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JULY/AUGUST 2012 • 90

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TOTEM TRIBE III
LOUDSPEAKERS

ALBARRY AP11
AND M608
AMPLIFIERS

EVERYTHING
BUT THE BOX
LOUDSPEAKERS



HOW TO DIGITISE
YOUR VINYL

A LEGEND IS REBORN



There comes a moment in every product sphere when a truly iconic product is created. In the case of high-performance speakers, that product was the original Wilson Audio WATT/Puppy.

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editorial

Audio may not be the fastest moving stream in technology, but it's not stagnant. Significant changes do occur in the audio world periodically, and we are witnessing one of those changes in the pages of this issue. Because this month, two of the products featured are loudspeaker systems designed to work either on a wall or actually in the wall itself.

The logic is inescapable. Floor space is fast becoming a valuable commodity in modern life, increasingly people are using their wall-mounted TV set as an entertainment hub (even if surround sound didn't prove quite the high-end draw it was expected to be) and people want their audio systems to be the opposite of Victorian children; heard, but not seen. Traditionally, this has meant compromise, usually in terms of performance, but some of the latest designs work with the boundary to provide first-rate sound as well as nothing to see. Yes, this will probably always be a minority topic in specialist audio, and is often difficult to demonstrate, but it's an important aspect of today's audio system that should not be overlooked.

There is also a couple of significant trends in audio. The first is the call for digitising your analogue – as more people move to a computer-based audio solution, so vinyl is staging yet another comeback. Many subsequently feed the output of their audio system into a computer, for a variety of very logical reasons. However, there are a number of different ways to achieve this goal and it's high time we outline the procedures involved.

Next is the rise of the mini-show. Day or weekend long events – often run by a single dealer – have established a

firm foothold in today's audio world. This issue, we look at three such events. And there are more to come...

Hi-Fi Plus was saddened to learn of the death of George Bartlett (1946-2012), of Bartlett's Hi-Fi in Hackney Road, North London. His enthusiasm for audio and his professionalism as a retailer were only matched by his infectious sense of humour and his warm and friendly demeanour. He is survived by his wife Wendy and his children, Warren and Sarah.

Errata: Last issue, bad photography gremlins invaded our review of the Ensemble Natura loudspeaker. Sorry for any confusion caused. Here's what the loudspeakers really look like:



Alan Sircom

Alan Sircom
editor@hifiplus.com

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE: UK 6TH SEPTEMBER 2012 ... US 11TH OCTOBER 2012

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"The Truth, nothing more, nothing less..."



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- September 2010 John Bamford, *HiFi News*

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Or email them to editor@hifiplus.com

incoming!

Audio's grey future?

I am one of those you identify in your recent editorial (issue 86). I tried computer audio and I've turned back to CD. Even played uncompressed, when played next to the original CD file through the same DAC, computer audio sounds flat and grey and lifeless by comparison. And my digital audio is coming out of an old Meridian CD transport going into a Musical Fidelity V-DAC, so it's hardly in the Zanden class. And yet, aside from your editorial and a YouTube clip of Ricardo from Absolute Sounds, most people seem to say computer audio is at least as good if not better than CD. Why? If CD's downturn is so great as to make even Meridian stop making CD players, surely we are sacrificing good sound at the altar of convenience?

Fred O'Connor, via email

It is worth bearing in mind that we have 30 years of CD development and, although many of the digital design elements are common to both, most audio companies have less than a decade's design time in the computer audio domain. Even those who are unconvinced of computer audio's sound today should remember that many audiophiles felt it took until the mid 1990s to 'crack' CD. If you think computer audio doesn't make the grade today, there's nothing to prevent it from making the grade tomorrow.

We need some leeway to continue to experiment with all aspects of computer audio to find out what does and does not make a difference. Whether the computer+DAC, networked audio or music server solution proves to be the best way of making music remains unclear today. But I believe there is a future, so I don't think the future of audio is quite as bleak as you paint.

Finally, Meridian has not stopped making CD players... it still has its M80 compact system and flagship 808.3 Signature Reference players on its books, but it has streamlined its range of late and most of the G-Series product line – including its CD players – were dropped at this time – Ed.

"We need some leeway to continue to experiment with all aspects of computer audio to find out what does and does not make a difference. Whether the computer+DAC, networked audio or music server solution proves to be the best way of making music remains unclear today."

The nerd herd

I like your magazine particularly because it doesn't measure stuff. Hi-fi components are good enough these days not to require any sort of test apart from listening, and the nerds who support measurement seem to have never actually listened to anything in their lives. Choosing audio on the basis of measurement these days is like choosing wine by its chemical content.

Keep up the good work!

Christopher Nash, via email

Actually, I'd argue there are more reasons to measure than not in many cases. Measurement confirms or refutes the objective claims of a manufacturer, and can spot both flaws our ears might not and explain the reasons for the flaws we do hear. And there is often a correlation between what we hear and what can be measured. That being said, as any first year science, mathematics or philosophy student can tell you 'correlation does not imply causation' and the root cause of everything we hear in audio does not appear to entirely lie within the current corpus of audio measurement (or, as Einstein put it "Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted"). We should still rely fundamentally on listening, especially when listening is the end result – Ed.

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“Please, please, please stop reviewing headphones. We aren’t iPod users, we are audiophiles! We listen to our wonderful music through loudspeakers as it should be heard, not in tinny little speakers next to our ears. Leave this trend to the young; we deserve better from our hi-fi magazines.”

► Headphones? Nein Danke!

Please, please, please stop reviewing headphones. We aren’t iPod users, we are audiophiles! We listen to our wonderful music through loudspeakers as it should be heard, not in tinny little speakers next to our ears. Leave this trend to the young; we deserve better from our hi-fi magazines.

Lukas Müller, via email

Sorry Lukas, we feel headphones are an increasingly important way people get to listen to our wonderful music. And that’s not just for iPod listeners; the smaller, thinner-walled rooms in new build apartments and the time-crunched lifestyles we lead all point to increased use of headphones in the home, too. Besides, as many people are discovering, a good pair of headphones can do things that even the most expensive loudspeakers would struggle to achieve. There are also exciting new developments in headphone and headphone amp technology that are just too good to miss. So, rather than bury your head in the sand over this, try burying your head in a decent set of headphones and see just what we mean – Ed.

Classical tag lag

I understand the move to computer audio from a purely pragmatic sense. I don’t personally like or dislike the idea conceptually, but the problem I have with the whole concept is I listen almost exclusively to classical music and I have never found a system that can comfortably provide metadata suitable for my needs. Discs are poorly tagged at source, each program seems to have its own uniquely wrong way of doing things and the concept of consistency is patently too much to ask for. I’m afraid my conclusion is this is best left to the philistines!

Richard Benedict, via email

Classical tagging is a problem, I agree. The original IPTC metadata tag protocol seems to have been designed by people with a perfunctory concept of how classical music ‘works’. Worse, the people behind classical music metadata are not particularly consistent. There are tagging programs and even dedicated music server software like Sonata that help, but unfortunately the best way of getting classical metadata right is to do it yourself. We will be running a feature on classical metadata in an upcoming issue, finding ideal ways of getting the best custom set-up for your needs – Ed.

Instant Acoustics Expert

I’ve been intrigued by your (currently stalled) series of features on room acoustics. I look forward to seeing more. However, is there a generic, one-size-fits-all acoustic treatment ‘package’ that can be recommended without having to measure the room first? I do not have access to a spectrum analyser and have no intention of buying one if I am going to use it perhaps twice in a decade. I guess that’s a compromise, but I’d like better sound without jumping through all the room acoustics hoops. How do I do that?

Clay Beckton, via email

You are right that any ad hoc or boilerplate advice is always going to be a compromise, but there are pretty much standard recommendations that are more likely than not to work. In most cases, putting bass traps in the four corners of the listening room, treating the side wall (and perhaps ceiling) first reflection points with absorption panels and – depending on how near you are to the wall behind you – either an absorption panel or a diffuser in the centre of the rear wall are near-enough universal recommendations. If you are after this as a package, GIK Acoustics produces a series of four off-the-shelf room kits (and I’d consider Kits One or Three as an ideal starting place for most audiophiles), but realistically any acoustics supplier could provide a similarly good package that will work well – Ed.

► Boundary rebound?

Back when I first bought a decent system 25 years ago, practically all the loudspeakers worth owning worked up against the rear wall (the Epos ES14 was the only free-space speaker worth considering). Now, however, almost every loudspeaker is designed to work three feet from the wall. Why the change? I don't have the option; for me, speakers that go up against the wall is the only way to go, but now my choices are severely limited.

Malcolm Parks, via email

Times and trends change Malcolm, and the current trend is not to rely on the boundary wall for bass reinforcement. In part, this reflects a more international loudspeaker audience, because not everyone has a solid brick support wall to put their speakers against. Nevertheless, there are loudspeakers (such as the Guru QM10two, reviewed last issue) that are still designed to work close to the wall and others (Rega's current product line for example) that are not fussy about how close they get to the rear wall – Ed.

“Now, however, almost every loudspeaker is designed to work three feet from the wall. Why the change? I don't have the option; for me, speakers that go up against the wall is the only way to go, but now my choices are severely limited.”

Just say... maybe?

I was somewhat surprised by your ‘Just Say No’ response to my question published in Issue 88. My original plan was to replace the wall socket with an unswitched Schuko socket and use Schuko plugs and sockets throughout, but your response and that of the electrician I approached to do this has made me reconsider. I still think this is being overly cautious, because the fusebox is there for protection; though I guess fire regulations are all about being overly cautious. But, what about using Schuko plugs after the three-pin fused plug and socket? That way, I get to minimise the number of fuses in the circuit.

Trevor Passmore, via email

I got in contact with Martyn Allen, Head of Technical Development for the Electrical Safety Council about this. He said, “The main problem relates to using unfused plugs on ring final circuits, as the circuit protective device is likely to be 30 A or 32 A rated. It's less of a problem on a radial final circuit, as the protective device is likely to be 16 A or 20 A rated, although it is still not ideal. Ring final circuits are very common in the UK but are extremely rare in the rest of Europe – they predominantly use the radial final circuit. The fuse in the BS 1363 plug is fitted to protect the cable to the electrical appliance/product up to the socket-outlet – the protective device in the consumer unit (fusebox) is installed to protect the circuit up to the socket-outlet.”

However, when it comes to using Schuko plugs and sockets together with a fused three-pin BS 1363 plug, things become a little more blurred. To quote Martyn Allen again, “Anyone wishing to follow the Schuko route would be strongly encouraged to use a BS 1363 to Schuko converter extension lead. As there will still be a fuse in the plug supplying the extension, the protective earth connection will remain intact.”

Safety regulations are there for a reason, and although that reason may well be to protect the lowest common denominator, who might plug a frayed kettle lead into wiring that hasn't been changed since the Ink Spots topped the charts, they should not be ignored, even by those whose power solutions would comfortably pass every safety inspection – Ed. +



Denton - living the legacy...

Wharfedale's 80th Anniversary Limited Edition



Britain's most famous loudspeaker brand is 80 years old this year. To celebrate, Wharfedale is reviving one of its most popular models of the past – the Denton.

Introduced in 1967, the Denton exemplified Wharfedale's twin edicts of quality and value, balancing fine craftsmanship, natural sound quality and affordability inside a compact loudspeaker that was bought in its millions right across the globe.

The Denton 80th Anniversary Edition remains true to its illustrious namesake whilst making the most of modern materials and manufacturing techniques to deliver a speaker that is fully equipped for the 21st Century.



SHOW REPORT

Newport Beach Show Report 2012:

By Pete Trewin

Following on from the success of the 2011 show, this year's T.H.E Show, Newport Beach was bigger and better than ever. Amazingly, the show doubled in size one year after inception, this was achieved by Richard Beers and his team and was a resounding success.

The show was laid out between two neighbouring hotels (all of a 30 second walk). And alongside the show there were additional spin offs including a car show, wine tasting and live music. The show had enticed many exhibitors from all over the world, below is a small taste of what was on offer:

Official Opening; Ribbon Cutting

L-R: John Atkinson and Michael Fremer of *Stereophile*, David Robinson of *Positive Feedback Online* and Robert Harley of *The Absolute Sound* officially open T.H.E Show Newport Beach 2012.



BMC – German brands are making positive inroads into the US high-end. Judging by the exceptionally well-made, well-designed product line from BMC Audio, there's a very good reason for this



Lindemann BL-10 – sweet sounding, elegance from this German company



Vivid B1 – Under the masterful ear of the inimitable Philip O'Hanlon, this room was a real music lovers paradise



Avatar Acoustics – This family run room featured AMR and Rosso Fiorentino Volterra speakers, the music was great and the family made you feel as though you were at home



Legacy – finely handcrafted loudspeakers



MBL – Stunning looks and even better tunes coming from these omnidirectional speakers



Naim Audio, doing what it does best; musical producing 'World Class Sound'



Ayon Audio – exhibiting with their usual aplomb, Ayon were looking good and sounding great!



Focal and Devialet, the French joined forces and were impressing the visitors with the combination



VPI's top HRX turntable leads the two-armed vinyl charge +

SHOW REPORT

The Dublin Hi-End Show

By Alan Sircom

For one weekend in May, Kronos AV in Belfast moved due South to Leopardstown in Dublin. The Dublin Hi-End Show was a small event, with just eight rooms (one of which was a static display showing off the latest NAD, YBA and some delicious looking Raysonic electronics and Music Hall turntables). But the visitors who came got quality, rather than quantity, and it was surprising just how many big guns pitched up for the weekend.

HiFidelity played an Acoustic Solid turntable with a Hadcock arm into Electrocompaniet amps and to two pairs of Usher Dancer floorstanders. Prototypes of Graham Slee's tiny mono power amps were also on show, which made a very interesting comparison. Despite the EC amps being several times more powerful, the Slee's lost no sense of energy and dynamism. Interesting...

QAT was also there, using the MS5 music server as featured in this issue with the matching amplifier from the Radiance range. These, and an elegant new French-designed, Chinese-built YBA combo, were both playing through two pairs of the highly prized Mark & Daniel standmount loudspeakers on Track Audio stands.

Vivid Audio joined forces with Atlas Cables and Musical Fidelity, to showcase the G1 Giya loudspeaker, played through an AMS CD player and M8 pre/power, while Atlas was demonstrating its Asimi and Eos ranges of cables. This was both a demonstration room and a lecture theatre, as Atlas and Vivid took it in turns to explain the ethos behind the products.

Aanvil Audio was demonstrating a complete Bel Canto system, played through Analysis Plus cable into a pair of Triangle Magellan loudspeakers. The half sized Bel Canto boxes are the antithesis of big-box (and big-buck) American

high-end, but they are packed to the gills with sophisticated technology that also sounds good.

In one room, with a Music Hall analogue and Raysonic digital at one end and Tannoy at the other were a set of excellent sounding and keenly priced valve amps from JE Audio.

Finally, there were the big guns. Two full-throated high-end systems featuring Focal Stella Utopia loudspeakers, Tellurium Q cables and lots of Stillpoints. The first featured an all-Vitus Reference system (CD, DAC, pre and power), while the second was a two-way dCS system (featuring a Puccini and U-Clock, and a Debussy DAC) feeding a VTL TL-6.5 Signature line preamp and a pair of MB-450 III monoblocks.

The show was not hugely attended, as might be expected for a new show, especially when it coincided with the first dry weekend anyone in Ireland had seen for about three months. But those who attended came away wanting more. Which is perhaps the best result for a first outing of a show. +



Would you run a hammer drill next to your hifi system? Actually, you already are – inside the components

Why do
show visitors
consistently say:
"One of the best
sounds at the
show?"

At circuit board level, handling delicate signals, power supplies are like a drill.

Dirty alternating mains flowing through transformers and capacitors re-charging produce huge amounts of **VIBRATION** – not just vibration that we feel but energy over a wide spectrum right into the ultra-sonic.

Not surprisingly loudspeakers, designed to vibrate air, also generate unwanted energy.

Then, to share the damage around, we connect all these vibrating boxes together with expensive metal wiring! – an excellent conductor of both mechanical and electrical energy.

Why does this matter?

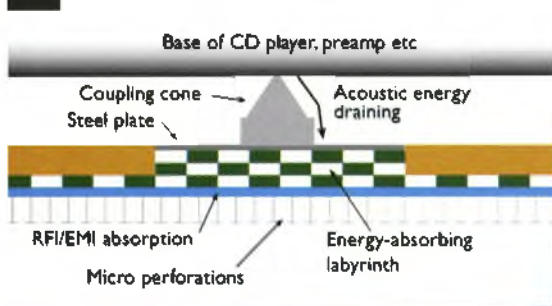
– simply because most electronic components are partially **MICROPHONIC**. Vibrate them and they generate small electrical signals. *Blend these signals from the whole system with the music and the damage is massive:*

- a hard, edgy treble • muddled timing • loose bass
- poor imaging • limited soundstage • distortion

How many systems sound worse when you turn up the volume – and sound flat when it's quiet? So the user is limited to a 'letterbox' of volume settings. These are all symptoms of a system **DEGRADED BY VIBRATION**.

What can I do about it?

The answer is to 'drain' the energy out of the system through platforms and block its transfer in the cables.



Cross-section
of Leading-
Edge platform.
The steel cone
'drains' damag-
ing acoustic
energy into the
labyrinth.

Dumping energy? – sounds like *Black Magic!*

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We worry. Show visitors consistently praise the sound but do they think it's beyond their reach? Do they think it's just superb main components?

Of course, it's the VertexAQ and LeadingEdge system-wide treatment, removing vibration and RFI and EMI pollution – with mains filters starting around £360.

It's not the main components, they differ every time from modest to exotic but the sound remains 'one of the best'.

Read more on our web site under **Essentials**.

Customers say we make some of the best sounds at shows and in our studio they have ever heard, so you know we can do the same in your home. Our advice takes account of your best components and guides you where change is needed, in stages you can afford.

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Just listen and you'll know

CD: Accoustic Arts, Bel Canto, dCS, Gamut, Resolution Audio, Vertex AQ dac-I, Wadia. Vinyl: Aesthetix, Clearaudio, Graham, Lehmann, Transfiguration.
Tuners: Magnum Dynalab Amplifiers: Accoustic Arts, Aesthetix, Bel Canto, CAT, Gamut, Sonneteer, Storm Audio, VTL.
Loudspeakers: Audio Physic, Focal, Gamut, Kawero, NEAT, Totem. Cables: Chord Co., DNM, Nordost, Siltech, Tellurium, VertexAQ.
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[sometimes]
technology meets art...



SHOW REPORT

Cool Gales Bath Audiofest 2012

By Alan Sircom



In a world where economies are crumbling and gloom and doom rule, Cool Gales Audiofest is bucking the trend. This year, the annual show was bigger than ever; so big in fact, it had two venues instead of just the Bath and Country Club.

Ivan Kursar and his family have run this show like clockwork for several years and adding another location a short walk from the main event could have gone so badly but worked surprisingly well. Too well, in fact; when turntable expert Frank Schroeder spoke for more than an hour about all things vinyl, the rest of the show almost emptied.

This year, the show comprised six demonstration rooms and one room dedicated to selling software, with Paul and Erica from Diverse Vinyl doing a brisk trade (although this year I kept the personal expenditure below the £100 mark). The regulars were there, although moved around a bit, and some new faces sprung up in the Cool Gales portfolio. The new addition was Absolute Sounds, taking over the Norfolk room of the Bath and Country Club and playing an EAT turntable with Koetsu Black cartridge into a Devialet D-Premier and a pair of Sonus Faber Guameri Evolution speakers. Sonus Fabers (this time the excellent Amati Futura) were also playing in the Club Lounge, being driven by a predominately Symmetry-based system comprising Brinkmann Bardo turntable combination, Esoteric's new K-03 player and either Esoteric or Trilogy amplification and Chord's Sarum cables.

Leema is a regular fixture at the show and the company showcased its value-driven Elements range of electronics,

played through the company's Xone floorstanders, with both a computer and a Scheu Diamond turntable as sources. Meanwhile, headphone specialist Electromod was demonstrating

the superb HiFiMAN headphone range, played through Schiit and Trilogy headphone amps, with treatment from both Vertex AQ and Lessloss Blackbodies. The room was also the first UK public outing for the latest version of the Stax SR-009 Electrostatic headphone system, and even had a pair of Pro-Jects on passive display.

Across the road in the Bath Royal Scientific and Literary Institution, two rooms on the first floor were also given over to audio. The first, run by Audio Reference and Eclipse, featured a Clearaudio Innovation Wood turntable with Goldfinger V2 cartridge and the Aesthetix Romulus valve CD/DAC, into a full three box Aesthetix Io Eclipse, Atlas monos and Eclipse TD712z Mk 2 speakers with a pair of 725sw subwoofers, all wired with Kubala-Sosna and ZenSati cables.

Finally, in a room dominated by a massive fossil on one side and lots of bleed-through from the Audio Reference system on the other, Frank Schroeder was playing the Artemis Labs SA-1 turntable and TA-1 tonearm (both designed by Frank, and a lot more on that next issue) with a Soundsmith Strain Gauge cartridge and equaliser into a set of Thomas Meyer custom-made amps and then to a pair of Aspara HL1 SE horns, once again all cabled with Chord Sarum.

With a £3 donation to the Musicians Benevolent Fund and raising more than £350 on the one bright day in May, Cool Gales managed to make the template for the small specialist show just as friendly as ever. See you there next year! +

KJ West One reopens: Or, how London got its high-end mojo back

By Alan Sircom

London is a world-class city. And yet, when it comes to high-end audio, recently it's been something of a wasteland. KJ West One was always the exception in terms of its product portfolio, but amid the trendy boutiques and designer shops of London's chi-chi Marylebone High Street district, it long looked a touch tired. Not shabby chic... just shabby.

That all changed thanks to some recent healthy reinvestment. The store has had a radical make-over; all marble floors, discrete lighting and not a cardboard box or a spew of cables on show anywhere. The store now has three demonstration rooms (an upstairs home cinema demonstration room, and two downstairs audio or audio/video rooms) with large open spaces for discussion and the occasional high-end soiree. The rooms open with double-sliding wooden doors and with a large curved oak architrave, look like something out of an elegant Starship Enterprise (the new KJ logo only adds to the Star Trek Voyager appeal). It exudes an air of professionalism, where the last gave off a scent of old dust.

This store relaunch is important because it puts London back on the high-end audio map. And Wilson Audio

John Giolas (L) and Peter McGrath (R) of Wilson Audio and Ricardo Franassovici (C) of Absolute Sounds are dwarfed by the XLF

recognised the importance of the relaunched store; Peter McGrath and John Giolas from the Utah-based company flew over to the UK just for the opening of the store... OK, just for the opening of the show and to install the £200,000 Wilson Alexandria XLF loudspeakers. Played on the end of a pair of D'Agostinos and through a Metronome CD player and Audio Research preamp, the whole system was producing masterful sounds, especially when you consider this is essentially a new listening room.

I want to think this is the start of the rebirth of high-end audio in the UK. KJ West One's prime location and reprofiled look can seriously help rebuild high-end audio's standing here. Passing trade is a rare commodity for high-end stores today; doubly so in places where passing trade might just be able to afford some of the best of the best in audio. KJ West One has the location to attract such passing trade, and now it has the store to do it too. Plus, with products like the Alexandria XLF being demonstrated, it has the power to wow! +



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Digitise your Vinyl *By Alan Sircom*

With the seemingly inexorable move to the use of a computer as an audio source, there has never been a more appropriate time to consider ripping your existing music. Ripping CDs is relatively easy – just pop them in the slot, make sure the music software is suitably and properly set up, and the computer should do the rest. By way of contrast, digitising your LPs can be a tedious and mind-numbing process, but one that can also be ultimately rewarding, cost saving and fantastic sounding.

Why you should do it

There are good reasons to digitise your record collection. First, you can preserve the best-possible version of your LP for archival purposes. Your records are never going to sound as good as when they first leave the record sleeve, or when they are fresh off the record cleaning machine, so that is the perfect time to port them across to your computer.

Perhaps more importantly, it means you don't have to re-purchase your existing record collection. One of the problems with CD was if someone decided to migrate across to polycarbonate exclusively, it was very difficult to incorporate your existing LP collection and the usual way of overcoming this was to re-buy any recordings you still wanted to listen to in the digital age. In fact, the music industry has come to increasingly rely upon listeners buying the same recording time and time again with each successive format. However, by ripping your LPs to computer, you aren't forced into buying the latest remix, remaster or reprocessed copy on the next file format... you already have the original.

Finally, it allows you to access your vinyl recordings in the digital domain. That sounds obvious, of course, but it means if you have a media player like an iPod or a smartphone, you get to carry your record collection round with you everywhere. In addition to saving money on new downloads (see above), there is something psychologically comforting about hearing the gentle crackle of the lead-in groove as your commuter train gets stuck in a siding outside of Paddington for 35 bloody minutes. Interestingly, staying with the psychology of

personal audio, I find when listening to ripped vinyl, I tend to listen to the whole album and not to become my own shuffle mode so readily. I don't know why this is and I don't even know whether it applies to a select few or applies universally. But there's something about playing vinyl recordings burned to an iPod that appears to be more appealing to the human condition (well, this human's condition at least) than an all digital solution can provide.

Why you shouldn't do it

One of the big issues with ripping your vinyl is the inconvenience factor. Not so much in the recording process, but editing and adding metadata to the tracks once they are on the hard drive. There are programs that can help, by helping you edit the tracks quickly and individually, running off to music database sites to populate metadata, album cover etc (all you need to do is enter the album title). But even the best of these occasionally falls foul of the more left field part of one's LP collection and the only way to do the job properly is fully manually. Which can be a chore. Generally, those who tried ripping their vinyl and gave up, usually fell at this hurdle, but recently this hurdle's bar has lowered considerably.

Once again falling into the potential trap of anecdotal pop psychology, some of us appear to be more troubled by the presence of clicks, pops and crackles (no matter how mild they be) when they are emanating from what should be a digital format. We expect our digital sources to have a silent (or perhaps more accurately, 'uniformly very low noise') background, and to have that near-silence punctuated by





echoes of the past can sometimes detract from the listening experience. In particular, we seem especially prone to hearing end of side distortion and track damage on digital transfers that we are more willing to forgive when the record is playing in real time. Track clean-up applications designed to remove clicks, pops and scratches have their place, but often the cure is worse than the disease. However, if you have a record that sounds like bacon frying (it's lunchtime as I write this) some mild corrective measures can help.

Hardware how

Put simply, you need a way to make your turntable speak computer. This normally means the use of what is known as an ADC, or Analogue-to-Digital Converter, and yes it is like a DAC running backwards, in almost every way except in reality. An ADC takes a line-level input and converts it into the datastream of ones and zeros that can be processed by any computer equipped with the right program.

The easiest way of achieving this (on the hardware front) is to buy a phono stage with a built-in ADC (in fact, the easiest way of all is to buy a turntable with built in USB-squirting phono stage, like the Pro-Ject Debut III/Phono USB, but this is unlikely to figure strongly in the collective *Hi-Fi+* consciousness, because most of us will have spent more on a cartridge than the £300 or so cost of the whole vinyl system. Nevertheless, for someone making their first forays into the vinyl frontier, this is an excellent option). Often, these come with a USB socket for the data transfer. Unfortunately, in many cases the quality of the ADC is a severe limitation. Four suitably equipped phono stages worth noting are the: Rega Fono Mini A2D, the NAD PP-3, the Pro-Ject Phono Box II USB and the Burmester Model 100 phono stage.

If you already have an existing phono stage running into a preamplifier (or a phono stage built into an integrated amp or preamp), take the record out feed and connect a dedicated

“The easiest way of achieving this (on the hardware front) is to buy a phono stage with a built-in Analogue to Digital Converter.”

‘break-out box’ (if you are an aspiring musician or bedroom DJ) a standalone ADC (if you are the rest of us). Until recently, this has been one of the great limitations of ripping your vinyl. The hardware came to an abrupt halt at the analogue conversion stage; ADCs have existed for as long as there have been digital recordings, but there are excellent ones that pros used (that routinely cost as much as a hatchback) and not so hot ones available to the general public. Fortunately, as the home studio movement grew, so the performance of increasingly inexpensive ADC devices improved. We have a situation now where the £10,000 state of the art ADC of a decade ago was bettered by a £1,000 ADCs of two years ago, which itself is being challenged by £200 or cheaper ADCs today. As the ADC will always remain the preserve of the studio specialist or vinyl die-hard, it’s unlikely to become considerably cheaper, but we are at a fine time to make music now (see side-bar for the latest aspiring ADC superstar). Most of these ADCs connect to the computer through USB and if you consider the performance of the USB connecting your computer to you DAC important, you might want to do the same in connecting up your ADC.

Over to the software

Once you have your LP in place and ready for the digits, you need to find some way to record your record. We’re going to concentrate on three de facto standards, which we will call ‘free’, ‘cheap’ and ‘not so cheap’. Starting with ‘free’ Audacity is an industry standard sound file editing program, available on Mac, PC and Linux. Because it’s a universal ▶



Three Steps To Heaven...

The best hi-fi components are just like any other thoroughbreds – you need to house and feed them properly if they're going to perform. Ignore the basics and they're just another collection of overpriced separates, rather than a well-oiled machine, greater than the sum of its parts.

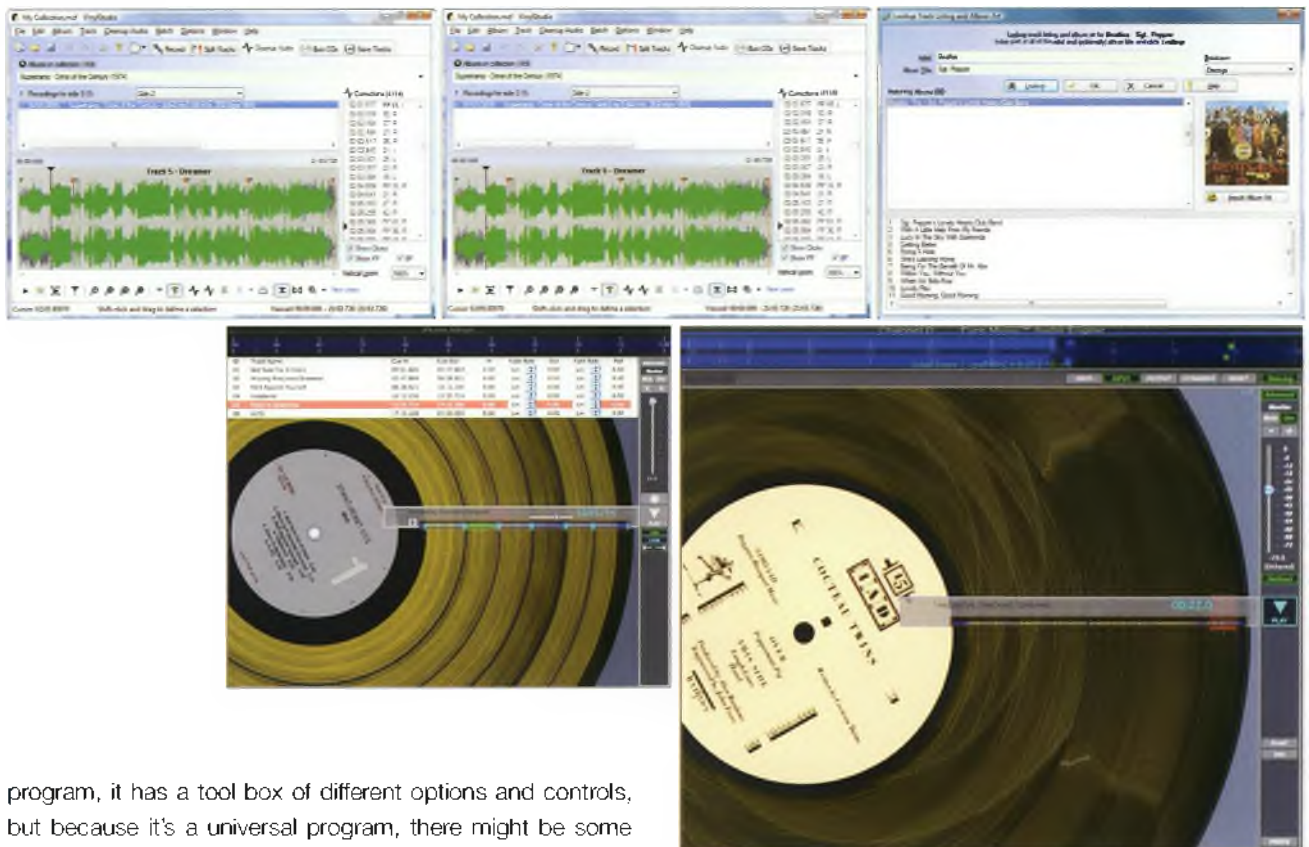
But keeping everything working together really is as easy as one, two, three: proper support, proper power cords and a matching set of signal leads – interconnects and speaker cables. Consistency is the key, which is why Nordost's new Blue Heaven family (and the rest of the Leif Series) uses the same materials and technology to provide cable solutions from your wall socket, via dedicated digital and source designs, right through to your speaker terminals.



Now add the Sort Kone into the mix, a sophisticated support solution that is based on the same principles of mechanical tuning incorporated into the Leif Series cables and you've extended that coherent approach still further, building the perfect base for your system. It's this solid foundation and only this foundation, that will bind your carefully chosen components into a single whole – a whole that really is greater than the sum of its parts, finally delivering on the potential performance; performance – and performances – that so often remain elusive. So remember...

great cables are much more than just icing on the cake.

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MAKING THE CONNECTION



► program, it has a tool box of different options and controls, but because it's a universal program, there might be some learning curve before you learn how to use it properly. In particular, its track editing subroutine is closer to professional usage than some might want and its metadata options are best considered 'crude' simply because people who use this might be editing down a 16-channel mix, producing a radio broadcast, adding sound to video footage as well as recording vinyl. Nevertheless, given the cost, you more than get what you don't pay for!

A 'cheap' alternative to Audacity for Mac users at least is GarageBand, but I think on balance, unless you plan on using GarageBand or its bigger brother to cut a record or mix a soundtrack, you are better off going for Audacity and saving your money.

As we went to press, I 'discovered' VinylStudio, a cheap (£24) download for PC and Mac that automates (or at least semi-automates) many of the properties required for recording vinyl (de-clicking, hiss reduction, even patching to reconstruct really damaged recordings). We've not had a chance to explore this fully as yet, but the program is proving hugely popular with the DJ set. The other standard program at this time is Spin it Again (\$35), which is for PC only. We will look at these at a later date.

The current audiophile standard is Pure Vinyl, from Channel D, and priced 'not so cheap' at £190. This is a complex, professional and sophisticated vinyl management and replay system for the Mac. It even has an interface that

replicates the experience of vinyl replay (even down to having the stylus bump in the end of side locked groove!), as well as sophisticated pop and click reduction techniques. We decided not to take this much further in this issue, as the program deserves a feature in its own right.

Notes from the field

First, clean your records. I mean really, really clean. Straight out of the record cleaning machine, dust-free environment clean. If your album looks like you rubbed it on a passing rabbit, those microscopic dust bunnies will sound like honking great thumps when ripping. Guaranteed.

The same applies to your stylus. It needs to be in tip-top form. No gunk, not much wear, but then again not brand new and in need of some hours to warm up. Make the record playing experience as clean-room as possible. It's worth saying this twice because it's so pivotal to the end result. Clean, clean, clean!

Remember that standard issue computer music programs aren't geared up for album play, especially when the tracks flow into one another. It's important to identify albums that behave in this way and mark them for 'gapless playback'. That way, you don't get a three second gap between tracks on the flip side of *Abbey Road*. ►

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HRT LINESTREAMER +

A part of the growing HRT family, the £299 Linestreamer + is designed to put sound into the computer, not take it out. Capable of reaching up to 24/96 precision, it eschews 192kHz but in the process eschews the expense of the Apogee Duet or the Benchmark or the new QA-9 from Ayre.

The Linestreamer is in a similar grey lozenge to the Streamer II+ (only slightly longer). It is powered from the USB link (so audiophile cables that cut the power line are strictly off the radar). The host program controls the sample rate, it runs Class One USB, so no need for drivers or hoop-jumping, and has a set of peak lights by the gold phono inputs in case of overload. It's basically as simple to use as a stone, and its limitation is what programs you use with it.

I used it taking the analogue output from a CD player and phono stage alike to see what kind of headroom the Linestreamer gives and what it sounds like in recording.

The latter is easy. It doesn't sound. It's inherently neutral to source component. No additional hiss or hash, not tonal irregularities or shifts, no veiling or unveiling... just what the source component fed it.

► If your phono stage allows it and you are using Pure Vinyl specifically, think about sending the computer an unequalised but line-level output from the cartridge and letting the computer perform the phono equalization. Some prefer the accuracy of the presentation, you might be one of them. If you have to consider using a reverse-RIAA converter, I'd pass... unless you have a lot of recordings with alternative EQ curves.

Finally, storage is cheaper than your time, so do it right first time. Try a few dry runs before you embark on an ambitious archival project. Rip your vinyl to WAV or AIFF masters, at as high a sampling rate and bit depth as your ADC will support. As soon as you finish your master, make a copy on an external hard drive, and then make another copy of the copy and ideally store one of these copies physically away from the others. That way, if the worst happens, you've still got your music. Then, just to be quadruple-safe, periodically transfer your copies to newer hard drives, just in case one is getting old enough to crash. You can never be too safe. +

The former is hard, because I struggled to find anything that would overload it. That said, 2.25V full scale sensitivity is a bit low as some output stages hit three volts or more. But as this seems a notional problem rather than real one, the Linestreamer + wins out.

A good ADC should have no intrinsic character of its own. It should be a chimera, letting the source dictate the performance rather than influencing the sound. And that is precisely what the HRT Linestreamer + does. OK, so 192kHz fans will whine about not scaling the heights, but this is not a £2,000 ADC, or even a £500 ADC. It's the ideal low-impact way of making your LPs make the jump to digital without causing a fuss, and for that reason alone comes highly recommended.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

HRT Linestreamer +

Electrical Full Scale Sensitivity: 2.25 Volts RMS Input

Impedance: 5k Ohm

Frequency Response (20 Hz / 20 kHz): +0 / -4 dB

S/N Ratio (DC to 30 kHz): 104 dB

S/N Ratio (A-weighted): 109 dB

THD+N (1 kHz Full Scale): .003%

THD+N (1 kHz -20 dB): .001%

Jitter contribution (DC to 30 kHz): > 130 dB below full scale

Indicators: peak, sample rate & mute Interface

Sample Rate: up to 96 kHz, Bit Depth: 24 bit USB

Transfer protocol: asynchronous

Price: £299

Manufactured by: HRT Technologies

URL: www.highresolutiontechnologies.com

Distributed by: Audiofreaks

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)208 848 4153



Ayre QB-9 revisited

By Alan Sircom

The Ayre QB-9 was one of the first high-end DACs from an established high-end brand that dedicated itself to computer audio. Even today, it's rare to find a high-end DAC of such lineage that only supports USB audio; other still include AES/EBU, S/PDIF and even Ethernet alongside USB, but the QB-9 is distinctly USB-oriented.

A lot has changed since the Ayre QB-9 first appeared. Then, file-based music replay was still largely not on the map for most audiophiles. Just two years later, sales of CD players are in steep decline and the revenue generated by downloaded music eclipsed physical media far sooner than anyone anticipated. Meanwhile, sales of high-resolution downloads have increased significantly around the world, and Linn Records's recent partnership deal with Universal Music to sell hi-res Studio Master downloads of classic albums from the Universal label only shows just how seriously people are taking the post-CD future. And, therein lay a problem for the original QB-9.

You see, the original Ayre QB-9 – being one of the first products to legitimise file-based audio in a reluctant audiophile market – was only capable of handling files with sampling rates up to 96kHz, albeit at 24-bit depth. And now, an increasing number of hi-res files are supplied in 24-bit, 192kHz precision... far beyond the ken of the early QB-9s. In fairness to Ayre, at the time the QB-9 was launched, extracting 24/192-level performance out of a USB socket was at best sketchy.

The big change came with Class 2 Audio, a software-driven update for Macs and PCs that supports higher sample rates, and this meant every QB-9 made after the summer of 2010 and every Ayre DX-5 multi-standard player supported 192kHz, but the one we tested was limited to 96kHz. Fortunately, those with early samples of the DAC can send their QB-9 converters in for minor elective surgery, for a small fee should they so desire.

This offers us a unique multi-faceted opportunity for a follow-up. Two years down the line, does the Ayre QB-9 still stack up against newcomers? Does the upgrade materially change the performance? Is it worth upgrading?

Let's recap. The Ayre QB-9 is a minimalist off-board DAC featuring a Texas Instruments/Burr-Brown DSD1796 DAC chip and a custom programmed apodising filter, with 'listen' and 'measure' options. It runs in balanced and single-ended mode (although the DAC is designed as a balanced circuit and sounds best that way), includes a couple of Ayre Link connectors, and its sole digital input is a isolated asynchronous USB Type B socket. There is also a new DIP switch, that takes the DAC from Class One to Class Two Audio levels. Fortunately, Ayre provides all you need to know about making the move to open up the world of 192kHz on its site. The site is a mine of useful information for computer audio at all levels, and is worth a visit even if your DAC doesn't come from Colorado. The QB-9 takes forever to come on song if disconnected from the juice for long periods, so is best left switched on (it doesn't run too hot).

In the two years since it landed, it's faced some stiff competition, both in terms of more flexible DACs (like the Arcam D33) and variations on the same minimalist theme (like the Conrad-Johnson HD3). And yet, the QB-9 still more than holds its own today. The Arcam is a technological tour de force, and is the more detailed of the two, but the Ayre is the more dynamic sounding DAC you want to listen to music through. On the other hand, other DACs (like the HD3, although this wasn't available at the time) sound even more fluid and natural, but the Ayre is the more detailed and precise. So, where two years ago, the Ayre occupied a class of its own, today it's perhaps the best overall balance; not sterile, not mellifluous... just right. It remains a clean and tight-sounding award winner. You still need to go to Audio Research, Bricasti or dCS level to find a DAC that sounds significantly better.

That's the thing about the Ayre QB-9; it's not one aspect that makes it good, it's the whole caboodle. It's got a distinct character; clean, crisp and incredibly lifelike, in all the right ways. And it's why the DAC just having a USB connector doesn't matter; the DAC is so good at playing computer sounds, you won't need anything apart from a computer. This applied in 2010, it applies today... so, 'no' the change in receiver chip didn't materially change the QB-9's performance.

Which just leaves the last question. Should you upgrade your QB-9 if you bought early? Such is the importance of 192kHz today that the answer is a reserved 'yes'. Reserved because I maintain that good sound need not be a function of high sampling rates, but this is fast becoming a minority position. The simple fact is Ayre's sales of the QB-9 would have stalled if the DAC did not include provision for 192kHz sampling and if you have an early QB-9 and intend to either sell it in future, you'll need to do the same (if you want an acid test of how good the QB-9 really is, see how few come up for sale).

This was a good DAC in 2010; it remains a good DAC today. The quality of the DAC shines through, whatever the resolution. +



Note: Our original photos were used because our review sample is Symmetry's demonstrator, and the last person to demonstrate it took a whopping great divot out of the front panel. A replacement panel was not available in time. Our apologies to anyone who expects to see the numbers '192' on the display in the photos!

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Ayre QB-9

USB Audio Input Signal: 44.1, 48, 88.2, 96, 176.4, 192kHz

16, 20, and 24 bits

Maximum Output Level: 4.00 V rms – balanced outputs

2.00 V rms – single-ended outputs

Power Consumption: 20 watts

Dimensions (WxHxD): 21.5x29x7.5 cm

Weight: 2.3 kg

Available in black or brushed aluminium

Price: £2,395

Manufactured by: Ayre Inc

URL: www.ayre.com

Distributed by: Symmetry

Tel: +44 (0) 1727 865488

URL: www.symmetry-systems.co.uk





EQUIPMENT REVIEW



Marten Coltrane 2 floorstanding loudspeaker

By Roy Gregory

I first reviewed the Marten Coltrane back in 2004. I liked a lot of what it did, but also found it flawed by a cool tonality and overly analytical presentation and reported accordingly. What goes around comes around and that very same pair of Marten Coltranes were destined to reappear in my listening room. The intervening 18 months of solid use changed the speakers out of all recognition. Gone was the lean, pinched sound, the lack of emotional breadth. In its place a richer, fuller sound, ripe with colour and texture. In fact, a whole different speaker – and one that was a whole lot better.

Those original Coltranes weren't new when they reached me, and well aware that a speaker's performance can alter out of all recognition as it runs in, I'd beaten the review speakers to pulp (metaphorically speaking) before ever settling down to form an opinion on their performance. But here I was, confronted with the unavoidable evidence that as much running as I'd given them, it simply wasn't enough. The review I'd written was inaccurate, and worse, misleading to potential owners.

All you can do is learn the lesson and move on. Reviewing the Coltranes made me much, much more aware of just how important running in can be, a fact reinforced by a series of speakers since, many of them also using the distinctive Accuton ceramic drivers. Marten learnt the lesson too, and now their drivers are run for several hundred hours before they're even installed into speakers. Even so I approached the Coltrane 2 with some trepidation and an insistence that they stay for longer than normal. In fact, they too have come, gone and returned again – doing several shows as well as prolonged periods of constant break-in over that time, so I'm as sure as I reasonably can be that I'm actually hearing what they can do; which is just as well, because it's quite a lot. But before we get to that, perhaps we'd better understand exactly what the Coltrane 2 actually is...

The original Coltrane remains in the range and is a three-way design, pairing a diamond tweeter and 100mm ceramic midrange driver with two 200mm ceramic bass units, all mounted in a 60mm thick constrained layer baffle, constructed from two layers of solid hardwood. The cabinet is a complex, one-piece, boat-shaped molding, constructed from 25mm thick carbon-fibre. Despite a height of 1130mm and a depth of 610mm (around twice its width) it succeeds in appearing smaller than it actually is – largely due to its rounded rear contours. The Coltrane 2 is the latest addition to the Company's range, and represents a beefed-up take on the Coltrane recipe. Gone are the wimpy 200mm bass units, replaced with much more macho

280mm versions, using the latest ceramic sandwich technology from Accuton. The midrange driver has expanded to 173mm in diameter and the tweeter has increased from 19 to 25mm. The cabinet has expanded to match, being around 80mm taller and broader, although still much the same depth. The result is a squatter, more planted look that I think suits the speakers' shape much better. The drivers make a better job of filling the baffle and the whole looks a lot more balanced in terms of its proportions.

At 60kg and hard to get a hold of, the C2s are far easier to handle if you can enlist some aid, although you can manage alone if needs must. Terminals are bi-wirable WBT NextGens and a three position rotary switch beneath them allows for a degree of low-frequency bass compensation. Internal wiring is from Jorma and the speaker is supported on stainless steel outriggers and adjustable Black Diamond Racing cones and pucks – although finding any sort of horizontal surface to act as a reference for rake angle is something of a challenge. I resorted to a straightedge resting on the outriggers, which works well enough for comparative purposes, if not absolute level. Like the original version, the C2 is reflex loaded by a massive, downward facing port – and it matters what surface that port sees. Sat on my (very) solid wooden floor, the Martens sounded happier with a softer interface ►

► immediately below the port, and a folded hand towel added an obvious sense of weight and impact to the bottom end, a more palpable and clearly defined soundstage and greater presence through the mid-bass. These are not small differences, so if auditioning the C2s (or other, similarly ported speakers) it is definitely something to consider

So much for the physical differences: for me, the real story of the C2 is contained in the numbers. Bigger cabinet, bigger drivers – that's got to add up to greater sensitivity or deeper bass, right? Well, not apparently in this case. The bottom-end extension and sensitivity of the C2 is quoted as identical to the Coltrane*, the only difference being a slightly milder impedance characteristic, now quoted as eight Ohm nominal as opposed to six. What's more, the crossover points have dropped considerably. The logic behind three-way designs is that a single driver covers the critical vocal range. This generally dictates crossover frequencies of around 300 and 4500Hz, avoiding the awkward 3kHz junction that occurs in most two-way designs. The Coltrane follows that pattern, with second order slopes centered on 350 and 4000Hz. But if you think that 4kHz is flirting with the vocal range, how about 2.8kHz – 'cos that's where the C2 crosses over from midrange to tweeter

All of which rather invites the question – why bother? Well, it all comes down to the bottom end; not so much the quantity but the way it's delivered. Those two 250mm bass drivers represent a 70% increase in swept area – and if that's not adding depth then it's being deployed in the service of sheer weight and the rather more ephemeral area of musical authority, which in turn depends on mid-bass speed and presence as much as the fundamentals. Now, given that the original Coltrane, even fully blossomed, didn't really plumb the depths with quite the aplomb you might have expected from a speaker of its size and price, the C2 starts to make some sense. Unfortunately, those driver and cabinet upgrades don't come cheap, meaning that the system price has risen too. The C2 finds itself face to face with some pretty serious competition, in the shape of Avalon's TIME (which saves some money on the speakers so that you can spend it meeting their appetite for power) and the Focal Stella Utopia EM, a speaker that despite its obvious differences, has reached several remarkably similar design decisions to the Marten. Just take a look at its crossover points and you'll see what I mean...

Even a cursory listen to a pair of warmed up (yes, ceramic drivers need 15 minutes or so to reach operating temperature) and fully run-in pair of C2s should tell you that Marten's re-balancing act has been remarkably successful. This is a speaker that enjoys an immediate and commanding presence. It delivers low-frequencies with an authority, weight and impact that was totally beyond its predecessor. With the Coltrane 2, Marten hasn't just provided that extra bottom-end drive and power, it has successfully mated it to the rest of the range, providing the solid musical foundation that's the basis of any great, full-range system. Just listen to the wide open spaces of the Kertesz/LSO performance of the Dvorak New World Symphony; listen to the percussion detonations (their detail and texture as well as their impact, the way they rebound off the rear wall) and the way the bowed basses are floated in the soundstage – as an exercise in dynamic and spatial coherence it's a tour de force that can be matched by few speakers, exceeded by very few indeed.

*In fact, the Coltrane has already undergone an evolution (in 2007) from the earlier model that I heard and reviewed. The original version was quoted as a four Ohm nominal load, with a minimum close to two Ohms. This made a far more demanding of amplifiers, and could contribute to the lean balance of the amp wasn't up to the job.



In order to understand the how and why of what you've just heard, it's necessary to reach for something from the other end of the musical spectrum. *This One's For Blanton* is a sparse, almost impressionistic piece of jazz interplay between Ellington's piano and Ray Brown's bass. With so little cover and such demanding, complex rhythmic interplay, few systems make it sound like music, fewer still actually make it groove. Listening through the C2s, the piano is angled left as usual. What is unusual is just how clearly the bass is located, both in depth and height. Even when Brown embarks on those fleet-fingered explorations of the instrument's lower registers, there's no slurring or smudging of the fingering or the notes themselves. Transition between the bass drivers and the midrange unit is tonally and rhythmically seamless – doubtless helped by the consistency in the materials and the gentle slopes of the second order cross-over. But also worthy of note is that the bass is neither over-blown in terms of scale nor over emphasized in terms of volume. It's amazing how this disc allows you to map the low-frequency voicing of speakers simply by following the relative weight and volume of the notes as Brown works his way up and down the range. The C2s never step out of line or push specific frequencies forward.

“This is the best balanced and most musically satisfying speaker I’ve heard from the company – by some distance.”

Instead, their bass output is that rarest of hi-fi phenomena – a bottom-end that’s flat AND powerful.

That linearity of its low-frequency performance certainly explains the C2s spatial coherence, the effortless way the soundstage steps away from and extends beyond the speakers. It also explains the lack of any rhythmic slowing or hesitation. Instead, the music is fluid and contiguous, as seamless as the space in which it occurs. Does it carry the quality through to the rest of the range? Yes and no. Rhythmically and dynamically, the speaker extends just as seamlessly out to beyond audibility, with no hot-spots or false emphasis. Tonally, there is a subtle dip around the tweeter transition – a slight hollowness that collapses the separation between the close harmony vocals on Steve Dawson’s *Sweet Is The Anchor*, that adds a little extra attitude or musical edge to Janine Jansen’s violin as she sparks the Beethoven concerto into life. Let’s not overdo this. This deviation is not only so small that it will pass unnoticed in all but the most sorted of systems, the most revealing of rooms. It’s only really apparent because the speaker is so flat in every other respect. Like a tiny dip in a salt-pan. Its audibility also depends on the matching amplifier – which brings us to another way in which the C2 represents a significant advance over its predecessor. The C2 is both easier to drive and makes the most of the amplifier doing the driving. You don’t need to lean the system one way or another to compensate for the speaker’s tonality, its degree of tonal and dynamic neutrality simply offers an open window on system performance – exactly the way it should be.

This lack of emphasis allows recordings and artists to speak with their own voices. Instrumental textures and the micro-dynamic detail that really breathe life into performances are reproduced with effortless clarity, making performances unforced, allowing them their own time, space and expressive emphasis. As a speaker it may not be as musically forgiving as the Avalon TIME, but there are listeners that will view that as a benefit. It is not as easy to drive or room-match as the Focal Stella, but it is both more neutral and more honest. It doesn’t just take a seat at the top-table, it makes its own space and its own case. Marten has managed to build a genuinely full-range speaker system that is both neutral and musically expressive. It goes loud with vanishingly low-levels of distortion, while its relatively benign drive characteristics make realistic levels easy to achieve with any competent partnering amplifier. All told, it’s an elusive combination that’s hard to achieve, yet they have succeeded in spectacular fashion. A speaker system is exactly that – a system comprising various parts: the baffle, the cabinet, the cross-over, the drivers and the mechanical termination. Everything has to be right to really realize the performance potential inherent in the parts. Achieving that is a tricky path, part science, part art, part evolution and mostly experience. What I hear from the C2 is a speaker that finally delivers – and in emphatic style – on the promise inherent in Marten’s sophisticated cabinet technology.

This is the best-balanced and most musically satisfying speaker I’ve heard from the company – by some distance. It might lack the absolute transparency



and awesome dynamic range of the massive Coltrane Supreme, but it also avoids that speaker system’s almost surgical approach to musical dissection. When the C2s depart they will be missed – leaving a hankering to hear just what the upmarket and the more affordable models might deliver. Undoubtedly expensive, the Coltrane 2 is an attractive and beautifully finished product. It is worth every penny. Or is that krona? +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Three-way, reflex loaded loudspeaker

Driver Complement: 2x 280mm ceramic sandwich bass drivers

1x 173mm ceramic midrange driver

1x 25mm diamond tweeter

Bandwidth: 20Hz – 60kHz ±2dB

Impedance: 8 Ohms nominal
4.1 Ohms minimum

Sensitivity: 89dB

Dimensions (WxHxD): 395 x 1210 x 630mm

Weight: 60kg ea. Net

Finishes: Black cabinet with black, oak, cherry, maple or Walnut baffle

Price: €75,000 per pair

Manufacturer: Marten Gothenburg Sweden

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

QAT MS5 music server

By Alan Sircom

Known as the 'Radiance Series', the QAT MS5 is a Chinese-made music server that gets surprisingly close to a turn-key audiophile music solution. It combines ripper, server software, two terabytes of storage, comes complete with its own RP1 tablet remote, or can be driven by an Android or Apple iPad tablet with (practically) the same functionality. Unlike most PCs retasked for audio duties, it's every bit a dedicated device, running fanless and using its own operating system for full music duties. And in the rich red and contrasting black finish supplied, it looks pretty cool too.

On-board functionality is fairly limited; deliberately so to prevent the MS5 from ending up being used to surf the net while playing music. On the computer connections side, it has merely a pair of USB ports, an Ethernet connection and a RS232 port for updates. In theory, both of the USB ports could be taken up with a Wi-Fi dongle (supplied) and an external USB storage. I'd recommend a wired connection to the internet where possible. Where the QAT wins over any computer is its connectivity to the audio world, it having both single-ended gold-plated phonos and balanced XLR sockets



for analogue output and a gold plated S/PDIF phono connection for digital links. The custom boards designed for audio use are first rate, and feature a pair of 24bit/129kHz Analog Devices AD1955 DACs.

You need that Ethernet connection because there's no way of accessing the QAT MS5 without it. There's no wired screen or keyboard option. There is QAT's own small, dedicated tablet, but Apps are available for all the fashionable fondleslabs. It basically takes over a single shelf in your hi-fi rack, and will ultimately likely push out your existing CD player – and possibly a tuner – when you discover its charms.

You also need that Ethernet connection to access internet radio sources. The QAT takes a relatively simple path with internet radio; it's a separate 'radio' shaped button that pulls down a series of stations and sub-stations. It's unbelievably easy to navigate, compared to some of the more 'song and dance' ways of accessing online radio. Simple means if your favourite station isn't on the list, finding it is a little harder than some systems, but there's usually more than enough radio to go round.

The ripping process – via a dedicated TEAC CD drive – is painstaking. That's a polite way of saying 'slow, but thorough'. You can skip tracks either prior to ripping or during the ripping process, but don't quit mid-way through the process or you'll lose all the data from that disc-ripping session. You can multitask (ripping a disc while playing another) but I think the QAT is happiest divided into ripping sessions and playing sessions.

In terms of metadata, the QAT picked up about 80% of discs first time, and that increased to a better than 95% success rate by the simple expedient of ejecting and reinserting the disc.

The remaining discs could still be ripped, but you would need to manually enter the metadata. Automated metadata was confined to album and track details and cover image, but was almost perfectly accurate (one disc pulled up the wrong album cover, but it was a very old CD of Holst's Planet Suite that most metadata engines fall over at, so no big deal).



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“This is a music server for people who don’t like the idea of having a computer proper in the audio system.”

► The two mild grumbles over the metadata acquisition process fall mainly to genre tagging (it doesn’t do any by default, but appending your own is quick and easy) and classical track listing. Classical metadata is a pain at the best of times, but the QAT tended to list basic track information rather than specific musical information. Once again, this was easy and quick to update and repair, but if you are planning on ripping a lot of classical music and using an iPad, buy yourself a Bluetooth keyboard of some description.

I don’t want this to seem like harsh criticism; most music server software is hopeless at wrangling classical metadata and worse, most is harder to edit than the QAT. And what you get if you go deeper

is an excellent system. It’s taking the easy route that defines the QAT. It automatically rips to FLAC (meaning those two terabytes of storage equates to about 3,000 CDs), it allows you to download music stored on a USB drive to the internal storage, and to download music on the internal storage to an external USB drive from the same menu (this potentially acts as future proofing if your source of CDs dries up, because the QAT currently has no provision for downloading music from the internet), although uploading by batch isn’t possible. Playlisting is easy too, although it lacks the drag-and-drop and smart playlist capability of computer-based systems. It’s also best to use the app in a linear manner, rather than multitasking, because it might crash on you. All this means generally is restarting the app.

But paradoxically, this isn’t a computer based system, even though it is based on computer architecture. This is a music server for people who don’t like the idea of having a computer proper in the audio system. It’s also for people who have listened to good existing CD replay systems and aren’t content with off-the-shelf computer solutions. Those online – because they are already well dipped in the whole computer audio environment – are prone to scoff at such a solution, but I must admit the convenience of having a dedicated device that does the job so well and without complaint is enticing.

Sound quality is practically a given. Comparing the replay of the QAT with my benchmark (and now historic) Lyngdorf CD-1 CD player, the QAT edged ahead slightly, sounding more focused and precise, especially in the bass. The quality of the in-house DACs of the QAT became apparent when connecting both players to both the Arcam D33 and then to the AMR DP-777 digital converters. They both delivered a quality digital datastream to the converter (the idea of computer-based systems somehow being inherently awash with sonically deleterious RF or jittery nasties is debunked by the performance of that single coaxial digital output), but the analogue output of the QAT was more in line with the sound of the converters (especially the D33) than was the sound of the CD-1. Overall, whether connected through





► analogue or digital outputs, the QAT had the edge in coherence, detail and articulation while CD still retained its composure in the dynamic range stakes.

Comparing like with like (the QAT vs a MacBook Air into the revised Ayre QB-9) was fascinating. The tonal character of the two performers was very different; the QAT was 'dark' to the QB-9's 'clean', suggesting a mild accent toward the lower mids on the

MS5 and the upper mids on the Ayre. But while the balance was different, the quality of the sound made by both was very closely matched. The detailing and presence of the sound in both cases was neck-and-neck. All of which bespeaks the quality of the QAT MS5.

What I found particularly good about the MS5 was its ability to define fast-paced midrange and bass notes particularly well. Audiophile equipment is typically poor at portraying things like 'Apache' by Michael Viner's Incredible Bongo Band (a 'culturally significant' recording with a sound quality that's best left 'undescribed') but also makes all the audiophile noises when portraying something with more 'space' than 'pace' ('Amandara!' from Talking Timbuktu with Ali Farka Toure and Ry Cooder). This last highlighted its excellent ability to reproduce an expansive soundstage, throwing a sound deep into the room and wide as the speakers will handle.

I have been concerned in general that computer based systems place too great an accent on small-band dynamics, and that a full orchestra is somehow foreshortened compared to more traditionally hi-fi oriented devices. I am not too sure where this concern comes from, but it's unfounded here. I played Mozart's Requiem (Gardiner, Philips Classics) without a single concern. The music scaled properly, the insight into the piece itself and the energy of the rendition. I chose this deliberately because the lightness and pace of the period instrument approach could have foxed the overall presentation of the QAT, but it got the balance just about right.

I've long advocated the concept of computer audio as 'just one more shelf' in the system, and that is precisely what you get here. Hook it to your network, load the QAT app, plug it to your system (balanced preferably, or single-ended or even digitally) and the results – both from ripped discs and internet radio stations – are excellent. It's a real no-brainer. A good music server is basically a CD player that never forgets, and that's what you get here. There will always be nay-sayers – the "you can do the same for a fraction of the price with a computer and a DAC" crowd and the "it's not as good as my Wadia/dCS/Zanden CD player" group. But the QAT MS5 isn't for shouting about. It's for quietly playing music the way it always used to be played... damn well. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

TEAC CD-ROM drive

2TB hard disk

Supports up to 24bit, 192kHz

Fan-less chassis design

Supports PCM, WAV, APE, FLAC, AIFF,

WMA, M4A, MP3, AAC, Ogg Vorbis

Digital inputs: USB, RJ45

Analog outputs: RCA, XLR

Digital Outputs: RCA, USB

Dimensions [WxDxH]: 42.5x37x26.5cm

Weight: 12.7kg

Finish: Silver, Black, Red, Green, Off White

Price: £3,999 (including RP5 remote)

Manufactured by: QAT

URL: www.qat-audio.com

Distributed by: Zepher Audio

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Totem Tribe III on-wall loudspeakers

By Alan Sircom

Totem is best known for its high-quality free-space loudspeakers. But it also makes on-wall designs. Often, that bespeaks of a larger company than Totem, but it's also a sign of the company taking the whole loudspeaker world deeply seriously. Especially when the on-wall offerings are as good as the Tribe tribe.

The speakers could easily be mistaken for a home cinema sound bar, if turned through 90°. It's a slim, thin and elegant array with a D'Appolito (or 'MTM' for midrange-treble-midrange) array of drive units. As you go up the range, so the drivers get bigger and better, but the basic layout applies universally. We went for the Tribe III, which features the company's Torrent neodymium, long-throw mid-bass units.

Perhaps the reason why hi-fi magazines give these products such short shrift is the fact they generally need to be bolted to a wall, and there comes a time when bolt after bolt after bolt going through your wall becomes a costly and domestically unacceptable exercise. This is a unique problem for the reviewer though, because the end-user will generally only bolt one set of speakers to a wall per house (or at worst every few years). Nevertheless, because the reviewers fight shy of making with the masonry drill, the on-walls get overlooked. Totem solves this particular conundrum with a set of elegant stands that place the speakers close enough to the wall to make no odds.

The only real issue surrounding the installation of the Tribe III is the mounting bracket and the bi-wire loudspeaker terminal block are very close to one another. This means install the speaker cables before affixing the speaker to the wall (which is fairly obvious really, just back to front from the usual way of wiring speaker cables to free-standing loudspeakers). This becomes a real pain when using the optional floor stand for those not wanting to bolt speakers to the wall. It works if you have two people (one with the speaker with wires fitted, the other offering up the speaker to the stand) but trying this solo ends up trying to stuff your hand in a place hands don't fit. While I recognise the double entendre potential of that statement, it doesn't make for ease of connection. But, we have to suffer for our art sometimes.





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Getting dedicated

When times are tough sometimes its the little tweaks and system upgrades that can lift the gloom. Did you know for the cost of some tweaks you could upgrade your power supply? I recently installed a dedicated supply to my Hi-fi system. I had moved house just over a year ago and it was a job on my list. I decided to use the products I sell, and practicing what I preach has worked out even better than I could have imagined. It is an ideal that every enthusiast should consider. Costs can depend where your distribution board is, and before I go any further if in any doubt consult a qualified electrician, better still get him to do the install.

I decided to use the Furutech FP-3TS762 which is a 20amp cable designed for the job. A dedicated circuit was run from the Distribution Board into a double socket which I have fitted two QRT Qv2 line harmonisers. The Qv2 need to be on the same circuit as your Hi-fi normally plugged into the distribution block or conditioner, but the idea appealed, so I indulged myself.



The FP-TS762 was continued to my listening room ending at a Furutech double socket from the FP-1363 range.

My electrician was so careful with the actual preparation of the Furutech wire, even cutting back of the insulation on the conductors so not to lose a strand. Correct earthing was of prime importance including earthing the cable shielding.

From the wall socket my system I use my best power cord.



To complete the story I will tell what happens from the wall. My best power cord supplies a QRT QBase6 distribution block and from the primary earth position I feed my Audience aR8 adeptResponse Teflon power conditioner, via a QRT Qx4 purifier, a must for any system. Note the Qv2 in the Qbase6. I have since added more. The Audience aR8 provides the ideal distribution method for my components as well as being the finest product of its type on the market. Please visit my website as I

have put together a few packages to use on a dedicated supply.

Now I can sit back and enjoy my system... Dave



Pricing guide

Furutech FP-3TS762 cable £76.90 per m, cut to length
Furutech FP-1363 double socket from £137.95

Quantum QRT Qv2 from £299.00
Quantum QRT Qbase6 from £949.00
Quantum QRT Qx from £1,199.00
Audience adeptResponse power conditioners from £2,799.00
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► The specs speak of a loudspeaker that isn't power hungry, but that's not strictly the case. Yes, these are not tough speakers to drive, but neither should you make the mistake of thinking these to be hang-on-the-wall cinema speakers that could be used with any ol' AV receiver. Feed them a thin gruel of underpowered amps with specs that suggest lots of power, but only when driving one channel and you will hear a thin and weedy sound. We used them with a number of products to good effect, but the sound of an old Primare all-in-one device spoke of how well these components work in reality. We also fed them some delicious BeChocolate (more on this in next issue) to see just what they can do in a style-led environment.

The big thing about Totem speakers in general is the midrange, which is what makes them such a success in the UK (generally making loudspeakers that aren't the size of barn doors helps in the UK, too... but getting the mids right is a trait UK listeners have always praised highly). What this means is the loudspeaker gets everything from the deepest quack of a bassoon to the widdly-wee shredder guitar solo notes about four octaves higher is covered perfectly. Put another way, it means the full range of the human voice gets the loudspeaker disappearing trick. Although this is not a home cinema magazine, it's hard not to point out that a loudspeaker designed to hang on a wall that's about as thin as a flat-screen TV, when used on its side is about as wide as many wall-hanging flat screen TVs and is particularly good at the whole dialogue thing is going to be something of a shoe-in for the dialogue channel in a home cinema system. And, given the high-quality of music Blu-ray discs, the Tribe III are a natural choice for the music loving videophile. In such a market, almost £1,700 per loudspeaker is at the upper end of the price spectrum, but in the hang on the wall speaker market, the Tribe III represents the best of breed, so it still works out as the video-users best sonic bet.

Two channel enthusiasts having cleansed themselves of the aforementioned 'TV' unpleasantness should also consider joining the Tribe tribe, because what works so well for continuity announcers, works wonders for music too. The speakers have that

lithe, bouncy quality that you always get from a Totem design, but in a package that takes up precisely no valuable floor space.

They are (as you might expect) particularly good with voices, whether massed choirs or singer-songwriters wailing their lives away. I played the Tallis Scholars through the tribes and the tingles I got up my spine made me think I was giving thanks for not getting the plague. Then I played *Teardrop* by Massive Attack, a whole glum of Radiohead and felt like it was noose-tying time.

But it's not all about voices. The Tribe IIIs are clean and dynamic enough to play the instruments as well as the vocals. It seems to be pitched perhaps more at the rock and jazz end of the spectrum – saxs blare and guitars wail and chime well here, but violins sound a touch scratchy and a full orchestra didn't have quite the scale expected – but not so much as to prevent someone who loves classical music from thoroughly enjoying the Tribe IIIs.

The speakers do have limitations that are a function of a thin loudspeaker designed to hang on a wall. They give

surprisingly good stereophony, but the image width is not as expansive and the solidity of images is not as rooted as one might get from a good pair of speakers at this kind of price. The idiot answer – lack image depth because there isn't as much air behind the loudspeakers – is as wrong as 'silver cables sound bright because they are made of shiny silver stuff'. These speakers have good image depth, and project sound into the room with a high degree of transparency and accuracy, but image width was always coming slightly up short, wherever you placed them. It was an enveloping, forward sound for all that.

This is not to say the performance I got from these speakers was world-class – the likes of Marten (also tested ►



"Put another way, it means the full range of the human voice gets the loudspeaker disappearing trick."

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► in this issue) have nothing to fear from the Tribes – but they perform as well as many £1,000-£1,500 floorstanders. Which is pretty damn incredible for a wall hanger speaker, at any price. Where the conventional free-space speakers win out is in the bass. The Tribe IIIs do give good low end performance, but they cannot side-step the laws of physics. For deep bass, you either need more cabinet volume or a subwoofer. It's as simple as that. Still, if you are making the what appears radical step of hanging your speakers off the wall, a sub or two is not too big a next step to make.

There's another slightly less well known bonus about hang on the wall loudspeakers that doesn't often make it into the public consciousness. For reasons that don't make a whole lot of sense, generally on-wall or in wall (2 π) loudspeaker designs need less room acoustic treatment than free space (4 π) loudspeaker systems. This shouldn't be the case – there's still a first reflection to cope with and the need for bass traps in the corners and ridding the world of flutter echos should still be important considerations. But for some reason, the need for such treatment never seems quite as vital when the speaker is near enough one whole wall of the room.

For all these reasons, it's a shame on and in-wall loudspeakers don't get the credit they deserve among audiophiles. The Totem Tribe III manage to harness most of the properties of Totem's free-space designs, without that annoying whine from the upper wife as she grumbles for the 567th time that loudspeakers shouldn't be out in the middle of the room. Real estate floorspace is increasingly at a premium these days and sometimes you have to be pragmatic. The Totem Tribe III is a pragmatic solution to the sometimes-vexed question of loudspeaker placement that doesn't sound like a compromise. It sounds like music. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Drive Units: 1x 30mm fabric dome tweeter, 2x 100mm polypropylene cone 'Torrent' mid-woofers

Frequency Response: 40Hz-25kHz $\pm$ 3dB

Impedance: 4 ohms

Sensitivity: 89dB

Recommended power: 30-200W

Dimensions (WxHxD): 15x91.5x9.5cm

Weight: 13.6kg

Price: £1,650 per loudspeaker

Manufactured by: Totem Acoustic

URL: www.totemacoustic.com

Distributed by: Totem Acoustic UK

URL: www.totemacoustic.co.uk

Tel: +44(0) 7740 284459



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Jadis JA120 Mono Power Amplifiers

By Roy Gregory. Photos by Adrian Lyon

In these days of Global Warming, environmental sensitivity and the rapid evolution of highly efficient Class D amplifiers of diminutive dimensions and seemingly improbable rated outputs, one's forced to wonder whether there's really a place for amps like the Jadis JA120? In fact, if you wanted to define the audio equivalent of an electrical dinosaur, you could do worse than start with one of these French mono-blocs: over two feet long, a foot wide and another foot high, and weighing in at a far from cool 100 lbs, it would qualify on grounds of physical dimensions alone. Add to that no fewer than six output tubes a side, with a constant current draw of around 250 Watts, all required to produce a comparatively modest 100 Watt output – as well as a lot of heat – and high efficiency and environmental concerns are clearly not top of the product design agenda.

The JA120 uses the new KT120 tube. But Jadis have done more than just look at more powerful output tubes. There is an additional front-end tube, adding more gain to the driver circuit at the expense of increased complexity, while fuseable resistors now protect the audio circuits should an output tube fail. These look just like a 20mm fuse – and are just as easy to replace. In addition to these steps, the power pendulum has swung the other way, meaning that the JA120 only claims 100 Watts from its six output tubes, running them well inside the comfort zone.

So, what about the output transformer? Many years ago, I interviewed Andre Calnette, the founder of Jadis, and he suggested that 90% of the sound of any valve amp is down to its output transformer. Which probably explains why the company takes the unusual step of winding all its transformers in-house. Indeed, they are very much a house speciality and the hand-wound designs have been steadily refined over the years. Combine that with the revised driver arrangements and the JA120 sits at the pinnacle of the company's current thinking; if there was ever an argument for oodles of glass driven Class A power then this should be it...

Just as the output tubes are used conservatively, that rated output should also be considered conservative. In use, the JA120s deliver just the sort of power I've always lusted after from the marque. If to these ears the 80s sounded sluggish and the 100s lack the immediacy of the 30, neither complaint can be leveled at the 120. This amp is big, bold, dynamic and when necessary, dictatorial – in the best Jadis tradition. What's even better is that getting it to play ball is simplicity itself, as long as you follow a few simple rules. The first and most important is that you will probably want to lift the earth connection on one of the power cords to avoid a ground loop. Secondly, in my experience the Jadis amps work best on short interconnect driving long speaker cables and this latest model is no exception. If you must run long cables there is a balanced input option and I'd certainly consider it. Running single-ended, shorter interconnects bring a welcome immediacy and clarity to the sound which recedes as the leads get longer.

Eagle eyed readers will have noticed the twin sets of output terminals. That's exactly what they are; not alternative impedance taps from the transformer. To match the amplifiers' impedance to the speaker, you need to remove the bottom of the chassis and rearrange a set of metal jumpers. This might seem like a chore, but it's generally a one off operation and when it comes to transformers, if that's the way Jadis want it done, I'm not going to argue. But don't overlook this adjustment just because it isn't external. The other thing the amplifiers benefit from is proper support; adding mechanical coupling to bypass the rubber feet provided a welcome boost in focus, transparency and low-level resolution.

Power is a deceptive quality. There are plenty of amplifiers out there, boasting prodigious power outputs on paper, yet in practice, they never seem to deliver. Conversely, there are other amplifiers that belie their modest paper specifications and produce performances with real musical impact and presence. One of the reasons that I always loved the JA30 was their ability to punch above their weight. It was a quality that seemed to diminish as the Jadis amps got more powerful, but the JA120s have

“Power is a deceptive quality. There are plenty of amplifiers out there, boasting prodigious power outputs on paper.”



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW / JADIS JA120 MONO POWER AMPLIFIER

▶ sorted that failing once and for all. Real musical power isn't just about Watts – although they certainly help. It's about how many of them get where they need to be, and just how quickly they can do it. It's about presence, weight and the ability to jump when the music demands it, and together they add up to drama and impact. The trick is to deliver that, but to master subtlety and delicacy too – and that's where the 120s really score.

Play large-scale orchestral music and they won't disappoint, even on the loudest crescendos. They can't match the spatial definition of an amp like VTL's 450 Series III, or that amplifier's ability to hold things stable and separate but they make up for it with sheer enthusiasm. When the music demands drive and momentum, the JA120s simply ask, "How Much?" They have an unburstable quality that's backed up by their sheer physicality and muscular delivery – but those qualities translate to the quieter, more-subtle passages too. So the opening of Vasily Petrenko's masterly reading of Shostakovich's 11th Symphony might lack the defined acoustic space of the 450s, the sense of location locks the early, muted timpani rolls in place, but its sense of occasion, of pathos and atmosphere is undeniable, its ability to draw the listener into the mood, the narrative and history that underpin the composition. What makes it so compelling is the tension in the measured tempo, the lurking sense of impending catastrophe. It depends totally on the system allowing Petrenko's pacing and direction to survive intact – so much more difficult with such a glacial tempo, yet the music never becomes ponderous, instead taking on a living, breathing presence in the listening room. As the work slowly builds, the amps simply let it swell, slowly by stages into the first, shattering impact of the opening crescendo. This is music of massive expressive power and range, yet the Jadis encompass that power effortlessly – from that quietest, most muted of openings to the monstrous explosion of that first climax, from the first staccato rattle of the side drums on the left, so suggestive of musketry, to the answering swell of panic from the basses on the right, quick, shuffling feet

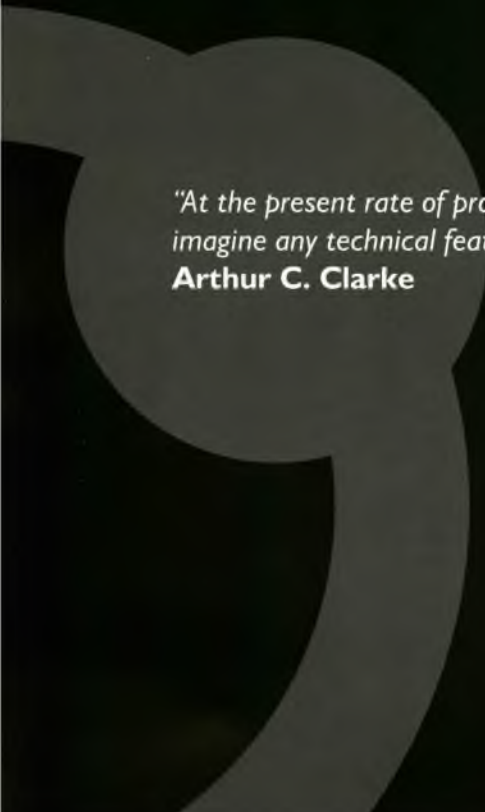
in the snow, through layer on layer of intensity as the movement builds into the prolonged, militaristic finale: followed instantly by the quiet stillness of aftermath and devastation as the troops recede. I've heard this disc on tens of system and I've heard Petrenko perform the piece live, but I'm not sure it has ever been quite so vividly pictorial in nature.

If the Petrenko performance demonstrates the JA 120s' ability to change scale and pace, precisely and without hesitation, then a performer like Ahmad Jamal shows just how far it can stretch that envelope. Listen to Jamal play live and his dynamic range, his shifts from soft to seriously loud can only be described as sudden, reminding you in no uncertain terms that the piano is a percussion instrument. Playing Ahmad Jamal's *Alhambra*, the changes in pace and attack in his playing, the way he switches mood and melody have never sounded so explosively present, while his command of rhythm, the placing of notes and the precision of their weighting is at once clearly defined but also fluidly unconstructed; ▶





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► there's no hint of mechanical agency here, just beautiful, liquid lines and phrases, heightened by contrast and stark punctuation. There's a characteristic sweetness, a slight rounding to the extreme highs that removes any vestige of recorded edge, but the harmonic development is still astonishingly natural; just listen to the subtle decay on the cymbal work and the way it survives behind Jamal's explosive right hand forays.

Bind all those things together and the JA120s' forte should be human voice; they don't disappoint. Too many amps make a mess of Ella, smoothing everything down to a caramel gloss or removing the body and weight that underpins her flawless phrasing. The Jadis monos place her in the room, all effortless grace and vocal dexterity, perfect pitch and tonality but leaving you only too aware of just what a wondrous instrument you are witnessing, and just how well she plays it... In fact, voices as disparate as Zinka Milanov and Michelle Shocked (The Texas Campfire Tapes) come up glorious in their own individuality. Warm and weighty, the JA120s stay just the right side of overly kind or romantic, never robbing a lip of its curl or a snarl of its spit and attitude.

As I've already suggested, the JA120s lack the absolute transparency, extension (at both ends of the spectrum) the spatial definition and low-level resolution of some other amps out there – in part down to a higher than average residual noise level, a fact of life with every Jadis amp I've ever lived with. But against those failings you need to balance their extraordinary musical and temporal coherence, their unfailingly natural expressive breadth. They are that most unusual of hi-fi components, one that can show you the beauty in a recording without emasculating its emotional impact or trivialising it. If you have a collection of recordings and you've reached that point on the hi-fi journey where all you want to do is enjoy them, then you'll find no better or more tractable tool than the JA120. Big, heavy and pricey it may be, as well as unfashionably inefficient, but it has power to spare and musical authority to burn – as well as knowing when a touch of delicacy is really what matters.

In Len Deighton's *Goodbye, Mickey Mouse*, General Bohnen describes the P47 Thunderbolt: "it weighs too much, costs too much and drinks too much..." To which Colonel Dan Badger responds, "General, you just described my wife, but I still love her dearly." Listening to the JA120s, basking in the warmth they churn out and picking my way around the real estate they occupy (while recalling their crates, lurking in the store room) I know exactly how he felt. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Class A tube mono-bloc

Valve Complement: 2x ECC82,
1x ECC83, 6x KT120

Input Sensitivity: 560mV

Input Impedance: >100 kOhms

Rated output Power: 100 Watts

Dimensions (WxHxD): 30x29x68cm ea.

Weight: 45kg ea.

Price: £9,900 ea.

Manufactured by: Jadis S.A.R.L

URL: www.jadis-electronics.com

Distributed by: Absolute Sounds

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

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The Aesthetix Rhea and Rhea Signature phono stages, often the starting point for our Aesthetix customers, typify the experience. *The Absolute Sound* described the Rhea with three words, "open," "transparent," and "uncoloured", adding that it imparts "a sense of palpability and immediacy that recalls the magic of live music."

Of the Aesthetix Calypso and Calypso Signature linestages, *Stereophile* said simply, "That's how live music sounds."

The hybrid Atlas power amplifier, now available in Signature and monobloc versions, completes the amplification line-up. In a detailed review in *Hi-Fi+* issue 76, Roy Gregory raved, "You'll travel a long way to find amplifiers that deliver a greater sense of the music's truth."

Recently launched in the UK, the Romulus CD player and Pandora DAC, both with valve output stages, will soon have reviewers struggling for superlatives.



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Walls of Sound loudspeakers

By Alan Sircom

The trouble with loudspeakers is not everyone loves having them in the room. The other trouble with loudspeakers is they are generic and not designed for your room. Walls of Sound resolves both issues at once. By building loudspeaker systems into your walls, there are no free-standing loudspeakers to trip over, knock over or damage with the vacuum cleaner. By custom designing the loudspeaker specifically for the room, you can get a sound far better than you ever could shoe-horning the wrong speaker into a room.

By its very nature, this is a bespoke service, and realistically something that has only been possible in recent years. Owner and designer Stuart McGill works by pitching up at your home, taking out a briefcase full of test gear (actually, a laptop and a measuring microphone) and takes a series of readings to analyse your room's sonic signature. Stuart then works with those numbers to help create custom crossovers for his speakers in your room. Then, the builders move in. Ideally, they work with the cavities in your wall, but can build a whole false wall should the need arise. Two or three days later, after some redecoration and some fine tuning, simply hook your wall to a suitable amplifier and away you go!

The system is effectively a three-way design, featuring a chambered subwoofer (fitting into the exterior wall cavity, assuming your house was built in the 1920s or later... earlier homes may need some more building work), an open baffle midrange (basically along the same wall, but a few feet from the subwoofer chamber) and a tweeter in a sealed chamber mounted on the brick wall itself.

Walls of Sound has five systems, depending on room size; System One being designed for smaller spaces and System Five could fill a barn... literally. Discussing the roll-out of drivers is immensely complex under these circumstances because although they are off-the-shelf models from big name drive unit designers like Scan-Speak, each version of the Walls of Sound design has its own set of drive units to suit the setting and the room size. Suffice it to say System One comprises a single treble unit, a single 130mm midrange and a pair of 200mm aluminium driver bass cones, the top system features a different tweeter, a pair of 140mm midrange units and four 300mm bass units per side, and the other systems all sport different sizes and configurations of driver. You begin to get the picture of how custom this system really is.

The problem with reviewing a highly customized system is where do you start? The easiest solution is to visit an owner, but calling someone up and saying "Hi, can I hear your wall?" isn't going to work. I've seen *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, I know how that sentence ends. You start off asking to listen to walls, pretty soon you get in a fight with Nurse Ratched and end up with the



Chief smothering you with a pillow. Not for me pal, not for me.

So, I went to Grahams Hi-Fi in London's New North Road, because the room in the store's lower level has been given over to a Walls of Sound installation. This installation gives some idea of the skills of the designer. It's a snapshot, a single case of a very customizable system, but the other way of looking at this is the idea of the system is to make the same performance possible in

anything from a box room to a ballroom (well, almost) and so this snapshot should be indicative of the concept wherever it's installed. I also know this space relatively well; twentysomething

years ago, it was one of my demonstration rooms (I was working for Grahams at the time). Although it's been through a series of improvements, the space sounded so poor, I considered this to be a worthwhile challenge; if Walls of Sound can put lipstick on this particular pig and pass it off as a supermodel, the company must be up to something good.

To say it succeeded was something of an understatement. The sound was top-to-toe consistent, effectively making the wall appear like two point sources of sound. There was no sense of tinkly audiophile fluff or nonsense, no coloration or artifice... just good solid twenty-to-twenty sound.

"The idea is to make the same performance possible in anything from a box room to a ballroom."

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► It's odd, but describing attributes of this loudspeaker system's sonic performance can sound like apologising for limitations that simply aren't there. It's as dynamic as the recording that it is fed, as detailed as the track playing, if the music has a big, expansive image, it sounds big and expansive. If not, it doesn't. Vocals are articulate. Instruments are solidly rooted in a three dimensional space, but not artificially so. It favours no particular style or genre of music, so it's just as likely to deliver good sound from a Led Zep track as it is from a state of the art jazz recording from the 1950s, or a state of the art classical piano piece from last week.

In some respects, I have some sympathy with the 'it all sounds the same' brigade, except I feel that the phrase is missing the word 'should'; for all intents and purposes, audio should converge into sounding functionally the same, with minor variations for personal taste. Unfortunately – or perhaps fortunately (for me, at least... it keeps me in mortgage payments) – that isn't the case and products keep cropping up that act as exceptions to the 'it all sounds the same' rule. What we really need



is something like a Platonic Form of 'loudspeaker'; an ideal anchor by which all loudspeakers should be measured. By providing the nearest you can get to the ideal sound in whatever room the Walls of Sound system goes into, this gets as near as possible to that Platonic Form. Speakers in the same room will almost inevitably deviate from what the Walls of Sound package produces, typically errors of frequency commission (too much bass, not enough bass trapping) or omission (getting round the bass problem by not making enough of the stuff).

Singing its praises ("The Walls are Alive With the Sound of Music") is all very well, but I suspect simply turning a wall (or, in the case of Grahams, walls... it's now a complete 5.1 channel system) into a loudspeaker should be just the start of the process. If a job's worth doing, it's worth doing properly and although the wall-based speaker seems to require less room treatment than free-space designs, tailoring the room properly should be an important consideration too. It's kind of part of the deal, and – given you've removed the two big loudspeakers from the living room – should be considered acceptable under domestic management trade-off rules.

I can see why this might not be universally accepted though, in the same way active loudspeakers should be more widely accepted for their performance but are often overlooked in audiophile circles. The loudspeaker effectively undermines the upgrade path and eliminates the possibility of showing off just how much you spent. Don't look at these as being facetious criticisms; people wear expensive clothes, drive fancy cars and have exotic wristwatches for more

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► than just the quality of the cut, the ride and the engineering. And, periodically the same drive, forces us to change our beloved devices for change's sake. It's time to be brutally honest to yourself, and there's no shame in this; if even a tiny part of your rationale for buying a big pair of loudspeakers – and the Walls of Sound package price equates to a big pair of loudspeakers in the audiophile domain – is that they are big and expensive looking; if your loudspeakers change with the phases of the moon, then this is categorically not the loudspeaker system for you. In fact, you should actively avoid hearing this, because if you end up liking it – and you probably will – you might end up cutting off a nice big corner of your hobby by mistake. You might not be able to go back to conventional boxes.

Audiophiles are inherently conservative. We tend to only like a thing when it's been discontinued, and its replacement will be uniformly disliked and distrusted until that too is discontinued. In this light, Walls of Sound might have something of an uphill struggle, because such conservatism means people faced with a better sound or a more conventional speaker package will choose the conventional. Also, there's a paradigm leap between "I want some new loudspeakers" and "I want some new loudspeakers, where's the sledgehammer?" Hard installed loudspeakers are always going to appeal to a minority audiophile audience, but anyone who dismisses them as just being for people who don't want to see their speakers, or worse as 'footballer's follies' should check out Walls of Sound. If you can find a conventional loudspeaker that does better whatever the price, I'd be surprised. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Walls of Sound

Price: on Application

(typical price from £9,995-£49,975)

URL: www.wallsofsound.co.uk

Our thanks to Gramhams Hi-Fi for the demonstration room

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Albany AP11 preamplifier and M608 mono power amps

By Steve Dickinson

Albury comes from that honourable tradition of small British hi-fi manufacturers, each ploughing an individual furrow and (hopefully) cultivating an enthusiastic group of adherents along the way. Some have moved up to a bigger league, others remain small, specialist and, largely, below the public's radar. The particular blip that was Albany burned brightly for a while, gaining many admirers in the 1980s, but faded from view years ago. Well now it's back.

Fans of the original Albany designs will recognise the red acrylic casework, and the gold screen-printing, not to mention the shoebox-style of the mono-bloc power amplifiers. It's an individual look, befitting a range that is almost blatantly true to its roots. The translucent red casework is distinctive and attractive, and I particularly like the way the red monitor LED lights up the internals in the dark, although if I'm honest, the graphics do look a little dated nowadays.

Fans will also recognise the 'house sound' in these new units. The M608 mono amps derive directly from the older M408 and M1008 designs, offering 60 Watts into an 8 Ohm load and almost twice that into 4 Ohms. However, the implementation has been significantly updated, and the M608 comfortably outpoints the old M1008's 100 Watts, largely thanks to considerably greater reserves in its power supply. Albany's designer, Neil Burnett, tells me the M608's power supply is capable of delivering almost a kilowatt for transients and is only cruising at the amp's rated output. He thinks its 60 Watt output is enough for most situations when you've got that sort of headroom for dynamics, and I believe he may be right. Big orchestral material, played loud, impresses by its extraordinary lack of congestion. For example, the Jansons/Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra's Dvorak Symphony no. 9, on SACD, retains depth, detail and texture, even in this most exuberant symphony's more climactic sections.

The AP11 pre-amplifier is completely new; its form more closely resembles a duty-free bulk pack of cigarettes, and it doesn't weigh that much more. It offers four line-level inputs including a dedicated CD input, recording loop, and a built-in moving-magnet phono stage. I don't use a vinyl source, but the designer was keen to point out that this is much more than just a throwaway. Those with record players might afford it serious consideration before assuming they need an expensive add-on. The CD input has lower gain than the other line-level inputs, and one thing I really like is that the volume control has a sensible and usable arc of operation. There are a lot of amplifiers out there whose volume controls go from 'is it working?' to 'Anti-Social Behaviour Order' before you've got past the 10-o'clock position. With the Albany, the music really starts happening from about ►

The Aletheia dac-1

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Aletheia - a Greek word used in philosophy meaning "the state of not being hidden; the state of being evident" (Heidegger).

For us, what is clearly 'evident' is that if you take a different approach to D to A conversion, one where you employ the simplest conversion processes, fed with incredibly good power supplies and all painstakingly isolated from the influences of RFI and vibration, you get a musical presentation of staggering realism and beauty.

"As a reviewer, you tend to go through a lot of equipment. And in fairness, some devices pass through your system almost unnoticed. Others, you remember for the excitement, the energy or the detail they brought. A few leave a lasting impression. But this is different.

When the dac-1 left the listening room, I experienced something close to mourning. No, not the mourning for the loss of a loved one, a cherished pet, a broken vase that came with a lot of deep-seated memories, a lost love or even that dream job you completely failed to get back in 1986. This was mourning for the loss of music. That's how far under your skin the Aletheia gets and I can think of no recommendation higher than that."

Alan Sircom | Hi-Fi Plus Issue 85
Aletheia dac-1 review

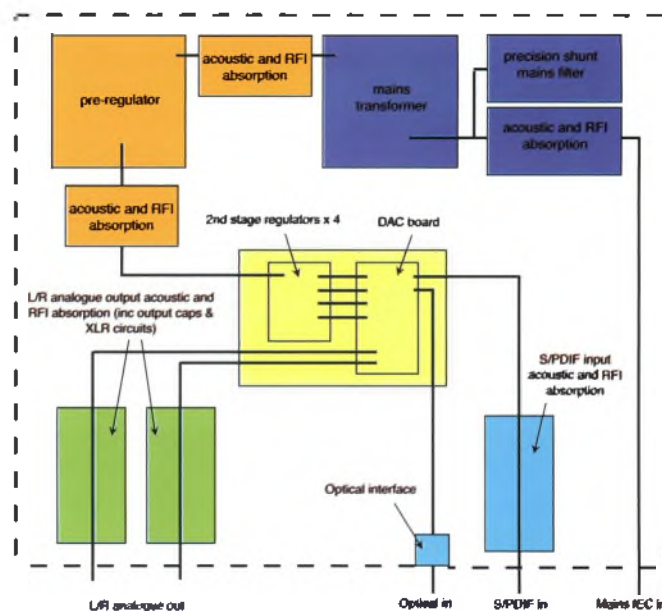


Figure 1. Aletheia dac-1 topology

“Whether it’s large-scale orchestral or girl-and-guitar; jazz, Gregorian chant or brass bands, the Albarrys get right to the heart of the musical message.”

► the 8-o’clock position but, depending on the recording, is usable all the way round to 2-o’clock, and beyond. And, despite the modest on-paper figures, that 2-o’clock position will coax enough output from the M608’s to ensure that your neighbours have the local council’s environmental nuisance department on speed-dial. This is definitely the sort of combination where the numbers only tell part of the story.

And storytelling is what the Albarrys excel at. Whether it’s large-scale orchestral or girl-and-guitar; jazz, Gregorian chant or brass bands, the Albarrys get right to the heart of the musical message and bring you the performance. It’s a combination of lots of things, done well. Whether it’s timing, tunefulness, speed and dynamics, or pretty much any other touchstone of performance that matters, the Albarrys give you no cause to doubt them. Like the David Berning ZOTL/ZH230 combination, they are completely even-handed in their treatment of any music you care to throw at them. They are not a ‘poor man’s David Berning’ though, partly because, even at under a third of the price of the Bernings, they are still a costly prospect, but mainly because describing them in that way is trite, and fails to do justice to their remarkable capabilities. Still, if you’re lusting after the Bernings but can’t stretch the budget, seek out the Albarrys, and be happy.

They are extremely fast, having the lightness of touch that seems so often to be the preserve of relatively low-powered amplifiers but, in

this case, there is a core of steel supporting that nimbleness. Earlier this year I heard Return To Forever play live at a jazz festival. Stanley Clarke’s bass attack is almost violent in its speed and impact, and very difficult to reproduce in a hifi system. ‘Sorceress’, from the live comeback album *Return to Forever Returns* starts with Clarke’s whip-crack bass and percussion, working together to create an effect which is almost a physical blow. The Albarry amps didn’t have the intensity of the real thing, but came close, kept the depth and impact of the percussion, and remained true to the pitch of the bass notes. The whole performance was considerably faster, more exciting and more enthralling than anything else I’ve played it through.

I also learnt things about familiar, favourite recordings I thought I knew inside out. Prokofiev’s compelling Piano Concerto no. 2, played by Yundi Li with the BPO under Seiji Ozawa has many dense and powerfully climactic sections, masterfully and convincingly rendered, but the big surprise was the second movement. I like the Li interpretation much more than the familiar Ashkenazy account, for the fluidity and dexterity which breathes life and fire into the first movement cadenza, a section which Ashkenazy renders somewhat taxing and laboured. But, the second movement is a *moto perpetuo*, which I’d previously felt Li took at too fast a tempo, preferring Ashkenazy’s more articulate and measured approach. But, with the dCS Puccini playing through the Albarrys, Li’s phrasing and exquisite control suddenly makes much more sense; it is without question played at a breakneck pace, but despite this pell-mell dash for the tape, it never seems rushed.

One of the most outstanding aspects of the Albarry approach is this preservation of inner detail, and the sense it conveys. Much of the credit goes to the pre-amp which is ►





Meet The Ancestors...

The hi-fi industry refers to racks and other equipment supports as "isolation devices", going to great lengths to describe how these products protect electronic components from the outside world. Unfortunately, structure born mechanical energy is the least of your system's mechanical problems!

In fact, the greatest damage to sound quality is done by vibration generated within the equipment itself; from the mains transformer, the power supply caps charging and discharging, every resistor or transistor that passes the signal. And although that vibration might be small, it's also right where the fragile audio signal is, right where it can do most damage. And to make matters worse, most of your equipment comes with soft rubber feet, meaning there's nowhere for that vibrational energy to go. It just carries on circulating round the unit's internals until it finally dissipates. That's why hard cones or couplers work under audio equipment: they offer an exit route for that energy, so that it can dissipate in the supporting surface.

But not all cones are created equal...

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► easily among the most transparent and engaging examples I've found and, frankly, peerless at the price. It drives when it has to drive, it trips lightly when tripping is required, and it can convey a degree of stillness which can be almost numinous. But, this is definitely one combination where there isn't a weaker half. The power amps work their own magic on the pre-amp's output. I've no doubt either component would work well in conjunction with other partners, but the combination is rather special. It has an ease and fluidity that effortlessly reveals the musicianship in a performance, yet digs deep and drives hard when the occasion requires it.

Many amplifiers faced with a big orchestra simply default to a muddled heap of sound. In stark contrast, the Albarrys continue to discriminate between the component elements. This resolves the wall of sound into something rather more than the sum of the parts. Tchaikovsky in general, and Capriccio Italien in particular, might not be an obvious choice if you're looking for subtlety in phrasing and musicianship. I was playing it because the system was getting some amazing results out of the denser, blowsier orchestral canon, and I like it, so what the heck? Anyway, some of the full-on orchestral sections have a percussion part for a tambourine, usually heard as a vague shimmering in the background, but this time it was clear that the skin of the tambourine was also being struck by fingertips, the texture of the strike was readily discernible, and quite separate from any other percussive sounds going on, not to mention the rest of the Royal Philharmonic in one of its more extrovert moments.

Partnered with a suitably articulate source (I got astonishing results with the dCS Puccini and U-Clock) the amps repeatedly proved themselves more than capable of preserving all the nuance and subtlety the player dug out of the disc. It's a no-brainer for complex jazz and modern music. Something like *Hard Fairy* by Graham Fitkin: two pianos battling it out with a soprano saxophone; dense, layered and complex, but the Albarrys kept their head and presented not only two distinct pianos, but gave quite extraordinary insight into the phrasing and the musicianship of their players.

There is an overall feeling of cleanliness about these amps, but without any hint of sterility. The Albarrys, unlike the Bernings, do add a little of themselves to the music: a sort of organic feel which I found entirely welcome. It's not warmth or any obvious coloration and tonally the amps are quite lean and neutral. It's perhaps that there is a sense of fluency about their presentation, which the more analytical and transparent approach of the Bernings eschews. The Albarrys are slightly more relaxed in their treatment of leading edges of notes; never losing the impact or the timing, but a touch more legato than staccato. They won't beautify your music for you, but if there is beauty to be had, they'll find it. More to the point, they give a level of insight into the performance that I've never found at this price. Much as I love my Accuphase, the time has clearly come to put it out to pasture. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Albarry AP11 pre-amplifier
(figures for line section)

Inputs: 4x line

1x (mm) phono stage

1x tape loop

CD input gain: 4.5 dB

Other line inputs: 15dB

Sensitivity: 3 mV

Size: 75mm x 440mm x 158mm (HxWxD)

Price: £1995.00

Albarry M608 monobloc
power amplifier

Output: 60Watts into 8 Ohms (18dBW)

Damping factor: Greater than 500

Input sensitivity: 500mV 0dB

Size: 140mm x 150mm x 265mm (HxWxD)

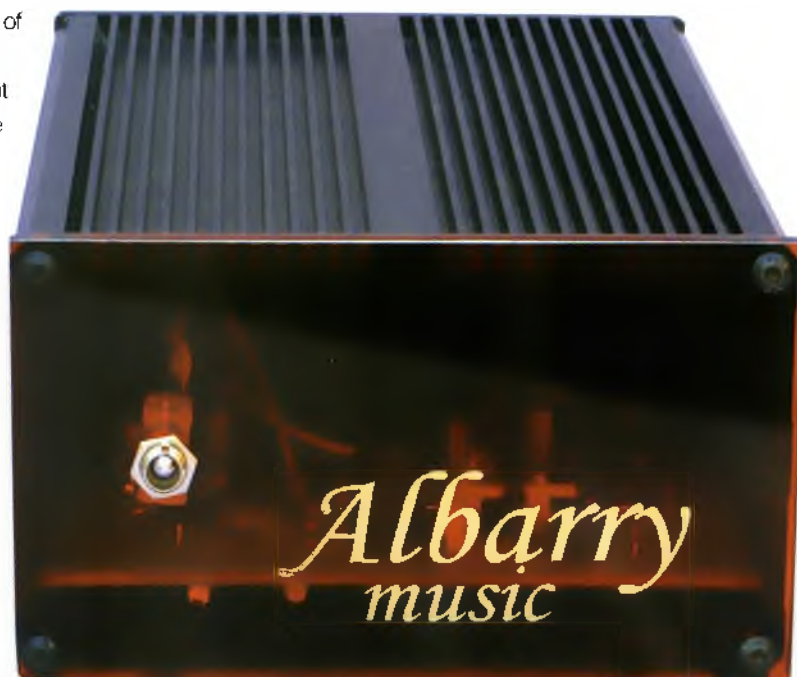
Weight: 14Kg (per pair)

Price: £2550.00 per pair

Manufactured by: Albarry Music Ltd

Tel: +44 (0)1782 507253

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Oracle Delphi Mk VI turntable

By Alan Sircom



The test of time. Whatever you say about a thing, if it's been around for decades and still going strong, it just has to be good. The Canadian Oracle Delphi turntable is a perfect example of this maxim; the first Delphi decks appeared in 1979: before CD was launched; when Gary Numan was in Tubeway Army, both Cheap Trick and Bob Dylan were at the Budokan; and the nearest thing to a laptop was a sleeping cat. Like most audio devices that have been around for a few decades, there have been some significant changes to that original Oracle design – the Delphi is now in its sixth iteration – but the underlying design remains fundamentally unchanged.

The fundamentally unchanged part is a wholly good thing. The deck practically defines 'timeless styling'. It looked amazing 30 years ago, it looks just as amazing today. Perhaps more so; the level of fit and finish of those polyester-coated alloy surfaces was rare in the 1980s, and almost unheard of today. Buy it, install it and people – real people, not just audiophiles – will coo over it, with many a nod of approval.

The changes are subtle, but significant, and unfortunately that tends to limit the options for upgrades for previous models. The subchassis and arm base have been made more substantial, it's moved from a DC motor to an AC one (with an external power supply which can be hidden... the deck is controlled by two very clever alloy stalks – marked '33' and '45' – that illuminate when pressed). The bearing was changed in the last version to a nylon contact bearing, but the setscrews and thrust pad in this bearing have been redesigned with new materials to ensure a lower noise bearing over a wider range of temperatures. ▶



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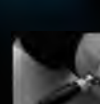
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Brent Butterworth, Sound & Vision



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► But perhaps the really big change is the Micro Vibration Stabilizer System (MVSS), which are three silicone-filled dashpots sited near the suspension towers, which damp the free springs in the towers by means of a screw wound into the silicone. These are adjustable to suit the choice of arm, cartridge, room size, equipment support, taste, temperature... practically any parameter you care to think of. But the result is the same. Perhaps the best way to think of this is a set of infinitely adjustable shock absorbers on a car; you adjust them to get the best possible performance, then leave them be, rather than obsessively adjust them to suit different needs. I found about two and three-quarter turns on each dashpot worked well (Oracle suggests anything from two to three and a quarter turns of the screw in the goo will do). You find there's a point where the sound just falls into perfect balance; quarter turn less and the sound is too soft, a quarter too much and it begins to sharpen up even legato instruments. The Goldilocks point is easy to identify though.

You've got to admire engineers that decide 'good enough' isn't good enough, and make their own instead. It engenders and creates an ingenuity that makes smart solutions for seemingly intractable problems, like the clever bit of bent wire that makes fitting a belt to a 'difficult' platter a piece of cake. That policy extends right down to the optional lid hinges. These are tall, adjustable blocks of aluminium the size of elegant cigarette lighters (remember, this harks back to the day when it was still OK to discuss cigarette lighters without fear of becoming a pariah). The standard hinges wouldn't sustain the optional folded clear Perspex lid without having to include less attractive front supporting uprights, so these custom-built hinges allow the lid to seemingly float over the turntable. It's an elegant solution, albeit a more expensive one, and gives the deck that kind of thoroughbred engineering elegance that is so rare today.

"You've got to admire engineers that decide 'good enough' isn't good enough, and make their own instead. It engenders and creates an ingenuity that makes smart solutions for seemingly intractable problems."

It's perhaps why – when it comes to tonearms – there is a long-standing mutual respect going on between Oracle and our own engineering centre of excellence, SME. The default choice of arm for the Delphi VI is an SME, but uniquely, it's a special '345' version using the armtube of the SME V with the yoke of the SME IV and branded in Oracle livery. I used a V with a Lyra Delos for the most part. It's a happy balance with the deck.

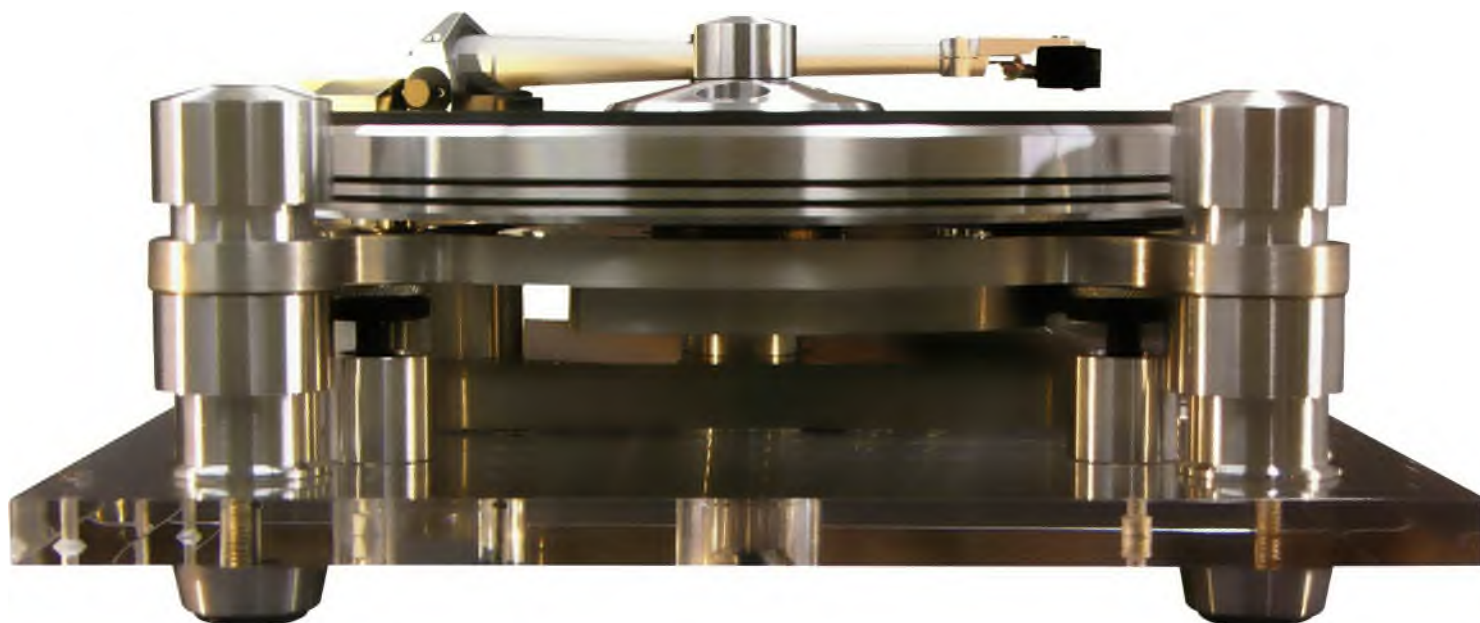
Although I've had relatively little exposure to Oracle decks over the years, those I've heard have always been good sounding. Perhaps, it must be said, a little too good sounding, straying into 'nice and polite' territory. All of which makes the Mk VI such a pleasure to play with, because for whatever reason – OK, it's those three little dashpots – the deck has managed to lose that leading-edge softening that helped make some of the previous Delphi models sound

a bit 'soft', while retaining that sophisticated and fundamentally neutral presentation that always kept you coming back for more.

With the addition of those little dashpots it seems, the deck now has some pep in its step. What I find majorly attractive about the Mk VI is just how easy music flows now. The Delos is an honest but big cartridge, which could become 'twitchy' in too free a system, but sings like dream here. It's tamed perfectly here though; the richness of the Oracle presentation is no longer 'soft' but 'creamy'. Transients are tight and precise, but the sound seduces and draws you in.

The presentation is kind of like listening to Orb records, and the *U.F.Orb* album did get an airing through this player. Music is portrayed sumptuously, with a big soundstage and effortless dynamic range. Those who love the Well-Tempered sound, but would like something a bit more 'full-fat' will love what Oracle does to the music. It still has the temporal precision and focus of the likes of W-T, but the Oracle adds some meat to the bones in the process.

What the Oracle brings to the party is an absence of noise floor. It's a little like your records have been cleaned that bit deeper, but I could have sworn my already-quiet Mo-Fi version of Beck's *Sea Change* got even quieter, and those albums that sound like frying bacon, seemed to let the surface noise 'float' over a quieter underpinning. It sounds like navel gazing of the first water, but when you listen to the Oracle, you realise there is a subtle, but important, difference between ►



► 'silence' and 'absence of noise'. And, the Oracle trades in silence, the rarer of the two.

OK, let's put the Oracle into some perspective. This is a 'spendy' deck; not in the Kuzma XL4/Continuum field of expenditure, but it's up there with mid-spec Linn LP12s, Brinkmanns, Clearaudios, SMEs, Avid and VPI models. And it sits comfortably in among such vaulted company on both sonic and build-quality standing. It doesn't wipe out the competition, but nor does the opposition crush the Canadian deck. You pay your money, and take your choice... and if your choice is a sound that is rich and enveloping but one stays just the right side of 'lush', that choice is likely the Oracle Delphi VI.

In fact, the manual is the deck's biggest stumbling block now. It reminds me of a line from a classic slice of 1970s British comedy – "I'm playing all the right notes, but not necessarily in the right order" – because all the information needed to get a superb sound from the Delphi VI is in the instruction manual, you just need to throw the pages up in the air a few times and hope they end up reassembling themselves the right way round. Given that an increasing number of turntables today will be set-up and installed by the end user, the manual needs a re-shuffle, or even a re-write.

We live in a world of planned obsolescence, of product life cycles measured in months. A typical computer part might stay on the shelves as long as a pot of yoghurt these days. Which makes a deck with staying power like the Oracle all the more exciting. It's been around for decades. It will be around for decades more. But the changes made to bring it to Mark VI show it's not simply preserved in aspic. The deck is just as viable in 2012 as it was in 1979 thanks to a series of upgrades and improvements that keep it sounding as good as it looks. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Speeds: 33/45rpm (controlled from stalks on subchassis), fine tune speed control on separate power supply, or optional Turbo power supply

Suspension: Tripedal mounting, each tower featuring seven mechanical filters

Motor drive electronics and drive belt: AC synchronous motor, dual current drive circuitry. Molded belt.

Record / Platter mass: 4kg

Record surface: hard acrylic

Subchassis: brushed aluminum with a clear lacquer-coat.

Plinth: Clear Acrylic.

An optional Black Granite plinth is available for an extra charge.

Dimensions (WxDxH): 47.5x36.3x15cm

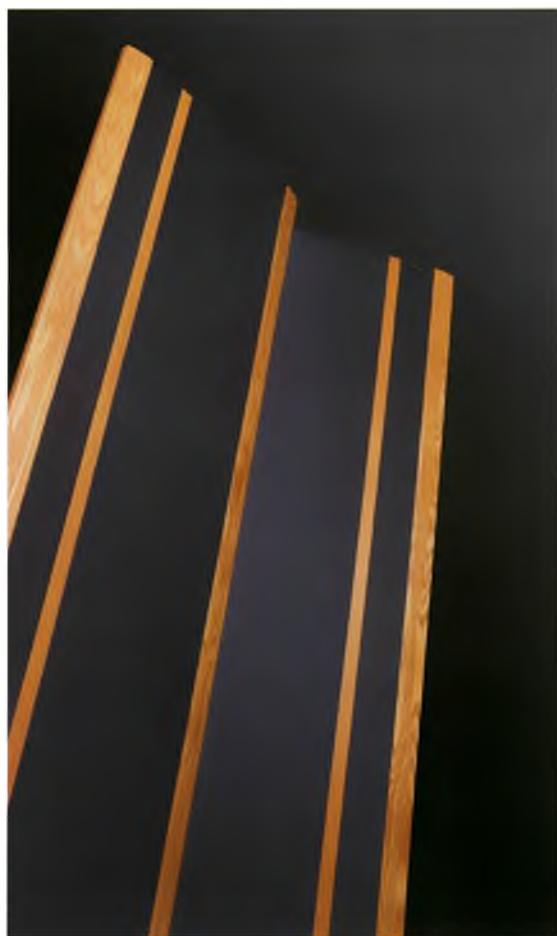
Weight: 16kg (acrylic base, as tested)

Price (as tested): £8,595-£10,895 (excl. tonearm and cartridge)

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URL: www.oracle-audio.com

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URL: www.coherent-systems.co.uk
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Everything But The Box Terra III loudspeaker

By Alan Sircom

We British have a terribly parochial attitude to continental Europe at times. Mention Bulgaria to the average UK hi-fi buff, and they'll probably start talking about Georgi Markov, umbrellas and ricin. OK, so the whole spycraft aspect of Markov's murder on Waterloo Bridge remains grimly fascinating, but that happened 34 years ago. It's time to move on. People don't think of British people as gobbing punks anymore. OK, actually they do... but the point is Bulgaria is home to a lot more than CSS agents with murderous rainware. It's home to Everything But The Box.

More fool us. Everything But The Box is a Bulgarian company that's been going for just under a decade, making a range of small, but perfectly formed loudspeakers and subwoofers. And by 'perfectly formed', we are a long way from small 'monkey coffin' rectangular wood-finished cabinets; we're talking music of the spheres here. The Terra III for example. The company's top of the line is front ported two-way standmount, which looks like a scaled-down version of Pete's Dragon carrying a door. Aside from the drivers and the composite front baffle (made from an amalgam of com, granite and resin, no less), everything about it is aluminium, right down to the HF equaliser knob at the rear. And everything about the fit and finish is exemplarily, like that aforementioned contour knob, which has a laser-etched earth logo cut into it. The aluminium exterior is pressure cast and acts as a monocoque. It's then finished in the richest lacquer you can imagine this side of a Bentley and finished in one of 16,000 different shades. Er... yes, sixteen thousand colours (including Bentley colours); more if you include two-tone shades. They can even have a corporate logo sprayed on the front. My pair came in a neat shade of, well, black.

The Terra 3 uses a 100mm Morel poly cone woofer coupled to a 30mm silk dome from the Chinese manufacturer Wavecor, which sits in a deep brushed aluminium horn. Two gold-plated Supra connectors and three custom made aluminium feet complete the package.

It's an easy package to drive too, a comfortable eight-ohm nominal load, with only a couple of dips below five ohms in the published impedance plot. The speaker is a moderately insensitive 86dB efficient design, and that places a limit on loudness relative to amplifier power output, although the Terra III is rated at handling up to 150W amp designs. In reality, unless you are after high volumes in big rooms

or wanting to use three-watt SET designs, the Terra III is perfectly comfortable in replay.

We live in a world that can't make up its mind between desktop audio and mainstream audio, but that's the joy of the Terra III; it's happy in either setting. That treble equalizer knob at the back is almost perfectly designed to adjust between the two



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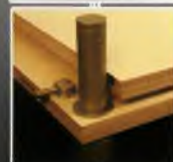
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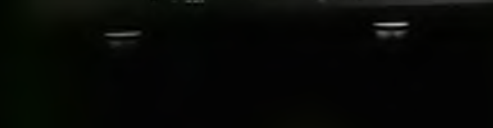
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“But, of all aspects of the EBTB’s performance, it’s the speed that’s most notable and most alluring.”

► uses of the Terra III, and the combination of front port, backswept baffle and treble tuner makes this a loudspeaker that works in a wide range of rooms and less-than-ideal settings. It’s less room fussy than most boxes. In fact, the only operational issue in install is those three feet splay wide and if you plan on using speaker stands, use ones with a large top plate.

This is not to say the Terra IIIs are unfussy about where they sit. They need careful positioning, ideally clear of rear and side walls and quite strongly toed in, to hear them at their best. They also need – and for that matter – deserve good, massy stands. The EBTB speakers have a relatively wide dispersion characteristic, so imaging is not a one-person experience, although when at their best with a sharpish toe-in, they do have a distinct sweet spot.

That all said, this is not a loudspeaker that needs a lot of acoustic treatment to sound good. The light-step it treads in the bass means there isn’t much need for bass trapping and the sloped front baffle is very good at eliminating some of the need for first reflection treatment. No, the Terra III is not immune to room acoustic anomalies and placing a speaker this good in a bad room is something of a travesty, but the speaker is less fussy about its surroundings than it is about its positioning.

EBTB is creating a stir in the pro market, and if the Terra III is anything to go by, it’s not hard to see why. These are tight, fast and precise loudspeakers, detailed and insightful and fundamentally neutral, with a lot of clarity in the

often hard to resolve upper mids. While not a three-way design, you could almost swear there was a dome midrange unit in the mix, such is the definition of that mid-band.

But, of all aspects of the EBTB’s performance, it’s the speed that’s most notable and most alluring. It’s a quicksilver design, paced more like a small sealed box or even an electrostatic than a ported two-way; playing some fast stick work from Art Blakey on the *Moanin’* album was not a problem, and it even got past the slightly syrupy mix of the first Lady Antebellum album to dig up the quality of Dave Haywood’s picking (it’s a mark of how little Country matters in the UK; Lady Antebellum’s first album went double platinum in the US and got to 191 in the UK charts... shame really, it’s a good album).

There’s honesty to the sound of the Terra III that manifests itself in the speaker’s every action. It doesn’t try to force you into listening to a particular genre, it doesn’t hide the truth about bad recordings and compressed mastering, but neither does it prevent you from hearing just how good the best recordings can be. If only more mastering suites used EBTB speakers!



► It's funny how our biases work against us. Part of the reason why I'm banging on about not dismissing these speakers out of hand is that is almost precisely what I did. Not in the "it's Bulgarian" sense (good audio is truly international these days), but I admit that I thought the shape was indicative of style over substance. Then you hear them, and realise this speaker design is backed up by some seriously smart, audio-savvy guys (specifically, Kamen and Dobromir Dobrev). The shape isn't there for decoration; it's there because it helps knock out internal standing waves and cabinet resonances. And those audio smarts prove themselves in the quality of the sound; it's honest and beguiling in the extreme.

Nevertheless, there's an issue to address; on desk, the Terra III is perfectly fine, but in the room, you'll probably end up adding a REL or similar subwoofer to fill in the bottom end. Although it cites 59Hz as its lowest point, sound falls off quickly below 100Hz. This is not such a problem as might first seem as it's a very clean roll-off, lending itself perfectly to use with a good sub. There's no lumps or bumps in the bass, it just falls away progressively after about 100Hz, and you just find the sound of bass instruments is leaner than

usual. This is rare in any loudspeaker, but in a ported speaker, it's almost unheard of. There was absolutely no sense of the port chuffing along at about 80Hz, all you had was just a gentle distancing between you and the bass; it retained the complexity and expansiveness of Mahler's Symphony of a Thousand, but it lost enough bass and baritones to make it the Symphony of About Eight Hundred. But the fact remains, if you are using these speakers away from the nearest of near-field, a subwoofer is going to feature in your future pretty damn soon.

Don't dismiss the Everything But The Box Terra III as a styling exercise or a mug's eyeful or even as a desktop speaker. It's more than that. This is a loudspeaker of great clarity and detail and speed. It's a studio monitor for people who want their monitors to look good, too. OK, so in most domestic listening rooms, the monitor comes with a need for some low-end reinforcement in the shape of a subwoofer, but if ever there's a next-generation candidate for 2.1 or 2.2 channel stereo systems, it's the Terra III. Very highly recommended. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Two-way ported standmount design

Tweeter: 30 mm silk, neodymium

Bass-mid: 100mm neodymium, shielded

Frequency response: 59-25kHz

Nominal impedance: 8 ohms

Sensitivity: 86db 1 watt/1 meter

RMS Power: 150 W

Dimensions (WxDxH): 21x38x28 cm

Weight: 5kg

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

AKG K3003 in-ear monitor headphone system

By Alan Sircom

AKG is no stranger to top-notch ear-wear. The Austrian brand (a part of the Harman group since 1994) has a powerful and long-standing reputation for making some of the best transducers around; the company's C414 has been one of the condenser microphones of choice for professionals for more than 40 years, and the company's current flagship K701 headphones are extremely well respected. But nothing in the current line-up prepares you for the £1,000 AKG K3003 in-ear monitors.

As these are special earphones, they are not sold through normal channels. On the other hand, this is also a set of universal IEMs priced at the custom-made levels. Most IEMs have at best two drive units. The K3003 has a dynamic bass driver that sits just outside the ear, with two-armatures for treble and midrange.

AKG custom makes the K3003 in its Austrian factory, tests every model (rather than batch testing) and comes in two versions; the K3003 (headphone only), and K3003i (headphone with in-line microphone). With the bass sitting at the tragus of the ear, the IEM extends further out of the ear than most, so styling is important. The brushed stainless steel exterior, which extends to the elegant microphone and volume control block (on the K3003i only) and even the jack socket sleeve.

Fitted with the grey-banded 'reference sound' filter as standard, the K3003 also includes a black-banded 'bass boost' and white-banded 'high boost' filter modules that screw onto the in-ear section of the IEM. In reality, the 'bass boost' is effectively a partial low-pass filter (cutting midrange and high



frequencies) and the 'high boost' is a partial high-pass filter (cutting midrange and bass frequencies). Because of the depth of the armature and filter set, standard IEM ear sleeves will not fit in the K3003, AKG provides special latex-free spherical sleeves in small, medium and large fittings.

Although naturally the audio output of the K3003 is compatible with almost any player or smartphone, the optional remote/microphone block of the K3003i is compatible with Apple's 2nd Generation and beyond iPod Touch, 3rd Generation and beyond iPod Shuffle, 4th and beyond Generation iPod Nano, 120GB iPod Classic, as well as all iPads and iPhone 3GS and later versions (ensure the software of the iDevice is up to date).

The K3003/K3003i is supplied in a cigar box-sized multi-layer case. The top layer contains the headphones, the leather travel case, the filter modules and the serial number of the headphones. The second layer holds the audio adapter mini-jack socket, the in-flight adaptor, a box of ear sleeves and the manual. The travel case is designed to wrap the earphone cable without tangling – AKG studied portable use and found many people wind the earphone cable around the device when not in use, which can lay the minijack open to damage; by supplying a travel case, the user is more likely to wind the cable around this than the portable device (in theory) and thereby lengthen the mean time between repair of the K3003.

A conventional three-way loudspeaker generally has a significant advantage over loudspeakers with just a woofer and a tweeter. That middle- ▶

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range loudspeaker drive unit covers the part where most music (and, for that matter, voices) happens. This is not something that is normally a function of an in-ear device, because of the lack of space the ear itself, but the results are exceptional, at least if the K3003 is indicative of the breed.

The K3003 works from the midrange out. The clarity of the midrange is exceptional. Not just exceptional for an IEM... just exceptional, in the way something like a Stax is exceptional. There is a level of insight into the midrange that

gets into the back-story of the music playing. This can be a double-edged sword; listening deep into the mix sometimes reveals details in the recording that usually remain buried, and some of them should stay that way.

That midband clarity extends out to the treble and bass, but where this works so well is the lucid way sounds appear coherent. A musical instrument extends out of that midrange without changing tonality or character. This is more a property of planar magnetic or electrostatic headphones rather than IEMs, so this is a true indicator of quality. It's also makes voices sound uncannily accurate, although female voices are very slightly less distinct than male voices.

There's one mild downside to the whole three-way speaker system. Because the bass unit is effectively outside the ear, the isolation properties of the K3003 are at best fair. The Tube has the oldest sections of underground railway in the world... and as a consequence it's also one of the noisiest. Travelling around that service is a major test of an IEM's isolation. The K3003 managed to keep a lot of the regular mid-band rumble and clanking at bay, but the top end screech of metal-on-metal between Edgware Road and Paddington stations and the general bass thump-thump-thump (admittedly hard to cut) have been better attenuated with deeper-seated in-canal IEMs.

All of this is with the Reference filter in place. Swapping out for the bass boost (really a mid-treble cut) does give the impression of deeper bass... but it is an impression. Ditto the treble boost, in reverse. I significantly prefer the Reference filter because it made the vocals sound 'right', although the boost filters are significantly less heavy-handed than heavy-handed tone-shaping from a portable source. With the treble-boost filter in place, the K3003 still delivered good and neutral bass. I found the treble boost lifted the midrange and treble, but not the high treble. If anything, it seemed to make the treble even more 'pure' sounding than the Reference, although the Reference is the better balanced sound overall. Meanwhile, the bass boost makes the K3003 more in line with a lot of popular IEMs and headphones; no, it's not a Beats-beater and doesn't turn fey folk into deep dubstep, but it gives the K3003 a brooding, big bass sound.

Comparing the snarling Nick Cave vocals on the first and eponymous Grinderman album [Mute, CD] with Elizabeth Fraser's vocal on *Teardrop* from Massive Attack's *Mezzanine* [Virgin, CD] is fascinating. Cave's primal growl is surprisingly articulate, his diction bringing out the vitriol of the lyrics and that is presented perfectly here. Meanwhile, Fraser's almost fey breathy vocals are harder to resolve under any circumstance (the lyrics are 'poetic' to the point of almost being word salad) but the K3003 does better than most. Nevertheless, the IEM does seem to mildly accent the breathy part of her voice... perhaps the nearest this gets to deviating from absolute fidelity.

The bass boost filter brings out some of the dark, brooding power of music, while the treble boost filter helped bring voices up out of the mix. On balance though, I still prefer the Reference.

Expensive? Of course, but the K3003/3003i does make a good argument for being worth every penny. They are phenomenally well made, deliver outstanding sound without being demanding of either source material or player, and bespeak of understated luxury. For the person who understands the best of engineering is reassuringly expensive, this fits the bill perfectly. Unless you are in the habit of carrying round a pair of big Stax headphones with your iPod, this will redefine the sound of your system. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

AKG K3003i in-ear monitor/headset

Frequency Response: 10Hz – 30 kHz

Drivers: 40mm Mylar/titanium diaphragm drivers

Sensitivity: 125 dB

Impedance: 8 Ohms

Max. Input Power: 15mW

Cable Length: 1.2m

Weight: 10 grams, without cable

Warranty: Two years, parts and labour

Price: £1,000

Manufactured by: AKG Acoustics GmbH

URL: www.ake.com

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

PAB Anti-Vibration equipment support platforms

By Jimmy Hughes



PAB stands for Pro Audio Bono – a Polish company making a range of anti-vibration equipment support stands. The concept is simple; a shelf is suspended via strings from four turrets placed at the corners of a large base, and height adjustment is possible.

PAB offers several versions of its support stand. The Standard (reviewed here) is the basic model. It features a 12 ply wooden base and shelf capable of carrying a load of about 48kg. If this isn't enough, PAB offer something able to support nearly 60kg. With a shelf measuring 48cm x 39cm, the PAB stand should be suitable for all except the largest components. The base part measures 255 x 39cm, and therefore has a fairly large footprint – bigger than many dedicated hi-fi support shelves.

We used our review sample under a Classé CP800 preamp. Installation is very simple, and takes just a few minutes. Once on the PAB stand, the component being supported rocks back and forth slightly if pushed from the front. We immediately noticed an improvement. Playing a fairly 'busy' jazz track (Joe Sample's *Carmel*) with solo piano, drums, guitar, and bass, the sound seemed cleaner and more open, tonally. The piano projected better and had greater brilliance and immediacy.

Of even greater importance was the increased clarity apparent. The various instruments seemed to separate better, allowing you to follow the individual lines with greater ease. The overall presentation seemed more relaxed, making the music easier to follow.

Removing the platform caused the soundstage to collapse, making the top end seem a shade hard and brittle. The lovely open brilliance of Joe Sample's piano seemed to diminish, and the musical interplay between the various instruments became harder to follow.

The bass line seemed less fluid, and wasn't quite as clear. It was the sort of difference that made you doubt your senses; could a support stand really create that degree of change? Reinstating the PAB platform confirmed that it could and did.

Trying the PAB platform under an Avid Volvere turntable brought a similar result, sonically. The music seemed clearer and better separated, while at the same time being more relaxed and refined. It was a very clear difference, and much bigger than expected.

Again, the sound had a relaxed sort of quality that made it feel as if there was less sense of strain. I don't mean to imply that things sounded lazy or lacking in energy – quite the reverse. Rather, there was a more flowing fluid sort of quality to the presentation.

Because the shelf is able to move in the horizontal plane, you have to be uniquely careful when using a PAB platform with a turntable. Rough or careless operation could cause the tonearm to jump. ▶

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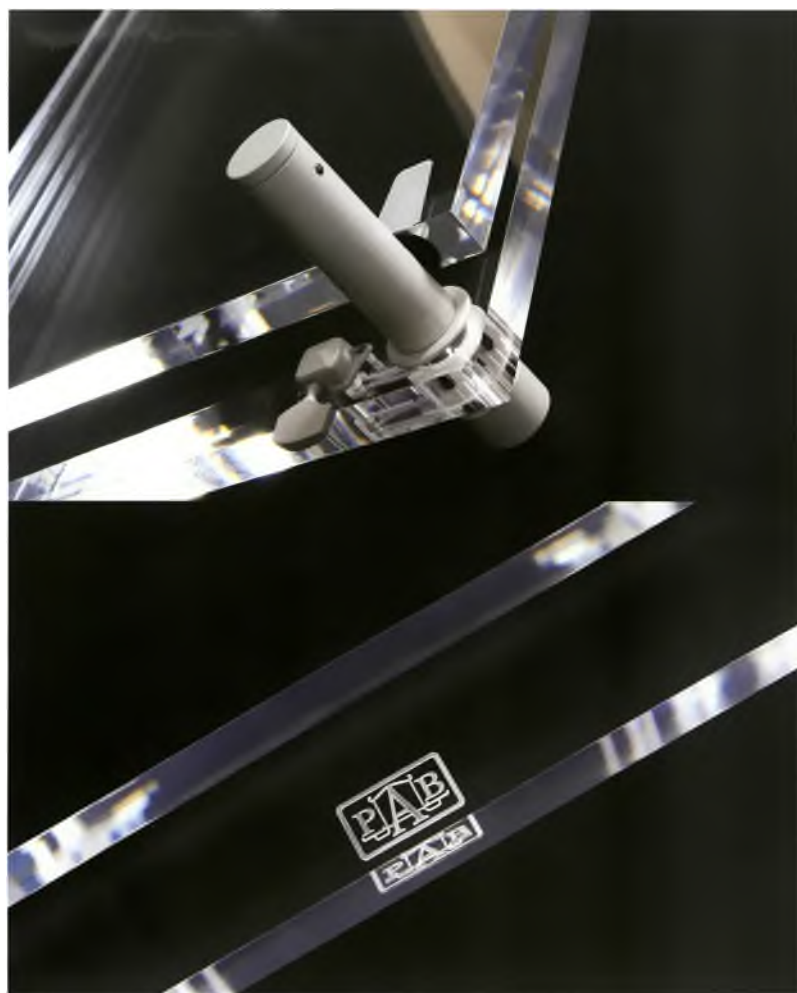
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“The music seemed freer and less compressed, sounding fresher and more alive. There was something of that holographic depth and space you get with good vinyl reproduction.”

▶ But perhaps the most surprising and intriguing improvement came when I put the laptop computer I use as a music source on a PBA platform. Once again, I heard a distinct improvement in clarity and inner detail while playing a CD I'd ripped to the hard drive. The difference was very obvious; I could actually hear the sound change while moving the computer between the two locations while the track played.

The track I chose was Happy Family from King Crimson's album Lizard. Not only was there a greater impression of stereo width/depth, but I experienced a more holographic soundstage. The sound seemed decidedly 'flat' with the laptop back on its usual surface.

But once the laptop was placed on the CP800/PBA shelf, there was noticeably greater transparency. Each instrument and voice seemed more separate and distinct, with greater individuality. The soundstage literally bristled with extra detail.



This particular track is a bit manic and 'busy', with voices and instruments popping up all over the place. It can sound a bit chaotic and messy, but – with the laptop on the CP800 – the sound also became noticeably more coherent and easier to follow.

The music seemed freer and less compressed, sounding fresher and more alive. There was something of that holographic depth and space you get with good vinyl reproduction. That hard-to-describe sense of crisp dynamic-projection and intimacy.

But, as soon as the laptop was placed on its original support surface, the sound seemed to cramp-up, with voices and instruments losing their individuality and separation. I was very surprised by this, and dismayed not to have realised how sensitive laptops seemed to be.

While I'd found that the 'sound' of my laptop could be altered by using an audiophile USB cable, I'd not noticed any sonic difference between (say) the computer's mains power supply or the in-built battery. So I wrongly assumed it wasn't sensitive to what it sat on.

Sitting the laptop on the CP800 seemed to transmit the sonic benefits of the PBA support shelf. And while things might've sounded even better had the laptop been provided with its own dedicated shelf, the improvement was still very worthwhile.

So, be warned; it's quite likely that – having heard what one PAB stand can do for your sound – you'll start thinking about buying more platforms. I speak from bitter experience here; I'm so impressed with what one does, I'm looking at buying two or three more!

The standard PBA support shelf costs £479. So, not cheap, but certainly a very worthwhile purchase considering the level of sonic improvement delivered. It's possible to buy PBA direct from Fidelity Art or selected dealers. Decisions! Decisions! +

Manufactured by: Pro Bono Audio

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Origin Live Linear Flow 2 cables

By Alan Sircom

Origin Live is best known for its turntables and tonearms, but for the longest time, it's also made a range of inexpensive interconnects and speaker cables. We looked at the top Linear Flow 2 loudspeaker cable and matching shielded version of the phono-phono interconnect cables.

Starting with the interconnect, it's made of good quality copper conductors, twisted together to reduce inductance, set in a balanced configuration (even though this cable is terminated in single-ended Eichmann Bullet phono plugs, XLRs are an option) and shielded with a nickel-plated copper braid. A rarity among interconnects, the Linear Flow 2 has a flying earth wire, which could help hum, RF or lower the noise floor (although in my system, it did nothing at all).

The loudspeaker cable has a similar construction, making it a true Litz wire design (so no using it with Naim amps from the 1980s) again using high-purity copper in place of silver-plated or even pure silver conductors for the quality of sound. Curiously, although Origin Live will supply the cables terminated with banana plugs if you so desire, the company prefers to ship cables with wire ends tinned with solder (it does not supply the cable 'off the reel'). In addition to the interconnect and speaker cable ranges, Origin Live also (naturally) makes a tonearm cable in the Linear Flow 2 design, but it doesn't make a power cord of any description.

Unlike cables that take a family approach (swap one cable out of the system and the whole house of cards comes tumbling down) these are very much standalone, no fuss wires. There's no special synergy that makes the use of one pointless without the other, even though their sonic signatures are near identical in reality. Linear Flow 2 is far too down-to-earth to rely on ideology.

Both types of Linear Flow 2 excel at getting out of the way. It sounds like faint praise, but these are fundamentally 'characterless' cables, not adding their own identity to the sound and not masking the personality of the devices the Origin Live wires connect with. This might make them hard to demonstrate, because many will go for the biggest bang for the buck; but there's more to music than fireworks, and the Linear Flow 2 cables both make a less dramatic, but no less significant, influence on the sound.

The absence of character means they can fight above their weight. While some systems are (in some cases unconsciously) optimised for top-line cables, there are other extremely high-end systems that need no such special treatment and it is these systems that would benefit from the Linear Flow 2 approach. It shines in those no-fuss, no-nonsense systems that use old-school Brit-fi components; the perfect cable to wire an Audiolab or a Musical Fidelity to a pair of Monitor Audio or Spondors, for example.

This is down to both cables inherent sense of balance and poise. They don't give music a zing, a sense of rhythm or a bloom; they play it straight, and such a straight shooter is rare these days. Origin Live talks about an absence of ringing in the system when Linear Flow 2 is in place; I have to admit, my system doesn't seem plagued by ringing whether the cable is in place or not, but the overall sound (between Lyngdorf CD-1, Sugden A21SE and Avalon NP2.0) lost that glare that sometimes besets CD sound, and that doesn't happen too often.





Of the two, I felt the loudspeaker cable was the stronger of the two, but really not by much. Both have an unfatiguing sense of naturalness and integrity to the sound, and place absolutely no emphasis on any aspect of the overall performance. The loudspeaker cables, however, do get out of the way even more than the interconnects, especially at the frequency extremes; it brings out the texture and feel of bass notes and the sense of urgency high treble can bring to a piece of music. The interconnect did this too – and perhaps just as well – but there was just a

hint of enhancement to the bass and a slight sheen to the top that was not noticeable in the loudspeaker wire. As said though, the difference was minor.

Hi-Fi+ can sometimes have a rarified approach to cables. We stress cables used as a component in the system, insist people use a front-to-back one-brand solution and can get myopic and wonder why the world and his wife aren't spending thousands on cable systems. But in the real world, despite our entreaties, people don't behave like that. They still buy cables piecemeal, hoping that $A+B=C$. What Linear Flow 2 represents is the best solution if you are buying piecemeal, because it sounds consistent and good and is neutral enough not to upset the cable neighbours. But Linear Flow 2's effects are cumulative, and the more you bring your system into Origin Live line, the more consistent and good and neutral it will sound. OK, so it's not going to win over that many listeners who have a £20,000 cable solution, but it is an extremely 'right' sounding at a price that doesn't leave people gasping for air. Very strongly recommended as a loudspeaker wire, and highly recommended as an interconnect cable. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Prices: Linear Flow 2 'screened' interconnect: £388/1m pair
Linear Flow 2 loudspeaker cable: £30/mono metre
Loudspeaker cable termination fee: £30 per cable
Banana Plugs: £35 per cable

Manufactured by: Origin Live
JRL: www.originlive.com
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Good music needs a LeadingEdge

music matters

By Alan Sircom

Last issue, I presented a pragmatic ‘four feet’ rule of establishing a good system; an appropriate system, appropriately accessorised and installed, for a room that is appropriately treated. Get these in balance and good sound is more or less guaranteed. Unbalance one of these and luck comes into play more and more.

Here’s what I mean. Room treatment can transform a system, but too little in the wrong places and you might as well not use room treatment whatsoever, while use too much and you risk strangling the life out of a room. This is – or at least, should be – the reason you go to a specialist dealer; a good dealer can create an appropriately-designed system for you and your room, know how to install it to get the best from it and fine-tune it to extract still more. And we aren’t the only people to think that way.

Vertex AQ is a popular buzzword round these parts. Actually, there are a number of companies that might never publicly admit as much, who place Vertex AQ’s devices under the “damn it, they work” cognitive dissonance banner. But recently, Vertex AQ’s Steve Elford (*pictured right*) has been working with Kaiser Acoustics in Germany to create the LeadingEdge product line. Vertex AQ’s power and cable products remain the same, but the Ken Barlow (sorry, Kinabalu) platform has been replaced by an upgraded LeadingEdge version, that can build into a stand system.

More interesting though, the LeadingEdge brand also includes acoustic panels. Very different to the standard acoustic panels, the LeadingEdge panels actually begin to act where bass traps end, at the midband and beyond. They vary in size from mini panels designed to quieten down the space around the individual components, to large back-to-back D-shaped panels the size of old Quad Electrostatic loudspeakers.



Unlike absorbent bass traps, the LE panels have an array of tiny perforations along the veneered wooden front panel. Behind these ‘micro-perf’ holes, the panels have a paper honeycomb, which form small air chambers to act as a series of tiny Helmholtz resonators.

The idea is not new, but it is new to domestic audio environments. Eagle-eyed frequent fliers might have noticed the inside of the engine cowlings are covered in little perforations (to both lower noise and reduce air turbulence before it hits the front turbine) and those who have sat in large modern conference halls may have noticed the ones that don’t echo have perforated acoustic panels along the walls and ceilings.

I’m not going to talk specifics, because currently Steve Dickinson has a set of LE panels in for assessment, but Steve, Roy Gregory and I all attended a session discussing the LE equipment recently, and the results (in Roy’s room) were exceptionally impressive.

The LE and Vertex AQ equipment dove-tail beautifully, and interestingly when demonstrated in shows, on a variety of systems, the system always receives high praise. It fits perfectly into that four-foot foundation discussed earlier too.

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record reviews

How To Read Them

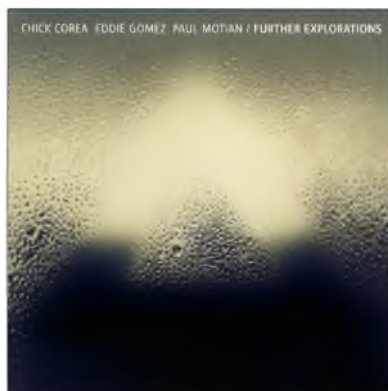
The information contained in the record reviews is presented in the following way. Albums are identified by label and – where possible – serial number. Beneath this you will find one or more icons which denote the available formats for the recording. The first icon refers to the format reviewed.

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

This issue's featured reviewers are:

DD – Dennis D Davis
RSF – Richard S Foster
MP – Mark Prendergast

	CD		120g LP
	Gold CD		150g LP
	HDCD		180g LP
	XRCD		200g LP
	Double Disc		10" LP
	DVD		Availability As S/H LP
	SACD		Vinyl Double Album
	Hybrid SACD		45 RPM
	Multi-Channel		



Chick Corea, Eddie Gomez, Paul Motian

Further Explorations

Concord Jazz CJA3336402



This important tribute to the New Jersey-born pianist Bill Evans stands as a high watermark in the careers of all concerned. Evans' legacy is awesome and here we get two of his former musicians melding beautifully with who many think was his best pupil, Boston-born Chick Corea.

From the start you are enlivened by the breathy fresh soundstage, Eddie Gomez doing wonderful Danny Thompson-like stuff on the double bass. Motion's drumming, telepathically moving around the speakers, Corea's piano precisely inflecting out from both speakers.

A double CD of three guys in a club playing endless solos to an audience of affluent dinner guests (you can hear people's knives and forks sound as they eat) may seem somewhat self-indulgent. But the selection from Paul Motian's 'Mode VI' to Evans's own 'Turn Out The Stars' has the most exotic variety; beginning in Ambient and Impressionism and going all the way to the outer reaches of sonic exploration. The next time you listen to John Martyn pay some attention to Thompson's bass style for its origins are in Evans's own legacy. A satisfying tribute to a jazz legend and to Motian himself, who tragically passed on in Nov 2011. **MP**

RECORDING
MUSIC



David Sylvian

A Victim Of Stars 1982-2012

Virgin Catalogue



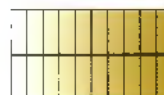
Not since 1989's superb *Weatherbox* have we had a satisfying compilation of David Sylvian's oeuvre. Although best known for 'Ghosts', Sylvian's post-Japan work is detailed here.

We get his early work with Ryuichi Sakamoto, typical extended 1980s drum-machine fare before we get to 'Forbidden Colours', the excellent soundtrack song to Oshima's film *Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence*. We also get the rarer 1984 re-recording which featured on the back of 'Red Guitar' (also here) which opened the campaign for his mega-selling debut solo album *Brilliant Trees*.

Pushing ever outward Sylvian teamed up with Robert Fripp and Bill Nelson, and both 'Taking The Veil' and 'Silver Moon' are from that meeting. Each successive solo album is featured by its best songs.

By CD2, we are in America. Sylvian steepes himself in a kind of smouldering ambient blues/jazz best heard on 'Surrender'. The melancholy of 'Darkest Dreaming' even made it to the soundtrack of CSI. From then we've had one difficult album after the other. Yet there's sun on the horizon as a new track 'Where's Your Gravity' restores the oceanic ambience and texture of old. A rather intoxicating career summary. Essential. **MP**

RECORDING
MUSIC



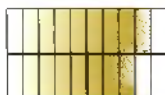


Manuel Gottsching CD
Inventions For Electric Guitar/E2-E4
 MG.ART (REMASTERED EDITIONS)

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the relatively obscure, *Inventions For Electric Guitar* by Berlin ex-krautrockers Manuel Gottsching was one of the hippest records in clubland. An album of only three lengthy tracks, revolving arpeggios tripped from a Fender Stratocaster directly injected into a mixing board in Berlin during the Summer of 1974. Much of the time, the mind is tricked into thinking you are listening to ancient harp music from a distant land, so laden is the original instrument with electronic effects and sounds.

Gottsching added a looping/dancing rhythm to this sound and came up with his masterpiece, *E2-E4* in 1981. Its succulent tones, deep rhythm and scatter-like sounds inspired Detroit Techno and more. The hour-long track was designed as an experiment by Gottsching to listen to while flying between dates on a European tour with Klaus Schulze. Italian DJs re-issued it as 'Sueno Latino' in 1989, Gottsching's music exploded all over clubland. For years it has been an expensive purchase. In its new remastered state it still rocks and tilts. This music is as important for its weave and consistency as it is for its stylistic place in history. Obscure but important, these recordings transcend mere genre. **MP**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Terry Riley CD
In C / A Rainbow In Curved Air
 Esoteric Definitive Remastered Editions

Released in 1968 by Columbia, *In C* was a revolutionary piece of music. Recorded in Buffalo the 11-piece ensemble, fronted by Riley's saxophone, seems to float through a series of eddies. There are no surges, no grand themes or expositions. It's delightfully light and has the feeling of music in airy suspension.

Inspired by *In C*'s commercial success Columbia engineer David Behrman coaxed Riley into writing *A Rainbow In Curved Air* in 1968. Here, under a bright glittering surface of spatially separated mirror images Riley demonstrated his amazing chops on electric organ and harpsichord. The tape-looping seemed to fan out the sounds in a psychedelic spray, punctuated here and there by Indian percussion.

Its direct effect was on the sequences of *Who's Next* in 1971 where Pete Townshend openly credited the composer on 'Baba O'Riley'. Its long-term effect was that Minimalism, the new compositional method of the 20th Century, seeped into all popular music from there on in. Eno and the bulk of UK post-punk is in *Rainbow*'s debt. In short, two vital re-issues which now sound glorious with superb 16-page colour booklets apiece. **MP**

RECORDING
MUSIC



The West Coast Pop Art Experimental Band
Where's My Daddy/Markley A Group
 Spiral Groove 180g
 Companion CD
 Sunbeam Records SBR 5079

The mystery and cult surrounding America's West Coast Pop Art Experimental Band continues to grow with each new re-issue. The group was the brainchild of Oklahoma oil trustafarian and lawyer Bob Markley.

The music danced between fuzztone rock, acid pop, baroque and avant-garde sound effects. The hi-fidelity aspect of the psychedelic cult band was always on the side of 'reverb-laden'.

For years *Where's My Daddy* (1969) and *Markley A Group* (1970) have been expensive rarities commanding large sums to psychedelic collectors. Though not as ambitious as their earlier albums and featuring a more direct recording style they nevertheless still draw respect and fascination from fans and here at last are presented in top-flight 180 gram pressings. Sunbeam's Companion is a remarkable series of band member recordings made before, during and after the group's demise and contain some of the most avant-garde and strange-sounding artefacts from the psychedelic rock era. Absolutely fascinating. **MP**

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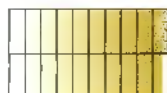

Claire Fischer Orchestra CD
Extension

Pacific Jazz Records/International Phonograph 77

Pacific Jazz was a Los Angeles based jazz record label founded by Richard Bock. This 1963 recording finds one of the more obscure names in jazz leading a full orchestra of studio and headliner west coast regulars. Fischer was an in demand arranger of pop records in the 1980s and won two Grammy awards, yet his early LPs have faded into obscurity. Jonathan Horwich, who produces CD reissues for the likes of Mosaic, and on his own label International Phonograph, tends to release more avante garde jazz, so this West Coast release caught me a little off guard. Skepticism quickly gave way to delight.

Certainly the music has a connection to west coast jazz, but Fischer's compositions are unlike anything else in that genre. They have the feel of a really good musical soundtrack. The tune 'Igor' is a reference to Stravinsky, but has as much Bernstein. The title track evokes a Mike Hammer movie. Not to overdue the point, but this CD has become a soundtrack of my life since it arrived—a great discovery of music that somehow passed me by. As an added bonus, the sound is spectacularly good. Jonathon Horwich never gives us anything ordinary. This one is exquisite. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC


Lee Morgan
The Procrastinator

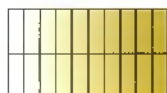
Music Matters/Blue Note 83023

45

In the mid 1960s, Blue Note was evolving from the hard bop classics it did so well into its next phase, what I think of as nouveau hard bop; hard bop with more progressive, hipper writing. The top of that class—Wayne Shorter and Herbie Hancock, join Morgan here and he fills out the group with Bobby Hutcherson, Ron Carter and Billy Higgins. The music, all written by Morgan and Shorter, was recorded between 1967, but for reasons we may never know was not released until 1978 as a double LP with a 1969 session recording with a different line up. This release is the "original" 1967 session and it's a gem with beautiful playing and writing throughout.

In the past, collectors had to make do with the abysmal sounding "two-fer", a sought after Japanese LP or the 1995 CD release. Music Matters gives us what the LP might have looked like if released as a stand alone original with a great Francis Wolff shot of Morgan on the cover and the usual fold-out cover of Wolff photography. More importantly, this Kevin Gray mastered 45 RPM LP set at last serves up one of the best sounding LPs in the Blue Note catalog, and at the same time gives evidence of the improvements in Gray's mastering chain from his collaboration with Music Matter's Joe Harley. Brilliant record! **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC


Patricia Barber
Nightclub

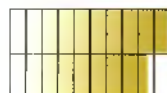
Premonition Records 90763-1

180

Barber has become something of a target among audiophiles as music for audiophiles. However, this self-loathing does not carry over to the general public. Her unique voice also makes it hard to pigeonhole her style. But this too easy dismissal misses the point — Barber is an immensely talented performer. *Nightclub* is the second Barber reissue by Chicago based Premonition Records.

As with *Café Blue*, Premonition cut no corners with this reissue. Jim Anderson, who supervised this reissue, originally recorded the sessions. Bob Ludwig prepared a master from the original tapes and Doug Sax of The Mastering Lab cut the lacquers for this 180 gram two disc 33 1/3 RPM set, and the two LPs are packaged in a sumptuous fold out cover of heavy cardboard with top drawer cover slicks. The sound of a small jazz combo has rarely been captured and presented more beautifully. I've heard Barber perform live and the sound of this release gives up nothing to those experiences. If not Barber's best album, it is among her better ones, and kudos to Mike Friedman at Premonition for lavishing such care on his beloved Chicago artists. *Nightclub* has never sounded this good before. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC

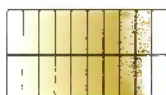


**Priscilla Ahn****A Good Day**

Mobile Fidelity/Blue Note MFSL 1-363

Ahn's dreamy voice and catchy tunes sound like the perfect hook for the opening credits of a TV series or movie, and she has in fact had considerable success placing her tunes in episode's of TV shows aimed at a hip under 30 audience. That's not knock on Ahn's music, just a recognition that similar marketing opportunities did not exist for singer-songwriters of an earlier generation. *A Good Day*, released as a Blue Note CD in 2008, was Ahn's first record. Born in 1984, Ahn took her Korean mother's last name and has split her time between the United States and South Korea.

In addition to writing much of her own material, she is a talented multi-instrumentalist, and her use of harmonica, autoharp, guitar, ukulele, piano, harpsichord, Wurlitzer, glockenspiel and bells give the music an exotic flavour. I found myself listening to the instrumental lines after the first few spins in a way I've not listened since first hearing Sgt. Pepper. Ahn is very much the clean cut, well scrubbed figure, but sexier than the usual girl next door—Carly Simon with a bit of Doris Day thrown in. She richly deserves her Blue Note label affiliation. Mobile Fidelity has done a splendid job of mastering this release and in a reversal of roles, the LP version includes three bonus tracks not on the CD. **DD**

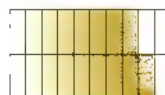
RECORDING**MUSIC****Sarah Vaughan****Snowbound**

Pure Pleasure/Roulette PPAN R52091

Sarah Vaughan had one of the truly great voices in jazz history, yet wasted her gift during the 1960's with many a record pandering to pop tastes. This is one of the gems that stands out from that period. The choice of material is first rate, and Sarah brings something new to each tune. It's very lush in both sound and song selection, but there's nothing second rate about the performances. Vaughan's incredible alto soars like no other jazz singer and her vibrato hangs in the air like bird in flight. If ever there was a voice that could work with a string section, it was that of Sarah Vaughan.

No other jazz singer had quite the range and control to stay with a string section. The strings here perfectly compliment the performance and do not over sweeten the dish. Nor does the orchestra overpower Vaughan. Listen to the mix between strings and Sarah on 'I Remember You' and marvel at how seldom string vocal albums work as well as *Snowbound*.

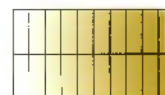
The recording is quite decent with everything captured nicely, with good balance between voice and strings—good enough to make you wish the engineer had done better job capturing the room acoustic. Sean Magee at Abbey Road Studio has done an excellent job in re-mastering the session. **DD**

RECORDING**MUSIC****Stevie Wonder****Innervisions**

Audio Fidelity AFZ 086

Wonder's 1973 album *Innervisions* is now considered a work of enduring genius that remains one of the greatest pop albums of all time. Wonder composed the nine songs on the album and performed virtually every part. This is a concept album, dealing with issues of race, poverty and drug abuse, but it also contains incomparably tender love ballads. Released in August of 1973, the album provided a musical refuge from the unrelenting Watergate hearings that dominated the news. The opening tune 'Too High' introduces Wonder's seamless groove, then follows 'Visions', one of the most beautiful ballads of the classic pop era.

The nine tunes add up to a message of hope while at the same time it contains a warning of the hard work ahead. The last five years have seen a renaissance of Stevie Wonder reissues, both on vinyl, CD and SACD from Speakers Corner, Mobile Fidelity and Audio Fidelity. This is the fifth CD by Audio Fidelity mining Wonder's classic period. *Innervisions* is one of the best sounding multi-tracked albums of all time. This new mastering by Kevin Grey is outstanding, freeing you from the task of locating a clean copy of the original Tamla vinyl. Stevie's voice, ARP and Moog synthesizers have never sounded better. **DD**

RECORDING**MUSIC**

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Boston Symphony Chamber Players BSO Classics 1102.

The Boston Symphony Orchestra has had a commitment to chamber music since the days of Erich Leinsdorf in the 1960s and the founding of the Boston Symphony Chamber Players. This ensemble comprises the first chairs (principals) of the wind and string departments of the orchestra, making a wind quintet and a string quartet. With the addition of some visiting players, the BSCP on this disc is able to field a trio, a quartet, a quintet, a septet and a decet to complete their well-planned program. The music encompasses works by Ravel (1905) to Dutilleul (1990).

These are mesmerizing and captivating performances and for those who love chamber music a fantastic disc. I think you will be won over by the quality of the works. The sound reproduction afforded (recorded by Sound Mirror) is nothing but the best and each composition shines with demonstration quality sound. This disc has gotten much play in my listening venue and while I find the SACD layer to offer a more pleasurable presentation, the CD layer is a quality product. I await their next release with great anticipation. **RSF**
www.bso.org

RECORDING
MUSIC



Sergei Rachmaninov: Morceaux de Fantaisie, Op. 3; Etudes-Tableaux, Op. 33; Corelli Variations, Op. 42.

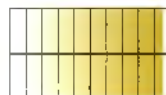
Nareh Arghamanyan, piano.
PentaTone PTC 5186 399.

On the evidence of the new PentaTone SACD, the 23 year-old pianist Nareh Arghamanyan has a glittering career ahead. Her career blossomed in 2008 when she won the Montreal International Music Competition and currently she continues her studies with Arie Vardi in Hannover. She has made a CD for Analekta, but this is her first for PentaTone with whom she has signed an exclusive contract.

Arghamanyan has chosen compositions that span three periods of Rachmaninov's creative life from the early 'Morceaux de Fantaisie' Op.3 (1892), the first set of Etudes-Tableaux Op.33 (1911) and finally the 'Variations on a Theme of Corelli' Op.42 (1931). This is a taxing programme, but one that allows her to display her fine musicianship to the full. It has been said that one needs to have great strength to play Rachmaninov, if that be the case Arghamanyan has all the strength she needs. Very authoritative playing with a program on disc that offers outstanding sound and playing is definitely on this disc. Don't miss it, you'll be sorry. The sound is fabulous on SACD and quite excellent on the CD layer. **RSF**

www.pentatonemusic.com

RECORDING
MUSIC

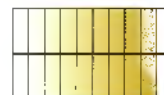


Robert Schumann: Piano Concerto in A minor Op. 54; Introduction and Allegro appassionato, Op. 92; Introduction and Concert-Allegro, Op. 134.

Angela Hewitt, piano.
Hannu Lintu conducting the
Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester
Berlin, Hyperion CD, CDA67885.

Angela Hewitt has recorded almost 40 discs and this one features her first recording of a romantic concerto, the great opus 54 piano concerto. Apparently she has had this repertoire in mind for some time but was waiting for the right conductor to record with. She heard the Finnish conductor Hannu Lintu and asked if he was interested. He agreed but scheduling conflicts kept them apart. Recorded finally last August, this is a collaboration I hope to hear more from. While the other two compositions in this collection are not at the same league as the piano concerto, they are still of very worthwhile interest. Hewitt's playing is exceptional and the engineers at Hyperion have given us a first-rate recording of near demonstration quality. The piano is sharp without shattering and the definition is exceptional. Included are excellent liner notes by Hewitt. All in all, a disc that I am happy to add to my Hewitt collection and I'm sure it's a disc you should add to yours. **RSF**
www.hyperion-records.co.uk

RECORDING
MUSIC





Igor Stravinsky:
L'Oiseau de feu (The Firebird, 1910 Ballet Score);
orchestrations by Stravinsky
of works by Tchaikovsky,
Sibelius and Chopin.

Andrew Litton conducting the
Bergen Orchestra.

BIS SACD-1874.

My number one favourite interpretation of The Firebird is no longer currently available. But there is a new game in town and it's Andrew Litton and the Bergen Orchestra completely decked out with fabulous sound on both the SACD layer and CD layer.

The BIS 24bit/44.1 recording produces an orchestral image of great solidity and satisfying depth, though a little more warmth to upper strings, and perhaps greater weight and depth to the bass end of the spectrum would be good. One of my key tests for a quality performance of this work falls in track 17, Dance of Kastchei's Retinue, Enchanted by the Firebird. Well, I can tell you there is absolutely nothing lacking here and the movement is just sheer excitement. BIS has generously offered track listing for all 21 movements of The Firebird, something I don't see very often. Definitely not to be missed for any reason. The fill up orchestrations are very nice and lovely to have, but the keys to the kingdom go to Litton and the Bergen. Exceptional. **RSF**
www.bis.se

RECORDING
 MUSIC



Igor Stravinsky:
Rite of Spring (1913);
Firebird Suite (1919); Scherzo
à la Russe; Tango No. 72.

Budapest Festival Orchestra
conducted by Ivan Fischer.

Channel Classics CCS SA 32112.

I have my own preconceived ideas about the Rite and the Firebird Suite and this disc fares exceptionally well against those ideas. I have been a fan of this conductor and his marvelous orchestra for some time. The pacing of the first part of the 'Rite', The Adoration of the Earth, draws the listener in to his pacing of the work and the listener is not disappointed!

The 'Rite' still sounds pagan, scary, and beautiful. The opening of the second part, The Sacrifice, is hauntingly beautiful. The orchestra portrays a thrilling sound in this performance and captures the essence of Stravinsky's ballet score. If the 'Rite' was the only work on this disc, I would still suggest the purchase, but we're given three more compositions to fill out this SACD. I like the Firebird Suite very much, but I love the complete ballet. This 1919 arrangement of the suite is executed exceptionally well and has been given lots of play time in my system. The disc offers demonstration quality sound and performances. The Scherzo and Tango are just delightful. A must own disc. **RSF**
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RECORDING
 MUSIC



Antonio Vivaldi:
La Cetra - 12 Violin
Concertos Opus 9.

Holland Baroque Society Meets
Rachel Podger.

Channel Classics CCS SA 33412

Way back in 2003 Rachel Podger and Channel Classics gave us Vivaldi's La Stravaganza with the Arte Dei Suonatori Baroque Orchestra. (Channel Classics CCS SA 19503). It is still in the top 10 favorites of Channel recordings offering demonstration performance, demonstrational sound.

Now we move ahead nine years and we are treated to another Vivaldi masterpiece, La Cetra. Podger's violin is a 1739 Pesarinius and it sounds glorious. Rachel Podger gives as authoritative and accomplished accounts of the solo parts as one could wish for. The vitality and freshness of her playing in the fast movements is a joy, as is the sweetness of her sound in Vivaldi's lovely cantabile largos. One of the great delights of this set is that because each of the concertos is so varied in character, one can happily listen to all twelve in a single two-hour sitting without the slightest hint of boredom. With this new release comes new sound and Jared Sachs has once again provided the listener with demonstration quality on both the SACD and CD layers. Another must own disc if you please. **RSF**
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RECORDING
 MUSIC



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Pink Floyd – The Wall – Immersion

every home should have one

By Mark Prendergast

Myth states that Punk descended in 1977 and wiped the floor with Prog. Wrong. Even though Johnny Rotten placed Pink Floyd on the very top of his hit list, even wearing an *I hate Pink Floyd* T-Shirt with the band members eyes scratched out and held together with safety pins. But as Joy Division and The Durutti Column were making history in Manchester as they spent 1979 recording their debut albums, that year is only memorable for one release: the behemoth of Prog, the bloated double-album Roger Waters's conceit that was *The Wall*. Not only was it a US No 1 smash it produced the No 1 transatlantic single 'Another Brick In The Wall Part 2' (with the help of the children of Islington Green School) and broke the Floyd completely into mainstream culture.

I say conceit because if ever there was a Progressive Rock monster, *The Wall* is it. The bulk of the record is made up of Roger Waters rants, moans and self-indulgent chatter punctuated thankfully by the dulcet tones of David Gilmour & Rick Wright and saved from musical nadir by Gilmour's beautiful guitar solos. Not only has it shifted over thirty million albums it was the very height of Prog when everybody thought Prog was dead. It all began on *The Animals* tour of 1977. Due to sheer velocity of fame and numbers by 1977 the band had to tour stadiums using giant inflatables. The numbers coming to their concerts could not be accommodated in the theatres and arenas of old. Instead of a loyal band fan club listening carefully to every nuance and beat of the music these North American stadium audiences came coked up and boozed up and were in no mood for subtlety. "Give me something to shake my ass to" was what one vociferous American girl screamed at the band. It all reached breaking point at Montreal's Olympic Stadium in July of 1977. A manic fan screamed at an ailing Waters (suffering from hepatitis and on severe medication) the bassist stepped

forward and spat directly in the fan's face. David Gilmour just walked off. It seemed Pink Floyd were finished.

And then Waters decided that the next time they would play it would be behind a giant 40 foot wall! During 31 shows across North America and Europe Progressive Rock reached its zenith. If the album had a troubled birth: recorded between Jan and Nov 1979 in Miraval, Los Angeles and New York with producers Bob Ezrin and James Guthrie and an increasingly maniacal Waters who literally sacked Rick Wright from the band and gave Gilmour the hardest time of his life, its destiny is this incredible box set. If previous Immersion editions seemed like cash-ins, this I tell you as one who literally hates the album, is possibly the best Pink Floyd box set in history. Why? Not for the James Guthrie remastering, which began in 1994. Not for the DVD extras or photo book, Gerald Scarfe art prints, collectors' cards, replica memorabilia, prints, drawings, coasters, lyrics and the kitchen sink. It's not even desirable for the remastered *Wall* 2CD or the remastered version of *Is Anybody Out There?* (the definitive live version of the album and miles better than the muggy original studio LP from 1980-81 and released as a long box in 2000). No what makes this box gold are the two discs of *Wall Works In Progress*. For the very first time in Floyd history we can hear over sixty-four tracks (yes 64) Roger Waters', David Gilmour and band demos exactly how

the album evolved. And fittingly the largest concept album ever made has fittingly the largest boxed set ever released! +





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