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editorial

It's rare that we get to fly the flag for the UK. We stress the international flavour of the magazine, and this month's issue is no exception, packed as it is with some of the best products from around the world. Nevertheless, in the year of the London Olympics and the Queen's Jubilee it's good to remember that – even against stiff competition building products on the other side of the world – we British can still make things, and make 'em good!

This issue, we've highlighted 10 of what we think are the finest examples of what we British do best; engineering excellence and technological innovation. Some of this doesn't come cheap – good engineering never does, but just ask the F1 guys why they still choose machine shops in Middle England, and you'll understand why British can still be best.

This issue is also full of shows. Spring has become the time to show off the latest and greatest new products, and with events taking place somewhere in the world almost every weekend, you can easily run up enough air miles to buy your own Boeing. Once again, there's a touch of flag-waving to be had; the Chester Group, the organisation behind Audio World 2012 and the National Audio Show at Whittlebury Hall in September, is fast becoming the main audio show organiser around the world. The New York Audio and AV Show, and events in Australia and Sweden are now run by the Chester Group, and doubtless there will be more to follow.

Alongside the larger shows, a series of smaller, dealer-run events are taking place around the world, building a grass-roots movement of good sound. It might be a tough time to be in business right now, but it's a fascinating time to be in audio, because everything's changing!

And we have several great examples of that change in this issue. For example, the mighty Magico Q1 re-defines the very physics of what's possible from a standmount loudspeaker, the Fostex HP-P1 is a perfect example of just how high the music on the move bar can be raised and the Naim SuperUniti represents the champion for the titanic change that's taking place in the way we listen to music in the home.

Even the most unchanged format around right now – the not-so-humble vinyl LP replay – gets a makeover in the process. Recently, Conrad-Johnson took its already fine TEA-2 phono stage and put it through a series of improvements and upgrading of components, essentially making three products from the same circuit. But the big question is, does this make a sonic difference? If you've ever considered buying the Special Edition, or hot-rodding your existing amplifier or phono stage with top-line components, you must read this.

It's like the 100m sprint for your ears!

Alan Sircom
editor@hifiplus.com

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SHOW REPORT

The New York Audio and AV Show

By Alan Sircom

In a way, it was badly named: there was no 'AV' in the New York Audio and AV Show. There was a lot of audio though, and more than 2,000 attendees. Making it one of the most successful new events on the audio calendar.

It was a distinctly analogue show, though. Turntables were everywhere, and even the occasional reel-to-reel. The positive analogue vibes had a clear effect on my digital voice recorder, sending it into hashy-sounding hell for daring to convert sounds into ones and zeros. If only I'd brought my portable cutting lathe! So, rather than cover every room in the event, I'm limited to the ones that stayed lodged in my memory, because they were exceptional.

It was an ambitious affair, set aloft the 15th and 18th floors of the prestigious Waldorf Astoria hotel in the heart of Midtown Manhattan. An Anglo-American event (staged by The Chester Group and The Home Entertainment Show) in the middle of April, it was a bit like setting your watch back 20 years, in a good way.

It could best be described as 'uncompromisingly vinyl'. In many rooms, digital it seems was a passing phase, and they didn't even speak the language of computers. Naturally companies like Soundsmith were always going to stress vinyl (the talk of the show was Peter Lederman's outstanding \$7,500 Hyperion moving iron cartridge that sports a cactus needle as a cantilever), but companies like High Water



Sound were fiercely no-digits, even though the two-armed \$40,000 TW Acoustic is only one link in the chain. Silent Running Audio stands, GT Audio's Tron amps from the UK, Pranawire cables and Cessaro Affascinate SE-1 horns made up the rest of the system. This was perhaps the most tweaked and changed system in the show, having been built and rebuilt at the end of the first day to sound at its best. Digital was not totally forgotten – the show did mark the first outing for EMM Labs new DACx2 (which sadly wasn't playing when I visited the second Audio Doctor room) and the first public auditions of the DaVinci DAC – and even headphones had their place at Woo Audio's fine stand, but vinyl predominated.

At opposite ends of the scale, this was the first time I got to hear both the Walker Proscenium Black Diamond III turntable in all its might (it's not distributed in the UK) and the new Merrill Williams R.E.A.L. 101 turntable, and I was not disappointed in either case.

Exhibitors were divided more or less evenly between manufacturers and NY-based dealers showing what they do best. Some of these (Sound by Singer, MBL) ran ticketed demonstrations that were so well attended, waiting in line for an hour or so was the only option. Others had a 'drop in' approach, but yet again the rooms were frequently packed out. Of these, perhaps Innovative Audio had the most, er, innovative solution. Making a good sound from a Spiral Groove/dCS/VTI/Wilson system in its own right, at the end of each day at the show, the company ferried off interested listeners to its ►

[sometimes]
technology meets art...





► own Midtown store for a demonstration in more controlled surroundings. I was also taken by Wes Bender Studio's system, comprising Redpoint turntable, Lindemann and Viola digital, Zesto and Viola analogue electronics and a pair of Hansen loudspeakers. The sound was excellent - all power and confidence - but the confidence of the team was even better. When I pitched up with my "I'll show 'em" test CD of James Blunt, they already had a copy pre-loaded on the laptop. And their collection wasn't limited to little-known British post-dubstep acts; they had a play-anything approach that was a refreshing change to the semi-enforced sound of The Eagles burping out of hotel rooms around the world come showtime.

The rooms themselves were a problem. They always are when people attend a show for the first time; a couple of years in, when they are used to the sound of the room, they can tailor their system and room treatment - and sometimes even music played - to match the room. But this was a new show, with new room problems. Many of the rooms were made of thin wood partitions, faced with padded cloth, which hampered many systems attempting to recreate a full-range sound. The Sony loudspeaker through EMM/Pass Labs and the YG flagships played through Brinkmann turntables and Solution electronics (*above*) were the first rooms most people encountered and they set the scene well. In fairness, the Sony speakers made an admirable sound given the limitations, but the best sound seemed to be a foot from the floor and the unflappable Philip O'Hanlon made the YG-based system sing like an angel with some beautiful 45rpm vinyl, but break out anything with deep bass and the rooms began to sing along too, irrespective of room treatment.

Despite the rooms, there were several sounds that made the grade. This was one of the big questions at both 'Meet The Editors' sessions over the weekend, and the response was near unanimous. Almost everyone who heard the Scaena Spiritus 3.4 loudspeaker system (*left*) - driven by a combination of AMR phono preamp and Conrad-Johnson ACT/ART amplifiers, being fed by a Kronos turntable and a DCS stack CD system on a decoupling of Stillpoints and a Silver Circle power conditioner - thought it sounded remarkable. It was well-integrated, possessed of deep bass (almost an impossibility given the room dynamics) and yet as fast as a small two-way. The 'alien invasion' looks might not appeal universally, but the sound certainly seems to.

Other universally liked systems took advantage of the room inequalities by either not playing to them or dialing them out altogether. UK passive magnetic preamp experts Music First Audio made something of a splash in their first US show, by making a fine sound through small, tidy equipment, playing tapes off a Revox reel-to-reel and out into a pair of old Rogers LS3/5a. This perfectly matched the limits of the smaller hotel rooms on the 15th floor. Similarly, Red ►



► Wine Audio's increasing range of fine, battery powered amps were sounding great through a pair of Kudos Cardea C20 floorstanders, a MSB Data CD transport and Tellurium Q loudspeaker cables. And then there was the Robyatt room, which coupled an Oswaldmill Audio Anatase turntable, King/Levinson preamp, Miyajima Labs output-transformerless tube power amps into a refurbished pair of Quad ESL-57. The OTL/ESL combination has long been thought of as a match made in heaven, but it was hell trying to extract any blissed-out listeners from their seats. This should be the note heard around the world, because it made you wonder if the last half century has really seen any tangible improvement in sound quality. Judging by this room, the jury's still out.

Another fascinating take on retro was in the VAS/VPI room. This has perhaps two of the new stars of the show; the \$1,299 VPI Traveller (*above right*) and the \$4,000 VPI Classic 4. They couldn't be more different; the Traveller could be called VPI's Cub Scout, a trimmed down Scout complete with a wholly new gimbaled tonearm, that the lesser-spotted Harry Weisfeld has discovered can be made for less than a unipivot. The Traveller is a tribute to Harry's late wife Sheila, who passed last year. Partnered with an entry-level Audio Note cartridge, this was making some very big, bold sounds through a VAS Citation pre and trio of monos into Aurum Cantus floorstanders to deliver trifield stereo sound from a late 1950s concept reborn. In terms of dynamics and scale, this ticked all the boxes. Where the VPI Traveller is a Scout on a smaller scale, the Classic 4 is the Classic built BIG; it's basically a two-armed Classic 3!

A new deck for most people (myself included) was the Holborne, a minimalist Swiss-made \$5,275 Analogue 2 turntable with matching \$3,475 turntable and a made-for-Holborne Benz-derived moving coil cartridge for just under \$2k. Driven by a belt made of magnetic tape, the deck was sounding intriguing in a Berning pre/power (with the new 60w mono versions of the ZH-230), driving a pair of prototype



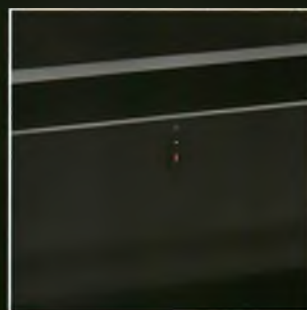
versions of the Zellaton Concert, using Tellurium Q cables once again. The room desperately needed more people in it when I was there, but had distinct touches of greatness about it. As in, this was warming up to be one of the best sounds I've heard at a show. Perhaps any show.

For me, the best sound of the show probably wasn't even the best sound of the show. It was sitting at the end of the Saturday in the Audio Note room listening to a Brahms piano intermezzo LP in its entirety. Four of us were in the room when it began, and all four were still in there when it ended. No rush, no fuss, no pressure from Audio Note's David Cope... just good music, played in a relaxed fashion. OK, so the cost of the system was 'meaty' – high on \$61,000, excluding cables – but I'd heard a lot more sound for a lot more money, but nothing quite so engaging.

At the completely loopy end of things, kudos must go to Bumester for setting up what must be the ultimate DJ system. As well as being used as a PA for the live music at the venue, and the sound reinforcement for the lectures, the company used its Reference Line equipment – including two Model 100 phono preamps – as the electronics for a series of DJ events on the Friday and Saturday nights. The Technics turntables were also atypical, featuring Soundsmith cartridges proclaimed to be 'unbreakable' (they comfortably survived two sessions unscathed... try that with most audiophile cartridges and tears will ensue). If you've ever wondered what hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of audio gear sounds like playing house music at club levels... it's actually rather impressive!

Rather than draw in legions of new generation audio buyers, the New York Audio and AV Show reawakened the interest in New York's audio enthusiasts of old. Which is half the battle. It generated enough interest for two of the major audio stores in NYC to establish their own rival events, and some of those attendees were manufacturers surreptitiously checking out the show's potential for the future. And, judging by their response, next year will be bigger and better than ever. +

Quad QSP Stereo Power Amplifier



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Ken Kessler, *Hi-Fi News*

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Hi-Fi News - April 2012

Quad's unique 'current dumping' technology first wowed audiophiles in the 1970s with the legendary 405 power amplifier – the only hi-fi component to ever receive The Queen's Award for Technological Achievement. Quad has since refined the technology over several product generations, culminating in the new Elite QSP.

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SHOW REPORT

Munich High End 2012

By Alan Sircom



Despite being more subdued than most years, High End at the Munich M.O.C is still the high point in the audiophile show calendar. Two exhibition halls, two atria and four corridors of the latest in audio make it the most important event of the year in the West. And yet, this year there were some major omissions, perhaps most notably Clearaudio, which normally takes a huge display in the centre of one of the main halls.

Starting with the main halls, one of the first stalls you encountered was a combination of Acoustic Signature turntables from Germany and Soundsmith and VTL from the US, reflecting the true international feel about the event. While not playing, Soundsmith showed off its Hyperion cartridge, which is actually four cartridges in one. The Hyperion comes in both CL (nude contact) OCL (optimised countour line) form, with both versions in regular and LT form (uniquely designed specifically for a Linear Tracking turntable... which means a dual compliance suspension that is lower in the horizontal than the vertical, and as such ideal for the passive movement of a linear tracking arm). All at \$7.5k US, which includes a 10 year warranty which includes retipping (to the original owner). A lot of this is thanks to the cactus spine cantilever, which naturally sports stacked columnar cells, tapered to a point. This is half the mass of other super-hard materials used in other cantilevers, and suggests God is a vinyl lover, after all. On the same stand, Acoustic Signature was showcasing its range of tables, from the mid-priced Barzetti up to the full-blown 176lb Ascona, while Luke Manley of VTL was showing off an open-topped full TL-5.5 Series II and one of a pair of MB-185 Series II monos.

Next door was Kuzma, showcasing its new Stabi M turntable (which was also playing in the Nagra/Marten room). Shown in prototype form last year, the new deck is visually drastically improved over last year's design. Being made from solid aluminium means it tops the scales at just over 60kg/132lb, uses a DC motor with an external trimming power supply, elastic damping feet, a clever lid arrangement and a motor housing made from brass. It's designed to accommodate 12" tonearms with ease. Price of the deck is still to be finalised, but EU price is expected to be in the middle teens.

Pro-Ject continued to demonstrate its firm commitment to vinyl. Not only did the company display a whole raised floor of more than 20 different designs, it also chose Munich to launch the company's new Phono Box RS, a remarkable €800 phono stage that includes per-channel cartridge loading, adjustable impedance from the front panel and the option of a Decca curve alongside the standard RIAA. A key part of Pro-Ject's Reference Series, this should rattle a lot of feathers in vinyl circles.

Roy Hall's Music Hall turntables don't get the coverage they deserve in the UK press, for the simple reason that Music Hall turntables aren't in the UK yet. However, decks like the new €3,999 MMF-11 should change that. With its four-layer chassis, high mass acrylic platter, inverted bearing and carbon fibre arm, it looks set to take on all comers.

On the cartridge front, Ortofon has finally promised supplies of its €5,950 MC Anna Heritage cartridge sometime this year. Before that, however, the company has shaken up its popular 2M line of moving magnet cartridges, including for the first time a 2M mono model.

Holborne is a comparatively new Swiss name. The company has hitherto concentrated on electronics, but recently launched a turnkey Analogue 2 turntable package, complete with

external power supply, mag-tape driven platter, 'dualpivot' arm and Benz-sourced MC cartridge. The package is said to cost around €5,000.

One of the best rooms in the show was playing a lot of vinyl as a matter of course. The decks of choice in many rooms this year were Spiral Groove and Dr Feickert, but one of the more exciting sounding examples was the Scheu turntable and arm package playing through ASR electronics, Westforest and Thixar isolation systems, Organic Audio cables and YG loudspeakers. This was a system so good, it would be hard not to recognise it as star of the show.

Even record cleaning machines had more presence than usual, Okki Nokki had a whole stand devoted to the cleaner, but the most talked about record cleaner on display was the Audio Desk Systeme Record Cleaner, a slow, expensive, methodical and ultrasonic cleaner that is currently making a big noise in making vinyl a lot quieter.

Of course Munich wouldn't be the same without a spot of extravagance, and that came in the shape of the Uranie by French amp experts Jadis. Costing something close to €90,000 the huge subchassis and

stand are made out of granite, by an expert who spends six months of the year working outdoors. So he builds turntables in the winter and you'd better get your order in before September!

Perhaps the most epic vinyl room was the Swissnor room. The company was making some pretty fine tube amps and a very good sound, but it was also showing off and selling off some excellent refurbished classic Thorens decks, and even had a couple of one-off prototypes on show. Sadly, the glorious blue TD 124 had been snapped up long before I arrived, but I couldn't help love the looks of a classic autochanger.

Munich High End is a hot spot of high-end electronics, but it needn't all be high-end. Value driven British audio brand Arcam, for example, may have been showing off its new FMJ DAC, but behind the scenes it was also showing off its latest rBlink, a wireless Bluetooth converter with an anticipated price of £149 in the UK. This joins the rPAC headphone DAC, drDock iPod/iPad dock and rLink converter, for a complete set of entry-level digital products.

At the other extreme, French digital experts Audioaéro was showing its new digital music center upgrades to its upmarket LaSource player. Don't expect much change from €28,000 for a transport-less LaSource and about €8k on top for the model with a VRDS transport. This was played too loud through a pair of CAT monos and Vivid Giya loudspeakers, but even overdriving the room, the quality was apparent. The French digital experts were out in full force; elsewhere Devialet was showing the next round of upgrades and updates to the D-Premier amp/DAC, Metronome Technologie were showing the T5 CD transport (€7,600) and C5 converter with USB (€7,590) to excellent effect (the company was also showing everything from its entry level CD8 Reference player at under €7,000 right up to the multibox Kalista Ultimate/C8 combination at beyond €65,000) and Micromega was showing its €299 MyDAC converter, the first of a new range of small, slim products.

Burmester has made the transition from CD to what comes next with effortless ease. This year's big launches by the Berlin brand included the 111 MusicServer, a €29,000 that processes up to 32bit, 386kHz precision, and

L: The Acoustic Signature Ascona receives a nod of approval

R: A bumper crop of Pro-Ject turntables



► features an interface designed by ex-members of the Apple team, and the 113 D/A converter (which features apt-X Bluetooth as well as a host of wired and wireless connections, and is a development of the MMI module for the company's high-end CD players). And it also announced the Burmester in-car system for the new Porsche 911, which many felt was the best sound of the show in many respects.

Perhaps the high point in the Munich Electronics sound was the launch of the Constellation Centaur monoblocks. Belonging to Constellation's Performance Series – rather than the extremely expensive Reference Series – the equipment represented a level of precision and clarity that is rare to find at any show. The Constellation of great designers really does seem to make a difference.

British manufacturer Chord added a revised version of its CPA8000 flagship preamp, an as yet unnamed network music player to match the flagship line and a network player for the

Chordette range, the Index. Meanwhile Creek Audio is about to release a new budget line, comprising DAC with built in CD transport and integrated amplifier the Evolution 50A series. The source component featuring the digital dream team of John Westlake and Dominic Peklo suggests the player will punch above its weight, while Creek is an expert in making budget amps. Prices on both are expected to be in the £500-£600 mark.

Streamers made by CD experts were commonplace. Some added streaming functionality to new or existing CD players. Others made new streamers altogether. Densen did both. Its new B-475 Superleggera CD player includes a digital input and its range of upgradable Oxygen streamers that can work by AirPlay, DNLA or other streaming options, all 24/192. Going through the models adds better rectification, more transformers and a better DAC or two, with prices ranging from about £1,200-£4,000.

Esoteric showed its three latest high-end models at the show. The K-07 and K-05 CD/SACD players and the D-07X digital converter. All feature 32-bit DA conversion and asynchronous USB connection, the big difference between the two players is the K-05 sports a VRDS-NEO transport mechanism while the K-07 features a VOSP transport mechanism. The D-07X is a true dual-mono design described as 'also for music servers'.

Manley was also showing its new Chinook phono stage, effectively a Steelhead without the front panel adjustments for half the price. EveAnna Manley also announced that Zia Faruqi of Tube Technology will be working closely with the Manley brand presently.

Naim Audio has been very busy on its digital streaming side lately. Its latest versions of its NDX and UnitiServe players will sport a 2TB hard drive, while the £2,795 ►

L: Audio Desk Systeme's magic LP cleaner

R: MAD England speakers? You got that right, Duke!



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"The only downside is they are addictive. You start with one, and pretty soon you have three or four..."
Alan Sircom, HiFi+ Issue 85

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L: Lehman Audio's headphone amp gives good wood

M: Densen's breathes life into computer audio with its top Oxygen streamer

R: Stein's H2 redeunsmoothulates the listening experience

Naim Uniti2 all-in-one sees improved analogue circuits, a bigger transformer and a power increase to 75W per channel.

At a satellite show, Jeff Rowland showed off its new 725 monoblock power amps. Based on the excellent 625, these amps were sounding good in a too quiet room, comprising dCS and Spiral Groove front-ends, Transparent Audio cables, Stillpoints isolation and Avalon loudspeakers.

Siltech and Crystal Cables naturally shared a room given the companies are run as a husband and wife team. Edwin van den Kley-Rijnveld launched the new limited edition battery-powered SAGA (Structural Amplifier Gain Architecture) amplifiers, adding the €9,000 V1 interstage amplifier and €18,000 P1 power amplifier to the existing €28,000 C1 preamp. The interstage amp acts to boost the dynamic range of preamplifiers, delivering 140dB of dynamic range from the terminals of the 300W P1. These sounded truly remarkable when playing through the Crystal Cables Arabesque Three standmount loudspeakers, fed by a dCS Puccini/U-Clock and using Crystal Cable's new flagship Absolute Dream cables.

There was a lot more, like Tron's beautifully made single-ended triode amplifiers and van den Hul's new phono stage. Or like Stern's Harmonizer. As well as many excellent products that weren't showing new ranges or (like Dan D'Agostino audio) were hoping for the preamp to arrive... but didn't. And then there was Bo Christensen; supposedly retired, Bo showed his new concepts for new designs to be seen later in the year. More on this soon.

Munich is always a fine venue for loudspeakers, especially loudspeakers on the far side of sanity. We live in a world where the majority of music now gets played on ear-buds the size of a chilli bean, but that doesn't stop the German audiophile from loving horn loudspeakers as big as a wardrobe. And while the truly crazy one-off designs were thin on the ground this year, brands like Avantgarde were still making their big, bold statements (albeit this time without the full Basshorn rig) and Cessaro (this time with the full Basshorn along with the

Gamma I loudspeaker, sounding wonderful in a room with Tron tube electronics and TW Acoustic turntable). And there were many more.

Both Adam and Backes & Müller are well-known brands in Germany, specialising in active loudspeakers. While distinctly pro-based, Adam has launched a range of more affordable passive speakers (with active models to follow) for home users. The three-strong Tensor Mk 2 series stretched from the €8,000 Gamma to the €20,000 Alpha. B&M had both a booth and one of the biggest domestic speakers ever, the towering chrome €500,000 BM Line 100.

One of the high-points at Munich is the Silbertone room, in part because it uses vast blast-from-the-past loudspeakers. This year, though, the horns came from Japanese brand GIP Laboratories with its fascinating range of field-coil loudspeakers in large horn systems. With a bewildering array of driver and enclosure options on offer, discussing models and prices are almost pointless, but every speaker is hugely efficient, harking back to a world before Sputnik and a sticker price close to the astronomical.

KEF surprised the audio world with its LS50 loudspeaker. Announced with an eye to the past, looking back to the LS3/5a, the new speaker is as a clean sheet small bookshelf monitor... but that's probably where the similarities end. With a Blade-derived Uni-Q drive unit, a cabinet using constrained layer

damping, and a lot of technology behind the design (including a lot of finite element analysis for the cabinet and computational fluid dynamics techniques in the port construction). The net result was a loudspeaker that sounded outstanding; not just outstanding for the money, just outstanding. And that means this £800/€1,000/\$1,500 speaker had most people trying to justify not buying a set, that's how good they are!

Kaiser Acoustics announced its new Chira loudspeaker. This standmount speaker features an integral stand designed in partnership with Vertex AQ, making the stand essentially a Vertex AQ labyrinth laid on its side, while the room was filled with Leading Edge racks and acoustic treatment, Thrax tube amps and a Spiral Groove turntable, as well as a Vertex converter, power and cable systems. The resulting sound was highly controlled, detailed and seemed to dial past the problems inherent to the Munich rooms.

MAD England Audio is really living up to the name, with a loudspeaker that's as Mad as it is English. The Duke Limited Edition is a short floorstander with a union flag inlay built into the veneer of the loudspeaker. It was only on passive display at the show, but a part of the company's Noble series, is this the ultimate loudspeaker in this Bumper British Year for the anglophile?

Marten was highlighting its new Django XL. Priced under €10,000, the entry point to its Heritage Series, the full-range three-way floorstanding design features three 8" SEAS bass units and a ceramic mid and tweeter from Accuton. This was making some lovely sounds in a room shared with Nagra, which was itself showing off its new €12,000 Jazz preamplifier, a complete rethink for the brand.

Ocean Way is perhaps best known as a studio in Burbank and Nashville. It also makes loudspeakers. Big, horn-loaded, studio inspired monitors that mostly sell to other studios and well-heeled audiophiles half a world away. The loudspeakers sounded jaw-dropping in almost every respect; dynamic, detailed and surprisingly accurate monitors, that start at around \$50,000 and keep going until you add a zero to that sum. Per channel. Trouble is, the AS-1 and HR-3 speakers played at Munich made you think that would be money well spent.

L: Holborne. Swiss turntable, 100% Toblerone free

M: KEF's LS50 loudspeaker was the star of the show

R: Creek's new Evolution 50A pair.

Darwin approves

With all the noise about the KEF LS50, Tannoy's more restrained room could go unnoticed, but the company was offering advance previews of two of its new ranges; the middle-range Precision series (comprising two floorstanders and a stand-mount) and a new one-driver floorstander in the Definition series that will use Alnico magnets (in the style of classic Tannoy horns of old).

Zellaton by Podszus is a new/old company. The original patents for the metal dome loudspeaker drivers date back to the 1930s, but the company disappeared in the mists of time. Then, a few years ago, the grandson of the original Zellaton patent holder began making loudspeakers again, using the distinctive hand-made metal loudspeakers. Products start from the Emotion floorstanding loudspeaker at €17,000 right up to the as-yet-undecided Reference model.

Finally, there were big launches I missed, because there's only so many rooms it's possible to do in a few days. At the entry-point end of things, Boston Acoustics is leveraging the golden ears of the brand ambassador of Ken Ishiwata of Marantz for its new m-series loudspeakers. Ishiwata – who also announced a new up-market stereo range of €3,000 streamer, €4,000 CD/SACD player and €4,000 amplifier range – had the €2,750 flagship speakers in a wide, toed-in arrangement. Meanwhile, in a nearby dealer, Magico showcased its new \$28,000 S5 floorstander available in a range of finishes (a first for the brand) and capable of both taking and giving out the punishment (a 1.2kW limit on amplification and a 118dB loudness ceiling). Those who heard the three-way, four driver design were deeply impressed. +



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SHOW REPORT

Audio World 2012 Show

By Alan Sircom



This year, Audio World took a small, but significant step West, moving from Heathrow to Weybridge in Surrey. The move marks the end of three decades of London-based hi-fi shows.

But it was still the venue for important product launches. Voxativ announced its distinctive Ampeggio Due loudspeaker (*below left*), a wide, but shallow horn system using the company's AC-Xp driver and claiming to reach down to 25Hz. Meanwhile Origin Live showed late prototypes of its Astute speaker range. The drum-shaped loudspeaker pod hangs by a thread, in this case from a C-shaped support arrangement, to reduce reflective resonances from the cabinet itself. Fortunately, the 'thread' is actually a high-tech monofilament that has a tensile strength so great, you could probably hang a Bentley from a single strand.

Origin Live was also showcasing its popular range of turntables and arms, and there's more to come soon. Similarly, Inspire Hi-Fi showed its range of turntables and modified turntables, including the £999 X12 upgrade, which takes a standard LP12 and stretches everything on it to make it able to accept 12" tonearms, and the ambitious £3,975 Monarch direct drive turntable, which takes the famous Technics 1210 deck and transforms it beyond all recognition.

For a show in 2012, next-generation audio was relatively thin on the ground. More

companies were playing CD, LP or even open-reel than file-based systems, but AMR was the notable exception. As ever sharing a room with Select Audio, the company played a simple system of the new AMR DP 777 digital converter (fed by a J-River/J-Play fed computer) into a Pass Labs integrated and a pair of Verity Audio loudspeakers.

Arguably the boldest (and possibly loudest) display was for ZenSati cables (*below, right*). The system itself was turned away from the audience, allowing the listeners to see the sheer heft of the gold and silver cables that cost an unspecified number of megaquids. I expect cable companies around the world will be turning their equipment away from the listener soon!

The company with the biggest presence at the show was 15 Audio. It took two rooms; one a dedicated Burmester-only room, the other a more open-ended system concept, switching between a system comprising Boulder electronics with Hansen loudspeakers, and one featuring Ayon and Triangle. Both worked well, but in some respects, the latter room worked better, simply because the Burmester room was probably too small to let the loudspeakers breathe.

There were perhaps four sonic highlights at the show. Jeremy Baldwin of the Right Note consistently makes a good sound in any room he exhibits in, and this time his combination of dCS, VTL, Focal, Leading Edge and Vertex AQ proved to be one of the stars of the show. Similarly, Studio AV's Vitus, Focal, Stillpoints and Tellurium Q proved popular with show goers. But perhaps the most interesting product at the show was the £3,300 per pair Bodnar Audio Soundglass Fantasy loudspeakers from Poland (*above left*). With the equipment on the Polish PAB Anti-Vibration rack, through an N-Audio DAC and tube amp (also from Poland) and playing from an old Linn CD player, this made some exceptionally fine sounds without breaking the bank. Expect to hear more from these names.

A small show, then, but friendly and well attended. We look forward to next year. +





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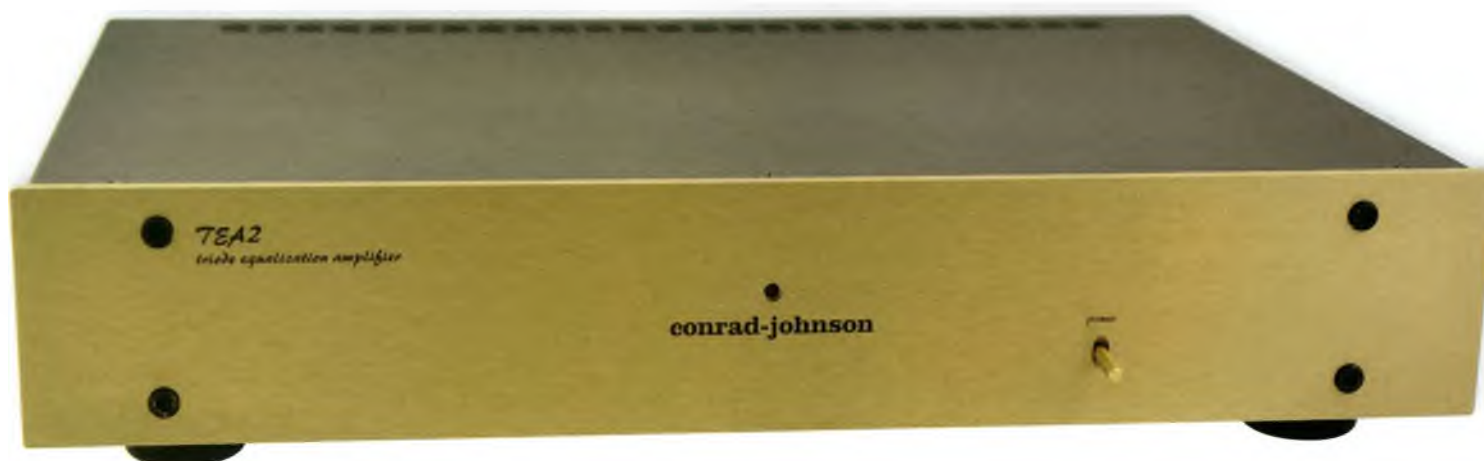
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UPGRADING...

A tale of three phono-stages - The conrad-johnson Tea-2 – in all its guises

By Roy Gregory



When it comes to cars, the concept of a shared platform is both widely accepted and understood: you can buy a Volkswagen Golf with an 85hp/1200cc engine, a 105hp/1600cc Blue Motion turbo diesel injection engine or a 270hp/2000cc petrol injection. These cars are all built on the same body pan and all look pretty similar from the outside, but neither the general public nor the insurance companies think that they're the same thing. Drive them and you quickly realize that despite the common DNA, these are three very different vehicles indeed – and that they exist to appeal to very different customers.

It's a developmental culture that the hi-fi industry has been slow to adopt. Many companies have produced 'breathed-on' editions of their products, but generally speaking, these have simply superseded the donor unit, rather than augmenting it and spreading its appeal. Perhaps the one real exception to this rule has been Marantz, with their KI Signature special editions – although these tend to be tweaked versions of the original rather than wholly new products. Power amps have appeared in stereo and mono versions that share the same metalwork, but that's about as far as it goes.

But here we have three outwardly identical units from conrad-johnson that straddle a price band from £2,695 to £5,995. And when I say identical, I do mean identical. You need to look at the small, stamped product identifier plate on the rear panel to tell them apart – unless you take the lid off, that is. Inside, you'll find identical circuits and tube complements, but the components differ markedly: about as markedly as the engine in a 1.2 Golf and the motor you find under the hood of a GTI. These products take the concept of a shared platform pretty much as far as they can, with common casework, circuit boards and principal power-supply components.

"So what?" you might well ask. Well, when it comes to performance and what you have to pay to get it, those shared parts reduce build costs significantly, meaning purchasers get a lot more music for their money. But just as interesting, at least on an academic level, is the opportunity that the 'Tea-2 three' provide to compare and contrast the influence of and benefits to be had from component quality as opposed to circuit topology or the size of the power supply. The audible differences here – and they are extremely audible – are purely down to the quality of the components populating the PCBs. Given the amount of advertising ink (and review column inches) that have been expended on the subject of audiophile components, it's too good a chance to miss, especially given the presence of this year's fashionable must have parts – Teflon caps – in the SE model and top-price Tea-2MAX. But we're getting ahead of ourselves here. Perhaps we should start by examining the basic product architecture – and what changes c-j have made to produce the more expensive versions.

The Tea-2 was first reviewed by AS back in Issue 70. It costs a pretty approachable £2,695, given that this is a fully active tube moving-coil phono stage, delivering 55dB of gain from a pair of cascaded 12AX7s for the input with another 12AX7 split between the two channels to provide a second gain stage. A mosfet output buffer provides a suitably low output impedance. The circuit is global feedback free and employs passive RIAA equalization. Two small banks of dip-switches placed inside the casework, adjacent to the

single pair of input sockets, allow for user selectable load resistances in seven discrete values ranged between 130 Ohms and 47 kOhms – and that's all the adjustment you get, although you can order a low-gain (LG) version of the TEA-2 that uses a 12AU7 in place of the second-stage 12AX7 to deliver 40dB of gain that's more appropriate to medium and high output cartridges (moving-coils though, rather than full-fat moving magnets, with their even more robust signal levels). This isn't just a case of swapping tubes, so although a high-gain unit can be switched to low-gain or vice versa, it requires a trip back to the factory and some component changes. In other words, don't think you can do this at home...

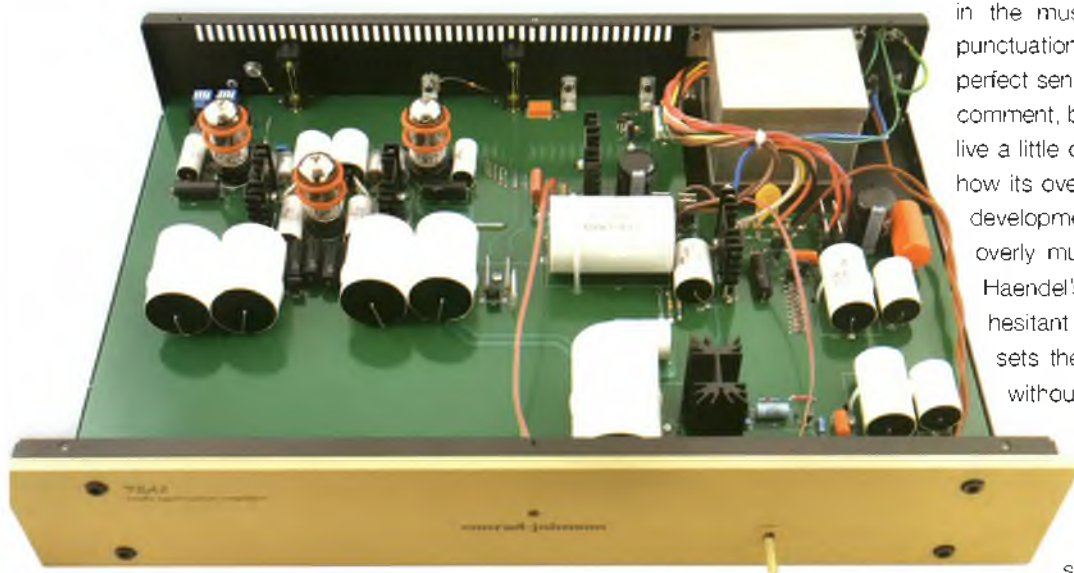
The first thing to say about the TEA-2 is that by avoiding the use of input transformers to deliver low-noise gain, c-j has decided to challenge the performance envelope of their chosen active devices exactly where they are traditionally weakest. If that seems like an odd choice, the thing you need to bear in mind is the superior phase performance and linearity of active amplification over transformers. In a phono stage that means pushing tubes about as far as they can comfortably go – but no further; hence the modest 55dB gain. Not so long ago, low-noise and heaps of gain were top of the phono stage priority list, but nowadays things have got a lot more sensible. Cartridges with an output level below 0.4mV are few and far between, meaning that the TEA-2 will comfortably accommodate all but a select few cartridges currently on the market (and most of those come with a firm recommendation as regards a matching transformer). Interestingly, c-j's own TEA-1 phono stage offers purchasers a choice of 54.5dB of all-tube gain, or 63dB if you opt for transformers, but it's an option that's been deemed unnecessary at the TEA-2's price point(s) – and I can understand why. Running a range of different Lyra and Clearaudio cartridges I never suffered noise or gain problems, so I think it's safe to say the c-j has called this one right.

So far so good, and as AS's review will attest, the TEA-2 in stock form delivers plenty of musical bang for your bucks. It's essential honesty is underpinned by excellent musical coherence and the sort of expressive rhythmic articulation that will leave PRaT aficionados scratching their heads at

the revelation that not ALL music times out at 4/4. Soundstages are broad and deep where appropriate, with excellent instrumental spread and separation. More importantly, they clearly position the orchestra or band in a single acoustic space. Despite the glowing hot bits in the circuit, don't assume that the sound of the TEA-2 will be overly warm, sweet or romantic. Music is delivered with a crisp clarity, presence and emphatic dynamics where called for. It's a balance of virtues that makes the most of vinyl's enduring appeal, with a sense of musical communication and flow that those rediscovering record players will quickly recognize as what they have been missing, while those new to the format will greet with a mix of wonder and amazement; so that's what the parents were into!

Let's take Ida Haendel's recording of the fiendishly difficult Sibelius Violin Concerto as an example, both of what the TEA-2 can do in standard guise, and what happens when c-j up the component quality. Performed with Berglund at the height of his astonishingly fruitful sojourn with the Bournemouth Symphony, this is a disc that captures a heartfelt and technically excellent solo performance, balanced by dramatic yet perfectly contained orchestral support. Haendel's mastery of instrument and score is clear from the opening bars of the first movement, the c-j clearly revealing the almost plaintive sense of dark anticipation in the music. Berglund's crisp orchestral punctuation is perfectly placed and makes perfect sense. That might seem like an odd comment, but having heard the piece played live a little over a week ago, it's remarkable how its overall mood and almost mesmeric development can be destroyed by an overly muscular or prosaic performance. Haendel's beautifully poised almost hesitant shaping of the solo melody sets the scene, Berglund fleshes it out without swamping the violin (Messrs.' Sokolov and Petrenko please take note).

It's this ability to step aside, to pass the fragile phono signal through without stamping



► its own character or interpretation all over it that makes the TEA-2 such an engaging and worthwhile performer. By refusing to strip away harmonic colour in the pursuit of detail and definition, or add padding in search of some misguided romantic notion of musicality, it succeeds in delivering what was put on the record in remarkably unadulterated form. Indeed, unless you heard something considerably better, you'd be more than happy with this. Which brings us, I guess, to the unimaginatively named TEA-2SE...

The sidebar spells out the physical difference between these two units, but a simple list of components doesn't prepare you for the gulf in musical performance. If you are expecting TEA-2 with frilly bits, think again. The holistic quality and sheer musical integrity are there, but both the overall presentation and the degree of musical insight on offer make this an all-new product. At £3,995 the SE is bigger, bolder and far more dramatic. It offers greater substance, a more defined sense of space and focus on individual instruments. It's tonally richer with a greater sense of instrumental texture and as a result it is musically (even) more expressive. Backgrounds and the air within the soundstage are blacker, making for wider dynamic range but also better micro-dynamic definition. The result is a more immediate, more intimate and more purposeful presentation that, whilst it isn't more forward than the basic TEA-2, places you closer to the band. Instrumental separation is significantly better, both spatially and tonally, so when Sibelius uses quiet bowed bass in tandem with muted timpani rolls below the solo violin, rather than just a moody rumble, now you can pick the instruments and place them too.

This is a big step up in performance and musical impact. Impressive as it is on the Sibelius, with its measured balance of delicacy and outright power, where it really scores is with more modern music. Jazz horns get real punch and trumpets rip, while the added authority and control at low frequencies separates out plucked bass and

drum lines, keeping them locked to the rhythm. Art Pepper swings just the way he should, and grooves groove, whether it's Ray Brown or Roger Waters defining the shape. But where the SE leaves the basic version for dead is when things turn visceral. Orchestral tuttis have real impact (and impressive texture and instrumental separation) whether it's Berglund and the Bournemouth or Barbirolli's Mahler 5. But step up the angst control to 11 and *The Falling*, a collection of P.J. Harvey B-sides and you'll be shocked and impressed by just how much anger and aggression one woman can extract from an acoustic guitar. The SE adds real power and impact to the mix, built out of its wider dynamics, quieter, blacker background and broader palette; The TEA-2 delivers the recording, the SE puts flesh on the bones and walks them right into the room. It's a neat trick given the £1,300 premium you'll be paying over and above the basic version.

The Tea-2MAX ups the ante again, by a not inconsiderable £2,000, bringing the asking price to £5,995. With more Teflon on board than a top-flight speaker cable wrapped in James Murdoch's raincoat, (and a price-tag that would finance quite a few phone hacks to boot) then if the hype is to be believed the MAX should deliver something special. It doesn't disappoint. Instruments and voices step back slightly when compared to the SE, but that's a function of greater focus and definition. Each source of musical energy is more concentrated, more precise in its contribution. Depth and darkness both increase, the acoustic is more palpable, the colours more vivid. But the big difference lies in the way the added resolution, detail, texture and micro-dynamic finesse are bound together, bringing that indefinable sense of human agency to reproduced music. Polly Jane becomes a living, breathing (and more than slightly frightening) presence, each sardonic curl of her lip, each wrung out emotion laid bare. The anger, hatred and pain communicate much, much more directly – and while that might not seem like fun, it's exactly what an album like *The Falling* is all about, lifting it from curiosity value to diamond in the rough, with a strangely addictive power and core beauty. These often unpolished tracks deliver their emotional content in raw and unadulterated form; the TEA-2MAX has the emotional range to get right out of the way and let the message through – in all its painful glory, in the same way that it tells you just how good a violinist Haendel is, just how bound she is to the music and how listening to her and Berglund (as opposed to Sokolov and Petrenko) brings home what it's like to live in the stark beauty of the Finnish landscape, deep in the shadow of the Russian behemoth. As the third movement's insistent opening drums out, you can almost feel her gathering herself for the climactic release of the solo response. It's this level of connection and musical insight that sets the TEA-2MAX apart from the SE – and most of its peer group.

The MAX mods reveal the humanity in recordings, whether its pop-corn pop or the intensity of Coltrane's 'Love Supreme'. This is what high-end audio is all about: access to the original event, seeing past the system and into the presence of the performers. The TEA-2MAX puts you on firmly on the shortest path possible – and it does it without pulling recordings apart. Surface noise is separated so effectively, presented in its own distinct plane, that even quite badly damaged records are playable, the music emerging from even the most unpromisingly noisy surfaces. In the same way, it allows performances to overcome the strait-jacket confines of poor recording quality. But as ►



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

What separates the TEA-2 in its basic form from the SE and MAX versions? You can look at that in two ways – what they do musically and what's in the box. In terms of specific component changes, the differences are outlined below.

The TEA-2SE (compared to the basic version)

1. Replaces 6 x 0.15 μ F 'bypass' capacitors with CJD Teflon capacitors (output caps C15 and C17; power supply caps C5, C6, C21, C22).
2. Replaces 2 x 0.15 μ F inter-stage coupling capacitors (C10, C11) with CJD Teflon.
3. Replaces 4 x 0.1 μ F caps across tube bias diodes with CJD Teflon (C9, C12, C13, C14)
4. Replacing 10 x phono input load resistors with VISHAY.
5. Replaces 4 x 100 Ohm input and output "damping" resistors with VISHAY (R37, R47, R51, R52).
6. Replaces 2 x 1.0 MOhm output load resistors (R27 and R31) with 500 kOhm VISHAY or Caddock.

The TEA-2MAX incorporates all of the SE upgrades, but in addition:

1. Replaces the output coupling caps and 'bypass' capacitors (C15, C16, C17, C18) with 4 x 2.0 μ F CJD Teflon capacitors (so each channel has output coupling via a total of 4.0 μ F of pure CJD Teflon).
2. Upgrades C6 and C21 to 0.47 μ F CJD Teflon.
3. Increases the storage capacitance in the final regulator (C20) from 13.5 μ F to 20 μ F.
4. Replaces all RIAA "load" resistors (4 x 2.2 MOhm - R40, R41, R49, R50) with 2 x 4.4 MOhm Caddock resistors.
5. Replacing all other RIAA resistors with VISHAY (R38, R48; R39, R62)

6. Replacing resistors in the MOSFET followers (R24, R25, R26; R28, R29, R30) with VISHAY.
7. Replacing all resistors in the final voltage regulator stage with VISHAY (R53, R54, R55, R56).

As you can see from the changes detailed above, certain key points in the circuit benefit from being revisited and further upgraded in the MAX, but the essential theme here is ever increasing quantities of Teflon capacitance and higher quality resistors, especially in the key cartridge loading and output stages.

Round about now is where the DIY brigade will be scoffing at the number of components employed and the increases in price that result. Well, there are two ways of looking at that too. You could get the soldering iron out and start butchering a basic TEA-2, but if you do you'll be invalidating the warranty of the unit, dispensing with all the care and experience that went into the selection of the substitute components and destroying the unit's residual value. You see, part of the problem is that besides being horribly expensive, Teflon caps aren't actually available on the open market, and any audio circuit is a balancing act akin to building the Eiffel Tower upside down; any change in one place needs to be balanced and accommodated elsewhere. So simply sticking "better" components into stock units will certainly make them sound different – but it's unlikely to actually improve them. In the case of the TEA-2, you'd risk destroying the very quality – its overall musical coherence – that makes it so appealing in the first place.

Or, to use another motoring analogy, it's always cheaper to buy a car than build it out of spare parts!

► impressive as it is, it's an ability that comes at a price, and that's what makes the TEA-2 series such a boon. Those looking for a first step on the high-end vinyl ladder will not be disappointed by the basic model: It's more than capable of demonstrating just how much music lies in the grooves of a vinyl record. The SE model is a cat of a different colour, able to show both the benefits of bigger, better cartridges and bigger, better systems. It's command of both frequency extremes and its purposeful dynamic delivery will win hearts and minds amongst those who always seem to be asking their system for more. The MAX plays in a higher league altogether. I'd be intrigued to know just how close it gets to the flagship model TEA-1, because on this showing, if you are in the market for a no-frills, no-fuss phono stage then the TEA-2MAX needn't fear the competition at or anywhere near its asking price.

But in sonic terms, what's really interesting is just how much of the difference I've described between these three units is down to the quality not of the music, but of the space around and behind the instruments that are making it. Judged in absolute terms (and even within the frame of reference of this group) the basic model paints its pictures on a dark grey background, with a discernable grain and texture. The SE has an almost velvety blackness, that possibly heightens colour, but like velvet, it too has a texture. The really impressive difference is when you move to the MAX. There is no quality to the space, just space itself. Even on recordings that fall below the basic, this ability to give convincing shape and body to instruments is exceptional. With the MAX, the P.J. Harvey four-tracks are stunningly lifelike and present, not just because of the sheer detail and harmonic resolution that set out the guitar as a three-dimensional thing, but because of the clear separation of what is guitar and what is not. As an object lesson in the nature and importance of true transparency in the reproduction of recorded music, it's startlingly effective.

So, three great products at three different price levels. They may well look the same but there the similarity ends – other than the fact that they all offer superb musical value, irrespective of their asking price. But what's really interesting from a more academic viewpoint is just what this tells us about the critical impact of component quality on audio performance. If anybody tells you that one resistor sounds just like any other, or there's no difference between capacitors of different types but the same value (a bit like all cables sound the same and mains leads can't possibly make a difference) then all you need to do is ask them whether they've heard the difference between these three phono stages... The implications as regards shared chassis development are even more interesting. Whereas there are plenty of ranges that share casework components, I'm not aware of any product

family (outside of an upgradeable CD player like the older Micromegas) that takes things this far. How much would a TEA-2MAX cost if it used its own boards, transformer and unique chassis parts? By taking this route c-j have managed to deliver more performance for what is I suspect, quite a lot less money. The evidence is clear to hear – all you need to do is listen. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Conrad-johnson TEA-2. SE and MAX

Type: All-tube phono-stage

Tube Complement –

High Gain (55db): 3x 12AX7

Low Gain (40dB): 2x 12AX7 and 1x 12AU7

Inputs: 1pr RCA/phono

Input Impedance: User variable, 130 Ohms to 47kOhms

Outputs: 1pr RCA/phono

Output Impedance: Less than 200 Ohms

Dimensions (WxHxD): 19" x 3.625" x 13.625"

Weight: 14lbs (TEA-2)

Finish: Champagne facia/black body

Prices: TEA-2 £2,695;

TEA-2SE £3,995; TEA-2MAX £5,995

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BEST OF BRITISH

The UK's Gold Medalists

In this Jubilee year, the year the Olympics comes to London, it's sometimes hard to find manufacturers that are truly British; designed and built in the UK, by a British-owned company. While we live in a truly global society, occasionally it's great to fly the flag and cheer for the home team. The 10 companies listed below we feel are our Gold Medalists; they make products that are the world's best in their particular event. There are others; let's cheer them on at www.facebook.com/HiFiPlus

By Alan Sircom

Audio Note

Based in Hove in East Sussex, Audio Note makes a vast array of sources, valve amplifiers, loudspeakers and even cables, at a range of prices

that run from the affordable to the

kind of price tags even billionaires would struggle with. The company has a fiercely loyal following too, because it does things differently and is almost pathologically unable to make a bad sound. Chances are strong that if you have a single-ended triode amp or a NOS DAC, you will have – or have considered – an Audio Note product.

Chord Electronics

Kent-based Chord Electronics has been at the forefront of high-technology two-channel and multichannel electronics for decades. Known initially for its powerful, yet compact switch-mode power amplifiers (designed originally for the BBC), Chord has diversified into all aspects of audio electronics. From its world-class Reference range, to its tomorrow-friendly (and wallet-friendly) Chordette modular system, the company keeps pushing the limits of what's possible in audio technology.

Cyrus Audio

Perhaps the most recognisable product line in audio's history, Cambridge-based Cyrus' long-lived line-up of half-size 'singing shoeboxes' has come to dominate the UK audio scene. Cyrus electronics offer a clear and affordable upgrade path that can take an owner from a humble CD player and integrated amplifier to a sophisticated array of components, each driven by its own dedicated power supply unit. A hugely popular choice, especially for the home market.



dCS

From its beginnings in the pro-audio world, dCS has long defined the boundaries of what can be resolved from digital audio. Redefining the possibilities of ultra-high-end stereo CD and SACD replay, the Cambridgeshire-based high-technology company produces a series of digital components, from integrated CD/SACD units right up to multi-box players.



Recently, the company has set a high bar for computer audio replay with its Debussy DAC... and there's more to come.

Leema Acoustics

The brainchild of two ex-BBC engineers, Leema produces several ranges of high-technology electronics and domestic monitor loudspeakers from its factory in Welshpool in Wales. With a line-up ranging from traditional high-end audio electronics (including the unique, multiple-DAC Antilla IIS Eco CD player), right down to its value-driven small form factor Elements range, despite being the youngest brand in this list, Leema is fast becoming a force to be reckoned with world-wide.

Linn Products

Based in Glasgow, Scotland, Linn Products needs little introduction; its classic Sondek LP12 turntable has been the subject of an almost infinite number of upgrades, options and third-party customization right from the get-go, nearly 40 years ago. It's still made today, but Linn wouldn't have won a Queen's Award for Export this year on the basis of a turntable alone; Linn today is just as well known for its excellent line of state of the art Digital Streaming products, amps and loudspeakers.

PMC

Another ex-BBC engineer, Pete Thomas, co-founded the Professional Monitor Company 20 years ago. Since then, the Bedfordshire-based company has gone from strength to strength, producing products that perfectly span the divide between pro and domestic. PMC's client base reads like a who's who of the music business. Recently, however, PMC has created a couple of lines designed specifically for domestic use (and you can read about one of those on page 55) and the international success of this new generation products means

PMC is going to be around for another 20 years and beyond.

Rega Research

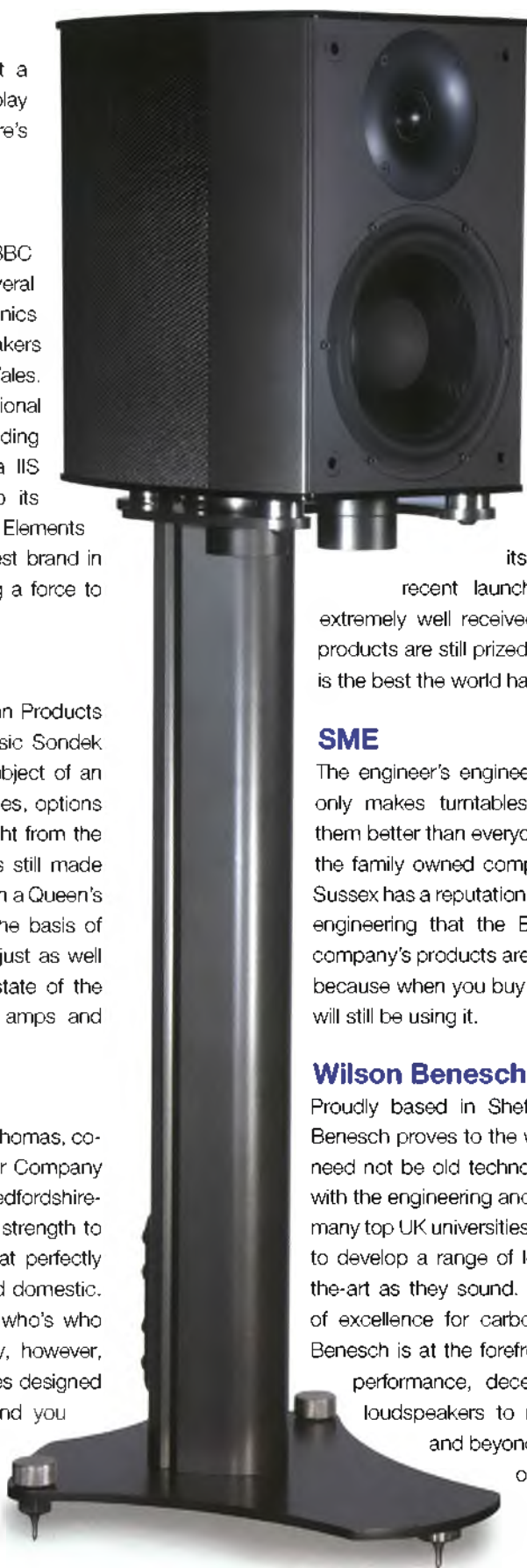
The seaside resort of Southend-on-Sea in Essex may be known as the place where London goes to play, but for audiophiles it offers more than arcade games and wheelks. Rega Research is also based in the town. Starting with a single Planar 3 turntable in the late 1970s, Rega's range has grown to encompass every aspect of modern audio, and – while originally best known for its lower-priced products – Rega's recent launch into the high end has been extremely well received at home and abroad. Its older products are still prized on eBay, but its latest range really is the best the world has to offer.

SME

The engineer's engineering company, in our world SME only makes turntables and tonearms... It just makes them better than everyone else. Starting in the late 1950s, the family owned company based out of Steyning, East Sussex has a reputation for old-school, do-it-right precision engineering that the British are justly famous for. The company's products are not for sprints, but for marathons, because when you buy an SME, your great grandchildren will still be using it.

Wilson Benesch

Proudly based in Sheffield, in South Yorkshire, Wilson Benesch proves to the world that loudspeaker technology need not be old technology. The company works closely with the engineering and materials science departments of many top UK universities (including nearby Sheffield Hallam) to develop a range of loudspeakers that are as state-of-the-art as they sound. The UK is an international centre of excellence for carbon-fibre manufacture, and Wilson Benesch is at the forefront of that excellence. From high-performance, deceptively conventional looking box loudspeakers to radical multi-way tower speakers and beyond, the company is our ambassador of high-tech. +



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Magico Q1 loudspeakers

By Alan Sircom

The Magico Q1 is a standmount loudspeaker with an integrated stand (which is bolted to a recess in the underside of the speaker) and is shipped as standard with this mounted in place. It's a two-way sealed box that sits on a single column pedestal. And that is inevitably going to be twisted into "it's not a real standmount" by rivals. Because "it's not a real standmount" is going to be the excuse that will issue from those trying to justify their place in a post-Q1 loudspeaker world.

Their styling is bold... and none more black. The Q1s stand tall for a pair of floorstanders (the 25mm Beryllium dome tweeter is above ear height for most sofa-dwellers) and the squared off corners and thick black aluminium plates make the Q1s look like small monoliths from *2001 – A Space Odyssey*. I left some Ligeti playing overnight to give them some running in and by the time I came down next day, my cats had started using primitive hand tools. Three days later, they were building a space station.

Joking aside, the Q1 are an uncompromising styling exercise for the home. Deliberately so; they make the big, bold physical statement because audio makes a big statement in its own right through these speakers. Music is an unapologetically stirring experience through these speakers and we need more things this uncompromisingly good and exciting if we are ever to reach out to a new audience.

Although you'll never get to see inside the box (it's a sealed box design, and they do mean sealed), it's like a little city under the hood. The cabinet bolts to a complex cross-braced aluminium skeleton, with additional mounting plates at the front and rear of the cabinet, for the drivers and the crossover respectively. These massy plates also add stiffness to an already unfeasibly stiff cabinet. There's constrained layer damping inside instead of anything soft and sticky, fluffy or foamy, because the cabinet is so thick and dense and non-resonant that a spot of BAF wadding or long-haired wool wouldn't make a shred of difference to performance. This does.

The drive units could be seen as a sign of just how seriously Magico takes the whole process of speaker making. The 25mm beryllium dome tweeter and 177mm NeoTech (carbon fibre meets Rohacell sandwich) mid-bass unit have been seen before in the Q5. Except they haven't; in the intervening time between the first and subsequent Q models, Magico has been performing a series of improvements to both drive units. Not significant enough to warrant Q5 owners returning their speakers for a new set of drivers, but specific improvements to the Q1 driver set to make the speaker all the more correct. But in a way, you can see the dedication that goes into the Q1 in every aspect of the speaker, even down to the little spike wrench the company supplies with the speaker.

The reason for the stand being an integral part of the design becomes clear if you scratch the surface (good luck with that by the way; you might want to

try a diamond cutter, because that's probably the only way you'll get under that black coat). The stand is directly coupled to the speaker by being bolted to it. That acts as an effective damping mechanism, in precisely the opposite way most stand-mounts at the high-end tend to work; Magico feels the normal way of minimizing resonance in standmounts (adding mass to the stand and decoupling the loudspeaker) is fundamentally flawed.

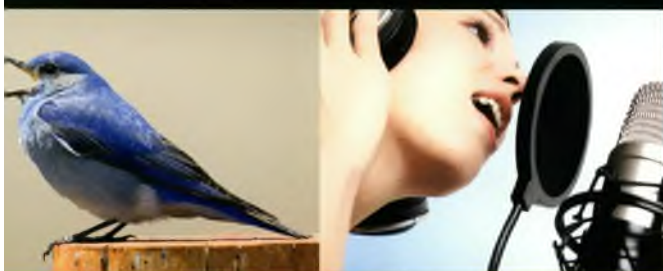
The result of all this development was a long time coming. A two-way sealed standmount like this, with its single-wired crossover and slightly curved front baffle, shouldn't have taken long to engineer, given the whole Magico way of things (everything, right down to the aluminium factory, is in house or made to order). But, given the whole Magico way of doing things (no retreat, no surrender, no compromise), it actually took a surprising amount of work bringing these speakers to market. There is a lot of computer modeling, prototyping, measuring, listening, re-working and going back to the computer CAD/CAM pen tablet type thing (it was so much simpler when it was 'back to the drawing board').

The result is a speaker of powerful appearance. It's a simple, timeless design in the same way a Le Coubusier chair is timeless. Functional to the point of utility, engineered at a premium for those who have no knowledge of the meaning of the word 'over-engineered', well proportioned no-quarter stuff. It's the kind of loudspeaker that you want to know how to field-strip it in less than 30 seconds flat with your eyes closed. It's all very Y-chromosome stuff; like flight-recorder boxes, boxing stats and Tonka toys.

Installation is simple, but deserves and demands painstaking adjustment to get it right. Give it some air, preferably a metre or ►



WALLS OF
SOUND



THE WORLD'S FIRST BESPOKE IN-ROOM LOUDSPEAKER DESIGN SERVICE. WHY?

BESPOKE. The word that truly underpins Walls of Sound. It's the essence of how we do things. We recognise that our customers have listening rooms and ancillary equipment that differ as much as their musical tastes, so each system is optimised for the individual. No two systems are the same.

YOUR ROOM IS THE WEAKEST LINK

Room acoustics play a critical role in what you hear and can have a greater effect than the rest of your system put together – as much as 10 or even 20db variations in frequency response. As every room is acoustically different, the speaker needs to be designed to compensate for this. We will measure the acoustics of your room from your listening position and then design your ultimate loudspeaker, for the flattest possible frequency response by using the most advanced acoustic measurement and design software available.

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX...

So you think big, ugly boxes are necessary for the highest quality sound? Wrong. Quad proved in the '60s that the best box was no box at all – and a wall is even better!

"No fewer than three different sources of distortions endemic with conventional box loudspeakers are completely avoided."

Paul Messenger, *HiFi Critic*, Jan-Mar 2012

All drive units are built into your cavity walls for maximum acoustic performance and minimum visual impact. Why? Because acoustic energy from the rear of the drive units disappears into the cavity wall rather than being reflected back as distortion through the cone or the box sides. In addition, the rigid wall structure provides outstanding clarity. Bass is clean and clear, and incredibly deep, without the normal 24db/octave roll off or distortion associated with box loudspeakers.

"The overall bandwidth was quite exceptional, extending right down to the very lowest audible frequencies."

Paul Messenger, *HiFi Critic*, Jan-Mar 2012

THE SPEAKERS SIMPLY DISAPPEAR

"The aesthetic issues involved in a Walls of Sound speakers system are totally revolutionary, in as much as there really aren't any aesthetic issues. The in-wall loudspeaker simply disappears from view, and that alone takes it into a different dimension."

Paul Messenger, *HiFi Critic*, Jan-Mar 2012

THE WORLD'S BEST DRIVE UNITS

We use the world's finest drive units, building them into their ideal acoustic environment to perform at their best – and the results are stunning. All systems are three-way, with twin 8" bass units per channel up to two 12" units per channel for the ultimate system. 5.1 Systems are also available for the ultimate home cinema experience. Prices start from £10,000 per pair, including design, installation, loudspeaker cable and re-decoration, with all design work overseen by Stuart McGill, founder and CEO, Walls of Sound Ltd.

"Meeting and working with Stuart McGill has re-invigorated my enthusiasm for a radical approach that has real potential."

Paul Messenger, *HiFi Critic*, Jan-Mar 2012

HOW TO GET IN TOUCH

We are now installed in some of the World's finest HiFi dealers, including Graham's HiFi in Islington N1, and Robert Taussig in Blandford Street W1. Alternatively, we invite you to come and listen in our own facility just outside Oxford (2 miles Junction 7, M40). Call us on 0845 121 3114, or email: stuart@wallsofsound.co.uk. We will be delighted to send you a brochure, or visit our website at www.wallsofsound.co.uk.





► so from side and rear walls and somewhere between two to three metres apart, with a slight toe-in. Fortunately, being sealed boxes with almost no rear or side radiation pattern, if you cannot quite achieve the rear and side-wall positioning, it's not a big deal. Like the Mini II's these speakers replace, they benefit from being placed in a larger room than you'd normally consider for floorstanders, but unlike the Mini II, that's 'benefit', not a mandatory recommendation.

Similarly with amplifier choices, the church has been broadened. It's a relatively low sensitivity speaker by today's standards (claimed 86dB) but a relatively benign load by the same high-end benchmarks (five ohm nominal, with just a four ohm impedance dip at 156Hz). This means amplifiers of 50W and above will drive the Q1 well, although a couple of hundred watts of good, clean power will drive them exceptionally well. Especially as the Q1s seem to have been designed for the occasional Mr Hyde elements inside all of us that leaps out and turns the volume up to stupid for a while.

There is no such thing as an unburstable loudspeaker. Too little power played pushed into clipping, or way too much power burning out the voice coil can kill drive units. But with the Q1, you'd have to really hook the speakers up to something outrageously powerful and have scant regard for your hearing to do overpower the drive units. I played AC/DC so damn loud on these babies, I was unable to hear myself speak two rooms away and they didn't turn a hair. For the bulk of the test, I used a Devialet D-Premier to drive them perfectly (I'd imagine two of them would drive the Q1s perfectly squared).

My listening notes on this loudspeaker are, er, brief. In fact, just two words, written big. The second word was '... me!' The other word was short and earthy and not suitable for publication. The big reason for this; it goes back to that old and lost goal for audio – high-fidelity – and makes you remember why it was important. The audiophile-baiter might turn up their nose at this statement and point at a lesser loudspeaker and claim that it does the same job at a fraction of the price. And that argument has complete validity... until they get to the end of the first bar of music played through the Q1, and realise just how much closer Magico gets to that high-fidelity goal than other standmounts.

It gets voices right, making them sound like real people, not wide-mouthed human impersonators. It gets instruments like the piano right too, and it's perhaps here where you start to get an understanding of why it is so good at its job. Of those 88 keys, I'd say 82 of them were all present and correct.

Of the remaining six, they were portrayed without boost or bloat, but just didn't have the same energy and dynamism of the rest of the left hand. That in itself is remarkable on any speaker, but on a standmount it's worthy of high praise indeed.

But what really got me was the way it not only tied everything together musically, but made a truly huge sound in the process. Not artificially big, bloated or bounced off the side-wall expanded, but just right. So when you played 'Flume' by Bon Iver, you got that small, falsetto-frail voice and a real-sized guitar, and when you switched to Beecham conducting *Carmen* (EMI), you got all the scale of the operatic stage. And yet in both cases you could get past the scale and listen into the music. Justin Vernon (Bon Iver) is particularly key here, because the recording isn't stellar and lesser 'audiophile' speakers will be caught out by that. The Magico Q1 just resolves good music.

The big advantage to standmounts is they image better than otherwise similar floorstanding peers. The disadvantage is the lack of bottom end. So any speaker that can do both would be an immediate winner, but to date none do. Until now. Magico claims 32Hz at -3dB in the wild, which is deeply impressive, but I think is understatement. In my room, there was still a lot happening at 28Hz. Even the mighty Mini II it replaces couldn't compare. The Mini II had slightly less bass and was a lot more demanding of the room it sat in. The Q1 has a good 8Hz at the bottom end in room on the Mini II (which ►



One Step Beyond...

Norse Series 2 – one giant leap for audio kind!

First was the Space Shuttle and ribbon topology SPM. Next came Valhalla and Micro Mono-Filament construction. Together they created near perfect conditions for optimized signal transfer. Then the Norse series brought those technologies to cables with more down to earth, real world pricing. Now, Norse Series 2 delivers the next step.

By refining the dimensions, spacing, number and arrangement of the conductors, we have created a range of cables that are finally as mechanically sophisticated as they are electrically elegant. Superior materials, signal transfer and now physical behavior, elevate the musical performance to levels that you might have thought were out of this world. You'll get all the resolution, transparency, speed and musical coherence that you expect from Nordost – but you'll also get real-life dynamic range, greater weight, more drive and a natural sense of presence and energy. Making great music is all about delivering a great performance – and that's exactly what these

cables do. They can't make a bad system into a good one – or a bad musician into a better one. But they sound like they can, simply by getting out of the way and finally revealing what your equipment is really capable of. Like so many things in hi-fi, when it comes to cables, hearing less really is more.

**It's not rocket science –
it's much, much better
than that!**

NORDOST
MAKING THE CONNECTION

- means it has a good 8-10Hz in room at the bottom end on almost every other small speaker), and the Q1 is quite capable of being installed in small to medium room; the ideal place for a small loudspeaker to behave like a loudspeaker, which was the big limit for the Mini II.

By making a loudspeaker that works in a small room and delivers unparalleled bass response, Magico has answered the Big City Audiophile question. Those who have enough money to afford speakers like Q1s tend to make their wealth in cities. And if they live in the big city where the money happens (be it London, New York, Tokyo, Frankfurt, Singapore or what have you), space is often at a premium. The traditional loudspeakers the size of a garage door will not work in a room 3m wide and 4m long, but even that space may set the listener back a fortune.

This is perhaps the most important loudspeaker I've ever sat in front of. Why? Because it doesn't try to bend the rules of physics. Instead, it shows us just how much more we can get out of the physics if we try really hard.

Magico's Q1 demonstrates that real-world and honest bottom-octave sound is possible from a two-way standmount sealed box loudspeaker, and from a speaker design that isn't the size of a large fridge.

That throws down a challenge to all – if the Q1 can do it, why can't your speaker? Hopefully, others will rise to the challenge, and that suddenly raises the standard for audio across the board.

And there's more! For those who can't afford the Magico Q1, you should still be happy this loudspeaker exists. This is the Formula One car of our world. Things that go on inside this speaker are being watched by intellects vast and cool and sympathetic to the audio cause, just as things that go on inside a Formula One car are watched by those looking to create the next generation of production car. What the Q1 does is create a trickle down set of ideas for subsequent generations of loudspeakers (whether or not they have a Magico badge on the front). That way, audio gets just a little bit better at doing its job. Of course, if you buy the Q1, you get to be the audiophile equivalent of a Formula One driver.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Design: Two-way

Enclosure: Sealed

LF Driver: 177mm Nano-Tec cone

HF Driver: 25mm MBe-1 dome

Frequency Response: 32Hz–50kHz ± 3 dB

Sensitivity: 86dB SPL @ 1kHz @ 1W @ 1M

Nominal Impedance: 5 Ω

Minimum Impedance: 4 Ω (at 156Hz)

Dimensions (Inc Stand):

1120×370×250mm

Weight: 54kg (Inc Stand)

Price: £28,500 per pair

Manufactured by: Magico

URL: www.magico.net

Distributed by: Absolute Sounds

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

Tel: +44 (0) 208 971 3909

So not only is the Magico Q1 an excellent loudspeaker, it will help bring out excellence in future loudspeaker designs. Rival manufacturers will need a solution that challenges this speaker, fast. That being said, I think I'm comfortable in saying it's going to be some time before anyone catches up with the Q1. Few companies could even start to build with the dedication and single-mindedness that is needed to build a speaker this fantastic. +





Point/Counterpoint: Naim SuperUniti

We think the SuperUniti from Naim is one of the most important products launched by the company for years. It represents the best one-box solution from the brand. But there are a lot of different ways to think about the product. So one opinion just isn't enough.

Unbeknownst to either reviewer, we gave a sample of the Superuniti to two very different reviewers; one – Malcolm

Steward – is both a regular Naim user and is a passionate supporter of music serving systems, the other – Chris Thomas – still prefers CD replay and hasn't used Naim equipment in years.

There will be some repetition of ideas, because both wrote full reviews. But we thought you'd prefer the full thickness opinion of both to compare and contrast. Enjoy! – Ed

By Chris Thomas

Several years ago Naim Audio sensed that the audio wind was changing direction. It could see that, with CD sales declining and less people in their main markets interested in buying CD players, the company had to seriously look at where the world of audio and themselves were heading. Naim deal in complete systems, have a large manufacturing plant and employ around 120 people who design and build an extensive range of equipment from the amplifiers, that they built their early reputation on, through to loudspeakers and incorporating just about everything in between. Late last year the amalgamation with Focal was a huge and defining moment in the history of the company and we will just have to wait to see how that looks in the long-term. But it isn't a huge leap in imagination to believe that Focal had also seen the writing on the wall and noted the solutions that Naim was producing and the technologies that they were and still are pursuing and that this was one of the main attractions to the French company who had also dipped their corporate toe in the water where streaming was concerned. The two brands simply must have

also understood that the market is and was going to be even more super competitive where both quality and price were concerned and they needed to establish an early foothold.

Naim became totally convinced that those winds were blowing towards streaming audio with all the complexities of file storage and retrieval that the technology demanded. This was to be its future and would require that the company look toward acquiring a whole new skill-set to add to the experience they already possessed. So it embarked upon a recruitment drive to enlist the talents of software engineers and designers who understood the nuts and bolts of what this commitment entailed and the result has been a whole range of real-world solutions for those who share their vision of hi-res file storage and replay. The alternative for the consumer is to get involved in the world of d-i-y computer audio and the complexities, ever-changing options and the unpredictability that offers. It might appeal to the audio/computer geek within us but, from what I have seen and heard, it can be enormously frustrating, though the results, if you know what you are doing, can certainly be quite impressive.

QAT
AUDIO TECHNOLOGY



a worthy partner

www.qat-audio.com

▶ The single-box system has always been something of an audio lover's dream and the SuperUniti doesn't quite justify that description I suppose, as it does not have a CD transport where the cheaper Uniti does. But for those wanting to stream stored music files through a wired or wireless network the Superuniti makes a compelling case for itself. What you get for your £3,250 is a substantially constructed component, unashamedly Naim in appearance and built around an amplifier derived from the SUPERNAIT that can deliver 80 watts per channel. It also features design elements lifted straight from other Naim products like the Naim DAC. It is a streaming client, the first in the Naim range to offer 24-bit/192kHz compatibility, although this is appearing routinely now and can be added as a retro upgrade to other devices. It was also the first to be able to stream Apple Lossless from a network storage device.

"Once configured, the unit is impressively stable and I had no glitches at all; just a few early buffering delays that were completely sorted with a wired connection."

So, the SuperUniti is a single box solution that can also sit at the heart of a more component-laden system, as its connectivity possibilities are profound. It offers no less than 10 inputs, with six of them being digital and it clocks these into a buffer memory and then, to preserve stability of the data and therefore the music, will clock them out again. It can stream music from various places but a decent NAS drive is a good bet, or a Naim HDX Hard Disk storage/CD ripper like the one I have been using, or your computer's hard drive, or an iPod/iPad/Phone through its panel mounted USB port. The SuperUniti will see these devices immediately upon set-up and signing-in to the network and I tried it both wired and wireless with wired always being the preferred option. From a NAS it will play a whole range of formats. MP3 with fixed and variable bit-rates, WAVs, AAIF, AAC, WMA, Ogg Vorbis, Apple Lossless and of course 24-bit FLAC at 96kHz or 192 kHz. I am reliably informed that Apple's Airplay may also be compatible with a firmware upgrade in the near future. It may even be in play as you read this as both Naim and Apple move in silent and mysterious ways. Another new feature is

an analogue volume control that employs a discrete resistor network to better control the myriad of input possibilities.

Also included is an FM tuner, a DAB tuner plus access to the wonderful world of Internet Radio that is a particularly favourite feature of mine. Of course Naim do provide a decent remote and there is a small screen on the unit itself, but to really get to grips with the SuperUniti there is nothing like an iPad or an iPhone after you have downloaded a free iOS app called nStream. Without this clever and functional interface the SuperUniti seems fussier and less intuitive to me. All the pain is in the setting up. It took me a short while to work through the menu system so the SuperUniti saw my network and as I mentioned, it saw the HDX and my ripped and stored files immediately.

Once configured, the unit is impressively stable and I had no glitches at all; just a few early buffering delays that were completely sorted with a wired connection. As if in commemoration of the Focal liaison, I connected the SuperUniti to a pair of their Diablo Utopia speakers using Naim's NAC A5 cable, which is not a favourite of mine (that tweeter can be a cruel taskmaster) so I also tried some other high-end cabling. Straight from the box this Naim sounded like a real bag of nails. It was crude yet powerful, with a very unattractive lack of anything approaching finesse or delicacy. It dealt with music with an iron hand or should I say boot and painted the picture with broad strokes and weight, seemingly happy to ignore the small in favour of the big. As a reviewer one gets use to this kind of thing and just about everything needs a period of running-in, warming up or whatever you want to call it. But the SuperUniti was particularly ugly until it felt warm to the touch. After an hour it was completely unrecognisable and the cacophonous jumble of crudity had grown amazingly more refined. As the days passed it became an entirely different proposition altogether and was more musically balanced and focussed with infinitely more resolution and a subtlety that would have seemed entirely outside its abilities at first listen. Perhaps the integrated Moon amplifiers are the only other audio electronics I have heard that went through such a Jekyll and Hyde transformation. Was it was because this particular unit was brand new? Who knows, but do not audition any product in the dealer's dem room or at home straight from the box and expect to make anything approaching an accurate assessment and positively insist that the Uniti products have been running for at least a couple of days and preferably a lot, lot longer before you even consider a critical listen. ▶

Best of Show...



MB-450 series III monoblock amplifiers



TL-5.5 series II pre-amplifier



ST-150 stereo amplifier



TL-7.5 series III pre-amplifier



Year after year, show after show, VTL are credited with creating some of the best and most lifelike sounds. VTL amplifiers are born from a passion for music; this passion and more than twenty years of development has brought a range of amplification which provides uncompromised sound quality with truly modern functionality and reliability.

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SERIES V~12

MAGNESIUM TONE-ARM

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



SME

“The best pick-up arm in the world”

► If it was bad initially, I could hardly begin to appreciate what it had become after a week or so of continuous use. Power without finesse is a dangerous thing for the soul and the ears, but the SuperUniti was exceeding my expectations. As with all streaming products, where multiple sources are in play, the interface is absolutely and totally critical if frustration is to be avoided. Using the iPad I could scroll through the CDs I had ripped and select individual pieces with ease. Likewise with the radio sections. If you like Internet radio as

going to cut it at all. This tuner demands a proper aerial with all the associated costs involved.

Naim, who operate their own download store, sent over a memory stick of their first hi-res release, a version of Antonio Forcione's *Meet Me In London* album. This plugged into the front panel input USB socket and gave me a pretty good idea of what the SuperUniti is capable of when being supplied with 24 bit, 192 KHz quality. I know the album well but was surprised how different the new version is. After



I do, Naim have pre-programmed a few favourites for you including Radio Paradise at various bit-rates, with the best being 320Kbps. As a way of exposing yourself to new music I find Internet radio to be quite excellent, but there are a lot of radio stations out there and if the interface is a bit clunky it can be a horribly frustrating business. But sorting by genre or country is easy on the Naim and though it's true that you will tend to want to listen to only the best quality stations at first, I found that the more obscure low bit-rate ones still play some interesting music. But, if quality is your thing then Radio Paradise as well as the test stream of Radio 3 at 320Kbps, or even (say it softly) the Linn station is quite excellent and anything you find that you like can be easily added to the pre-sets list. The DAB section sounds very DAB-ish but the FM, as you might expect from Naim is very, very good and right up there with the highest bit-rate Internet broadcasts but please bear in mind the absolute need for a proper FM aerial to achieve this level of quality. A bit of damp string just isn't

the slightly sparse sound of the original, this sounds ultra smooth and effortlessly detailed with a very low noise floor. The prominent acoustic guitar is now tonally richer and less stark. You might even believe that it is less dynamic initially, but it is more colourful, closer and tangible and has a notably less compressed leading edge. But it was the vocals that really drew my attention. They are so much creamier, sheer and shimmeringly vivid and it is a lot easier to appreciate the tightness and beautiful pitching of Sabina Sciubba's exceptional voice, particularly on 'Visions', the Stevie Wonder track, which has a completely new level of delicate vibrancy. Another track that grabbed me with its intensity and emotional involvement was 'Caruso', a glorious and classic study in harmonic shading, timing and phrasing and a song that great singers can make their own through interpretation and dynamic vocal contrasts. The hi-res version has simply moved the recording to a new level and not just of technical excellence, although that might well be at the heart of it. The ►

LUXMAN

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- extra weight and density that 24/192 has revealed makes the music so much more immersive and moving.

When friends found out I had been using a Naim Uniti product in conjunction with the HDX CD ripper/Hard Drive all they wanted to know was how it compared in sound quality terms to a CD player and amplifier separates and I guess that some of you are wondering that too. It is, in fact a difficult question to answer without a whole list of caveats. If you ask me whether the files ripped into the HDX and accessed through the SuperUniti sound as good as a straight CD replay through something like a Naim CD 555 then I say 'no', but it is very much better than I thought it would be and with the advent of file storage on a separate NAS at 24-bit/192KHz it would be a fool who said that Naim in particular and streamers in general are not moving in a positive direction and toward something special. There are a whole host of components out there at various price levels using streaming technology and that list is going to grow and grow and as it does in-house sounds and styles will emerge. We are really just at the beginning of a long journey where files stored at super high rates will very likely take the audiophile ground. The SuperUniti is a complex product that Naim, through investment and design imagination, have done a really excellent job with and it is easy to recommend.

By Malcolm Steward

Many years ago, when I was a young lad, my living room, like those of my friends, featured a coffin-sized wooden enclosure that housed a radio and a record player alongside an amplifier and a pair of loudspeakers. If those loudspeakers were integral to the device then it was called a radiogram, and if they were discrete then the device was a Music Centre or a Stereo. Regardless, one enclosure housed the source components and the amplifier in both types of device. Only when one's taste and wealth increased did one progress to what were known as hi-fi separates, or individual components. Now, in the subsequent millennium, we see the same all-in-one concept, albeit in a slightly more sophisticated and elegant guise – and without the vinyl-replay element – resurfacing in modern homes. Sure, the record player has gone, as has the monolithic wooden enclosure, but the principle remains the same: reduce the hi-fi system to a single component to which one can attach loudspeakers to suit one's tastes.

These more modern all-in-ones are not completely new: in the past few years we have seen various combinations of CD player, cassette deck and radio receiver, for example, along with midi systems, but the quality, in particular, of the amplifier, was generally nothing about which one would wish

to write home. The result was that these contraptions tended to be partnered with speakers that would never be described as especially refined.

The compact all-in-one, however, is very much *à la mode* right now. The floor bestrewn with amplifiers and anaconda-girth cables might have been popular with some in the 1970s but it never was a good look, especially in bijou British homes. Even with the benefit of the typical American rumpus space, it is not an arrangement that shouts sophistication at a 'normal', non-audiophile visitor. Furthermore, the falling from favour of mechanical replay devices – CD, cassette, vinyl, and DAB's dismatisation of radio – greatly expands the potential for these devices. They have progressed from their early iterations, as the Linn Klassik, and the Arcam Solo, and now incorporate networked audio technologies – streaming, computer-audio and internet radio – along with far more advanced amplification than before, enabling them to be successful partners with more demanding and revealing loudspeakers.

The SuperUniti is Naim Audio's latest stab at a 'melting pot' product. The new all-in-one design is essentially the result of a meeting between the UnitiQute network audio player and the SUPERNAIT integrated amplifier with a handful of additional facilities and features. The original NaimUniti incorporated a CD player; however, the SuperUniti does not, lest the name indicates it might. Perhaps SuperQute might have made a more appropriate name...

Enclosed in its full-width Naim Reference casework, the SuperUniti contains a 24-bit/192 kHz streaming digital media player, a USB media player, a multi-format radio receiver that includes internet radio, iPod connectivity, a high-res 24/192 DAC, and an 80W (into eight Ohms) stereo amplifier. ►

“The SuperUniti is Naim Audio’s latest stab at a ‘melting pot’ product. The new all-in-one design is essentially the result of a meeting between the UnitiQute network audio player and the SUPERNAIT integrated amp.”



► The SuperUniti will stream up to 24-bit/192 kHz audio files from a UPnP server installed on a hard disk server, laptop or desktop computer, or Network Attached Storage, provided that the files are in an appropriate format: FLAC, WAV, AIFF, MP3, Windows Media, and Apple Lossless, AAC, and Ogg Vorbis are all supported. Though why anyone would spend this much money on a device and then play MP3s on it is completely beyond my comprehension.

As a Uniti family product the device appeals not only to hardened Naim fans but to a whole new range of customers – people who might not relish multi-enclosure systems knotted together with kilometres of cable just so that they can listen to a few tunes. So the SuperUniti faces a tough task: delivering recognisably Naim standard performance, and providing the type of convenience buyers might attain with any other brand of network audio player and integrated amplifier. (To be honest, the only true, level-playing-field competitor here seems to me to be the Linn Majik DS-M, to which I was listening only a month ago.)

SuperUniti convenience, as far as I am concerned, comes primarily through the free n-Stream app for iPads and iOS devices that allows you to flick through your musical library quite effortlessly and build playlists should you so wish. It will also perform gapless playback with appropriate rips. Please note that I loathe the iPad but I have to admit that there is no better way to operate a Naim streaming device of which I know.

The SuperUniti can, if the buyer wants convenience above all, be used wirelessly: there is even an accessory antenna available that delivers 5dB additional gain for improved performance with Uniti family devices. Regardless, if you want the finest performance use a decent quality Cat6 patch lead for connection to your network, particularly if you wish to exploit the SU's hi-definition capabilities. (Be sure the connection between the SU and your NAS/music storage device is unshielded CAT6 from end to end.)

Before getting involved with the network side of its performance, let us consider its more fundamental capabilities as an amplifier. Its performance, the company

says, is reference level... something along the lines of the SUPERNAIT. This integrated has proven to me that it is more than up to the task of driving 'difficult' loudspeakers with total disdain: its 80W output becomes 120W at 4 Ohms and the amplifier, more importantly, can deliver current by the bucket load when required. It is certainly not one of those amplifiers that struggles for breath when faced with the loudspeaker equivalent of a steep incline: it simply carries on sounding totally composed and unflustered. The SuperUniti mirrors that performance closely and under normal listening the amplifier sounds as though it is barely ticking over, even at respectable listening levels appropriate for bands such as Staind. I used it successfully with a variety of speakers from Focal, NEAT and PMC.

The sound of the SuperUniti is refined, polished and communicative even when it was pushed hard. After a long session driving the NEAT XLS to respectable levels with a selection of album rips by Echo and the Bunnymen, the aluminium casework was warm to the touch yet the sound betrayed no sense of strain or distortion: it stayed as clean as when the session began despite the increased volume level. And increasing the volume level is something that is hard to resist with the SuperUniti, given the way the device draws the listener into the performance and renders the impact of music so stunningly visceral.

For example, the intensely rich way that the SuperUniti presents tonal colour and instrumental texture, along with the stable, deep soundstage the unit creates, makes music a tangible solid entity rather than the insubstantial, wispy, vapid creation that some hi-fi systems attempt to pass off as a performance. The Vivid Curve album *Live at Edgefield*, played through the SuperUniti/XLS combination, saw the band live up to the vivid part of its name with iridescent, natural colour and texture present on the didgeridoo and percussive elements on the track 'White Ochre'. The power, intensity and sheer believability of those instruments hovering between the NEATs – not to mention the embouchure of the player modulating the timbre of the didgeridoo wildly being made so overtly apparent – was literally breath-taking.



Equally splendid was the way the combination portrayed the vocal prowess of Alison Krauss and the superb accompaniment of her band, Union Station on the album *Paper Airplane*. Her voice was as sweet and detailed as could be, yet delicate and full of emotive energy. It was also communicative and extraordinarily sensual, given an appropriate song, such as 'My Love Follows Where You Go'.

The ability of the SuperUniti to generate an emotional connection with a performer was also demonstrated with its rendition of tracks by psychobilly act, Webb Wilder and the Beatnecks. It truly conveyed the Texas bar room energy of this extraordinarily tight band with ease and conviction. And it certainly conveyed the pathetic humour of 'Nashville Bum' ('I look good in cowboy clothes... and I sing through my nose...') The SU and NEATs truly relished the rhythmic drive of the bass guitar and drums, conveying all their urgency and drive, topping it off with the abrasive leading edge attack of Wilder's guitar. It capably demonstrated that it could instantly transport the listener from his cosy country lounge to a rowdy Texas road-house (If it could only change one's cup of tea into a bottle of Michelob, the transition would be faultless).

I am gradually realising the true appeal of these new all-in-ones. I have been using a NaimUniti and, more recently, a UnitiQute as the mainstay of my office system driving NEAT lota loudspeakers. Both have been and are excellent in such a role: either will accept the input from my PC soundcard and iDock along with USB connections and a network connection giving UPnP access to music and internet radio. I can see the appeal of these devices as a replacement for a regular hi-fi set-up, and not just in a 'second' system, especially now that their performance has been elevated to such musically rewarding levels. While the SuperUniti would not be capable of seeing off my regular full-size Naim/NEAT system, it certainly would not be completely embarrassed put alongside it. I doubt I could have said the same a decade ago when all-in-ones were decidedly the poor relation of 'proper' high fidelity. With the arrival of the SuperUniti that is most certainly no longer the case. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Single-box streaming device.

Analogue Inputs: 1 x 5-pin DIN, 2 x RCA pair, 1 x 3.5 mm front panel jack

Digital Inputs: 6 x S/PDIF (1 x coaxial BNC, 1 x coaxial RCA, 3 x optical Toslink, 1 x 3.5mm front panel mini-Toslink)

Sample Rates Maximum: 192kHz (coaxial) 96kHz (optical)

UPnP input: Ethernet (RJ45), Wi-Fi

USB/iPod input: Front panel USB (type A)

iRadio input: Ethernet (RJ45), Wi-Fi

Audio Formats Supported: WAV and AIFF (up to 32-bit/192 kHz) FLAC (up to 24bit/192 kHz) ALAC (up to 24-bit/96kHz) WMA (up to 16-bit/48kHz). Ogg Vorbis (up to 16-bit/48kHz) MP3 and M4a (up to 320kbps) WMA, MP3, MMS.

Output Power: 80 wats per channel into 8 ohms.

Analogue Outputs: Preamp out (4-pin DIN), Subwoofer out (RCA pair)

Digital Outputs: S/PDIF (coaxial BNC 75 ohms)

Dimensions: 87 x 432 x 314mm

Weight: 12.8 kg

Price: £3,250

Manufactured by: Naim Audio, Southampton Road, Salisbury, SP1 2LN, UK

URL: www.naim-audio.com

Tel: +44(0) 1722 426 600

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Nordost White Lightning Anniversary

By Alan Sircom

White Lightning Anniversary has the toughest job in the Nordost catalogue, because it wears more hats than the brand's other cables. The suffix 'Anniversary' is there for a reason. White Lightning is the spiritual heir to the original Flatline speaker cable from 20 years ago. Flatline needed big shoulders, because it revolutionised loudspeaker cables and was the foundation stone for everything Nordost stands for today. White Lightning Anniversary shoulders its own burden, but in a very different way.

The starting place in the Leif cable range, White Lightning represents the first analogue interconnect and loudspeaker cable in Nordost's line-up that is likely to be demonstrated as a product in its own right, which means it's likely to be presented both to those who are currently sceptical of the significance of cables in general, and those who 'get the cable thing' and are wanting to check out what Nordost does. As such, White Lightning is likely to end up in the widest range of systems, both in cost and performance terms. If it succeeds, it opens some minds to the importance of cables and Nordost's design ethos. If it fails, it turns sceptics into cynics and pushes people away from more up-scale Leif, Norse 2 or even Odin solutions. It must also be able to be good enough in its own right to be the end-point for some, and the jumping off point for the true seeker. That's a lot of responsibility for one family of cables.



Both interconnect and speaker cable feature silver-plated 99.9999% purity, oxygen-free copper solid-core conductors in an FEP (Fluorinated Ethylene Propylene) insulation. The loudspeaker cable uses ten 16 AWG conductors in its construction and the interconnect features four sets of 26 AWG, fully shielded by a braid with 95% coverage. In creating the new Leif range, the company has paid obsessive-compulsive levels of attention to the connections, geometry and configuration of these cables, to round up and eliminate any subversive elements, including padding in the interconnect, stray dielectric effects in the loudspeaker cable and other enemies of SMERSH.

All of which looks good on paper, but is functionally meaningless if it does not translate to the way the cables perform in a system. Fortunately, it more than ticks that box too. Nordost recommends a thorough burn-in before serious listening, ideally by a dealer who has access to one of Nordost's own Vidar machines. I gave the cables a week under the cosh with a Blue Horizon Proburn burner-inner-thingy. I left one interconnect cable unburned for comparison purposes, and yes it makes a difference, to the point that if someone offers the service, jump at the chance.

Suitably burned in and plumbed into one of several different systems, it's clear White Lightning is more than up for the challenges it faces. It's like an aural accelerator, playing the leading edges of music with precision and speed of attack, as if the musician was unimpeded by the recording and replay processes. This is a common Nordost trait, and as you move up the ranges, this leading-edge delivery becomes increasingly more pronounced and almost uncanny. If you are used to the Nordost way of doing things, this is an immediately recognisable characteristic, which the White Lightning does extremely well

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▶ (albeit not to the standard anticipated by the monofilament wires). To the uninitiated, it's like your system just grew a supercharger. How to hear this in one easy lesson; play something with some urgent stick-work, such as the military-like opening to Art Blakey's 'Blues March' from his classic *Moanin'* album. Suddenly, the drumming becomes that bit more insistent and direct; Blakey never sounded tired, especially when playing this intro, but on White Lightning he's wired!

A lot of people mistakenly think because this excellent leading-edge performance so redolent of Nordost is the immediate impression, it's the only characteristic of the brand. White Lightning shows that thinking to be out of kilter. Ask any passing synth player; sounds have an attack, decay, sustain and release. How that ADSR envelope is built can define much of how things sound (the shape of the initial waveform and its subsequent harmonic and enharmonic structure being the other major components in the sound of sounds). And White Lightning approaches all these elements of a sound with exceptional even-handedness. There's no rosy glow to the sound, but neither is there an etched or bright presentation. The White Lightning sound is fluid, tightly coiled and exceptionally consistent. If you want to listen to your music as nature intended, White Lightning shows you how. And it really applies universally; from 'Photoshop Handsome' by Everything Everything to the Marriner/ASMF version of Barber's Adagio on Argo with touches of Little Walter, Rubén González and Al Green between the two. Best of all, the interconnect and speaker cables behave in an almost identical manner, to the point where breaking up the band would be a travesty.

Chris Thomas – in his review of Blue Heaven in issue 87 – pointed to something that I think is key to the White Lightning sound. He noted a shift to making the Nordost sound a little bit sweeter and possessed of an even tonal balance, and that's precisely what happens here. The old Flatline and Flatline Gold of 20 years ago were fast and furious, but with the prevailing zingy sound of metal domes of the time, could be edgy. Many came to like that sound, but it wasn't as accurate as this is.

You could think of this as Nordost, only smaller. It delivers all the fundamental qualities of openness, naturalness and speed of attack as its bigger brothers, just not to the same degree of explicitness. It's in the soundstaging that you can see where your extra money goes as you climb the range. It's lacking that expansive width and depth that typifies Nordost's upper slopes. This is still a good cable for those after image depth and height, it's just that it paints more 'rolling hills' than 'mountain ranges'.

Like the new Blue Heaven, White Lightning Anniversary manages to harness the transient delivery common to all Nordost cables with the broadband natural performance that was hitherto the domain of the brand's big guns. That alone will win friends. That it doesn't have the expanse of sound you get from further up the ranges is understandable and more than acceptable under the circumstances.

In short, White Lightning Anniversary is Leif affirming! +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Nordost White Lightning Anniversary Leif Series interconnects

Capacitance: 43.0pF/ft

Inductance: 0.046μH/ft

Price: 1.0m pair - £125

Nordost White Lightning Anniversary Leif Series loudspeaker cables

Capacitance: 8.7pF/ft

Inductance: 0.18μH/ft

Price: 5.0m terminated pair - £375

Manufactured by: Nordost Corporation, USA.

URL: www.nordost.com

UK Distributor: Atacama Audio

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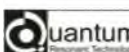
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Guru QM10two

By Jason Kennedy

Three years back, I wrote about the original Guru QM10 in fairly glowing terms. It was a charming and stylish speaker of a distinctly different hue to the average aspirational standmount. The only real shortcoming that I found with it was limited power handling: it worked well in normal UK living rooms but not in larger ones, because the tweeter was not up to the job of moving that much air. It would seem that I was not alone in this finding as the new version of the QM10, aptly named QM10two, has a more conventional soft dome tweeter that allows the whole speaker to work in spaces both large and small.

The QM10two retains its predecessor's squat MDF cabinet, a box whose post formed corners and the radius on the slot shaped port are CNC machined in order to produce the pleasingly modern shape. It's still uncommonly wide for its height and sits on cylindrical foam feet; these are intended to float the speaker on its stand and represent the opposite approach to spikes, or even Blu-tack. This decoupling was used in order to reduce resonances in the speaker, and the speaker's designer Ingvar Öhman considers spikes introduce excess mechanical tension into the cabinet, which cause distortion and induce resonance in the supporting stand and floor.

There is now a dedicated Atacama built stand for the QM10 with outriggers and wells for the foam feet, alternatively you can use a stand with a large top plate or an intermediary wooden plate as was the case with the old QM10.

The new tweeter is still smaller than usual at 20.5mm and is horn loaded to aid efficiency, but looks rather more capable than the tiny driver it replaced. Between tweeter and mid/bass is a small hole that hides a LED. This indicates the speaker is being driven into overload between 30Hz and 5kHz, a range covered by both drive units. I've not managed to push it hard enough to see this in action but can imagine that it might have its benefits in some situations.

It's coupled with a 100mm bass cone made of mineral fibre that is coated and textured so that it looks like a weave. The crossover is arranged so that both tweeter and woofer overlap from two to five kilohertz, a very unusual arrangement that explains some of this speaker's sonic character. Both drivers are set in an aluminium mounting that ties them together aesthetically, it's horizontal brush marks providing a contrast with the very shiny finish of the woodwork. This is of a piano finish that can be black, white or even red if you're of a brave persuasion. Or a Ferrari nut.

Another aluminium plate is inset into the top of the box where it provides extra stiffness and a more robust finish for the many items that such a useful flat space might invite in the home. It's not quite LP sized, but it's close enough. The top plate is brand marked with the company logo, but there is absolutely no indication of the model name anywhere on the speaker. The back panel is another piece of brushed and anodised aluminium with one pair of terminals for 4mm plugs only.

Guru offers unusually specific set up notes for the QM10two, stating that it should be close to the wall and toed in so that you can just see the outside edges of each cabinet. However, it also says that you should sit 1.2x the distance between the speakers away from them, which is less easily accommodated. Guru also encourages you to use plenty of damping in the room in order to cut down on reflections, it also sticks with its original suggestion of placing a coffee in front of the listener, for sonic as well as beverage and foot support purposes.

The QM10two shares many qualities with its predecessor, not least being a very strong sense of pace; whether the tempo is fast or slow, this characteristic is always evident. It has the effect of making pretty much everything you play more thrilling and

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'Very refreshing to find a speaker with
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▶ engaging. Naturally the more upbeat pieces provoke the greatest excitement but even in mellow numbers, it's a joy to appreciate the beat. Samuel Yirga's *Habasha Sessions* feature radiant piano playing from this young Ethiopian, he uses variations in tempo and dynamics to bring the music to life and you can fully appreciate how finely he has honed his skill with the QM10two.

It's not the most tonally neutral of speakers, but its colorations are not extreme and don't take long to accommodate, largely because of an effusiveness that is contagious. The way that these speakers can throw out a voluminous and expansive soundstage, one that is richly populated with juicy sounding instruments, makes it very hard to remain neutral yourself. The bass is deeper than expected – if not totally even – and the midrange has some audible peaks, but these don't get in the way of the music. The quality of communication is extremely high, thanks to good dynamics and the aforementioned timing skills. This, combined with above average transparency, delivers the sort of sound that I can listen to for hours without tiring.

Sensitivity is specified as 87dB and this coupled with an impedance that doesn't drop below 4.5 ohms, which means that the QM10two isn't particularly power hungry. It worked well with a 50 watt, Class A set of Valvet A3.5 monoblocks, but also proved to be a good match with a Leema Lucana integrated that has considerably more power on tap. The latter naturally let the speaker produce the tightest bass, which translated into greater pace, but the Class A's finesse was equally evident and worked very well with acoustic music. This pairing revelled in the bodacious production of Massive Attack's *Heligoland*, delivering a full-figured and dynamic soundstage that, while not perhaps as precise as more neutral speakers, is very true to the spirit of the music – energy being the key quality on this occasion; that and dark rumbling bass. This band are nothing if not shoe-gazers of the cup half empty persuasion. They do a great line in low frequency pulsing and this compact

speaker's apparent hump in the low bass does this wub-wub-wubbiness more justice than you might expect.

Next to B&W's comparatively priced PM1 standmount, the QM10two's tonal idiosyncrasies are more obvious... but so is their speed. Naim's recent 24/192 remaster of Antonio Forcione's *Meeting in London* has some very nimble fingerwork. At one point in the song 'Take 5', where one guitar solos while another provides rhythm, it's easy to appreciate the fluidity and precision of the playing from both instruments. This album's saving grace however is the contribution of Sabina Sciubba, whose delicious voice brings light and fun to the music, leavening guitar-work which is not always sufficient diversion from one's troubles and cares.

For a bit of fun I also hooked these speakers up to a Shindo Labs Appetite integrated valve amplifier. This is neither a powerhouse nor a particularly neutral 6V6 push-pull device, but it shares many of the same qualities as the Guru. The combination delivers even greater deviation from the tonal norm; female voice is strangely aerated, but the effect on the music is to introduce a tight but loose quality that's strangely appealing. There's plenty of punch ▶

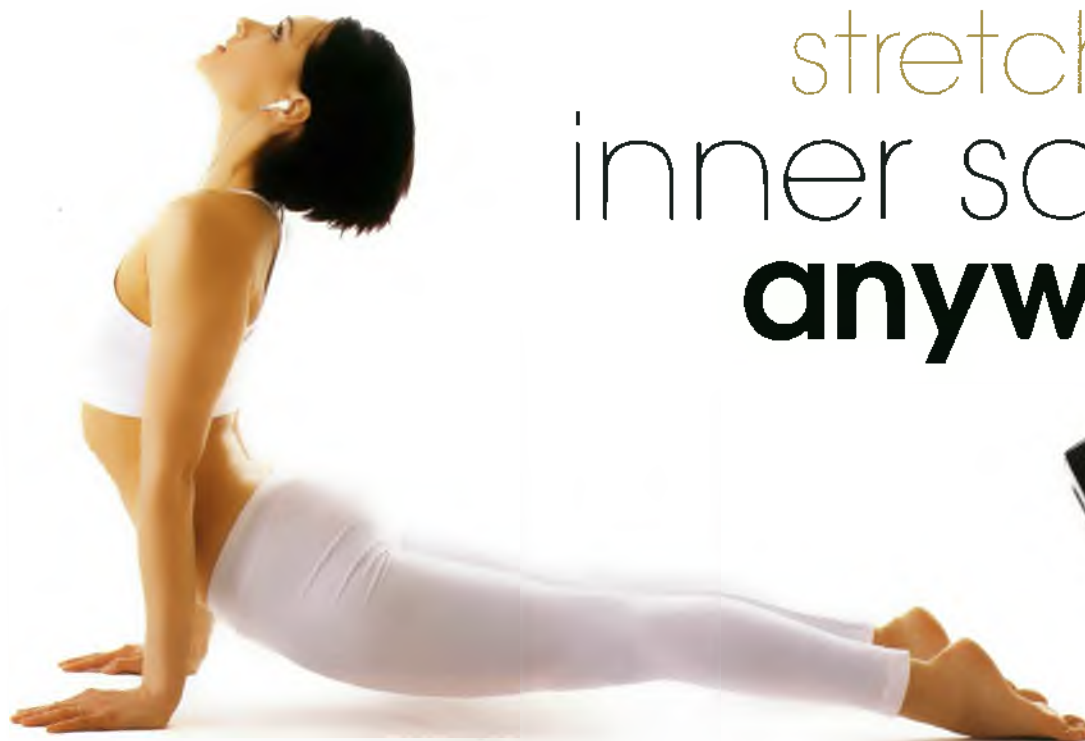
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► to kick drums and a great sense of pace. Meshell Ndegeocel's bass playing oozing from the speakers like hot liquorice. It's the sort of sound that puts one in mind of hoppy bitter or full bodied claret, rich and chewy if not particularly healthy. However if you want to enjoy the music rather than try and establish precisely what type of plectrum the guitar player is using, it's a combo I can recommend.

All too often we can get carried away with wringing the last ounce of resolution out of the system and this process takes us away from the purpose of the pursuit which is surely the appreciation of music. One reason for hi-fi's demise in the public consciousness is that enthusiasts and manufacturers emphasise the technical over the pleasure. The key quality that good audio hardware brings to our lives is that it maintains our interest in music, something that many seem to lose as they get older. With products like the Guru QM10two, which not only brings the music to life but looks good enough for the style conscious to put in their living rooms, there is the potential to bring those who think that home entertainment has to be on a screen back to the higher plane of music. In other words this is an inspiring speaker, check it out. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Size HxWxD: 232x300x252mm

Weight: 6kg

Treble driver: 20.5mm soft dome
tweeter

Bass driver: 102mm mineral fibre cone

Sensitivity: 87dB

Impedance: 5 ohms

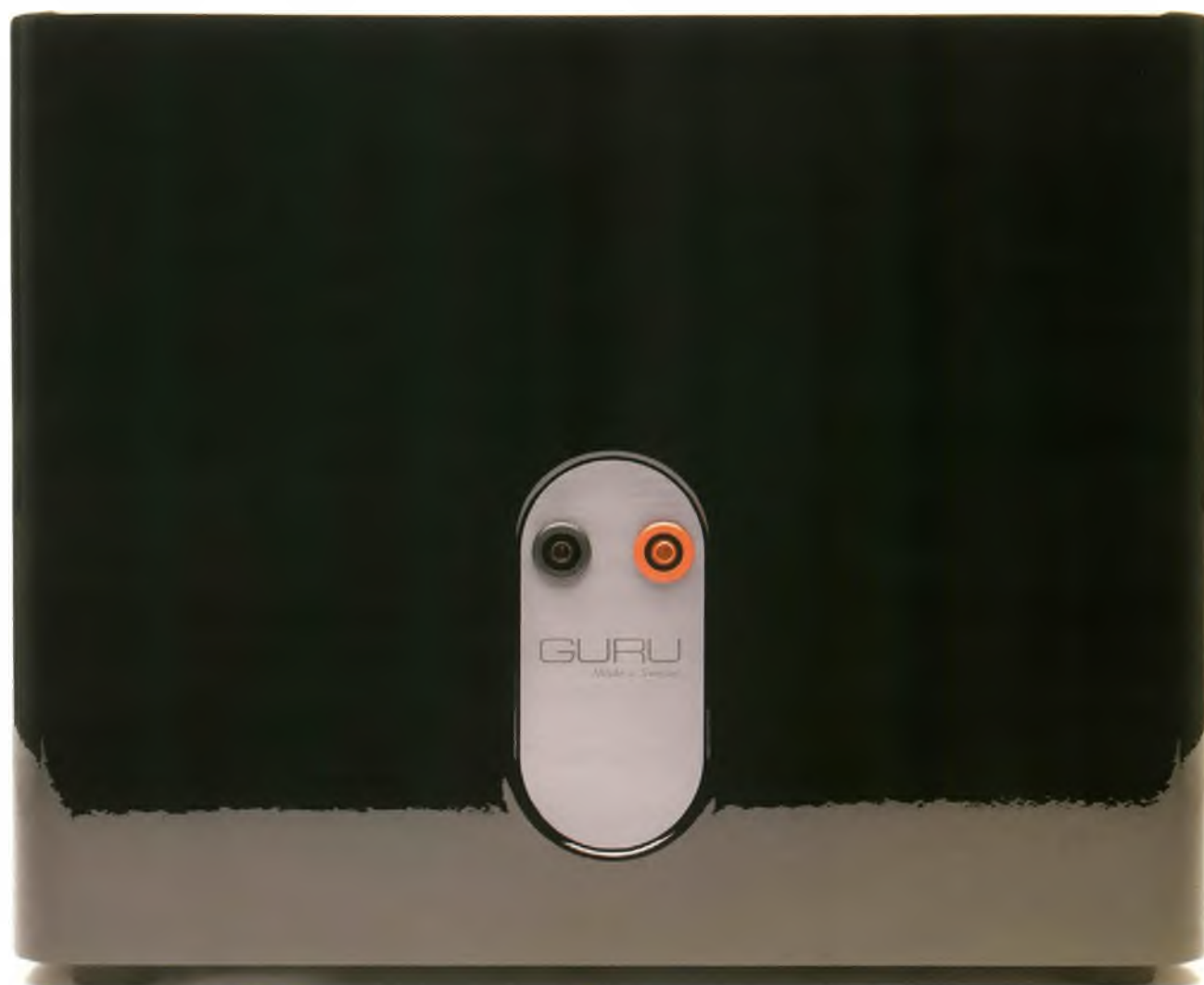
Finishes: black, white & red piano
lacquer

Price: £1,795 per pair

Distributed by: Tom Tom Audio

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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.



What do you listen to? If your system beguiled at first, but now proves tiring over an evening's listening, why not give us a call? We can arrange for an audition either here at Cool Gales or in your home. For more information, reviews, and brochure downloads, visit www.coolgales.com/artemislabs

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PMC Twenty.21 standmount loudspeakers

By Alan Sircom

The Twenty series – developed to mark PMC's 20 years in the speaker business – are proving extremely popular round these parts. The elegant Twenty.24 is one of the best floorstanders (reviewed in issue 86) you can get for the money, but what if you have neither the money nor the room to house a set of tall tower speakers?

The PMC Twenty.21 is at the opening end of the Twenty range. It's the smallest bookshelf in the series, a two-way transmission line design that has a very narrow front baffle and a five-degree back-swept demeanour for both style and time alignment. The Twenty series is something of a departure for PMC. Like the Fact range before it, the Twenty series is the first to be designed from the ground up as a domestic model. It's voiced more for home audio instead of studio requirements, with an accent on 'musicality' as well as common elements like low distortion.

Twenty is a 'clean sheet' design, although it builds on PMC's strengths. No components used in the Twenty series feature in any other PMC speaker. Pete Thomas, chief designer of PMC, is a strong supporter of the transmission line, a

method of channeling bass through what is effectively a labyrinthine and damped tunnel. This bass emerges at the large vent at the front of the loudspeaker effectively as a second bass driver. Not only does this mean extra bass for any given loudspeaker drive unit size, it gives a constant air loading so the driver is less likely to distort at any given frequency. PMC's Advanced Transmission Line is the latest and greatest expression of this design.

The drivers are PMC specific.

The 27mm Sonolox soft dome tweeter ►

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“It’s a good, honest loudspeaker that makes an excellent sound that will appeal to the maximum number of people today.”

► is a design specially made for the company by SEAS, while the M13 140mm bass driver is also made to PMC’s spec. It’s a doped paper cone, built into a cast alloy chassis. These are not earth-shattering speaker driver designs, just good, solid and well-built drive units, built to a high standard. They are connected via a 24dB/octave crossover, which ends in bi-wire terminals.

The cabinet itself is also good, solid stuff; 18mm thick MDF to be specific. With all the internal chambering that goes into a transmission line (also 18mm MDF), the speaker has no need for internal cross-bracing, and the cabinet is very dead to the knuckles. It comes in a choice of three wood finishes and a rich ‘diamond black’ gloss, which really looks the part. The grilles are magnetically attached so if you decide to go grille-free (and you probably should), there are no ugly holes staring back at you.

Even the stand is thought through properly. The top-plate is actually two top plates, with some constrained layer damping material (technical term: goo) between them. It’s spiked at the bottom and comes with two hollow uprights; the front can be filled, the rear has holes for cable management. The stand is not a mandatory element in the PMC design, but it’s an ideal (and reasonably elegant) first choice.

The thing is, this is an easy loudspeaker to love. It’s small enough and efficient enough to drive to make it a neat fit into some relatively humble systems in some exceptionally small spaces, yet throws out a deceptively big

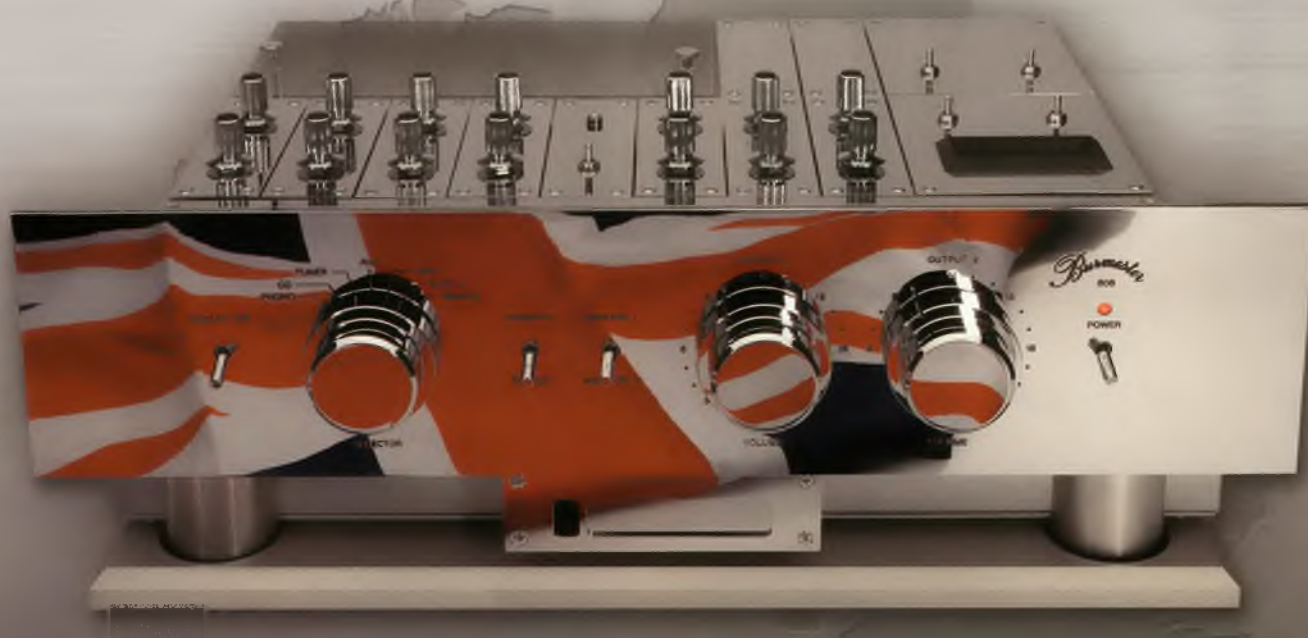
sound for the size of speaker. They perhaps lack the sort of bare-boned transparency of the studio-derived PMC models, but that only tends to be better for making these loudspeakers more popular in the home.

It’s also a very forgiving speaker in terms of positioning and room treatment. Yes, the more obsessive you are about these things, the better the end result, but the speaker isn’t that fussy. Just get the speakers mildly toed in, level and a foot or so from the rear wall, things will be peachy. The stands allow a degree of fine tuning of sound by filling the front-most pillar with silver sand or kitty litter, a big room needs that front tube perhaps a third full, a box room almost two-thirds full, but even this has a lot of wiggle room. And as for loudspeaker cables, simple is often best. This isn’t the most system-revealing loudspeaker out there; if you are a wannabe CD player designer, this speaker won’t tell you all you ever wanted about the sound of the player, just the tracks being played through it.

Perhaps as a consequence, it happens to tick most of the boxes for all the sub-genre of hi-fi enthusiast. The ‘PRaTtlers’ will like it because it ‘times’, keeping the tempo of music structurally intact, while ‘absolute sounders’ will praise it for its ability to resolve the voices and the ambience in a choral piece. Those who are determined to see music replay drawn down to a science project will like the way PMC’s pro background has not been compromised in the 21, while those wanting loudspeakers built by elven folk will find something to love. OK, so if you are so militantly attached to one of these audio personality types that you find yourself constantly reliving the “Are you the Judean People’s Front?” scene from *Life of Brian* in forums, you’ll probably put the Twenty.21 second on the list, and those in love with horns, electrostats, single-ended triodes or the endless swapping of boxes will find another option. But this was never the speaker for the audiophool; it’s a good, honest loudspeaker that makes an excellent sound that will appeal to the maximum number of people today. Easy to say, hard to do and even harder to find in the wild. ►

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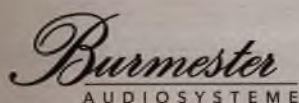
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► Audiophile reviews demand musical examples, but when a speaker is really good, these become almost redundant. A good speaker displays that quality in every sound it serves up. However, there is an acid test of every loudspeaker that seldom gets talked about... talking. The human voice is a pig to reproduce well, because our ears are so attuned to its sound. A useful and potentially speaker-crushing test is to record the voice of someone you know well (not your own voice, it will sound different to you) and play it back through the system. If you can't do this, try listening to the news or talk radio (especially BBC Radio Four's *Today Programme* or *PM*). And the Twenty.21 passes this test perfectly, making both an articulate and honest representation of male and female voices. The speakers have a clarity on vocals that gives a sense of naturalness, which is surprisingly rare.

Of course, there's more to sound than speech, and the Twenty.21 nails the music well too. And it's here where the usual laundry list of good tracks becomes almost pointless. Play some classical music and you'll think this speaker was made for classical music. Do the same with Jazz and you'll think Pete Thomas spends his life listening to Louis Armstrong and Miles Davis. Play rock and you'll think Jimmy Page or Jack White signed off the design. Play funk and... oh, you get the picture. It's a surprisingly big sound with excellent stereo, but what draws you in is just how much you get from the music through these speakers.

There is one musical point worth making though. Unlike its studio-derived brothers, the Twenty.21 is slightly more forgiving of recording quality, but it doesn't suffer compressed fools gladly. Play some squidged and turned up, everything-louder-than-everything-else signal compressed recording and the PMCs portray that with unflinching honesty. It will make the best of a bad job, but you will still hear a loud and thin sound. I'd rather that than compromise good music in the process though.

Coming hot on the heels of the big Magico Q1, I expected a period of readjustment, and some disappointment during the handover period. OK, so the Q1 has a good octave or so on the Twenty.21, and the sound 'disappears' far better with the Q1 (especially in the lower registers), but the interesting part was just how close the two come in fundamental terms. OK, so the

price multiplier that comes with the Magico question does resolve into a considerably better loudspeaker in virtually every way: you can see and hear where the money goes, right down to the speaker terminals. But the Twenty.21 does a lot of the same 'right' as the Q1, too.

Not every music lover has a huge listening room; especially in the UK, where small family homes mean small family rooms and dedicated rooms are rare. The PMC Twenty.21 cuts through the room size and delivers big room sound without the big room, and without the big room costs. Thoroughly recommended, if you like listening to music! +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Drive Units: LF PMC twenty series, lightweight doped 140mm cone with cast alloy chassis, HF PMC/SEAS®, 27mm twenty series, SONOLEX™ soft dome, Ferrofluid cooled
Effective ATL™ Length: 1.72m
Frequency Response: 50Hz – 25kHz
Crossover Frequency: 1.8kHz
Sensitivity: 87dB 1w 1m
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Input Connectors: 2 pairs 4mm sockets (Bi-amp or Bi-wire)
Dimensions (HxWxD): 32.5 × 15.2 × 27.7cm (+6mm grille)
Weight: 5kg
Available Finishes: Walnut, Amarone, Diamond Black, Oak

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Tube Amplifier Company C-60 CD player and V-60 amplifier

By Alan Sircom

The transcontinental design, manufacturer and shipping of products can get a bit weird at times. These are European designs by the Vincent people in Germany, made in China by the Tube Amplifier Company people to be shipped as either as Vincent or T.A.C., depending on the country into which they are sold. Here in the UK, the company that distributes Vincent distributes this pair, so naturally they are given the T.A.C. moniker. Simple, isn't it?

Actually, the deeper reason is this is the flagship pairing of the Vincent/T.A.C. duo. In countries where Vincent is well established, the duo tend to have a Vincent name tag. But here in the UK, where Vincent's profile is not so high, it ends up a T.A.C.

Regardless, the V-60 integrated amplifier came first, followed by a (physically and sonically) matching C-60 hybrid HDCD-

chummy CD player. So, it's fitting to start at the beginning. The all tube V-60 is a 'fuss-free, albeit heavy, integrated valve amp. With eight 6CA7 (that's 'beefed up EL34' in Cyrillic), it can deliver 60W per channel, fed by 6CG7s acting as cathode followers and a pair of 6922s in the input stage itself. All the tubes are built-tough Russian samples, and the amp auto-biases, so no fiddling around the tube-protecting top plate. You can almost judge a tube amp by its weight, such is the importance of the transformers in valve designs, and this one has clearly got things right.

It couldn't be simpler to use. There are four and eight ohm taps on the rear; plug your speakers into what you think sounds the nicest if you are confused or concerned. The button on the front left turns the thing on and off. Next to that is a light that tells you the amp is warming up when first turned on. Next to that are a series of source selector LEDs, there's a big volume dial in the middle and a channel change button on the far right. These are echoed in the remote. Easy, fuss-free valves, the way they used to be when transistors were just a twinkle in their designer's substrate.

The V-60 is joined by the matching C-60, which reads like it should be a cassette recorder but is in fact a CD player. A top-loader, the C-60 sports a Burr-Brown 1792 24-bit, 192kHz decoder chip fed by a hybrid power supply (sporting a 6Z4 rectifier) and a tubular output stage featuring a pair of 6922 double-triodes. The valve output stage is not uncommon these days (even ▶

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Alan Sircom hifi+ 87

FUOCO Sondoro integrated amplifier



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► Rega uses one on its Isis variant), but extending the tube roll-out to a regulator in the power supply is rare in a digital product.

The C-60 has the option of a FET or a tube output stage. It would be easy to dismiss one or other option out of hand depending on your personal preference, but it isn't quite as easy as that. In test, both through the V-60 and through other pre and power combos, they sounded identical. Not similar... the same. It turns out that it appears the FET buffered output stage is also voiced to sound like the tubes, it's just there for those rare high input impedance amplifier inputs that need some 'extra added'. It's also louder, so it might be worth ensuring your preamp has enough headroom should you take things off piste and go with an alternative amplifier. The C-60 does have balanced output, even if the V-60 does not, and the controls are divided between the front and top plates, but are big and friendly.

What's really clever about this pairing is the visual styling. Each is designed to echo the other, and they stack really well together. Of course, if separated, the effect is lessened, but I think the compact, rounded off square design will prove visually appealing to a relatively wide audience, and it's a heck of a lot better than just yet another standard black box. Heat is likely a consideration; the C-60 directly on top of the V-60 gets warm fast. But T.A.C./Vincent seems assured there's no real risks involved.

In a way, it's best to look at the two as a complete entity. Taken separately they have their places, but the combination is stronger than the individual parts. Nevertheless, what's really good about the amplifier is it's not the sort of valve wuss that runs from the task of driving a set of loudspeakers. It grips speakers traditionally not normally associated with tube use (Monitor Audio for example) without the least complaint or difficulty. And it drives them surprisingly loud.

It's the valve amp for those who are ambivalent toward valves. It's not 'lush' or 'warm' or 'euphonic', but neither is it too 'lean' or 'stark' sounding, like a child's impression of how solid state might sound. It exists somewhere between the two; a good, brooding bass (the nearest the V-60 gets to showing its valve-y colours) an open and inviting midrange, an extended treble that has none of the rolled-off smoothness of valves nor the glassiness of solid-state.

It also presents a very big sound, throwing out a large, voluminous soundstage, perhaps even bigger than the music playing through it. You'll never want for ambience in the V-60; even close mic'd voices (like the Richard Burton intro to *The War of the Worlds*) end up being so full of large, you start to think like an orthodontist. It's a very cogent and coherent soundstage – you really hear the interplay in a jazz trio for example – but a damn big one.

The amplifier (in its Vincent livery) received an Editor's Choice this year from our sister title *The Absolute Sound*, and in some ways, this highlights the difference between European and American tastes. The big soundstage, the open and engaging midrange and the fluidity of the sound overall pushes all the buttons on that side of the pond. In Europe, however, we tend to favour a sound more taut and precise. And perhaps more up-front. Dynamics rather than micro-dynamics. A bit smaller scaled, but what goes on in that smaller horizon is densely packed.

That said, the V-60 does speak European languages almost as well as it copes with American English. It has all the precision and dynamics we like over here, too. It just does so in a big way. This works well, because you listen to the sound played through the V-60, pick up on elements that you find

“What’s really good about the amplifier is it’s not the sort of valve wuss that runs from the task of driving a set of loudspeakers.”



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

C-60

Outputs: 2x XLR, 2x RCA, Coaxial digital, Toslink digital

DAC precision: 24-bit, 192kHz

Frequency response: 20Hz-20kHz
(+/-0.5 dB)

Total harmonic distortion: <0003 %
(20Hz-20kHz)

Dynamic Range: > 100 dB

Signal-to-Noise Ratio: >90dB

Channel Separation: >90dB

Maximum output: 2.5 V

Dimensions (WxHxD): 45xx11.8x39cm

Weight: 12 kg

V-60

Inputs: 4x RCA line

Nominal Output Power 4-8 Ohm: 60
Watt RMS

Frequency response: 20Hz - 40kHz (+/-1dB)

Input sensitivity: 300mV

Total harmonic distortion: <1.5% (1kHz, 1W)

Signal-to-Noise Ratio: >90dB

Input impedance: 47KOhm

Dimensions (WxHxD): 45x21.3x42cm

Weight: 34 kg

Price: £3,600 (C-60), £3,999 (V-60)

Manufactured by: Vincent/T.A.C

URL: www.vincent-tac.de

Distributed by: Classic HiFi

URL: www.classichifiuk.com

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appealing (and, let's face it, there are a lot of them) and largely filter out the rest. This is why it's the closest the valve community gets to creating an 'everyman' amplifier today; it still retains the sweet midrange, rich bass and refined treble that attracts people who like tubes today, yet has top end insight, midrange detail and bottom end grip that pushes the solid-state buttons. Of the two devices, it's definitely the star of the show.

The CD player is no slouch though and is a perfect match for the amplifier. It has the same large, open and fluid characteristics, but the overall presentation at first appears very slightly lean in the process. In fact, it's not at all lean; there's a lot of bass going on here, it's simply held in check for when it's required. Bass is orderly, and that helps bring the amplifier back in line with a possibly more European sound sensitivity (it doesn't through out a huge soundstage and there is a touch of sweetness to the detail). Ultimately the pair compliment one another well.

I'm not convinced the CD player is the most accurate one out there. Whether through tube or the FET buffer, the sound was always beguiling and front of house. Trouble is, there are sometimes that presentation isn't called for; Massive Attack's *Mezzanine* for example sounded forced and almost lost its way in the process. But, in fairness, you don't buy a be-valved CD player for its accuracy, do you?

This pairing is an oddity, but for all the right reasons. It does things backwards to conventional tubular thinking; it's normally the CD player that sounds solid-state and the amp that sounds tube-y. Here, it's closer to the other way round. Actually, that works; a bit like using a tube preamp and a solid-state power amp. You get some of the richness that valve-lovers demand, but all of the fuss-free clean performance of a solid-state device. The result is very satisfying nonetheless. +



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Ensemble Natura loudspeakers

By Alan Sircom

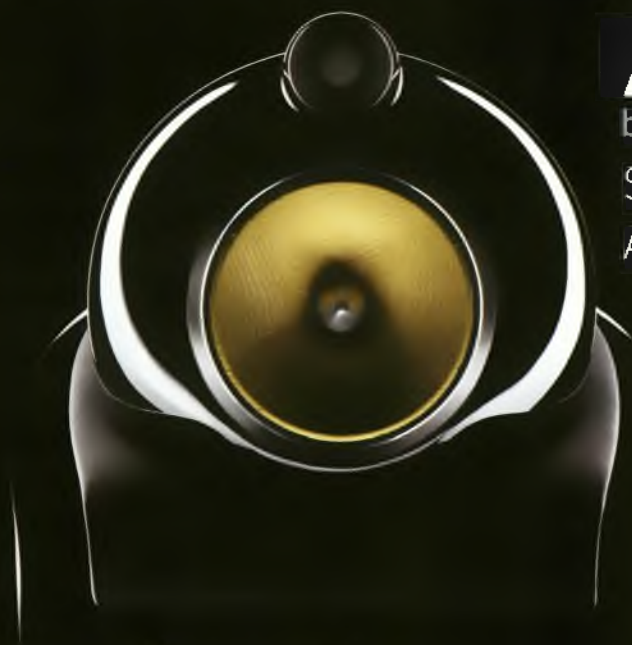
In the past, I've ripped into Ensemble's names, for no other reasons than sport and devilment. But when it comes to the Natura loudspeakers, it's humble pie time. I simply can't think of a better name to sum up one of the most natural sounding speakers around.

These two-way ported and backswept 'floorstanding' loudspeakers are masters of decoupling. The speakers sit on a base with four squidgy rubber feet and a constrained layer base plate, so no direct coupling there, but then the loudspeaker cabinet itself is internally further decoupled from the base. This means the loudspeaker cabinet itself is free to move around, nearly independent to the base. This can be disconcerting for people more accustomed to loudspeakers rooted in place with spikes and high mass, but it seems to give the Natura several important sonic benefits we'll discuss later.

The cabinet itself is a multi-layer aluminium sandwich arrangement, and Ensemble prefers the damping such an arrangement brings to overstuffing a speaker with wadding or long-haired wool. This means the cabinet is relatively lightweight (by audiophile standards), but surprisingly inert. The swept-back look helps to create both a natural time alignment and helps deal with some room acoustic properties (such as first reflections from the ceiling and floor).

The drivers are custom specified but not made from space age stuff; the 25mm fabric dome tweeter is notable in its deliberate lack of ferrofluid in the magnet gap, while the 180mm mid-bass cone is doped paper and custom made to Ensemble's specification. On the end of the phase cap,





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► there's a very small white foam pip topped with what looks like silver foil, and there's a felt over-baffle that visually connects woofer with tweeter. And at the rear are a couple of medium sized ports and the Ensemble-made connectors.

While I'm in humble pie eating mode, I've had something of a sea change about the Delrin-based Ensemble multi-way connectors. The Synergia posts take Ensemble's oversized 6mm banana plug in the centre hole, pull the spring-loaded white Delrin sleeve out and there's space for spade lugs. Unscrew the Delrin sleeve and you get access to a through the plug 4mm banana plug hole. Screw the Delrin sleeve back in and you can make them even grip bare wire. Ingenious? Perhaps, but practical certainly, although the Delrin itself can be slippery to gain purchase when scrabbling round the lower back of a loudspeaker. Behind the speaker terminals, the Ensemble custom devices continue with extensive use of Slinx Extrema cable, and Ensemble's own high-grade Procac capacitors (alongside air-cored inductors) in the minimal phase, minimal group delay crossover.

While an obvious partner for Ensemble's own Fuocco integrated amplifier, the Natura is in its comfort zone between 15-120Watts. With a modest six ohm minimum impedance and 87dB sensitivity, this doesn't call for a powerhouse to drive it, but it shouldn't be considered a speaker to be played at high volumes. If your tastes run all the way from AC to DC and like it loud, keep looking; the Natura isn't the speaker for you.

The speakers I received were well run in (they were the demonstrators used at Whittlebury Hall) so I have no idea whether they require a significant amount of time to warm up. They were finished in Ensemble's all-over silver-grey livery; an option of wood veneered side and rear panel is available. There is also an optional grille, with a little Ensemble logo



standing proud at the top, like a small Rolls-Royce Silver Lady but without the cool retraction device. The grilles come supplied with little grommets that fit around the holes so that the grille does not rattle or buzz and the grille itself is damped, but still... £325 for a pair of grilles is somewhat 'spendy', even in the context of a £12,800 loudspeaker.

That decoupling mentioned earlier has a significant advantage it seems. It makes the Natura one of the least room fussy loudspeakers around. Put it in a room not much bigger than the box it comes in and it sounds great. Put it in a barn of a room and it sounds great. Put them in a room that doesn't fit the profile (say, an L-shaped room, or something with an alcove) and they still sound pretty damn good. Just give them some space to the rear to let those ports breathe and try to have them form the bases of a triangle and everything is fine. This room independence is extremely good and uncanny. Yes, the more you can do to treat the room the better, but the Natura is a great loudspeaker for those who cannot add room acoustic treatment due to having to make domestic compromises. As in, any of us who have a shared listening room that doubles as a living space.

Now comes that name again... Natura. It fits so well, because this sounds remarkably natural. Natural, rather than neutral, although it makes a good stab at neutrality too. Like the Fuocco before it, there's something inherently 'healthy' sounding about the Natura, very much the perfect loudspeaker for lengthy listening of acoustic instruments in their own space.

The acoustic instruments lends itself toward classical and jazz recordings. Especially smaller orchestral and jazz combos. This is perhaps one of the best chamber music ►



"I found myself turning the music down; not because it was hard or aggressive, but because the music didn't need to be played that loud."

► loudspeakers I know of. The sense of interplay between instruments, and the flow they bring out of the music itself draws you deep into those wonderful Beethoven late string quartets by the Takács Quartet, on Decca. The sound fills the room well and gives a passable impression of there being four musicians in the room with you.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Two-way rear-ported loudspeaker

Drive Units: 1x non-ferrofluid 25mm fabric dome tweeter
1x 180mm custom built mid-bass drive unit

Connections: multi way Ensemble Synergia post single wired

Frequency Response: 33Hz-28kHz ± 3 dB

Impedance: minimum 6 ohms

Sensitivity: 87dB/W/m

Dimensions (WxHxD): 24x101.5x23.5cm

Weight: 34kg per speaker

Finish: body: all smoke silver or, optionally, smoke silver with wood veneered sides
baffle: dark flannel grey, high-gloss finish
footplate: smoke silver

Price: £12,800 per pair (grilles £325 per pair)

Manufactured by: Ensemble, Inc. Ltd.

URL: www.ensembleaudio.com

Tel: +41 61 461 9191

A curious by-product of my time with the Natura was the complete failure to need to turn the music up. If anything, I found myself turning the music down; not because it was hard or aggressive, but because the music didn't need to be played that loud. It was as if a noise floor had been lowered in the overall performance.

I seem to be making the implication – by mistake – that the speaker only shines on string quartets and 1950s jazz trios. This is not the case; it sounded powerful and scaled up well to accommodate a full symphony orchestra. Once again that sense of flow and lyricism shone out. The realistic scale of the string quartet does extend up to the full orchestra, although the Natura doesn't go for the holographic approach to soundstaging and it doesn't play for the instantly impressive dynamics. It just does the sound of an orchestra recreated naturally in room; a concert hall in microcosm.

But where it really came into its own was solo piano. This difficult instrument to reproduce is something of *bête noir* for most loudspeakers, but the Natura aced the test with ease. I played the Uchida version of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No 30 (Philips CD) and found the whole need for audio gratification just melt away. It sounded like music, and the sound was laid back and just breathed.

I found myself leaning heavily toward the classical and jazz ends of my collection and simply didn't play as much rock, pop or electronica when the Naturas were in my system. Not that it made these genre bad sounding; far from it in fact. It simply seemed that I got my fill of rock that bit quicker than usual through the Natura. On the other hand, the likes of Brahms or Chopin... well, I could sit and listen all day. I'm not sure why this was – I don't subscribe to the 'good for classical' argument and I think these speakers are universally good at everything they play – but the effect was clearly noticeable. Perhaps the loudspeaker creates a sophistication field that permeates the listener... not likely, but I've encountered more than my fair share of loudspeakers that create something closer to a zone of idiocy, so perhaps this isn't so crazy. It's not that rock was out of the question, but I did end up spending more time listening to music like Sylvia Plath by Ryan Adams rather than Public Enemy. I don't think the speaker filters your tastes, but because acoustic music sounds so sublime through the Naturas, you end up playing a lot of acoustic music.

The Ensemble Natura is a lovely speaker to sit in front of. Its room-escaping properties and relatively easy drive make it almost universally accessible and its sophisticated presentation makes it a noble way to migrate audiophiles into classical music lovers. +



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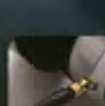
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Focal Spirit One Headphone/Headset

By Chris Martens

Any number of high-end loudspeaker manufacturers have entered, or contemplated entering, the high-performance headphone marketplace, and it is easy to understand why. For an entire generation of music enthusiasts, entry-level 'hi-fi' systems are now more likely to be based on headphones than on speakers. Recognising this trend the powerhouse French speaker maker Focal has now joined the ranks of latter day headphone manufacturers with its lovely new Spirit One headphone (£199)—a product that in many ways aims to embody the firm's sonic values and overall design aesthetic.

I first saw the then-unreleased Spirit One as a design study mock-up the 2011 CEDIA show, and from the outset I felt it was a bit of a sleek, European looker. I'm pleased to report that all the little textural details and nuanced design elements that made that initial static demo model look so cool have found their way into the full production model I now hold in my hands. But more importantly, the Spirit One captures a meaningful measure of the traditional Focal sound—a sound characterized by unforced natural warmth and a certain suave, sophisticated presentation.

I won't try to tell you that the Spirit One is the sonic equivalent of Focal's mighty (and mighty expensive) Grande Utopia EM flagship loudspeaker, which would be an implausible stretch. But, I will tell you the Spirit One might very well be the most appealing, accessible, and cost effective 'entry-level loudspeaker' that Focal makes. And that, as you'll see in a moment, is a very fine thing to be.

Features

- **Drivers:** The Spirit One features 40mm dynamic (that is, moving coil-type) drivers fitted with Mylar/titanium diaphragms.
- **Elegant, Euro-Styling:** The Spirit One is an unusually handsome headphone whose design plainly is the result of a great deal of careful thought. Visually, you are treated to a pleasing mix of subdued textures and colours, where the headband is finished in matte black, the frame finished in brushed silver ▶



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metal, and the ear cups are finished in matte black with a combination of brushed silver trim with tastefully restrained chrome accents. The look is modern, yet inviting—not overly angular or severe.

- Comfort-first design:** The Spirit One not only looks good but is also, very much by design, easy to adjust and extremely comfortable to wear. One deceptively simple but actually quite sophisticated feature involves the design of the headband and frame of the Spirit One. The centre section of the headband carries a thick pad and is fitted with sliding frames you can adjust to accommodate various head sizes and shapes. At the business ends of the frames, Focal provides hinged, articulated arms that carry the headphone's ear cups. The really clever part is that those articulated arms swivel in two axes (rotating side-to-side, and also moving inward and outward) to ensure the ear cups always align correctly with the contours/angles of the wearers' ears—something that can't always be said of competing headphones. The upshot is that the Spirit Ones are uncannily comfortable—not only when you first put them on, but for longer listening sessions.

- Compact, Closed-Back, Circumaural design:** Focal describes the Spirit One as a "closed back, circumaural" (that is, over-the-ear) headphone, but in truth it's not much larger than some of the on-ear 'phones we've sampled. The ear cups of the Spirit One are just large enough to fit around your ears, although those with larger ears might discover there's not an awful lot of extra room to spare. Nevertheless, the ear cups, which are fitted with padded leather ear pads are extremely comfortable and do a very good job of blocking out external noise. According to Focal, the various elements of the Spirit One's frame, ear cup, and ear cup pad designs combine to provide 18dB of passive noise attenuation.

- Made for iPod/iPhone/iPad design:** Recognizing that a very



large percentage of prospective customers have adopted Apple's ubiquitous iDevices as their source components of choice, Focal has fitted the Spirit One with a fabric clad, detachable signal cable that comes fitted with an Apple-compatible mic/remote control module (whose styling precisely matches that of the headphone). Smart accessories: The accessory pack for the Spirit One includes:

- A canvas clad, moulded, hard-shell carrying case with zipper closure.
- A fabric, drawstring-type carrying bag.
- The aforementioned detachable signal cable.
- An aeroplane adapter.
- A threaded 3.5mm mini-jack plug to ¼ phone jack plug adapter.
- A 3.5mm mini-jack male-to-female adapter cable.

Sonic character

Like many Focal loudspeakers, the Spirit One enchants—even seduces—the listener with its warm, natural-sounding, and wonderfully nuanced midrange. This isn't to suggest that midrange frequencies are the only thing the Spirit Ones do, but it is the part of the part of audio spectrum that these headphones handle with the greatest levels of refinement and panache. Some headphones suppress or "scoop" the mids to make bass and highs sound more spectacular or else press midrange frequencies forward for greater emphasis of vocals, ▶

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"These cans (HE-300) are an amazing value. The performance you get is really, really good. The fact that they can give you very respectable results from the HP jack on an iPod is just stunning." Keith Bertrand (keithpgdrb), Head-Fi.org



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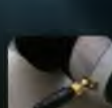
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► strings, brass and wind instruments and the like, but the Spirit Ones do neither of these things. Instead, they simply present the heart of the music in a natural and unforced way, conveying as much musical subtlety as the recording has to offer—all without exaggeration or over-dramatization.

Bass is also warmly voiced, powerful, and supplies a good amount of foundation mid-bass support, though it does—on some tracks and with some amplifiers or personal digital music players—have a slightly larger-than-life quality. Still, the good news is that the Spirit One's bass is never booming, billowy, or loose sounding. It exhibits good definition and transient speed even when driven directly from an iPod, and is capable of even higher resolution and better levels of low-frequency control when driven by a top-shelf portable amp such as the superb Ray Samuels SR-71B Blackbird.

Upper midrange frequencies and highs are reasonably clear, but may strike some headphone aficionados as being just slightly rolled off or perhaps a touch softly focused. But this, I think, is probably a wise design choice on Focal's part in that it makes the Spirit One more forgiving (or at least tolerant) of records that are basically much too 'hot' in the first place, and therefore have potentially strident treble transients and brash, harsh upper midrange sounds (a lot of modern pop recordings suffer from these problems). Happily, the Focal 'phones can show you most of what's right in really good records, while also exposing the flaws in lesser recordings—yet without beating you over the head with those flaws. Instead, the Spirit One has a consistently relaxed, easygoing demeanour that can work well with most any genre of music.

I should mention that one of the Spirit One's particular strengths is its sensitivity. For the most part, these 'phones are perfectly happy to be driven directly from an iPod. The Focals really don't need (or even leave you wishing for) an outboard portable amp. If you do happen to choose a really good portable amp you may, on some recordings, hear small but worthwhile improvements in terms of more finely rendered textures and details,

as well as better control at the frequency extremes. But surprisingly, there are also many instances where the Spirit One actually sounds better when powered directly from an iPod or other portable player, rather than through an auxiliary amplifier (a phenomenon I've not encountered with any other headphone to this point). Frankly, I don't know precisely what it is about the Spirit One that enables it to perform so well when driven by a humble iPod, but there you have it.

“Frankly, I don't know precisely what it is about the Spirit One that enables it to perform so well when driven by a humble iPod, but there you have it.”

Musical examples

One of the easiest ways to get a handle on the Spirit One's formidable midrange strengths is to listen to a recording that highlights expressive female vocals—preferably vocals that feature delicate inflections, modulations, and other tonal shifts that add richness and texture. One such recording is 'Pride and Joy' from Brandi Carlile's *Give Up the Ghost* [Sony]. On this track we hear much of the range of Ms. Carlile's voice in action, both in terms of pitch and dynamics. On the opening verse we hear a softer, quieter, more plaintive side of her voice, dramatized by an almost impossibly delicate vibrato, as she sings, "All in all it wasn't bad/all in all it wasn't good/but I still... ..care." But as the chorus arrives, Carlile seems to shift gear, modulating her phrases upwards in pitch and suddenly stepping up dynamics to sing with considerably more force and vigor. The effect is that of seeing (and of course hearing) two different sides of the singer's personality, and what's impressive is that the Spirit One seems equally comfortable as it reproduces both of them in sharp juxtaposition.

Still, you can hear hints of the "relaxed, easygoing" qualities I alluded to above on 'Pride and Joy.' I have noticed that through some headphones (and with some amps in play), Carlile's vocal can exhibit traces of a certain glassy-sounding, unnatural upper midrange and treble sheen (it sounds impressive in a way, yet wrong). But with the Spirit Ones in play, that glassy quality never materializes—not even in passages where Carlile is singing at full voice and with serious gusto. This is an instance where Focal's clever voicing choices plainly work out in the listeners' favour, capturing delicate inflections and vibrato where desirable, but without imposing more upper midrange/treble detail than we bargained for.

But there is more to the Spirit One than suave midrange delicacy, because this is a headphone that is ready, willing, and able to handle more boisterous, full-range music should the mood strike you. A good example would be the potent, upbeat, forceful instrumental blues track "If You Love Me Like You Say" from Debbie Davies' *I Holdin' Court* [Little Dipper]. Davies' howling Stratocaster is, as you might expect, the centrepiece of this song, but to my way of thinking the engine that really drives the song forward would be the terrific rhythm section of Davies' band. The Spirit Ones do a terrific job of reproducing the sound of the drum kit (and in particular the hard, crisp, yet surprisingly deep "pop" of the snare drum), while also giving the powerful yet also articulate voice of the electric bass guitar it's due. Many headphones I've heard have tended either to underplay the power of the bass guitar (perhaps because they just don't have enough low ►

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► frequency 'oomph' to do it justice), or else give the bass a loose, overblown, larger-than-life quality (perhaps because they are trading away bass quality for quantity). But the Spirit Ones are different in that they give the sound of the instrument an appropriately full measure of weight and heartiness yet also reveal the agile, bouncy, infectious syncopated qualities of the lines being played. With foundations like these, it's hard to listen to "If You Love Me Like You Say" through the Focal without experience a certain impulse to get up boogie in time to the music.

Conclusion

Consider this headphone if:

- You like a headphone that combines sleek European styling, very good fit and finish, and exceptional comfort for the wearer.
- You appreciate the benefits of the Focal 'house sound', which as a general rule places more of a premium on natural warmth and a suave, sophisticated, and even seductive presentation—especially through the heart of the midrange where most of the music really lives (this in contrast to 'phones that attempt to impress with sizzling highs, overpowering bass, or overly prominent, 'hey-look-at-me' mids).

- You want an over-the-ear headphone that is not much larger than some competing on-ear models we've tried.
- You like the idea of a headphone that really doesn't need an outboard amp (at least not for playing at satisfying levels; the Spirit One sounds just fine when driven from an iPod or iPhone).

Look further if:

- You want an extremely revealing headphone—preferably one with plenty of upper midrange and high frequency resolution and detail. The Spirit One can sometimes sound rolled off and/or softly focused in these areas.
- You find the Spirit One ear cups a little too compact for their own good, in which case you'll want to look at 'phones with more spacious ear cups.

Bottom Line

The Spirit One is a fine first headphone from Focal—a headphone that at once reaches upward toward higher-end performance, yet is sensibly (and accessibly) priced and very easy to drive. It is comfortable, well made, efficient, and well balanced in a sonic sense. Perhaps most importantly, it serves up the sort of sophisticated, revealing, and natural-sounding midrange that has made Focal loudspeakers so popular among audiophiles. +

First Published online in Playback Issue 56

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Accessories: As listed under "FEATURES", above.

Frequency Response: 6Hz-22 kHz

Drivers: 40mm Mylar/titanium diaphragm drivers

Sensitivity: 104 dB

Impedance: 32 Ohms

Weight: 225 grams

Warranty: Two years, parts and labour

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Manufactured by: Focal & Co

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Fostex HP-P1 Headphone amplifier

By Alan Sircom

Fostex is a huge pro-audio-based company out of Japan, but it also has a domestic arm, and that domestic arm makes some very clever products. The HP-P1 is the perfect example of just how smart Fostex is at reading the market.

The HP-P1 is a DAC+headphone amplifier, but one designed for those on the move as well as those with a penchant for plugging in next to a laptop. It works by using a built-in battery, so that you can hook your iDevice or other smartphone to the USB connector. It has apple Authentication (it registers on the 'About' section of your iPod or iPhone) and a shortened Apple connector-USB cable so that the two can hook up on the move. It also has a separate traditional USB connector allowing the user to charge the battery from a laptop or a plugtop USB charger. You cannot charge the P1 through the iDevice (that's a no-no under Apple's own rules). The P1 comes with a dinky little pouch, but should also come with a strap or two to harness it to your smartphone, or iPod (at a pinch, two of those red rubber bands posties leave all over the place, or a charity wristband both make

good alternatives). It features a conventional potentiometer combined volume control/power switch that feels good in the hand, and has three gain settings and two filter settings to fine tune the sound. It'll take you about five hours from exhausted to full battery and the fully-charged battery will keep you going from London to New York, or roughly seven hours.

Under the hood, it's built using the AKM 4480, 32-bit DAC chipset, which is used almost exclusively by Fostex for this device. It has two filter options; the first is a standard sharp roll-off, but filter two is a minimum delay filter to limit pre-echo (this only works on the digital input, naturally; the analogue mini-jack line input is untouched by a digital filter option). I significantly preferred option two in use, but the beauty is the option is there for all and instantly switchable. There's also a cheeky bonus that comes with the Fostex. It includes a line audio output minijack, which allows you to take the output of your iPod and hook it to a full-blown stereo system or even to a recorder, without the need for a docking device. It also comes with a Toslink connector for digital hook-ups... and potentially digital recording off an iPod!



Fostex recommends headphones of a greater than 16-ohm impedance and the amp itself delivers 80mW, more than enough to drive most headphones and IEMs well. Don't move too far outside of its happy place though, because the amp will begin to show its limits. So, no power hungry planar magnetics type headphones (the HIFIMAN HE-500s were a stretch). On the other hand, a pair of headphones like the Sennheiser HD-25-I IIs, the Focal Spirit Ones or the Sony MDR-7506s I use for recording work perfectly.

There's three questions to address here. The first is 'why?' The iPod has a perfectly good headphone socket in its own right. This is a pretty simple fix; the HP-P1 brings desktop audio quality to portable audio rigs. It allows the iPod user a wider range of headphones at a wider range of volume levels without strain, and – unlike any iPod or iPhone bought in the EU – there isn't a volume limit to constrain you. While that means 'louder' which spells hearing damage, it also means 'more dynamic headroom' at any volume level, which means better sound. Unequivocally. Uncontestably.

The next question is 'how does it compare?' In a way, this is a tougher question because it's almost in a class of its own. Few single box devices for a portable player combine digital input and amp in a single, elegant box. There are single-box headphone amps that are designed to glom onto a computer for someone wanting better quality than the supplied socket. There are stack box systems comprising little DAC and little headphone amp that when all strapped together turn a svelte little device like an iPod into something that makes you think "prototype". The Fostex takes all those things and turns them into one box that is still inherently portable.

The last question is 'how does it sound'? It's crisp, clean, inherently neutral and detailed. Extremely detailed. This isn't the kind of headphone amp you'll choose if the first word that comes to mind is 'rich' or 'lush' or something similar. Instead, it's rather like choosing really good detailed solid state amplification in your main audio rig. It's precise and controlled, and pretty much what you need from a headphone amp on the move. And it's in the sound quality where the iPod on its own falls flat, lacking dynamic range and energy on any recording that has some dynamic range. In short, it's like you moved your hi-fi system in between your ears.

My recommendation? If you have an iPod Classic or Touch, get one of these. Buy yourself a neoprene iPod case (so the iPod doesn't slip around too much), pack it full of good quality files (the iPod defaults to 128kbps VBR AAC... you might want to go up to 256kbps or even lossless), strap it to the HP-P1 with a couple of charity wristbands of your choice, get a pair of Sennheiser HD-25-I IIs and be shocked at how good portable audio can sound. It might seem strange to spend far more on the digital and amplifier electronics than

"It allows the iPod user to access a wider range of headphones at a wider range of volume levels without strain."

you would on the storage device itself, but the improvements are there for the listening.

Are there any shortcomings? Not really. If you use headphones with a right-angled minijack, the 'business end' of the HP-P1 can get congested (it will bump into the volume control or the USB lead) and all three (USB, mini-jack and volume) stand too proud of the front panel to look elegant (although you get brownie points for having something that looks like a 1970s walkie-talkie without the aerial).

I'll admit a guilty secret here. The guy from SCV has been contacting me asking for the HP-P1 back, and I've not been returning his calls and emails, because I've been just enjoying the sound I've been getting on the move so much. That's how good this is. I guess now the review's been published, that excuse dries up! +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output power: 80mW per channel
Impedance: 16 ohms or more
Frequency response: 20Hz-20kHz ± 0.3 dB (@32 ohm load)
Outputs: Headphone (stereo mini-jack); Line-out (stereo mini-jack); S/PDIF Toslink optical digital
Inputs: Analogue (stereo mini-jack); USB Type A (dock connection to iPod/smartphone) USB-iPod connector supplied; USB Type mini B (charger, cable supplied)
DAC: AKM 4480
Power supply: Lithium Ion battery
Charge/operating time (max): 5/7hrs
Dimensions (WxDxH): 7.5x13x2.5
Weight: 0.26kg
Price: £549

Manufactured by: Fostex
URL: www.fostex.com
Distributed by: SCV London
Tel: +44(0)20 8418 0778
URL: www.scvlondon.co.uk

Have we got things horribly wrong?

music matters

By Alan Sircom

There is currently very little joined-up thinking in audio. In recent years, we have more or less abandoned the concept of source-first systems, synergy, speaker-led systems, 'the absolute sound' benchmarking to live, unamplified music and almost every other ethos. This magazine has – to a lesser or greater extent – continued to push a systematic approach to music reproduction in the home (and this has been echoed by companies that take a similar stance), but our voices are often drowned out. This has meant the current thinking in audio seems to be 'anything goes'.

Unfortunately, it's all too easy to see why this *laissez faire* approach has come to predominate, because the first victim of a slump is integrity. In most cases, the high standards required to provide a system that is designed to perform cogently do not sit comfortably with an urgent need to sell anything to keep in business; magazines, faced with falling revenue and circulation, run to their 'safe place' of review after review after review and buyers have to resist the impossibly tempting idea of shopping around for the best deal instead of staying loyal to a company that understands how to create a good system.

In the process, it all goes horribly wrong, and we all suffer as a result. In a way though, you suffer more than most, because you end up with a system that only delivers a fraction of what it can do. The up-side (again, for you) is unless the equipment you currently own is either broken, hopelessly mismatched or completely inappropriate for the room it resides in, you likely already have at least some of the tools needed to create an excellent sound. The audio components are extremely important – they are a foundation stone to good sound, after all – but they are only part of the picture. Just as a house built on one foundation stone is a house with subsidence.

“Live with it for a month; if it works... fine. If it doesn't... change it back”

What makes a good system? I believe it's a selection of appropriate products, carefully installed and working together harmoniously in an appropriately treated room. And we approach this in an utterly backwards manner. We build a system perhaps not quite at random, but one that's capable of potentially good sound, but then install it relatively haphazardly with no concept of room treatment. We then randomly stab at 'fixes' or component changes to help improve the system. Finally, some give up altogether or decide the path lies elsewhere and go for professional equipment and room acoustic treatment, often accompanied by a heavy-handed approach to both.

Instead, start with the equipment you currently own, and re-install it to the manufacturer's specifications. Care and attention is needed from the outset; simply taking a spirit level to your equipment to ensure everything is level and 'dressing' your cables to prevent a rat's nest of

power, interconnect and speaker cables will subtly raise your system's game. Then, taking those same components and attending to their surroundings with the same amount of due care used in installing the initial system can improve matters still further. The end result of such attention to detail might necessitate repositioning equipment, listener and loudspeakers to more appropriate places (often the basic installation could be considered a 'first fit'; subsequent investigation into the care and feeding of the system will often involve moving equipment around to get the perfect placement). Finally add some problem-solving room treatment to fix anything that the earlier processed didn't iron out, and check the system's placement and layout one last time. Then, apart from adding new sources as and when they arrive, and periodic cleaning, tightening and general servicing, you could have years or even decades of enjoyment from an unchanging, perfectly optimised system.

If this sounds like extolling the virtues of 'everything matters', think again. Much of audio's past is dotted with things that either didn't do what they were intended to do at all, or did the wrong things. Each step – from the first fit with nothing more than a spirit level to the final implementation of room treatment, should be approached with a sense of trial and error. Try something and live with it for a month; if it works... fine. If it doesn't... change it back. Naturally, if your speakers are at a jaunty angle and you straighten them, if you don't hear a difference, there's no need to put them back to their original wonkiness. But if nothing else, you have established how good your system can sound, under its present circumstances. +

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Classic Album Living Room at Vintage



Classic vinyl records are back in vogue, and the Vintage Living Room is the perfect place to browse and buy. The store is filled with a wide range of classic albums, from the 1960s to the 1990s. The staff are knowledgeable and friendly, and they can help you find the perfect album for your collection. The store is also a great place to buy new vinyl records, as well as vintage hi-fi equipment. The Vintage Living Room is a must-visit for any classic music lover.



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW Kaiser Kowero! Vivace loudspeaker



EQUIPMENT REVIEW ASR Emitter II Exclusive integrated amplifier



KAIER KOWERO! VIVACE LOUSPEAKER

The Kaiser Kowero! Vivace loudspeaker is a high-quality, high-performance speaker that is perfect for any living room. It features a 6.5-inch woofer and a 1-inch tweeter, and it is designed to provide clear, crisp sound. The speaker is also very easy to use, and it is a great value for the money. The Kaiser Kowero! Vivace loudspeaker is a must-have for any music lover.

ASR Emitter II Exclusive integrated amplifier

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record reviews

How To Read Them

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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.

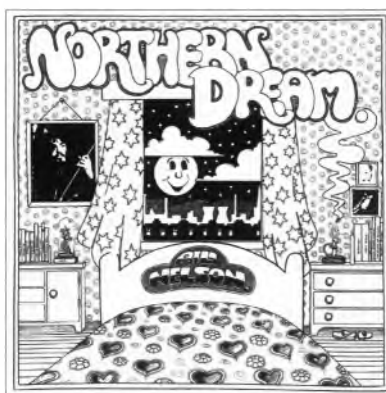
This issue's featured reviewers are:

DD – Dennis D Davis

AS – Alan Sircom

MP – Mark Prendergast

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	Multi-Channel		



Bill Nelson

Northern Dream

Cocteau Discs/Esoteric COCD1001



Born in Wakefield, Yorkshire in 1948, Bill Nelson had a gift for art and design. A late teen present of a Gibson ES345 guitar from his musical parents allowed him to experiment, and his third recorded experiment was *Northern Dream*. Though only 250 copies were made, one found its way to John Peel which encouraged EMI to sign Nelson and pave the way for his Be Bop Deluxe period.

Northern Dream is a curious time capsule. Nelson cranks out blues after blues. There are tape manipulations and guitar nods to heroes Hank Marvin and Duane Eddy. Here and there we get backwards guitar sections tilting towards Jimi Hendrix. He uses flutes and recorders to add colour to the mix and the odd found sound. This remaster can sometimes bring out deficiencies in the original two-track recording. 'Bloo Blooz' sounds like a lazy David Gilmour outtake from *Ummagumma*, put to tape in minutes after munching through another stoned breakfast. But 'House Of Sand' and 'Loves A Way' are especially enticing acoustic/electric fare whilst the closing 'Chymepeace (An Ending)' with its chunky guitar and glistening tonal finale point the way to the future. A handy little primer before diving into the forthcoming EMI Be Bop Deluxe box set. **MP**

RECORDING

MUSIC



Genesis

From Genesis To Revelation

Repertoire Rep 5205



Few groups have had the lucky start that befell Genesis while still at Charterhouse public school in Surrey during the late 1960s. In August 1969, pop svengali Jonathan King offered the teenage group a record contract with Decca and the chance to record a debut album *From Genesis To Revelation* in the Summer holidays in London's Regent Studios.

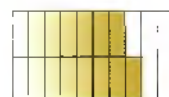
Peter Gabriel (vocals, flute), Anthony Phillips (guitar), Tony Banks (keyboards, piano) and Mike Rutherford (bass) were obviously talented and had no problem writing songs. *From Genesis To Revelation* is a big production sound overlaid by strings and horns. It's baroque psychedelia!

They were subsequently dropped by Decca. *From Genesis* became a curio eventually commanding over £1,000 in its unboxed vinyl prime.

This superb re-issue includes the original thirteen tracks with the addition of all contemporary Single A & B sides, an exhaustive and well-illustrated 24 page colour book in a gatefold digipak. Certainly you can hear the source of the mature Genesis here, the roots of such albums as 1972's *Foxtrot* and 1973's *Selling England By The Pound*. Most impressive is how sure and together the group are as teenagers. A revelation indeed. **MP**

RECORDING

MUSIC





Harold Budd

In The Mist

Darla DRL 248

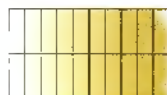
CD

In a career which has spanned five decades, pianist and composer, Harold Budd has recorded thirty eight albums. One of the great American composers and a true Minimalist, Budd has now returned to what he does best, sound painting. *In The Mist* is the closest to painting in sound you will get. Recorded and mixed by Michael Coleman in Mesa, Arizona, the album is divided into three distinct movements.

'The Whispers' are a series of five pellucid piano compositions whose tones are allowed to reverberate into silence. Sometimes the EQ is haloed other times muffled. Part 5, 'The Art Of Mirrors' is an homage to British film cineaste Derek Jarman. 'The Gunfighters' are more resonant piano compositions with spartan electronic and percussive effects. XTC's Andy Partridge describes these 'empty' compositions as the next best thing to De Chirico!

Budd insists that there is much tone-bending, especially on the final 'Shadows' pieces where he takes the string quartet into new areas of sound. The screeching highs and aggressive attacks of the violins are taken out and replaced with chorus reverb and harmonizer. The result, string music which sounds unison and floating. At 75 Budd can still surprise and delight. A beauty. **MP**

RECORDING
MUSIC



John Foxx And The Maths

The Shape Of Things

Metamatic META29S

CD

Even though many of his songs seem derived in sound from the paintings of Max Ernst, John Foxx has always maintained a foot in mainstream pop synthesis. He was a contemporary of such groups as The Human League, The Cure and New Order in the early 1980s. Foxx's post-Ultravox work *Metamatic* charted and producing hit singles such as 'Underpass'.

For his 30th album, Foxx teamed up with London synthesist Ben Edwards, who uses vintage analogue instruments, especially the original large Moog synthesizer. Drum machines, keyboards and feedbacking guitars frame Foxx's cinematic delivery. The sound is as if the original Ultravox were starting all over again.

On such compositions as 'Psytron' and 'Modreno', Foxx openly acknowledges his admiration of the work of German pioneers Karlheinz Stockhausen and Kraftwerk respectively. The massed choral nature of 'Buddwing' reminds us that Foxx is never far from his Lancashire Catholic past. Though there are many clever sounds here the stand-out track is 'Rear View Mirror' with its enervated Ballardian songscape that could have come direct from the pages of the 1973 novel *Crash*. Five decades on and he's still going strong. **MP**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Tangerine Dream

Zeit (Expanded Edition)

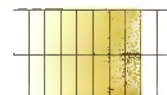
Reactive Erecad21017 2CD/2LP

CD

The cult of Tangerine Dream, a Berlin-based '60s group inspired by both Salvador Dali and The Beatles begins here, with their 1972 unclassifiable masterpiece. Early experiments with Klaus Schulze had failed and both Edgar Froese and Chris Franke were looking for a new direction when they saw Peter Baumann playing in a nightclub. With Dieter Dierks and Ear records behind them they got down top recording *Zeit* with Baumann and Popol Vuh's Florian Fricke and his hugely expensive Moog synthesizer. That added to VCS3, Mellotron, organ and four cellos made up the sound of this *largo in four movements*, recorded in just three days!

On release, the German press were horrified at a music with no beats, no rhythms at a "a cold empty music as distant in feeling as the stars in the cold night sky". But in these sound eddies and slowly pulsating flashes of light was something verticentric, a sound that was as outer space as one could go, a veritable alternative soundtrack to Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey. Amazingly the English loved it, John Peel played the record to death and the cult of Tangerine Dream was born. This lovingly compiled new edition adds a contemporary Köln performance CD to the set. Unique. **MP**

RECORDING
MUSIC



6 Essential Questions To Ask Before Upgrading

1 Surely upgrading my cartridge is better than changing my arm?

Staggeringly, tests show that a £120 cartridge can outperform a £2500 one, just by virtue of being in a better arm. Not only this but in the long run it saves a fortune to run a good arm with a lesser cartridge. Arm installation is easy with help from adaptors and guidance - Visit our web site for help or phone us.

2 Is it worth changing my arm?

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Reproducing the original sound



Art Blakey

Indestructible

Music Matters/Blue Note ST-84193

180g

Art Blakey's groups were rarely anything other than all stars, and in many cases he was able to assemble all superstar groups. *Indestructible* is a perfect example; it's a hard bop outing with Lee Morgan, Curtis Fuller, Wayne Shorter, Cedar Walton and Reggie Workman recorded in 1964. The band members wrote all the music, with a Cedar Walton ballad balancing out material from Shorter, Morgan and Fuller. All the horn players are in fine form, and Blakey's drumming is Blakey's hard driving best.

As good as this album has always been, I found myself discovering whole new levels of thrills listening to this new 45 RPM reissue by Music Matters. I quickly traded off my original Blue Note, which sounds congested by comparison. There's a lot going on in this music, with six strong players going at it hard and Blakey blasting the sound level meters into the red. Much of the detail of the music is lost on the original. When the guys at Music Matters heard the master tapes they went into a swoon over the riches there, and when Kevin Gray was able to capture the vastly improved sound on 45-RPM vinyl, they were ecstatic. You will be too—it's a spectacular record. One of the best Blues Notes and not to be missed. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Billie Holiday

Solitude

Clef/Speakers Corner MG C-60

180g

Solitude is one of Norman Grantz's early 12" record releases on the Clef label, and it was a reissue of material he had released on 10" LPs. Six of the songs come from Holiday's first Clef 10" with filler from two others. This is classic Billie from 1952, with backing from Grantz stable mates Oscar Peterson, Barney Kessel, Ray Brown and others. Holiday's association with Grantz allowed her to record with first rank players, a departure from what she enjoyed earlier with Decca.

While some may prefer the sound of Holiday's voice during her early Columbia 78 sides, these later Grantz recordings have two big advantages. First, most every tune is a classic, which includes plenty of filler with the gems. And despite the early vintage, these sessions are remarkably well recorded. There is little to make these recordings sound dated compared to recordings later in the 1950s. Sure, some of the later material benefits from improvements in recording technology, but there is not much early 50's material that can compare. Speakers Corner continues to work its way through the Holiday catalog, and they have done first class job on this reissue. Unless you want to shell out generous cash for an original, this is a no-brainer. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Carole King

Carole King Music

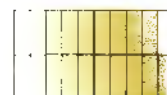
Ode/Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-352

180g

This is the second of Carole King's 1970's masterpieces released recently by Mobile Fidelity. Her mega-hit *Tapestry* was released in the spring of 1971. Her *Carnegie Hall* concert was recorded in June of 1971 (but not released until 1996) and is mostly songs from *Tapestry*. *Music* was released in December 1971, and contains all new material. Mobile Fidelity has released both *Music* and *Carnegie Hall* as SACD and vinyl.

While *Music* does not maintain the level of perfection of songwriting displayed on the two earlier albums, there are only a few slight stumbles, carried on the shoulders of another batch of timeless songs such as 'Some Kind of Wonderful', 'It's Going To Take Some Time' and 'Carry Your Load'. There is the obligatory song with backing from James Taylor. Like *Tapestry*, *Music* was recorded at A&M Studios in Hollywood. Both records share a similar DNA, with a slightly closed in perspective and a well-defined but not expansive soundstage. Mobile Fidelity's new mastering job by Rob LoVerde minimizes these limitations and cleans up the top end and tonal balance significantly. Now if only Sony would let Mobile Fidelity complete the 1971 sweep by performing a similar cleanup with *Tapestry*, which would really be some kind of wonderful. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



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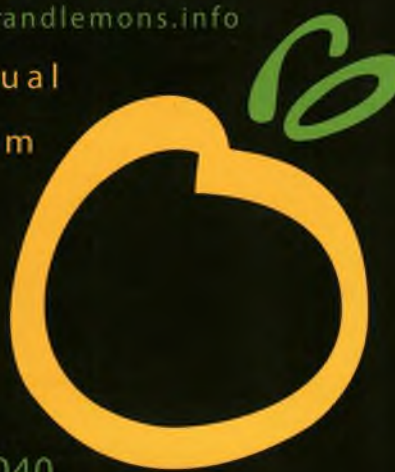
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Bach Motets

John Eliot Gardiner,
Monteverdi Choir
SDG SDG716



Recorded in front of a live audience (possibly... they are the quietest audience I've ever heard) in St John's Smith Square, London at the tail end of 2011, Gardiner and the Monteverdi Choir return to the Motets that proved so popular 30 years earlier on Erato.

The six motets presented here are to the voice what his organ fugues are to the keyboard. The phrasing is deft – this must be the finest rendition of the complex 'Komm, Jesu, Komm' on disc to date. The fact they make the whole recording sound easy and joyful and even bouncy, despite the obvious complexity of the works, makes this a mandatory purchase for just about everyone. While some will bemoan that the recording is just CD-based, most will enjoy a difficult set of pieces made deceptively simple and sublime.

OK, so there's a slight lack of space around the choir and there's a very slight grain to the upper registers (both possibly as a result of trying to factor out a live audience), but the overall sound is excellent, and the performance is excellent throughout.

There are many who say that everything that came after Bach is just a footnote to Bach, and it's in music like this that you can't help feeling they're right. **AS**

www.sdgmusic.com

RECORDING
MUSIC



Berlioz: Symphonie Fantastique, Béatrice et Bénédict (overture)

Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Robin Ticciati (cond)

Linn Records CDK400



Can there really be anything more to extract from Berlioz finest hour and a bit? Ticciati and the SCO clearly think there's more to be said, and they say it very well indeed.

Although 28-year old Ticciati took over the helm of the SCO in 2009, this is his first recording with the orchestra, and the first for Linn Records in the process. Expect more from this rising star. Every movement is timed and presented to perfection, at times dark and brooding, at others alive and almost unhinged (as it should be). OK, so perhaps the best interpretations out there really wig out at the Witches Sabbath and Ticciati pulls back from the true craziness, but otherwise this is an excellent reading. The 'Béatrice et Bénédict' overture is a zesty palette cleanser, too.

It's a fine recording; albeit one that's surprisingly quiet, in order to retain real-world dynamics, especially of those rolling tympani in the Sabbath. It's good on CD, exceptional on SACD and multichannel doesn't add a great deal, so presumably great as a high-res download too. Linn is proving itself a consistently fine label with albums of this calibre. More please! **AS**

www.linnrecords.com

RECORDING
MUSIC



Pärt: Cantor Spiritus

Paul Hillier, Theatre of Voices; Ars Nova Copenhagen; Christopher Bowers-Broadbent, organ; NYVD Quartet.

Harmonia Mundi HMU807553



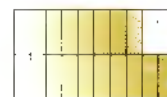
This is almost a 'Greatest Hits' of Pärt's devotional work, drawing together some of his most recent works coupled with several pieces from the mid 1980s. It's a contemplative, almost ambient body of work, best played quiet to bring out the meditative aspects. Most of the 10 tracks are performed by Paul Hillier's Theatre of Voices and the Ars Nova Copenhagen, but it's more than just choral work. The chamber music played by NYVD Quartet also has that Pärt ability to still mind and body.

The recording is wonderful too. It's not demonstration quality thanks to the fact that the music will sadly leave many glazed over and demonstrations are all about dynamic range, but this is detailed, layered and surprisingly warm given the content and Pärt's reputation for sounding cold and distant. There isn't a great deal more to be had off the SACD side, although there does seem to be slightly less grain in the upper registers on the SACD layer.

I think everyone should own at least one Arvo Pärt recording. And this is perhaps a great place to start. Find your still place and enjoy. **AS**

www.harmoniamundi.com

RECORDING
MUSIC





Mozart: The Piano Sonatas

Robert Silverman, Piano

IsoMike IsoMic5602 (seven disc set)



Ray Kimber (of Kimber Kable fame) has developed a clever system for making live recordings in the concert hall. The microphone arrangement (four mics – stereo front and rear – placed above the front of the stalls with a series of large, petal shaped absorbers around the mics to control directivity, hanging in the air like a huge taupe clownfish) is designed to collect the natural ambience of the hall, while retaining the dynamics of the concert.

The recording, made at the Austad Stage of Weber State University, in Ogden, Utah in August 2007 and recorded in DSD, not only showcases the IsoMic system, but Canadian Robert Silverman's measured performance. The complete cycle is in three distinct sections, starting (perhaps perversely) at the middle, then early, then later works. He plays with a careful combination of attack and lyricism to the presentation, which is slightly out of step with 'beauteous' modern performances.

Silverman's performance has been criticised for "staying out of the picture", but I don't agree at all. Some of the best-loved Mozart Sonata cycles are getting rather historic now, and the performance style has moved with the times. We have moved away from heavy-handed interpretation to a lyrical 'less is more' presentation, as seen here. Yes, if you are looking for a lush and romantic reading of Mozart, this isn't it,

but – despite the modern Steinway D – is closer to the original intent, without being mere 'note reading'. That's a difficult tightrope to walk and reflects the maturity with which Silverman approaches the sonatas. It's possibly more 'relaxed' a performance than, say, the pacy Uchida recordings, but all the more lyrical as a result. Silverman is also a sonata cycle that appreciates the beauty of the sound of the music as much as the music itself; he's one of those rare musicians who is also an audiophile.

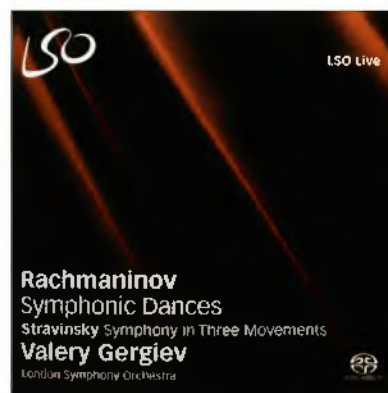
It's not perfect. The IsoMic system lends itself to live performances, but not live audiences (who wants to attend a performance with a whopping great set of Dumbo ears obscuring the view and the sound for anyone not in the front five rows) and the recording is surprisingly dry as a result. In fact, there's a lot of ambience going on, but the hall does not dominate the recording. If anything, it's the reverse; those looking for demonstration quality SACD might skip over this for something more immediately impressive. I guess a lot of people think a piano in a concert hall should sound like a piano in an echo chamber, and can't quite deal with the natural ambience this recording delivers.

Perhaps most of all, these recordings make it all the more upsetting that multichannel audio has never made the impact it was supposed to. In stereo, on CD they are excellent. On SACD they are sublime, but on four-channel SACD the sound is tremendous. The sense of 'being there' is uncanny, almost irrespective of the quality of the multichannel system (I don't have a multichannel SACD rig, but I know a man who has).

This is a premium recording, on a very limited 2,400 copy release, which is already well into its life cycle. Don't miss out – this seven album set is expensive, but worth it! **AS**

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RECORDING
MUSIC



Rachmaninov: Symphonic Dances, Stravinsky: Symphony in Three Movements

London Symphony Orchestra,

Valery Gergiev (cond)

LSO LSO0688



This is a good grouping. Rachmaninov's last full work has become a fixture in the collections of many classical listeners and audiophiles alike, thanks to the gusto of the piece. It's also a perfect counterpart to Stravinsky's *Symphony in Three Movements*, which is an insistent and tense piece.

Gergiev goes more for 'Symphonic' than 'Dance' in the Rachmaninov, bringing out the sensitivity of the playing by the London Symphony Orchestra. While the Stravinsky sees Gergiev' keep tight control over the syncopation and yet still manages to keep the scale and power of this brooding piece flowing.

A live multichannel DSD recording made at the Barbican in 2009, James Mallinson does an excellent job of balancing the warm, dry acoustic of the concert hall with the drama unfolding on stage. It's recorded – especially on the SACD layer – to bring out the intensity of the piece, so play it loud! The multichannel recording brings some ambience and reverberation to the recording, but two-channel SACD and CD are perfectly fine in their own rights. **AS**

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The Doors – L.A. Woman (40th Anniversary Edition)

every home should have one

By Mark Prendergast

It's no surprise that The Doors most famous album, *L.A. Woman*, has shifted over ten million copies since its release in the early Summer of 1971. Some would point to the subsequent tragic death of Jim Morrison in Paris (many believe of a heroin overdose in a nightclub with his body subsequently moved back to his apartment and propped in a bath to add shades of Hendrix-like speculation of suicide/murder or witchcraft to the myth) which propelled an initial two million copies changing hands in its first year of release. But listening again to the album forty years after its inception the answer to its success is a loud and equivocal assertion - it's a bona-fide rock classic, up there with The Stones *Beggars Banquet*, Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland* and The Who's *Who's Next?* as perfect super-charged rock and roll music for the late 20th Century.

A little unknown fact is that at the time of recording legendary film-director Michelangelo Antonioni actually auditioned the band in their Workshop rehearsal space, about 200 square feet of studio near Santa Monica boulevard which meant the group could relax and play live together to get the feel. Antonioni rejected 'L.A. America' as a climax for his counter-cultural film *Zabriskie Point* (opting for Pink Floyd instead) but The Doors loved the vibe in the rehearsal rooms, opting quickly at the end of 1970 to co-produce the album themselves without their old mentor Paul Rothchild, relying on engineer Bruce Botnick for guidance instead.

The sessions went like liquid crystal, Jim Morrison in 'serious' mood turning up on time for rehearsals straight, only drinking the odd beer and living across the street in a hotel, leaving domestic tensions with his partner Pamela Courson at home. As evinced on 1969's *Morrison Hotel*, the blues were now the prominent driving force of the band, leaving the intense LSD/Absinthe fuelled gothic dread of 1967's *The Doors* and *Strange Days* long behind them. In only a few short weeks the album was in the can, finished off brilliantly by the spooky 'Riders On The Storm', a veritable soundtrack on tape, derived from writings about murder on an American highway, and for the first time on record we can now hear that the storm audio-verite was Jim's inspiration. As the track closes Morrison is heard to exhude a wordrous feeling of approval with "I love it".

There have now been sixty-one versions of this album, in every format imaginable. Many say the 1998 DCC Compact Classics LPZ 2050 vinyl cut by Steve Hoffmann using vacuum tube technology is the best version ever, though only in a meagre 5,000 copy pressing. For my money, the 1991 CD is top-notch, remastered to perfection by Paul Rothchild himself. In 2000 there was even a 5.1 Surround Sound version, in 2007 an expanded single CD version to celebrate the 40th Anniversary of the founding of The Doors themselves. In 2010, there was even a box of 7" vinyl singles of each track. But this latest edition has been long- in- coming and long-awaited.



Bruce Botnick has done a sterling job of remastering the album again on Disc One but I personally prefer the 1991 mix. I felt that Krieger's guitar does not have enough bite on 'L.A. Woman' and that 'Riders' has far too much top end. Yes there's more detail but in places less clarity.

But this bonus disc is the diamond here. We hear the songs in live form, not demos but fully fleshed out works of art. Ray Manzarek's arsenal of Hammond B3 Organ, Vox Continental, Gibson G-101 combo organ, Wurlitzer Electric and his trusty Fender Rhodes, the dominant keyboard on both 'L.A. Woman' and 'Riders On The Storm'. Robby Krieger is outstanding on guitar, his fierce twang following Morrison's undulating snake-like vocal to perfection at every turn.

On the alternate version of 'Beer Down So Long' it positively trembles. Bearded and slightly portly with drink, only 27 but with a vision way beyond his youth, the bonus disc evinces a playful but serious artist. As he says before the superlative new version of 'Riders', are we serious now, this is Take Ten now, it'll never be Take Ten again! before launching into the legendary dream track. The bonus disc contains two additional blues tracks 'She Smells So Nice' and 'Rock Me'. The gatefold vinyl 2LP the entire second CD disc of unreleased material in a new package. Sweet. +

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