disc took hold. For the latter had one great advantage, aside from portability, flexibility and cost – they could also reproduce the human voice.

Nevertheless I suspect most hi-fi buffs hailing from an age when home-



**ABOVE:** The town of Les Gets in the French Alps is home once a year to a celebration of vintage musical automatica. The Ed takes time off from his biking holiday to ponder prehistoric audio

building loudspeakers and valve amplifiers was *de rigueur* would also get a thrill from experiencing the meticulous construction and distinctive sound of these machines

'Orchestrions – the closest our ancestral hi-fi buffs had to music on demand'

first hand. Home to a wide variety of these fascinating mechanisms including a three violin/piano quartet 'Phonoliszt Violina' from 1920 and 'Grand Orchestrion Lucia' from 1905 – equivalent to a 15-piece orchestra – is the Musée de la Musique Mécanique in the Haute Savoie region of France.

The local church has the largest surviving example of a Philharmonic Aëolian organ installed into its transept, this fabulous 1910 orchestrion being fully restored together with 700 original works in 1994 at a cost of some 3 million Francs.

It is now listed as a working historical monument. The ideal way to experience the sound and exquisite engineering of these audio masterpieces is to visit the town of Les Gets in the middle of July when it opens its collective doors to antique music enthusiasts from across the globe. There you'll meet our cousins in arms, as passionate about maintaining and restoring these musical marvels as many of us are about collecting and restoring treasured vintage hi-fi.

## BACK TO THE FUTURE

Did I say that musical automatica had expired? Well that's not quite true if Yamaha's extraordinary Disklavier pianos are any guide. These computer-controlled instruments, introduced in the mid-1980s, were the first to convey the pianist's sense of touch, captured at the point of playing and recording.

Furthermore, our Investigation strand recently featured musician Pat Metheny's use of a custom orchestration for his latest tour [HFN, Jun '10]. Next month we'll discover how 21st century technology has enabled the 're-performance' of Oscar Peterson's earliest jazz solos on an automated Bösendorfer Imperial piano – a thrilling prospect for jazz buffs.

Neither has the original artisanship completely died out. More recently J Verbeeck of Belgium was commissioned to build a 118-key transportable orchestrion by the Kelders family. Dubbed 'The Victory' this massive automated orchestra carries at least 2 tonnes of 'books' (the original perforated paper used to instruct the mechanisms). However, when I saw The Victory in action it was being governed by thoroughly up-to-date software running on a palmtop PC at the rear of the truck.

This instrument is occasionally demo'd in the UK (see [www.rba-rentals.com](http://www.rba-rentals.com)) where you can also browse from a wide selection of CDs that capture The Victory in full flight. Big speakers are a must! ☺





## 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

# Breaking the codec

With bandwidth so plentiful why do companies still sell compressed music online? **Barry Fox** hears the views of legendary producer George Massenburg and listens to high-bit online radio Linn-style

**E**xecrable' is the succinct way legendary engineer and producer George Massenburg describes some of the digital compression systems now being used to sell music online. Massenburg, who has worked with artists such as Little Feat, Linda Ronstadt, Aaron Neville, Frank Sinatra and Earth Wind And Fire, was talking at the Audio Engineering Convention held in London early this year. I was privileged to sit on a panel with him so heard it all first hand.

'These systems take something essential from the music and lop it off. With so much bandwidth and memory now available the question is not how to make a better codec, but why are we using codecs at all.'

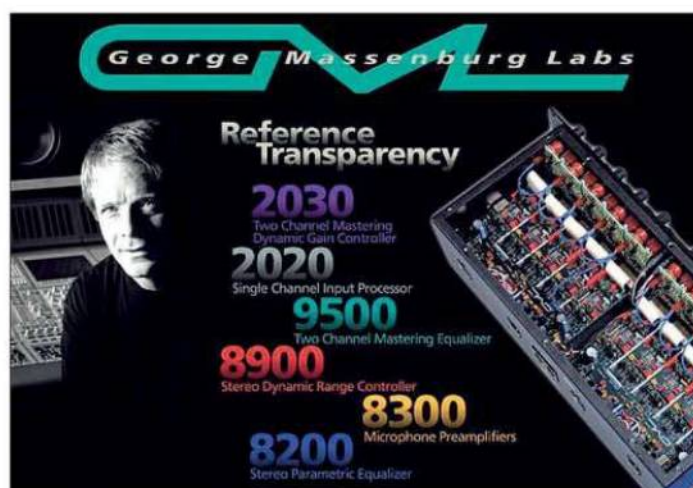
'At the moment there are problems with FLAC (Free Lossless Audio Codec) software decoders. I have found they will play some tracks but not others. I had to write an extra program to make some tracks play on my computer. That's hardly a consumer solution.'

### SLASHING THE SOUND

Massenburg took 96kHz/24-bit recordings by Phil Collins and Diana Krall and squirted them through a range of different codecs, such as MP3 at 128kbps and AAC at 256kbps. Graphics on screen showed how compression collapsed the dynamic range, raising quiet passages and squashing loud peak spikes.

'These are standard systems and they are not good enough for us to use. By coding the hell out of music, and slashing the sound, we are missing a market. We need a good trademark name to describe high resolution sound. But we can't use 'HD' because people

**RIGHT:** George Massenburg – hi-resolution audio captures the 'small sounds and localization cues' that truly bring music to life. For more see [www.massenburg.com](http://www.massenburg.com)



will associate it with HD Radio (the hype name for the in-band-on-channel IBOC digital system used with AM and FM in the USA) which isn't high resolution.'

Massenburg then rammed his point home by electronically subtracting the compressed version of music from the original version and playing the difference signal, which is made up of the sound lost and distorted by brutal compression.

'These are distortion levels of 15% or 20%,' he said while playing the pure distortion to show that it generates a clearly recognisable replica of the original. 'AAC is better, but it is still adding 5% or 10% distortion.'

'Don't think that it doesn't matter

for loud rock music,' he said while playing a Neil Young analogue track that had been digitised at 192kHz/24-bit before crunching with MP3. 'If anything it's worse because of the complexity of the sound.'

Massenburg has high hopes for Blu-ray as a new audio carrier. 'Recent industry agreements mean there will be no regional coding and no need for video menus.

Coloured buttons on the remote control will do the job. So it can be used without a screen and in cars. And before long there will be a single player that plays everything – DVD, DVD-Audio, SACD, BD and BD Audio.'

'We also need to get away from Digital Rights Management,' says Massenburg, taking an opposite view to most of the record industry.

'DRM doesn't work. All the talk and debate about DRM and watermarking delayed DVD-Audio by two years and wrecked its chances of success. And with DRM you think that you have bought music and then find that you haven't.'

Massenburg does see one advantage of MP3. 'People who download DRM-free MP3 often find they want better quality and go out and buy the CD.'

### THRILLED TO BITS

Meanwhile Linn is taking a radically different approach, with a DRM-free and free-to-receive, internet radio streaming service that uses 320kbps, the highest bit rate possible for MP3. The object is to boost album sales by playing random tracks. I do hope it pays off – I'm listening to the jazz stream as I write this. See <http://radio.linnrecords.com>.

'The question is not how to make a better codec, but why are we using codecs at all'





# Roksan

## Warranty Notification

Effective 1st November 2009, all Roksan electronics and turntables supplied via authorised dealers are to be covered by a 5 year parts and labour warranty.\* As a gesture to existing customers, this will also be extended to all current owners of K2 products.

In an age where product longevity and second hand resale values are constantly under threat, Roksan wish to reward their loyal customers by allowing their warranty to be transferrable from owner to owner. Thus, the warranty stays with the product from initial date of sale to 5 years old as long as it remains within the country of origin.

\* terms available upon request



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## 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

# Cost no-object excellence...

**Barry Willis** enjoys a reminder of how effective really good audio gear can be, even for the battle-scarred veterans among us. Though such a rarefied sound comes at a price...

What does \$280,000 sound like? If we are talking about the latest offerings from The Lotus Group, the answer is 'exquisite'. Recently, I had the opportunity to audition a system put together by the Northern California-based distributor of exotic audio products, including the company's open-baffle Granada loudspeakers and the new SMC-VRE-1 preamplifier from legendary designer Steve McCormack.

I had heard this system a few months earlier, minus the VRE-1, and although it was then among the most impressive I'd heard in a long while, the addition of McCormack's latest creation lifted it into a rarified stratum, with a degree of transparency that by comparison renders murky many otherwise superb systems.

The improvements brought about by the inclusion of this piece – and by many careful refinements to the Granada speakers by former Record Plant chief engineer and Sausalito Audio founder/CEO Manny LaCarrubba – made for a revelatory listening session.

### RARE ACHIEVEMENT

Among the tunes played that afternoon were LaCarrubba's studio recording of Boz Skaggs singing 'Somebody Lend Me A Dime'. A performer that I never fully appreciated when he was at the peak of his popularity, Skaggs is one that I enjoy tremendously now. We also heard several tracks from Shelby Lynne's tribute to Dusty Springfield, *Just A Little Lovin'*. Reportedly recorded in real time to 2in analogue tape, the disc has an emotional palpability that's apparent even on modest systems. The Lotus Group's system delivered Ms Lynne and



**ABOVE:** Hand-made Feastrex D9ell drivers with phosphor-bronze frames coated in dozens of coats of Urushi lacquer. The cost is \$69,000 – but for that you get a matched pair

her troupe of ace musicians with a level of effortless realism rarely achieved at any price. The afternoon was breathtakingly free of even a hint of bloom, bloat, grit, glare, stridency, or strain.

The SMC-VRE-1 (the designation refers to 'Virtual Reality Engine') is as superficially simple as it is sonically excellent: four line-level inputs (no phono stage) balanced

or unbalanced, balanced outputs, and a stepped attenuator. Internal circuitry is fully balanced, with Lundahl and Jensen coupling transformers on both inputs and outputs.

In operation it's dead silent, thanks in part to an outboard choke-filtered power supply and attention to RFI rejection and avoidance of ground loops.

McCormack's set the bar very high for his competitors. At \$14,500, the VRE-1 is beyond the reach of all but the most fortunate audiophiles. That's not a bad

thing; such achievements prompt others to attempt this level of performance at more accessible prices.

### SPEAKERS, TOO...

Likewise, the Granada speakers, which at \$125,000/pair may find buyers among Russian oligarchs but probably few mainstream audio fans. Core performance is attributed to Feastrex Type II field-coil drivers handling midrange and upper frequencies. Ultra-exotic – phosphor-bronze frames, handmade washi paper cones, lambskin leather surrounds, dozens of coats of Urushi lacquer – two Feastrex drivers alone account for around half the cost of the Granadas. Two large woofers in each baffle and a whopping quantity of DSP to tame them enable wall-shaking but tuneful bass.

Other notable costs in the system are \$60,000 in PranaWire cabling and a \$6000 Lyngdorf DPA-1 digital preamp used as a DAC. By comparison, the pair of Pass Labs XA 30.5 Class A power amps seem trifling at only \$5500 each. For more info, see [www.lotusgroupusa.com](http://www.lotusgroupusa.com).

'Another notable cost in the Lotus Group system is \$60,000 in PranaWire cabling'





## 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

# Getting the job done...

Choosing a component can sometimes be a compromise between looks, ease of use and sheer performance, but as far as **Jim Lesurf** is concerned, performance wins out everytime

**L**isten to Alfred Brendel and you quickly realise he isn't just playing a piano, he is making music. What you hear isn't just a pattern of notes exactly as written on a score. This distinction between technical ability and performance explains why someone like Daniel Barenboim can inspire others and conduct so well. He, too, is a musician and not just a pianist.

Unfortunately many items of consumer equipment fall into the trap of being impressive in many ways but fail to perform where it matters. Take a flea-powered amplifier that sounds wonderful at low volume levels but which can't drive your favourite loudspeakers without blowing a fuse. Or the amp that looks great but hums along with the music. The classic clash is that between ease of use, appearance, and sheer performance.

### WHAT A PERFORMANCE!

When I used to build my own audio gear I would ensure the music sounded good through it. But if you tilted the casework you would hear a scraping noise as the components inside slid around! Of course, problems like this aren't inevitable. I once said to a friend that you could use one LED instead of a series of normal diodes to give a controlled voltage drop. It saved assembly time

**BELOW: The Cambridge DV30 Sonata DVD player – a sound buy when the only factor that really matters is performance**

and space on the circuit board. I casually remarked that it also looked nice to have the diodes light up, but alas no-one apart from the maker would see them inside the box. He then designed his next power amp with a glass top so that you *could* see the LEDs inside when it was on. It both looked and sounded excellent!

Modern optical disc players are often expected to play all kinds of discs. This one-box-does-all versatility is very useful. And ideally, every player would offer all the features, cover all the discs, and perform superbly. During recent years I've been happily using a DVD player by a well regarded UK maker.

It provides fine sound and pictures. It is also, mechanically, totally silent – unlike my distractingly noisy DVD Video recorder.

One nice feature is that it has a 'go to time' ability. You can put in a home recorded DVD+/-R(W) and go to a particular movement or item without having to fiddle about zooming or skipping forwards. You can also switch off the machine, turn it on again, and play will resume from where you stopped. This is useful when watching commercial discs as it avoids having to keep sitting though the same, 'We'll saw your legs off if you dare copy this!' nag screens.

Alas, this super full-feature high-spec player started to skip and stutter when

playing home-recorded DVD+/-R discs. This made it impossible to enjoy them. Commercial discs were fine, and the affected discs all played correctly on my recorder. Tests showed the same problems with home recordings from other recorders. So I sent the player back for service and am using a Cambridge Audio DV30 'Sonata' player instead.

### A RESULT...

The DV30 is much smaller than the super-player and doesn't have as many features. It is also much cheaper.

However, it has faithfully played all the DVD and CDs I've loaded into it. No problems with any of the DVD+/-R discs that the super-player struggled with. Good picture and good sound. Mechanically silent. A result!

The maker of the super-player has now had it for some months and so far as I can tell it has discovered that none of its players at the factory can play the DVD-R disc I sent in to show the problem. So, unless there is a development I am continuing to use the DV30. I wish it had all the extra features offered by the super-player but in practice what matters is that it does the main job. It plays the discs I want to enjoy without any problems. In the end what wins is performance. ☺

'Unless there is a development I am continuing to use the Cambridge DV30'







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## Steve Harris Contributing Editor

Steve Harris edited Hi-Fi News between 1986 and 2005. He loves jazz, blues music, vinyl and vintage hi-fi and anything that makes good music come to life

# More classical, less gas...

When it comes to classical on the radio, does simple, wall-to-wall music actually have the greatest appeal? After listening to the bright new BBC Radio 3, **Steve Harris** thinks so

**M**uch as I enjoyed comparing FM stereo tuners for the September group test, I have given up hope that any manufacturer will introduce the one feature which, I feel, would perfect the pleasure of listening to Radio 3.

What's needed is a device to mute the most annoying presenters, and eliminate the nuisance of repeated trailers. By monitoring the audio waveform, it could be set to mute automatically when it detected a specific voice, or an exact repetition of words and music. You'd hear each new trailer once, but then happily carry on listening, knowing you wouldn't have to endure it again.

### OVER TO YOU...

Actually, starting on the 3rd of June, Radio 3 ran a trailer that was for once not just a nervous, unwanted plug for some upcoming delight. Instead, we heard the BBC Trust asking for listeners' opinions, as part of the consultation process for its forthcoming report on Radio 3, Radio 4 and Radio 7. By the time you read this, the 12-week consultation period will have ended, and the report should be published by the end of 2010.

In terms of its own listening figures, Radio 3 is doing fine, with RAJAR data

for the first quarter of 2010 showing an increase over the same quarter last year. But if Radio 3 is holding its own, so is Classic FM, and with a much larger audience. According to RAJAR, its reach is around 5.5 million compared with Radio 3's 2 million or so.

In 2009, Radio 3 won 'UK Station of the Year' at the Sony Radio Awards, but this year had to be content with 'Best Music Programme', for *Words and Music*. So this spring, presenters had to stop telling us we were listening to the 'UK Station of the Year'. As if to compensate, bright new enhancements were added, a weekly

rundown of the classical chart being just one. You might have been surprised one evening to catch *In Tune* presenter Shaun Rafferty asking listeners if they'd had any exciting experiences with E.

Although Radio 3 is clearly aiming to reach younger listeners, this was actually just part of *In Tune*'s rather laboured 'A-Z of Opera'.

It was amusing, recently, to hear a *Through The Night* presenter signing off at 7am by mentioning that with the BBC iPlayer, you could listen to *Through The Night* through the morning or through the afternoon. Was he implying that some listeners might not want the hurly-burly of classical charts, listeners' emails and the rest of it, but still prefer the calm, traditional music presentation of *Through The Night*? If so, he may have been dragged off by managers to the original Room 101 in Broadcasting House (or wherever they take miscreants these days) to be re-programmed.

In the end, Classic FM seems at ease in its skin as the 'Relaxation Station', while Radio 3 looks awkward when it dresses down. Yet also, Radio 3 has wider brief than just classical music, a fuzzily-defined obligation to culture in general. How many

'Classical on good old FM has been a success story for commercial radio'



ABOVE: BBC Broadcasting House in London – home to Radio 3 and the original Room 101

listeners resort to Classic FM during Radio 3's discussion programmes, or its world music excursions? Would simple, wall-to-wall classical music actually produce higher listening figures?

### SUCCESS STORY

While the BBC was seemingly ready to sacrifice its digital rock station, Radio 6, to give commercial broadcasters a chance, classical music on good old FM has been a success story for commercial radio. Even though you can tell when the adverts are coming up, in time to turn the volume down.

With its magnificent resources, the Proms, the wonderful BBC orchestras and everything else, Radio 3 should be overwhelmingly superior to Classic FM, and in fact it still is so most of the time. And yes, I am still profoundly grateful for what I'm getting. I don't know what will emerge from the BBC Trust's report and all the politicking behind the scenes. But I hope Radio 3 won't change too much. ☺



ABOVE: *Through The Night* – in the day



Somehow Coventry didn't seem such a bad place after all



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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.

## NO GO FOR TAMI SHOW REGIONAL CODING FRUSTRATES READER

Since purchasing my first copy of *Hi-Fi News* in November 1966 (scan included) I have never had reason to write and grumble. However, the July issue carried a review of the *TAMI Show* DVD by Ken Kessler. This had to be purchased, so I placed my order at HMV.com and, around two weeks later, the DVD arrived in the post. Thrilled, I inserted it into my Sony DVD player, pressed play, and... guess what happened? Yes, on the TV screen appeared the following message: 'Playback Prohibited by Area Limitations'.

What! It had to be a Region 1 DVD. I had just spent £12 on a disc which will not play in the UK. Nowhere on the DVD or the sleeve notes or in the review in *Hi-Fi News* or on the HMV.com website did it say that this DVD was Region 1. I feel let down, especially by *Hi-Fi News* after a reviewer failed to mention regional coding in his review – the most important consideration when buying a DVD.

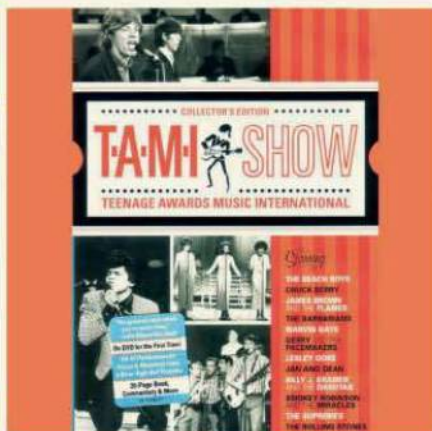
I might add that I emailed The Shout Factory in America, which released the disc, who

replied that it only has the rights to distribute *The TAMI Show* in North America. They did not answer my question as to why there is no regional coding mentioned on the DVD disc or sleeve. I also rang HMV.com who, to their credit, said they would refund the full amount I had paid. I declined the offer as I hope one day to be able to watch the disc. So I am stuck with a DVD I want to play but can't unless I go out and purchase a multi-region player. And all because Ken Kessler failed to state which region the DVD was meant for.

*Trevor Garnham, via e-mail*

Ken Kessler replies: While apologising to Mr Landau for failing to cite the regional coding, I must point out that I did not know it was a Region 1 disc. As Mr Landau notes, the DVD's packaging does not indicate this, and, as my main player is multi-region, it played without any problems. Therefore I had no way of knowing it was Region 1.

In future, I shall identify any DVDs I may review by playing them in a Region 2-only machine.



ABOVE: Scan of the November 1966 issue of HFN, as supplied by Trevor, and the cover of the *TAMI Show* DVD, which fails to mention that it is Region 1 only

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please use 'Sound Off' in your subject field

## Extreme hi-fi?

FROM EXTREME TWEAKS TO EXTREME LISTENING

I read with amusement the extreme lengths Jonathan Briggs declared himself prepared to go to in order to listen to his system in peace and quiet [see Sound Off Sept '10]. Well, I like to listen to my music loud. However, the only way I can do this is to go to a nightclub, where the sound quality is bad, it's full of kids, and the only music is, er, club music.

So I've been thinking about setting up a listening club, basically a space with a suitably extreme hi-fi. Obviously it wouldn't be loud all the time, just now and again. It would be a bit like *Fight Club*. Well, without the fighting. Oh, and no Brad Pitt either. Anyway, there would be one simple rule: 'It's all about the music'. I just wondered what other readers thought.

*Nash, via e-mail*

## On being human

AN AUDIOPHILE SHARES HIS THOUGHTS...

Humans are complex beings; the increasingly estranged subculture called audiophile, perhaps even more so. Humans understand that life is finite and that time is precious. Ever noticed the contradiction in an audiophile's appreciation of a product of high longevity such as an SME arm, but the use of it to play a fragile vinyl record, its grooves continuously being grated away? Are audiophiles subliminally revelling in the finality of such a precious moment, one possibly never to be repeated?

Then there's the fact that humans tend to appreciate something more when deprived of it – a bassline that sounds much more solid after a few moments bereft of it. Audiophiles love music reproduction, but seem to loathe music compression. But, are we really in love with the sound, or the silence in between?

Humans experience the world through their senses, which, in turn, are tainted by emotions. Ever wondered how the same system sounds better at different times? Is it temperature affecting a bass-reflex alignment, or something else? Why do certain products require 'break in'? Is it the nomex spiders that require loosening-up, or could it be that our senses require acclimatisation to an uneven frequency response in order to focus on more important matters like dynamic impact and lack of phase-anomalies? Why are we able to 'filter out' certain characteristics, but not others? Are these characteristics of the sound more important than we might have thought?

These interpretations might motivate you to question the yardstick by which you evaluate your equipment, or (humans being human) you could disagree with me completely...

*Albert de Graaf, South Africa*



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## TV volume

IDEA FOR A MUTE BUTTON, AND A FREE APP...



Richard Ingham quite rightly complains about the sudden increase in volume level when adverts appear between TV programmes [see Sound Off, Sept '10]. It's an issue which has been taken up with the TV companies by the Royal National Institute for the Deaf (RNID) but little headway has been made.

My Sony Trinitron CRT TV, the KD-28DX200U (yes, not everyone has an LCD or plasma set!), has an 'auto volume control' feature which is effectively a dynamic range reducer or volume limiter. When adverts are shown, the volume is reduced, thus removing the irritation. However, when it's on, everything sounds flat and bland so I never use it!

Why don't TV manufacturers provide a single button on their remotes to reduce volume level by 20dB? One press to turn it down, one to return to normal?

*J Winterbottom, Sutton Coldfield*

HFN replies: Steve Harris also calls for a mute device – this time for annoying presenters and trailers (see p98)! Meanwhile, the RNID has released a free app (pictured above) for the iPhone and iPod Touch with which you can check your hearing for any noise-related damage. See <http://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/hearing-check/id362792472>.

## More on Radford valve choice

READER EXPLAINS HOW COMPANY OVERCAME LIMITS OF CONTEMPORARY TUBE DESIGNS

I have just been reading your article on the Radford STA 15 in the September 2010 issue. I really enjoy these items on landmark items or designs. Your approach is excellent: lucid, well researched, and well presented. You mentioned the use of the ECF 82 triode/pentode valve in the phase splitter section, but you did not mention why Radford chose to use this valve rather than what was till then the more usual ECC 83 double triode. Radford's view was that the then current designs were too limited in their bandwidth, particularly at upper frequencies. Many designs of that day would have been rolling off at the high teens or early 20s of kHz. To reproduce a transient waveform (say a 1kHz squarewave) cleanly, you need to accurately reproduce all the harmonics of this frequency and this would require a flat frequency response extending to more like 50kHz. This explains the company's obsession with transient response.

Radford identified two key areas:

1) Phase shift and stray capacitance within the output transformer. Radford worked diligently on this aspect and ultimately produced excellent transformers with very high bandwidth and low phase shift.

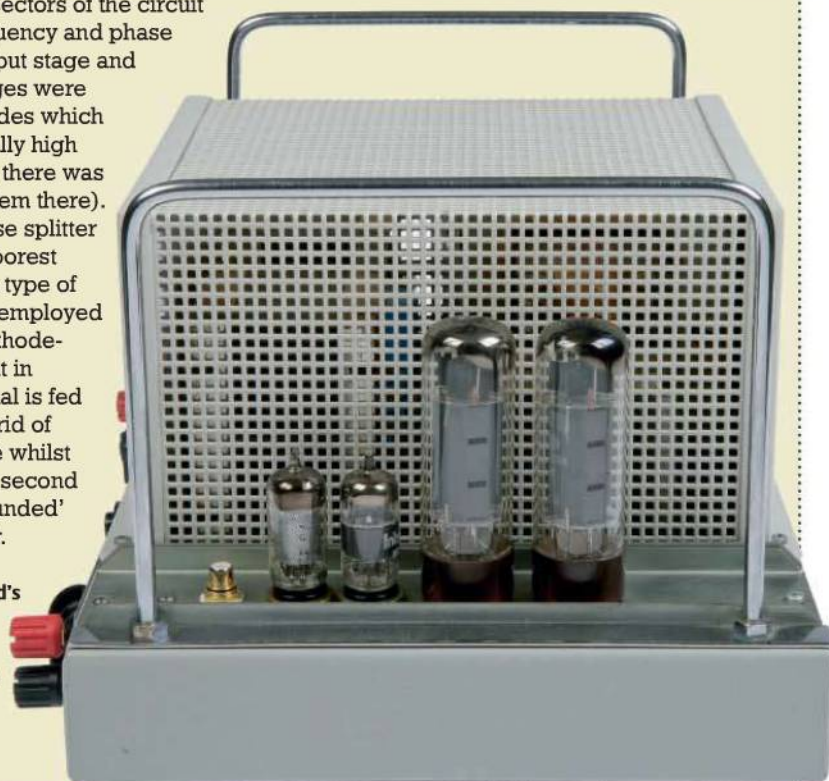
2) Identify sectors of the circuit that were frequency and phase limited (the input stage and the output stages were modern pentodes which have intrinsically high bandwidth, so there was no great problem there). It was the phase splitter that had the poorest response. The type of phase splitter employed is a form of cathode-coupled circuit in which the signal is fed to the signal grid of the first device whilst the grid of the second device is 'grounded' via a capacitor.

**ABOVE: Radford's STA 15 amp used an ECF 82 triode/pentode in the phase splitter – but why exactly?**

This results in antiphase signals being produced at the anodes. The 'grounded grid' section will have much greater bandwidth since grounding the signal grid prevents 'Miller effect'. Pentodes have much greater bandwidth anyway, so what would seem to be called for is a triode pentode valve with the triode section grounded and pentode section used in its standard configuration. And this is exactly what Radford did. Conveniently, Mullard was producing the ECF 82 valve at the time, which fitted the bill nicely.

'Overall negative feedback' – the words alone are viewed with distaste in certain quarters these days, but like it or not, feedback is an integral part of all designs of this era and indeed of most designs to this day. The better the performance of the amplifier before feedback, then the better the performance will be when feedback is applied. By having a design in which each and every stage has inherently wide bandwidth and low phase shift, Radford was able to apply feedback optimally to give low distortion whilst maintaining unconditional load stability, plus of course, that accurate transient response that they were seeking. On the face of it, they should sound good with electrostatics.

*Nick Willans, via e-mail*





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## Consuming problem

CAN A COMPONENT REALLY PUT OUT MORE POWER THAN IT CONSUMES?

I have noticed that the power consumption figures written on the back of components you have tested can differ a lot from those given in your lab measurements.

For example, in your review of the Pioneer Susano receiver [HFN, Nov '08] your measurement for power consumption at its full 7x200W output was around 2500W, but to the rear of the Susano it is written as just 550W. Again, 800W is written on the back of the Yamaha DSP-Z11 receiver yet your lab power consumption gives it at around 1300W at full power output. I cannot understand the difference, as I know from the laws of basic physics that no component can produce more energy than it consumes. More recently, when we look at the specs of Pioneer's SC-LX83 [HFN, Sep '10], power consumption is also marked as 330W but power output is 7x140W. This gives a total of 980W, which looks to contradict the basic law of conservation of energy. Can you explain where I am wrong in these measurements?

*Dr A Sukuru Mercan, via e-mail*

Paul Miller replies: What we are seeing here is not a re-drafting of the laws of physics but an assumption that all manufacturers' specifications are based on the same set of standards. They are not. For example, it's always wise to scrutinise the technical small print – when a manufacturer claims '100W per channel' does this mean 100W per channel at a time or 100W through all five or seven channels simultaneously? This is not the same thing, as I'm sure you'll agree. The same goes for power consumption. Why assume



ABOVE: Rear of Pioneer 'Susano' SC-LX90 showing power consumption specified by manufacturer at 550W

that this is its draw at full output, all channels driven? Sure enough, I make this clear in our measurements with independent figures at idle and at the manufacturer's rated output.

The fact that Pioneer specifies the power consumption of its SC-LX90 at 550W [see picture, above] is pretty meaningless unless we know what the amplifier's output is at the time. 550W probably equates to the SC-LX90 running at full output in *stereo* mode while our figures refer to its consumption in *multichannel* mode. Amplifiers employing a Class D technology may achieve 80-90% efficiency with traditional Class A/B designs offering around 50-60% although AV amplifiers are also dragged down by the additional draw of their current-hungry DSP stages. Hence the Pioneer SC-LX83 AV amplifier you mention not only draws 1.1kW at 5x150W/8ohm output but also demands a full 100W simply being switched on!

## Arm for a Decca Gold?

WILL UNIPIVOT BE A GOOD MATCH OR SHOULD I LOOK ELSEWHERE?

I would like to say how much I enjoy your Audio Milestones articles. I really liked the August 2010 review by Ken Kessler on the Decca cartridges. I have been into the sound of the Decca Gold for a few years and would agree with Ken that it offers real value for money in the Decca range (not quite up to the top Decca, but near enough for the price).

I'm interested in Ken's opinion on a suitable arm for the Gold as he mentioned the SME in his article. You forgot to say that Deccas can be kept going for ever. (Well, as long as J Wright keeps servicing them!)

My present system comprises a heavily modified Ariston RD11s (Origin Live motor etc), a Hadcock GH228 tonearm rewired with Cardas silver

cryo wire and WBT RCAs (straight cable run), plus a recently rebuilt Decca London Gold with the Super Gold stylus profile (J Wright). My amp is an LSA Standard Hybrid feeding a set of Kingsound Queen hybrid electrostatics. I was using the LSA phono stage but I have returned to my trusty Bellari VP 129 phono stage as I prefer the sound (it's not as detailed as the LSA's stage but more musical). I am fairly happy with the sound, but as always I think I can achieve more.

I have a limited budget as do most of us so I have to do one thing at a time. I would like to upgrade the tonearm to a Graham Phantom. I like the unipivot and think it suits the Decca. I was also looking to upgrade the phono stage, maybe to an Icon Audio? I will in time look for a new turntable

but feel the Ariston, with the changes I have made to it, will survive a few upgrades for now. Some say a suspended turntable and a unipivot tonearm are not a good match due to floor-borne vibrations but I have solid concrete floors and a well designed isolation plinth to eliminate this problem and welcome anyone to visit and see what I mean!

Just a note to add to Ken's review. Deccas can sound dead and appear to mistrack if not kept very clean. Your records also need to be very clean to get the best from these cartridges. That's not to say that surface noise is always inaudible in the quiet bits, but the sound is great if you can put up with these small problems.

*Robert Gardiner, via e-mail*

Ken Kessler replies: I would advise the use of any arm with user-adjustable damping, which can range from vintage



ABOVE: Decca Gold cartridge

models to my current fave, the admittedly dear SME Series V. While SME's founder and primary designer, Alastair Robertson-Aikman, deplored the Deccas, his arms served them beautifully. Any SME with damping, including a 3009 in good shape [see p114], will work beautifully, as well as Decca Internationals, your own choice of Graham, and other damped unipivots.

For a phono stage, I love the little NAD, EAR's 834P and I suspect that the forthcoming Trilogi will be a beauty.



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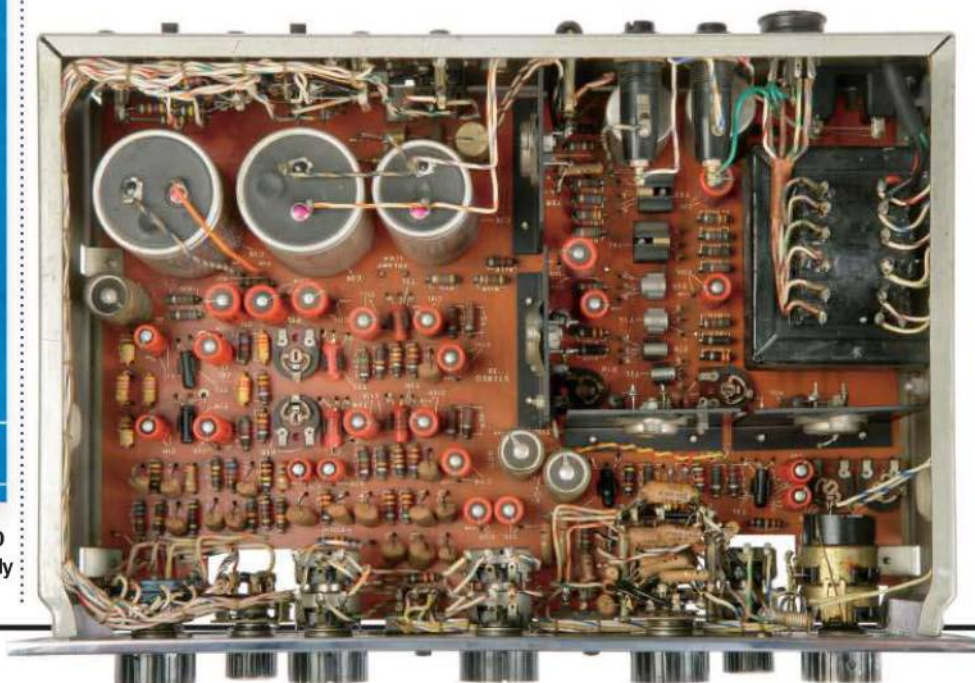
\* terms & conditions apply



Review: **John Howes & Haden Boardman** Lab: **Paul Miller**

[illegible]

One of the big selling points of the Stereo 30 was its compact size, the amp measuring 33x11x23cm (whd) – not much larger than the earlier varislope preamp on its own! The Stereo 30 could be mounted in a cabinet with the aid of a bracket supplied or be used free







standing. A very smart wooden sleeve was available to complement its appearance for £6.10s.0d. The styling of the Stereo 30 bore a strong resemblance to the earlier Stereo Point One valve preamp. This was a clever move because it not only continued the 'Leak look' but also meant that the company's earlier valve Troughline tuner was a perfect cosmetic match. Later Leak released a double width wooden sleeve to accommodate both the Stereo 30 and the Troughline tuner side by side.

The Stereo 30 utilised the newly developed germanium transistors, which were state of the art at the time. These devices suffered from several problems including noise, thermal instability and gain variations. However, this early venture into solid-state amplifier design must have been an invaluable learning curve for Leak. The amp utilised 18 transistors, two diodes and four thermistors in total, Mullard supplying all the transistors, many of which were specially selected.

The quasi-complementary output stages comprised six transistors capacitively coupled to the speaker with over 60dB of negative feedback. A pair of AD 140 power transistors were employed in the final stages of each amplifier, mounted vertically on four separate heatsinks.

## LOGICAL LAYOUT

The build quality of the Stereo 30 was very high indeed, carrying on in the finest of Leak traditions. Neat wiring and logical layout is everywhere to be seen and the marking of component numbers on the printed circuit board makes servicing easy. While on the subject of servicing, if you purchase one of these models secondhand please don't plug it in and switch it on when you get it home! Have an engineer check it over after slowly increasing the mains voltage with a Variac, this will

re-form the electrolytic capacitors and avoid any problems. Due to their age, the controls and switches will all benefit from treatment with switch cleaner. I have found that the small slide switches in particular (before cleaning) and can cause very weird and obscure faults. One other point worth mentioning is the speaker sockets used on all of the Leak solid-state amplifiers. As far as I know these are unique to Leak and are not easy to find nowadays. So if you buy a secondhand Stereo 30, Stereo 30 Plus or

70, make sure you get the speaker plugs!

Specs-wise, the Stereo 30 advertised an output power of 10W into 15ohm and 15W into a 4ohm load. Total harmonic distortion was given as 0.1% for 8W output per channel at 1kHz into a 15ohm load. Meanwhile, hum and noise were claimed –66dB below full output on the tuner and tape amp and –52dB below full output on all other inputs. Its price on release was £49.10s.0d

The amp was manufactured between 1964 and 1969 (interestingly, its valve counterpart – the Stereo 20 – was produced from 1958–1967). During this five-year run 50,000 units were produced.

## 'The front tape monitor switch bypasses the preamp'

### FUNCTION

The function of an amplifier is to convert the electrical signals from the input device (tuner, tape head, mic, etc.) into a form suitable for driving a loudspeaker system, and to provide the necessary power to do so.

The Leak Stereo 30 amplifier is a solid-state amplifier, using germanium transistors for the output stages. It is designed to provide a high level of performance, with low distortion and high efficiency.

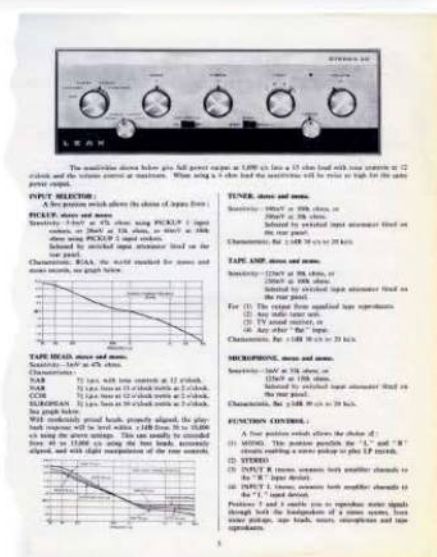
### APPEARANCE

The appearance of the amplifier is a factor in its selection. The Stereo 30 is a compact, well-designed unit, with a high-quality finish.



### EASE OF INSTALLATION

The Stereo 30 is designed to be easy to install. It has a compact size and a high level of performance, making it a popular choice for many users.



**TOP:** The Stereo 30's well designed fascia copied that of Leak's earlier valve designs **ABOVE & BELOW:** Detailed technical data, instruction sheets and performance charts

In 1969 the Stereo 30 Plus was introduced and the Stereo 30 was withdrawn from sale. This was a very different animal to its earlier brother, boasting all-silicon transistors and a power output increased to 15W per channel into 8ohms and 10W into 15ohms. A completely redesigned printed circuit panel with pluggable sub panels was adopted and a headphone socket was fitted to the fascia. The Stereo 30 Plus had a much shorter manufacturing run of three years, finishing in 1972.

## STEREO 70

It's only fair to mention the Leak Stereo 70, which again used silicon transistors. This more powerful model had an output of 35W per channel into 8ohms, retailed for £69.10s.0d and was produced between 1968 and 1972. Harold Leak sold the company to the Rank Organisation in 1969



## VINTAGE HI-FI

and retired to Jersey. The Stereo 30 Plus and Stereo 70 carried on in production until the release of the Delta 30 and Delta 70 models in 1971. Both these models had updated appearances although the circuitry was virtually identical. Neither the Delta 30 nor Delta 70 are listed in the 1975 *Hi-Fi Yearbook*, ending the link with the original Stereo 30.

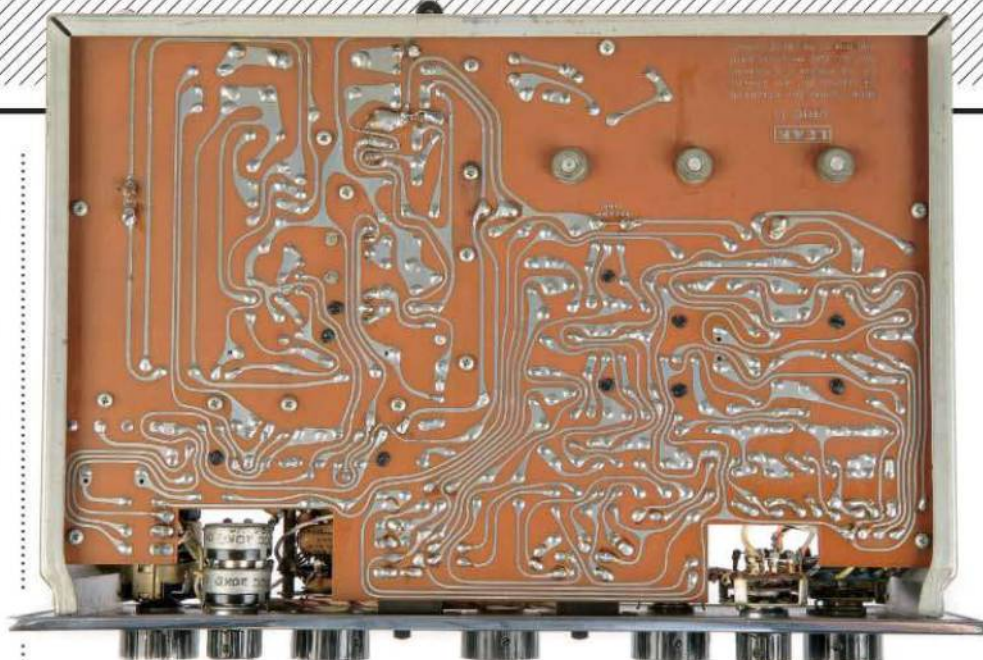
Although sonically the Stereo 30 is not my favourite Leak model, you cannot deny its landmark status in the evolution of the modern hi-fi amplifier.

### HADEN LISTENS...

Time waits for no man, and the arrival of reliable transistors in the early 1960s marked the beginning of the end for domestic valve equipment. The origins of the Stereo 30 can be traced back to the classic work by Dr Hung Chang Lin at the American RCA labs in the 1950s on his 'classic' quasi-complementary design.

Connected to a period Lenco GL69 turntable, mounted with a Pickering XV15/625E MM cartridge, a 1980s Philips CD960 CD player and a set of Jim Rogers distinctive-looking JR149 loudspeakers, auditioning commenced!

First up was Dave Brubeck's classic album *Take Five*, on both original vinyl and CD, which revealed a lot about the little Leak's character. In short, the sound was a little neutered. One tip here is that in use, the selector switch toggles between radio, tape head, tape, microphone and gram pick up, the signal being fed through the tone controls, a slope filter and three silicon transistors. In common with a lot of '60s designs, the tone controls are fed to the tape recorder output (so be careful if recording from the tape outputs of one of these animals). The positive upshot of this



ABOVE: Printed circuit board technology and circuit layout was certainly advanced for the day

is that the tape monitor slide switch on the front panel bypasses the preamp section completely, allowing 'direct connection' to the power amplifier section via the volume control. In the case of CD, this makes a major improvement to the clarity and depth of the sound.

Playing a 'demo' version of 'Easy Money' from the Rickie Lee Jones *Duchess Of Coolsville* box set proved that we've come a long way in the last 45 years. Featuring just Rickie Lee and solo guitar this track is a joy, but sadly the little Stereo 30 seemed to take too much away, the track sounding bereft of soul and emotion.

Switching to a bit of Hammond-based jazz courtesy of the Brooklyn Soul Organization, the Leak fared little better. Dynamics were curtailed, bass sounded coloured and sat on, and the amp appeared not to be fully in control. Treble was better, but suffered from quite a lot of grain while hiss was high by modern standards. True, the midrange was certainly sweet enough, but then it lacked realism and openness.

Switching to a DG recording of Igor Stravinsky's *L'Oiseau De Feu* had the amplifier totally confused; it simply did not have the power or control to resolve this testing recording – even on the easy to drive JR149s. LP replay was noisy, but better than some other vintage amps I have encountered. High output MM cartridges are needed here, but the preamp on this design is clearly showing its age. Flexible and versatile, I suppose it could be considered marginally better than the

company's valve Varislope design, but not by much. Using the tape monitor feature as a 'source direct' made a lot more sense for digital and radio replay, the result being that a huge layer of noise and grain was removed from the sound. Nevertheless, even in this mode the stereo image was somewhat flat. In fact, the entire sound was more than a little sterile. The output stage is connected to the speakers via a large capacitor, which has a major sonic impact on the sound.

The final album tried, via both CD and vinyl, was ABBA's *The Visitors*. This classic set appeared to suit the Leak's character a little better, but still, by more

modern standards, the soundstage sounded flattened while Agnetha's usually strong vocals were lost in the mix.

### IN CONTEXT...

In defence of the little Leak, it must be remembered just how bad mid-1960s ancillaries were. Indeed, this amplifier would have been the most technically competent part of a typical low-to-mid-priced hi-fi system and, despite my personal effort to throw as many of these amps into the skip as possible over the past 20 years, there are still a lot of them out there. Yet the fact remains that the basic – if not crude – power supply, nasty RCA phono sockets and fairly poor sonics count quite heavily against it.

However, it does look quite cute in the matching wooden case and the printed circuit board design and production engineering are absolutely first class. What's more, reliability-wise they are quite tough. Just remember that the 1A fuse

'This amplifier could make sense for a second system'

### Amplifiers that are acclaimed throughout the world



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Extract from Test Report by J. C. B. taken originally from the Music Trade Review, February, 1966 and in our advertisement in October's "Hi-Fi Yearbook". The full Test Report and an illustrated brochure on the amplifiers will be sent to you on request.



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LEFT: Ad for Leak Point One amp from 1959; the styling was reworked for the Stereo 30



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## VINTAGE HI-FI

## LAB REPORT

### LEAK STEREO 30 (Vintage)

It is fascinating to open up the world of the very earliest transistorised amplifiers and discover why, on grounds of sound quality alone, most enthusiasts have always preferred their more mature valve forebears. The top line performance of this Leak Stereo 30 is not a million miles off that recorded for the valve Stereo 20 [HFN, Mar '10] with dynamic power outputs of 13W, 16W, 12W and 5.5W into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads [see Graph 1, below]. It was rated at 10W/15ohm and 15W/4ohm but, as I couldn't obtain more than 7-8W before the DC fuse blew, I felt little temptation to push this vintage tranny amp any further. Neither is the output impedance vanishingly low, measuring between 0.2ohm and 0.9ohm from 20Hz-100Hz versus a more consistent 0.4-0.6ohm through the same bass region for the Stereo 20.

Distortion is as low as 0.06% through the midrange from 1W to 5W/8ohm [see Graph 2, below] much as it is for the Stereo 20 but increases more markedly at higher frequencies to ~3%. The Stereo 20 held distortion closer to 0.7% here. Another contrast is provided by the 30's extended and 'grittier' 3rd, 5th, 7th, 9th... distortion harmonics, all at equal amplitude and unlikely to endear it to valve lovers. Neither is its response as flat as that achieved by the '20, combining a gradually shelved-off bass (-1.4dB/20Hz) with a more pronounced high treble cut (-0.7dB/20kHz and -17.7dB/100kHz).

Readers may compare the various filter responses, and more, for the Leak Stereo 30 by navigating to [www.hifinews.co.uk](http://www.hifinews.co.uk) and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



**ABOVE:** The rear panel is packed with facilities, including a voltage selector for connecting the amp to a range of power supplies; power cable measures 13ft!

can pop quite easily with more modern speakers and the output transistors have been known to blow for no particular reason. Also bear in mind that the thermistors used to aide stability can drift to a high value with age, all of the switches are prone to going noisy, and it would make sense to replace all the electrolytic capacitors, as the originals shipped with the Leak are now well past their sell by dates.

### TOP MONEY?

Is this amplifier worth this kind of expense? A keen DIY enthusiast could clearly tweak the design, replacing the phono sockets and speaker connectors and fitting good quality electrolytic capacitors and a decent quality volume control. But paying someone to do it would be far from economical.

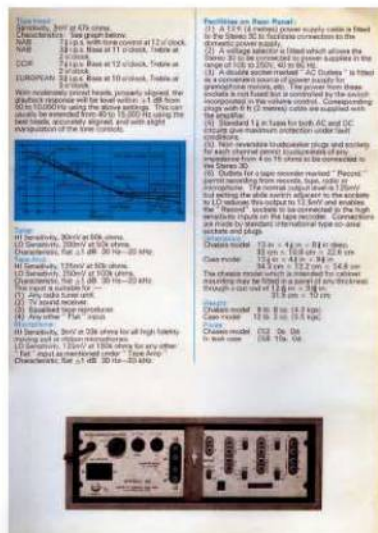
As the demand for vintage Leak kit has gone up, I have seen the odd 30 sell in excess of £50, which in my view would be top money.

Audiojumbles and Audiofayres see these little amps turn up quite regularly, and it is not a bad car boot find for a few quid. In comparison to modern budget transistor amps there is an openness to the sound that some may find more appealing.

### SECOND SYSTEM

The later Stereo 30 Plus differed in internal layout, used silicon output transistors and (less reliable) plug-in boards. In fine fettle, the 30 Plus is a marginally superior amp and more powerful to boot. The larger 70 Plus is no better or worse than the 30 Plus, but is twice as powerful again. As John Howes points out, both Plus designs morphed into the later Delta models, with just cosmetic changes.

For a few quid, this amp could make sense for a second system in a period '60s room, in the same way some 7in 45rpm enthusiasts I know of insist on using a Dansette record player to play their singles collections. If working correctly, with noise-free switches, it could provide plenty of fun. But sonically it simply does not cut the mustard. ☹

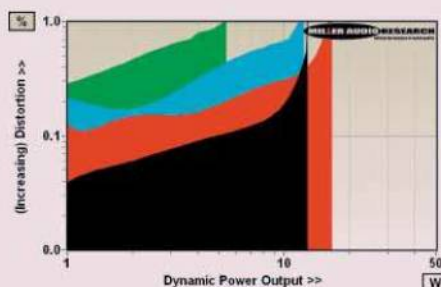


**ABOVE:** Performance charts and rear panel explained from original brochure

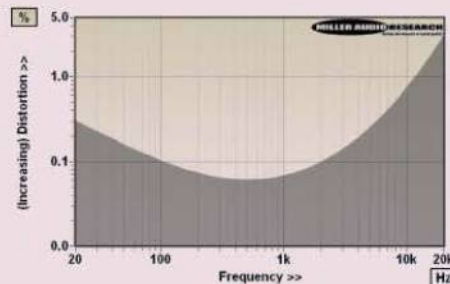
### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Leak's first foray into solid-state electronics resulted in a superbly designed and engineered fully transistorised amp. A sophisticated level of build and an early PCB aid reliability and longevity. Nevertheless, even by the standards of the day the 30 was something of an average performer and by 2010 standards it really does sound quite miserable. So, an interesting amp, but not a great sounding one.

Sound Quality: 60%



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



**ABOVE:** Distortion vs. frequency from 20Hz to 20kHz (1W/8ohm). High treble distortion increases markedly as negative feedback is less effective

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	Fuse. See Report, above
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	14W / 12W / 8.6W / 5.3W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	1.0-0.02ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)	-1.6dB to -17.7dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/10W)	21mV / 68mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/10W)	75.9dB / 86.0dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 1W)	0.059-3.0%
Power consumption (Idle/1W output)	5W/15W
Dimensions (WHD)	330x115x249mm



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## Workshop Notes 13: A Tale of Two Turntables. British Brio versus German control.....

It is an irony, 30 years after it was supposed to lie down and die quietly, that vinyl sounds better than ever. Brilliant, if fanatical, designers like Conrad Mas and Helmut Brinkmann have pushed the performance envelope so far that vinyl still gives even the very best of digital not just a run for its money, but very often a good kicking. And that's before we factor in the thousands of LPs we vinylistas still own and the very special magic of it all. **AVID** have perfected the suspended, belt-driven design and their new SP spec double belts and upgraded power supplies are way ahead of anything else on offer. Joining the fray is a particularly interesting turntable from Germany the **Brinkmann Bardo** – no belts, no suspension, direct drive, mass loaded & with electronic speed control. Unsurprisingly, they sound markedly different. Which is better? That is for you to decide. These two outstanding, fresh-off-the-drawing-board designs are at Audio Workshop Norwich raring to go and eager for your attention. Please don't disappoint them.....Call me, Julian Musgrave, and hear the best that vinyl can offer.

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# SME 3009



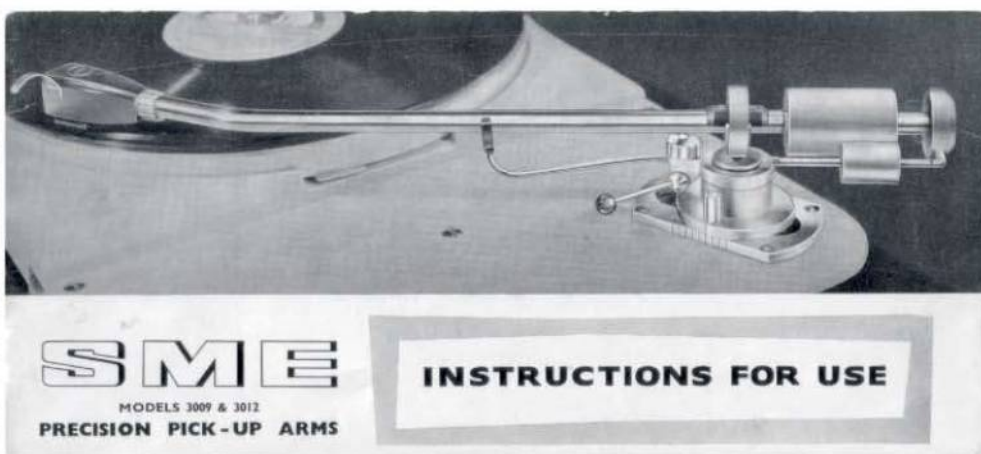
Not just a world-wide best seller but the best of its type too. **Ken Kessler** tells the story behind the development of the SME 3009 tonearm, still cherished to this day in all its variants with hundreds of thousands remaining in regular use

Sales figures are curious things. If sheer quantity is your measure of success, then the McDonald's hamburger is the world's greatest food, *The Sun* is the UK's best newspaper and you'd rather own a BiC pen than a Montegrappa. Flip the coin, and you suddenly seem arrogant, if you equate popularity with a lowering of quality.

But every once in a while, a worldwide best-seller just may be the best of its type, too.

Such thinking makes the SME 3009 and its variants a bit of a conundrum, for the sales of that tonearm in its three mildly-modified forms – aka Series I, II and II Improved plus the elongated 3012 and a handful of versions with gilded parts – constitutes not only the best selling tonearm in history: it is probably the only high-end component ever to pass the million-mark. Yet its quality was hardly of the lowest-common-denominator.

Alastair Robertson-Aikman – or AR-A, as he was known – created in the original SME tonearm a



**ABOVE:** Original manual for the 3009 Series I. The arm, which appeared in 1959, not only featured a method of mounting that was adopted industry wide but boosted the popularity of the detachable Ortofon headshell used. It soon became known as the SME headshell

**LEFT:** Alastair Robertson-Aikman pictured in the 1980s. He founded SME, originally called The Scale Model Equipment Company, in 1946 to produce scale models and parts for the model engineering trade

component that attained the sort of sales figures probably not even met by iPod docks. Compounding the selling of a tonearm, and therefore making its achievements even more remarkable, is the knowledge that separate arms are only purchased by audiophiles, not casual buyers. At best, the latter would have acquired one without even knowing it, having visited a hi-fi emporium, asked for a turntable, and been sold a Garrard 401 or a Thorens TD 124 with an SME 3009 already in place.

## TWO MILESTONES

Early audiophiles, though, were a hardy, self-sufficient and adventurous lot, who wouldn't have considered buying a 'turnkey' record deck already fitted with arm and cartridge. Hey, half the fun was choosing your own components. What SME provided for the hi-fi industry and the customers were two standards that worked for decades, thus garnering two 'milestone' achievements with a single product. The first was, in creating a hugely popular tonearm in its own right, devising a genius

of a template for arm-mounting that other manufacturers would follow. The so-called 'SME cut-out' maintained its supremacy until the egos of others demanded that they *not* support a standard set by a rival – an act as foolhardy as, say, a digital camera or computer peripheral manufacturer not using USB or mini-USB. From 1961 onwards, the tonearm cut-out that served as the default for countless manufacturers, from Garrard to Thorens to Technics, was the SME.

If the cut-out alone was noteworthy, for it signified that the first-ever product from the company down in Steyning was a standards-maker, the second milestone was SME also popularising Ortofon's detachable headshell fitting so successfully that it became known as the SME headshell – though AR-A always credited the Danes for the design. The 3009's collateral effect, then, was to tonearms what the Mini was to small cars. It revolutionised the separate tonearm.

SME was founded in 1946 in a field far removed from audio, as The Scale Model Equipment Company





Limited, producing scale models and parts for the model engineering trade and hobbyists. To this day, model car enthusiasts – who wouldn't know hi-fi from fly-fishing – still think solely of model cars when they hear the three letters 'S', 'M', and 'E'. The desirability of those kits, tricky to build but innovative in their day, has increased to eye-watering levels, with commensurate prices.

### A THOUSAND PIECES

It wasn't only scale models that occupied SME prior to music lover AR-A's first foray into hi-fi hardware production. SME also undertook contract work in other, more serious fields. In the 1950s, SME gradually moved away from model making to critical precision engineering, including the production of parts for aircraft instruments, business machines and other devices, which in 2010 also includes parts for medical and Formula 1 clients.

Alastair told *HFN* that, 'the Series I precision pick-up arm was envisaged in the Autumn of 1958.' He had a working prototype available by the Spring of 1959. AR-A showed it to the then-Senior Technical Editor of the *Gramophone Magazine*, Percy Wilson, one of the most influential figures in audio. Asked what he thought of its commercial possibilities, Wilson replied that he and one or two of his friends would like to own one. Crucially, he told AR-A that, 'perhaps an annual turnover of as many as a thousand pieces might be possible.'

On the strength of that support, the 3009 became a viable commercial product.

In August 1961, SME opened a new factory in Mill Road, Steyning, Sussex, while the company's name was changed to SME Limited. After re-tooling the three-year-old Series I, it was replaced with the Series II in 1962. Instead of a steel arm tube, the Series II used a polished, bright-anodised aluminium arm tube, 9.5mm diameter with a wall thickness of 0.56mm. A fibrous lining assists the dissipation of acoustic information. Moreover, SME was able to move from machining every part to using techniques such as pressure die-casting. The Series II stayed in production for 10 years. 'And for much of the time,' AR-A remembers, 'there was a backlog of more than two thousand units.'

In 1973, SME met the demand for an arm of lower mass than the

Series II with the Series II Improved, which also offered for the first time a fixed headshell version. (Note: There was also a short-lived, completely different arm called the Series III, an ultra-low mass type aimed at users of ADCs, Shures and other cartridges aspiring to sub-1g tracking.)

All of the same basic family ran for the next 30 years. By 1982, with the sudden burst in popularity of the moving-coil cartridge with lower compliances and higher tracking forces, AR-A recalls that, 'cartridge developments precluded a "one size fits all" philosophy. For the next four years, we developed the Series V, an arm of extraordinarily structural

integrity dictated to the needs of medium and low compliance moving coils.'

### ALL IN HOUSE

Consistent from the very first model was SME's insistence on zero-compromise standards of manufacture, finish and construction. Thus, all parts production was undertaken 'in house', including screws and tools for the arms' installation and set-up. SME's capabilities included all design work and tool-making, through every stage of production, including machining, pressure die-casting, injection moulding, metal finishing, electroplating, anodising and many other processes. One world-class watch-maker, upon seeing the factory and acquiring his own 3009 Series II Improved, was moved to describe SME's capabilities as 'the equal of anything made in Switzerland.' And yet this expertise was available to an SME 3009 owner for a price less than the cost of the steel bracelet on a Rolex.

But the cost difference between an SME Series II Improved and Series V of the late 1980s kept the



**TOP:** Series II arm appeared in 1962 and featured a polished, bright-anodised aluminium arm tube with a fibrous lining

**ABOVE RIGHT:** Nearly forgotten but now highly collectible, the SME 2000 plinth, made to accept the Garrard 401, Thorens TD 125 as seen here, and other turntables

**BELOW LEFT:** Shure leaflet from the US advertising the 3009/1 and 3009/2 variants, which measured 9in and 12in respectively

**BELOW RIGHT:** Model 3012 Series II in its original box



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Made by dedicated craftsmen working with extraordinarily close tolerances and standards — provides features unattainable in any other tone arm. Its "secret" (it has one) is care in manufacturing and testing and utterly accurate adjustments for every critical factor in tracking. It is not improvisation—perfection never is. It is, however, worth every penny to the audiophile who needs a pick-up arm capable of realizing the full potential of cartridge and record.

Among its features are: virtually frictionless knife-edge bearings; unique weight system that statically balances arm longitudinally AND laterally; tracking force adjustments (from 1/2 to 5 grams) as accurate as a fine stylus pressure gauge; "anti-skating" bias adjuster; hydraulically operated "slow-motion" set screw; sliding base for overhang adjustment; height adjustment, etc., etc.

Model 3009, for 12" inserts, Audiophile Net ..... \$89.50

Model 3012, for 10" records, Audiophile Net ..... \$99.50

Model 3004, Plug-In Head for Shure-SME Tone Arm, Audiophile Net ..... \$50

**SHURE SME SERIES 2 INDEPENDENT PICK-UP ARM**





## AUDIO MILESTONES

former in production for its value as an entry-level product. The 3009 ceased production in 2003. For 2004, SME, '...filled a gap at the bottom of our range with the new M2 Series arms, drawing on the most worthwhile design features and offering what we believe are unbeatable value and performance for money.'

### THE 3009/3012 SERIES

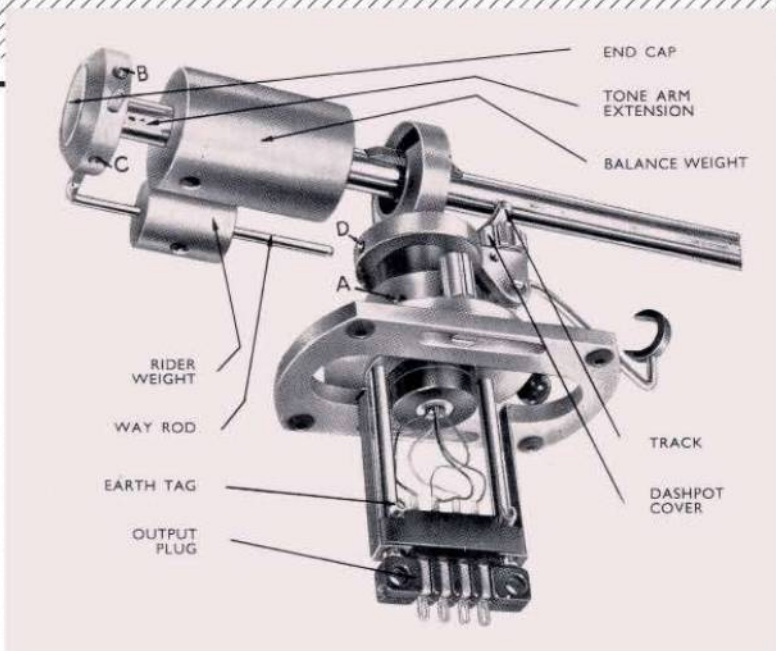
Dubbed from the beginning as the 3009 for 9in versions and 3012 for the 12in version, the arm is identified in 'collectors' shorthand' as 3009/1 or 'Series I' and 3009/2 or 'Series II' to indicate which model series is which. The final version was the '3009 Series II Improved', which lasted into the 21st century.

As you might expect of any product with such longevity, it has developed cults that are either 'pro' or 'anti' certain variations, as well as a few mysteries.

Fixed headshell or removable? 9in or – for the Japanese – 10in length from pivot to stylus? And what about Americans who describe some arms as '16in' because they could play 16in transcription discs? UK users always referred to SMEs by their effective length (pivot to stylus), while some US users added in the counterweight and shell. As for the rarer 10in versions of the Series II and II Improved, these were supplied primarily to suit certain Japanese turntables. Add to these the gold-plated limited editions, variations in the form of cable connectors, choices of counterweights, and you have fuel for cultism.

What never varied, though, were the fundamental details common to all, from 'J'-shaped arm tubes to the methods of applying tracking force. The arms used high-precision, fully-protected ball-races for the

**RIGHT:** Detail of Series 1 arm showing proprietary connectors and overall intricacies of construction



vertical axis and 0.13mm radius knife-edge bearings in chrome seatings for the horizontal axis.

SME produced a low-inertia design with the fixed elements of the balance system made light, while the heavier movable elements were set close to the fulcrum.

Precision was such that accurate tracking force up to 1.5g could be applied without a tracking force gauge.

Vertical tracking force was set using weights on an outrigger, while lateral balance was achieved by changing the distance

of the outrigger from the main counterweight, performed with an Allen key. The barrel-shaped main counterweight's position was adjusted by turning a small dial at the rear of arm, and it could be split into two pieces to change the range of acceptable cartridge mass. Two weights were available, of 64g and 77g, allowing the use of very heavy cartridges, up to 32.5g. SME employed a hanging-weight-on-a-thread to set adjustable bias corresponding with tracking force, via notches on a rail, a system credited to John Crabbe, late of these pages.

Total flexibility and dependable set-up were intrinsic features of the arm, the only major 'add-ons' or alterations during the arm's lifetime being generated by changes in the status quo for cartridges, eg the optional FD200 fluid damper for the

Series II and later models, changes in effective mass, and the availability of a fixed-headshell model; many audiophiles refused to believe that a detachable headshell could boast the rigidity of a fixed model.

Users delighted in the most coherent and thorough owner's manuals ever seen in audio, and niceties such as a baseplate that allowed the arm to slide forward

or back for set-up with the supplied protractor. All of the arms were fitted with fluid-damped lowering and raising devices,

and VTA was easily set thanks to the adjustable arm height.

**'Hundreds of thousands of 3009s and 3012s remain in use today'**

### COLLECTORS' NOTES

Collectors who seek out pre-owned 3009s and 3012s should note that the model 3009 Series II Improved is considered to be the definitive version. The standard arm has a typical pivot-to-stylus distance of 231.2mm. This is the one to buy if you want the true 'classic'.

With detachable headshell, a 3009 exhibits 9.5g effective mass, while the fixed headshell version reduces it to 6.5g. This didn't affect the arm's universality, thanks to the choice of accessory counterweights. But the lower mass provided better matching for high compliance cartridges: it raised the system resonance above the critical 5-8Hz region, where excitation by record warp occurs. ☺

**BELOW:** Original manual for Series II arm. Shure and SME collaborated a lot during this period as the Shure range of cartridges was considered to be the best and was thus used as a reference by SME. Also, in some territories, both companies employed the same distributors







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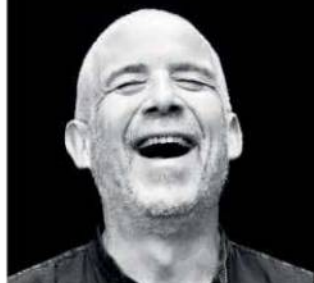
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AUDIO ALCHEMY DDE V3 & PSU 3 (LAST ONE £900) NEW OLD STOCK.....		£425
THETA DSP PRO GEN III XLR/RCA OUT.....	MINT/BOXED.....	£795
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SME 20/A SME V.....	EXCLT.....	£4750
NOTT'S ANALOGUE MENTOR/EMINENT TECHNOLOGY.....		
MKII AIR BEARING TONE ARM/SUMIKO BPS.....	VGC.....	£2750
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McCORMACK MINI PHONO DRIVE (MM/MC £600?).....	EX DEM.....	£349
PROJECT PHONO BOX.....	EXCLT.....	£49
ANTIQUE SOUND LABS MINI PHONO 2 BOX.....	VGC.....	£295

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AUDIO SYNTHESIS PASSION (SILVER VERSION).....	MINT.....	£395
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MUSIC FIRST SILVER PRE SPECIAL ORDER.....		
2 VOLUME POTS 2 BALANCED OUTS (ELOTS!!!).....	EXCLT.....	£2450
ALCHEMIST APD-15 INTEGRATED PHONO STAGE.....	EXCLT.....	£599
MUSIC FIRST SILVER PRE AMP (E3K?).....	DEM.....	£2050
YAMAHA CX2 PRE/MX2 POWER AMP & CDX993 CD.....	EXCLT.....	£995
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ARCAM SOLO.....	MINT/BOXED.....	£599
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DENON AVC A11 SR AV AMP (CHAMPAYNE GOLD) EXCLT/BOXED.....		£895
DK DESIGN VS.1 SIGNATURE MKIII INTEGRATED DEM/BOXED.....	RING	
PASS LABS ALEPH P PRE AMP.....	EXCLT.....	£1150
ADVANTAGE I200 INTEGRATED AMP.....	EXCLT/BOXED.....	£795
QUAD 306 POWER AMP.....	EXCLT.....	£249

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AUDIONOTE CONQUERER 300B POWER AMP.....	MINT.....	£1295
SHANLING MC-30 FABULOUS ALL IN ONE DEVICE MINT/BOXED.....		£495
PAPWORTH 200M KT-90 MONO'S VOL.CONT. (E6K) AS NEW/BOXED.....		£3750
AUDIO SYNTHESIS PASSION (SILVER VERSION).....	MINT.....	£395
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MUSIC FIRST SILVER PRE SPECIAL ORDER.....		
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**DECCA** Gold boxed, Decca Blue boxed, Decca FFSS Tandy (Decca) with spare stylus, offers, Linn Kans, mint, boxed £185 Tel: 0772 9620621 [KL]

**RUSS** Andrews Torlyte Shelves x 4, Shelf Type 1 dimensions – width: external 540mm, internal 450mm, depth: external 495mm, internal 450mm, height: external 130mm, internal 105mm, as new and unmarked – cost new £201 each, sell for £100 each Tel: 01407 811055 (North Wales) [KL]

**MUSICAL** Fidelity KW phono stage, used once (£2500) £1200 no offers Tel: 01708 457691 [KL]

### 2. AMPS

**VIVA** 300p Class A tube amplifier in immaculate condition, 25W per channel, six line inputs, bright red aluminium chassis, contact details 01422 376234 or email: peter.ski@talktalk.net [JK]

**QUAD** 306 amp, 34 preamp and FM4 tuner, excellent condition, in original Quad boxes with manuals and cables, £350, delivery or collection TBA Tel: 07801 043231 email: alan@deadparrot.myzen.co.uk [JK]

**CARVER** TFM22 power amp, great sound from classic American amp, Excellent condition £180 Tel: 02380 224003 (Southampton) [JK]

**AUDIO** Research LS-1 preamp, mint condition £420 Tel: 02380 224003 (Southampton) [JK]

**MARANTZ** MA500 monoblocks x four 380 wpc, superb sound, mint condition, boxed with manuals £380 Tel: 02380 224003 (Southampton) [JK]

**QUAD** 405-2 amplifier, ex. Condition £70, Quad 34 preamp, ex. Condition £70 Tel: 079141 19196 (Jim) [JK]

**AUDIOLAB** 8000P power amplifier, excellent condition, unmarked, £250 Tel: 01689 608925 (Orpington, Kent) [JK]

**EXCEPTIONAL** MBL 6010D reference preamplifier + XLR opt +

MC opt, probably the best preamp in the world, bought new a few months ago, like new, silver, a marvel, list price £19,000, asking £9500 email: voix\_de\_fugue@yahoo.fr [JK]

**TACT/LYNGDORF** SDA 2175 power amp, 200 WPC, excellent condition (£1300) £575 Tel: 07776 143890 [JK]

**MCCORMACK** DNA-225 power amp, mint condition, boxed, £1300ono Tel: 07728 557772 (Midlands) [JK]

**NAD** C350 amplifier and NAD C542 CD player, mint condition in original boxes with manuals etc. £350 for both. Email: biometrics@1to1.org / or Tel 0208 738 8086 daytime (West Herts) [JK]

**SANSUI** amp, AU-X510 £85 Tel: 020 8950 0658 / email: michael.stewart5@ntlworld.com (South Herts) [JK]

**KARAN** acoustics KAS 180 power amplifier purchased new May 2008, as new condition, one of the best solid state amplifiers in the world, £2800, demonstration available, Tel: 01929 421377/email: ali.goldsmith@btinternet.com (Dorset) [JK]

**JBL** 18 subs + power amp, unused in the box £800 Tel: Gary 01543 686828 (Staffs) [KL]

**ICON** Audio Stereo 40i HT delay + valve up grades, light use Tel: Gary 01543 686828 (Staffs) [KL]

**QUAD** 707 power amp, serial no. Q 1945, excellent condition, 120W per channel, buyer to collect, offers to: vs006i9281@blueyonder.co.uk (Maidstone, Kent) [KL]

**UNISON** research S6 valve amp, not working, offers, buyer collects Tel: 01492 853091 [KL]

**SANSUI** amp AU-X510 £85 Tel: 020 8950 0658 / email: michael.stewart5@ntlworld.com (S.Herts) [KL]

**MARANTZ** PM66SE amplifier £90 Tel: 01708 457691 [KL]

**TUBE** Technology Unisis Signature valve power amplifier, 30W per channel, superb sound, excellent condition, with manual £900, Tube Technology M.A.C. valve phono amplifier for MM and MC cartridges, wonderful sound, excellent

condition, with manual £650 Tel: 07767 712116 or e-mail mike1304@hotmail.co.uk [JK]

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**NORDOST** Heimdall 2m biwire speaker cables, boxed, excellent £650 (£1136) Tel: Pete on 0775 7174120 [JK]

**KIMBER** Kable, Select, Russ Andrews, K.S. 1011 1 metre interconnect, WBT – 0110cu termination £475 ovno retails at £765, sounds beautiful Tel: 01656 653976 [JK]

**JPS** SC-2 interconnect 1 metre length, 1 pair with fully balanced XLR terminations £325 including UK postage Tel: Tony Richards 01273 845029/email: jennifer.richards@tesco.co.uk [JK]

**TRANSPARENT** Music Wave plus biwire 15ft pair £200 ono, Mandrake silver wire interconnect phono metre pair £100 Tel: 020 8368 4228 [KL]

### 4. CD/DVD PLAYERS

**CD** Cyrus CDXT transport player, silver, boxed as new, can demo £350 ono Tel: 07766 415325 [JK]

**COPLAND** CDA822 CD player with remote control, vgc. Very analogue sound, low digital noise, XLR and RCA outputs, rarely available, a classy machine £800 or near offer Tel: 020 8443 3950 [JK]

**SONY** SCD-XA9000ES cosmetically perfect, original packaging and manual but extremely temperamental, repair needed, too good to dump, originally £2000 yours for £100 Tel: Val on 01908 661094 [JK]

**RESOLUTION** Audio Opus 21 with legendary GNSC Reference Level Mods, awesome two box CD/DAC/ preamp in black, perfect condition, £1900 Tel: 07930 401351/ email: catswinger@gmail.com [JK]

**MERIDIAN** 500 transport and 566 DAC 24 bit, mint, boxed, instructions £500 ono Tel: Mike 01246 209578 (day) 07780 888686 [JK]

**ARCAM** Alpha 8 CD player + R/C £55 Tel: 020 8950 0658 / email: michael.stewart5@ntlworld.com (South Herts) [JK]

**MERIDIAN** 602/606 Transport/ DAC (black), mint, as new, little used,

stored in original boxes last 12 years £375 Tel: 01962 711800 (eve/weekend) 01252 620644 (day) (Hampshire) [JK]

**ESOTERIC** P-03 SACD player and D-03 DAC eighteen months old in absolutely pristine condition, including all boxes and manuals £13750 (£20500) email: majba13@yahoo.co.uk Tel: 01797 253073 [KL]

**TEAC VRDS-T1** transport (includes Trichord upgrade £400 / receipt kept) manual, remote, boxed £275 Tel: Ken 01384 293955 (West Midlands) [KL]

**MARANTZ** 6003 CD player only 2 months old, as new condition £200 Tel: Tony on 02380 224003 (Southampton) [KL]

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**TANNOY** 15in monitor gold loudspeakers, LSU-HF-15-8m rare opportunity, four pairs available, units 'mint' to slightly marked, all in Shabby 'Lancaster' cabinets, inviting offers, one pair, or lot, Tel: 01253 875194 (Blackpool, Lancs) [JK]

**AUROUSAL** A1 Mk II speakers in cherry finish, mint condition, full packaging and instructions, can arrange delivery if necessary £300 (were £645) email: ianringstead@talktalk.net Tel: 07894 708422 or 01246 432398 [JK]

**WILMSLOW** Audio hand-built large floor standing classique loudspeakers, 910mm tall x 260mm wide x 300mm deep, to large after all my efforts for my room, as new £600, buyer will have to collect, 40kgs in weight Tel: Vic on 01372 456196 anytime [X]

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**LINN** Espek loudspeakers, boxed & near mint condition, maple finish, £850 ono (originally £2500) Aktiv cards also available Tel: 07813 960156 / e-mail: ob.mm@virgin.net [JB]



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## LAST WORD

# OFF THE LEASH!

KEN KESSLER TELLS IT LIKE IT IS...

The separates market is shrinking, but the battle for hi-fi's future rages on. Ken Kessler explains...



'Paradigm shift' is one of those newspeak expressions that many overuse, but its meaning is wholly applicable to the world of audio, circa 2010. According to the dictionary, it identifies the 'acceptance by a majority of a changed belief, attitude or way of doing things.' It does not say that the majority *like* the change, only that they *accept* it. We audiophiles have yet to do so.

To which paradigm shift am I referring? It is the now-total relegation of separates – and *not* just the high-priced stuff – to the same moribund category as typewriters, CRT TVs and VCRs: consumer goods that still exist, but on an ever-decreasing level. What made me realise that the shift is complete was a visit to one of the UK's largest 'electronics' chains, to buy a computer for my son.

### DUBIOUS MERIT

This palace of all-things-mains-powered stocked at least 30 fridges, 60 flat panel TVs, and more vacuum cleaners than even *Which?* magazine would test in a year. For music hardware, two aisles hosted iPods, a few of their rivals and iPod accessories. But self-contained 'hi-fi'? One aisle only, and *every single product* was a mini system of dubious merit. Not one standalone CD player, amp, tuner – *nada*.

Thumb through the ads in this magazine and – blessedly – you will see that there remain specialist hi-fi dealers able to serve those who still care about sound quality. But the market is tiny. My local independent tells me that he is kept alive by flat-panel sales, though hi-fi from Rotel, KEF, B&W, Marantz, Roksan and a few others continue to matter.

He also told me that completely denied to independents were the bread-and-butter sales that have shifted *en masse* to 'e-tailers'. 'I just cannot match on-line prices for docks or headphones.' Unsurprisingly, one area he doesn't even consider is that which carved up hi-fi with the finesse of Jack the Ripper: powered speakers to feed from

computers. And that was the very reason I visited the shop, to find out what's on offer for those who should be buying separates but simply won't. My motivation for studying the market was a real-world scenario that ripped my eyelids way past my nape.

A dear friend in New York – achingly sophisticated, a lawyer of impressive qualifications and a patron of the musical arts – e-mailed me for some advice. She wanted a pair of speakers to run off her computer, compact and around £400.

Now I, as would you, immediately suggested an admirable, musical combination of a respected integrated amp, for example a NAD C316BEE, and any of a

few dozen £200-per-pair, audiophile-quality two-way speakers.

She, alas, had been to the Apple store and was just about to hand over her Amex for some plastic dreck. Fortunately, as she's so savvy, her eyes wandered over to B&W's Zeppelins, the most successful hi-fi-to-computer crossover product on the market. I now swear by the Zeppelin Mini (aka the 'Zep II') as the ultimate space-saver sound machine. But, because her idea of music is live and classical, she wanted a wider stereo spread. The natural progression was to B&W's new MM-1 active mini-speakers.

So I borrowed a pair from B&W, to see if they could do what she wants.

### REAL MUSIC...

The MM-1s cost the same as the 'Zep at £399, but they're less physically in-your-face. You can separate them by nearly 5ft and they accept signals from anything you can feed via a 3.5mm jack, and USB.

They go loud enough and deep enough to deliver real music. They're gorgeous: black cloth-covered mini-towers standing only 170x100x100mm (hwd). They're genuine two-ways, with 3in woofers and 1in tweeters driven by four 18W amps. But none of that matters to my friend: in four minutes, they were up-and-running, off an iPod Nano in Pure's cool i-10 dock, which even matches the MM-1's shape and colour.

In a world full of injection-moulded swill with £29.99 price tags despite the famous badges on their grilles, it's a tonic to know of high-quality USB-enabled mini-speakers like the glorious MM-1s – as well as Eclipse's TD307 PAII and others – which *can* raise the level of music-from-computer from execrable to tolerable.

No, make that *much* more than tolerable. The MM-1s haven't been switched off since I got them, so the entire point of this polemic is this: you are the go-to-guy when the non-audiophiles among your friends want some 'sounds', but won't consider anything on your preferred NAD/KEF/Marantz/etc shortlist. The MM-1s are something you can approve of that they'll actually *want*. But if they balk at £399, just take a deep breath and walk away. As I do. And still the battle for hi-fi's survival rages on. ☺

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Floorstanding Loudspeaker of the Year – Hi-Fi+ Awards 2009 (issue 68)



There comes a moment in every product sphere when a truly iconic product is created. In the case of high-performance speakers, that product was the original Wilson Audio WATT/Puppy.

Now David A. Wilson has reengineered the speakers that defined audio excellence for a generation. The Sasha W/P boasts the same uncompromising approach to design as its illustrious predecessor but with newly devised innovations such as the resonance minimising material that has been specially created for the cabinets, a revised motor/magnet assembly to bring new dimensions to the bass and a redesigned crossover that dramatically increases midrange clarity.

The result is a loudspeaker with holographic imaging, free-breathing dynamics and unrestricted sonic detail. A speaker that takes sound onto a new and rarefied plane. A speaker for people who don't know the meaning of ordinary.

The new Sasha W/P joins Wilson Audio's other extraordinary designs, including the Duette – probably the best 'bookshelf' speaker in the world – the compact floorstanding Sophia 2, the imposing MAXX 3 and the peerless Alexandria 2. Speakers without compromise, brought to you by Absolute Sounds: premier importer of the world's finest hi-fi.

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