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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.

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editorial

People famously rode into – and drove out of – the Great Depression. Economic uncertainty brings with it a great deal of woes, but it can also be the engine of social, political and, most significantly, technological change. If you struggle to remember what life was like when the economy was booming, it might be because you weren't tweeting your every move using your iPad back then.

This 'engine of change' means we must face some difficult facts about our little world. I have come to the conclusion that CD will be all but consigned to history by the middle of the decade. The talk is of 'inflection points' now; the moment when an act's sales move from predominantly 'CD-based' to 'download-based'. Each one is different and many acts have already crossed that threshold, while some still have years before they change, and some new acts began life firmly on the download side. The interesting part of this is how rapidly CD sales drop away for an act following its inflection point. The concern for CD-loving audiophiles is whether there is a kind of Grand Inflection Moment, when the majority of acts sell more downloads than physical formats.

Although some have said CD will be 'all over' by the end of this year, I think it's more likely that some time in the next eighteen months, the majority of bands will have passed that tipping point, which will ultimately cut CD sales dramatically and probably irrevocably.

I wish I could see a long-term future for optical drive, but I really don't think there is one. Car manufacturers are already considering life after the CD. Unlike a turntable, CD players rely on key components (such as the laser eye) that

cannot easily be fabricated in a machine shop by a competent engineer. Unlike vinyl, CDs need to be produced in an expensive-to-run clean-room environment. We could point to CD ubiquity as a guarantee of its future support, but that same ubiquity didn't stave off the end for compact cassette, the VHS tape or even the incandescent light bulb. So, although I sincerely hope there will continue to be disc-based products made and supported for the longest time, once that mainstream market begins to tail off fast, I fear things will begin to become pretty scarce, both in terms of discs and players.

This invites two big questions. What do I do now, and what do I do then? For now, I'd suggest if you were putting off that ultimate CD player purchase, don't, and if you have gaps in your collection, think about filling them relatively quickly. Or maybe now is the time to start investigating computer audio if you haven't already done so. Or even do what the Hipster kids do and buy a turntable. Because the future may not come with an optional CD player.



Alan Sircom
editor@hifiplus.com

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE: UK 5TH APRIL 2012 ... US 10TH MAY 2012

ARABESQUE MINI

by
Crystal Cable

"Potential legends don't come along that often.
The Arabesque Mini might just be 2012's new legend..."
by Alan Sircom, Hifi+ Issue 85



For more information about the Arabesque range or Crystal Cable's comprehensive range of Interconnect, Speaker, Digital, HDMI, Fire Wire, USB and AC cables please contact Absolute Sounds by phone +44 (0) 20 89 71 39 09 or visit www.absolutesounds.com.

www.crystalcable.com

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for the love of music...

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Or email them to editor@hifiplus.com

incoming!

A Rant from Hants!

First I must apologize for what follows. You see, I am usually a quiet soul but cannot remain so any longer for this needs to be said. I have loved music since I can remember and for the last thirty five years I have by necessity become an audiophile. In those years I have also attained degrees in physics and qualifications in computing and digital electronics, and spent twenty years working on complex software systems such as operating systems and computer architectures.

I have been driven to write because, I am currently sitting and listening to music, and as usual I find myself switching from my £7,500 CD to my £1,500 turntable, not because it sounds 'different', but because it sounds BETTER and this fact is due to the laws of the universe, let me explain. There are two fundamental parameters that define the accuracy of a digitally sampled analogue system and they are sampling rate and word length. Yes, there is lots of clever digital signal processing going on, but this is just manipulation of the sampled output. Now we started with CD red book standard of 16 bits at 44.1 kHz and now we are talking about lossless formats of 24 bits at 96 kHz that, surprise surprise sound better than the CD standard. So what is the ultimate for digital replay? I'll tell you, it's infinite sampling rate and word length, or in other words ANALOGUE.

So let's stop being fooled by all the record and hi-fi companies. Digital systems are an approximation to reality and are for convenience only, and that cannot be in doubt. So sell your dreadful DAB, CD player and network thingamys and buy an FM tuner, turntable and loads of vinyl and listen to music as it was physically produced, propagated through space-time and received by your auditory system.

And another thing, I resent the fact that I have had to 'go digital', because analogue media has become so difficult or costly to source. It has cost me a small fortune to attempt, and I mean attempt, to attain an acceptable digital sound. To be honest I think that you, yes you the hi-fi press should be more aggressive at defending analogue, as to a man, or woman from everything you say, you all prefer analogue!

The problem is being compounded by the fact that we now have a whole generation of young people who think the universe is digital and that it's great. And they are the ones who are now starting to sponsor and develop these sub-standard products. Well they are wrong! And it is up to us older folks to make them aware that, accepting possible spontaneous symmetry breaking of space-time at the Planck scale, the universe is in fact a continuum, or ANALOGUE, and it is better for it.

There is obviously a place for convenience but it has little to do with experiencing the power of music. At the end of the day progress is not always a good thing, so keep the faith and let the analogue music play.

I'll be alright in a minute, is it time for my medication!

I AM Seething of Hampshire (aka Dean Marshall), via email

"I find myself switching from my £7,500 CD to my £1,500 turntable, not because it sounds 'different', but because it sounds BETTER."

Thanks for that. I hope getting it off your chest makes you feel better. I also hope the army of the self-righteous don't rise up against you. The keyboard warriors who know a little but say a lot might get jolly bated at any suggestion that doesn't include the phrase 'bits are bits'. Please send us some of your medication, we could use some of it round here too – Ed.

We want better downloads!

In regard to the potential demise of CD, it occurs to me that even if we move to a 100% download world, hi rez versions (CD quality or above) must be easily able to be made available by the record labels to channels that support this type of download (such as hdtracks.com)

The recording/mixing process, even if its digital, will be done at a reasonable resolution so producing lossy and lossless versions of the music will not cost any more for the record labels.

The potential downside is that we audiophiles lose access to "native" PCM versions of CD such as WAV files that require no decoding.

From a pure technical perspective, a digital format such as WAV needs little

▶ downstream processing during playback as compared to FLAC, which to the paranoid amongst us (myself included), would be the worst aspect of a hi rez, all download world.

Peter O'Shea, via email

Sadly, the music business has never been blessed with great powers of logical thought when it comes to giving the public what they want. There are, however, legitimate bandwidth issues (for example, few people with low broadband speeds would really spend all night downloading an uncompressed album, when they can get the MP3 file in a few minutes), but right now the only people investigating this are the music loving audiophiles, which are a minority interest in the music business.

I'm less concerned about the use of FLAC though. It is akin to folding a piece of paper to make it fit into a smaller envelope. You can experiment with taking uncompressed ripped files from a disc, compressing a copy in FLAC and listening to the two files. If you are worried, simply unpack the FLAC file into .WAV or AIFF before you play it, rather than unpacking it on the fly. I fully understand that this is an hurdle many are reluctant to jump, but it's more of an intellectual one than a sonically deleterious one – Ed.

Computer clarity

I believe your contributor concerning computer-based audio is a little unclear and misinformed? In the table showing different file formats he clearly states that WAV and AIFF gets the highest audio rating – 5/5. What dismisses him immediately, in my opinion, is the fact that he also rates FLAC and APE as also 5/5 but giving Apple Lossless a 4/5.

Has this guy ever compared WAV/AIFF to Lossless Compressed audio formats? No, probably not. Because had he done so, he would surely note that WAV or AIFF sound similar, with the one big advantage for AIFF is the fact that it supports tagging. He would also note that FLAC and M4A sounds similar on most occasions but that depends mainly on the hardware/software

responsible for decoding the files. APE has no chance whatsoever in a similar listening environment as it is a symmetric compression format, which requires as much effort to decode, as to encode.

And if you try, I am certain that you will all rank AIFF or WAV files higher on the audio scale than their lossless compressed brethren! I cannot really explain why, but it seems that real time decoding introduces some form of jitter or other time-related distortion.

Other than this I believe he is doing a good job! I enjoy reading these articles a lot as it is another person's point of view of something that I personally have spent a lot of time in investigating, listening and comparing different solutions.

Furthermore I highly enjoy reading your magazine, as it is well written with a nice dose of British humour and seemingly knowledgeable articles on the higher end audio spectrum.

I subscribe to the magazine on my iPad and I do believe it is the future of magazine publishing! Great job in converting the paperback into an electronic version! Best regards from cold Sweden!

Mikael Ollars, via email

The inclusion of .APE files in the list was possibly a step too far, but it's good to be complete on these things, though. Speaking personally, I've not been able to hear much difference between FLAC, ALAC, .WAV or AIFF in most circumstances. I know many who disagree, and feel strongly that uncompressed files are better sounding and that it's better to open lossless files to their uncompressed form before replay than playing them uncompressed, but I struggle to hear such differences on anything apart from a truly take-no-prisoners system. Even then, I'm not convinced the differences are clear cut. I think this is worthy of more experimentation – Ed.

Two rights...

As an avid reader of your magazine, lately also excellently via iPad, I would like to ask you for your view regarding a potential pairing of your reviewed Mastersound Evolution 845 with my Audio Physic Cardeas (your review of the APs led me to auditioning and subsequent purchase), with a view to substitute my Luxman L-509f. If not fully confident, which (tube) alternative(s) would you suggest?

Jérôme Koelewijn, via email

Sadly, I didn't have the opportunity to test the Mastersound and Audio Physic in the same system. I would suggest the match might not be the best one around, if only because the Cardeas might need some driving beyond the power of the 845 tubes. Although it is an 89dB efficient speaker with a four ohm nominal impedance, it's the sort of loudspeaker that demands a lot of power. If you are set on using tube amplifiers, I would look at something a lot more powerful like the VTL ST-150 power amp or the Audio Research VS115. Adding a preamp to the mix of comparable quality will raise your budget quite considerably – Ed.

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news

MartinLogan Montis loudspeakers

Hot on the heels of the ElectroMotion ESL, the new Montis loudspeakers replaces the Spire in the company's top Reserve ESL range of hybrid electrostatic loudspeaker designs. Using the 112cm XStat Curvilinear Line Source panel, coupled with a 254mm aluminium cone woofer driven by a 200 watt Class D power amp per side, the main change between the Montis and its predecessor is the new 24-bit digital Vojtko EQ system, which kicks in at 100Hz and extends the low frequency performance down to 29Hz. The Montis also adds a new high gloss black cherry wood finish to the range.

Price £9,800 per pair www.martinlogan.com www.absolutesounds.com



Arcam FMJ D33 SuperDAC

Arcam's new D33 from its Full Metal Jacket range features dual 24-bit/192kHz Burr Brown DACs, a full range of coaxial, AES/EBU and 'advanced' asynchronous USB inputs, sports fast or slow roll-off user-selectable filter options, is said to have the sort of heavyweight power supply normally found in an amplifier and features balanced and single-ended audio outputs. The D33 also supports RS232 connections for custom install use.

Price £2,000 www.arcam.co.uk

Cyrus Modular amplifiers

Cyrus Audio has adopted a modular approach to its new amplifier range, to reflect the changes in the audio world. The concept is to build the 'perfect' amplifier for the listener, from a range of options, rather than build-in preconceived notional 'useful' functions that may not apply anymore.

There are two power options (40w and 70w) and the amplifier can be supplied with analogue inputs only, a five-input DAC option, plus an even better DAC and an upgradable external power supply option if you choose the 70w option. In essence, the new modular system is based on the existing Cyrus 6 and 8 models, retaining the iconic 'singing shoebox' die-cast chassis (although a new aluminium alloy replaces the magnesium of old) and the changes have seen price repositioning... and for once, a lowering of prices in both amplifiers and matching CD players.

Prices: from £699 (Cyrus 6a)-£1,700 (Cyrus 8 Qx DAC), www.cyrusaudio.com



Densen B-475 CD player

Densen calls its new two-box B-475 flagship CD player a 'Superleggera' model. The second 'super light' aluminium in the range (the first was the B-275 preamp) divides the player's functions, with one cabinet containing the CD transport and DAC and the other the power supply. The player features a modified CD transport with external clock control, a 24bit DAC and Densen's Class A output stages, all on the same four-layer Teflon PCB. It features a digital coax input and two sets of outputs, while the '2NRG' power supply sports three custom transformers and 200,000µF of reservoir capacitance.

Price £5,960 www.densen.dk, www.kogaudio.com



Burmester 113 DAC

Burmester has been developing what it calls its 'MMI' module for its popular 061, 069 and 089 CD players.

One of the offshoots of this development line is the new half-sized 113 DAC. Incorporating aptX and A2DP Bluetooth connection and both Class 1 (to 24bit/96kHz) and Class 2 USB audio (up to 24-bit/192kHz, currently only stable on Mac platforms) alongside two conventional digital inputs, the 113 is designed to accept digital audio of yesterday, today and tomorrow with ease. It also features user-switchable upsampling between 24-bit/48kHz to 24bit/192kHz, and a DC-coupled balanced signal path free from coupling capacitors.

Price £2,370 www.burmester.de



NEWS IN BRIEF

Fidelity Art PAB supports

Fidelity Art has announced the new PAB range of anti-vibration furniture. Using plywood platforms held in place with brass pillars, the shelves are completely suspended by a series of tightened threads, and yet can hold up to 59kg. Built in Standard, Signature and Reference ranges, the platforms are merely the first step in a whole anti-vibration support range. Prices for the platforms range from £479 to £799.

www.fidelityart.co.uk

Phiaton PS 500 headphones

Phiaton has announced its new top-of-the-line headphone, the PS 500. The closed back circumaural design features a 40mm titanium dynamic driver claimed to be of 'studio quality'. The PS 500 is intended to for extended listening sessions, with an extra-wide padded headband, 'extra plush' earpads and leather cup housings. The PS 500 will be sold exclusively through iHeadphones and its Amazon.com store for £170.

www.phiaton.com www.iheadphones.com

Cabasse architectural speakers

Cabasse has announced a new collection of custom install speakers, featuring the company's co-axial loudspeaker technology, which it considers ideal for in-ceiling and in-wall use thanks to its wide dispersion characteristics.

The first of the 15-strong range include five models in the Archipel architectural in-wall/in-ceiling range, as well as in-wall versions of the company's Antigua two-way and Minorca three-way standmount loudspeakers. Prices range from £199 to £649 per pair.

www.cabasse.com/en

An Apology

In our CES round-up in Issue 86, we mistakenly reported the Music Hall range as 'badge-engineered Pro-Ject' turntables. Although the Music Hall turntable range is built at the Pro-Ject factory and share common design elements, the Music Hall range is a highly respected brand in its own right and a completely separate entity to Pro-Ject and as such should not be considered mere badge-engineering. Our apologies for any confusion caused.

FEATURE

Computer Audio for Beginners Part 3

The future of music, at your fingertips By Vincent Luke



Having established a good foundation to choosing and using the right methodology for getting the best out of computer audio, Vince Luke of AMR concludes by looking at some of the issues you might encounter in setting up a first rate computer audio system.

We are going to focus specifically on some well-known applications that build on the concepts laid down in previous parts of this feature. These are two of the most popular and distinctly audiophile-based programs to help extract good music files. They are not the only options; others – most notably Pure Music and Amarra on the Mac – are available, but there are so many systems on offer, it's best to concentrate on what you know best.

In this case, that's Audirvana on the Mac OS X platform and J. River Media Center/CMPlay on the Windows platform. All represent fine and bit-perfect players.

Audirvana on the Macintosh OS X

Audirvana is a well-known Bit-Perfect audio program on the Mac OS X platform. The following optimisation guide was kindly provided by Damien Plisson, developer of Audirvana. This version is freeware and is available at www.audirvana.com

If your OS X is Snow Leopard starting from 10.6.3, then it does not require a USB Audio Class 2.0 driver program to be installed. However, with the latest Lion OS X: Please consult your DAC vendor to confirm that the DAC does/ does not require a USB Audio Driver program.

To take advantage of an 'Integer Mode', which bypasses certain non-audio processes, please consult your audio playback vendor to confirm whether or not this feature is available.

General Optimizations

1. Connect the DAC on a dedicated USB bus

The USB plugs on your Mac are not equivalent. One may be already shared with an internal peripheral like the built-in iSight webcam.

To check the DAC is connected to the right plug:

1. Use the "System Information" application you can launch from the Apple menu, popping the "About this Mac" dialog. Then click on "More info..."
2. Scroll the left column down to the Hardware section
3. Select USB
4. Check on the top right pane that "USB Audio" is listed alone under a "High speed USB bus" section

Connect any other peripherals, such as external hard drives, to another bus, or even to a Firewire or Thunderbolt one.

2. Deactivate screen saver

In System Preferences, Apple Desktop and Screen Saver Preferences, in the Screen Saver tab, set the Screen Saver Activation time to 'never'.

Computer Audio Optimisation Issues to Consider

Hardware-related	Soultion
CAS/NAS/PFP Most if not all Upsampling software employed in a computer is no match for hardware DSP chips.	Unavoidable area of weakness compared to traditional source components such as CD players.
CAS/NAS/PFP SPDIF/USB outputs usually contain large amounts of jitter.	Use Asynchronous audio devices (ones that do not derive their clock from the PC) to eliminate the effect of Software-Induced Jitter, mostly Asynchronous USB right now, but also some internal devices. A true Asynchronous USB audio implementation goes a long way but is not the end all and be all. Additional attention to address the different sources of jitter will further improve the sound -----Ofv
NAS must be optimised to stream without dropouts even when it is doing housekeeping, transcoding etc.	Attention to setup and constant updates by software vendor
NAS Network quality is crucial, may need extensive Wi-Fi tweaking in extreme circumstances, e.g. when there is Wi-Fi interference from nearby routers in urban settings.	Attention to setup and constant updates by software vendor
NAS/PIP Limited sonic performance (finite ability to extract performance). NAS from Logitech Squeezebox to Linn DS System are aimed at broader-market and user is tied to pre-defined software from the vendor.	Feature of NAS closed system. Attention to vendor for software updates.
Software-related	Soultion
<p>CAS/NAS/PFP Bit-Perfect streaming is essential, without not "Hi-Fi or High-End". This was outlined in Paper 2: 2.3; Bit-Perfect playback. Incidentally, all audio playback programs that Bit-Perfect do NOT sound identical because no two computer audio programs were written in the same fashion; one will be more complex than another and hence utilise CPU resources less efficiently causing more software jitter to negatively impact the sound.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> On Windows use ASIO or for Vista/7 WASAPI-Exclusive mode; both bypass Windows' audio system. Software player support is needed as standard Windows audio player is not Bit-Perfect and cannot use ASIO/WASAPI-Exclusive. On Mac OS X, needs special software player (Audivana etc.) or special software that integrates with iTunes (PureMusic or Amarra), as iTunes is not reliably Bit-Perfect. 	Where possible, use dedicated computer for playback and strive for Bit-Perfect playback software.
CAS/NAS/PFP The PC hardware produces Software-Induced Jitter which is directly proportional to its CPU loading.	<p>On the CAS, minimise the number of superfluous software stages to avoid dropouts and Software-Induced Jitter, normally a dedicated computer with only the basic operating system (Windows, OSX, Linux) and the music player is recommended.</p> <p>On the NAS, consult the vendor as attention sonic performance varies.</p>
Mains Power Supply-related	Soultion
CAS/NAS/PFP and all modern electric appliances such as Blu-Ray players use Switched-Mode Power Supplies which generates and injects a vast amount of Radio Frequency and Audio Frequency noise.	Traditional audio power conditioners filter are ineffective as they filter at a higher frequency. Either change to linear power supply or new type of power conditioner required.
Ground Loop Issues from coupled into the HiFi system through the addition of extra boxes increases the likelihood of more ground loops issues injected into the mains power supply. - lack of isolation between complex digital devices (PC, Network Player, Blue Ray Player) and Hi-Fi may add digital noise into the signal path resulting in poor audio, so attention to isolation is essential, but difficult to do for devices with analogue outputs and not easy for SPDIF.	Traditional audio power conditioners filter are ineffective. No obvious power conditioner solution exists at present. A partial solution involves using a power conditioner on the audio chain, and a separate balanced mains transformer on the computer side.

[sometimes]
technology meets art...



► 3. Minimize use of other applications

Other applications might have peak demands on the CPU, the RAM and/or the hard drive, degrading the sound quality, even down to skips in audio playback in case of memory swapping to disk.

Advanced Optimizations

1. Deactivate Spotlight

Spotlight index updates are hard drive intensive, and thus the cause of sound quality degradation.

The easiest way is to place all your connected disks in the « Privacy » list (in System Preferences, Spotlight).

2. Deactivate automated Time Machine backups

Time Machine backups are very hard disk intensive, so the best to avoid any starting during the audio playback is to deactivate the scheduled backups (usually starting every hour).

In System Preferences, Time Machine, slide the main switch to 'OFF'.

Audirvana Settings



1. Selecting DAC for audio output

In User Preferences, Audio System, click on the Change button (in the Preferred Audio Device section on the top of the panel).

Select USB Audio 2.0 in the drop down list of the popup window.

Click on Select to close the popup.

USB Audio 2.0 shall appear under Active Audio Device.

2. Tweaking settings

Select 4s as the SPL rate switching latency to allow the advanced synchronization locking of the some converters to complete when changing sample rate.

Normally all the other default settings (all Low level playback options checked) shall give you optimal results. Leave the Max spl rate limit to No Limit as the DAC should not have such limitations, check with the manufacturer).

If you have less than 4GB of RAM, you may want to lower the Memory allocated for tracks pre-load value to avoid any potential audio dropouts due to swapping to disk of exhausted memory. As a rule of thumb it is best to leave at least 2.5GB RAM to the OS.

If you encounter some short and frequent audio dropouts and you have a Mac from before 2008 end, this may be due to insufficient USB bus power. A workaround consists in plugging the DP-777 in a USB powered hub that is connected to the Mac. Of course no other device shall be connected on the same hub.

Upsampling

You can force upsampling to the 192kHz, or oversampling to 2x or 4x the track native sample rate.



For this, select the appropriate option in User Preferences, Audio Filters.

Different choices of Sample Rate Converter algorithm are proposed.

CoreAudio 4x4 implements a double oversampling for the up-sampling, and 4x oversampling for the down-sampling, giving a sample rate of 192kHz.

J. River Media Center/CMPlay on Microsoft Win7

Optimising J. River Media Centre/CMPlay, both of which are Bit-Perfect audio playback programs on the Windows platform, follows along the same broad lines, just on a different operating system. Essentially, once you recognise that what applies, applies universally, the concepts become a lot easier to point at any system.

However, specifically for these programs, bit-perfect playback simply involves selecting Auto sampling rate switching.

Prior to this, as Win7 is not USB Audio Class 2.0 compliant, you must install the relevant USB Audio Driver for your DAC.



► 1 Installation of J. River Media Centre

Go to: <http://www.jriver.com/download.html> download and install the J. River Media Center program. (30-day free trial or US\$49.98 for the full version).

Once installed, launch J. River Media Center.

Then navigate to Tools > Options.

With the Options page open:

On the left panel, select Audio.

On the right panel, make sure the following settings are as follows:

- Output mode: ASIO
- Play silence at start up for hardware synchronization:
4-5 seconds



- Play files from memory instead of disk (not zone-specific): Selected
- Do not play silence (leading and trailing): Unselected
- Cross-fade for sequential album tracks: Unselected*
- Use gapless for sequential album tracks: Selected

*One may wish to try Cross-Fade selected for radio/disco/pop music.



Then click **Output mode settings**.

The ASIO Settings window will open.

Device, make sure ASIO Driver is selected. (this one is called TUSB but name will vary from one driver to another)

Buffering, make sure the marker is all the way to left (i.e. maximum buffer).

Then click OK.



Click DSP & output format.



The DSP Studio window will open; Make sure NONE of the DSP settings are selected.

And you are done! Now enjoy the sound of your J River system. +

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MOON Evolution Series 850P Dual-Mono Preamplifier and 880M Mono-Bloc Power Amps

By Roy Gregory Photography by Simon Marsh

Simaudio's MOON series electronics are a well-established face on the UK hi-fi scene, with an enviable reputation for solid engineering underpinning excellent sound. For many a dealer they are fast becoming the "go to" choice, capable of delivering musical performance in a whole host of different system situations. That's an enviable position for the mainstream MOON series electronics to occupy, but the MOON Evolution series, and especially these flagship models need to offer a bit more than that.

The 850P pre-amp and 880M mono-blocs supersede the P8/W8 combination, the difference in designation in part reflecting what the company feels is a significant step up in performance (as well as price in the case of the 850P). As always with MOON products, the evolutionary nature of their development means that the changes on paper, one model to the next, might appear small. But the scale of such incremental advances aren't necessarily reflected by the advances in sonic performance and this pre-power combination is not just the most impressive pairing I've heard from MOON (and by some distance), it is genuinely impressive by any standards. But let's start at the beginning and see what goes into these products.

The 850P (£19K) shares a number of important features with its predecessor (the £14K P8) including the now familiar twin chassis format, with audio circuitry in one box and power supply and control circuitry in the other. That power supply features no fewer than three of MOON's proprietary toroidal transformers. These use special core materials and vacuum encapsulation to create designs that are smaller, more efficient and generate less vibration than equivalent conventional units. In this case they feed no fewer than 40 individually filtered supplies for the fully differential, dual-mono audio circuit.

Parts in the signal path have been revised and upgraded, particularly when it comes to the silicon, whilst the 850P employs the same stacked circuit board topology as the P8, a complex and costly exercise, but an approach that, in combination with the use of four-layer boards, significantly shortens the signal path. But the real advances are in the physical construction of the unit. The rigidity of the casework has been improved with thicker panels, while in the case of the PSU it is now also smaller, making it the same size as the audio chassis as well as also further improving the stiffness of the structure. Of course, that doesn't actually help unless you provide an exit route for stored energy. Thankfully, the MOON's rigidly coupled feet do exactly that. But the biggest change is internal, where the audio circuit board is now suspended on an octet of high-performance (and high priced) polymer isolators to further eliminate microphonic effects. Taken together these measures have reduced

the signal to noise performance of the already extremely quiet P8 by another 3dB, making the 850P not only a serious contender for the title of World's Quietest Pre-Amp, but pushing its performance to the limits of current measurement techniques. All Evolution series units share the same chassis design, with its four legs and adjustable cone feet – just don't be tempted to stack the 850P's two boxes. Do so and you'll seriously erode the low-level resolution and transparency.

The 850P has a total of seven line inputs (there's a matching, standalone phono-stage on the way). Like most modern pre-amps, the 850P employs a discrete resistor array to set level in 0.1dB steps. Where it differs is in the beautiful weighting of the rotary knob and its associated control logic, which is equally beautifully judged, offering two carefully chosen rates of change on the knob itself and three on the remote. Finally, the sensibly low 50 Ohm output impedance should eliminate any question of matching issues.

The 880M mono-blocs share the same improved chassis mechanics as the pre-amp and offer considerably more power than their predecessors. With 32 bi-polar output devices per channel, their selection and the details of their deployment are key to the amplifiers' performance. MOON employ a carefully selected transistor that has been further refined to their specifications. The circuit is fully differential throughout, but unusually, each output device is individually

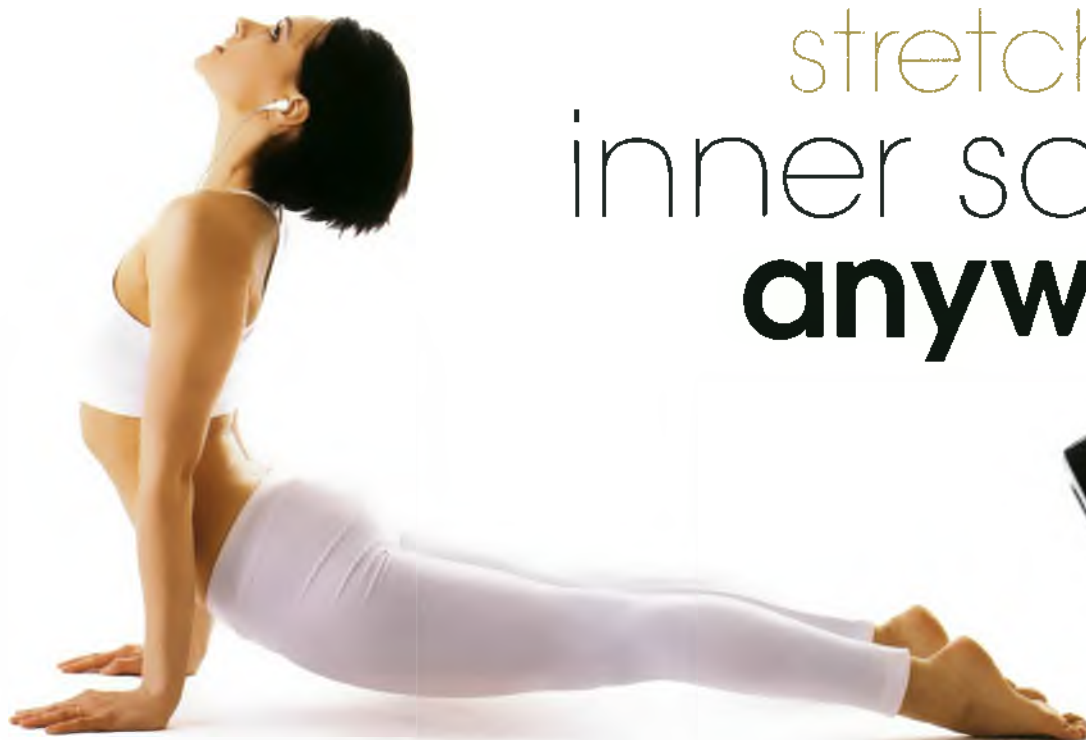
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► decoupled (one from another) to further lower the output impedance and increase the damping factor – to a figure of 2000! Like all MOON amps (and pre-amps), the mono-blocs are global feedback free and DC coupled throughout. According to MOON the amps are unconditionally stable and run to 10 Watts in Class A. Both the 880M and 850P feature DC servos to eliminate the risk of inadvertent damage to loudspeakers; with 800 Watts on tap, smoking your drive units with a moment of loud carelessness is all too real a possibility.

You want loud, there's few better places to look than the *Thin Red Line* OST, with its combination of sheer scale and massive dynamics. Yet it is also a subtly crafted piece, full of the texture and delicate detail. The epic 'Journey To The Line' ably displays the MOONs' grace under pressure and unburstable appetite for massive dynamic impact. The huge drum crashes that underpin the central crescendo seem bottomless in their depth and weight, without ever being ponderous. Whilst MOON describe the output stage of their amps as unconditionally stable irrespective of electrical load, it's a terms which could equally be used to describe their musical performance.

Running the MOONs over this particular musical obstacle course, quickly reveals two things: the sense of musical purpose and sheer momentum that characterized early big MOON amps has survived intact, but here it's combined with a significant increase in subtlety and the preservation of low-level detail; but more importantly, to hear these benefits you'll need to get your listening level just so, which probably means slightly louder than you expect. Don't worry, the MOONs can handle the dynamic demands, even if your existing amps can't. Lose your bottle and back off the volume and the pace and momentum of the track rapidly dissipates, becoming just impressive (and rather bombastic) noise rather than effective music.

Don't underestimate just how musically critical (and demanding) these amps are. Get that (beautifully weighted) volume control set to just the right level and you'll be swept away; anything else and the results can be distinctly ho-hum. These amps are all about the dynamic envelope and scale of real life, real instruments, real performances – and that includes the volume. In fact, they insist on it.

As important as the level is to large-scale works like *The Thin Red Line*, it becomes even more critical and apparent with smaller scale pieces. Switching to Shawn Colvin's *Steady On*, and the track 'Shotgun Down The Avalanche', even at optimum volume, the Moons lack the immediacy and startling projection, the almost ghostly naturalness of the vocal that set this track apart. The stop-start conjunction of verse and chorus, the way the instruments punctuate the phrasing, the way that shifts in playing pressure accent the track and drive it along – all these things are diminished. That is, they're diminished until you dig out the LP. It's another example of just how critical or revealing the MOONs are when it comes to performances and the media on which they're stored. What I'm describing here is the discrepancy in quality between the original LP and the CD transfer.

The MOONs offer a more holistic, contained version of events. Those sleigh bells, the attack on the driven guitar chords are all held in the same acoustic space, rather than given the emphasis of those other amps. Which you prefer is down to personal taste, but throughout the listening period the MOONs resolutely refused to exaggerate the music they played. So, what you hear is what is there – just don't expect the MOONs to sweeten things or make the sound any more cuddly.

The MOONs still can't quite match the rhythmic articulation and deft micro-dynamic expression of small amps or the OTL Bemings. But the cost here is much smaller than anticipated, especially given the load tolerance and sheer potential energy on tap. What's more, as the musical forces involved increase and the density of the recording fills in, the MOONs find their feet. The stark clarity of 'Shotgun...' presents with their severest test. Stepping up to *Short Sharp Shocked* with its more fluid, traditional arrangements and fuller sound, the results



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► are significantly better. Step up again, this time to Neil Young's *Sleeps With Angels* and the MOONs' absolute stability and seamless top-to-bottom continuity really come into their own. 'Safeway Cart' basks in the easy dynamic grasp of the big MOON amps, its measured tempo and the natural attack and shape of the deep guitar notes giving it a real sense of direction and musical purpose, perfect contrast with the fuzz guitar fills and the bleak subject matter. The result is a musical and emotional tour de force.

Neil Young to Beethoven might seem like a bit of a reach, but DGG's SACD transfer of Carlos Kleiber's supreme 7th (with the Vienna Philharmonic) draws all these strands together to brilliant effect. The second movement employs much the same measured tempo and repeated phrasing that defines 'Safeway Cart', and presents systems with a similar challenge. It's Kleiber's masterful control of the VPO, his direction of the orchestral forces that makes this performance so special. With the MOONs you really hear his influence, the orchestra really does become one. Meanwhile, the 1st offers startling dynamics and tonal shading. It demands a simultaneous shift in level, shading and density, but the 850P and 880Ms simply take it in their stride, without hesitation or any apparent effort.

You'll notice that I've barely covered these amps' tonal character. That's basically because, to all intents and purposes, they don't have one. Yes, they lean, ever so slightly, to the cooler side of neutral, but it's a deviation that's so small that other elements in the system will make much bigger differences. What's much more important is that they are incredibly even from the deepest bass to the highest treble, with no unsightly lumps or bumps to intrude on or distract the listener. In the same way that dynamics – or more properly, dynamic limitations – are not allowed to shatter the musical illusion, tone and to a large extent texture are utterly consistent, never undermining the performers or their performance.

It's this poise, control without constraint, the ability to encompass both the musical and expressive demands of the programme, that marks the MOON amps apart. They allow the different elements and strands in the music to coexist, their relationships in level, time and space preserved, unimpeded by the nasty, mechanical business of audio reproduction. The MOONs reestablish the world of the performers and invite you in.

Opt for the MOON-light and you'll be rewarded with electronics that while unfailingly critical and demanding when it comes to set-up, partnering equipment and the quality of recordings, are also holistic, natural and unexaggerated in their presentation, and possess an innate sense of balance and poise that (almost) never allows the real world to intrude on the reproduced. These Moon amps are confident, unflappable, evenhanded and so far as I've been able to discover (and believe me, I have tried) unburstable. They also possess a level of musical sophistication, expression and range that escapes all but the very best electronics. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

850P

Type: Fully balanced dual-mono line-stage

Inputs: 3prs balanced XLR, 4x RCA

Tape Loop: 1x singled-ended RCA

Input Impedance: 11kOhms

Input Sensitivity: 200mV – 4.0V RMS

Gain: 9dB

Outputs: 2prs balanced XLR

2prs single-ended RCA

(fixed and variable)

Output Impedance: 50 Ohms

Weight (total shipping): 32kgs

Dimensions (WxHxD): 18.75x4.0x16.5 each

880M

Type: Fully balanced mono power amp

Inputs: 1x balanced XLR, 1x RCA

Input Impedance: 47.5 kOhms

Input Sensitivity: 2.25V

Gain: 31dB

Outputs: 2prs 5-way binding posts

Rated Output: 800 Watts/8 Ohms

1,6 kWatts/4 Ohms

Weight (total shipping): 42kgs each

Dimensions (WxHxD): 18.75x7.5x16.5 each

Price: £18,900 (850P), £29,000/pr (880M)

Manufacturer: Simaudio Ltd

URL: www.simaudio.com

Distributor: Renaissance Audio

URL: www.renaissanceaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)131 555 3922

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

conrad-johnson ET3 SE preamp, Classic Sixty SE power amplifier

By Alan Sircom

Last year, I investigated the then-new conrad-johnson ET3 and found it an excellent performer. It's a line stage – with optional phono board – tube preamp that owes a lot to the circuit design that has gone into the company's GAT flagship. With the Classic preamp effectively off the radar, the standard ET3 represents the base model in the conrad-johnson preamp line. But what would happen if it had key components 'pimped'?

The question is answered in the guise of the ET3 SE. It retains almost every attribute of the ET3, right down to the single 6922 double triode input tube, one triode section per channel. This takes care of voltage amplification, while the FET buffers make sure the amp has ideal low impedance output for even driving amps at the end of long interconnects.

The zero feedback ET3 circuit was shaved by Occam's Razor, using the simplest possible circuit to make as good a sound as possible. The ET3 SE doesn't reverse that decision, it packs the circuit with game-raising components. It replaces the already well-chosen polyprop caps in the signal path with Teflons, adds more Vishay resistors into the mix (they are only used in the stepped attenuator on the base model), the jack sockets get a silver-plated remix and so on. This puts a higher price on its head, placing it financially (and, as we'll see, sonically) in between the standard ET3 and ET5.

Like all c-j preamps, absolute phase is inverted, but this simply requires adjustment at the loudspeaker terminals of the power amplifier. Those high-quality, high-end, high-price capacitors that form a key aspect of the SE modifications come with a high run-in requirement; it sounds pretty good from the get-go and a lot better after a few hours, but the improvement as it comes on song just keeps going and going and going. We are looking at hundreds of hours of play to get to the best out of those components. Fortunately, unlike some devices, the tonal balance of the amps settles down quickly so after a weekend or so of listening, you get the SE sound, but as the intervening weeks pass, you get more of it.

There is no balance option, which means the two sets of LED volume settings are redundant. The rationale for the twin volume displays is understandable from a common design perspective (it's the same block used



in the ET5 and GAT, which do allow balance control), but not if viewed from the position of the ET3 alone. Kludgy segue alert; those looking for balance in reviews should note... the above is the sum total of the negatives surrounding the c-j SE combo in this review.

The ET3 is not the only SE game in town. The company has applied performance upgrades to its new Classic Sixty power amp. This replaces the LP66 at the entry point of c-j's range. The Classic Sixty in its standard guise uses four EL34 power pentodes, alongside the regular zero feedback configuration of a 6922 double triode input per channel and a shared 6189 as phase inverter (the predecessor used a 6922 for both tasks and 6550s in place of the EL34s). The SE version once again features extensive use of Vishay resistors, eschews bypass polyprops for Teflons and higher-grade terminals. The big difference though is it uses four of the new KT120 power tubes. As with previous c-j amps, biasing the power tubes is done with a long plastic screwdriver and a series of LEDs on the top panel. A safety cage is provided; good job too, those KT120s run hot. The use of KT120s necessitates some beefing up of the power transformer over the standard Classic Sixty, so although the circuit remains the same, the two are not identical on some fairly deep levels.

The standard preamp is excellent, but these two are bloody marvellous. A good preamp is all about matching gain structures between sources and power amps. That can make or break a system and even those CD player makers who claim their products don't need a preamp often sound better with a world-class preamp in the chain. The key words there were 'world-class'. They are hard to come by. Price does not automatically confer 'world-class' status, but generally those best-ever preamps become more and more rare as the price drops. So, it's refreshing to find a truly world-class preamp in the ET3 SE. And a perfect partner in the Classic Sixty SE.

They have a richness of tone that isn't thick or stodgy, but instead give music shape, texture and body. Vocals project forward out of the mix with excellent articulation and a sense of solidity that makes you envisage a living, breathing human being standing in front of you. It makes listening to broken-voiced torch-song singers like Amy Winehouse or Billie Holiday almost impossible; you aren't in there with the mix, you are sharing their pain.

It's not just vocals; the voice of every instrument is presented with both elegance and insight. There's a lot of bass going on here, too. Clean, deep and controlled bass, with oodles of bounce and excellent definition and separation, I suspect much of this come down to the Classic Sixty SE and, I suspect, those KT120s. Whatever it is that's doing it, the net result is a sound thoroughly underpinned by its lower registers, and yet not constrained by them. Authority without being authoritarian is perhaps the best description of the c-j bass here.

This gives the sound a degree of fluid effortlessness. Not honey-

"Price does not automatically confer 'world-class' status, but generally those best-ever preamps become more and more rare as the price drops. So, it's refreshing to find a truly world-class preamp in the ET3 SE. And perfect partner in the Classic Sixty SE."

dripped or rose-tinted unless required, the sound flows from musical theme to musical theme with extraordinary ease. The dynamic range and shade of the music is retained perfectly, exposing those little cues that normally get lost in the mix. Naturally, this is the sort of sound that is made for fey-sounding dinner jazz that is still somewhat inexplicably popular in audiophile circles. What people forget is it is also made for playing Chopin, Sigur Ros, Bruce Springsteen's Nebraska, John Martyn, John Coltrane and a lot of music that didn't go to the Julie London school. It's not the same criteria that you use to listen to some rip-snorting Allman Brothers live blues or some Joy Division gloom, but the amps have the drive and energy to cope with that end of the spectrum too.

These amps have the deep soundstage and expressive dynamic shading that have long been a c-j trademark, but coupled with enough temporal control to have Naim enthusiasts see what all the fuss is about, the sense of authority that will appeal to ARC users and the precision, top-end shimmer and control that Krell lovers crave. It's still a c-j sound through and through, which means a sense of tying things together so that you can set all that aside and listen to the music. ►



► It just means the amps widen the opportunities and the musical potentials. With a lot of high-end audio, it's hard to imagine it playing hard house or dubstep, because it would sound truly dreadful. This can happily play any genre of music, so it's up to you whether you want to fill your listening room with the latest choons from Ibiza. Or not.

So far, we've concentrated on the sound through line level sources. That's because the phono stage behaves with equal elegance. It's quiet, has enough gain to cope with the majority of cartridges and adjustable resistive loading to suit MM and MC alike (it had no problems with my Benz SLR, for example). And it sounds fine, up to par with the line inputs and in many respects as good or better than most external phono stages. More than good enough in fact to clearly hear the benefit of the current crop of 45rpm high-end pressings, such as Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* album. Once again, it has those smooth, dynamic, controlled and deep properties of the preamp and the combination. While an external phono stage will bring some extra refinement to the mix, this is no also-ran. It's a TEA-1 stripped down to its bare essentials and makes the ET3 SE that rare thing in today's market – the full function pre.

I'm not a great fan of valve amps that try not to sound like valve amps. If you want solid-state sound, there's a whole load of amplifiers that fit the bill, the majority of which are solid-state designs. If today you choose a valve amp, you do so because you want that valve-like performance. OK, not so much valve-amp performance that everything sounds all rose-tinted and soggy, but that's not what is on offer here. This combination is valve sounding enough that the presence and physical weight

of instruments is presented in a highly natural manner. And that's why this c-j duo work so well together. There has been a move away from the sweet, soft c-j valve sound of the past, and this duo reflect that change, but in today's market, that sweetness of old might come across as saccharine. This is every bit the 21st Century approach to good sound; it just happens to need valves.

Yes, of course they work well apart. There is a lot of mileage in the 'dream team' combination of valve preamp and solid-state power, but the two c-j valve products work so harmoniously together it's hard to think of them seeing other amplifiers on the side. And it's here that I have to admit some of my own prejudice about their use with Avalon loudspeakers. I own a pair of the late, lamented Avalon NP Evolution 2.0 floorstanders and I have always thought the use of solid-state to be an obvious and comfortable match. Not this time. This time the team worked its hollow-state magic perfectly.

It has been some time since I've heard the basic ET3 or the ET5, but from memory,





TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

ET3 SE line stage

Gain: 25 dB

Maximum Output: 20 Vrms

Distortion: less than .15% THD

Impedance: 100 Ohms

Freq. Response: 2 Hz to more than 100 KHz

Hum and Noise: 98 dB below 2.5 V

Phase: phase inverting

Tube Complement: 1x 6922

ET3 SE Optional Phono Stage

Gain: 54dB

RIAA Equalization: +/- .25 dB 20Hz to 20kHz

Hum and Noise: -80dB relative to 10mV input

Phase: phase correct

Tube Complement: 3x 12AX77

Dimensions (WxHxD): 48x8.5x33cm

Weight: 5.9kg

Classic Sixty SE power amp

Power: 60 watts per channel RMS both channels driven into 4 ohms

Sensitivity: 0.7 V RMS to rated power.

Frequency Response: 20Hz to 20 kHz +0/-3 dB.

Hum and Noise: 96 dB below rated power output.

Phase: phase correct.

Input Impedance: 100 kOhms

Tube Complement: 1 x 6189 (12AU7), 2 x 6922, 4 x KT120.

Bias adjustment: built in LED indicators.

Dimensions: 44x17x34cm

Weight: 18.6kg

Price: ET3 SE £3,950. Optional SE phono board: £1,945. Classic Sixty SE: £4,895

Manufacturer: conrad-johnson Design Inc

JRL: www.conradjohnson.com

Distributed by: Audiofreaks

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)208 948 4153

I'm surprised at how close the ET3 SE gets to the bigger model. As the ET5 got most of the way to the performance of the GAT and this gets most of the way to the performance of the ET5, I can't help but feel the ET3 SE is right in the conrad-johnson sweet spot. In fact, it strikes me that the ET3 SE gets you about four-fifths of the way to the GAT's performance for about one-fifth of the cost (excluding phono, of course). Given the GAT is one of the best preamps ever made irrespective of price, that has to make the ET3 SE both excellent value and highly desirable.

There's been more time elapsed between hearing the LP66S and the Classic Sixty SE, but it seems the same catalogue-hopping performance has been achieved here. It might sound odd to say this, but don't be put off by the price tag, if you are coming at it from either direction. There are some who might never hit this level because their intellectual limit for power amp expenditure is a shade lower, and there are others who might dismiss this amp for not costing five times as much. Both are wrong-headed mindsets; both fail to see the amps as a pair of jewels in the high-end crown. In both pre and power, taken alone or together, you could confidently slot these two into extreme high-end systems and they wouldn't just acquit themselves, they would leave some serious head-scratching taking place. If there is a law of diminishing returns in the valve amp market, these two represent the inflection point.

If there is a single word to sum up the conrad-johnson ET3 SE and Classic Sixty SE, taken separately and better yet together, that word would be 'balance'. Not too earthy sounding, yet not too ethereal. Not lush sounding, yet not steely. Not priced out of its own market, but not built down to a price by throwing out good performance. Just... balance. Unless you are ideologically averse to valves or pathologically wedded to a hard, bright and brash sound, you owe it to yourself to take a listen to the ET3 SE/Classic Sixty SE. It's lazy journalism to end a review with the company's own slogan, but however hard I try, it fits the bill so well - "it just sounds right". Very highly recommended. +

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

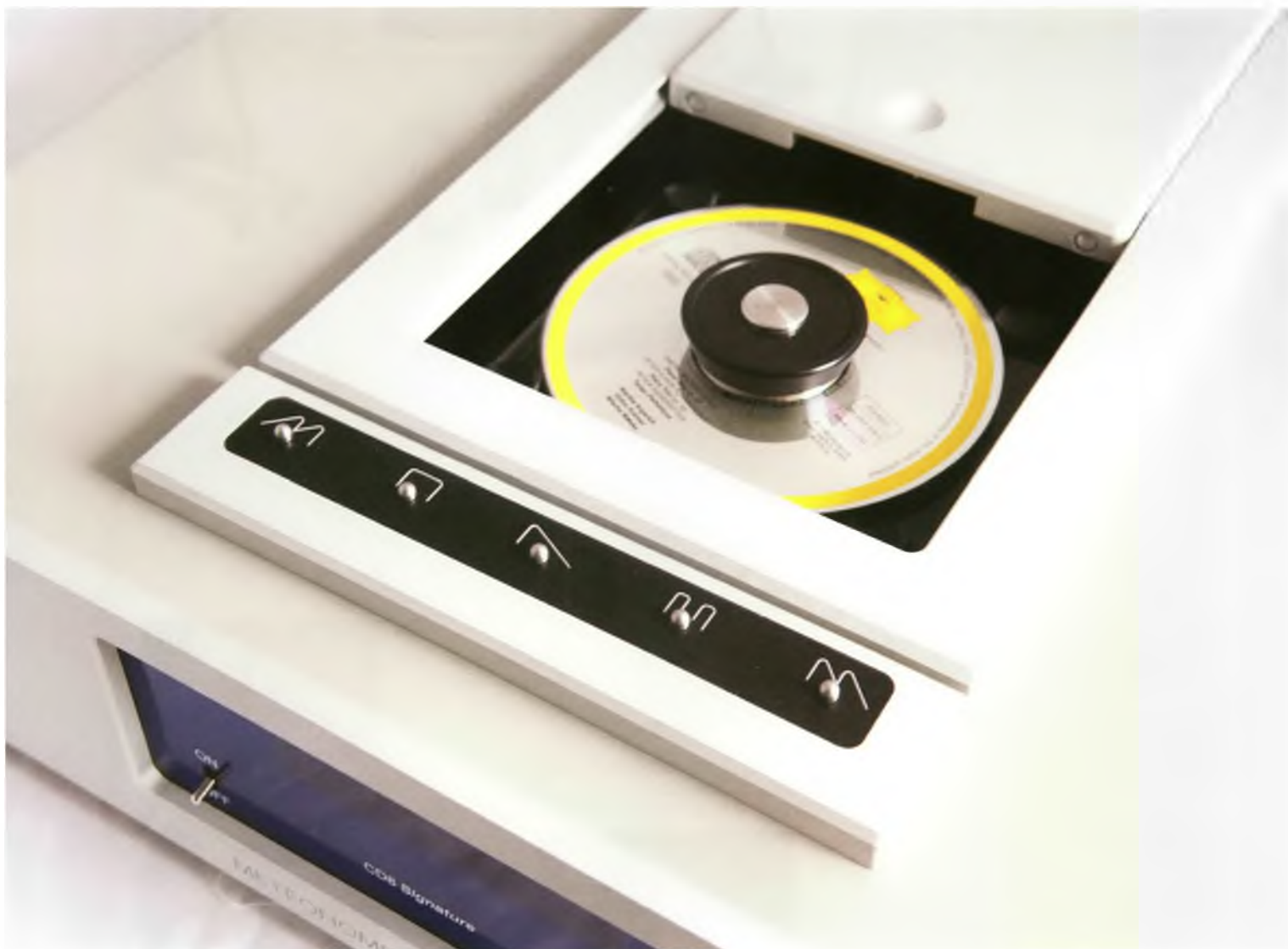
Metronome Technologie CD8 CD player

By Alan Sircom

It's perhaps a sign just how important this whole computer audio thing has become that virtually all new CD players today come with computer-friendly inputs. Even Metronome Technologie – France's most dedicated CD player maker – has capitulated with a USB input on its latest top-loading CD8 player.

Metronome is perhaps best known for its Kallista players, shiny methacrylate tributes to extracting the best from optical disc, that represent the pinnacle of performance and are priced accordingly. The CD8 is more down-to-earth. Aside from the main controls being on the top of the player in front of the CDM12 Pro v6.8 top-loading mechanism, the gunmetal or silver CD8 is perfectly conventional looking and operating. Some might miss the quirky sci-fi look of the Kallista, but having spun a few discs across a room for failing to put the puck on quick enough, a bit less 'quirk' will not go amiss.

The CD8 sits on three well-engineered spike feet; it has the aforementioned Asynchronous USB input, S/PDIF digital output and both balanced and single-ended stereo outputs. Using the appropriate drivers supplied with the Metronome, the USB input will support up to 24-bit, 192kHz file sizes and the





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"But for me the real star of the Show was the revised Raidho C1.1 bookshelf loudspeaker. There are subtle changes between this model and its C1.0 predecessor, but it took about a nanosecond to realise you were in the presence of greatness, even given the lofty company and its over-achieving predecessor."

Alan Sircom's CES 2012 Show report issue 86 Hi-fi Plus

"This emotional range is one of the last great frontiers in hi-fi -- and the C1.1s break new ground. At a time when systems in general and loudspeakers in particular seem to play things ever safer, opting for flat frequency response, resolution or some other technical parameter, at the expense of musical expression and involvement, the C1.1s are a welcome breath of fresh air. The challenge they represent for listeners comes in the form of a question, "Do you want to play it safe or are you feeling adventurous; do you want music to confirm what you already know or become a voyage of discovery?" Think carefully, because the wrong answer will generally prove expensive -- even if it might have seemed like the "safe" solution at the time. If it's adventure you want (or need), look no further than the C1.1s. Believe me, they'll take you on quite a trip!"

Audio Beat Jan 09 2012, an article by Roy Gregory

"the C1.1's were simply sensational" .. "had these two-way stand-mount speakers fallen within my purview, I would have nominated them for Best Sound of Show" Jonathan Valin CES 2012

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▶ player features a pair of AKM 24/192 DACs on its very high-spec PCB.

It's a curiously one-sided lift out of the box, and on closer inspection this is down to a group of transformers along the right side of the circuit board; three main toroidal transformers and seven independent isolating transformers. That would be three isolate power feeds for every aspect of the CD8's performance. This harks back in microcosm to the Kallista/D2A combination, which went a stage further and isolates everything in its own separate case.

The other big bug-bear with Metronome is dissipation of static electricity build-up in the transport itself. Metronome has customized the CDM12 transport for that end, adding an acrylic plate/plinth, which connects to three isolating pillars that sit in line with the three feet of the player itself.

As with anything Metronome, there are a few operating idiosyncrasies that you have to get used to. The days of the CD-as-Frisbee are long gone, but there doesn't seem to be much distinction between skip-in-track and skip-track that can occasionally prove frustrating (try playing an opera under such circumstances!). However, ultimately it is nothing to get too frustrated about and it's as much down to the listener learning to approach replay logically as it is the twisted

logic of the Metronome, but if you are used to a player that allows the user some degree of *laissez faire* in track navigation, you will need to relearn your approach to music replay.

Ask any Kallista owner about this, and they will immediately say that it's worth the effort to learn, because the rewards are so great. The full Metronome system redefines the word 'texture' in audio. Those unused to what the Metronome can do find the idea of music having its own feel, as if it were a piece of material, an absurd suggestion. Those who have spent time with any of the Metronome products understand precisely what that means. It's like mouth-feel in wine tasting, except with sound. I've tried to put more meaning on this unique property of sound from Metronome, but it's almost impossible. It's one of those intangible things that you get in real music but doesn't happen so often in audio. Except in rare cases, and the CD8 is one of those rare cases.

It's something to do with the flow of music. It doesn't make everything legato sounding, and doesn't make all its rivals sound staccato, but there is a sense of music moving from theme to theme here that is more like a good LP than CD normally delivers. I put on a James Taylor CD from the 1980s – 'That's Why I'm Here' – which is flawlessly recorded for the time, but by today's standards suffers from Yamaha DX7 Synth Overkill Syndrome. It's sometimes difficult to set these distinct and now relatively ugly chimney sounds in context today, but the Metronome straightens things out perfectly. The DX7 sounds no longer dominate and harden up a syrupy mix; they are a part and a function of the sound, and you can begin to see why every keyboard player in that decade used one.

There's a temptation to think this a 'soft' sounding player, but transient information is portrayed brilliantly. It's as much about harmony as it is melody though, and that is something that few players do well, and the CD8's abilities here make it appear at first 'soft' in comparison. Nothing 'soft' about its ability to play Shostakovich's Trio for Piano, Violin and Violoncello no 2 (Argerich, Kremer, Malsky, DG 289 459 326-2), just good keen dynamics and excellent transient information, coupled to a rich and full harmonic structure. ▶





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NORDOST
MAKING THE CONNECTION

► I'm not wholly convinced CD players contribute dramatically to the way a system produces imagery (this element being better defined by the amp/speaker interaction), but that being said, this one is more about tight authority than huge vistas of sound. That isn't to say it lacks soundstaging properties, but it's more precision than size that counts here.

The shock inclusion of a USB in a Metronome player passes off smoothly. The player is a touch cable-demanding in all its guises and the USB is no exception, so choose wisely. But the overall sound of the USB input is on a par with the spinning disc. This does give one the golden opportunity to compare CD and computer audio files through the same electronics and interestingly it comes out as something of a dead heat. Ripped CDs sound as good as their live-played original discs, and the Metronome's computer audio side isn't letting the side down in any way. Whether this means the start of a planned migration to ripped disc replay or it just means you add some Internet radio to the front end is down to the individual.

The difficulty anyone faces writing about CD in 2012 is two-fold. First, there are those who think there should be no reviews of CD players anymore, because the time of CD playing has long since passed. This is, of course, nonsense, making the fallacious jump from the individual to the masses. Not everyone has migrated away from CD replay, and it seems not everyone will until it becomes impossible to do otherwise. And, as long as there are new CD players, we'll keep reviewing them, because there is still a market out there.

The second problem is CD is a victim of its own success in hi-fi circles. They have all got pretty damn good, and the gap between a good £200 player and a good £20,000 player is considerably smaller than it is between other aspects of hi-fi replay. Worse, many of those differences only manifest themselves after long hours of close scrutiny. Generally, the more you pay the better you get (a lot of cheaper players deliberately choose a brightly lit presentation that doesn't lend itself to long listening in full-range systems), but sometimes the price differential becomes hard to justify.

Not with the Metronome CD8. The sound it makes is inviting, natural, beautifully structured and more like analogue than many players. Not in an artificial, softened edges kind of way, but just in that organic, not listening to electronics sound that CD so rarely achieves. If you want even more analogue-ness about the sound, there's always a valve version of the same for £1,000 more. But, the solid-state sound is particularly wonderful from the outset.

There's just one other question to be answered. How close does the CD8 get to the full Kallista? Well, that depends. If you have a system that scales the heights of high-end, the difference is marked and immediate. In that case – and, let's face it, if you have a system that reaches those heights, there is unlikely to be anything in your system that costs less than the CD8 – the difference is (a lot of) money well spent. In systems where spending £8,000 on a source component seems more logical and likely, then the differences are less pronounced. In other words, you have to throw the window really wide open to notice the differences. The only big change between the two is the Kallista sounds a couple of notches faster and more direct than the CD8, whatever the system.

Metronome adding USB to a player sounded ominous, but the reality is the result merely adds to the whole system, while taking nothing away. It remains an excellent player that simply adds computer music to the line-up. Few other players flow quite as well as Metronome, and the CD8 brings that bang up to date. Strongly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

CD player, with USB input

Transport mechanism: Modified Philips CDM12 PRO v6.8

DAC: Dual 24/192 AKM chips

Outputs: Line level RCA phono, balanced XLR, digital audio S/PDIF coaxial phono

Inputs: USB Type B

Dimensions (WxHxD): 45 x 12 x 42.5cm

Weight: 1.5 Kg

Available in black or silver aluminium

Price: £7,950

Manufacturer: Metronome Technologie

URL: www.metronome-technologie.com

Distributed by: Absolute Sounds

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

Tel: +44(0)208 971 3909



Hart Audio D&W Sonix

By Jason Kennedy

David Hart is a dedicated man. When he delivered to me his first speaker design, the EVO1 Dual Monitor a couple of years ago, I tried to explain that selling substantial loudspeakers is a very tough game that's dominated by big brands. Fortunately I could not divert him from his course. He is clearly obsessed with getting great sound out of Tannoy Dual Concentrics and no amount of rational argument will get in his way.

The Hart EVO1 is a stonking loudspeaker. Its array of actively driven compact bass units

give it a speed and authority that is pretty rare. However, in the dark veneer of the pair I used, it is among the most domestically challenging speakers on the market. The finish is beautiful but the scale and shape is way beyond 'dog coffin', a point I made to him as tactfully as I could a year or two back, and he has taken this onboard with this latest model, the D&W Sonix – the 'W' in the name commemorates David's late father. It retains the topology of the EVO1 in a smaller and considerably more attractive pair of cabinets. It's devoid of the bass amplification of its stable mate but has the same modified 300mm dual concentric main driver firing forward and no fewer than nine four and a half inch 'bass' drivers on the rear. You have the same array on the back of the bottom cabinet as well, giving a massive effective cone area. The rearward firing nature of this arrangement means that proximity to walls and corners is even more critical than it usually is, as for that matter is height off the floor. At the September National Audio Show Hart was using fairly high stands which were big enough to store vinyl LPs in with room to spare, but when the speakers came to me he had found some nicely made stands in the Track Audio range which raised the speakers about 15cm off the ground on truly fearsome spikes.

This massive array of drive units is intended to combine the speed of a small cone with the area of a large one, but the electrical effect is to reduce impedance to a fairly low level (below four ohms). So, while this is a highly sensitive speaker (94dB), it does need an amplifier that can deliver current, which makes it extremely valve friendly for those designs whose output transformers have a four ohm tap. I managed to borrow a Proteus integrated from English Valve Amplifiers and got some spectacular results with that 27 watt, stainless steel encased beast; its KT90 output stage proving well suited to the unusual load of the Hart speakers, allowing them to deliver the most natural and transparent midband I have encountered for some time.

Hart modifies the 300mm dual concentric with his own magnet 'recipe' and also uses silver voice coils; so, despite appearances, it's no longer a Tannoy. The cabinet it sits in is braced but not damped, this combined with the fact that the back panel is covered in drive units which are acoustically transparent at low frequencies means that the system works like an open baffle.

Which presumably explains the transparency and openness of sound it's able to produce. The other advantage of having so many drivers is that it gives the speaker substantial power handling, the rear drivers are specced at 36 watts apiece (times 18 per channel) while the 12inch can handle a nominal 450watts, so you end up with a system that can theoretically generate over a kilowatt. David says he uses proprietary technology to eliminate standing waves in the main driver cabinet which one suspects is another way of saying that the nine small drivers effectively transmit the rearward output of the dual concentric so that reflections are minimised.

On the top and bottom of the lower bass only cabinet there are Audiophile Base suspension beams, which are designed to isolate the





“Hart modifies the 300mm dual concentric with his own magnet ‘recipe’ and also uses silver voice coils; so, despite appearances, it’s no longer a Tannoy.”

cabinets from one another, and the floor or stand. You cannot spike the Base that’s attached to the speaker, which has soft feet, but you can put the whole thing on a stand like the aforementioned Track design or one of the Audiophile Base models. The cable terminals are by WBT and the linking cables that Hart supplies to hook up the two cabinets are in silver wire, as the rear drivers are unfiltered you can drive the system in a bi-wired configuration but links are still required.

Finding the best position and for that matter height for this speaker in my room proved a little more tricky than usual, not least because you can’t move both cabinets



simultaneously unless you’re a bear. The problem is the bass which I eventually realised is so open and unboxy that it is never going to have the character encountered in the majority of box speakers. This means it comes across as being a little lightweight in quality unless you put the speaker very close to the wall, but then the sound starts to thicken up in the midband. It’s only when you start playing acoustic bass instruments do you realise that it’s phenomenally natural in the lower registers. Double bass has rarely sounded this convincing, exciting even. When Stanley Clarke starts to strut his stuff on the recent Return to Forever album (Corea, Clarke

► & White) it's easy to appreciate his tremendous technical and musical skill. Equally apparent is the live nature of the recording which isn't always the case with this album. This result is of course only partly down to the quality of bass, but the sheer transparency of the midband is pretty thrilling too, as this is where all the atmosphere is created and the harmonics of bass notes reside and define the whole. Thanks to its high sensitivity, this is an extraordinarily dynamic loudspeaker, it's massive headroom means that it can deliver big swings in level without so much as a murmur and it can do this with an amplifier that isn't a powerhouse in the usual sense. Obviously the Proteus can swing a lot of current but it only has four output devices a side and this means it's as nimble as it is revealing.

David has done something slightly radical with the crossover that feeds the dual concentric. Specifically, he has reduced treble output by a whopping 10dB. This was done because he finds this part of the driver's spectrum to be uncomfortably forthright when the speakers are on axis, and I have to say I that have some sympathy with that view. As a result the speakers need to be on axis for any treble to get through, but it also means you can play the system at high levels without things becoming uncomfortable, even in hard sounding rooms.

Voices are particularly beguiling because there is a slight emphasis on the midband and you get very strong resolution of tone and nuance. You can hear all the effects that have been used to enhance voices in the studio but likewise the emotional depth, the soul of the singer is plain to hear. This transparency benefits classical material well too where the combination of openness and timbral texture combines to bring real life and vitality to the music. The true potential of the bass was brought to the fore by a Bowers & Wilkins Society of Sound download (24/48) of an Ethiopian pianist called Samuel Yirga. His playing is bold and rhythmic and the quality of the instrument, it's power and dynamics are abundantly clear along with the natural reverb of the recording. The piano has weight yet there is a speed to it that you rarely get with speakers in boxes, I wouldn't say that the D&W Sonix sound like panels but they have the same degree of freedom from constraint.

In my room, I found that they worked best when placed directly on the floor. Fortunately, this doesn't seem to restrict image scale and allows the speaker to give the deepest bass without fogging the midband. It's not a speaker for headbangers or anyone that enjoys having their internal organs agitated by sound for that matter, rather it's for music lovers who appreciate acoustic instruments and voices and want to hear them without the intrusions of traditional cabinets. With a good Class A amplifier, such as the Valvet A3.5s solid state monoblocks, let the speaker take off in very entertaining fashion. They have speed combined with a lack of grain that is rare and makes for highly engaging and revealing musical entertainment. It's not a speaker for everyone, but it's significantly prettier than its predecessor (especially in its piano finish alpi macassar veneer) and it's one of the most nimble and dynamic, valve friendly designs in the business. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Size per cabinet: 43cm cube

Weight per channel: 102kg

Rated sensitivity: 94dB

Nominal impedance: 4 ohms

Mid/treble: 300mm dual concentric, horn loaded tweeter

Bass: 18x 4.5inch doped cone

Price: £19,500 per pair

Manufacturer: Hart Audio

URL: www.hartaudio.com

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Ensemble Fuoco integrated amplifier

By Alan Sircom

There perhaps has never been a more apt company name than Ensemble. The products work so well as an ensemble, that pulling the complete package apart for individual reviews seems wrong to the point of immorality. Nevertheless, not everyone has the wherewithal to buy a complete system, and arguably the most significant place to start is the Ensemble Fuoco integrated amplifier.

Incidentally, the word 'Fuoco' means 'focus' in Italian, but if you are the sort of hunt-and-peck keyboard dyslexic who tends to type 'oco' as 'ooo', the name suddenly sounds like the sort of clown that never gets children's birthday gigs.

Fuoco is slightly shorter and stubbier than most modern amps, and although a brushed aluminium version has been seen, the amp is usually finished in Ensemble's gunmetal grey livery, like a kind of highly polished classic NAD, but with far nicer knobs. It's a hybrid 150W design, featuring a pair of ECC 81 valves in the power amp input stage and bipolar output devices. The valves are specially selected from Mullard and AEG-Telefunken 'NOS' collections from the Golden Age of audio, sit in Ensemble's own Novolino valve seats and are wrapped in Ensemble's own Kevlar/copper Tubesox dampers.

Get used to the words "Ensemble's own"; the company tends to take the long route to perfection, eschewing the soft option of buying in things

like RCA sockets or speaker terminals, preferring to spec these to its own design. This works beautifully with Ensemble's own Synergia RCA sockets, which seem like some of the most robust and 'right' looking sockets around. It's less successful with the matching all-copper speaker terminals; these are designed for 100A 6mm banana plugs, but will take the more commonplace 4mm plugs, bare wires and 8mm spade lugs, but the spring-loaded design means anything apart from the 6mm bananas comes with a fair degree of swearing. The circuit uses Golden Gate reservoir caps, but also features Ensemble's own Procap capacitors, and the whole amplifier sits on Ensemble's own Microsorb resonance control system.

This latter technology is slightly strange to those of us used to rigid connections between device and what it rests upon, because the amp has some movement. In fact, it has some movement in the vertical and horizontal planes (the amp sits on soft rubber feet that allow





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► some vertical 'play' while these feet link to plates that are quasi-independent to the rest of the amplifier sections. The net result is if you put your hand on the top of the amplifier and shake it, the amp wobbles like a set jelly for half a second or so, before coming back to rest. This is common to all the Ensemble products, even the loudspeakers. As the valves are given a further degree of vibration control from the Tubesox dampers, and the high degree of isolation around the mains transformer, this is clearly something of an Ensemble obsession.

It's hard to disagree with the obsession when you hear what it does in situ. I used it both within and outside of a near-full Ensemble system (no CD player or power conditioner, but Ensemble isolation platform, interconnects, speaker cable and power cord). It's clearly better when in Ensemble context, but works very well out of its Swiss home.

I don't think this is the most neutral amplifier on the planet, as it goes for euphonic sweetness over stark clarity. However, I think this is the sort of sound that makes (or – more likely – attracts) people who think neutrality is over-rated. I have a particular soft spot for Gram Parsons, but recognise that albums like *Grievous Angel* are not at the forefront of high-end recording quality. It's all a bit thin and constricted, on even the best systems, which can make the sound through hyper-accurate systems appear stark and functionally unlistenable.

But the Fuoco aces it, making Parsons' delicate and faltering vocals impassioned rather than nasal and grating.

That's the thing about the Fuoco, it sounds lovely at all times. There are a few works that don't take kindly to this sort of approach, but they are surprisingly few and far between, and I don't envisage many Crass fans will be in the market for a delicious sounding Swiss amplifier anyway. The rest of us end up with something that makes music seem health-giving in its presentation.

For a reviewer, the big difficulty with the Fuoco is putting notes on a page. You put a piece of music on, sit back and listen to it. The music ends, you have a smile on ►

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► your face and a blank piece of paper or empty Word document. Repeat the process, and you repeat the whole blank sheet/smiley end result. Any notes that drift into your head are all about the music being played, and nothing to do with the sound of that music.

There's an interesting effect that I've only really encountered with Ensemble. Some systems make you a music snob by mistake ("I don't 'do' rock music because my system doesn't 'do' rock music"), others make you a musical glutton ("I stayed up until half-past stupid and played 50 tracks from 35 albums"), but the Ensemble creates brief musical programmes for you. Two things happen here; you find the concept of turning off the album after one or two tracks morally unconscionable, and you find you are musically sated after about two or three albums at most. Part of this comes from the fact that it's almost impossible to use the Fuoco as background listening, as it deserves and demands your attention no matter what. Even if you play music at whisper quiet late night levels, the Fuoco draws you in. In fact, the Fuoco is one of those rare amplifiers that still works at low levels, where most seem to lose dynamic range or bass energy.

It's perhaps not made for people who think volume controls only go one way – up. The Fuoco goes loud enough, and doesn't clip early or go hard or edgy until pushed to the limits, it just has a natural volume level that it extracts for each recording and that is usually lower than most imagine. Oddly, although I have more than my fair share of loud music moments, this didn't seem to trouble me too much. The Fuoco didn't steer me away from the likes of 'Stay Lucky' by The Gaslight Anthem, but it was like a trustworthy soul informing me about hearing damage that comes from playing music too loud, so it gets turned down but the enjoyment remains almost as powerful as ever.

This isn't the kind of amplifier that makes you think of individuated performance aspects, and while this doesn't make for the best possible review, I think focusing on those aspects (detail, instrument solidity, imaging, articulation... even dynamics, although it does all these aspects well) skips the Fuoco's strongest suit; its holistic nature. Listening to music through the Fuoco is like a day at the health spa – the massage, the sauna, the Jacuzzi all combine to relax you in a way far deeper than those treatments can do on their own. No, listening to music through the Fuoco won't make you healthier or cleaner, it won't enhance your sex life and probably won't make you a better person. But it will leave you musically refreshed each time you take a listen.

In a way, the Ensemble Fuoco sounds timeless. Good audio doesn't come with a use-by date. In others, it's out of step with what modern audio sounds like, and in a way that makes you wonder if modern audio is out of step with what sounds good. And then, in another very real manner, it's right up to date; although I prefixed this review by suggesting not everyone buys a complete off-the-shelf system, many do just that. And it's here where the Ensemble, er, ensemble really works. The Fuoco is one of those rare products that works as a standalone piece of equipment that also becomes a gateway to having a whole system from the same brand. But as part of the whole Ensemble system, it really shines.

This is not an amplifier by the people, for the people. Its appeal is confined to those who appreciate a level of refinement and musical grace uncommon

in a disposable 'good enuf' world. Its appeal deliberately goes beyond strict adherence to objective norms and if either of those two elements strike a chord with you, you are going to Fuocoing love this. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs: 5x line RCA

(including 1x tape loop)

Power output: 100 W / 8 ohm 150 W / 4 ohm per channel

Input sensitivity: 0.36 V (150 W / 4 ohm)

Input impedance: 45 kohm

Signal to noise ratio: 99 dB

(full power 4 ohm to noise floor)

THD+N: 0.2 % (1 W / 4 ohm / 1 kHz)

Negative feedback: 20 dB

Input valves: Selected, matched ECC 81 (12AT7)

Outputs: Ensemble SYNERGIA binding posts, accepting 4mm and 6mm banana plugs, 7 AWG bare, 8mm spades 3

Dimensions (WxDxH): 9.5x31.5x13.5cm

Weight: 15.5kg

Price: £7,250

Manufacturer: Ensemble Inc. Ltd

URL: www.ensembleaudio.com

Tel: +41 (0)61 461 9191

NORDOST BLUE HEAVEN

By Chris Thomas

Photography by
Simon Marsh

A cable review is always an interesting proposition as it provides the writer with an almost infinite amount of holes and pitfalls that can be plunged into headfirst. Even in these more enlightened times cabling is still, surprisingly enough, a contentious subject. I find it hard to see why myself but it would appear that nothing causes the audiophile angst level to rise quite as much as cables and their contributions. Now we are entering the age where computer based music systems are more widely used, I anticipate that the furore that will follow when USB cable comparisons appear in the pages of this and other magazines will be a terrible thing to behold. Cables are the messengers of the system, conveying delicate, precious and easily corruptible musical information between electronic components and as such, have been regularly shot for many years for crimes they did not and could not have committed. With this in mind, perhaps a few personal guidelines forged through the heat of adversity and attested by my own ears might be a wise move so you can see where I am coming from where cable reviews are concerned.

Some years ago I realised that reviewing individual cables by inserting them in an existing system was unsatisfactory, but it was the way it had always been done. It encouraged the idea that cables were mere accessories and the results of doing things this way were a combination of luck (if it worked) and system chemistry rather than a balanced and informed assessment of what a particular cable choice might bring to a system. To say that this is an unreliable approach is a gross understatement and many a good cable suffered in this way.

This is why, in these more enlightened days, I will only review a complete cable

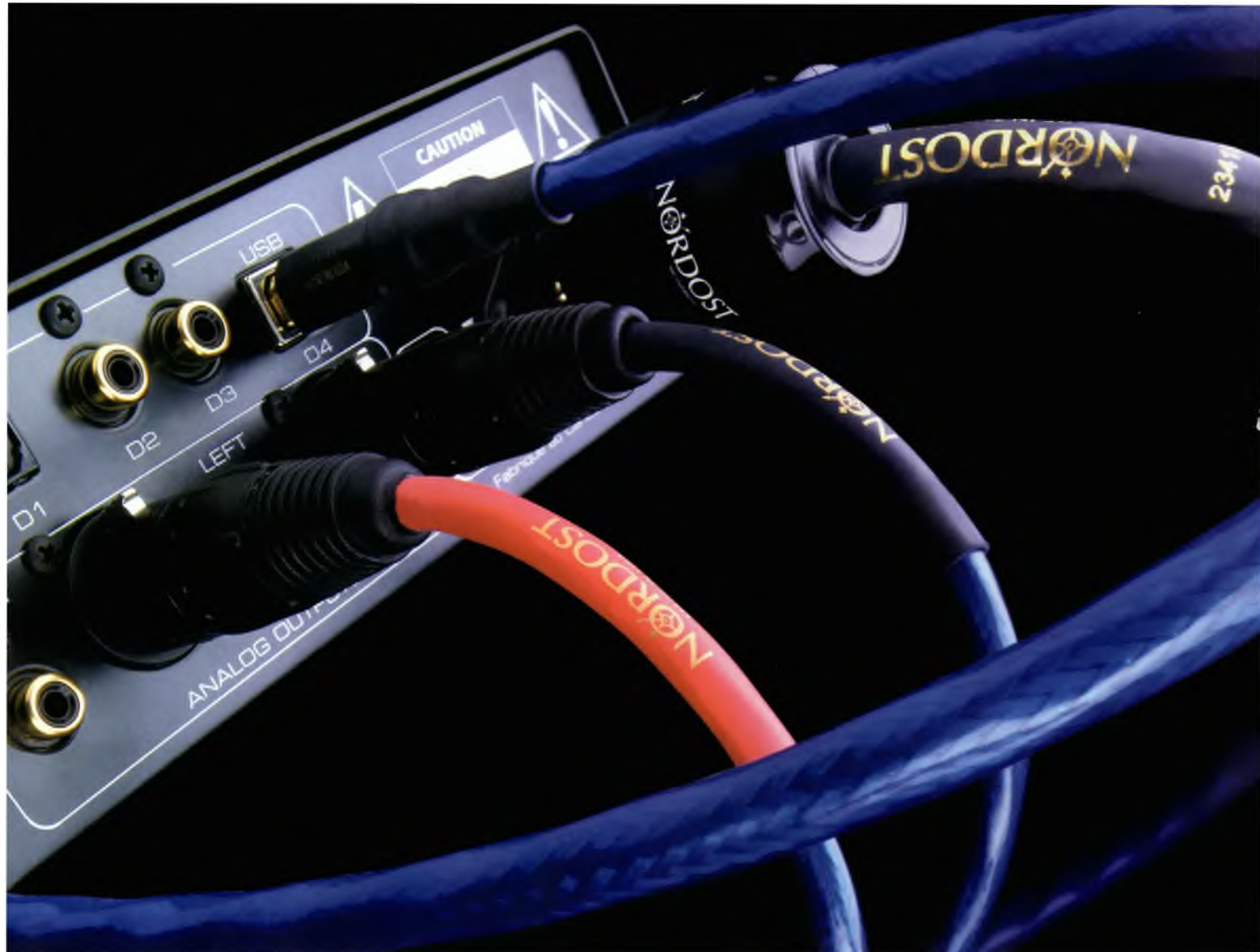
loom, regardless of which manufacturer is supplying it. This should comprise of everything from the mains leads, through the interconnects to the speakers and might also incorporate data cables if a computer is included in the system. It seems obvious to me that, to give both the cable manufacturer and the reader an honest and fair view of the performance, then there really should be a continuity of concept, design and manufacture that provide the cables with every opportunity to do their thing and see what they can bring to the whole musical experience. Viewed in this way the audio cable ceases to become an accessory and is more accurately viewed as an absolutely vital component to system quality.

Most of the serious cable manufacturers can provide a whole loom these days, but one of the companies who have been at the forefront of this idea is certainly Nordost, whose Blue Heaven range has just undergone a complete redesign. It now comes under the Leif (pronounced Life) banner and ranks second from top in a four cable family, with the revised Red Dawn above it and the all new Purple Flare and White Lightning in turn below. It might be number two in the family, but it is also right at its heart. While the other cables are available as interconnects and speaker cables, it's the Blue Heaven line that provides all the other essential options, from power to dedicated tonearm and digital cables, allowing customers to mix and match according to budget and priorities, but still maintain a coherent cable set up.

This is a bold ambition but Nordost are a very thorough company where every cable is individually designed for purpose. The one thing they do not do is to get in a pile of existing cables from manufacturers and decide which one they like the sound of before stamping their name on the outside. Each cable starts life as a series of specially drawn conductors designed specifically for a certain cable. The plating process meets clinical standards of consistency, purity and absence of contaminants. The Blue Heaven speaker cable uses 14 solid-core copper conductors of 14 AWG (American Wire Gauge), silver-plated and laid within an extruded FEP (Fluorinated Ethylene Propylene, which is very close to what we would call Teflon) ribbon, chosen for its exceptional dielectric properties. Designing their speaker wires to lie adjacent to each other as opposed to being wound allows Nordost to maintain excellent spacing accuracy along the entire cable length. The interconnect cables were supplied to me in both balanced and single ended configuration and are a fully shielded design. Internally they use 4 x 24 AWG, solid core copper conductors, also silver-plated by Nordost and wound in a minimum cross-section configuration with no extra padding. Again FEP is used, the connectors are quite deliberately low mass and Nordost also pay considerable attention to their termination and grounding. Making their own wires means that Nordost can ensure that those materials, methods and terminations are totally consistent across the whole family.

The mains lead, or power cord as Nordost like to call them, is the exception to this rule. Electrical standards dictate that the conductors must be stranded and experience shows that once you use a stranded conductor in a power cord, silver plating is actually detrimental. So the Blue Heaven mains lead uses stranded copper conductors, but also uses Micro Mono-Filament (MMF) construction. ▶





► Borrowed from the more expensive cables in the Nordost line, this is confined in the Leif series to just the power cords and digital leads, critical applications in which the company feels it makes the greatest difference. MMF topology means that a thread of FEP is wound around each of the conductors before an FEP sleeve is extruded over them. This reduces the contact between the conductor and the FEP dielectric by more than 80% making them a virtual air dielectric design.

Perhaps no other company have extolled the power cable so exuberantly as Nordost as being the most important in the system and I am sure that many of you will have seen their demonstrations of this at Hi-Fi shows around the world. Having tested the theory myself many times it is something that I wholeheartedly agree with, though I do understand that it is an ideological step too far for many. It is available with a number of plug-types and it is worth mentioning that all Nordost cables are terminated at the factory in the US and cannot be re-terminated anywhere

else if the full performance is to be maintained. Because of this, second-hand offers of one metre interconnects that have been home-fashioned from hacked-down longer lengths are best avoided.

As ever, it is going to take a fair old time to run the whole loom in and even though Nordost's own burn-in machine, used by some of their dealers, can help reduce the wait, for me there is nothing like putting some long, hard hours into the system before making any hasty judgements. The other thing I have found with Nordost cabling is to get it as neatly installed as you can and then leave it alone. Don't move it around and certainly do not coil it. Just leave it be. It is certainly true that Blue Heavens of the past have been slightly glossy tonally, especially when fresh and this has only served to reinforce their undeserved reputation as bright, especially in certain systems that mercilessly exaggerated this. The new cable is quite different, surprisingly so in fact and impeccably balanced with no trace of any tonal lift through the bandwidth at all. What remains is the superb speed and rhythmic delicacy. There is no sense of blurring confusion whatsoever as the music remains assuredly cohesive from top to bottom and under all types of musical duress. When I speak about the speed I also mean the way in which the cable is able to focus its energies so efficiently as if it is carrying no excess fat or artificial weight as a handicap. The sound is always crisp, very transparent with a slight dryness in the bass perhaps. Installed into a dCS CD player, Vitus SS 010 or David Berning Pre One/Quadrature Z amplification driving a pair of Focal Utopia Diablos the Blue Heaven excels at sheer articulation in that it can show you musicianship and style through very small dynamic shifts and contrasts. Compared to a some of the pure solid wound cables I have heard it gives away a small amount in sheer ►

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Blue Heaven Leif Series interconnects:

1.0m pair £259.99

Blue Heaven LS speaker cables:

5.0m pair £954.99

Blue Heaven LS power cords:

1.0m £149.99

Blue Heaven is also available in tonearm cable and data cable configurations plus of course many lengths with various terminations for all applications. Contact dealer for details.

Manufacturer: Nordost Corporation, USA.

Email: info@nordost.com

JK Distributor: Atacama Audio

Tel: 01455 283251

Url: www.nordost-cables.co.uk

weight and overall scale, but I prefer the leaner and extra delicacy that the Blue Heaven provides plus of course the extra speed of musical delivery and recovery which allows the system to loose energy as fast as it gains it. The Blue Heaven skips through the music with remarkable rhythmic focus and intensity where so many cables seem to wade through.

After about three weeks of daily use the cables began to undergo a change. There was always a slight question mark in my head over their absolute resolving power through the midband and after initially feeling very complimentary of their impeccable balance they seemed to grow a little soft and somewhat dull. But, gradually a new performance level was taking shape and they just grew in sophistication and balance as the weeks rolled by. What emerged was an even livelier cable set than before with an extra edge and clarity to their dynamic resolving power. The system had put on some weight, but in all the right places, drawing the electronics together as a more enjoyable whole with an even better feeling of stability to the musical picture. Now the system was sounding like a single musically focussed unit rather than a collection of expensive components.

One of the interesting things about assessing a cable loom is that you can reverse engineer the process by replacing just one of the cables and listening to the effects it has on the whole. I changed the balanced interconnects that carried the signal from the CD player to the amplifier with a more expensive cable from another manufacturer. If ever any validation was needed for the complete loom approach this was it. I am not saying the system sounded bad. In fact the sound became warmer and fatter, but the rhythmic togetherness and the whole swing and beating pulse of the music had vanished. Now it stuttered along like so many high-end systems I hear. It was certainly impressive hi-fi, but the detailed focus and explicit telling of the musical story was severely compromised. This is where the Blue Heaven and the full loom approach really show its benefits and strengths. The way the system responds as the going gets tough, especially during multi-instrumental passages, is so much better because the cable's influence and uniformity of speed brings a sense of harmony and balance that the mix 'n match approach simply cannot match.

The Blue Heaven seems to me to suggest a slight shift in the Nordost sound and it is a move that I think will give the range a far broader appeal. This is a very sweet set of cables indeed that can offer tonal balance that is just about perfect with a depth, image stability and quietness that you normally only hear in much more expensive models. Combine this with the virtually unique speed and rhythmic delicacy that has always been a hallmark of the Nordost approach and you have a cable that is not as brutal when it comes to exposing system flaws as it once was. Some will still prefer the heavyweight, bigger scale of the multi-strand heavy copper cabling on the market. They will like the warmth and cosy musical weight and punch of those cables as opposed to the Blue Heaven's stunningly articulate and expressive abilities. It is also true that, while the Blue Heaven has notable resolution, the monofilament cables higher up the price scale take this and pure musical transparency to entirely new heights of sophistication. But, for systems of all prices and qualities, the Blue Heaven represents a brilliant solution to an age-old problem and for very reasonable money too. +



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Esoteric C-03 preamp and A-03 power amplifier

By Alan Sircom

We get it so wrong sometimes. TEAC's Esoteric division has a well-earned reputation for its CD and SACD players (the company does make the VRDS transport mechanism, so its reputation is not without some considerable justification). The trouble is, that means we often think of Esoteric as a company that only makes CD and SACD players. This review goes some way to redress the balance.

The C-03 line preamp and the A-03 stereo power amp form a key part of Esoteric's core range of products. It used to be the spiritual home for the P-03/D03 popular two-box player. There is also an I-03 integrated amp, an E-03 phono stage (reviewed by Jason Kennedy in issue 78) and the K-03 combination CD/SACD/digital source in the range. And yet, whenever most hi-fi types think of Esoteric, that last model is the only one they see. This is crazy. These are some of the most competent, well-built and good sounding amps you'll hear. They are cut of the same cloth as those legendary electronics from big name Japanese brands that are seldom seen outside of Japanese

waters because they are so big and expensive. They show up a lot of really well liked amplifiers for the bits of bent tin they are made from. They deserve to be taken seriously.

Disengaging rant mode, the C-03 is a beautifully made line preamplifier that sits on three well-built feet. It inputs and outputs balanced and single-ended sources with equal ease and can switch between them seamlessly. That said, it is a single-ended circuit, and sounds best in single-ended operation. A profoundly minimalist design (the left knob selects the source, the right controls volume level, and the black bar in the middle houses the blue LED readout and the power button), the amp has just three single-ended and two balanced inputs and two single-ended and two balanced outputs per side. And it really is 'per side' because it's a fully dual-mono, with only the front panel and the power input common to both channels. For all its minimalism, it's not hair-shirt and allows a very wide degree of fine-tuned gain adjustment to ensure all your sources play at a similar level at any given volume. You can even disable unused inputs. Pick the C-03 up and it feels reassuringly meaty and heavy, some of which comes down to the chambered internal construction.

The circuits in those chambers are built with quality and longevity in mind, and sport high-grade components, such as Wima capacitors from Germany and a combination of 6N and 8N purity copper at key parts of the circuit. All of this high-spec design and build means individual preamp stages are physically as isolated as possible throughout the amp.

It's joined by the A-03, a 50W pure Class A stereo chassis. They have a lot in common; pure dual mono design, ultra-minimalist approach,



high-grade components, compartmentalised design and a lot of isolation. There's not much to put on the front panel of a power amp if you are thinking minimalism, apart from a power switch, but it also comes with a colour-changing glowing ring to show whether the amp is in standby or full operation mode. It goes quiet for about a minute from start-up as it runs through its warm-up cycle. When it comes to a dual mono design, few brands go as far as separate power toroidals, but Esoteric does with the A-03. And part of Esoteric's commitment to long term use is the scratch-resistant blast finish on the thick aluminium panels, so unless you take a Dremel to it, it'll look like new for longer. Once again, Esoteric allows balanced and single-ended inputs, and comes with provision to act in bridged mono mode at the flick of a rear panel switch.

Curiously, the baseplate and isolating sections of the A-03 use steel as opposed to aluminium. Steel is tough (of course), but can also be magnetic; not a good option for an electronic chassis. Fortunately, the use of nickel in mild steel helps prevent the formation of ferritic structures in the alloy, so it's not a big deal. But it is a heavy one, as the amp weighs in at a healthy 38kg.

Like the rest of Esoteric's 03 range, the design goals of the C-03 and A-03 are built upon the company's recent highly successful exploration of remastering classic albums. Having some of the best master tapes from the Golden Age of classical music recording on hand gives Esoteric a unique perspective in creating what it calls an 'audio impression' of the master tape experience. That sounds like psychobabble, but TEAC has had some healthy exposure to the professional world over the last 59 or so years, and it has delivered some of the best sounding classical remasters ever, so this 'master tape experience' claim has more credence to it than you might first credit.

Which leads me to my big issue when it comes to the perception about Esoteric amplifiers. Those who think they are an also-ran, a catalogue filler for the disc players should take a listen to these amps... they are really, really good. It's not one of those immediate, grab you by the throat and shake you until you like it, sounds (and I guess this might be why some justify their skipping over the amps in the line up). Instead, it comes with one of those 'oh yes' sounds, usually accompanied by a slow nodding of the head and closed eyes. The guaranteed

sure sign that something sounds very good indeed.

What the C-03 excels at is doing all things very well. There

will always be products that are outstanding at one thing and less good at others, but the C-03 is equally good at doing most everything. My worry here is damning a damn good product with faint praise, because the natural inclination is to focus on the strong or weak points, and the C-03 really doesn't work that way. Neither is it one of those 'the whole is greater than the sum of the parts' preamplifier. The sum of the parts are good, the whole is good too. So, your notebook quickly turns into a set of tick boxes. Detail... yep, does that. Transparency... check. Dynamic range... fine. Soundstage... nice and wide, thanks very much. Tonal balance... very nice. Musical satisfaction quotient... too busy listening to music to notice. If you want that two seconds from complete disaster edgy detail or rich, euphonic sounds, this isn't the product for you. If you establish your pecking order of good sounds based on one aspect of music at the expense of all others, you'll likely find a better match elsewhere. This is the preamp for people who have moved past that, and know that good sound encompasses a diverse range of performance aspects in dynamic equilibrium. And you'll use it until you drop.

The A-03 has a shade more character of its own. It adds a drop of Class A smoothness at the top and a spot of bloom at the bottom. I'd have to say, it blooms a lot less than any other Class A amp I've heard this side of an original Krell KSA-50. It is in many ways the perfect foil for the neutral – but not starkly neutral – C-03. While I dislike the 'good for classical' epithets, I think this is a combination better suited for the more cerebral end of the musical spectrum. The honesty of the preamp



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- and the smoothness of the power make for a sound that makes you want to listen to orchestral, chamber music and jazz. It can do opera and rock, but refines the sound rather than highlights the energy.

The reason for this manifests itself when you separate the two products. The preamp is the more comfortable device outside of the Esoteric fold. Its honesty and even-handedness shines through wherever you place it. The A-03 is more comfortable in place with its Esoteric chums. Out in the big wide world, it can go from 'refined' to 'lush'. But in context, the two shine work so beautifully together, why go looking further afield.

In the C-03 and A-03, Esoteric has a beautifully made, no fuss, no nonsense and great sounding solid-state amp combination that will last and last and last. The up-front expenditure might be steep, but you are in it for the long game here. Your great-grandchildren will still be thanking you for spending wisely. In a world of planned obsolescence, the Esoteric C-03/A-03 combination will be making good music for decades to come. Lovely! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

C-03 preamp

Maximum output level: 7 V

Rated output level: 2V

Output impedance: 47 Ohms (RCA) 100 Ohms (XLR)

Total harmonic distortion: 0.005% (1 kHz, 2 V input)

0.001% (1 kHz, 2 V input, Awgt)

Frequency response: 5 Hz to 120 kHz (−3 dB) 10 Hz to 35 kHz (−0.5 dB)

Signal-to-noise ratio: 100 dB (2 V input, Awgt)

Gain: 0 dB / +12 dB switchable

Input sensitivity: 2.05 V (rated output) 870 mV (850 mV output)

410 mV (400 mV output)

Maximum input level: 7 V

Input impedance: 40 k Ohms (RCA, XLR)

Dimensions (W x H x D): 45 x 13 x 38cm

Weight: 22 kg

A-03 power amp

Rated power: 50W per channel (8Ω), 100W per channel (4Ω), 200W (bridged mono)

Frequency Response: 5Hz to 100kHz (1W, 8Ω +0/-1.2 dB)

Signal-to-noise ratio: better than 117dB THD+N: 0.009% (1kHz, rated output 8Ω)

Dimensions (W x H x D): 45 x 22 x 43cm

Weight: 38kg

Price: £7,995 (C-03), £8,495 (A-03)

Manufacturer: Esoteric [URL: esoteric.teac.com](http://esoteric.teac.com)

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

AUDIOVECTOR SR6 AVANTGARDE ARRETE

By Paul Messenger

Audiovector might be one of Denmark's lower profile speaker specialists, but designer Ole Klifoth actually founded the company more than 30 years ago, and has deliberately kept the company under tight control by concentrating on creating high quality products at premium prices.

Until the horrendously costly, available-only-to-order R11 first appeared some eighteen months ago, this SR6 Avantgarde Arrete was the company's 'flagship' model, so it's very much a 'statement' model. Enclosing a total volume of around 70 litres, it's quite a tall floorstander, standing 1.25m in total height. However, it's not unduly visually intrusive as the width is a reasonably slim 24cm, curved and tapering to a narrow spine, and the 36cm depth is by no means excessive. The substantial build is reflected in a total weight of 36kg.

It's possible to approach this Avantgarde Arrete variation on the SR6 theme in slightly easier stages, as Audiovector – perhaps uniquely among speaker brands – pursues a policy of 'upgradeability'. The SR6 is actually available in three different versions: the 'starter' is the £9,300/pair Signature; the Avantgarde version comes in at £12,540/pair; this Avantgarde Arrete's £18,800/pair price-tag ups the ante considerably.

Even the base Signature model here incorporates quite a number of neat ideas, but these naturally increase as one moves up through the hierarchy. All three share essentially the same enclosure, a handsome affair with curved sides that are designed to reduce reflections and avoid focusing the internal standing waves. Two thirds of the front panel and the rear spine are finished in a silver laminate, matching the complex MDF plinth, while the rest is tastefully covered in a choice of high class real wood veneers. The shape means that only light enclosure damping is required, and Audiovector stresses the importance of applying the foam damping blocks with great consistency.

The driver line up is considerably more complex than first appearances suggest. Although only three drive units are visible, two more are hidden within the enclosure, and considerable efforts have gone into maximising the performance of each to suit its role.

The two concealed units primarily supply bass only below 80Hz, though in truth there are few signs of any roll-off, and they continue to operate well up into the midband, albeit at a lower level than the front-mounted drivers. This bass section consists



of a visible 200mm bass driver that fires downwards into the well ventilated plinth area, plus an internal 165mm unit with very powerful magnets that supplies isobaric loading (operating in acoustic series). It's an arrangement – only found in the Avantgarde Arrete version – that effectively enlarges the bass chamber (by a factor of 1.4), and also allegedly improves bass 'speed'; this c30 litre bass chamber is also reflex-loaded, by the lower of two front ports.

The two front-mounted 165mm bass/mid cone drivers also follow an unusual configuration, as they operate in parallel, acoustically speaking, but the lower one is driven at a significantly lower level (-6dB) than the upper one, and is also rolled off earlier, at around 1kHz, rather than the normal mid-to-treble crossover that occurs around 4kHz. The lower driver is reflex-loaded through the uppermost port, while the upper unit is effectively open at the back, vented through holes that are part of the spine. The drivers have powerful magnetic motors and use 120mm diameter cones made from a glass/carbon fibre mix attached to a light paper membrane with a foamy glue in order to increase thickness and stiffness. The units now have titanium voice-coil formers, which combine light weight with good thermal characteristics and a freedom from hysteresis. The centre of the cone has a fixed 'bullet' phase plug, and all the drivers use three-point fixing, presumably to avoid too much enclosure excitation.

The tweeter is another unusual and interesting device, and is based on Dr Oskar Heil's Air Motion Transformer (AMT) principle. It uses a pleated diaphragm that look a little like the bellows of an accordion, and 'squeeze out' the signal both forward and to the rear (in dipole fashion). The rearward radiation is allowed to vent through the uppermost holes in the rear spine.

While the five-driver configuration might be complex, the crossover networks are deliberately simple affairs, with very few high quality components, and a compact layout that minimises the copper used in PCB tracks. Deep cryogenic treatment is applied

“The driver line-up is considerably more complex than first appearances suggest. Although only three drive units are visible, two more are hidden within the enclosure, and considerable efforts have gone into maximising the performance of each to suit its role.”

where appropriate. Three pairs of terminals apply the signal, permitting bi- or tri-wiring or –amping. Chatting to Ole Klifoth, it's clear that his main priorities are to try and capture the dynamic realism and precise 'fast' timing that one hears with live music. To this end he's actually a big fan of active drive, so can probably be persuaded to produce an active version if one asks very nicely.

Numerous other subtle details deserve mention, including the spring-decoupled front spikes that help avoid transmitting vibrations into the floor. These deliberately allow some lateral movement but none in the vital fore'n'aft direction.

Audiovector was keen to supply its own speaker cables, and I was perfectly happy to use them during the review listening. These cables are quite elaborate affairs, with cryogenically treated high purity copper conductors, asymmetric construction, crimped rather than soldered joints and so on. The 6m pair I was sent costs around £2,500 – far from cheap, but certainly capable of doing a very decent job.

Measurements very much confirmed the company's claims for high sensitivity (in the 92-93dB/W region), but not the 8 ohm nominal impedance. 'Nominal 8 ohms' cannot seriously be taken to include 'dropping to around 2.5 ohms at 100Hz' by any stretch of imagination. Although the generous sensitivity provides some compensation, this is still a demanding load that will best be handled by a solid state power amp with ample current reserves, and a requirement for low resistance cables is also indicated.

The in-room far-field averaged frequency response looked quite impressive. The bass port resonance is tuned to about 42Hz, so the bass rolls off quite quickly below 30Hz, and there was some exaggeration of our major 50Hz room mode, but above 60Hz the trace remained within a very creditable +/-3.5dB, implying fine overall neutrality. A mild dip 2.5-3.5kHz and a slight peak around 5kHz are the only obvious departures.

This is directly reflected in the sound quality, which is beautifully balanced, smooth and evenhanded. However, a good overall balance is something that many and much less costly speakers can achieve, and is only part of the story here. The ingredients that really set this top SR6 model apart are its fine timing and superior dynamic expression, two characteristics that are much rarer and more difficult to achieve, especially alongside decent neutrality.

It's really the preference for minimalist crossover networks, plus the difficulty of combining the three distinct performance elements of neutrality, timing and dynamic expression, that lies behind the considerable complexity

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SME

“The best pick-up arm in the world”

- of the Avantgarde Arrete's driver line up. All speakers involve some degree of compromise, between performance variables that are often mutually exclusive, but the end result here seems very well judged.

Perhaps its most striking feature is the tightly focused imaging. This is a speaker that leads with its upper midband. It sounds well balanced anywhere in the room, but sit down in the prime listening seat and everything snaps brilliantly into focus, delivering excellent image perspectives with a tight central focus and good depth. This speaker favours direct over reflected sound, which in turn will sharpen the image focus.

Voices are realistic and expressive, though not without a mild degree of nasal and pinched coloration. Speech in particular sounds clear, explicit and quite open, with fine dynamics and articulation.

This is not a particularly sweet sounding speaker, but it is an undeniably honest one. Some might find this honesty a little too ruthless, and there's no denying that wear and damage on old vinyl treasures can sometimes sound a little too uncomfortable, especially when they're played at a high level.

The top end of this speaker undoubtedly sounds quite strong, relatively speaking, and while on the one hand this helps bring welcome openness and reality to the proceedings, it's not always welcome. One wonders to what extent the minor measured peak at around 5kHz might be responsible.

When the speakers were first installed, I used my normal Vertex AQ speaker cables, which have silver conductors – expensive, true, but arguably appropriate with such a costly pair of speakers. These cables did tend to emphasise the rather strong top end, so that this part of the spectrum was a little too obvious. Changing the speaker cables to those supplied and branded by Audiovector, which use copper conductors, not only improved the coherence of the overall sound, but also demonstrated the wisdom of Audiovector choice.

It's always difficult trying to put costly and elaborate speaker designs into a proper market context, though in this case the SR6 Avantgarde Arrete carries a pricetag that's quite similar to two notable competitors: the B&W 800 Diamond and the KEF Blade. All three models have their own distinct identities, starting off with quite different physical appearances. That's obviously a matter of personal taste, but the Audiovector is clearly the most conventional and conservative in this regard.

Sonically speaking it lacks some of the bass weight and extension of its rivals, but that's not necessarily such a bad thing: the Audiovector's bass is certainly quantitatively adequate and qualitatively good. Its strongest point, however, is the way it grips and drives the midband, delivering voices with unusual excitement and realism. I can't say it's a better speaker than either the 800 Diamond or the Blade, but it's certainly a fully competitive alternative. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Frequency range: 24Hz – 52kHz Sensitivity (ref 2.83V): 92.5dB (confirmed)

Nominal impedance: 8 ohms Measured impedance minimum: 2.5ohms

Crossover frequencies: 80/350/2,800Hz Power handling: 450W

Dimensions (HxWxD): 125x24x36cm Weight: 36kg

Price: £18,800/pair

Manufactured by: Audiovector URL: www.audiovector.com

Distributed by: Henley Designs

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We're often asked this question. At Cool Gales, we're fortunate to be able to audition a huge range of high-end hi-fi gear, from the well-known "usual suspects" to obscure exotics, from components with eye-watering price tags to those that are eminently affordable, from classic vintage gear to the latest cutting edge.

Little wonder, then, that our customers frequently ask us to distil our experience, curious to know what exactly we fire up in the evening when we want to listen to music.

We're spoilt for choice here for turntables, but among our favourites is the Artemis Labs SA-1 coupled with the TA-1 tonearm, both designed by analogue guru Frank Schröder. Frank trained as a watchmaker, and his own hand-made tonearms are treasured by those fortunate enough to afford the price tags and patient enough to endure the two-year waiting list.

The TA-1 tonearm (available separately), although unmistakably a Schröder, is actually made by Artemis Labs engineers in California. Just imagine: it's now possible to have a Schröder-designed tonearm at about half the price of a Schröder-made tonearm, and within only two or three weeks of order. And a real beaut it is: with a kingwood wand and brass counterweight, and all necessary adjustment controls, minutely tuneable. Sonics are very definitely Schröder, with the finest details apparent, and breathtakingly musical.

The SA-1 turntable is a design of genius, beginning with its bamboo-layered plinth, the grain of each layer running in different directions, resulting in an extremely rigid, yet relatively lightweight, compact base, framed by solid ebony.

Power is provided by a high-torque DC motor sourced from Switzerland, with its own Artemis-designed power supply, driving a loop of magnetic tape. A variable tensioning pulley wraps the tape almost 360° around the platter, thus eliminating any pull on the bearing. The result may well be the best of all drive technologies: the precision of direct drive, the immediacy of idler wheel drive, and the purity of the best pulley drives.

The user manuals, both written by Frank, are an education in themselves in the art of analogue.

We've heard more expensive tonearms and turntables—indeed, some very much more expensive—but none better.



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Consonance Linear 1 preamplifier, Cyber 211 mono power amps

By Alan Sircom
Photography by James Wilkinson

Consonance is one of those companies that everyone skips over. The brand makes some of the most consistently excellent products in any line up, and yet all of us keep choosing the same old high-end famous names. This is a crying shame, because the Linear 1 line preamp and Cyber 211 mono power amps offer truly stunning performance at a price that makes a huge amount of sense. They are made in China, and maybe that highlights the anti-Chinese rhetoric that sometimes goes on in hi-fi circles.

The Linear 1 is a fully transformer-coupled line preamplifier, with a very impressive valve line-up – a pair of 2A3 as input triodes, a 6SL7 double triode in the phase splitter stage and a pair of 101Ds in the gain stage. This is an odd choice of tubes in some respects, possibly more commonly seen in low-power single-ended triode power amps in their own right, they work well to give the preamp the linearity and gain to drive almost any amplifier well. It's a simple but not basic design, with the standard issue

Consonance small but handy remote handset, four phono and one XLR input, phono and

XLR output and the selection and volume controlled from front panel and remote alike. Balance is not adjustable. With its matt black finish, dark grey case valve case and matt wooden side cheeks at the back of the of the amp, it's all about refined elegance.

Its look is echoed in the Cyber 211 amps. These tall, stubby amps sit on four outrigger feet, and look like some kind of CGI cutesy robot from Wall-E. Each amp has an E88CC input triode, a 5687 line driver, a pair of 5AR4 as rectifiers and a whopping great 211 power tube per side. This delivers a healthy 16W per side (an almost identical version with 845 power tubes is also available in the same chassis and at the same price, delivering 28W per channel).

These are easy amps to use, with a bias control and front-mounted biasing dial in easy access (as there's only the one power tube to bias, it's easy to operate). Behind this is a transformer hum control, designed to overcome hum from any potential DC offset – a neater way of doing things than DC blocking potentially.

Opera recommends a heavy run in, but it's not that important. They sound excellent from the outset. As they bed ►





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► in, there's a very slight touch of top-end hardness (almost like a grainy tube grunge) that goes away. But it's nothing to hold back over. What you hear day one is what you get, with very little change, just a slight opening out as time goes by.

What I like about these amps is it brings really top-banana single-ended triode sound to a whole new audience. Really, the only other player in town here is Pure Sound, and while it sounds fantastic too, the look is a little more 'agricultural' than the Consonance models, in my opinion. And bringing Single Ended Triode sound to a wide audience means it's going to be a shock to some when first hearing this kind of amplifier combination. It's unlike most audio sounds, the immediacy and direct-coupling to the sound is generally quite remarkable, and makes a lot of good audio sound artificial, slow and arch by comparison.

And then there's the dynamic range. I'd like to see a set of these amplifiers (with a friendly set of speakers) installed in every A&R person's home, so the next time they decide to push up the gain to 0dBFS on a CD, they hang their head in shame. This shows what's possible in natural sounding dynamic range. If your discs have the measure of a full dynamic range, the Cyber 211 will dig that range out of your music.

I always like to invert things a touch. Gritty sounding amps get plinky plonky jazz played through them, where smooth, detailed and dynamic amps get something really gnarly. This time, they got 'Debaser' from the Pixies *Doolittle* album. The album is dynamic, but mixed in that late 1980s way that manages to forget there's any music below about 100Hz. Nevertheless, what was there was portrayed in a sublime manner.

It's the speed of transient attack that gets you with this combination. 'Teardrop' by Massive Attack has that slow build coupled with some fast snare rim shots. If not well handled, it can sound ambient and big, but a bit slow. Here, all the ambience and speed were in full-effect. This also highlighted one of the few shortcomings of the amps; if there's any sibilance at the top end, this set-up will find it and expose it. Some of this is mitigated by use of soft dome tweeters, but it's always there. But it's a worthwhile trade when you consider the way the sound envelops you with these amplifiers.

There was a moment when listening to the classic 1962 Decca recording of the Nelson Mass, I felt like I was whisked away to King's College Cambridge. The layering of voices, the way those voices soared away, the way they were clearly ►

► differentiated from one another, all makes for a sound more like the real thing. The sense of harmonic structure and separation left me transfixed for a lot longer than writing a review should allow.

I tried the amps separated, and the gain structure of one really benefits the other. The preamp gives the power amp the chance to breathe properly and the preamp sounds masterful through the powers. It all goes together beautifully. It's an infectious sound. You don't just like it, you invite friends round to like it too. The irresistible charm and speed of the amps wins friends and influences people.

The limitations of SET amps are fairly well known and apply equally here. There are only as good as the transformers

driving them, which means a big, unevenly heavy amp (breaking it up into mono amps and putting two big carry-handle bars across the top is a good plan. You need efficient, easy load loudspeakers to take advantage of the 16 W on offer and unless you have speaker sensitivity in the 100dB+ range, playing loud in big rooms is never going to happen. It does go surprisingly loud for 16W, in part because the way it distorts is so clean and attractive. So, you may be playing into clipping and still loving the sound. There's also the largely intellectual issue about SET designs and measured response, which bothers some people greatly, while others just enjoy the sound of SET amps.

The Consonance Linear 1 and Cyber 211 are important amps. If these amps were made in the UK or the USA, their level of fit and finish coupled with the fine sound would have people lining up to shout loud about them. However, they would cost about three times as much, and people would not bat an eyelid. This is a combination you have to take seriously. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Consonance Linear 1

Zero negative, transformer coupled preamp

Inputs: 4x RCA, 1x XLR

Outputs: 2x RCA, 1x XLR

Valves: 2x 2A3, 1x 6SL7, 2x 101D

Harmonic Distortion (for 2V RMS at output): less than 1%

Frequency Response (@ -1dB): 5Hz-60kHz (Gain=9.5dB),

5Hz-40kHz (Gain=15.5dB)

Input impedance: 600ohms

Signal/Noise Ratio: 90dB

Dimensions (WxHxD): 40x22.5x43cm

Weight: 25kg

Cyber 211 Mono power amplifier

Valves: 1x E88CC, 1x 5687, 2x 5AR4, 1x 211 per side

Warm up time: 3 minutes

Power Output: 16 watts (@1kHz) RMS

Total harmonic distortion: less than 1% (10watt, 1kHz)

Frequency response: 5Hz - 47kHz (-3dB)

Input sensitivity: 0.6V

Input impedance: 100k ohms

Input: 1x RCA per side

Output: four and eight ohm taps, user selectable

Signal/Noise Ratio: 90dB

Dimensions (WxHxD): 18.5x33x42cm per channel

Weight: 15kg per channel

Price: £4,495 (Linear 1), £4,995/pair (Cyber 211)

Manufacturer: Opera Consonance

URL: www.opera-consonance.com

Distributed by: Alium Audio

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Basis Inspiration Turntable and Vector 4 Tonearm

By Robert Harley

I have long admired and enjoyed Basis turntables. They are passionately designed and meticulously built, and epitomize insightful engineering in the pursuit of sound quality. I lived with the 2800 Signature for several years and found it superb. Could the Inspiration really be that much better?

The Inspiration is a five-component affair, comprising the turntable itself (including the integral Basis Vector 4 tonearm), a freestanding motor that sits on the turntable's lower platform, the Synchro-Wave power supply, a vacuum control-unit, and the vacuum pump. Although designed to the same principles as all Basis tables, the Inspiration boasts several cosmetic and engineering departures. One of these is in the acrylic platter and subchassis. This new acrylic is designed for maximum energy transfer between the record and platter so that the platter acts as a sink for record vibration. Keep in mind that any relative motion between the record and stylus that isn't created by groove modulation is noise and distortion. That motion is converted into an electrical signal and amplified. Even the tiniest vibration ends up colouring the music. How well an interface of two dissimilar materials (in this case, the record and platter) transfers mechanical energy is determined purely by the mechanical impedance match of the two materials. The more similar the product of stiffness times density, the greater match in mechanical impedance and the greater the energy transfer. The new acrylic's stiffness and density are more like that of an LP, resulting in less spurious vibration of the record. It's also slightly lower in hardness and has better self-damping properties.



This superior self-damping makes it a better choice for the subchassis as well. The difficulty in polishing this softer acrylic to a transparent finish resulted in a bit of serendipity. Basis experimented with other finish techniques, and hit on a frosted-edge look that is a departure from previous Basis tables. The edges, grained in-house to impart the frosted appearance, tend to hide what's behind the turntable, as well as to look more elegant. The frosted edges complement the metal parts' matte finish to give the Inspiration a unified appearance.

The thick rectangular subchassis is suspended at each of its four corners with fluid-damped "Resonance Annihilators." These devices employ a series of internal springs and dampers that isolate the subchassis from external vibration. The Resonance Annihilators are contained within the corner posts, which themselves are mounted on a platform below the subchassis. This vibration-isolation and damping system is so effective that if you apply a stethoscope to the subchassis and pound on the equipment rack you will hear no sound through the stethoscope. The platter spins on a cost-no-object bearing.

The vacuum hold-down is identical to that of the 2800 Signature, but the small control unit now sports a much finer finish. The control unit allows you to finely adjust the amount of vacuum, indicated by a precision dial. An ideal setting is a gentle 0.5 PSI of negative pressure, which is just enough to create intimate contact between the record and platter but not enough to embed any dust on the LP or the platter in the record's underside. This intimate contact between platter and record reduces spurious vibration in the LP, resulting in better sound. You can hear for yourself the effect of vacuum hold-down simply by comparing the sound of a record with the vacuum turned on and off. The vacuum pump itself is so quiet that I positioned it on the floor next to the turntable and never heard it in operation.

▶ As with all Basis 'tables, the Inspiration benefits from the Revolution drive belt, a belt so thin it is translucent. Basis founder A. J. Conti discovered that uniform drive-belt thickness was a crucial factor in speed stability, and when he couldn't get his vendors to make a belt to his standards, he designed and had a machinist build belt-grinding machinery and began producing them in-house. The Revolution belt's thickness variations (along its length) is just ± 0.1 microns, about one one-thousandth ($1/1000$) the diameter of a human hair. (Incidentally, the CD specification for track pitch is 1.6 microns, ± 0.1 microns). Conti personally measures the thickness, the thickness variation, width variation, and surface finish (at 4x magnification) of each side of each belt before it is packed with a turntable.

The Synchro-Wave power supply drives the AC synchronous motor with dual sinewaves 90 degrees apart, one for each motor coil. Operation is so smooth that while holding the motor in your hand, you can't tell if it's running. Selection between 33-1/3 and 45 rpm is done via a switch on the Synchro-Wave's front panel.

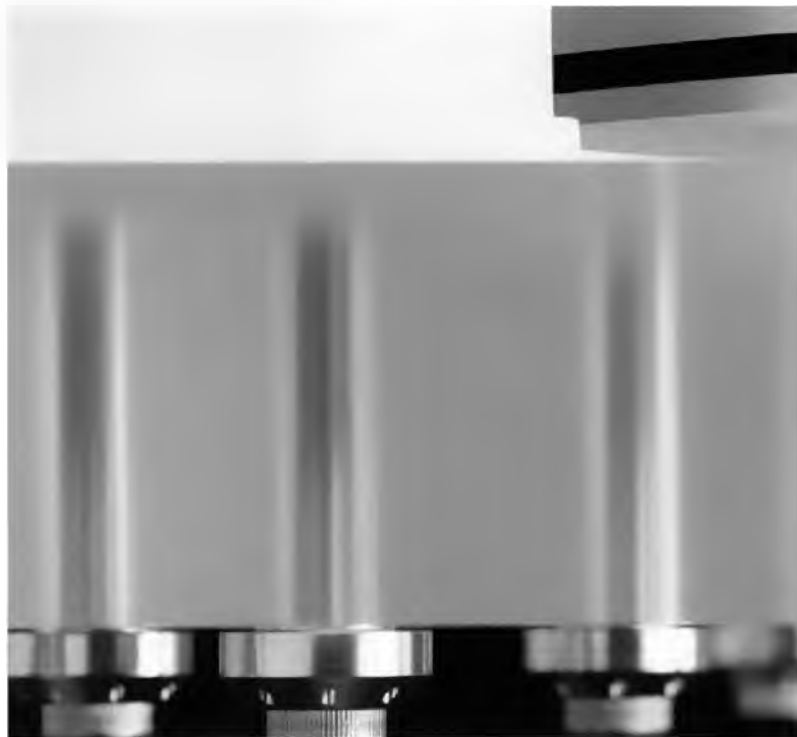
The motor itself is encased in lavish metalwork. To assure the finish quality, Conti

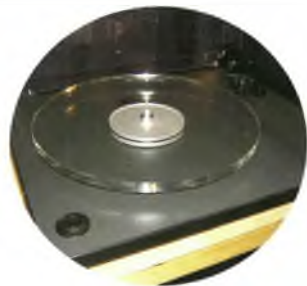
accompanies the metal parts to the anodizing shop and stands behind the technician as the parts are anodized, inspecting each one as it comes out of the bath. This attention to detail shows in the finished product; the metal parts have an elegant matte finish that is beyond reproach. Looking at the Inspiration as a whole, it exudes a sense of refinement and quality.

The integral Vector 4 dual-bearing tonearm features a novel technical solution to a fundamental problem of LP playback that occurs in unipivot arms: dynamic azimuth error, or the tendency of the arm to rotate around the armtube's axis when the stylus encounters record warp. This phenomenon causes the azimuth (the perpendicularity between the stylus and record) to constantly change from the ideal 90 degrees. The solution in the Vector 4 is to asymmetrically weight the tonearm (via a cutout in the counterweight) so that it "leans" onto a second "stabilizer" bearing. The main bearing is similar to a conventional unipivot, and bears virtually all the arm's weight. The secondary bearing simply stabilizes the arm to prevent the arm from "rolling" in response to record warp, and also to eliminate bearing chatter. This design reportedly also reduces tracking error, a claim that I can verify; in nearly five years of listening to a Vector I've never heard it mistrack. Moreover, most tonearms produce a "chattering" sound when playing as they vibrate in response to stylus movement, but the Vector is completely silent. Adding the stabilizer bearing sounds like a simple and obvious solution, but before the Vector, no one had thought of it.

The Inspiration incorporates Basis' cable-support system, a small block of acrylic mounted to the base behind the tonearm that isolates the turntable and tonearm from vibration entering through the cables. The heroic measures to isolate the turntable from vibration could be compromised by this vibration path, but the cable-support system effectively maintains isolation.

Basis makes a dedicated stand for the Inspiration that holds the turntable, Synchro-Wave Power Supply, vacuum controller, and vacuum pump. The ▶





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The New Angle on LP Reproduction, Level 2: Introducing the Lyra Kleos MC Phono Cartridge

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Lyra's "New Angle" technology solves this fundamental problem by compensating for how the signal coils are affected by vertical tracking forces, and optimally aligning the coils when it matters most - during playback. Introduced on our entry-level Delos, the New Angle technology enables the Delos to perform well above its pricepoint.

But being audiophiles, we wanted to achieve the next higher level - which is the new Kleos. Building on New Angle technology, the Kleos innovates with a stronger chassis machined from aircraft-grade alloys, narrowed mounting area to improve energy transfer, and pre-stressed construction combining multiple materials with non-parallel surfaces to inhibit internal body resonances. The fully hand-made Kleos also has a Lyra-designed line contact stylus and platinum-plated output pins, achieving an exceptionally quiet noise-floor with superior immediacy, resolution and tracking, wide dynamic range and explosive transients, plus a warmer and natural tonal balance. The Kleos is a high-value cartridge that surpasses the sound quality of substantially more expensive cartridges.

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Jonathan Carr, Lyra Designer



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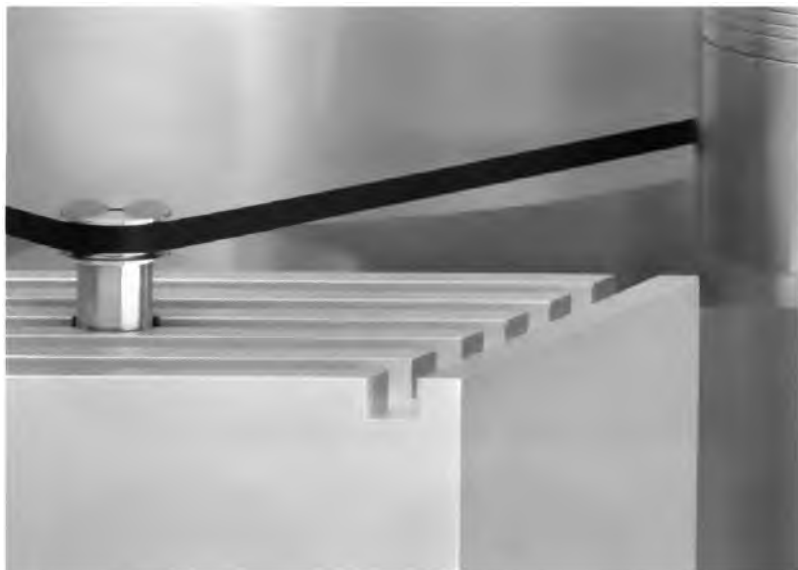
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in its ability to bring instrumental images to life, courtesy of this vividness of timbre and richness of tone colors. This quality, I believe, is the primary reason the Inspiration transcends the experience of hearing reproduced sound and instead fosters a feeling of being in the presence of contemporaneous music-making.

This ultra-precise pitch stability is key to the soundstage solidity and stability. The Inspiration's spatial presentation is phenomenal in every respect, but particularly in the clarity of image outlines and the sense of each instrument occupying a specific location separate from other instruments. "Crisp" is a word that comes to mind in describing the soundstage. The stage is richly portrayed, exhibiting palpable immediacy on instruments toward the front of the stage, with layer upon layer of depth in fine gradations all the way to the back of the hall. The Inspiration is particularly adept at precisely conveying the distance between the musician and microphones, a performance characteristic that allows a dense and richly textured musical panorama to unfold before you.

A fundamental quality of Basis 'tables has been a lack of noise, a characteristic that is extended in the Inspiration. It isn't just an utterly silent, jet-black background, but it also seems to make LP surfaces quieter. When listening to good pressings—try the spectacular new Reference Recordings releases *From the Age of Swing*, Stravinsky's *Firebird* and *Song of the Nightingale*—the residual background you often hear from LP playback is simply nonexistent. The *Firebird* has long passages of extremely low signal levels, but the combination of pressing quality and the Inspiration's vanishingly low noise produce an eerie quiet that you don't normally associate with LPs. At the other end of the dynamic scale, the Inspiration is immune to congestion or hardening of timbre on orchestral climaxes even at high levels through large loudspeakers with prodigious bass output—no doubt because of its heroic vibration-isolation design and execution.

Transient reproduction and dynamic rendering are simply phenomenal. Through the Inspiration transients start very quickly

- expensive stand is made from acrylic to visually match the turntable. It doesn't employ any isolation technology, but is rigid and non-resonant.

The traditional Basis qualities—a dead-quiet background, flawless pitch stability, wide dynamics, crisp transients—are in abundance. This new 'table delivers a highly precise-sounding presentation, with great clarity, high resolution, lack of added warmth, great transient speed with no overhang, and a seemingly colourless rendering of timbre.

The Inspiration's great triumph is that it nails every single technical aspect of reproduced sound by any sonic criteria, but does so in a musically communicative and engaging way. The Inspiration doesn't detract from musical expression with its high-precision rendering; in fact, that precision is exactly why the Inspiration is the most musically rewarding source component I've had in my home in more than 22 years of reviewing. The Inspiration's clarity, transparency, resolution, vividness, and life are not artifacts but rather characteristics of the music. With the Inspiration there's no hint of hype or etch to transient detail, and no thinning of tone color that causes timbres to become "skeletal" in the pursuit of "resolution." Yet the Inspiration isn't warm, forgiving, relaxed, or easygoing. It doesn't soften transient leading edges, adds no richness to timbres, and never warms up the upper bass and lower midrange with a bit of overhang. What it does do is act as a transparent window on the LP, faithfully conveying exactly what's in the grooves with no editorial interpretation. The Inspiration can be vivid, immediate, and lively, yet simultaneously rich, full, warm, and full-bodied because music can have all those qualities simultaneously. The Inspiration's defining quality is that it doesn't walk the fine line between analytical sterility and romantic warmth; it simply rejects the dichotomy by being so colorless and transparent to the source.

Moving to the specific performance attributes, the Inspiration's rock-solid pitch stability pays musical dividends in many areas. This quality confers many sonic rewards, some of which you wouldn't naturally associate with micro-speed variations. The first of these is the sense of timbral realism. The Inspiration renders instrumental timbre with a lifelike immediacy, vividness, and palpability that are simply sensational. Turntables without this precision seem to dilute the sense of life. Timbres are simply believable, and with that believability comes the sense of a human being playing the instrument. The Inspiration is stunning



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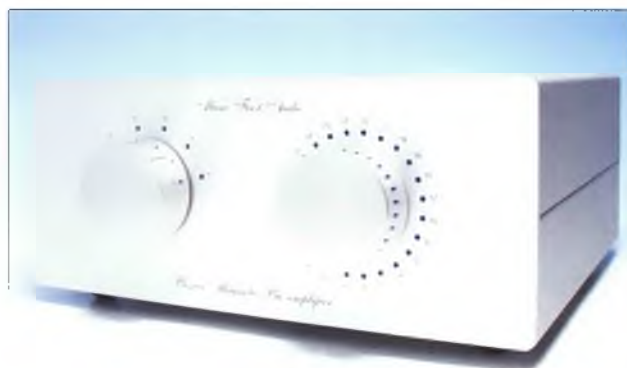
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▶ with steep leading edges and no overhang. I had the impression that none of the transients' energy were smeared on the leading edge, or stored and released later on the trailing edges. Consequently, percussion practically leaps from the soundstage with stunning vividness. The entire presentation has a dynamic agility that powerfully conveys music's rhythmic power. This is true whether the dynamics are small in scale, as with low-level percussion, or massive, as with orchestral climaxes. Moreover, the Inspiration beautifully conveys the sense of swing, and of intricate rhythmic nuance, in great acoustic bass-playing on jazz LPs.

The Inspiration is unique in my experience in the way it resolves very fine detail, particularly instrumental decays. It beautifully resolves instrumental and reverberation decays smoothly down to inaudibility with no reduction in resolution or change in timbre. This quality also contributes to the Inspiration's jaw-dropping impression of instruments hanging in space. I know of no better example than Shelly Manne's ride cymbal on Sonny Rollins' *Way Out West* (the Analogue Productions reissue). When played on the Inspiration, the cymbal is right there, vivid, alive, present, and "now," not merely an acoustic representation of a mechanical representation of a magnetic representation of an acoustic waveform produced 54 years ago. That's the essential magic of high-performance hi-fi—the ability to erase time and space and make you feel like you're experiencing the music spontaneously as it's being created. This magic is the cumulative result of a product's specific performance attributes. A non-audiophile will experience the magic without a clue as to why the music sounds so lifelike. But in the Inspiration's case, I can clearly identify why it produces such magic—the utter lack of noise, stunning transient fidelity, richly textured tone colors, massive resolution without the slightest bit of analytical etch, spectacular three-dimensional soundstaging, and the unprecedented ability to resolve decays to below audibility.

The Basis Inspiration elevates LP playback to an entirely new level of musical expressiveness and listener involvement in my experience. The Inspiration seems to cross a threshold that is not just "better" on a sonic checklist (although it is phenomenal by every specific audiophile criteria), but that fosters a transformative musical connection that instantly makes me forget that checklist. It manages to produce a sound with tremendous clarity, resolution, and vividness, yet it never suggests even a hint of mechanical stentility. This ability to convey a massive amount of musical information in a totally unforced, natural, and relaxed way is the Inspiration's core achievement.

The Inspiration is the result of meticulous, dedicated, and even obsessive design. Some of this perfectionism is beneath the skin. But much of it you can appreciate just by looking at the execution. Every aspect of the design performs a technical function. The Inspiration is all it needs to be—and no more. There is no superfluous gesture, no added bling. This 'table's beauty emerges from its core values. It's also backed by a 27-year-old American company that can repair or update any turntable it has ever made.

How close does the Inspiration come to A.J. Conti's cost-no-object *Work of Art*, the turntable that "inspired" the Inspiration? I have no way of knowing, but when enjoying music through the Inspiration, it never occurred to me that I could possibly be missing anything more. +

"The Basis Inspiration elevates LP playback to an entirely new level of musical expressiveness and listener involvement in my experience... It manages to produce a sound with tremendous clarity, resolution and vividness."

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inspiration Turntable

Type: Belt-drive turntable with vacuum hold-down

Dimensions: 17.7" x 12" x 16.75"

System weight: 100 lbs.

Vacuum Hold-Down Control Unit and Pump

Dimensions: 6" x 3" x 10.5" (control unit)

Dimensions: 8" x 5" x 8" (pump)

Weight: 6 lbs. (control unit)

Weight: 15 lbs. (pump)

Basis Vector 4 Tonearm

Effective mass: 11–15 grams

Synchro-Wave Power Supply

Speeds: 33 1/3, 45

Dimensions: 13" x 3" x 10.5"

Weight: 12 lbs.

Warranty: Ten years parts and labor

System price: £49,000

Manufacturer: Basis Audio

URL: www.basisaudio.com

Distributed by: Select Audio

URL: www.selectaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1900 813064

First Published in The Absolute Sound issue 220

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Eclipse TD508 II/TDA501 II desktop speaker system

By Alan Sircom



In a very real way, dismissing this Eclipse system as a desktop speaker package is doing it a great disservice. It's a full-range, time-domain oriented speaker system that happens to work exceptionally well in the near-field, and that includes the computer desktop. The distinction might be subtle, but crucial.

The system comprises a pair of TD508 II loudspeakers and the conical 12W TDA501 II integrated amplifier. The amp has two inputs; one a pair of phono's, the other a mini-jack line input, there's no remote and the volume control is adjusted by turning the chrome apex of the cone. It's powered by an external in-line power supply. It can be used with the matching 316SW subwoofer, but in genuine near-field installations, that bass reinforcement is not a mandatory requirement.

The amp is designed to showcase the Time Domain 'logic' of the speakers, with emphasis on the envelope of the musical notes played rather than flat frequency response. Although the frequency response is claimed to be linear from 10Hz-100kHz, the amp is more about amplitude and instantaneous dynamics. As a consequence, putting the TDA501 II on a conventional cone and dome loudspeaker makes for a sound that very taut and 'fast' sounding, yes,

but not that tonally accurate. But the point of the TDA501 II is not to be an everyman amp, it is specifically designed to enhance the performance of the TD508 II loudspeakers, and that it does extraordinarily well.

The loudspeakers sit on a small, adjustable duck-foot stand when sitting on a desk, although there is an optional floor stand and wall/ceiling bracket that marries to the stand. The speakers can be used with a variety of amps, but with the combination of low, 81dB sensitivity and an effective 24W limit on amplifiers, the best option is the logical matching one. These specs also place the speakers right in the near-field, because limited power handling and low sensitivity imply low volumes in big rooms. Gold 4mm speaker terminals are provided, but it's best used with small, thin untinned grey speaker cables Eclipse supplies with the TDA501 II amp.

The key element of the Eclipse loudspeaker is that full-range white cone, set in a 80mm drive unit. It's no bass hound and no high treble screamer, but what it does, it does with precision and speed. ▶

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A. M. S. M.

[illegible]

42

3. *Journal of Education*, 94:159.

The speaker used the Yiddish word *tsaytungs* to mean the speaker is counted for now and.

[illegible]

This pair of species demands a medium-to-large room, even though the speakers are quite compact. In the next installment, we'll look at the two most well-

[illegible]

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► It's worth giving the system a protracted listen, because your prior audio experiences are coloured by the sound audio makes, and this approaches the whole audio process very differently. After a while though, you hear the ringing attack of plectrum on metal guitar string as Tommy Emmanuel races through Guitar Boogie, even on the comparatively bloated and frankly just plain wobbly sound of a good YouTube clip, the glitzy pomp of the Rome 'soundtrack', the majesty of Mozart's Requiem (the Gardiner/Philips Classics edition) and the snapped in place precision of James Blake.

The more you listen, the more you are drawn in. Old Bowie albums like Space Oddity normally don't have much to say to the audiophile, but here Bowie's voice is crystal clear and his slightly louche style is exposed; a bit like Sinatra, he managed to hit passing tones with a precision and control that was rare in a time before Auto Tune.

Three points emerge. First is, it's not surprising these speakers are so beloved by studio types; they by-pass the technology and tell you a great deal of what is happening in the mix and even in the studio. Second, this means that the speaker system is unconcerned by the musical format used, which can help bring out the best in lossy compressed music. Finally, these speakers work well at the sort of levels that suit someone working at a desktop.

There are limits, of course, but they do appear imposed deliberately, not simply because the loudspeaker designer forgot to 'do' bass. As discussed earlier, the mechanical limits of the speaker prevent a high degree of turning up the volume, but given where you are relative to the speakers, this might not be a bad thing. Of these limits, the bass is perhaps the most noticeable; it's all there, just not in the sort of intensity that would wind up with a doorstep full of King Tubby fans or dubstep warriors. I'd also suggest using some kind of USB-based digital converter. The multi-format headphone output from many computers isn't bad in many cases, but there are better options in the digital domain.

The other big problem is the addictive nature of the Eclipse sound. It might 'only' be a desktop system, but if you end up spending a lot of time at your desktop, pulling away and listening to more conventional cone and dome, panel or even horn speakers will sound unsatisfying and slow-sounding. It's a hi-fi reeducation, and potentially the only things that will hit the target will be more and bigger Eclipse loudspeakers.

It's been 10 years since the first Eclipse design and they are as exciting and innovative as ever. I can't help but praise these speakers to the utmost, wherever they end up being used, if only for the near magical way they handled the Johnny Cash version of 'Hurt'. Any desktop speaker that can do that much goosepimpling by the end of the first few bars deserves the highest recommendation. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

TD508 II One-way, no crossover ported loudspeaker

Drive unit: 80mm full range

Frequency response: 55Hz-20kHz (-10dB)

Sensitivity: 81dB/W-m

Input Resistance (Rating/Max.): 12W/24W

Impedance: eight ohms

Dimensions (WxHxD): 16x24x23cm

Weight: 2.8kg

TDA501 II Integrated amplifier

2x inputs: 1x RCA phono, 1x stereo 3.5mm Minijack

1x 3.5mm stereo mini output

Frequency Response: 10Hz-100kHz (±3dB)

Output: 12W (THD: 1%)

Harmonic Distortion: 0.05% max (1kHz, 1W output)

Input Impedance: ten ohms

Input Sensitivity: 180mVrms (at 12W output)

Input impedance: eight ohms

Cut-off frequency: 90Hz (-3dB)

Power consumption: 18W

Dimensions (WxHxD): Amp 16x15x14cm

AC Adaptor: 12x3x6cm

Weight: 930g (amp), 360g (Adaptor)

Finishes: Silver, Black or White

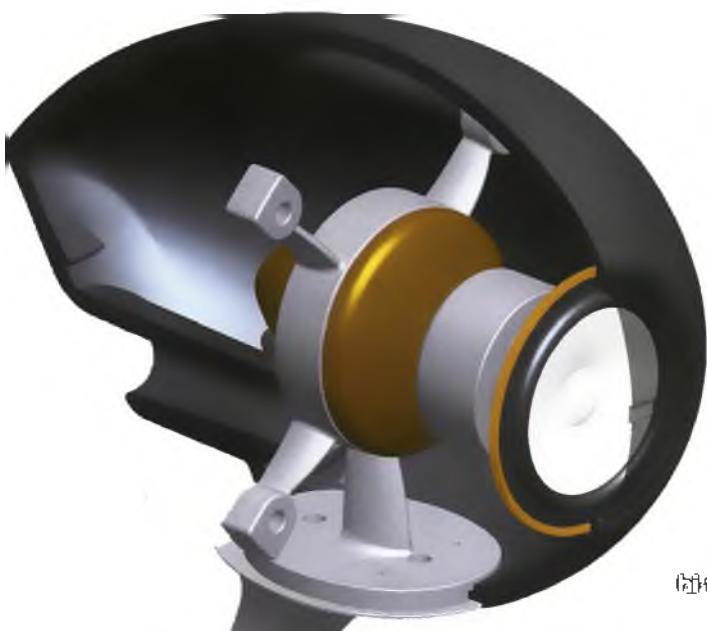
Price Eclipse TD508 II: £600 **TDA501 II:** £179

Special package price: £669

Manufacturer: Eclipse TD

URL: www.eclipse-td.net

Tel: +44(0) 20 7328 4499





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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Thomas Audio Support Systems MagicRack MR1 equipment support

By Alan Sircom

This is a clever concept, made of British gumption, and more than a nod to other trades. Thomas Audio is the brainchild of Simon Thomas, audio and cycling nut who – when he isn't running his high end bike store – is always tinkering with his hi-fi system. One day he applied his cycling smarts to the hi-fi, and the Thomas Audio Support Systems MagicRack MR1 was born.

Equipment stands essentially work as marriages or divorces; they join the component with the ground in wedded harmony, or they try their level best to keep the two apart. The Thomas rack falls into the latter category. It uses thick rubber straps joined to the wooden side-bars of the rack with screws and battens (which allow a degree of adjustment), and these side bars sit on other bars with wooden spars to determine the width of the unit. Each set of bars, spars and straps (with thick wooden dowels to act as stand-offs between the bars and spars and bars and straps) represent a single level of the support platform, and the whole thing slots together in a manner reminiscent of those days when you used to try and put the yellow plastic star shaped peg in the blue plastic crescent moon hole with the red plastic hammer. Meanwhile, your kit sits on a pair of rubber hammocks.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Three tier rack: £600.

Additional Tiers: £200

Wood/gloss black finish as standard.

Others by appointment

Manufacturer: Thomas Audio

Support Systems

URL: www.magic-racks.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)7895 815636



It's a neat idea, and gives the equipment a certain amount of freedom of movement in the horizontal and even vertical planes. However, it does impose lower size and weight limits on anything that comes to rest on its strappy goodness. A lightweight DAC or similar will have a spot too much freedom of movement, and it goes from 'hammock' to 'bouncy castle'. Also, half-sized boxes in full-sized racks will end up with the rubber straps supporting the edges of the product, rather than the feet. Fortunately, the word 'custom' suggests you could order a mini rack for smaller products.

The MagicRack MR1 opens out the midrange and treble well, making the soundstage seem more natural. The upper bass is rich and easier to pick out from its surrounding elements. It stands (ahem) somewhere between Quadraspire and Townshend racks. It's a support best used with middle to high-end equipment; too cheap and the balance of expenditure and the returns that expenditure gives don't add up, too high-end and you'll probably be looking at something like a Stillpoints rack that costs more than most budget systems in its own right. This represents the happy place. In addition, the upper bass richness that works so well in many systems could work to the detriment of the sound when used with absolute top-of-the-line systems.

For the rest of us, the MagicRack MR1 delivers great performance without massive outlay. It will keep feedback at bay while making the system come alive that bit more.

It's well worth slinging money at! +

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READER'S SYSTEM

Special K

Our man of mystery takes his music enjoyment very seriously indeed

By Alan Sircom



We don't run that many reader's systems in *Hi-Fi+*. But sometimes they are irresistible. This was one such case. The

difficulty is, when one has a lot of very good equipment, it's natural to become highly protective of identity. The last thing anyone would want is a system review that began, "Barry Spigot, of 164 The Grollicks, Pinteresque, Hants has a £30,000 system, a mediocre alarm and no-one's at home during the day. Go visit!" However, even if their safety and security is assured through a high degree of anonymity and false identities, some people still shun the spotlight.

So it is with Mr. K. ▶

"The main talking point of the system is the loudspeakers, specifically their use of Feastrex Monster Alnico drive units; as far as we can tell, the only pair in the country thus far."



▶ A true gentleman of the old water, Mr. K manages to achieve that effortless, self-effacing British charm that an army of Ralph Lauren store designers would happily sell a kidney to attain. And his audio system is a perfect reflection of his nature. A bright, shiny state-of-the-art system would never fit the profile. Neither would a bright, shiny sound. This is all about effortless comfort and luxury, style without trying to be stylish.

The system, largely put together by Audiolinics with more than a little help from Select Audio, begins with an SME 10 turntable, but with an SME V in place of the standard made-for-the-deck Model 309 tonearm. The cartridge on this deck is one of the hidden stars in the audio heavens; the Transfiguration Orpheus. This moving coil design is capable of seeing off some of the best cartridges around. As a Benz-Micro user, Mr. K thought I might not be taken by the Transfiguration sound, but who wouldn't be impressed with the smooth highs, liquid mid and powerful bass of the Orpheus?

The well-chosen secrets continue with Mr. K's use of a RCM Audio Prelude IC phono stage from Poland. This is a truly hand-built design, its components matched under lab conditions to ensure the phono stage is within 0.3dB of the RIAA curve across the whole 20Hz-20kHz range, and yet DIP switch adjustable (from its rear panel) to match load impedance and gain. Even in an unknown

system, it was clear this is something special, if only down to the complete absence of noise floor. This is something that I hope to investigate further in time.

On the digital side, an Opera Consonance Reference CD2.2 deck in black takes care of optical disc replay. While this is an exceptional player, CD does not feature strongly in Mr. K's listening. He's not anti-digital and no luddite about such things, but on balance most of his listening takes place on vinyl. And, with the LP's continued high profile, and lots of excellent reissues and new releases on the format, he's not about to change just yet. A classic Magnum Dynalab FT-101A FM tuner completes the list of source components.

Mr. K's power amplifier is high-end royalty; an Air Tight ATM-300 stereo power amp. This could be used as a one-source integrated amplifier, because it does include an attenuator, but wisely Mr. K chose to use it with the passive magnetic Music First Audio preamp. The Air Tight uses 300B power valves. Mr. K has sourced NOS Western Electric valves, as well as the best vintage valves in every seat in the house. That's dedication, and not cheap.

The turntable and power amp sit on Vertex AQ Kinabalu platforms, although neither takes advantage of the matching couplers and rest on the chambered platform directly. Personally, I'd use either the Ken Barlows to full effect with the coupler/decoupler tripod, or choose a different platform, but Mr. K is happy with the sound. The CD player also sits on an isolation platform, but this – like any talk of cables in the system – was quickly forgotten when it came to the listening.

The main talking point of the system is the loudspeakers, specifically their use of Feastrex Monster Alnico drive units; as far as we can tell, the only pair in the country thus far. These 125mm full-range units look slightly like Lowther drivers, but feature a truly huge Alnico 5-7 magnet, making this one of the smoothest sounding loudspeaker drive units ever made. Although full-range, Feastrex suggest the inclusion of a 230mm Feastrex passive radiator with the 'smaller' 125mm main driver. The cabinet is custom made to Feastrex's specifications and beautifully finished, if without ornament. This makes for a frightening efficient design, falling only slightly short of the company's field-core technology for efficiency and, allegedly, tonal beauty.

The Feastrex-derived loudspeakers have a natural limit in bass response. So Mr. K carefully and discreetly uses a B&W PV1 subwoofer ▶



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► hidden from view to reinforce the bottom end. It's incredibly well integrated, never drawing attention to its performance or booming away loudly. It simply adds some extra substance to those last octaves.

Mr. K's tastes fall very much away from the loud, raucous rock end of the spectrum, preferring instead to find gems of world music, classical and jazz. His jazz tastes run to the eclectic, but not necessarily avant-garde. Mr. K is at his happiest finding wonderful, little-known live performances from excellent but less famous acts; the kind that stormed Ronnie Scotts for three nights in 1956 then were heard of no more. Not obscure for the sake of being obscure, but acts with something to say and not much time to say it. Yes, the standards and classics are there, but Mr. K is all about quality, not simply quantity.

His system flows. There is no other word that better fits the sound it makes. Music seems to drip effortlessly from the loudspeakers. It's not a simulacra of a 1950s jazz club, a concert hall or any of the usual hi-fi soundstage clichés; it's a living, breathing and flowing sound, as if his house had decided to make some music.

As a consequence, the word organic fits too, but in a different way from normal in the hi-fi press. We normally reserve the word for a sound that is extremely well integrated and not too bright sounding. We use it almost interchangeably with 'natural'. That's not what

organic means here. It means the sound of Mr. K's system seems to have been grown out of the walls, floors and furnishings of the room. It's an extension of the house itself, remove it and something fundamental blinks out of the room; uplift it and play it somewhere else and the magic it creates would disappear. It's an uncanny effect (in a wholly good way), something that few systems realise, but it makes the overall performance seem more structured and uniquely entertaining. You never once get the feeling you are listening to hi-fi, but neither do you get the feeling you are listening to an impression of another room. The music flows from the room itself, the system is just there to facilitate that.

The sound is honest, musically remarkable and gives any instrumentalist the freedom to express themselves naturally and totally. But 'neutral'? That would be a flat, lifeless and an alien invader into Mr. K's environment. It's just not a goal here, and the system sounds better for it in this case.

Being presented with a system where I know perhaps 10% of the components in the chain makes it functionally impossible to point to what individual components contribute to the mix. I can pretty much tell what the Transfiguration is doing, having some experience of an SME 10 and SME V. I can also hear – or rather, not hear – the quality of the phono stage thanks to its low background noise. And most of all, I can recognise the sheer fluidity and openness of the Feastrex speaker designs, because the sound is so unlike the majority of loudspeaker systems. But to pick apart this kind of system defeats the object. The system works as a complete unit. It is very much an extension of Mr. K's room, which is very much an extension of Mr. K's domestic life. As a consequence, it's clear he lives well; not a life of bacchanalian excess or cloistered quiet. Just... well.

Mr. K's system also makes you remember what makes this whole hi-fi thing so infinitely fascinating. It's a perfect reflection of his tastes and character. Perhaps not many would find it to their ultimate liking, but that isn't the point. This isn't a popularity contest: it's a man, trying to find the best possible sound for him. And I think he's got it. +

Does your system have a tale to tell, and would you like it told? Please get in touch with the team at editor@hifiplus.com.

Do you like music, or the sound it makes?

music matters

By Alan Sircom

We haven't forgotten the ongoing acoustics series of columns, but the magazine is in the process of making a listening room, and the whole acoustics concept works far better when we have something more than a piece of plasterboard and a door to play with. Please forgive the hiatus.

One of the interesting questions that fell out of last issue's discussion about blind tests of USB cables was 'which is best?' To recap, we played several USB cables, from free to about £2,000 under blind conditions to a panel of five listeners, three chose one distinct pecking order, while the other two chose a similar pecking order but with a very different winner. This has caused a little bit of a stir among a few readers; some who dismiss the whole test as invalid because – despite not actually being there at the time – they are convinced all the cables sounded exactly the same. For the purposes of this column, let's not go there right now. But some contend that there should always be one distinct product better suited for any given system, and that differences in personal tastes would likely be expressed in completely different systems. And yet, the panel of listeners seemed to suggest no such thing.

The interesting part of this was that the pecking order of the test was very consistent, just that there were in fact two pecking orders reflecting the tastes of the two different sub-sets of the group of listeners. Interestingly, what they identified in the specific cables was remarkably consistent, but their reactions to those aspects identified were not. So where one sub-set praised a specific cable for sounding coherent and dismissed another for being too separated and disorganised, the other sub-set dismissed the first for being almost claustrophobically close-knit and praised the second for its instrument separation and detail.

The more I thought on these two reactions to the same sound, the more I thought that one reaction calls on 'the music' while the second highlights 'the sound music is making'. Sir Thomas Beecham's famous snipe – "The British hate music but love the sound it makes" – doesn't quite fit here, because the difference is not a pejorative one. The reality is closer to those who go to concerts, and those who go to concerts and follow the score. Both are moved by music, just in a very different way.

Let's be brutally honest with ourselves here. If you listen to music played on your audio system, do you immediately engage with the central musical themes, or do you find yourself teasing apart the sound, following the bass lines, and enjoying that simulation of being in the same acoustic space as the musicians? If so, you are possibly drawn to the sound the music is making, as well as the music itself.

This might also serve to explain why the likes of Cardas Clear scored so consistently across both groups. Possessing a sense of balance to its presentation, Clear managed to sustain the interests of both sub-sets relatively well. As one directed toward the music, but with a light dusting of loving what really good staging, I find that balance very alluring.

At the risk of repetition, I want to make it perfectly clear. The two stances are not mutually exclusive. Just because someone is drawn into the music doesn't make them appreciative of a well-tuned soundstage, and just because someone is initially wowed by the presence of the recording doesn't mean they are some kind of music hating hi-fi hyperbuff with one disc of train noises and an outstanding system. We all listen differently, and our priorities for listening are different too.

This also seems to explain why some find some systems 'too hi-fi', and why others find some systems 'too dull'. Once more these two sides of the same argument have more in common than it first seems, because often both suppress the '... for my liking' suffix in both cases.

I think I might be on to something here. A few interesting asides break out of this, though. Such as 'nature or nurture?' – is it possible for someone to have feet in both camps? Is it possible to switch sides, and if so how? And, just how much do you have to change in a system +

"Do you immediately engage with the central musical themes, or do you find yourself teasing apart the sound, following the bass lines and enjoying that simulation of being in the same acoustic space as the musicians? If so, you are possibly drawn to the sound the music is making, as well as the music itself."

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FEATURE

Classic Album Living Room at Vintage

By Richard

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Kaiser Kawa! Vivace loudspeaker

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record reviews

How To Read Them

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

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

This issue's featured reviewers are:

DD – Dennis D Davis
RSF – Richard S Foster
AS – Alan Sircom

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	DVD		Availability As S/H LP
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	Multi-Channel		



Air
Le Voyage Dans La Lune
 EMI



Taking its inspiration from the 1902 Georges Méliès silent classic movie, the French electronica duo Air have come up with arguably their best album since 1998's *Moon Safari*.

This is less ambient and even less electronic than before. It's not the kind of post-clubby chill out vibe Air does so well, but shows the duo are truly polymath in their approach to music. There's still classic Air tones ('Cosmic Trip' for example), but there's elements of rockiness in 'Sonic Armada' and 'Parade', piano tones in 'Retour Sur Terre' and even a spot of Tangerine Dream in 'Moon Fever'.

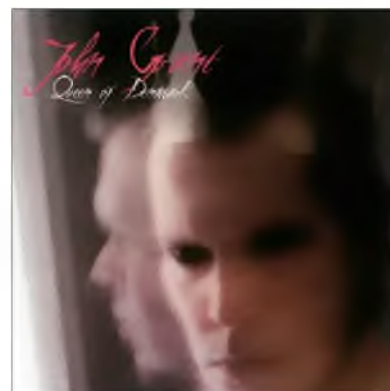
The odd thing about a lot of modern ambient and post-dubstep albums today is they are too short. This is less than 36 minutes long. It's a good 36 minutes and I think the themes in the album are played out by the half hour mark, but it would be nice to hear some of those themes better developed. Popular music broke the three-minute barrier in the 1960s, but aside from a couple of tracks, you might never have known that.

Air always take their sound quality seriously, and *Le Voyage...* is no exception. It's a bit of a wall of sound (all their albums are) but not too compressed and very approachable. In all, this is one Air album that needn't stay in the background. **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC



John Grant
Queen of Denmark
 Bella Union



We missed this back in 2010; a mistake that needed repairing. John Grant was the frontman for Denver alt-rockers The Czars. When the band broke up in 2004, Grant went into the predictable drink and drugs hell, but emerged with a series of indie-folk torch song ballads four years later. Picked up by folk rockers Midlake, *Queen of Denmark* is a collaborative affair, but very much John Grant's take on the world, a coming to terms with his addictions and his sexuality.

In other words, don't expect an album of smiley, happy tunes; titles like 'Where Dreams Go To Die' isn't going to be big on fun. However, it's not simply a gay man in the Midwest opening a vein on microphone. It's a reflective and ultimately uplifting album of songs about love and loss as well.

Few artists attain this kind of emotional sophistication in their work at any time in their careers. John Grant got it while waiting tables. He might not achieve the same poise in his personal life, but we reap the benefits of this in an album of raw and rare beauty. There aren't any duff tracks, but his baritone lends itself perfectly to 'Where Dreams...' and 'Caramel'. It's a good, if close mic'd and cut a little hot, recording too. If you find magic in melancholy, you'll find a lot to love in *Queen of Denmark*. **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Justice

Audio, Video, Disco

Ed Banger

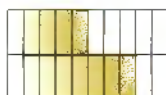
CD 150

There's something about French dancey duos. First Daft Punk and Air, now Justice. Except Justice are different; their first album *Cross* was clever crunked up remixes of the likes of 'We Are Your Friends' by Simian. It was all a bit noisy and grungy, but nothing prepared us for *Audio, Video, Disco*.

Imagine mixing all those early Heavy Rock and Prog bands together, folding in a touch of 1980s hair-rock, and this is what you get. Not altogether sure where the 'Disco' part comes in (apart from the backbeat to 'Canon'), but it's definitely fun to hear. Of course, the guitars are replaced with synths, which can make the whole sound a bit Stylophone, and the bombast extends to the dynamically squashed, everything goes to 11 mix, but as example of how to blend dance music with indie rock, it's an excellent example of the breed. You are witnessing the birth of stadium disco.

This is an album that has also been made for LP. The sleeve lends itself to the bigger format (it's a gatefold and you don't have to play *Where's Wally/Waldo* on the cover as you do with CD), the album comes with a host of extras that simply don't come with the optical disc format. It's worth praising for that alone. Let's rock, disco style! **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC



The Fall

Ersatz GB

Cherry Red

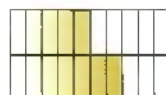
CD 150

Apparently, this is The Fall's 29th studio album, which means I possibly have about a third of The Fall's output. At some points, it seemed like they were knocking out one album per week, but the pace has slowed considerably of late. That doesn't mean Mark E. Smith is running out of steam, just that the output is as unpredictable as the content these days. Despite that, you know what you are getting with a Fall album; depending on your viewpoint, a cause for celebration, or an aural equivalent of a blocked toilet. This is no exception.

Coming after the excellent *Our Clutter Your Future* album, *Ersatz GB* is merely 'good' (by Fall standards, other words may apply for non-Fall followers), but like any Fall record, it comes with moments of sheer brilliance. It takes a few listens to get what Mark E Smith is on about (usually because it's a word salad of seemingly inane swipes at everything from mouth ulcer treatment to Snow Patrol), and there's an increasing re-politicised stance to the band.

From an audio perspective, there is no 'Bury Pts. 1&3'. No slow peeling back of the din, because it's almost all din. Still, 'Taking Off' has a powerful riff and the sublime 'Greenway' will challenge any system. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC



The Little Willies

For The Good Times

Milking Bull Records

180

The first album in six years – and only the second album ever – from this surprising and distinctive New York club-country band. The Little Willies get called "Norah Jones' other band", when in fact it's a true collective. The quintet is a meeting of equal talents – Jim Campilongo, for example, is the guitarist guitar heroes secretly admire.

In a world where country means either Ryan Adams or Garth Brooks, this is about as Patsy Cline as it gets these days. A blend of acoustic and lightly amplified electronics, it's open and airy, dynamic and everything you might want to show off your hi-fi.

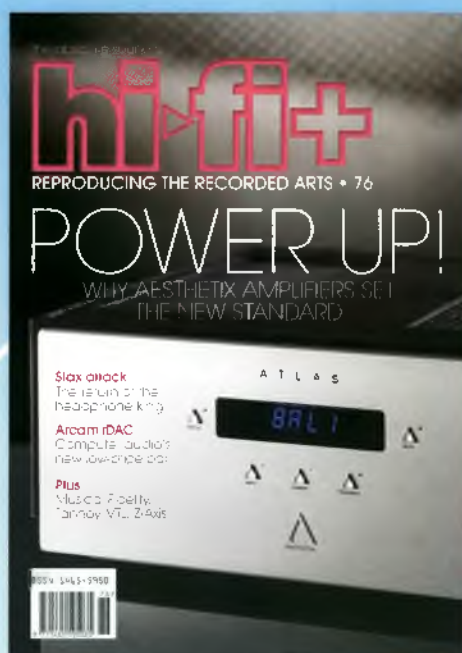
It's mostly covers (the exception being Campilongo's mostly instrumental 'Tommy Rockwood') and very well executed ones at that. Outstanding tracks include 'Lovesick Blues', 'Fist City' and a sublime cover of 'Jolene'. Norah Jones could make a Pantera track sound smooth and sultry, but that is only to the good here.

This wasn't intended as an audiophile recording. It's a bunch of musicians musicians playing the music they love and are damn good at playing. It just so happens the resultant sound is so hi-fi friendly, this should be the one on everyone's list. Even if you hate that Norah Jones album, this really is the next CD you should buy. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC



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Ben Webster Meets Oscar Peterson

Verve/Analogue Productions
MG VS-6114

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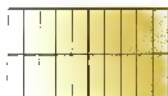
45

Oscar Peterson met a lot of musicians during his long association with Norman Granz. Mellow ballads are not the first thing that comes to mind when thinking of Peterson, but here he teams up with one of the masters, and proves himself highly adept.

Peterson had teamed up on Webster's earlier masterpiece *Soulville* (itself slated for this 45 RPM series later this year), and magic is reprised in this 1959 recording with backing from the balance of Peterson's trio of that year – Ray Brown and Ed Thigpen. Music doesn't get any sweeter than this!

Analogue Productions' Verve series is mastered at Sterling Sound and this LP is from the stereo tapes. While I've always preferred the original in its mono version, that preference no longer stands. The stereo image is stunning, with good center fill, decent depth and no sense that instruments are stuck in the speaker locations—in other words all the attributes of the best mono recordings with the advantages of stereo spread. You'll use this record to show your doubting friends just how much better can sound than any digital format. Except for the lack of a foldout cover, this package is sheer perfection. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Blue Mitchell

The Thing To Do

Blue Note/Music Matters 84178

180g

45

Too few jazz albums work as great dance music, but if you can drop the stylus on the first cut, Fungii Mama, of this Blue Mitchell LP from 1964 and sit down without first dancing around the room a couple of times (at least in your head) you might want to consider a rhythm transplant. This almost eight minute long track resides on my desert island list of favourite songs. Mitchell is joined here by Junior Cook on tenor, a very young Chick Corea on piano, Gene Taylor on bass and Al Foster on drums. Mitchell, Cook and Taylor had been playing with Horace Silver for five years, so the ensemble is somewhat tighter than some Blue Note dates that feature a house band. Blue Mitchell's talents as a trumpet player were considerable, but not so unique as to make him a household name. His Blue Note sessions were available on the out of print Mosaic box set, and this is perhaps the best LP of the set.

While several of his Riverside albums remain in circulation on CD, today only a couple of the Blue Notes are widely available. Needless to say, this 45-RPM vinyl mastered by Kevin Gray is by far the best sounding version of this music available today whether on the new or used market. It's in the top niche of recorded stereo sound from Blue Note. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Horace Parlan

On The Spur Of The Moment

Audio Wave/Blue Note ST-8074/
AWMXR-00013

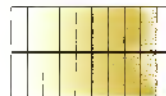
CD

Audio Wave has recently released another four of their Blue Note CD masters using the XRCd and K2 CD mastering technologies: 16 discs of what in each case is by far the best digital treatment the Blue Note catalog has received. *On The Spur Of The Moment* features Horace Parlan on piano, backed by Tommy Turrentine, Stanley Turrentine, George Tucker and Al Harewood, recorded in 1961 by Rudy Van Gelder.

Parlan's unique sound, derived to some extent from a polio damaged right hand, propelled him to play with some of jazz's most unique players. While the piano is always considered part of the rhythm section, his music here has a relaxed feeling, even on the less balladic material. The horn front section, handled by the Turrentine family adds to this relaxed atmosphere, with perfect synergy propelling the session.

This CD continues to establish the Audio Wave series as the best CD remastering of any digital jazz. Whether it's the JVC mastering and production, the strong team of Joe Harley, Alan Yoshida and Bob Bantz, or all of the above, this series should help save the CD format from the onset of downloading. It's not quite the equal of the Music Matter vinyl of the same title, but close enough for digital. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC





Jennifer Warnes

The Well

Impex IMP 6001-45 79216/7/8

The first thing you notice about this box set is its museum quality packaging. Instead of cardboard, the box is constructed of wood and impeccably finished with the highest quality paper stock. It's easily one of the most beautiful record boxes ever. Inside the box, an equally gorgeous booklet and photo insert provide lyrics and production notes. How can the audio production live up to such gorgeous packaging, I wondered.

Best known for her audiophile standard *Famous Blue Raincoat*, and her hit duet with Joe Cocker for the soundtrack of *An Officer And A Gentleman*, Wames has had a remarkable and varied career. She originally released *The Well* on CD in 2001 and retained all rights to the masters, and in 2010 Impex Records released a gold CD of the album. The title tune refers to Jacob's Well, an artisan spring in Texas hill country. Wames' singing is captivating on each number, but her rendition of 'You Don't Know Me' with Doyle Bramhall stand comparison with Ray Charles' classic version. The LPs were mastered by Bernie Grundman and the sound is to die for. If my usual scale goes up to 10, I'm giving this an eleven. It's so good sounding it's hard to listen to anything afterwards. A home run that gets my highest recommendation. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC

Miles Davis

Kind of Blue

Sony 88697883272

Sony has recently released two of its all time best selling jazz albums, *Kind of Blue* and *Time Out* on Japanese JVC discs mastered using the K2 HD process, a proprietary mastering process, familiar from discs available from Winston Ma's First Impression Music and Audio Wave's Blue Note reissue series, both of which also incorporate the XRCD glass master system which requires the discs to be manufactured at special XRCD facilities.

This new Sony disc foregoes the XRCO system allowing the CDs to be made at most CD plants, and uses only the special K2 HD mastering process. These two new discs are expensive, about twice what Audio Wave charges for its fabulous Blue Note releases. But, for those who can afford it, is that this is the best sounding digital *Kind of Blue* available. The K2 HD version gets the difficult to reproduce bass pluck sound better than the Blu-spec.

On the horizon, however is the Mobile Fidelity SACD version of *KOB*, so the story is to be continued. This limited edition numbered Sony version comes in a handsome foldout cover with a tipped in booklet, all of which are encased in a plastic slipcase. The reissue was produced by Michael Cuscuna and mastered by Hakamata Takeshi from the original three track master tapes. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC

The Beach Boys

Pet Sounds

Capitol/Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2065

It's unlikely there is anything left new to say about *Pet Sounds*. Brian Wilson, the creative and fragile genius of The Beach Boys, was so inspired by the Beatles' album *Rubber Soul*, that he felt compelled to create an album of similar synchronicity, an album he modestly hoped would be the greatest rock album ever. Few albums of the time were more than a few hits topped off with filler material sufficient to cover two sides of an LP. *Pet Sounds* was unique for its time in combining an album consisting of all great songs, all composed by Wilson, combined with unique instrumentation and recording techniques now taken for granted but innovative for the time.

Despite the multi-track recording, it was mixed by Wilson to mono. The first true stereo version had to wait until 1997, when a true stereo set was released on CD as *The Pet Sounds Sessions*, followed a couple of years later by a stereo LP release. Mobile Fidelity now gives us the first audiophile grade release of *Pet Sounds* in stereo. Keeping in mind that *Pet Sounds* is multi-tracked will never be audiophile grade sounding, this new issue, even in its CD layer easily makes the 1999 LP sound. I personally prefer the stereo mix to the original mono which DCC issued on vinyl and CD years ago. So color this release brilliant. **DD**

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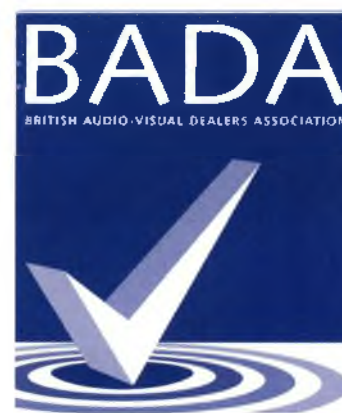
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Fryderyk Chopin

Fantaisie in F minor,
Nocturnes and Mazurkas
and Ballades and A La Minute-A
paraphrase on Chopin's Waltz in
D flat major, Opus 64, No.1.
Yevgeny Sudbin, piano



"Eugene" Sudbin has recorded many works exclusively for BIS including recitals of Haydn, Scarlatti, Rachmaninov, Scriabin, Tchaikovsky, etc. If you ever thought that Chopin was boring or that you didn't understand what all the fuss was about, this is the perfect disc for you to own. This is a highly lyrical version of many of his most popular works and Sudbin opens this disc with the expansive Fantaisie in F minor – sometimes described as the composer's 'grandest work' – continuing with a selection of pieces from three genres that are strongly associated with Chopin: Mazurkas, Nocturnes and the Ballades Nos 3 and 4.

Sudbin displays his exceptional skill throughout the compositions here and his style is simple yet very majestic. He is in complete control and you are carried away to a land of music you've not heard very often. I repeat: This is a disc for those who don't understand/like Chopin. For those who like Chopin, this is manner from the Gods. **RSF**

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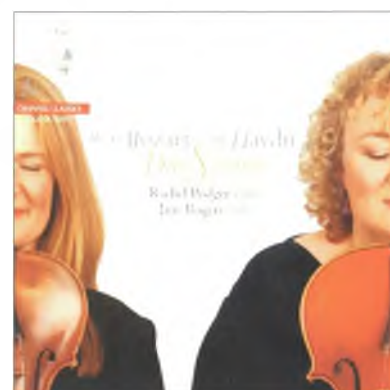


On this disc, I consider the Walton Coronation March to be the only 'non transcribed' performance. Gabrieli was of course the earliest well-known creator of rich music for brass, and one of the first to make use of spatial effects by placing groups of instruments some distance from one another. The Bach selections, Passacaglia and Fugue work extremely well. A trombonist from the San Francisco Symphony made the transcription of Percy Grainger's familiar Lincolnshire Posy. Revueltas' Sensemaya arrangement adds a clarinet, doublebass and percussion for a version that is just as exciting as the orchestral original. And three popular excerpts from Prokofiev's great ballet Romeo & Juliet are transcribed for the brass section plus timpani and percussion.

This is one of the few discs that is purely an SACD. Visit the site to order the CD version of these performances if you so desire. This disc is well worth exploring not only if you like brass instruments, but also for the music. There are some favorite 'cuts' here and I think they translate quite well for Chicago. Well worth owning. **RSF**

www.cso.org

RECORDING
MUSIC



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Michael Haydn

Duo Sonatas, with Rachel Podger,
violin and Jane Rogers, viola
Channel Classics CCS SA 32411

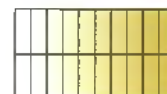


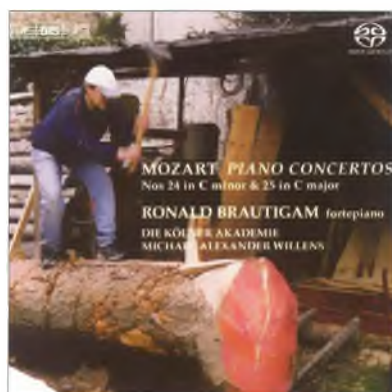
This is a generous coupling of five performances; three Mozart sonatas in G major, B flat major and the Menuetto (from 12 Duos for Horn kv. 487 as well as 2 of Haydn's works, Duo for violin and viola No. 1 in C major and No. 2 in D major. As I have mentioned before in these pages I am a big fan of Rachel Podger. Jane Rogers is a very accomplished violist and the sound of these two string instruments is nothing short of sensational. The compositions are very easy to listen to and the blending of the instruments makes for a delightful outing. Jared Sacks does his usual exceptional job of recording and the result is simply breath-taking. Michael Haydn (Franz Joseph's brother) has come to the party with well thought out and highly musical compositions that absolutely compliment the three works by Mozart.

Great compositions by extremely gifted composers given exceptional playing by superlative soloists all wonderfully recorded make this another must own SACD. The sound of the CD layer is just fine if you do not own an SACD player, too. **RSF**

www.channelclassics.com

RECORDING
MUSIC





Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Piano Concerto Nos. 24 in C minor & 25 in C major.

Ronald Brautigam, fortepiano.

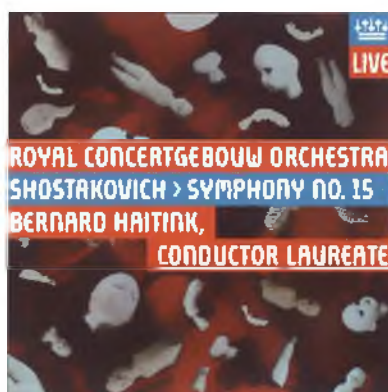
Die Kölner Akademie, conducted by Michael Alexander Willens

Composed in 1786, the Piano Concertos Nos 24 in C minor and 25 in C major are regarded as two of Mozart's finest achievements in the genre. On his copy of a fortepiano from 1795 and with the congenial support of Die Kölner Akademie under Michael Alexander Willens, Ronald Brautigam offers us a welcome opportunity to experience these masterpieces as they may have sounded when Mozart himself performed them. I have reviewed other performances of other composer's works played by Brautigam and have enjoyed his playing immensely.

One of the main characteristics for me regarding Mozart piano music, is I do not like when artists add their 'interpretations' to the music. I like my Mozart plain vanilla. The master composer's ideas, to my mind, do not need to be given any personal help by the artist. Brautigam plays these major works as they were written, and does so quite admirably. The sound quality reference grade and I am pleased to add this disc to my collection. Highly recommended. **RSF**

www.bis.se

RECORDING
MUSIC



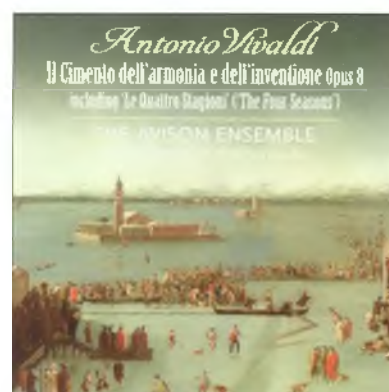
Dmitri Shostakovich

Symphony No. 15, Opus 141, conducted by Bernard Haitink and the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra
RCO 110003

This is a wonderful, exhilarating performance of Shostakovich's swansong. It's a deeply intense performance. The second and final movements of this four movement work are exceptionally brooding and of the many recordings currently available, I would consider this the best of yet to hear. The engineers at Polyhymnia have given us an exceptional recording feature an rivaled dynamic contrast which adds to the magnificence of this reading.

I listened to this recording several times, both in SACD mode and on the CD layer. While the CD is really wonderful, you have to play the SACD to understand how great it truly is. Each section of the orchestra adds to the whole and again, it's a wonderful exercise. The focus is outstanding and there is never a bit of smearing of instruments. There is great sound staging here with very good corner fill. The sound is upfront and immediate. My only quibble with this disc is that at 47minutes and 11seconds, there was room for another composition on this disc. A must own performance. **RSF**
www.concertgebouwkeest.nl

RECORDING
MUSIC



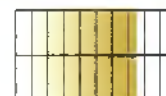
Antonio Vivaldi

Il Cimento dell'armonia e dell'invenzione, Opus 8 including 'Le Quattro Stagioni' ('The Four Seasons') The Avison Ensemble, Pavlo Besnosniuk director/violin
Linn CKD365

Though it does contain a sonnet probably written by the composer himself (complete with cue marks in the score) in the style of John Milton, and is intended as a four-concerto unit, it is also the tip of a much larger iceberg called The Trial between Harmony and Invention, a series of twelve concertos that begins with The Four Seasons. Often the other concertos get overlooked when in fact several of them are the Season's equals, like the invigorating No. 5, The Storm at Sea. Two others retain titles as well: No. 6, "Pleasure", and No. 10, "The Hunt". The set also has one oboe concerto as well, though most often all are played on the violin.

Each of these works is a beautiful composition and all are worthy of a devoted Vivaldi lover's attention.' I am a fan of Vivaldi concertos and the playing here is as good as it gets. Linn has given us a rather resonant acoustic and with these compositions it works just fine. Besnosniuk and the Avison take a rousing interpretation of the compositions here and they are well worth hearing. **RSF**
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James Blake – James Blake

every home should have one

By Alan Surcom

'Intelligent Dubstep' might seem like an oxymoron, but as the whole wub-wub-wubbiness of dubstep begins to wind down, it has created one of its first breakout acts in James Blake. Blake's post-dubstep soundscapes are highly evolved, reflecting his musical background (Blake studied music at Goldsmiths, and is the son of James Litherland of Colosseum fame). Now working with the likes of Bon Iver, Blake's first eponymous album was released about a year ago (with a special two-disc version with a live EP released at the end of 2011); a critically awaited and critically acclaimed cut. His success was virtually assured thanks to two phenomenally well-received EPs.

His songs are minimalist; a sparse mix of acoustic piano, electronica and vocals treated and untreated. He's already roped in the likes of Feist and Gonzales on 'Limit to Your Love', and more will follow. The vocals are often deliberately incomprehensible and looped, used as an instrument rather than lyrics conveying ideas and themes. It's all a little bleak and downbeat, but well worth owning.

For the audiophile, though, it's one of those albums that invites a lot of philosophical musing. Can an album of treated sounds and electronica be 'good' sounding? If a man's voice is put through auto-tune to deliberately sound unnatural, how do you determine whether the reproduction is 'good' or 'bad'?

Traditionally, a lot of audiophiles use the sound of live, unamplified instruments in an acoustic space as the reference point. The closer the reproduced sound gets to that reference live sound, the better the system. No such reference point exists in tracks like the opener 'Unluck' – everything, even the vocal, is worked on, deliberately so. The multi-layered vocals are as far forward in the mix as you can get, heavily Auto Tuned, backed up by a sound like a broken Bontempi, beats that sound like playing cards in the spokes of a Raleigh Chopper and the occasional percussive boom. It plays merry hell on many systems, but those either too small to even try or those man enough to cope with everything you can throw at them will shine.

This is a question that is often redacted from the audio canon, because these are sometimes the albums that get handed back to the prospective listener, with a dismissive "No... I don't think so". To reject music like this highlights problems in the system, and not necessarily the music.

My take on this is reminiscent of The XX album from a couple of years ago. It sounds fantastic, irrespective of whether the spatial properties of the sound are a function of careful microphone placement in an ambient church hall, reverb and panning on a mixing desk, or some clever DSP inside a digital audio workstation. In other words, good sound has to have an

"I know it when I hear it" element. It means that if you hear a sound that has never existed in the real world, it is still possible to evaluate how good or poor that sound is.

This navel gazing is getting far from the reason why you should own the James Blake album. I've found it's had a lot of plays since I first heard the album and despite the limited lyricism of the vocal lines, it's one of those achingly, painfully beautiful stark albums that gets under your skin. This is the kind of album that only happens about once a decade, like a dubstep Sea Change. Buy it, and buy the special edition with the *Enough Thunder* EP, if only for his excellent cover of Joni Mitchell's 'A Case of You'. +



JAMES BLAKE, BY JAMES BLAKE

Recorded: 2010

Produced by: James Blake, James Litherland

Released: 4 Feb 2011

Atlas, A&M Records

Also available as deluxe two disc and vinyl versions

Standard album track listing:

Unluck (3:00)

The Wilhelm Scream (4:37)

I Never Learned to Share (4:51)

Lindisfarne I (2:42)

Lindisfarne II (3:01)

Limit to Your Love (4:36)

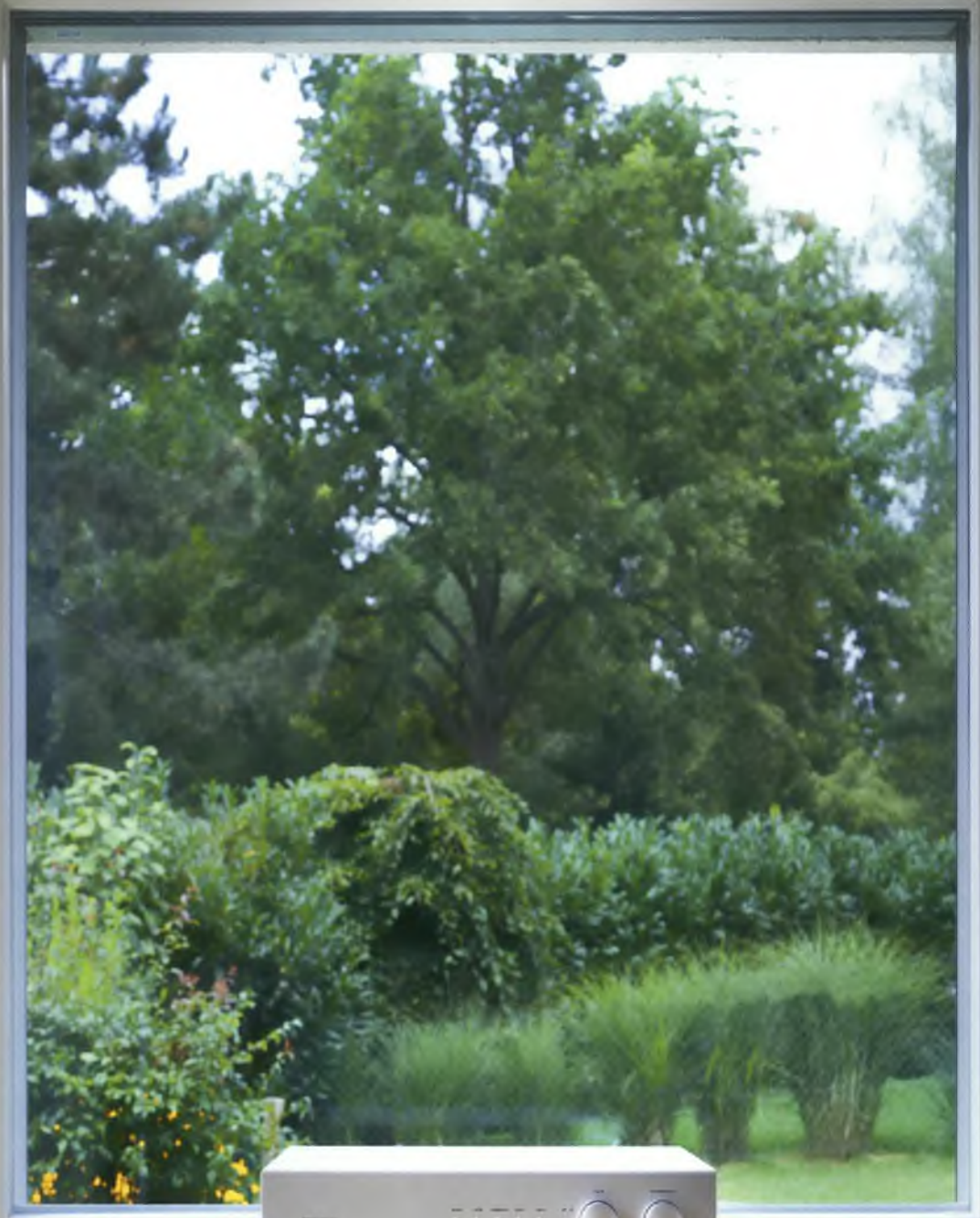
Give Me My Month (1:56)

To Care (Like You) (3:52)

Why Don't You Call Me (1:35)

I Mind (3:31)

Measurements (4:19)



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