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editorial

It's not easy to come by good news in the current climate. OK, so the Olympics and Paralympic Games both had a curious cynicism-suspending effect on the UK psyche, but almost as soon as the last elite athlete zipped up their sports bag, we were back to gloom and doom. Well, almost. You see, one of the great advantages of the downturn that is currently decimating the music business is there has started to be some smart thinking.

While we have not seen the last shot fired in the loudness war, recent releases have seemed to be pulling back from the full-scale musical brink. Pop may still be heavily compressed at times, but a few of the major releases are now beginning to reintroduce some dynamic range.

In addition, behind the scenes, studio engineers, execs and all-round bright folk are finding ways to satisfy both those of us who want our music as it comes, and those who just want everything as loud as it can be. Don't expect such a remarkable change tomorrow, but we are seeing the beginning of the end. Or the end of the beginning.

While we're continuing to see the glass half full, even the drop in sales of CDs can be considered somewhat of an advantage to a febrile music consumer. As the *Decca Sound* box set reviewed on the back page of this magazine will attest, we now live in an age where high quality music is no longer considered valuable and that means we can plunder music companies back catalogue with gay abandon. In fact, so desperate are these companies for revenue, they are virtually giving away their back catalogue for peanuts, because otherwise they risk giving it away for free... or worse, finding their crown jewels paraded for all to see, ripped on some dodgy file-share website.

That's not for me, and it shouldn't be for you. We should have standards to uphold. And it's easy to uphold those standards when you can buy high-quality CD versions from the record company for less than the price of a download!

It is with great sadness that we have to announce the passing of Paul Masson (1954-2012), International Business Development Director of Audio Partnership, who died in his sleep following a short illness. Prior to joining Audio Partnership in 1999, Paul had worked for Audio Innovations and Audio Note. He is survived by his wife and two teenage children.

Our thoughts go out to his friends, family and colleagues at this difficult time. He will be sorely missed by all.

Alan Sircom
editor@hifiplus.com

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE: UK 1ST NOVEMBER 2012 ... US 6TH DECEMBER 2012

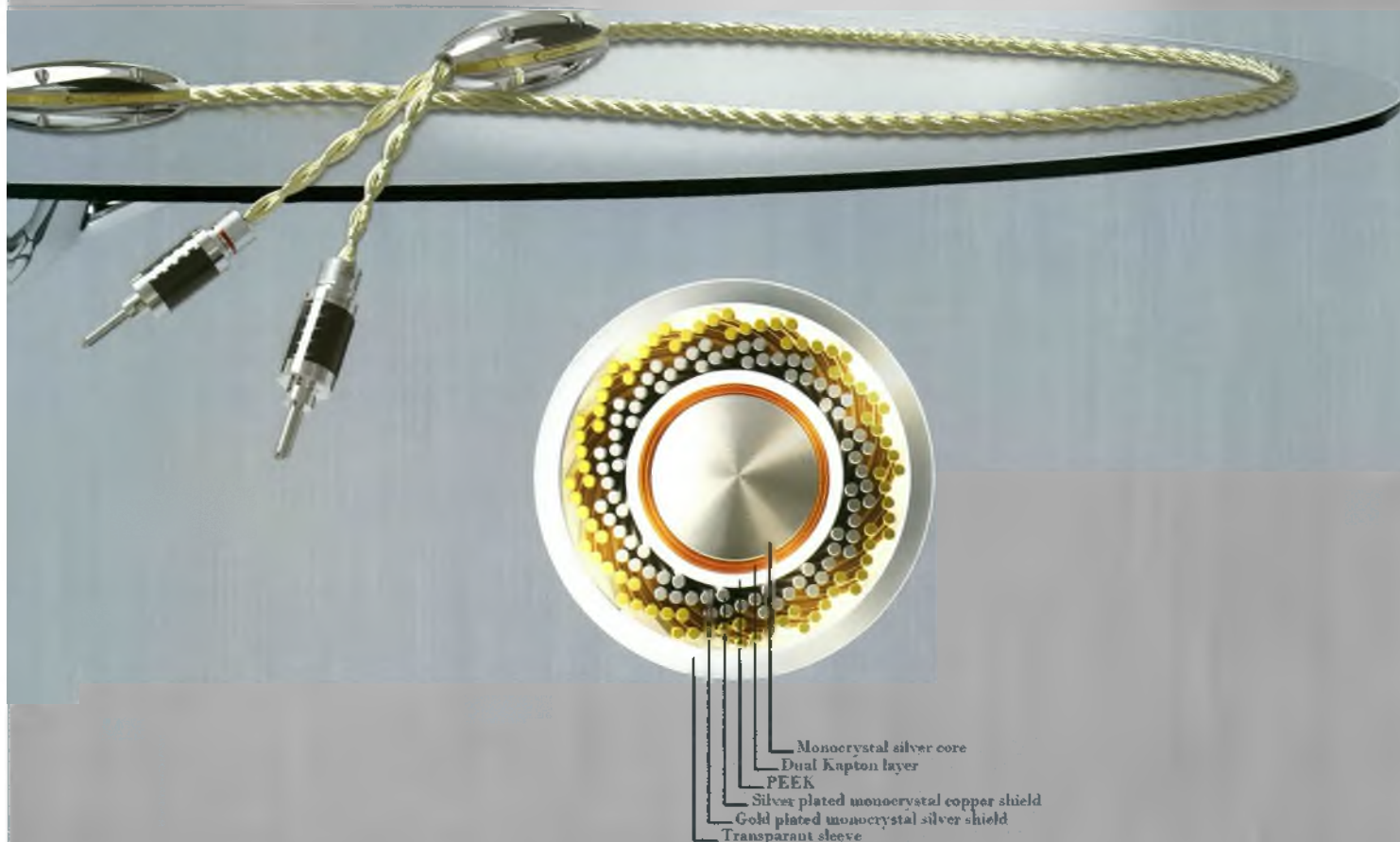
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by



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incoming!

The Art of War

In a recent edition of the rival magazine *Stereophile*, reviewer Art Dudley has the guts to tell it like it is, decrying the crazy prices in audio today. His battle cry “An interconnect is not, under any conditions, worth as much as a new car”.

I think this will be the “shot heard ‘round the world” in audio and marks the beginning of the end of ‘wanky wire’. I wonder which side will *Hi-Fi Plus* be on?

name withheld by request, via email

Art Dudley's excellent 'Skin Deep' editorial was not directed solely at cable. His criticism – which I think many of us share – was leveled at lofty prices across the board. The 'sticker shock' of the top floor of the Venetian Tower for this year's CES was palpable, where \$200,000 loudspeakers and \$70,000 DACs were the standard fare, and we now have cable brands (like ZenSati) that make Nordost's Odin look affordable. While there will always people across the planet who can afford to pay 'elite' money for their audio equipment, the industry's focus on these devices at the expense of those products that real people might afford is playing a dangerous game. The affordable still exists, but often fails to get the coverage in high-end audio magazines like Hi-Fi Plus, because of the nature of the term 'high-end'.

However, it's worth bearing in mind the tendency to judge prices by one's own finances. What is beyond the wildest dreams of one person might be a trivial sum for another, and it's easy to dismiss everything far beyond your own means as 'overpriced bling', irrespective of the performance in real terms. Whatever the product, trust your ears rather than your prejudices – Ed.

Where did all the good music go?

Is it any wonder that hi-fi is no longer the hobby it once was, when the state of the musical art is so dire? Our fathers had Frank Sinatra and Nat ‘King’ Cole. We had Pink Floyd and Steely Dan. Our kids have Justin Bieber and Adele. When I was at school, we used to have music classes where we listened and discussed a piece of classical music every week (I hated these at the time, but in hindsight, it gave us a good grounding for appreciating all kinds of music), but now that's almost forgotten and kids think classical music is anything recorded more than 10 years ago. Perhaps they should let audiophiles teach music!

Charles Oleander, via email

Every generation thinks highly of itself, and we think especially highly of our own music. While the Floyd and the Dan were remarkable recordings, I'm not convinced they have the same resonance to those of an older and a younger generation. Also, Adele and Bieber do not represent the entire musical output today. OK, so there are more things than just music to attract today's 'yoof', so that creative energy that gave us some of the great musical movements of the last 60 years are diluted somewhat, there are still vibrant and energetic musical scenes taking place that you or me or anyone over about 30 might

“Is it any wonder that hi-fi is no longer the hobby it once was, when the state of the musical art is so dire? We had Pink Floyd and Steely Dan. Our kids have Justin Bieber and Adele.”

never know of or 'get'. While compression is a continued concern in new (and remastered) music, modern music still has enthusiasm to spare; whether fiftysomethings will be sitting round in 2032 reminiscing over Fleet Foxes or White Denim in the same way... only time will tell.

The lack of classical music in schools has long been a problem. Orchestras today wouldn't be in such difficulties had education ministers from the 1960s onwards systematically sidelined music as a school subject. Despite this, classical music education does continue to fascinate (or bore) kids across the land. We still have some years before music needs to start circling the wagons. Hopefully – Ed.

► Golden oldies

I've bought a couple of fine products from the 1980s via eBay recently. I managed to get an Audio Research SP8 preamplifier and a Krell KSA-80 power amplifier (the rest of the system – also all bought second hand – comprises a Gyrodec with a Rega RB300 and a Sumiko BPS cartridge, a Meridian 508.24 CD player and a pair of ProAc Response Three loudspeakers). They were about the best you could get 25 years ago. I paid a little over £2,000 for the pair. I just wondered how good these two are compared to spending £2,000 on new components and also just how good they would be against the best of today's audio.

Tom Dyson, via email

Good question. A lot depends on the condition of the amps you recently bought. There are a lot of 25 year old capacitors inside those devices, some of which may be well past their prime and out of alignment. If they haven't been recently serviced, consider giving your kit an early Christmas present.

In absolute terms, it would be difficult to find anything at £2,000 new that would match your pre/power system. You may find more 'on paper' powerful than the KSA-80, but few things with the power to drive practically anything with so much low-end control. As to preamps, new would buy you the convenience of a remote control and perhaps a few extra touches, but nothing sonically in the same class.

Against the best of the best, your amp system still acquits itself well. The ARC/Krell combo was a particularly good one, with the potential hardness of the Krell being tempered by the smoother sounding SP8. As a consequence, it's a tough act to beat, even today. You'll find better phono stages, and systems that trade refinement for transparency, but depending on your viewpoint, it shows just how good those classics were (glass half full) or just how little we've progressed (glass half empty).

In some respects, that you can still use classic equipment of 25 years ago shows the investment possibilities of good audio. Perhaps not in terms of financial rewards, but compare this system to a TV set, computer or even camera from a quarter of a century ago and it becomes quite difficult to slot these devices into the modern world, unlike your classic amplifier combo – Ed.

A Touch of Class

I've got a Squeezebox Touch and although I've ripped my discs to the server, I now listen mostly to Spotify and internet radio stations. It is my main source for the hi-fi system (I sold my CD player and never used LP) and it feeds straight into my Sugden A21SE amp and Harbeth HL-P3ES-2 loudspeakers. Is there any benefit in using a separate DAC in place of using the Squeezebox Touch, and can I use the USB output of the Touch to a cheap USB converter. I'd like to

"A lot depends on the condition of the amps you recently bought. There are a lot of 25 year old capacitors inside those devices, some of which may be well past their prime and out of alignment. If they haven't been recently serviced, consider giving your kit an early Christmas present."

use something for no more than £250 if the benefits are worthwhile, even through Spotify.

Andy Young, via email

The DAC in the SBT is pretty damn good in and of itself. You might get a small performance boost from an off-board DAC, but it will probably not be a night-and-day thing, and that has nothing whatsoever to do with the way you are acquiring your music. To be perfectly honest, with £250 in the kitty. I'd suggest saving your money, or perhaps buying an aftermarket power supply for the SBT. I've not tried one of these yet, but upgraded PSUs – such as the one supplied by Mains Cables R Us, TeddyPardo, Russ Andrews or Mark Grant – are very popular with Squeezebox modders. If you are set on taking the DAC route, go for either a Cambridge Audio DacMagic or an Arcam rDAC.

The USB connector on the Touch is not designed to drive or power USB converters as standard. However, the software can be hacked using the Touch Toolbox 3.0, available from www.soundcheck-audio.blogspot.co.uk. It's worth checking the soundcheck site for Klaus' series of tweaks and modifications to the SBT – Ed.

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► Wire not?

I haven't upgraded my system in some time and I've got the bug again. The system as it stands comprises Krell KAV-280 CD player with a Krell KAV-400xi integrated amplifier to a pair of Original Sonus Faber Cremonas. I'm thinking about upgrading the cables (as any other change will be a significant financial investment I am not prepared to make at the moment and I am not interested in replacing my CD player with a computer any time in the near future, or adding a series of ugly room acoustic treatments to our living room – getting the hi-fi past the wife was enough of a problem in the first place, but swapping components or sticking things on the wall will Awaken The Beast).

Currently, I am using a pair of Crystal Cable interconnects (a free giveaway from one of your rivals, I'm afraid) and a pair of Transparent Music Wave loudspeaker cables. I was thinking of upgrading to a better set from each brand in turn, or maybe experiment with different brands, but what do you recommend?

Damian Hornby, via email

What is it, Krell month? We get asked similar questions about cable regularly, and they usually take the same old-school route: had good results from one brand of interconnect, and good results from a different brand of loudspeaker cable, so why not keep improving products from those brands? It's very unclear why this should be the case, but systems rarely turn out that way, and the benefits of using a structured approach to cabling a system (as in, using the same family of cables throughout) seems to outweigh and smaller advantages gained in making one product sound good from using a cable as a subtle form of tone control.

Our take on this is a pragmatic one. You have a very fine system (if it wasn't, you probably wouldn't still be using the same components over what is likely to be the last seven or so years) and up to a point if it ain't broke don't fix it. I would recommend as a starting place, trying some Crystal loudspeaker cable (in place

of the Transparent ones) and then trying some Transparent interconnects (in place of the Crystal Cables). One of these 'all your ducks are in a row' cable solutions will likely sound better to you than the other and you have started on the journey to a more coherent sound quality overall. This is a fascinating journey, and if the upgrade bug has hit home hard, experimenting with these core components is a more satisfying (and usually less expensive) path than constant swapping of electronics components. I would anticipate the next steps beyond getting your interconnects and loudspeakers in line is to do a similar experiment with power cords, and possibly isolation techniques to bring that fine system up to remarkable heights. And the other great joy of cable changes is all these improvements frequently fly under the radar of She Who Must Be Obeyed – Ed.

Audio Analogy

Why do reviewers and everyone else in hi-fi always fall back on making analogies? There are some entertaining writers in hi-fi and yet even the best of them fall back on weak asides about Porsches or Rolexes or Leicas. I've noticed this has become more noticeable in *Hi-Fi Plus*, now that it's the "Alan Sircom Monthly." Roy, to his great credit, didn't use as many analogies; although I prefer the more succinct approach and some of the (occasionally clunky) humour now, I wish everything wasn't compared to driving a Ferrari.

Saul Trent, via email

Well, writing is a bit like driving a Ferrari, while checking the time on your Rolex, through the barrel of your Leica lens. It's also like quaffing a fine Pauillac, but we don't condone drinking while driving, photographing and time-checking. In a way, our use of analogy is a failing on our part to create a robust terminology for audio itself, and part because people have a tendency to take a literal reading of the few musical terms we can use (it's why we no longer use the musical term 'tenor' in audio – it relates to a specific frequency region with far greater accuracy than 'upper bass' or 'lower midrange', but it now means people expect it to only play Pavarotti). It's also telling that as other things eclipse audio in the public consciousness, we withdraw still further and use what's left to draw analogies to audio. Forty or so years ago, watchmakers were using hi-fi for their own analogies, rather than the other way round. But I'll try to keep the analogy count down in future – Ed.

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COMPETITION

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Hi-Fi Plus is the international face of high-end audio. Here's the proof! We've teamed up with those incredibly smart people over at Antelope Audio, to give away one of the company's fine Zodiac DAC preamps. Normally, such competitions are limited to one country (usually the country from where the magazine is published), but not this time. This competition is open to everyone on the planet. As a consequence, we will be running this competition for two issues, to allow the most number of readers to enter.

The Zodiac DAC is part of a highly flexible and high quality range of combined DAC, preamp and headphone amps, as well as a number of important studio devices. The company's most significant contribution to the professional world is its Isochrone master clock locking system, a technology that became its unique oven controlled clock and features in all Antelopes digital products.

The Zodiac digital converter offers rare flexibility, in that it can be used as a headphone amplifier (it features two headphone sockets) or a digital preamplifier (it has both balanced and single-ended analogue outputs). With a 64-bit oven controlled clock coupled with a precise word-clock jitter controlling system, the Zodiac can process music up to 24-bit, 192kHz precision, with separate boards and power supplies for analogue and digital stages. Best of all, though, it has a reputation for being one of the best sounding converters around. And here's your chance to win one.

Competition Question

What is the secret of Antelope Audio's clock?

- A. It is deep fried**
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- C. It uses overhanged underhang**

Please send your answer – either 'A', 'B' or 'C' – via email to competitions@hifiplus.com, placing the words 'Antelope Audio Zodiac Competition' in the title. Remember to include your name and address in the email. Alternatively, send your answer on a postcard (including your name and address and contact details) to "Antelope Audio Zodiac Competition, Unit 3, Sandleheath Industrial Estate, Sandleheath, Hampshire SP6 1PA". The competition closes on January 10, 2013.

Competition Rules

The competition will run from October 4, 2012 until January 10, 2013. The competition is open to everyone, but multiple, automated or bulk entries will be disqualified. The winner will be chosen at random from all valid entries, will be contacted via email (where possible) and their name will be published in the magazine. The Editor's decision is final and no correspondence will be entered in to. Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd. is compliant with the data protection act and UK laws apply. We will not pass on your details to any third party without your prior consent, and if you do not wish us to pass your details on to Antelope Audio, please make that clear in your competition entry.



SHOW REPORT

Top Audio show 2012

By Alan Sircom

The Top Audio show in Milan this year was a far better experience than last year, unfortunately in part because the Italian economy has enforced a degree of predation. Last year, there were a number of co-operative ventures, where half a dozen very small manufacturers joined forces to share a room. That wasn't so prevalent this year, so the demonstrations in most rooms were more professional and polished. Here's a taste of the best Milan has to offer:



Paul Stephenson of Naim Audio with the new UnitiLite CD playing streamer amplifier (or should that be 'CDstreamlifier'?)

One of the best sounds of the show came from this combination of Clearaudio, McIntosh tubes and Tannoy Kensingtons in the Foné demo room



Italian distributor Audioplus made some sublime sounds with this interesting Estelon loudspeaker, fed by a combination of Soulution and Angstrom electronics



The talk of the show – and making some fabulous sounds through Wilson's Alexandria XLF – the D'Agostino Millennium preamplifier was shown in one of Audio Natall's rooms

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*Quote and text excerpt; Malte Ruhnke
Audiophile 1/2011*



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Audio Natali also had the first European airing of the new four box Vivaldi flagship from UK digital experts dCS



Forget slick marketing or sophisticated presentations, this is the way to promote more than €800,000 worth of new Audio Note products. Apparently

The best sound at the show, this multi-source system used Lamm and Edge amplification (and a lot of Acoustica Applicata room treatment) to make the Avalon Time's sing



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Revox is boldly moving into a fully streaming solution for the future. At the heart of that comes the modular Re:system M100 series of products



Nagra is having a bumper year of products. The solid-state Melody is the company's second new preamplifier in less than six months!



Audio Research slipped the LP1 under the radar. It's a new all-valve phono stage, in a smaller than usual box +

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FEATURE

YACHT AUDIO

How a German yacht-fi brand might have unlocked the secrets to excellent in-wall speaker sound

By Alan Sircom

As the name suggests, Yacht Audio has a specific clientele – the owners and makers of yachts. Although the company itself is fairly new to the market, it has been researching the demands of audio systems on some of the very largest yachts for years. And let's face it, as that means a lot of 'messing around on boats', who wouldn't be tempted by that kind of research project?

The fruits of that research resulted in a custom design and installation for loudspeakers in *Eclipse*: at 163m, the largest – and with rumours of a billion-dollar price tag, very probably most expensive – private motor yacht in history. Word spread. Yacht Audio has quickly built a small but select clientele that reads like a who's who of *Who's Who*. And now, the products are expanding out to reach a wider audience, including potentially those completely free from yachts.

Demonstrating such a system is a problem, as your best installation might be half a world away when you want to show it off to a client. Fortunately, Yacht Audio has built a large demonstration room into its chic office complex in Berlin. This room set also highlights a unique method of installation the Yacht Audio team discovered that makes the concept more than extend into the world of us landlubbers. That comes later, though.

The in-wall speaker is basically a D'Appolito mid-tweeter-mid arrangement,

built with very high grade materials in a very, very high-grade cabinet. It is designed to fit into an overlarge back-box (the front of the speaker is 22cm wide, 3cm deep and 60cm high), but the back box extends this to almost 40cm wide and adds an additional 8.5cm to the rear of the speaker. It uses two aluminium mid/bass drivers coupled to a J.E.T. tweeter built in the Heil Air Motion Transformer folded foil membrane design. The front baffle is made from tankwood, the rear panel bristles with custom made components from the likes of Mundorf and other famous names. It's not a cheap speaker (a figure close to £5,000 per unit is possible) and at 19kg it's not a light speaker, but it represents the pinnacle of what's currently possible from an in-wall.

Where Yacht Audio gets clever is the in-ceiling loudspeaker. Although it acts like a dual concentric, with the J.E.T. tweeter in the acoustic centre of the speaker, it's voiced to be a very close match with the wall-mounter, with identical 93dB sensitivity, three to four ohm impedance and similar crossover and roll-off points. It's a lighter design – because it needs to be fitted in a roof but still weighs 4.7kg thanks to its cast chassis.

This brings us back to the central reason for this feature. The installation itself. Yacht Audio's demonstration room in Berlin features a pair of the in-wall loudspeakers, placed vertically, around 4m apart (it's a big room) and driven by state of the art electronics. So far, so standard... but about 0.7m into the room, and again at 2m into the room are in-ceiling loudspeakers along the same plane as the wall mounted fronts. These are used independently powered by a six-channel amplifier, but with the DSP system deactivated and using each bank of wall and two ceiling loudspeakers as effectively one big channel. There is no delay and no phase issues to consider, they just act as one big speaker stretched over walls and ceilings.

The effect is profound and important. It's rather like I'd imagine what sitting inside a loudspeaker might sound like. The sound is enveloping and immersive, but without the occasional phaseyness of DSP. While this means the sweet spot of the speakers extends around much of the room, it doesn't

► just benefit those who want to walk around. It makes the experience far less like the sound of loudspeakers and far more like the sound of real music.

Curiously, this works without pin-point three-dimensional stereo soundstage that often passes for realism in audio. And yet, when you cast your mind back to that last gig you attended, pin-point stereo wasn't the first thing that drew you to the sound quality. It's an obvious pun to call this a wall of sound, but it does project a performance that sounds more like a wall of music that individuated instruments in many respects just like the real thing.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

In-wall loudspeaker

Frequency range [-3 dB]: 55 Hz - 40 kHz

Crossover frequency: 2150 Hz

Filter characteristic: 24 dB/Octave

Linkwitz-Characteristic

Nominal impedance: 4 Ohms

Recommended amplifier power: 30-300W

Sensitivity (2.83 V, 1 meter distance): 93 dB

Dimensions (HxWxD, exterior dimensions only): 60x22x3cm

Weight: 18.9kg per speaker

In-Ceiling loudspeaker

Frequency range [-3 dB]: 60 Hz - 40 kHz
given an in-ceiling volume between 10 and 30 litres

Crossover frequency: 2200 Hz

Filter characteristic: 24 dB/Octave

Linkwitz-Characteristic

Nominal impedance: 3 Ohms

Recommended amplifier power: 30-300W

Sensitivity (2.83 V, 1 meter distance):
93 dB

Visible diameter: 28cm

Weight: 4.7kg per speaker

Price: on application

Manufactured by: Yacht Audio

URL: www.yachtaudio.com

Tel: +49(0)30 54 70 74 75



The Yacht Audio loudspeakers suffer from the same limitation that applies to most in-wall loudspeakers; lack of deep bass. If anything, everything above the bottom octave and a bit is dealt with so well, you might never need some bass reinforcement, but play the right (wrong?) music and you'll quickly find the need for some bottom end thump. Yacht Audio is more into honesty than 'me tooism', and recommends third-party subs based on room size rather than make its own subwoofer for the sake of making a subwoofer. REL and Velodyne were bandied about as good alternatives.

They've got all the chops; outstanding dynamics, good detail, excellent articulation and the sort of in-the-room solidity that's hard to replicate almost anywhere else in audio. But as a concept it's expensive; you'd be looking at close to €20,000 for this kind of stereo set-up, and that's before installation, amps or subwoofery. And this level of performance cannot be wholly and honestly reproduced by a few cheap drivers in the walls and ceilings. But, my challenge to you the *Hi-Fi Plus* reader is to find out just what this wall/ceiling array has to offer in stereo terms.

The interesting part of this is the clever use of wall mount and overhead loudspeakers forming a massive front image. I'm not sure how replicable this would be without loudspeakers designed with the same degree of consistency however, as in-wall and in-ceiling loudspeaker designs are not commonly voiced identically and that could limit the performance significantly. Nevertheless, even if you only get 90% of the Yacht Audio performance, it represents a serious step change in the way loudspeaker sound reaches the listener. And it works really well, too.

If you do plan on experimenting with this and you can't quite stretch to the Yacht Audio concept, remember consistency is king. You would be better using a power amplifier per loudspeaker rather than wiring the speakers in series or in parallel to the same amp. And don't play around with DSP.

Having worked in the audio industry for a quarter of a century, there are some things that do not change. In this context, the constant is that hi-fi enthusiasts prefer a pair of loudspeakers they can see instead of singing walls, no matter how good a voice those walls have. Yacht Audio represents a significant improvement over most audio loudspeaker systems on a fundamentally musical level that it makes that drive to possess loudspeakers out in the room look like bias rather than informed decision. Isn't it remarkable that it took a shy billionaire with a need to bring music to his yacht to find one of the best ways of making sound in the home? +

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

TAD CR1 compact reference monitor loudspeaker

By Alan Sircom. Photography by John Hytch

There is nothing whatsoever 'compact' about the Compact Reference loudspeaker. OK, so it's a standmount loudspeaker and next to the full-on TAD Reference One monitor, the CR1 *is* compact, in the same way a Range Rover is more compact than an Abrams tank. At a meaty 46kg (plus a further 16kg for the stand), close to a metre and a quarter high, nearly half a metre wide and more than half a metre deep, 'compact' is not the first word that springs to mind. That it needs to be physically deep into the room to spring to life, thereby necessitating a bigger room than most standmount loudspeakers mitigates the size of the speaker somewhat, but even in a barn, these are not small loudspeakers.

For those who missed the back-story, TAD (Technical Audio Devices) Laboratories is a Japanese company, owned by Pioneer. The parent company has had an on-again, off-again working relationship with good audio (anyone who remembers the performance of the Pioneer A-400 amplifier will know just how seriously the company can take the task of making good audio) but where Pioneer also has to develop in-car and home cinema systems, TAD has a single goal – making the best possible audio components.

This is achieved in part by hiring the best designers for the task, in TAD's case Andrew Jones, formerly of KEF and Infinity; both very strongly research-driven companies, companies that understand both the importance of drive unit and of solid cabinet design. Those elements clearly rubbed off on Andrew Jones, because you could argue the TAD CR1 is an expression of those design briefs, writ large. When you delve a little deeper – Jones was involved in the Uni-Q development project for KEF – things snap into focus.

At the heart of the CR1 is its 16cm CST (Coherent Source Transducer) drive unit. This comprises a 3.5mm beryllium dome tweeter in the acoustic centre of a 16cm beryllium cone mid/woofer. Let's park the review there a while. TAD isn't the only game in town when it comes to beryllium, but it is the only company that goes the distance and makes the tweeter and the mid/bass unit out of this hard to work with material. Not only does that give TAD huge brownie points among industrial chemists and metallurgists (the conversation normally goes something like, "You vapour deposit beryllium over a 16cm cone? Is that even possible? When did you arrive from the 23rd Century and can I see your time machine?"), but it gives the loudspeaker a fundamental consistency of dynamic envelope and tonal colour that is almost impossible to replicate using different materials for treble and mid/bass. As one is sitting in the middle of the other, this becomes a highly significant factor in the overall design. While the loudspeaker is also designed to be near-as-makes-no-odds indestructible in normal usage, the downside is all that beryllium doesn't come cheap.

Back to the CR1 itself; the tweeter rolls off at around 2kHz and the mid/woofer at 250Hz. Bringing up the bass is a (slightly) more conventional 200mm bass cone, featuring TAD's clever short throw/long gap voice coil system and a triple-laminated aramid (synthetic fibre, more commonly used in cars and protective clothing) cone.

Drivers – no matter how sophisticated – do not a good loudspeaker make. The cabinet is a key player in bringing those drive units to life. Yes, the drivers play a significant role in this (especially the CST unit, with its 'ISO' isolation system that blocks vibration from being put into the loudspeaker cabinet), but the deadness of the cabinet, and the limiting of internal standing waves in the process makes the difference between good sound and 'good grief!' TAD played its last acronym joker by giving the ported cabinet the SILENT treatment, which stands for 'Structurally Inert Laminated Enclosure Technology'. Unfortunately, while it's good sport to scoff at acronyms, this one works well, because it describes both what it is (layers of machined birch ply, more layers of pressed MDF and a 27.5mm aluminium base) and what it does (makes the cabinet deader than Elvis, driving with Amy Winehouse in James Dean's Porsche over to Julius Caesar's house). The boat-backed body helps minimise standing waves and ►



► internal resonances, and the whole cabinet is finished in a rich high gloss sapele veneer with contrasting satin black curved baffle and top plate. The net result is a loudspeaker that stretches from around mid 30s (TAD claims 32Hz) to the upper bat (TAD claims 100kHz). The speaker is also a moderately efficient 86dB/W/m and with a nominal impedance of four ohms, but at this price point, such statistics are almost irrelevant, because the partnering electronics should be more than able to cope (polite direction to the range of TAD electronics aside I've heard TAD loudspeakers sound extremely fine on the end of Ayre and Belles electronics and I've no reason to expect the loudspeaker to place unfeasible demands on the partnering electronics).

Given Andrew Jones history, it would be easy to think the CR1 as the best speaker KEF never made, dismissing the CST unit as a UniQ driver made from beryllium in the process. And you'd be what we in the audio business call "an idiot" for doing so. That the CR1 shares common ancestry with designs like the KEF Blade makes the two speakers about as alike as a horse and a rhino. The

loudspeakers sound very different, behave very differently and even demand a different installation. In the case of the TAD CR1, the loudspeaker needs to be further from the rear and side walls and also needs slightly more of a toe-in than most coaxial transducer designs (such as Tannoy dual concentrics, KEF UniQs).

That 'slightly more toe-in' is in fact telling, because it seems TAD has resolved (or at least, practically overcome) the diffraction and intermodulation issues inherent to coaxial designs. Instead, what you get from the CR1 is something close to a true point source sound, only one that has all the scale and drama of a really meaty conventional cone and dome dynamic box loudspeaker. That's been a secret desire of most loudspeaker designers for the longest time, but a partially achievable one until very recently. The TAD design knocks that one out of the park.

How this sounds in reality is like a near complete absence of cabinet coloration, drive unit interaction and all the things we have come to expect from loudspeakers that are not electrostatics, but also with all the things we know electrostatics cannot deliver. Like bass.

I've used informative and detailed loudspeakers before, but nothing like this. There are loudspeaker terror recordings, the things you rarely hear in demonstrations because they pull apart a system like an angry chimpanzee. Piano, for example, or early music and all its polyphonic voices; these test the coherence of the system, its real-world dynamics (playing close mic'd drum kits tells you a lot about how impressive the system sounds, but a solo piano says more about how it will sound in day to day operation) and more. And in both cases, it was like being in the control room when the recording happened. The firm hand of Brendel was in the room and the Talis Scholars were behind double glazed glass. You could hear into the recording with all the precision one might need to drive a mixing desk – and any gain-riding or accidental mic distortions are clearly annotated. Which is to say, the overall sound is very slightly forward; ►



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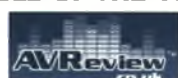
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► not bright in any manner, just direct and so unbelievable articulate in the presence and brilliance regions, all that insight comes across as a forward presentation.

This is actually one of the hardest loudspeakers to describe in sonic terms, because you end up thinking about things in terms of what other loudspeakers do wrong. When it comes to describing what this does right, it pretty much does all of it right. There isn't a genre that falls down through the CR1s – if the idea of playing some dirty dubstep through a £37,000 loudspeaker appeals, it will sound fantastic through these loudspeakers. If instead, your jollies are more cerebral and you dream of re-animating Miles Davis in your listening room, the CR1s get damn close to perfection in the current loudspeaker market. I could spend page after page examining every aspect of the CR1's performance in detail, but what's the point. It's good at all of that loudspeakery stuff, and a few seconds in front of these loudspeakers will demonstrate exactly what I mean.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Three-way bass reflex compact speaker

Drive units: Midrange/Tweeter:

concentric 160mm cone/35mm dome

Bass: 200mm driver

Frequency response: 32Hz to 100kHz

Crossover frequencies: 250Hz and 2kHz

Appropriate amplifier power: 50W to 200W

Sensitivity: 86dB (2.83V @ 1m free space)

Nominal impedance: 4Ω

Dimensions (loudspeaker, WxDxH):

34.1x44.4x62.8cm

Dimensions (stand, WxDxH):

40.7x52.5x53.2cm

Weight (loudspeaker): 46kg

Weight (stand): 16kg

Price (including stands): £36,999 per pair

Manufactured by: TAD

URL: www.tad-labs.com

Distributed by: Nu Nu Distribution

URL: www.nunudistribution.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)2034 442338

There is one aspect of the performance that is worthy of note though; the bass. The CR1's bass is remarkable, both in terms of depth from a standmount (it goes toe-to-toe with the Magico Q1 on this) and how it handles its last octave. What marks out a full-range loudspeaker from its rolled-off peers is generally an underpinning of solidity. You don't just get to hear the music, you don't even just get to hear the space in which the music was played, you get to understand the location itself. Your spatial cues are reinforced by that sub-30Hz region and this helps tell you the difference between recordings made in their own acoustic space and the use of echo and pan on the mixing desk. Loudspeakers that roll off in the low 30s can't retrieve that information, and that atavistic sense of 'thereness' is lost. Except, for some inexplicable reason, the CR1 does supply more of this information that it should. There is no smoke and mirrors here, no weird science, no sense of faking out the bass. The speaker rolls off perfectly, never once upsetting the status quo as it fades away in the bass... but somehow it preserves that sense of 'in the room' that normally only comes with full-range loudspeakers. But it's this that sets the CR1 apart from the majority of its standmount peers.

A few years ago, audio freed itself from the shackles of having to work to the limitations of price. The downside to that is those prices shot up across the board, but the upside is we are now getting some of the best products in history. And the TAD CR1 perfectly fits that description. I firmly believe that the best standmount loudspeakers the world has ever seen are gracing the stores right now. But even in such lauded company, the TAD CR1 still has the power to wow. Ultimately, it's hard to pick a winner in the 'cost no object' standmount loudspeaker race, because different loudspeakers will appeal to different listeners. But I can't help feeling that the CR1 will end up appealing

to more of those listeners than its rivals, simply because it sounds so very, very right. +



The ProAc Response K6 Loudspeaker

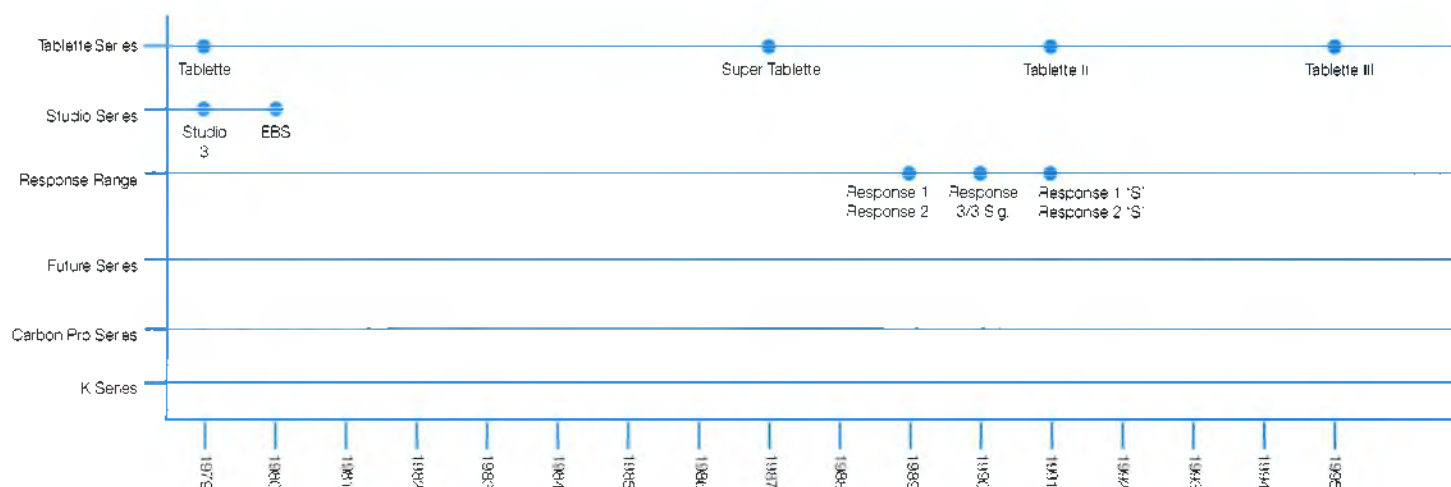
By Roy Gregory

Once upon a time there was a little speaker that could and a bigger one that did; ProAc's Studio 3 represented an early object of hi-fi desire as far as I was concerned (especially the EBS version), while the ultra-compact two-way Tablette was a more achievable goal. It still is, and if large, three-way stand-mounts have largely become the stuff of history if not legend, then the Studio 3's descendants are also still with us. In fact, no other UK domestic speaker manufacturer that I can name has enjoyed as long an uninterrupted run in business, without changes in ownership or design responsibility, as has the Northamptonshire company. Established over 30 years ago and still run by the original founder, Stuart Tyler, ProAc still seem to be one of British hi-fi's best kept secrets. With what can only be described as a talent for flying under the radar, below the horizon and keeping to the shadows, it's a wonder they've stayed in business... At least it would be if their products weren't so consistently reliable, honest and above all, rewarding. Like I said, a well-kept secret – not least because once someone owns a pair of ProAc's they seem to hang on to them for an almost indecent period of time.

At least in part, this low-profile reflects the Company's emergence at a time when the UK market was dominated by a small number of very large (and very loud) personalities, manufacturers who insisted not only that their way was the only way, but who liked nothing better than to debate the fact with (a polite term for "bully") those who disagreed with them. Mr Tyler had firmly held views on how best to proceed – one of which was not to waste time arguing with people

who had no intention of listening. From day one, ProAc have ploughed their own distinct furrow, carefully evolving and developing those engineering elements they believed in, whilst eschewing hi-fi and high-technology fashion alike. No metal dome tweeters here, or ceramic cones: no boat-backed cabinets or constantly changing approaches to bass loading. Instead, ProAc's product development history has been one of steady refinement, cautiously embracing new approaches, technology or materials only once they've been convinced that they offer genuine benefits over and above the tried and tested.

That might seem essentially conservative, but that's not the same as old fashioned. In fact, in certain respects the company has been consistently (and in some cases uncomfortably) ahead of the curve. The Studio 3 was available in a special AlNiCo magnet version, 25 years before it became the trendy silver-bullet ingredient for retro speaker brands. They produced narrow, deep cabinets long before that became the norm and in the shape of the short-lived Future series, a range of speakers with open-baffle midrange drivers long before that too became currently fashionable. Too long before; the Futures perished, being well ahead of their time. Once bitten, twice shy, and the Company soon returned to more familiar designs, but the Futures marked two significant firsts for ProAc; the open baffles sported not only carbon coned bass units, but ribbon tweeters too. Now, a decade later, both technologies (albeit in highly developed form) have started to find their way back into the range, first in the flagship Carbon Pro models, latterly in the Response D40/R and now, the new K6.



The K6 stands at the top of the Response series. It is a largish floorstander, 1185mm tall, with ProAc's trademark resolutely rectangular cabinet and narrow, deep footprint. A three-way design, the front baffle is populated by the same ribbon tweeter used in the Carbons (sourced from Italy but built in the Far-East), a 50mm soft dome midrange unit from Germany (another trademark ProAc item) and a pair of carbon coned 7" bass drivers. The low frequencies are loaded by a large diameter, downward firing port.

So much for the outside story; yet with so many speakers, that's really all you get – and all that the designer seems to be interested in. Drive units and cabinet composition/shape are the twin peaks of loudspeaker fashion, a world in which out of sight is very much out of

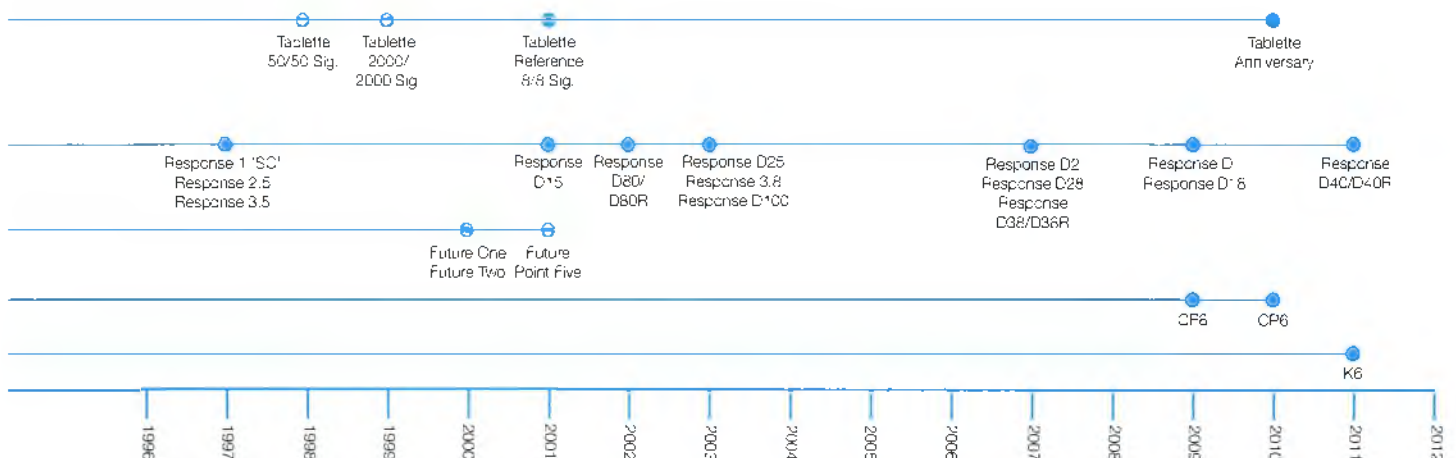
mind. But as I've already suggested, ProAc are anything but slaves to fashion and in fact, one thing that has always set the company apart from the crowd is their concentration on what's inside the box as opposed to what's on show.

The heart of any loudspeaker is always the crossover – or in some cases, its absence. It's also by far the hardest part of loudspeaker design to get right. While there are any ▶



The ProAc Family Tree

In the opening paragraph I suggested that ProAc is unusual for the continuity and longevity of both the Company and its products. This is a story of evolution rather than revolution, of the careful refinement and honing of existing ideas and elements, a fact reflected in the polished performance of the current range. But it's not until you see the products laid out in the form of a timeline that you realize just how significant this is. Each line below constitutes an unbroken development path, each model clearly related to the one before. What is fascinating is the shelf life of individual designs, as well as the number of basic design concepts that have continued from inception through to the current range. It rather underlines the clarity of both thought and purpose, the very qualities that so neatly encapsulate the ProAc ethos.



▶ number of computer programs that, given a box size and set of drivers, will calculate you the “perfect” crossover slopes, sonically and especially musically, they deliver a lot less than the whole story. I hesitate to describe it as black art, but there’s no doubting that this is where so much of the skill and experience that turns a good loudspeaker into a great one resides. It’s also where dealing with familiar variables really comes into its own. A consistent approach to bass loading and identical drivers (or at least, driver technology) make the voicing of a crossover and a speaker both easier and more predictable – leading in turn to far better musical results. In the case of the K6, the bass drivers might be all new, but the dome midrange and ribbon tweeters are familiar from earlier designs, while the woofers are locally built to ProAc’s own spec and using their own, specially produced Kevlar cones. It’s also interesting to note that both tweeter and midrange employ shallow horn flares to help couple their output to the air in the room – another point of consistency.

The company has always relied on reflex loading, and the downward firing port is also familiar territory from earlier designs. What is interesting though, is the way in which the plinth acts to terminate the port. In speakers where the port simply fires onto the floor surface, the distance to and nature of that surface can be extremely variable, complicating set-up and voicing with a completely uncontrollable parameter. ProAc’s approach makes the room interface far more predictable, musical results more consistent – yet you won’t find any mention of that fact in their literature. It’s almost as if they consider it so obvious that it’s not worth mentioning.

The other (supposedly) silent contributor to speaker sound quality is the cabinet. Its mechanical behavior and ability to deal with unwanted energy is critical to musical performance. Unfortunately, the longer a panel becomes, the lower its

resonant frequency and potentially, the more audible its effect. When the hi-fi world rushed to embrace slim, floorstanding cabinets, they forgot to mention this – and no one seems in any hurry to bring it up. Once cabinets get much over 800mm tall, the steps a designer takes to control their behavior can make or break that speaker’s performance: hence the massive construction or exotic materials used in cost no object designs. Unfortunately, those options don’t really exist at the K6’s price point. Instead, ProAc will have to rely on good old-fashioned engineering – the kind that uses appropriate tools carefully applied, rather than a bigger hammer. That means carefully dimensioned MDF, thicker where it needs to be, heavily braced and damped with Bituminous pads. It might be old-school construction, but done well it still delivers astonishingly effective results – and there’s not many people who can apply ProAc’s accumulated experience to the problem.

Devoted followers of female fashion (or watchers of Royal Ascot and Royal weddings) will be familiar with the concept of the “fascinator” – some sort of wispy, almost hat that perches atop the cost no object hair-dos of the rich and stylish; at least those who want to get noticed. Not so long ago, I would have put the majority of ribbon tweeters in much the same category; attention grabbers that often fail to deliver any real substance. But the times they are a changing, and whilst it’s definitely that ribbon unit that will provide the obvious visible fascination as far as the K6 goes, in this instance the speaker itself joins a short but growing line of successful hybrid designs that have reached the market in the last year or so.

Manufacturers produce products, a truth that might seem self-evident. But when it comes to a loudspeaker, what exactly constitutes the product? Is it the loudspeaker itself, or the music that it produces? Ask the loudspeaker manufacturers and the answer will be almost instant, although some will lean one way and some the other. To most the answer is obvious simply because they’ve never actually considered the question. In fact, take a look at the many, many manufacturers offering loudspeakers and it’s not hard to decide which camp they’re in. Now ask yourself a question: which group would you rather buy your speakers from? ProAc are firmly and unashamedly in that group that concentrates on music as product, a fact that becomes apparent as soon as you listen to their speakers.

ProAc quote a bandwidth extending out to 30kHz, which in these days of diamond and beryllium domes, is far from exceptional. I also suspect that it might also be termed “conservative” or “realistic” depending on your point of view, reflecting perhaps an innate understanding of the fact that while top-end extension is nice it’s far from the whole high-frequency story. Indeed, anybody who has spent time playing with serious super tweeters will tell you two things: they only work when you ▶





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LYRA

MAGNUM DYNALAB

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► get the integration just right and when they do work, the first place you hear the difference is at the bottom-end. Yes, you did read that right. Decent, linear high-frequency extension and energy is most easily heard as tighter, more precise, more tactile bass – with much better timing. Basically, it's as if getting the top-end just right locks in the rest of the range, as if a fine mesh has been adjusted so that it precisely overlays the bigger grids below. Well, the K6s have clearly got the quality and integration of their ribbon tweeter just so, because that's exactly how they sound. Not only are they seamlessly continuous from bottom to top, they have that clarity and sense of musical organization, the sort of inner balance and Zen-like calm that only comes from a really well sorted system, where the drivers, cabinet and crossover work together to create a whole that's greater than the sum of its parts.

But to get to that happy state you need to pay attention to at least one specific aspect of set up. Whilst the ribbon tweeter enjoys excellent horizontal dispersion, vertically it's another matter, making the rake angle of the speaker unusually sensitive, especially if you are more used to dome tweeters. To get the best out of the K6 you'll need to make sure that the ear is on the tweeter axis when you are seated in the listening position – and that means getting out the tape measure, a laser pointer and a second pair of hands. It might also mean that the speaker needs to tilt slightly forward to achieve that correct rake angle, a reflection of the tall cabinet and the modern penchant for ever lower sofas. You can hear the effect just by sitting higher or lower in your seat; as your ear nears the tweeter axis, you'll hear the soundstage open out and the instrumental placement lock in. You'll also hear the timing lock in, so don't think this doesn't matter if you don't listen to classical. But take the modest amount of time and trouble required to dial it in and the musical rewards delivered by the K6 are considerable.

What you should wind up with is a sound that steps away from the speakers and away from the system producing it. The K6 is all about balance. It's got enough weight to deliver satisfying orchestral crescendos, enough attack and dynamic expression to reveal a player or vocalist's technique. The soundstage is deep and wide enough to let you hear who is doing what with whom, and the broad horizontal dispersion leaves plenty of latitude when it comes to toe-in. The well-behaved and orderly bass also made placement a doddle, with utterly predictable results from each change in position; just as well given the potent bass performance of which the K6s are capable. Although I used the speakers in a largish space, this precision is a facet of their performance that suggests they'll be far more tolerant of smaller rooms than you might expect. ProAc suggest setting them up on an 8' equilateral triangle, so if you can accommodate that, then you've got a starting point to work from.

While individual performance traits can be bettered by other speakers, it's the package as a whole that makes the K6 a winning combination. The bass doesn't have the depth or bottomless weight of really full-range (much larger) speaker systems, it's ability to capture the character of bass instruments, their contribution to the music, is uncanny. The deep bass guitar melody that underpins the Stewboss track, 'Wanted A Girl', with its sustained notes and soft edges, is a real test of a speaker's ability to define pitch and placement at low frequencies, a test the K6s pass with flying colours: Pitch, position, shape and pace are never in question, creating the perfect, pulsing swell below the array of subtle percussion work, guitars and harp that fill the soundspace and cradle the plaintive vocal. Yes, if you want to get hi-fi anal about it you could criticize the absolute separation, the definition and resolution, the immediacy but that misses the point; it works – musically and emotionally, it works.

Extending the K6's hi-fi performance envelope without disturbing that fragile balance, that ability to both convince and satisfy – and to do so successfully enough to let you forget the speakers, forget the system and simply enjoy the music – wouldn't just be difficult, arguably it misses the point altogether. There are better speakers than the K6 – although not many. They are all either bigger or more expensive – and not many of them are made in the UK. I haven't heard ProAc's more expensive Carbon Pro models, both of which pre-date the K6, but this could just be the best speaker that ProAc have ever made; it's certainly the best I have heard. It might even be more than that; it might just be the best conventional speaker currently being built in Britain. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Three-way, reflex loaded loudspeaker

Driver Complement: 1x ribbon tweeter with AlNiCo magnets; 1x 50mm soft-dome midrange; 2x 170mm Kevlar coned bass units

Bandwidth: 25Hz – 30kHz ±3dB

Nominal Impedance: 4 Ohms

Sensitivity: 90 dB

Dimensions (WxHxD): 215 x 1185 x 370mm

Weight: 44kg ea.

Finishes: Black Ash, Mahogany, Cherry or Maple Rosewood or Ebony to order at extra cost.

Price: £12,995 (standard finishes); £13,995 (deluxe finishes)

Manufacturer: ProAc Loudspeakers

Tel: +44 (0)1280 700147

URL: www.proac-loudspeakers.com

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Hegel HD11 digital converter

By Alan Sircom

Hegel is something of an overlooked audio hero in the UK. In practically every other region on the planet, the Norwegian company is well respected for its range of excellent amplifiers, CD players and especially its DACs. In the UK however, the brand is almost unknown... which is a shame, because based on the HD11 32bit, we Brits are missing a trick.

The DAC is relatively basic (it's a DAC after all, and has little need of knobs or buttons in its day-to-day operation), but source selection is performed from a credit-card sized remote. The HD11 has an ace up its sleeve, as it can send messages back down the USB line – if you are using a computer – and control your music server software at a distance. It even works with software like Pandora and Spotify... excellent! And under the hood is a fruity toroidal transformer, the likes of which any passing audiophile would nod at in approval.

Hegel has a long history of DAC engineering, with its first converter dating back more than 20 years. This latest one sports a 32bit precision AKM DAC. It includes a pair of S/PDIF coaxial and a single Toslink

optical inputs, as well as both balanced and single-ended audio outputs and a Type B USB input. The Hegel HD11 32-bit supports USB, in adaptive mode. Not asynchronous USB; the darling of the computer audiophile is, according to Hegel designer Anders Ertzeid, has more to do with clever marketing than it is good engineering smarts. He's not that much more impressed with apodizing filters either, preferring just good old linear phase instead.

Fortunately, Hegel doesn't just randomly dislike things without having its own distinct pathway to improve the sound of digital audio. The HD11 32-bit has its own custom re-clocking system instead, as well as a special impedance matching circuit (on COAX 1) to reduce any cable-interface jitter problems in their own right. Although these coaxial inputs can process music up to 24/192 precision, Ertzeid prefers to keep USB sound at or below 24/96 quality, because he feels the extra processing going on in the computer to parse a 24/192 file creates more problems than it solves. Although this is a minority view among hi-rezzers (there has to be a better term than that), it's one that's gaining ground.

The problem with any electronic claim – unless it's a real fruit-cake one like 'elephant dung is a better conductor than copper' – is it often comes down to differences of opinion. Designers can make an elegant argument to support their case while undermining the argument of rivals, and vice versa. So, like most audio devices, Hegel's claims to the path of digital rightness stand or fall on their sound quality.

So, no problems there, then!

It's odd, this DAC is kind of the absolute opposite to the sort of product I normally go for. This is the kind of device that favours the frequency extremes and I often go all British about getting the midrange right. But here, that seems less of a concern. The DAC does have a distinctly clean, shiny top-end that could be misread as brightness in the wrong system and it has a big, powerful ▶





► bass, which is highly attractive. But these elements are not on the aggressive 'boom-tizz' side of things; they bring out the energy in the music well.

In fact, the Hegel HD11 is a very balanced performer, and not merely through its XLR sockets. It manages to tow a fine line between the plinky-plonky beautiful, but musically bankrupt sound of some DACs, and the more musically integral, but considerably less refined sound of products in or around this price.

Piano is an especially crushing instrument for digital (it's an especially difficult instrument to get right, which is why you so rarely hear played on its own in hi-fi demonstrations... these guys know how to hide their failings). It can ring, zing, clang, boing, tizz, reverberate, sound like it's being played underwater, practically everything except sound like a piano should. Out came Glenn Gould playing the Goldbergs (both '55 and '82 vintages), then Uchida and Brendel each taking their turn playing Beethoven's piano sonatas. And perhaps this is why I feel so warm toward the Hegel DAC; it plays those notes at the far left and right of the keyboard well, but not at the expense of the middle registers. And it also ties all this together so well. The piano sounds like a piano again. And, as you expand out from just a piano, so you discover that natural sound applies universally.

The HD11 is also smooth sounding, so much so you'd almost expect it to have a valve output stage. Or even be a record player. And yet, it's not smoothed over or a faked vinyl sound; the detail is still there and if the music needs to go to the Mastodon place (or for that matter the Mahler place) it does it with all the energy needed to replay this music properly. But it does that with an underlying satisfying sound quality, and a big soundstage.

If it has a weakness, it's that the smoothness doesn't quite extend across the frequency range and the top-end energy can make some of the more obvious casualties of the loudness war sound more stark than usual. This does seem to go away with burn-in and really only applies to that one per cent of almost unsalvageable albums, but the potential combination of Oasis tracks played through a new Hegel into some metal dome tweeters is not a promising one. This seems like nit-picking, however.

In fact, I'd almost place this weakness as a strength, because what it shows up in less than wonderful recordings, it also shows up when playing good recordings. In other words, while it makes the bad ones bad, it makes the good ones great. I think this is a better position for an audiophile DAC to make than to basically lie about the bad or cover up the good.

Hegel has come to stand for good, honest performance at a fair price, and the HD11 typifies that stance. It manages to balance between what audiophiles want from their systems and what music lovers want from their tracks. This is the kind of DAC you want to listen to, when you get over all the fireworks displays and show-boating of some of the more exotic variations on the theme. Highly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Digital inputs: 2 coaxial, 1 optical and 1 USB-B

Digital input precision: Coaxial / optical up to 24-bit 192kHz USB up to 24-bit 96kHz

Digital Filter: Linear phase analogue filter, 32-bit precision

Output signal level: 2.5V RMS (at 0dBFS)

Analog outputs: XLR balanced and RCA phono unbalanced

Frequency response: 0Hz - 50kHz

Noise floor: -140dB

Distortion: Typically less than 0.0007%

Power supply: Internal toroidal transformer and 30.000uF capacitors

Dimensions (WxDxH): 21x26x6cm

Weight: 3.5kg

Price: £1,200

Manufactured by: Hegel

URL: www.hegel.com

Distributed by: Aventure

URL: www.aventure-europe.com

Tel: +44(0)1347 440401

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Aaron XX integrated amplifier

By Alan Sircom

In Germany, the Aaron and Sovereign brands are well known as being the choice of the discerning engineer. And given the weighting the German people place upon good engineering, that's saying a lot. Reputedly, no less than the Fraunhofer Institute – the boffins behind the development of MP3 – use Sovereign amplifiers in their audio demonstration suite. So, the company behind both Aaron and Sovereign could be accused of knowing what they are doing.

Sovereign came first back in the late 1980s, with all the shiny gold and silver and over-massive build that represented the pinnacle of high-end at the time. Over the years, this budded out into a more down-to-earth brand – Aaron – with its more prosaic (but very rich and deep) black anodized finish and more attainable price points. Sovereign is still very much in business, still making some of the most expensive amplifiers on the planet, such as the €129,000 per pair, tall as a man The Sovereign monoblocks. But it's Aaron that now grabs the headlines in our more price-conscious time. As we shall see, deservedly so.

Both Aaron and Sovereign stick resolutely to their core. Both are amplifier brands through and through. Aaron makes integrated amplifiers, preamplifiers, power amplifiers and that's it. No new model every few years, either. There was a phono stage once and there's mention of a new high-

end phono stage in the offing, but the brand is principally there to make someone else's line-level source sound louder into someone else's loudspeakers. It's the prime example of do one thing and do it well.

The XX integrated amplifier was designed as a celebration of the Aaron's 20th year in business in 2009. It's a meaty, single-ended only, DC-coupled Class AB amplifier delivering 80W into eight ohms and 140W into four though its high-bandwidth bipolar output devices. Remarkably for an integrated amp that isn't the size of a car engine, it can keep on going into really gnarly sub-two-ohm loads, although I think any people still looking for an integrated amp to drive their Apogee Scintilas at high volumes for days on end ►



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Hegel's new DAC, HD11, offers a dramatic upgrade of all your digital music sources. The new 32 bit technology, combined with Hegel's proprietary re-clocking, dramatically improves the sound quality on both mp3 as well as high resolution audio. The remote control (included) provides easy control of the play lists on your PC or MAC. The HD11 is Plug & Play.

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What do you listen to?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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might want to consider something more 'meaty'.

It's also a proudly Euro-design; thought up in Germany, built in Holland and capitalizing on the sort of engineering Europe does best; small-batch, precision CNC machining and hand-built circuits. Audio manufacture in the West is at a crossroads; we either give up building things here and accept the consequences of that action, or make things that compete by building them the way we always excelled at, and accepting you are going to pay a premium for that method of manufacture. Except, in the case of the XX, that premium isn't as vast as might be expected; it costs €2,000 and the remote handset – that you could use to dig a road – is an additional €200.

Despite having just two pointy cone knobs on the front panel, the XX is deceptively flexible in use, and that add-on remote is not a mandatory device for the process. Push in the volume knob on the right and it goes into standby, push in the source selector knob and you can adjust the gain for the selected source. There's up to 6dB of attenuation on offer, so that wildly different outputs can be tamed (it's not fine-tuned enough for level-matching for listening tests, but will stop a too-quiet tuner being shouted down by a too-loud CD player, for example). The downside to this is it is too easy to go into one of the modification or sleep mode when all you want to do is change volume or source. You can also configure the Aaron to run bi-amped, using the Aaron No. 3 Millennium power amp (which has the same gain structure as the power amps in the XX), but this time just using the phono on the rear panel. A centre LCD display provides all the basic information.

"If this is the cheaper model, it doesn't look or sound like corners have been cut. Quite the reverse, in fact. The XX performs like it should be a £5,000 integrated but comes in at just €2,000."

By putting the standby switch on the front panel instead of the rear IEC block, Aaron has placed control of standby back in the hands of the listener. But I'd say don't use standby unless you are sure no listening will happen

for quite some time. The amplifier doesn't rely on a long run in, but because it's a Class AB design, the XX takes its merry time to come on song when powered out of standby. You would potentially need to turn the XX on at lunchtime to get it to sing for the evening listening session, and it does get quite hot for a AB design. As the amp seems an unburstable, exceptionally well made beast, I'd treat it like a Naim SuperNait and leave it constantly powered up, except in times of thunderstorm or annual holiday (the two often coincide).

There's a lot of thought gone into this amplifier, from the potted transformer to the mass-loading of the top plate (an additional Aaron logo on a chamfered aluminium plate also acts to damp that plate). The only thing I'm not convinced by is the italic script on the front panel. It's laser cut into the dark alloy front plate so it will never dull, but it detracts from the overall classiness of the look, in my opinion. The more expensive Aaron designs have a more understated script and optional black-on-black or silver-on-silver colour schemes, like the model numbering on a Mark Levinson.

The thing is, if this is the cheaper model, it doesn't look or sound like corners have been cut. Quite the reverse, in fact. The XX performs like it should be a £5,000 integrated amplifier, but comes in at just €2,000 and doesn't do so by being built out of papier-mâché or having a case full of air.

It's sound can best be described as 'upbeat'. It makes most push-pull valve amps sound like they've been sedated ►

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▶ and could even trouble a Naim design in the pace stakes. It's not got the almost psychic delivery of the likes of DarTZeel, but it is quicksilver fast. It's also extremely transparent, and it's hard not to combine that speed and that transparency without thinking 'electrostatic' like sound, but that's precisely what you get.

In the process of delivering such a speedy delivery, it comes with a 'too much of a good thing' caveat. I tried the XX with a number of loudspeakers and it never flinched from the task, but there were combinations that did not gel well together. Like, for example, the Raidho C1.1 tested last issue; the two combined to form a sound that seemed to exaggerate the properties of the ribbon tweeter at the expense of the bass unit, and the net result was lean and almost thin and reedy sounding. On the other hand a pair of Reference 3a Veenas (coming up in the next issue) sprang to life under the XX's care and attention, as did a pair of old ProAc Studio 150s and not so old but just as discontinued Avalon NP2.0s that I still use. On balance then, the amp is a force for good, but it needs to be partnered with suitably voiced loudspeakers to mitigate the occasional intensity of the presentation.

There's a lesson to be learned here. Although the amp can deliver the muscle needed to support more than £10,000 worth of loudspeaker, doesn't make it a shoe-in for good sound. However, I suspect the real reason for that disconnect was the pace of the amplifier and speaker combining to produce something too upbeat for its own good. When correctly partnered, the sound is full and harmonically 'right' and very, very fast. While that will never do for those who like their music 'full fat', or 'lush', there are a lot of people who readily dismiss a lot of modern audio as 'bloated' or 'stodgy' and for them, the XX is an ideal choice.

You'll notice I've spent almost no time discussing the other aspects of the amplifier's performance. That's because in almost all other directions the XX is at or beyond the performance of its rivals. The sound is articulate, coherent, detailed, extremely dynamic and infinitely presentable. The tonal balance – upbeat caveat notwithstanding – is fundamentally neutral, with outstanding bass, and the solidity of instrument images on the soundstage is excellent. It can also pump out the sound like it was going out of fashion; it seems to have near endless, undistorted power delivery for its class. Perhaps the only point of note in the rest of the performance is the soundstage, which is wider than it is deep, but doesn't throw out images too far past the boxes. Instead you get a tight ball of sound between the speakers, unless the engineer went crazy with the pan pot and made noises far to the left or right.

The Aaron XX is a limited edition amplifier. Not in the 'only 200 of these beauties will ever be sold', but at one point in the near future the celebrations of that 20th birthday will cease and so will the production of the XX. Given we are already close to the company's 24th birthday, I'd recommend getting in there quickly. It's worth it. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Power output: 80W (eight ohms),

140W (four ohms), power delivery into one-ohm loads suggested

Power delivery: DC-coupled, Class AB bipolar output stage, common emitter coupled

Inputs: Six, single-ended phono only, level matching available

Outputs: Tape, preamp phono outputs, WBT multi-way speaker terminals

Dimensions (WxHxD): 45x11x38cm

Weight: 12kg

Price: €2,000 (remote €200)

Manufactured by: Aaron & Sovereign (High End GmbH)

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Vitus SIA-025 Integrated Amplifier

By Chris Thomas. Photography by Simon Marsh

Tempus certainly does fugit. I was amazed to discover that it is now over five years since I reviewed the Vitus SS-010. This was a 25 watt Class A power amplifier with a built-in volume control, allowing it to be configured as a rudimentary two-source integrated amplifier, or a stand-alone power amplifier. One of my most abiding memories though is of its incomprehensible weight for such a relatively small unit that required a two-man lift for safety. But that Vitus was a marvellous amplifier; beautifully composed, tonally quite rich, with realistic control and a rhythmic flow that was totally alluring. In Class A mode (it was switchable through A/B to A), it could be extremely sweet and rather beautiful sounding and Hans Ole Vitus' legendary and almost obsessive devotion to transformer technologies bestowed the amplifier with some stunning musical capabilities.

While resolution was of a high order, it ultimately lacked a sense of super focused and highly detailed articulation. To achieve this and move its performance into the super-amp league you really had to electronically disconnect its pre section to use it as a power amplifier alongside a dedicated high-end preamplifier. Then, of course, system synergy became a more critical issue if you were considering anything outside the Vitus range. But I loved it as an integrated for its simplicity and fantastic musical cohesion although to Vitus himself it was always primarily a power amplifier with a volume control – and let's face it – he was its designer.

These days the whole Vitus family of electronics has grown into a more complete proposition with three individual ranges and a custom-built fourth tier on the way. I am very glad to report that, although itself discontinued, the genesis of the SS-010 continues and its spiritual successor is the SIA 025 (stereo integrated amplifier) and if I thought the previous amplifier was good then this continuously proved nothing short of sensational, especially for a single-box component. This is from the Signature range of products and though it may look like the SS-010 at first glance, a quick check of the back panel shows that this is a completely integrated design.

The colossal UI transformers (UI indicates the shape of the unit) that have always constituted a large part of both the weight and the sound of Vitus amplifiers are its beating heart. Hans Ole employs them more like a surgeon's scalpel than a tree-feller's axe. The one in the SIA-025 is capable of delivering precise and wonderfully accurate doses of perfectly allotted dynamic power throughout the bandwidth. This gives it great appeal and prevents it straying anywhere near the path of clinically detailed amplification that is trodden by so much high-end audio these days. In a time where the cliché has been somewhat over-used, it truly is an amplifier you can listen to all day, providing the rest of the system is up to the task.

There are now a full five inputs with three of them being balanced XLR and the remaining two are single-ended RCA sockets. The speaker connections are the superb standard Vitus types (perhaps my favourites), allowing for 4mm or spade connections quickly and efficiently, without the need for additional tools. I am happy that Vitus has done away with the old Phillips Pronto unit in favour of a custom made all metal rechargeable design that works from anywhere in the room and doesn't require line-of-sight. This is probably rarer than you might think and a constant bugbear of mine. The angle of acceptance has been enormously increased making the control of volume, change of input or the class switching operation easy and consistent. When you switch the amplifier on or take it out of standby it automatically defaults to Class A/B so switching is something you will need to do every time. But, I do believe this to be one of, if not the best remote control I have ever used and it needs recharging extremely infrequently. ▶

Line 2

SELECT

INPUT

MENU

STANDBY

"The colossal UI transformers that have always constituted a large part of both the weight and sound of Vitus amplifiers are its beating heart."

▶ The front window display though is not as accessible. As you can't actually read it very easily, if at all, from across the room and especially if you are way off axis, then its usefulness in these situations is questionable. But you will certainly need it when you are in front of the unit engaged in the initial set up of all the parameters, through the menu system. From here you can access the inputs, turn off those you are not using, name them, select their sensitivity etc, and you can change the brightness of the display and other parameters.

I have been told that most people, including 12 year-olds can master the menu within a few seconds, but I still don't like it. I have been caught in sections that I can't get out of on a few occasions. Now I know that Fraser and Mark at Kog, the UK importers, will be laughing when they read this and Vitus himself will be shaking his head while muttering Danish expletives, so let me apologise to them here and now. I operate many menu systems and like them to be simple and intuitive. No sooner do I think I have it when I push the wrong button and off I go again. I shall move on with my head hung in shame.

I have lived with the SIA-025 now for several months of listening. I have used three different CD players, a turntable set-up and four sets of stand mount speakers ranging from the truly diminutive Kiso, through the beautifully balanced Lindemann BL-10, a pair of Raidho's classy Eben C1.1 and Focal's powerful Diablo Utopias. Cable looms varied too, between Vitus' own Andromeda and a couple of Nordost set-ups and I even got a couple of weeks with Crystal's flagship cables, Absolute Dream. One thing that shone out through these changes was the SIA-025's stunning consistency and ability to do its "thing" regardless – and its "thing" is considerable.

In Class A/B the amplifier can deliver 100 watts of power into each channel but for sheer quality it has to be shifted into Class A mode. It's the absolute essence of the SIA-025 for me. From stand-by, straight into Class A I would say that you are looking at a half hour before it really begins to sing and then it just seems to keep getting better. Even after a solid afternoon and evening's listening I would swear that the amplifier was growing more fluid, textural and resolute with better dynamic contrasts, tonal shading and the delicacy of its musical message just seems to become more profound. At this point I feel compelled to add that a set of four Stillpoints Ultra SS resonance control devices sat under this amplifier offer one of the biggest musical bangs for your buck and I see them as a mandatory inclusion.

Now, I am more than big on system synergy as a concept for musical contentment. But I must admit that, to some extent, the Vitus tends to buck that trend by being excellent in just about every situation I put it in. Its musical attributes seem unhindered regardless of what speakers it was driving and through which cable loom. It maintains a feeling of total relaxation and ease and perhaps even more surprisingly, it never loses its impeccable tonal balance and this is no small feat. I must say that my listening was done in a smallish room and the speakers were all high quality stand-mount models so I cannot speak for fuller-range systems operating in large rooms, perhaps with inefficient speakers. But. Although that 25-watt Class A figure might be enough to dissuade many from even considering it, I would warn against being too hasty in writing it off as underpowered.

Perhaps I can mention Melody Gardot's new album *The Absence* at this point. This new release has a decidedly Latino feel, but it's the way that Melody uses her voice that gives it a very special flavour. Yes, she has a great way with lyrics and her phrasing



is certainly wonderfully relaxed but producer Heitor Peirera has done a fantastic job in giving her a beautiful and totally sympathetic opportunity to express the songs. He has understood what she, as an artist, is capable of and constructed a musical stage for her to open herself and her feelings into the music. Cleverly placing her close to the microphone he uses the sound of her lips shaping the words as a seductive textural palette which makes us lean forward to hear the nuance and the tiny dynamic shadings he incorporates wash the music with subtle colours that fit the mood of each song so wonderfully. It reveals a master-class in production and a lesson as to what a producer brings to a performance and why their true value is so often under-rated. The SIA-025 is absolutely marvellous in communicating this level of expression and performance. It seduces us with its uncanny ability to show each individual element in its full glory, yet maintain such a tremendous sense of cohesion that extends right through its explicit feeling of rhythmic flow and movement, to an alluring confidence in the way it allows the music to breathe. That it can do this without employing the iron-fist grip or dissembled bandwidth that encourages us to think in terms of bass, middle and top is, for me, one of its greatest qualities. It is also one of the things that keep bringing you back for more, as it seems to include you in the story and makes you want to hear more of it.

Listening to the track 'Night Sweats' from Larry Carlton's *Sapphire Blue* album just reinforces the very special feeling of close confidence that the SIA-025's way with music brings to a system. If The Absence utilises space and the darkness between for atmosphere, then this is a full-blown production, full of power, scale and presence, tonal contrasts and focus. I love the way the beautifully played bluesy, walking bass is established as a rock solid bedrock for the vamped Hammond organ, with its percussive leading edge to sit back off the beat with the drummer. The way the Vitus deals with the rhythm section and its fake suggestion of looseness is certainly critical. But it's when the rich pushed horn stabs change the emphasis of the tempo, suggesting a shuffle that you begin to understand where this amplifier can take you musically. It is so magnificently composed and lucid but has such fast, but relaxed control of the leading edge of notes. There is no snatching or confusion – just energy and flow.

The Vitus' appeal for me has got nothing whatsoever to do with the weight of the bass, its extension or exactly how much of it there is. It also has nothing to do with the usual hi-fi terminology and the vocabulary that most use to differentiate between equipment. The SIA-025 is about showing you the music and bringing you performance insight in a totally accessible way. Get the system right and it will find you sitting in your chair, closing your eyes, letting the music grab you emotionally to take you somewhere else.



If the price looks steep for a 25 watt integrated amplifier I think that you should still get a serious listen to it even if you were thinking of separates. It is that good. The Vitus SIA-025 is really about musical connection and emotional involvement and that is quite a compliment for any piece of equipment because those special experiences really are beyond words. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Integrated amplifier.

Inputs: 2 x unbalanced (RCA), 3x balanced (XLR)

Rated power: 2x25 watt Class A / 2x100 watt Class A/B

Freq. response: DC to 800KHz

S/N: >110dB

Remote: Yes, RC-010 – rechargeable.

Input sensitivity: 2, 4 or 8V RMS

Input impedance: RCA=10Kohms / XLR= 10Kohms

Power consumption: Class A/B: 50W; Class A: 250W

Dimensions: 130x435x430mm (HxWxD)

Total Weight: 42Kg

Finishes available: Consult importer

Price: £18,000

Manufacturer: Vitus Audio A/S, Denmark.

Email: info@vitusaudio.com

Web: www.vitusaudio.com

UK Importer: Kog Audio

Tel: +44(0)24 7722 0650

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GoldenEar Technology Aon 3 loudspeaker

By Chris Martens

There's an unwritten truth in audio circles: never try to import a standmount loudspeaker into Britain. OK, so this truth is subject to some serious conditions (it doesn't apply to the high-end, for example), but generally, when it comes to reasonably price standmount loudspeakers, there are so many famous British names (albeit, sometimes in name only) brands, trying to break the home crowd advantage is almost impossible. But, if any imported loudspeaker can achieve success in such a contended market, it's the GoldenEar Technology Aon 3.

This comes down to the guiding force behind the brand. Sandy Gross was co-founder of Polk Audio and founder of both Definitive Technology and now GoldenEar Technology, and is a man driven by a desire to make fine loudspeakers available at a relatively modest price.

The Aon 3 has a specification that belies that modest price tag. It sports a Heil Air Motion Transformer-type Golden Ear HVFR (high velocity folded ribbon) tweeter. This is a thin, light, and responsive pleated diaphragm made of 'a high-temperature film', coupled to high-powered Neodymium magnets. Unlike conventional dome tweeters, the alternate pleats of the diaphragm push and/or pull together in unison, effectively squeezing the air between the pleats outward or drawing the air inward. This is partnered with a 177mm mid-bass driver with MVPP (multi-vented phase plug) design sitting in a rigid free-flow cast-basket chassis, with a 25mm Kapton voice former and a high-gauss magnet.

That alone would place it among the best of breed for the money, but the Aon 3 also features a pair of side-firing 200mm passive radiators, which are claimed to act more in the manner of a tuned transmission line. Finally, the speaker cabinet itself is a truncated pyramid shape, which reduces the size of the front baffle around

"If any imported loudspeaker can achieve success in such a contended market, it's the GoldenEar Technology Aon 3."





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C1.1

S2.0

“Given this is an American loudspeaker and ‘larger spaces’ in that context means ‘half the size of Switzerland, this speaker practically comes with dual nationality and is perfect for our more cosy UK and EU rooms.”

- ▶ the tweeter, affords the speaker a degree of natural time alignment and reduces internal standing waves thanks to those non parallel sides. Gold binding posts and a keyhole slot for wall hanging (should you so wish) seal the deal.

One of the strongest design elements in the Aon 3 is GoldenEar’s superb HVFR tweeter. It offers excellent high frequency extension, superb detailing and transient speed, and is blessedly free from apparent edginess or problems with overshoot and ringing. It sets a very, very high performance bar that the rest of the speaker in turn attempts to match. The fact is the tweeter is so agile and finely focused that it becomes a real challenge to build a midrange driver that can keep pace. That this is not simply a tweeter with a loudspeaker in tow shows the depth of thought that went into this design.

The secret to the midrange unit is that it is in fact closer to a full-range driver. The result is a remarkably versatile mid-bass driver, one that seems to possess the speed, detail, and extension of a small driver, while also providing the kind of bass output normally associated with a much larger one. As result the Aon 3 offers a wonderfully seamless blend between its mid-bass driver and tweeter, but also offers something more: namely, unexpectedly deep bass from what is, after all, a very compact two-way bookshelf monitor.

In practice, this means you get a speaker that offers many of the virtues you would expect to find in much higher priced monitors: good midrange-to-treble balance, terrific openness and transparency, and plenty of subtlety and detail. But you also enjoy bass solidity and depth that are rare in small bookshelf monitors of any price. The Aon 3 offers enough bass that its low-end performance should satisfy most listeners, on most types of music, most of the time. What is even more impressive than the quantity and depth of the Aon 3’s bass is the quality, starting from the lower midrange and ranging right on down the lowest frequencies the speaker can reproduce. What is more, the low end (and lower midrange) of the Aon 3 is every bit as agile, detailed, and nuanced as the speaker’s midrange and top-end.

The Aon 3 deliberately limits low-end response to a respectable (and indeed, impressive) 38Hz, so you get less low-end punch and clout than you would from a full-size floorstander, but you also get a pure, unadulterated, high-resolution sound across that frequency range. That said, there are a few caveats and set-up tips to help readers determine whether the Aon 3 might be right for them.

First, the Aon 3 has a somewhat narrow dynamic envelope; while the bookshelf monitor works well in small and mid-size rooms, it may or may not offer enough dynamic oomph to fill larger spaces. Given this is an American loudspeaker, and ‘larger spaces’ in that context means ‘half the size of Switzerland’, this speaker practically comes with dual nationality and is perfect for our more cosy UK and EU rooms. Better yet, the Aon 3 for the most part sounds dynamically expressive, provided you don’t press it beyond its limits. Just use a judicious hand on your amp’s volume control and things should be fine.

The Aon 3 requires careful placement in order to deliver optimal bass. In my room the Aon 3s performed best when positioned within about 60cm from my listening room’s rear wall. When I pulled the speakers further out into the room, the bass lost weight and punch and became too lean sounding. Don’t settle for ‘good enough’ bass; keep experimenting with placement until the Aon 3s serve up a balanced combination of bass depth, weight, and clarity. Also, to unlock the Aon 3’s full imaging and soundstaging capabilities, plan on spending some time carefully adjusting toe-in angles and the distance between the speakers until you find a desirable sweet spot where images seem suddenly to snap into focus and soundstages take on desirable depth and breadth. More so than many small bookshelf monitors, the Aon 3s may require and will richly reward a little extra time and care during the initial set-up process.

One final performance note: For best results, you’ll want to hear the Aon 3s on good stands that position the speakers’ tweeters at ear level for seated listeners. When placed up at ear level, the GoldenEars produce images that are quite realistic in height and scale, with desirable qualities of spaciousness and three-dimensionality. In other words, while there is a keyhole for wall-hanging, please, please don’t use it.

To get a handle on the Aon 3, I turned to Ti-Ti Chickapea’s *Change of Worlds* [Orchard Park]—a lovely old chestnut of an album. The sound of the trio embraces elements of traditional folk music, next-generation bluegrass, and jazz. As I listened to the Aon 3s on this album, I was struck by their speed, purity, and sheer realism in reproducing intricate and finely woven guitar lines, and by the way each plucked note seemed almost perfect in attack, sustain, and decay—so that each

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"This is an open window into the control room, yes, but more importantly it's endlessly satisfying with it. It's like a musician's musician's speaker; capable of deep levels of insight into what's going on in a recording."

"...these loudspeakers do sensationally well with orchestral music (their dynamic range serves up those tympani with shock and awe on Pickard's 'Flight of Icarus'), they also start and stop with the sort of speed that's needed to play bangin' dance music."

Alan Sircom, Hifi+ issue 78

IDEA

"Tonally spot on, the overall presentation gives a sense of individual musicians working together, and the voices of those instruments, and the singers hanging together beautifully."

"...there's a physical authority to the sounds emanating from the Idea that makes the speakers so easy to get on with. And that's the big bonus of the Idea. You sit in front of them enjoying your music. A lot."

"These speakers are tonally accurate and they don't favour any end of the musical spectrum – I moved from Mozart to Pavement in short order and the Idea brought out the tonal majesty of the former and the gritty energy of the other in equal measure."

Which puts the loudspeakers in a class of their own."

"For those who crave a big image in a small room, I can't think of a better design whatever the cost."

Alan Sircom, Hifi+ issue 84



► note seemed to lead an independent life of its own. I was also floored by the way the Aon 3 demonstrated real weight and warmth on the lower registers of the cello, while revealing its underlying richness and woodiness, which remained fully intact even in the instrument's upper registers. This sort of top-to-bottom focus and consistency, spanning the range from upper bass on through to upper midrange, is one of the Aon 3's great strengths. I was also wowed by the accuracy and realism of the Aon 3s as they rendered the voice of the electric violin—an instrument that sounds pure, clear and at times quite incisive yet is never overly 'steely' or brittle-sounding (my wife owns and plays one of Aceto's electric violins, so it's a sound I know well). Finally, I was impressed with the way the Aon 3 found the understated but heartfelt emotion and subtlety in seemingly simple vocals. Best of all, each ensemble member is heard playing or singing from a precise location in a highly believable 3D soundstage that floats well free from the speaker enclosures.

If you look back at the comments I've just made, you'll see that they represent a blend of thoughts on technical performance (involving accuracy, tonal purity, and realism), but also on the speaker's ability to expose the emotional content embodied in the music. This ability to deliver both a strong technical performance and one that lets the music live and breathe is what makes the Aon 3 very special—and quite exceptional for its price.

The GoldenEar Aon 3 is a brilliant standmount that could easily pass for a far more costly speaker than it actually is. Several things make the Aon 3 lovable:

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: 2-way, dual-driver bookshelf monitor with dual passive radiators

Driver complement: one HVFR (high velocity folded ribbon) tweeter, one 177mm cast-basket mid-bass driver, and two 200mm side-mounted passive radiators.

Impedance: 8 Ohms

Sensitivity: 90 dB

Dimensions (H x W x D): 35.6 x 23 x 28cm

Weight: 10.4kg

Price: £1,000/pair

Manufactured by: GoldenEar Technology

URL: www.goldenear.com

Distributed by: Karma AV

URL: www.karma-av.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1423 358846

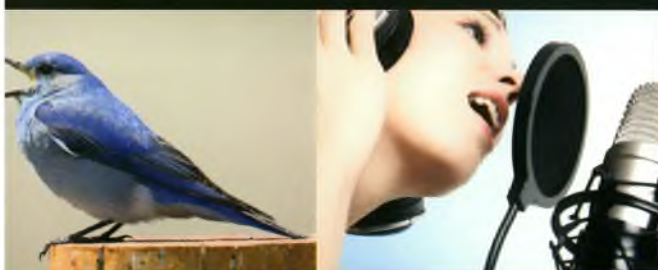
its transparency and detail, the seamlessness of the integration between its tweeter and mid-bass driver, and its very impressive bass output (for such a compact speaker). Watch out Brit-boxes, this Yankee speaker comes very highly recommended. +

"The GoldenEar Aon 3 is a brilliant standmount that could easily pass for a far more costly speaker than it actually is. Several things make the Aon 3 lovable... Watch out Brit-boxes, this Yankee speaker comes highly recommended"





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

Paul Messenger, HiFi Critic, Jan-Mar 2012

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Paul Messenger, HiFi Critic, Jan-Mar 2012

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

Paul Messenger, HiFi Critic, Jan-Mar 2012

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Vincent SA-94 preamp and SP-995 mono power amps

By Alan Sircom

One of the first of the brands to design in Europe and build in Asia from the outset, Vincent is perhaps best known for its valve designs. In fact, the company is completely device agnostic, as the SA-94 preamp and SP-995 mono power amps ably demonstrate. These are solid-state amplifiers through and through; in fact, the range is known as 'SolidLine' (as opposed to its 'TubeLine').

They are also truly balanced, dual mono affairs. The channels in the line preamplifier are about as separate as its possible to get in one chassis. OK, so the SA-94 has just one plug socket, but almost immediately after that the juice separates to two toroidal transformers (one per channel). The pre uses a Vincent-developed FET module, which acts to DC-couple the five single-ended and one balanced input. It's an elegantly obvious device to operate in some respects, with hard buttons assigned to inputs below the display, the basic display tells you all you need to know without superfluous extra features, and there's not much in the way of multifunction front panel keys. Everything is also replicated on the remote control (and more... there's a balance control that is not on the front panel). The only thing to confuse the listener... the old-school volume knob has been replaced by large up/down buttons on the right hand side.



SERIES V~12

MAGNESIUM TONE-ARM

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



SME

"The best pick-up arm in the world"

► Improved and enhanced from Vincent's SP-991 (with a DC Servo, using a OPA2604 op-amp in the power supply), the SP-995 monoblocks sports 15 FET output devices and eight 10,000µF capacitors acting as a reservoir, so that it is capable of delivering 100W in Class A into an eight-ohm load, and even 350W into a two-ohm load, which is extremely impressive. It can also be run in Class AB mode; less heat, more power, less clean sound. Think of this as the difference between 'refined listening' and 'partay'. This is controlled from the front panel. The amps support balanced or single-ended operation and there is a 12V trigger circuit that can be used between pre and power to ensure power up and down happen in the right order.

The power amps offer Class A and AB sound. Use Class A, and use the amps in balanced mode. Class A and balanced brings a combination of precision and naturalness to the presentation. Class AB on the other hand takes that clarity and freezes it out, making a performance that is as cool and cold as it is powerful. If you need the additional power Class AB brings to drive your speakers for anything other than parties, find some other amps.

Staying squarely in Class A then, the combination of the pure and as clear as a mountain spring qualities of the preamp are a perfect foil for the smooth refinement and big powerful bass of the powers. The two combine to make a sound that stays just the right side of 'full fat', an harmonically rich and entertaining sound that could so easily fall over into a thick and almost flabby sound, but never, ever does.

This makes for a sophisticated sound; the kind of thing that sounds great playing Maria Callas or Miles Davis as you sip your second Rob Roy of the evening. It's not the kind of thing you would play Green Day through while you necked your pint of snakebite. There is plenty of power on hand, but it's graceful power. Seductive, but not tube-like. Rich, but not lush. Detailed, but

not analytical and certainly not etched. But it's perhaps this that is the main thing that delineates the Vincent from the very top of the tree. The really, really good amps often have a similarly sophisticated Miles Davis character... but can also sound good playing something from *Dookie*. But don't think this compromised, instead it's a lifestyle choice. And given that a lot of audiophiles will end up using this Vincent amp combo to play Miles Davis, it's probably the right lifestyle choice.

This means you get a fundamentally clean and powerful sound with a very tidy and large soundstage, and excellent solidity. Playing Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* (Symphony No 6, played by Mariss Jansons and the Oslo Phil on Chandos), the size and scale of the orchestra is given full voice – and this is orchestra played large, especially in the impassioned, 'open a vein here' first movement. It's not just big scale, because there is a lot of refinement on offer too, but if there's a soundstage to be resolved, it will be portrayed to full effect on these amplifiers. ►



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HI-FI WORLD

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Vincent SA-94 preamp

Inputs: 5x RCA stereo (LINE IN), 1x XLR stereo (LINE IN)

Input sensitivity: 380 mV

Input Impedance: 47 kΩ

Outputs: 2x RCA stereo (PRE OUT), 1x XLR stereo (PRE OUT), 1x RCA stereo (REC OUT), 2x Power Control (3.5mm Jack)

Frequency response: 10 Hz - 20 kHz

Total Harmonic Distortion: < 0.1%

(20Hz-20kHz)

Signal to Noise Ratio: > 95 dB

Channel Separation: > 86 dB

Dimensions (W x H x D): 43x8.4x36cm

Weight: 10.9kg

Colour: silver/black

Price: £2,109

Vincent SP-995 power amplifier

Inputs: 1x RCA Main Input mono, 1x XLR Main Input mono, 1x POWER CONTROL (3.5 mm jack)

Outputs: connectors for up to 2 loudspeakers, 1x POWER CONTROL (3.5 mm jack)

Frequency response: 20 Hz - 20 kHz±0.5 dB

Nominal Output Power per channel at 8Ω (Class A/AB): 100 W (continuous)

Nominal Output Power per channel at 4Ω: 200 W (continuous)

Input sensitivity: 800 mV

Total Harmonic Distortion: < 0.1% (20Hz - 20kHz, 8Ω, at nominal output power)

Signal to Noise Ratio: > 90 dB

Input Impedance: 47 kΩ

Dimensions (W x H x D): 43x15x43.5cm per channel

Weight: 19.5 kg per channel

Colour: black / silver

Price: £1,659 per channel

Manufactured by: Vincent/T.A.C

URL: www.vincent-tac.de

Distributed by: Classic HiFi

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URL: www.classichifiuk.com

Moving over to some classic jazz in the shape of Julian 'Cannonball' Adderley's *Somethin' Else* shows the big scale applies universally, and this small combo could do with sounding less expansive. It's still good and open sounding, just big and full in the bass. This makes the amps ideal to partner with high-quality standmounts and some of the more clean sounding full-range standmounts, but less of a natural combination with speakers that come with bassier or more fat sounding bottom ends.

I was expecting the usual 'good power amps, shame about the pre' from this pairing, if only because good preamps are always thin on the ground at any price point. In fact, what Vincent provides is a pairing that is very evenly balanced – both pre and monos are extremely natural sounding and if anything, the preamp is ever so slightly better than the powers. Now that is a rarity. In fact, the pre and monos are so close in performance terms it would seem churlish to split them up.

There's been a niggling "I've heard this sound before" going over and over in my brain. It took a while to remember what the Vincent reminds me of, but finally it came to me – it sounds a lot like that classic early 1990s combination of PS Audio preamp and Counterpoint power amplifier that worked so well. OK, so the caveat to this is the Vincents only replicate this classic combo in Class A mode (Class AB does well, but it's got a more aggressive edge to it). But the big bass, the transparency and the overall sense of order just reminds me of that classic combo.

Obviously, recalling an amplifier sound from the early 1990s, when it resided in someone else's system and one that bears absolutely no context to anything in today's market is about as haphazard as you can get. It's almost like trying to recall the hair colour of the passenger of the 43rd car you passed on the Motorway last week. Except that the PS Audio/Counterpoint system was just so satisfying and enjoyable, and yet also so detailed and accurate, it stuck in the mind... and this is its modern equivalent. And like the PS Audio/Counterpoint combination, it even shares the same observations, namely it's more a beautiful sound than an energetic one. The amplifier combination is outstanding on opera, where the sense of theatre pushes the music along in its own right, but driving power chords and snappy electronica is slightly softened and bloomy. This is not really a deal-breaker for most people, but those who define systems from the temporal outwards will not approve of the Vincent combo.

The Vincent SA-94 and SP-995s are very good amplifiers in combination, and none too shabby taken as separate components. I marginally preferred the preamplifier to the powers when split, which is always a sign of good engineering because good preamps are hard to find. These are not amps that 'disappear' however; they impart their own distinct character on the music, and if you are in step with that character, you'll find these a difficult act to follow. That's not a bad thing, because the character they impart is easy to listen to and reminiscent of one of the best high-end combinations from high-end's heyday. We try not to focus on price here, but this offers a classic high-end sound, but without an astronomic price tag and could represent the first step in a long and exciting high-end audio journey. Enjoy the ride! +

Fono Acustica Armonica power cords

By Paul Messenger



While its background in music is beyond reproach, Spain has always seemed a bit of a desert as far as hi-fi is concerned. Whereas that musical heritage has been largely based on religious and folk traditions, its contribution to modern music has been no more obvious than its contribution to high end hi-fi.

An exception that maybe proves the rule is Fono Acustica, a cable brand that is decidedly high-end in terms of prices, presentation, and indeed pretension.

Hi-Fi Plus Editor Alan Sircom favourably reviewed the company's speaker and interconnect cables back in issue 82, and I collected these after he'd finished with them. Unfortunately the 2m speaker cables were far too short for my room layout, and Fono Acustica couldn't replace these with anything longer at the time.

However, FA did offer me some mains cables – 'power cords' in Fono Acustica parlance – as an interesting alternative. The one caveat was that its mains leads are currently fitted with European style Schuko plugs, but this wasn't a problem here as it just happens to be the type I normally use (via a Phonosophie six-way adapter).

I'm not convinced that styling and presentation really cut much ice with cables, especially those of the mains variety, but when it comes to top quality appearance, not to mention a smidgeon of surprisingly tasteful bling, one must give Fono Acustica due credit. However, a different kind of credit may well be required to cope with a rather dramatic pricetag of €5,350 (plus tax) for each 1.5m cable.

Neither Fono Acustica nor its website go into very much technical background to mains cable design, though these costly cables do seem to be constructed using the very finest ingredients. We are told that 'massive bundles of thermo-treated precious-metal conductors blended in proprietary

ratios' are involved. Insulation combines Teflon with air, alongside "ultra-effective" shielding, vibration-isolating outer tubing, and anti-resonance hardwood blocks. Connectors are the top quality M1F1 devices from Japanese supplier Oyaide, which not only look good and grip tightly but also assist shielding.

Sceptical readers will doubtless query whether mains leads matter at all, but in my experience they're just as important as the cables that actually carry the signal, even though the mechanisms involved are perhaps rather less obvious. While the actual signal conductors – the interconnects and speaker cables – have to carry electrical models of the music signal, the mains electricity that feeds the various components will be required to top up their supplies. Naturally this won't model the audio signal in the same way, but it will inevitably be related to that audio signal, and will therefore be modulated by it to some degree.

A key requirement for the mains is to make certain that the supplies within the specific components remain as clean and stable as possible at all times – requirements that were historically much easier than they are today.

One fundamental that enables a system to achieve rapid responses to the changes that make music interesting is to keep the source impedance of the mains as low as possible. The importance of this was powerfully demonstrated to me after my home had suffered a power cut, and then, after it had been repaired, sounded 'faster' with greater dynamic tensions. Extraordinarily, repairing the power cut had involved replacing a large but ancient and corroded fuse in a substation 150 yards down the road, yet the reduction in source impedance that had resulted from the fuse change was still audible through my hi-fi system, despite all the intervening circuitry and contacts. However, while certainly important, low source impedance is unlikely to be an issue ►



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- ▶ with the relatively short, low resistance mains cables used for hi-fi systems.

The other problem associated with the mains concerns pollution. What used to be relatively clean a couple of decades back has become increasingly distorted through a number of mechanisms. On the one hand, all manner of electrical devices today use switch-mode power supplies that tend to feed lots of high frequency rubbish back into the mains. At the same time, use of the radio frequency (RF) spectrum has also increased dramatically in recent decades, and the mains wiring throughout (and beyond) the house, acting as an aerial, collects some of this high frequency radiation and feeds it into anything connected to the mains.

Assessing mains leads is neither easy nor straightforward. Different hi-fi components will react differently, and mains pollution will vary from one location to another, so any evaluation must necessarily be qualified and circumspect.

That said, it was already pretty clear that these power cords would have a positive effect on the sound of the system. Even before they'd had a chance to run in, it was clear that these cables were adding a very welcome creamy richness to the proceedings.

After a few days 'warm up', it was time to do some more controlled listening. Using a Naim

CDS3/555PS as source, feeding a NAC 552 pre-amp, NAP500 power amp and Bowers & Wilkins 800 Diamond speakers, I first took the precaution of disconnecting every other source and turning off the wi-fi. With just the three components connected to each other (by a combination of Naim, Vertere and Vertex AQ signal cables), each powered via a Fono Acustica mains leads, results were truly dramatic, with remarkable and surprisingly powerful punch and dynamic expression, especially through the bass region.

The high drama was undoubtedly to some extent due to running the whole system as cleanly as possible, by disconnecting the other components and the wi-fi. However, replacing the power cords feeding just the CD player and the pre-amp with rather more prosaic examples clearly caused some loss of sound quality. The bass now sounded vaguer and more coloured, while dynamics were also clearly less punchy and dramatic.

I could quote numerous other examples along similar lines, but that would merely become repetitive while only serving to confirm that Fono Acustica's very classy power cords are unquestionably fine performers. However, there's also no denying that the thought of spending €16,000 (plus tax) on three mains cables does rather stick in the craw. While praising Fono Acustica's power cords on grounds of both presentation and performance, I can't help feeling that it may well be possible to achieve the latter for far less outlay. +



"With just three components, each powered via a Fono Acustica power cord, results were truly dramatic, with remarkable and surprisingly powerful punch and dynamic expression, especially through the bass region."

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Available in North American and Schuko connectors

Price: €5,350 each

Manufactured by: Fono Acustica

URL: www.fonoacustica.com

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Bowers & Wilkins PM1 loudspeakers

By Jason Kennedy

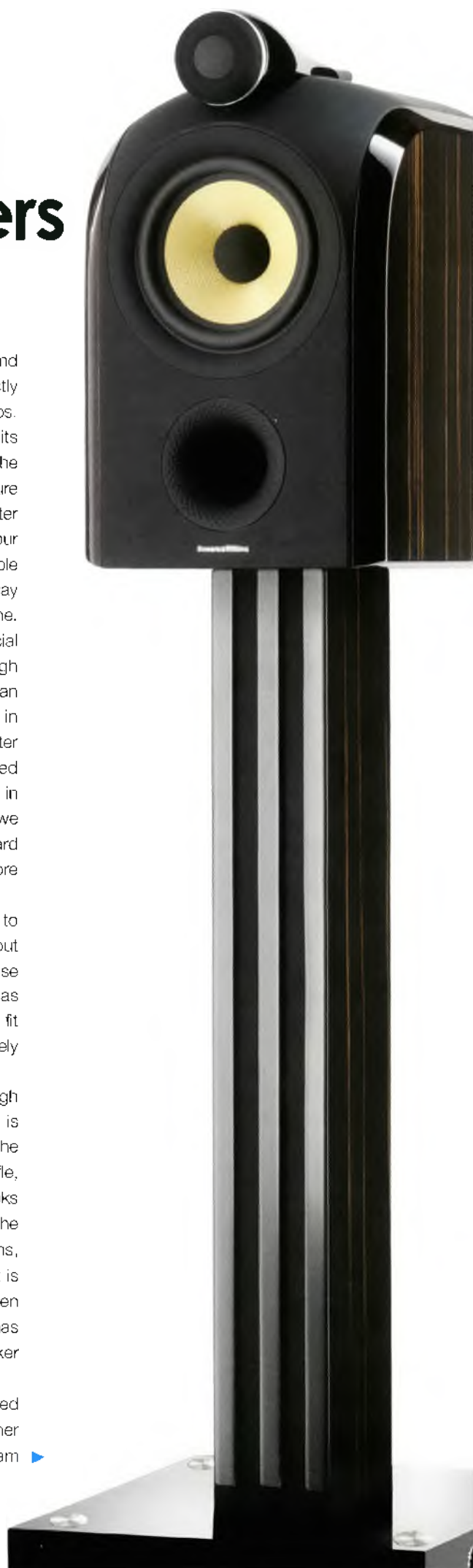
With its Nautilus tubed tweeter cradled on the top and shiny livery, this compact standmount looks distinctly like a miniature 800 series design, an 808 perhaps. But the PM1 shares only one component with its more expensive brethren; the cable terminal core. The influence however is very clear, it's the first non 800 series model to feature Matrix internal bracing and both the housing and construction of the tweeter are based on the same design theory. There are also two rather than four magnets in the motor, even if the dome is not diamond but more affordable carbon braced aluminium. This has 40kHz break-up which is still some way below the 70kHz of diamond but a useful 10kHz higher than aluminium alone.

These figures might not sound all that impressive but they are crucial if you want the speaker to be able to produce natural sounding high frequencies. Even though these break-up points are beyond the human hearing range what happens to the sound above this point has an effect in the audio-band, much like the way that higher sampling rates give greater treble extension which results in cleaner midband. The two are not unrelated of course, it was not necessary to make tweeters that rolled off smoothly in the analogue era because vinyl rolled off first. With high-res music files, we have material that theoretically goes up to 96kHz and anyone who has heard a good example of this on a revealing system will know that it sounds more open and relaxed than CD ever did.

Bowers & Wilkins has apparently been using strands of carbon fibre to stiffen the 'skirt' or base of 800 series tweeters since the mid nineties, but that process was painstaking and, now they tell us, not terribly stiff because it wasn't possible to apply thicker strands. With the PM1, the company has used pitch based carbon fibre that is wound into precision rings which fit inside the dome and are extremely stiff, importantly they are also relatively affordable by comparison with the previous system.

The PM1 is quite a dinky speaker, it stands a mere 13 inches high but is densely packed. You don't expect it to weigh over 9kgs, but this is immediately apparent when it needs moving. It also looks great thanks to the combination of a matt black centre panel that curves down to the front baffle, and very shiny side cheeks in what's described as Mocha Gloss. This looks great with the matching stand, itself a particularly attractive example of the breed. The base is piano black, with metal discs denoting the spike positions, and fluting on the single column to give it a more elegant appearance. It is inevitably quite expensive for a stand, but is well made and – being wooden – avoids the potential to ring inherent in metal tubing. The stand even has a conduit for cables to minimise the dangle factor and keeps the speaker looking clean.

The main driver is a Kevlar cone in a 130mm chassis that is differentiated from every other mid/bass unit in the catalogue by having a foam bung, rather than a phase plug, at its centre. This is separate to the cone this polymer foam



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► dome acts like a dust cap but without the tendency for such things to act like a whizzer cone. Rather it absorbs energy and reduces cone break up in the process, it looks like the sort of thing that should be appearing on two-way designs the world over, if it works with cone materials other than Kevlar.

The cabinet is not just good looking it's sculpted form is the work of industrial designers Native and is intended to emulate the shape of the 800 series 'head', removing sharp edges so that dispersion is smooth and imaging thus improved.

It consists of a thermoset polymer exterior attached to the MDF interior with a 'lossy compound' to form a low resonance cabinet. Boxes of this size are intrinsically easier to control and tend to

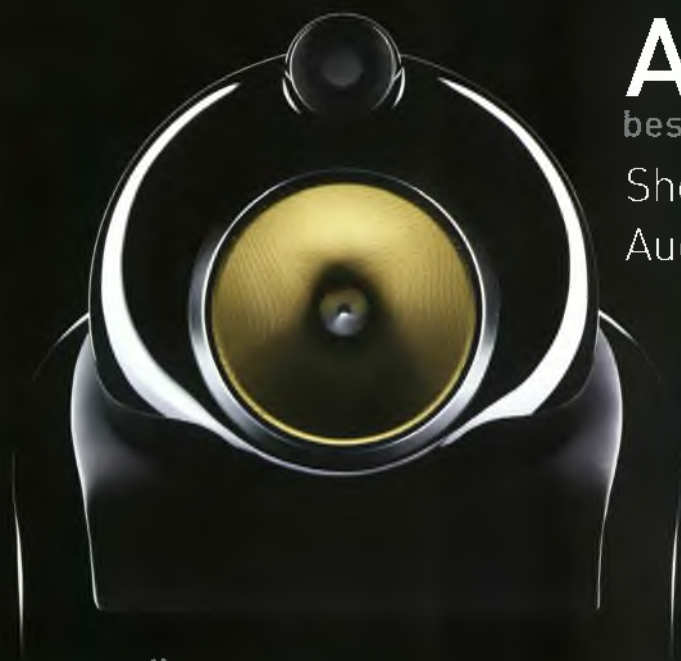
produce better imaging as a result but it doesn't do any harm to try and improve matters further.

The stand is supplied with bolts intended to mate it with the threaded inserts on the PM1's base but the guys in R&D use a sonically superior fixing, namely Blu-tack, so I followed this lead when setting up. As this is a none too sensitive speaker they also recommend a fairly powerful amplifier, so I brought in a Leema Tucana which although an integrated has no shortage of grip, certainly more than its 150 watt rating would suggest. This proved to be a good match, distinctly better than the more refined 50 watt Velvet A3.5 monoblocks usually employed. The extra power allowed the soundstage to expand and breathe in a wholly more convincing and engaging fashion. Steve Pearce from Bowers & Wilkins' R&D dept also recommends placing the PM1s wide apart with their axis crossed in front of the listener which is usually a good way of creating a broad sweet spot if not necessarily the deepest imaging. He also admitted that they have a slight bump in the low frequency response to make up for their diminutive size and while this is not obvious the speaker does have rather more bass grunt than it rightfully should. With this much resolution and extension available in the treble you need decent bass extension to balance it; a purist might disagree but there are very few compact speakers that don't take this approach to some degree.

Despite the 84dB sensitivity the PM1s like to play at high level. This is a trait of the 800 series as well and reflects the way that the engineers listen! You hear more when you are refining the product this way and you hear more in the home. They soak up power with minimal effort and deliver a full scale soundstage without even trying. That small cabinet just disappears to leave the music in the room, Joni Mitchell's live rendition of 'Edith and the Kingpin' on *Shadows and Light* takes over and lets her voice beguile you. In fact the more voices you play they clearer it becomes that the PM1 is uncannily good at the job of placing them in the here and now. This is presumably related to the high break up of the tweeter delivering a cleaner midband, that and the quality of engineering delivering very low distortion across the board. Distortion on the record is delivered with precision of course; Tommy Bolin's guitar is searing on Billy Cobham's masterpiece *Spectrum* – you want white heat, you got it.

The PM1 is a very revealing reviewing tool as well, easily differentiating between interconnects and making the most of hi-res material decoded by a Metrum Octave DAC. This made for highly compelling listening with familiar material, the speakers easily up to exposing the speed that this little converter is capable of and revelling in the musical treats it unravels.

The Resolution Audio Cantata DAC delivers more of the space and the acoustic detail in recordings, a lot more, and this leads to seriously three dimensional image projection from the speakers. It's more of a visual experience and one that the PM1 is equally capable of transducing, it allows the character of double bass to escape the box completely and make its presence known ►



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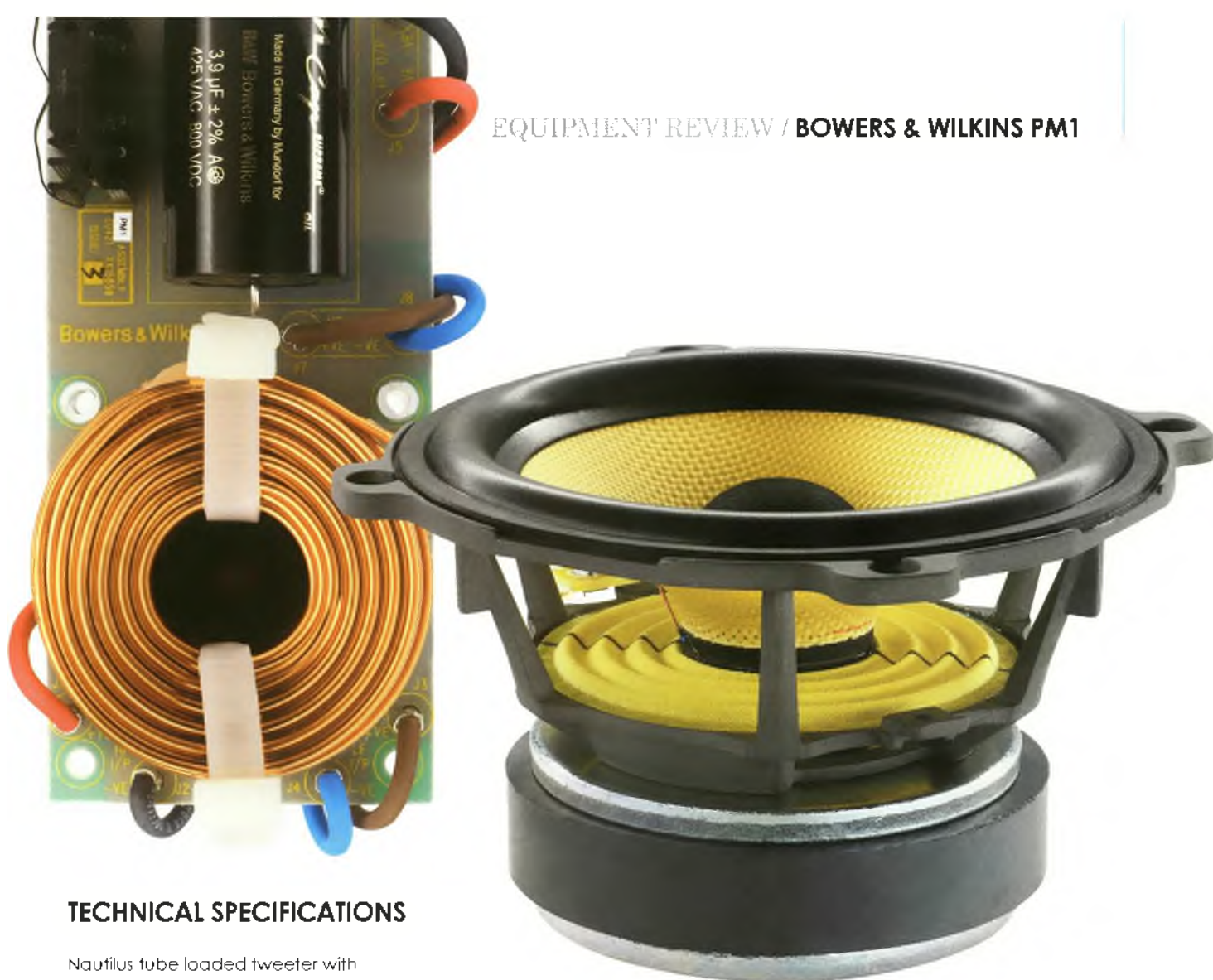
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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Nautilus tube loaded tweeter with carbon fibre reinforced aluminium dome, Kevlar brand fibre cone bass/midrange Flowport

Type: 2-way vented-box system

Drive units: 1x ø25mm (1 in) reinforced aluminium dome high-frequency 1x ø130mm (5 in) woven Kevlar cone bass/midrange

Sensitivity: 84dB spl (2.83V, 1m)

Nominal impedance: 8Ω (minimum 5.1Ω)

Crossover frequency: 4kHz

Recommended amplifier power:

30W–100W into 8Ω on unclipped programme

Dimensions Height Width Depth: 331mm (13in) x 191mm (7.5in) 250mm (9.8in) cabinet only, 293mm (11.5in) including grilles and terminals

Net weight: 9.3kg (20.5lb)

Finishes: Real wood veneers Mocha Gloss

Price: PM1 £1,995, stand £400

Manufacturer: Bowers & Wilkins

URL: www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk

Tel: 01903 221800

in the room without bloom or excess. This particular instrument was played by Dave Holland on the Anouar Brahem album *Thimar*, an ECM production that lets you hear plenty of tonal depth and nuance of playing when its delivered with this degree of transparency. The space between instruments and the solidity of the notes is first class. If however you enjoy the visceral groove of Led Zeppelin, and let's face it who doesn't (!), this is also very much on the menu. I had some difficulty restraining myself when I put the live version of Immigrant Song on at full tilt, and am mighty glad that more of this phenomenal live output has been committed to disc than was available back in the day.

PMC delivered its latest standmount the twenty.22 while the PM1 was in the house and as it's very close in price makes an interesting comparison. It's not close in size however, internal volume must be easily double but surprisingly it does not have such meaty bass, rather it excels in openness and pace. The Bowers & Wilkins has a more conventional presentation because it is a reflex ported system rather than a variation on the transmission line theme. Its smaller cabinet means it's also better able to remove itself from the equation and produce the full scale drama that well produced material is capable of.

The PM1 is proof that good things often come in small (densely packed) packages. It combines first class timing, spectacular imaging and remarkable bandwidth in a highly coherent and musically rewarding fashion. You need a decent amount of high quality power to hear what it's capable of but that done you'll be hard pressed to find a more revealing and engaging super mini. If ever there was a more perfect audio example of the phrase 'don't judge a book by its cover' than the deceptively powerful sounding PM1, I'd be surprised. +

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Lehmann Audio Linear SE headphone amplifier

By Alan Sircom

In the domestic world, Lehmann Audio is best known for its Black Cube phono stages, but on the pro-side, it's the first choice for high-quality headphone amplifiers for mastering. In a world where headphone sound has become the prime way people listen to music, a good headphone amp with oodles of gain is becoming a mandatory part of the recording process. Now, with increasingly power-hungry headphones appearing in the home, it's time to reevaluate the Linear range with the new SE.

Last time we looked at a Lehmann headphone amp was using the USB-equipped version of the standard Linear. This is a more traditional model, with just a line input and output, but with a few improvements, such as SSC feet, Mundorf caps and Mogami wire. Last time we looked at a Lehmann headphone amp, we viewed it in the context of the Sennheiser HD800s. Now it's time to let the headphone amp fly on its own.

It's a simple, extremely well made design, from the German experts in the field. The SE takes the basic concept of the Linear and runs with it, making a more refined and elegant design inside and out. So, where the standard Linear has a relatively simple case, the SE has an elegant sleeve in a range of funky finishes alongside standard silver. Not only gloss white or black, but also thin wood veneers; our model came in a lovely shade of olive wood. You do pay a healthy premium for that sliver of tree wrapped around the box, but quality is sometimes worth paying for. Unfortunately, I didn't have a standard and wood finish side-by-side to determine if getting wood bestows any performance enhancements too. Somehow, I think the finish is thin enough not to make a big difference.

It's powered by a standard 13A IEC socket and it's designed to be perma-powered, because the on-off switch is on the IEC block. The only other control (aside from the volume knob) sits on the underside of the device; two pairs of DIP switches, which provide a 10dB or 20dB pad to match the efficiency of the headphones.

The manual goes into some detail about headphone design differences and optimum settings, but its one rookie error is discussing the gain boost switches, but forgetting to tell users where these switches are. The obligatory blue LED (the audio industry loves its blue LEDs) and two ¼" headphone jacks complete the line-up and the whole caboodle sits on four closely spaced feet.

The Lehmann Linear SE is the audio equivalent of the perfect gentleman. It doesn't do anything apart from what it is asked to do, and then it does that job extremely well without ever calling attention to itself. If the music is dynamic, it plays the music dynamically, if it's

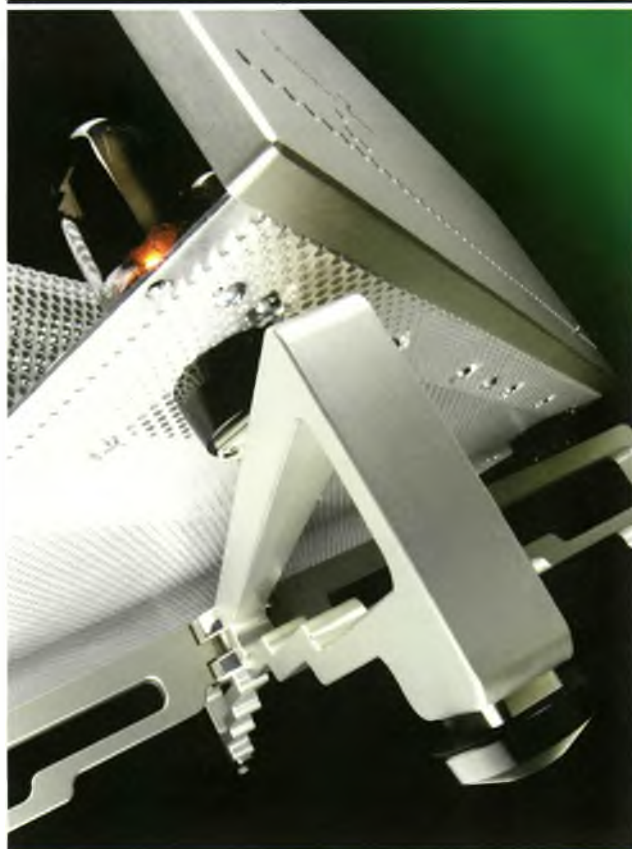




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“What you notice about the Linear SE is its absence of flubby bass that can plague headphone amps used with demanding headphones. Here, the bass is taut and controlled.”

► got a wide soundstage, it presents a wide soundstage (lateralisation effects inherent to headphones of old notwithstanding). It will play frankly stupid loud without distress, but is good at playing at whisper quiet levels too. As home headphones get more uncompromising in their sensitivity and impedance, standard issue headphone amps wuss out, and you are left with some of the more beefy or wacky designs... or the Lehmann Linear SE.

As a reviewer, this is a tempting design, because it allows the listener to focus on what the headphones are doing in their own right, rather than what the headphone amplifier is making of the headphones. Yet, for all this “straight wire with gain” approach, don’t think this is a hair-shirt, boring or uninspiring design. It’s instead the kind of headphone amplifier you can listen to for the longest time.

In comparison, what you notice about the Linear SE is its absence of flubby bass that can plague headphone amps used with demanding headphones. Here, the bass is taut and controlled; your first thought might be ‘dry’ or even ‘bass light’, but going back to a lesser design – which is a polite way of saying ‘its rivals’ – and what you thought was bass fullness is just bass bloat.

There’s a temptation to append near-magical properties to good products. In this case, it would be easy to try to ‘big up’ the Linear SE by saying it makes the sound of sources better, turns a nasty pair of headphones into something wonderful and more. And in fairness, some headphone amps do just that. This one doesn’t. It just makes the headphones sound how they are supposed to sound, and it doesn’t do anything nasty to signal while it does that.

I threw several headphones at this headphone amp. From amp-crushing HiFiMAN loads to benign Focal Spirit Ones. From studio-grade Sennheiser HD-25s that tell you the truth to such an extent, you need a lie down between listening sessions and ENG-friendly MDR-7506 pro-Sonys that can be fed from a camcorder, but have a presence peak that comes with a design that has been around so long the manual is written in Latin and is too well known and well-loved to change. In other words, a good selection of pro and domestic headphones that reflects the split pro and domestic nature of Lehmann’s audio presence. And, with all of these headphones, the Linear SE simply lets the headphone play itself out properly. It didn’t care whether the headphones were hard or easy to drive, it simply gave them the best environment to bring out their character.

I’m not going to compare Linear with Linear SE, I’m afraid. A lot of water has gone under the bridge since hearing the base model, and the comparison HD800 headphones have gone away, so not only would I be comparing from memory, but comparing apples with oranges... from memory. Despite this, I’m confident the Linear SE stands on its own and justifies the price jump between

the two. That absence bass ‘flub’ is the key (you can even hear this on fey breathy la-la girl singer songwriters like Fiona Apple, because when a string bass kicks in, it sounds like a string bass, not someone hitting a slightly tuned cardboard box... this is a function of headphone replay and bass in general, but the grip the SE has over those headphones drops this problem to a new minimum).

The Lehmann Audio Linear SE is a true winner. For good or ill, headphones in the home are providing a meatier load for the amplifier and this device rises to the challenge without turning a hair. But better still, it does it without a multitude of boxes or a multitude of tubes. If you seek honesty in your audio, this one tells the truth, but does it with a touch of class to boot. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs: 1 x RCA, 1 x mains

Outputs: 1 x RCA; 2 x ¼" Neutrik jack sockets

Output impedance: 5 ohms (headphones), 60 ohms (line)

Three switchable gain factors
SSC feet

Mogami interior wiring

Mundorf capacitors

Various real wood veneers

Dimensions (W x H x D): 12x6x29.5cm

Weight: 2 kg

Price: £1,500 (£1,800 wood veneer)

Manufactured by: Lehmann Audio

URL: www.lehmannaudio.com

Distributed by: Henley Designs

URL: www.henleydesigns.co.uk

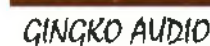
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Keith Bertrand (keithpgdrb), Head-Fi.org



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Bob Archer, CEPro



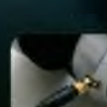
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Brandon Saltalamacchia, Tech Reviews (UK)



"HiFiMAN has done it again, the HE-300 has set a new standard of performance for its price class."
Steve Guttenberg, The Audiophile, CNET



"Incredible attention to detail with great build and audio quality. I was blown away."
Fabian Povsic, BuyMeAniPhone.Com



"With its solid, mostly metal construction and audiophile-grade detachable cables, HE-300 sure doesn't look like it costs so little."
Brent Butterworth, Sound & Vision



HiFiMAN

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hifiman.com
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Epiphany Acoustics E-DAC converter and EHP-02 headphone amp

By Alan Sircom

It's easy to get the high-end wrong. It's not just about the bling, the big tickets or the inch-thick front panel. It's also about the sound. In fact, in many respects it should only be about the sound; sumptuous finishes are academic if the end result sounds terrible. So, if it's only about the bling for you... move on, because these two little devices from Epiphany Acoustics turn on the charm from inside out.

This represents the cutting edge of the new paradigm in audio. Small, cheap, yet surprisingly well-built basic boxes at very attractive prices. Sumptuous finish or design-team aesthetics be damned... this is an electronics engineer making a thing to sell direct, with none of the nonsense usually entailed in the selling of a thing. So, instead of spending hundreds on a USB converter

from a big name, you get something the size of a box of matches, designed by an engineer blogger known as NwAvGuy. In this USB-powered E-DAC, the DAC itself is a ES9023 'Sabre' chip by ESS driven by a TE7022L UAC1 engine, capable of working to 24-bit precision with sample rates of 44.1, 48 and 96kHz. It takes a standard adaptive USB output from a computer, but includes on-board reclocking. All for £99.99.

This passes via minijack to the EHP-02 (there's an optional 02D version with built-in USB DAC), a wall-plug powered headphone amplifier that takes a line level mini-jack input, feeds to a headphone minijack output and has a tiny gain boost and a manual volume knob. You can tell this is price conscious stuff ▶



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

Although many MC cartridges have good performance, their sound is held back by how they are designed. The problem is, the signal coils should have the same angle as the magnetic circuit during playback, but MC cartridges are typically designed so that the opposite happens - applying normal tracking force pushes the coils out of alignment. This impairs coil sensitivity and linearity, and reduces sound quality.

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

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

Let the Lyra Kleos show you how good a New Angle on LP reproduction - Level 2 - can sound.

Jonathan Carr, Lyra Designer



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Audience AU24e High-Z phono cable

By Alan Sircom

Audience has produced a phono cable with a range of impedance matches to suit your cartridge. When you think that a cartridge has a tiny output and the wire can slug its performance, having control over the wire used makes potentially a huge difference. In fact, even among those naysayers, the right use of wire in a phono cartridge context is perhaps one of the few places they'll grudgingly give some ground to wire making a difference.

It comes in three flavours depending on the internal resistance of the cartridge, Low-Z (MC cartridges up to 30 ohms), High-Z (cartridges with an internal loading of between 30-100 ohms) and 'MM' (for everything else). The cable is terminated with Audience's in-house long, slim RCA phono plugs and an earth tag at one end and a DIN connector at the other (there is also a RCA-RCA variant for those using a terminal block, such as VPI or Well-Tempered). The cable itself is a custom-made variant of the Au24e design; strands of OHNO single-crystal copper conductors with polypropylene insulators and a polythene jacket. This layout is principally designed to minimise eddy currents in the signal path, and almost pathological levels of attention are paid to the selection and construction, in part because the signal received from the cartridge is low enough to be influenced by such things. I used a 1.25m High-Z cable in my SME Model 10 variant of the SME 309 together with the outstanding Benz SLR cartridge (which has an internal resistance on the cusp between High-Z and Low-Z), using the standard SME wire as comparison.

The difference was remarkable. The SLR is a fantastic tracker and doesn't make a big deal out of surface

noise anyway, but it was as if the noise floor just got lower. In addition, the D-Premier's phono stage is not particularly noisy anyway, but it seemed that low level 'shush' you get just above the noise of the phono stage got a lot quieter. The cable also passed a quick 'waggle' test without introducing any transmitted noise – this can be a concern with relatively inflexible cables in turntable settings.

If the cable's sole benefit was lowered noise floors, it would be a bonus, but possibly not an easy one to justify

given the price of the High-Z. But it's far from the only bonus. The High-Z brings out the inherent 'Benzness' of the SLR and more, making the coherence of that cartridge even more seamless, the bass at once more palpable and controlled, not just with low level details, but right across the board. It's like you connected your cartridge direct to your phono stage. This even made 'wall of sound' recordings like Love's 'Alone Again Or' better delineated. Wow!

OK, let's put this into some perspective. The change in cable is not as significant as changes in cartridge, or arm, turntable or phono stage. Instead, it completes all those things. It takes the vinyl replay system to the highest common factor and your records will sound better as a result.

The impedance-matched Audience cables came as something of a surprise. I like what Audience cables do anyway, and I should have expected the idea of matching the internal resistance of the cartridge should make a difference given how near the output of a moving coil gets to the noise floor of a system. But I didn't expect just how big a difference it makes. If you want to know how your cartridge really sounds, Audience's High-Z, Low-Z or MM will help tell you. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Price: (DIN-RCA): £949 (High-Z, Low-Z), £499 (MM) (RCA-RCA): £749 (High-Z, Low-Z), £349 (MM)

Manufactured by: Audience

JRL: www.audience-av.com

Distributed by: High-End Cable,

www.highendcable.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1775 761880



Cambridge Audio DacMagic Plus USB DAC/ Preamplifier/Headphone Amp

By Steven Stone



Cambridge Audio's 'original' £200 DacMagic (actually second-generation, albeit with a big gap between generations) was a huge success. It was so dominant that it earned a place as the DAC to beat if you were making, selling, or buying a sub-£400 Digital-to-Analog-Converter. But as with all good things, its time has finally come to an end and it has been replaced by the DacMagic Plus. But, with added features and a higher price tag of £350, does the Plus live up to its name?

What's changed? Most obvious is the addition of variable outputs controlled via a front panel volume knob. The front panel also sports a headphone jack as well as additional buttons for digital filter selection and absolute phase. On the inside of its diminutive case the Plus upconverts to 384 kHz and can now stream from a Bluetooth device, using hi-fi-grade aptX Bluetooth technology, via Cambridge's optional BT 100 adapter.

At its heart, there beats twin Wolfson 8740 24-bit digital-to-analog converters in dual differential mode, coupled to Anagram Technologies Adapted Time Filtering 2 (ATF2) 24-bit/384kHz audio upsampling with jitter reduction. This goes to the variable outputs, from an Anagram-based non-bit-chopping digital control. This is claimed to deliver excellent channel tracking with low noise. Asynchronous USB

connectivity arrived too late to be included in the previous DacMagic, but is a key part of this latest model.

Like the DacMagic it replaces, the DacMagic Plus can be considered a general purpose DAC that could be used either in a desktop or room-based system. However, certain of the DacMagic Plus' features plainly work better in a desktop context, such as the lack of a remote control, but the inclusion of a headphone amp, multiple digital input and output options, as well as balanced and unbalanced analog outputs, all give the DacMagic Plus near perfect ergonomics for use in advanced desktop systems. Combine the DacMagic Plus with powered speakers such as the Audioengine A5+ and you can have a complete, very high-quality desktop system for less than £1,000.

During set-up the DacMagic Plus had no significant issues. Straight out of the box the DacMagic Plus is configured to support up to 96/24 via USB 1.1. But for 192/24 capabilities you must change to USB 2.0 via a special combination of button pushes. The methodology for this conversion is buried on page 22 of the PDF version of the user's guide, though in my view this information really needs to be on a separate "read me first" page.

Once properly configured, the DacMagic Plus performed perfectly throughout the review period. But the DacMagic does have one ergonomic quirk: its volume control. Unlike

- because the power LED is red, not trendy – and more expensive – blue. This too comes to an aimighty £99.99.

Best of all, the amplifier can be battery driven. The battery holds a charge well and gives you hours of on the move listening. Some have questioned the need for a battery drive (the amp is not small enough to be truly transportable), but those people have never sat on a long train journey, playing music while they work off a laptop. Yes, the battery does mean some of the more punishment-grade headphone loads are best left at home, but the amp does extend good headphone listening to more than the desktop.

The designer is an outspoken critic of all things audiophile, so many of the things audiophiles seek in a DAC or headphone amp are conspicuous by their absence. Asynchronous USB? Don't be silly! Fancy gold terminals – pah! Any power supply upgrades... not while he draws breath. Exotic wires – are you joking? Perhaps on this last one he might want to reconsider, because the giveaway minijack to minijack cable supplied failed almost immediately.

From an audiophile perspective though, there are two sides to this; the side that looks at these devices in context (irrespective of cost) and the price-conscious side. The two converge to form an enormous 'Wow!' Separate the two devices first. What we have here is an excellent DAC for the money; it realistically ticks the DAC box neatly. OK, in absolute terms it does sound a touch thin and very slightly grainy in the presence region on incredibly pure tones like polyphonic early music voices, but not by a substantial amount and the moment you factor the price into the equation, any criticisms disappear altogether. In other words, you have to go looking for glaring faults to find minor idiosyncrasies, and this is commonly known as 'nit-picking'.

The headphone amplifier simply does the job of amplifying the E-DAC's signal without prejudice. It has a useful amount of gain (although headphones like the HiFiMAN do pose something of a challenge to all headphone amps, the O2 is one of those rare lower priced models that had no problems coping with crazy impedances) and it has a enjoyable sense of immediacy to the presentation that is highly alluring. Once again in absolute terms, the bass performance on the Lehmann was more tight and controlled, but given we are talking an almost 20-fold price differential, that's the sort of thing one can easily overlook. Especially as the O2 has a big powerful bass instead; use this with a pair of Beats and play some Skrillex at a good lick and you could dubstep your own neck off.

As a pairing, the two work very well together. There is a clear commonality to the designs that work in partnership. They also cancel each other out somewhat, but in a good way; the light touch of the DAC balances out the bass bloom of the amplifier. The two do require a very sensitive hand on the volume control; not because the amp will clip, but the pairing does seem to make a distinct sweet-spot on the volume dial that changes with each passing track. This is a good sign because it shows the two track the dynamic range of each recording well, but it's a pain and other systems have similar levels of resolution and don't require the safe-cracker approach to volume. But once again, this would be nit-picking at any price, but for £200, I feel churlish even mentioning it.

I often find headphone amps start well and end disappointingly, and somehow I just can't get as excited about the device two weeks after I first

turned it on. No physical changes have happened to the system, but I just find myself migrating back to other sources. Perhaps because the low cost never once made me feel like I needed to justify the presence of a headphone amp or a tiny DAC to go with it, I never once felt that sense of (non)buyer's remorse with the Epiphany duo. Perhaps that's the big epiphany in and of itself.

OK, so you aren't buying a Lehmann or (from memory) a Benchmark or a Grace Designs for a fraction of the price, but the products make a fine sound without the BS. We need a new generation to get into enjoying music and the sound it makes, and it is devices like these that do just that. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Epiphany Acoustics E-DAC Distortion: <0.005%

Dynamic range: >110dB A-Weighted

Audio formats: 44.1kHz, 48kHz & 96kHz @ both 16 bit and 24 bit

Interface: USB Audio Class 1

Compatibility: Windows, Mac, Linux

Line output: 2Vrms

Price: £99.99

Connections: 1 x 3.5mm input jack, 1 x 3.5mm output jack, 1 x power inlet, 1 x gain switch

Default gain settings: 1x and 2.5x

THD @ 1kHz: 0.0017%

Noise level (ref 400mV): -105dB

IMD: 0.001%

Power output @ 33Ω : 641mW

Crosstalk: 65dB

Channel balance: 0.6dB

Battery life: 8 hours

Price: £99.99

Manufactured by: Epiphany Acoustics

URL: www.epiphany-acoustics.co.uk

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most volume controls, which are in some way directly connected to an attenuator, the DacMagic Plus control is more like a switch. When you turn it, it feels loose and sloppy before it engages. Once engaged, it takes a moment for the volume knob to respond. To some prospective users, this volume control will feel cheap. Also with no dots, numbers, or indicators to tell a user what the relative volume level is, doing repeatable, matched-level comparisons between inputs with different levels was nearly impossible.

The DacMagic Plus offers three different digital filter settings that can be changed via a front panel button: linear phase filtering, minimum phase filtering, and steep filtering. Cambridge Audio encourages users to experiment to hear which filter setting sounds best with different material. Each input can have a different filter setting so when a given input is selected a particular filter will be employed. The DacMagic Plus includes one more adjustable sonic parameter: absolute phase. If a user holds down the digital filter button for more than a second it becomes the phase switch so you can go from positive phase to inverted phase.

For listeners who want to know exactly what the sampling rate is for every piece of music they play through their computer's playback chain, the DacMagic Plus includes a set of blue LEDs that inform you of the current rate. Since some players and computers will automatically downsample higher resolution digital streams if not configured properly, these notification LEDs can be especially useful to make sure that your new 192/24 music file is actually being played back at 192/24.

My most recent live recording of the Boulder Philharmonic included the world premiere of a composition by Ruby Fulton entitled "Deadlock." It is a concerto for beat box and orchestra. Shodekeh, the beat box soloist, used a small amp on stage in addition to an array over the concert hall's proscenium and a freestanding subwoofer. When I played back my 192/24 files of the recording through the DacMagic Plus I was immediately struck by how accurately the bass transients and dynamics were reproduced. During the Beat box passages I could hear how the bass travelled through the hall and how it bloomed as it expanded.

On commercial pop recordings such as Alexis Harte's "Please Come Out" from his superb album *Spoons of Honey*, the DacMagic Plus did a fine job of retaining all the subtle low-level background effects and textures. Imaging was precise without being pinched or etched. The cut begins with both record surface noise scratches as well as crickets chirping in the background. Through the DacMagic Plus it's easy to hear where and when these background sounds are very subtly feathered in and out of the mix.

If you are contemplating putting together a high-quality desktop audio system, or adding computer audio to an existing system, you will be hard pressed to find any DAC/Preamp that includes a more useful feature set or better sound for the DacMagic's £350 price tag. Yes, it's a great value. Yes, it delivers excellent sonics. And yes, the Cambridge Audio DacMagic Plus has earned my recommendation as the new benchmark for DAC performance with a price under £600. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs: three digital audio inputs (one USB input, plus two additional digital inputs – each with its own set of Toslink and S/PDIF coaxial jacks). Bluetooth connectivity is also offered via an optional Cambridge Audio BT 100 wireless Audio Receiver.

Outputs: two variable-level stereo analog outputs (one single-ended via RCA jacks, one balanced via XLR connectors), two (pass through) digital audio outputs (one S/PDIF coaxial, one Toslink).

Data Rates Supported: USB: 44.1kHz-96kHz at up to 24-bit resolution.

Optical and Coaxial S/PDIF: 32kHz-192kHz at up to 24-bit resolution.

Internal upsampling to 384kHz/24-bit via Anagram Technologies Adapted Time Filtering 2 (ATF2).

THD: <0.002%

Signal-to-noise ratio: 112 dB

Dimensions (H x W x D): 8.5" x 2.063" x 9.325"

Weight: 2.6 lbs. (without power supply)

Price: £350

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The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

music matters

By Alan Sircom

The rise of the Dictator-grade audio component knows no bounds. At the Top Audio show (see pages 12-14), Audio Note notably made it abundantly clear there is no end to just how high the high-end can go, with a system costing close to £700,000. It's easy for us mortals to get righteously indignant about such things, especially as there don't appear to be that many billionaire oligarchs trawling the halls of a hotel in Milan. But, that doesn't mean these products are in search of a non-existent buyer... the number of £100,000+ audio components sold is larger than most might imagine (Focal apparently sells around 100 pairs of Grande Utopia EM loudspeakers per year, for example).

Nor do I think that such products should be somehow prevented from being sold simply because they are priced beyond the reach of the vast majority of audio enthusiasts. There patently is a demand for billionaire-fi, and that demand needs servicing. However, this comes with an industry-wide responsibility to continue to meet the demands of the existing clientele. Prices of mature technologies generally increase – especially ones not anchored by selling in vast numbers – but while someone who bought a £5,000 amplifier in the 1980s might reasonably expect to pay £15,000 to buy something similar in today's inflation-adjusted money, they should not be expected to pay £45,000.

Moreover, just because a product can be sold for tens or even hundreds of thousands of pounds (or dollars, Hong Kong dollars, or yuan), doesn't mean it should. There are those products that exude quality; they are expensive, but you know why they are expensive by the build, the design and levels of fit and finish. You also know these products are 'serious' by the company they keep; they sell in slick and professional high-end stores, alongside products designed and made to the same grade.

But there are also products that don't exude the same quality. If beauty is skin deep, they may be built inside out, but when you are spending that kind of money, you would expect a build quality to match the sound. But that often doesn't happen. This is forgivable at lower prices – I have no problems with a product that looks like it was built into an old cake tin if it delivers top-notch performance at an extremely low price – but when faced with something that costs as much as an S-Class Mercedes, I would expect S-Class build, elegance and performance. Not shed-fi.

This doesn't mean good audio should be measured simply by sheer weight of front panel or by the shine on the aluminium billet the product is wrapped in, because there are a number of excellent products that eschew what the companies making them consider audiophile conceits

in order to produce a good sound. David Berning for example; the amplifiers are built on lightweight alloy chassis because Berning believes a heavyweight build undermines the performance of his amps. But even here the build quality shines through.

The difficulty is finding products that justify their high price both in terms of build and performance. There is a continuum here, with 'designed by Leonardo da Vinci, built to survive a thermonuclear strike, sounds like a throttled dog' at one extreme and 'sounds like listening to a choir of angels, may explode if you touch it, looks like something out of a 1950s Russian submarine' at the other. Most products exist somewhere in the middle, but realistically if you are spending the equivalent cost of a nice house in the country (or a studio flat in Chelsea) on hi-fi, I think it should tick all the boxes; it should look like a supermodel, will still be working when Team GB hosts its next Olympics and sounds like the musicians are in the room with you.

Hi-fi is old enough to fend for itself, and the seriously rich will choose products in the same way the rest of us choose products, but without the limitation of "I can't afford it". They don't need protecting from their own bank balance and if they want to spend some of that wealth on good audio, so be it. We – the huddled masses – are no more cheapened or undermined by the existence of super high-end audio than a driver of a Fiat Punto is cheapened or undermined by the existence of Ferrari and Lamborghini, but we are all cheapened by the existence of shoddy products, whatever the price. When someone pays big money for not much product, it affects us all. +

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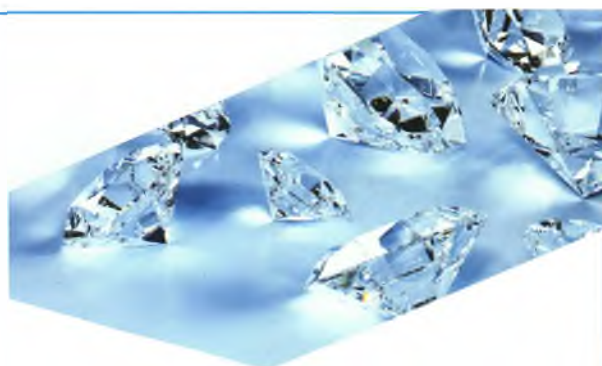
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record reviews

How To Read Them

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

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

This issue's featured reviewers are:

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

	CD		120g LP
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Dead Can Dance

Anastasis

Pias

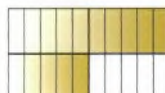


Well, this is a surprise! I guess most people (myself included) thought Dead Can Dance has disappeared in a cloud of pretention somewhere in the mid 1990s. Not a lot has been heard from the Australian duo since 1996's *Spiritchaser* (although there was a world tour in 2005). And yet suddenly, *Anastasis* appears.

It's perhaps fitting that the album name itself is Greek for 'resurrection', but the trouble is, perhaps the Dead should have stayed dead. Or perhaps they are still dead... tracks like 'Amnesia' and 'Children of the Sun' seem remarkably slow-paced. Dead Can Dance should be out of step with modernity (the band's fan base would never allow DCD to stray too far out of the 1980s), but this strangely sounds more dated than their earlier material.

On the upside though, this is fabulously recorded, like all DCD albums before it (*The Serpent's Egg* has long been on the edges of the audiophile playlist). I can imagine 'Agape' with its strong Middle Eastern flavour will quickly become a fixture in demonstration rooms and shows, because it's absolutely remarkable through a good system (and like all good audiophile-grade recordings, can make even laptop speakers sound great). It's also probably the best track on the album. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Rosco Levee

Final Approach To Home

Red Train Records



We Brits are occasionally surprisingly good at being Americans. Take Damian Lewis in *Homeland* or Idris Elba in *The Wire*. Even Americans think they are American. You could pass off the same trick with Rosco Levee. This – Levee's first full album – is good ol' American Roots Blues... from deepest Kent.

Final Approach To Home features a dozen tracks, from the country-folk 'Ol' Shanky Shake' (shades of The Band here) to the rootsy 'Goldrush' to the Allman Brothers-like boogie of 'All May Change Tonight'. Every track drips excellent musicianship and fine songwriting talent, all backed up by a good natural sounding mix ('I Got Soul' is particularly well recorded).

Perhaps the only giveaway that *Final Approach To Home* comes from a non-American is the diversity of styles on offer. This is a first album showcase of (obvious) talents, which means it sounds almost like a compilation rather than a corpus of work from an individual band.

Nevertheless, this is a strong debut, and Levee and his band is making waves not only in the UK, but even back in the US. Expect Rosco Levee to be a big name on the American Roots circuit, on both sides of the pond. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC





Sigur Rós

Valtari
Krúnk

CD 120₂

Sigur Rós fans (they aren't really 'fans', more 'wafting souls') have been somewhat concerned at the lack of output from the ethereal Icelanders. There's been not a squeak of a bowed guitar since 2008.

Last year's live album and DVD, *Inni*, helped ease the pain somewhat, but where was that new studio album? *Valtari* is the answer. It's based on a collaboration the band had with The Sixteen choir in London's Barbican nine years ago and the recording has been in progress since 2007. Only after *Inni* was out (sorry, couldn't resist) was the band ready to complete the project.

This is one of Sigur Rós most contemplative and thoughtful works in years, all recorded in that quiet confidence Sigur Rós has made something of a trademark. Given the band's ability to stretch one theme for half an hour or more, these five to eight minute long recordings could pass for being Speed Rós, but these are more short ethereal explorations that vast voyages. And then there's the achingly beautiful 'Varúð', one of the few where Jónsi Birgisson takes his voice out of falsetto and slowly builds in intensity the way few bands this side of Mogwai can muster.

It was worth the wait. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC



The XX

Coexist
XL

CD 120₁

The big problem with The XX's successful debut is breaking new ground without dividing the fans, and in many respects *Coexist* plays it safe. If you know the first album, you know precisely what you are going to get here; set your watch to 1980s time, this is pure ice-in-its-veins synth pop perfection, beautifully recorded by band member Jamie Smith.

A first, surface listen would dismiss it as yet more moaning about relationships by a band who spent too much time listening to Propaganda records. But go deeper and the rewards quickly manifest. Smith has gone from being a surprisingly good producer to a damn fantastic producer (he's very much the remixer of choice at the moment, and this has clearly honed his skills to a fine point).

The fascinating part of *Coexist* is that while it isn't a concept album, it's not an album of standout tracks (although 'Try' is particularly excellent). Instead, it's an album that works best played from front to back, several times. At which point you realise just why this is the better of the two XX albums. It may never be used in endless TV continuity links and adverts as the first album, but it's a clever and intelligent album that's also brilliantly recorded. A must buy. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Two Door Cinema Club

Beacon
Kitsune

CD 120₃

Tourist History, the first album from Northern Irish trio Two Door Cinema Club passed almost unnoticed, which was a shame because as first albums go, it was a bit of a good 'un, in a distinctly pop manner. *Beacon* shows a band maturing nicely. OK, it still has the neo-African tinkly rhythm guitar sound and tinges of 1980s disco that dominates the sound, but the band sounds more than just incidental music from an episode of *The Inbetweeners*.

There's some clever popsmithery here, as the band seems to be taking its audience through something close to stadium filling indie pop (tracks like 'Handshake' and 'Sleep Alone' are self-assured and polished examples of the genre) to tracks of complexity and fragility ('Settle' in particular is a slow build classic with something close to shoegazy churning guitars in the backdrop, and 'Pyramid' adds layers and layers like a less-pretentious version of Muse). There's a tendency – especially when the first album didn't sell in the millions – for a band to make a massive change in direction to compensate. TDCC are smarter than that; you can hear tracks like 'Cigarettes in the Theatre' in this new album, but developed into something bigger and better. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC



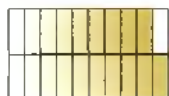
**Al Green****Call Me**

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XSHL 32077

Hi Records has opened up its catalog with four new releases on vinyl, including three by Pure Pleasure and Speakers Corners' reissue of Al Green's masterpiece *Call Me*, recorded at Royal Recording Studios in Memphis in 1973. Al Green's sensual voice was an amazing instrument. In 1974, Green was attacked by a former girlfriend, who then used his gun to commit suicide. Green entered the ministry and eventually stopped performing as a soul artist. That leaves this great album, which mixes seven soul tunes written by Green with impressive versions of Willie Nelson and Hank Williams' tunes.

Backed by the Memphis Strings, and top sessions horn and rhythm sections, Green delivers a flawless album. Speakers Corner has given us an impressive reissue, losing nothing to the original in atmosphere, and this LP is all about atmosphere. Willie Mitchell did a fine job producing and engineering this album, and this ranks as one of his better efforts. This LP sold in huge numbers, but I doubt you will find a copy that sounds better than this reissue pressed on perfect Pallas vinyl. Bravo to Kai Seeman for this gem. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC

**Bob Dylan****Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits**

Columbia/Audio Fidelity AFZ 140

For those of us who weren't yet nascent in 1967 when this album was released, this was not a typical greatest hits package. Dylan had suffered a serious motorcycle crash and wasn't able to keep the Columbia Records pump primed. So his top 40 hits were gathered into a singles album, covering his career through *Blonde On Blonde*. So what you get is 10 of the greatest hits of the classic rock era, arguably the greatest of all greatest hits collections. Which means that the only real issue up for discussion is how it sounds.

But compared to what the original singles, the original albums or the greatest hits package released by Columbia after it had abandoned its tube mastering system? Like many Dylan collectors I've collected originals in mono and stereo, various generations of CDs and Blu-spec CDs. Mastered at Stephen Marsh Mastering by Steve Hoffman, these cuts sound as fresh and clear as they ever have. All of the hits are presented in stereo, and it's the earliest songs that I find most improved. The first two Dylan albums as originally released were panned hard left and right but these mixes present coherent presentation that I prefer even to the mono mixes. This 5000-unit limited edition was sold out by Audio Fidelity to Amazon and other sellers, so don't hesitate. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC

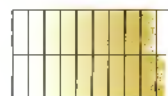
**Dianne Reeves****I Remember**

Blue Note/Pure Pleasure BST 90264

Although there is no shortage of vinyl issues of the top selling female vocalists, the more adventurous and obscure female jazz singers are underrepresented on LP. Pure Pleasure brings some relief to this drought. *I Remember* is an excellent choice to expand this horizon. Combining sessions from 1988 (recorded by Rudy Van Gelder) and 1990 (recorded by Malcolm Cecil in Los Angeles), the music was originally released in 1992 only on CD.

Reeves is backed by top-flight bands, and turns in captivating performances of nine jazz standards. She opens with a performance of Oscar Brown Jr.'s 'Afro Blue' that conjures Abbey Lincoln. But more often her debt to Sarah Vaughan is evident. Reeves has a big voice and an uncanny ability to interpret lyrics, both of which are on full display here. This album catapulted Reeves into the top flight of living jazz singers, and it remains one of her finest achievements. Probably sourced from a digital recording, the LP is now easily the best sounding Reeves album available, leagues ahead of the much thinner sound of her voice on CD. This and the Cassandra Wilson album are outstanding and Pure Pleasure deserves a gold medal for making them available. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



**Grant Green****Street Of Dreams**

Blue Note/Music Matters 84253

Music Matters is closing in on its 100th release and you would think after almost 100 titles, they would start to run out of worthwhile titles. Yet it hasn't happened and this title is strong evidence of both the depth of the Blue Note catalog and the excellent taste of Joe Harley and Ron Rambach. Grant Green is one of the jazz guitar greats, yet there are the great Green albums (and Music Matters has released a few of these) and a few (like *Street Of Dreams*) that garnered less than stellar reviews. There are no "hot" numbers here, yet there is never a dull moment. Green is joined by Bobby Hutcherson on vibes, Larry Young on organ and Elvin Jones on drums and together they turn in what I believe is the most underrated session in the Grant Green Blue Note discography.

Green, like Ike Quebec, is a Blue Note artist that you can always count on for exceptional sound and music to die for. Also like Quebec, he hits a groove that is disarmingly entertaining and at the same time unquestionably high art. *Street of Dreams* fits perfectly into that continuum—just listen to the title song, sit back and let your critical faculties take a break. Mastering engineer Kevin Gray, Harley and Rambach have outdone themselves. Highest recommendation. **DD**

RECORDING

MUSIC

**Jaco Pastorius**

Epic/ORG ORG 011

180

Pastorius was that light that burns twice as bright for half as long. He suffered from bipolar disorder, and it led to him spending the end of his short life on the streets, beaten to death in a violent confrontation. But this album, released by Epic in 1976, catapulted him to star status shortly before he joined Weather Report. Joined by an all star line up including Herbie Hancock and Randy Brecker, the album will sound familiar to anyone who has heard the Weather Report albums during Pastorius' time with the band. As Hancock notes in the liner notes, Pastorius could make sounds on the bass that are totally unexpected, and then upend your expectations again with his unique harmonic structure.

Much of the jazz cross over music of the 1970s does not hold up that well, but I never tire of listening to this album with the exception of one cut that has too much of a Sly Stone vibe. When you combine bass, electronic music and crappy 1970s oil embargo vinyl, you can hardly expect the original release of this music to be the best representative of the music. And this new 45-RPM release showcases just how good this music can be made to sound. Remastered by Bernie Grundmann and pressed by RTI, Jaco has never sounded better. An outstanding release. **DD**

RECORDING

MUSIC

**The Prestige All Stars****All Night Long**

Prestige/Analogue Productions 7073

Prestige's practice was to throw together a group of musicians and grind out a jam session with no time for rehearsal. This is an early Prestige session from 1956 and it bears the hallmarks of this practice, although the results are far above average. The stellar line up of stars, Donald Byrd, Jerome Richardson, Kenny Burrell, Hank Mobley, Mal Waldron, Doug Watkins and Art Taylor are young and full of fire for this excellent session.

All the "stars" take their turn, but the standouts are Kenny Burrell and Jerome Richardson. While not billed as the leader on the original release Kenny Burrell received credit as the leader when the session was later released. 25 year old Burrell is at the beginning of his career, but in less than a year he had become an in demand session player. It shows in this session, which is one of Burrell's best recordings. Richardson, at 36 was the elder statesman and his self-assurance is evident. Recorded by Rudy Van Gelder in glorious mono in his parents' Hackensack New Jersey living room, the sound is excellent if not quite up to the best he achieved in that venue with smaller groups. Analogue Productions and Kevin Gray have done a fine job in remastering the tapes, and the packaging is gorgeous. **DD**

RECORDING

MUSIC



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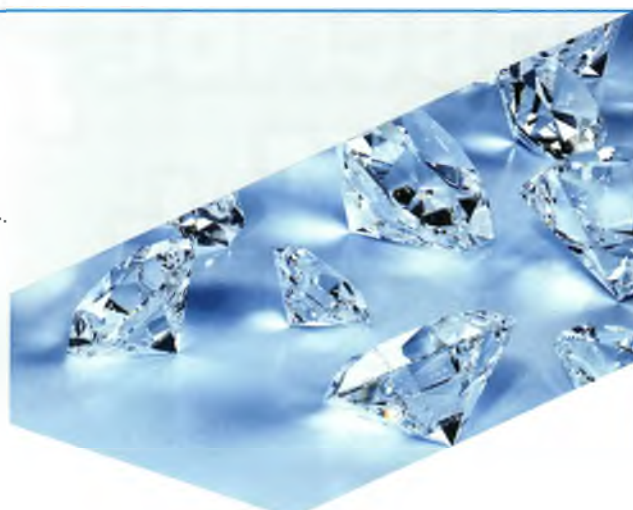


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Every Home Should Have One

The Decca Sound

By Alan Sircom

One of the great benefits for the end user in 2012 is the price war going on in the music business. Back catalogue – long considered a license to print money by record companies – is now something to sell off quickly and cheaply in large box sets. The trick with the really big boxes is to play the numbers game; you are likely to already own some of the recordings in the box, there are going to be some in the box you want and some albums you will thoroughly enjoy but didn't even know you wanted. Which means, as a rule of thumb, if the box set costs even roughly as much as the cost of the rest of the discs in the set you wanted, buy it anyway, because you are going to get all those extra albums for free.

Of course, when it comes to the *Decca Sound* set, all bets are off. This is a collection of 50 classic Decca recordings – from the first days of stereo to the present (well, almost... the most recent disc is from 2009). Some of these recordings are considered the best ever, both from a musical and recording perspective. You've got Solti's masterful version of Mahler's Eighth Symphony and snippets from his monumental Ring cycle, Britten's War Requiem, the excellent Falla *Three Pointed Hat* with Teresa Berganza, a selection of the Takács Quartet's remarkable renditions of Beethoven's String Quartets and an sea of talent. With a 200 page booklet, cardboard CD sleeves styled as the original discs and the whole package working out at around £2 per disc, it's one of those special offers that are coming to represent the true bonus of the tail end of CD. Briefly, to accompany the 50 disc set, there was a six LP set, pressed on 180g vinyl, but it's a mark of the continued success of LP that the 2,000 copies of that box sold out in very short order.

There are some omissions of course. Even a 50-disc 'best of' barely scratches the surface of Decca's output. As a consequence, it's light on opera (a lot of Puccini excepts aside), very light on Mahler (just the Eighth Symphony) and almost as much Mussorgsky as Bach. Interestingly too, although it's 50 years of Decca stereo best, it very much reflects the trends of today, even in classical music; classical music lovers of 50 years ago often had the 1812 and perhaps some Gilbert & Sullivan in their collections, but such things have been largely sidelined since the late 1950s (and probably with good reason).

Of course, there is more than a hint of sadness at the sight of this collection. Although there are recordings from the late 1950s to the late 2000s in the collection, it becomes clear just how much of a spent force Decca was in its later years. The company was a true pioneer of recording technology when stereo was fresh and new, and

as a result became a key player in the UK music scene. Many of these recordings were highly prized because of the quality of the performance and the recording. Today, Decca is a pale imitation of its glory days, as are many of the great names in classical recording.

The *Decca Sound* box invites a question about classical today and tomorrow. In 50 years time, will there be a record label with such a rich, diverse and impassioned mix of recordings that it would be capable of releasing a box of such breadth and depth as this?

The *Decca Sound* follows in the box set footsteps of DG's 111 album collection, now discontinued and soaring in value. The *Decca Sound* box is also another limited edition, and the price will rise as soon as it gets discontinued. I missed out on the 111 albums from DG... don't miss this one. +

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J. S. Bach: Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin, BWV 1001-1003.

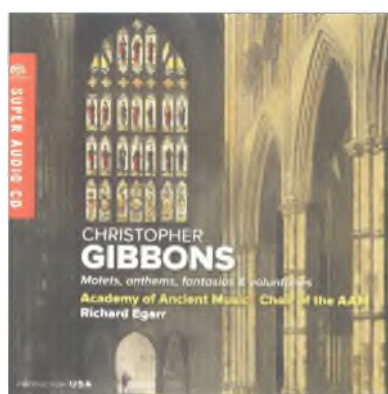
Isabelle Faust, violinist.

Harmonia Mundi HMC 902124.

In issue 77 I first 'discovered' Isabelle Faust and loved what I heard on her Bach works, BWV 1004-1006. Now, she begins here Bach cycle on a new disc for Harmonia-Mundi. While I have raved about my fascination with Johanna Martzy and here Bach performances, Faust is quickly gaining ground into what I call 'sacred territory'. Yes Martzy is my favorite, but as far as female violinists are concerned, there is a wealth of great talent today some of whom are: Rachael Podger, Julia Fischer, Hillary Hahn, and many, many more. Admittedly I like very much Julia Fischer's Bach on PentaTone however, some of that bias goes to the recording venue of Fischer's performances.

Faust is recorded at the Teldec recording studio in Berlin and to me, the recording is a little on the dry side but just a little. She is right up front and the sound of her instrument is nothing short of impressive. The acoustic somewhat reverberant and yet I still find it a little dry to my taste. From a technical point-of-view, Faust is right up there with any other violinist today or yesteryear. I do hope you will take the time to try and have a listen to this disc. I unconditionally highly recommend it. **RSF**
www.harmoniamundi.com

RECORDING
MUSIC



Christopher Gibbons: motets, anthems, fantasias & voluntaries

Academy of Ancient Music;
Choir of the AAM; Richard Egarr,
director & solo organ.

Harmoni-Mundi

One of the great joys in writing this column has been the ability to broaden my classical musical tastes. I'd never heard of Christopher Gibbons before, but I like very much what I hear.

We have wonderful forces at work here, the glorious Academy of Ancient Music and its corresponding force, the Choir of the AAM. Add to this, the drive and personality of Richard Egarr and you have a wonderful scoring that will be impossible to beat.

Ancient/Early music lovers may be critical of Gibbons, but I have found this disc indispensable and have enjoyed listening to it on several occasions. Egarr describes Gibbons as the "missing link between the pre-Commonwealth world of Williams Lawes and the Restoration baroque of Henry Purcell", and the beautifully played and sung sequence he has devised for the Academy of Ancient Music and its Choir alternates anthems and motets with organ voluntaries (performed by Egarr) and fantasias for two violins, bass viol and organ. Great sound in CD or SACD. **RSF**
www.harmoniamundi.com

RECORDING
MUSIC



Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 1 (Titan) in D major.

The Budapest Festival Orchestra
conducted by Ivan Fischer.

Channel Classics CC SA 33112.

This is the 4th Mahler recording I seen from Channel Classics. While the other recordings are outstanding, this has gone to the top of my list. The dynamics and clarity are spectacular. Fischer is a true Mahlerian.

The statement of the 'big tune' – three minutes into the finale – begins initially with a restrained simplicity that gradually blossoms into an impassioned climax, while the remainder of the movement proclaims the controlled virtuosity of the Budapest players right through to the symphony's cataclysmic conclusion. Those seeking the histrionics of a Bernstein may be slightly disappointed by Fischer's faithful adherence to what is in the score, but this thrilling performance is one to live with, and one's admiration for what Fischer achieves grows with each subsequent playing of this superb recording.

I've played this recording at least a half-dozen times and to my ears it gets better with each performance. There is a solid difference between the SACD layer and the CD layer, but even those without proper SACD kit won't be disappointed. **RSF**
<http://www.channelclassics.com/>

RECORDING
MUSIC





Oliver Messiaen: *Turangalila – Symphonie*

CD

Juanjo Mena conducting the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra with Steven Osborne, piano and Cynthia Millar, ondes martenot. Hyperion CDA67816.

While many will shy away from the works of Messiaen, this is one symphony everyone should listen to. It's a 10 movement score that is wonderful to listen to and a real workout for any fine stereo system. The recording puts pianist Steven Osborne and ondes martenot player Cynthia Millar in the foreground in its acoustics. The piano stands out with the prominence of a concerto soloist and this is more pronounced than in most recordings. Osborne does play the dazzling piano part brilliantly and Millar is similarly virtuosic in a performance that also pops out above the orchestra and highlights the strangeness of the instrument's timbres.

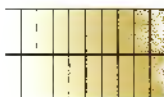
This is a glorious performance of a work that's rare in the concert hall, but a masterpiece packed with atmosphere, reverence, irreverence and a sense of fun in movements 5 and 10 that I have never heard before. Messiaen? Fun? Listen and believe.

The sound quality is exceptional and this disc will certainly make my top 20 list for 2012. This is a 'real corker' and should not be missed.

RSF

<http://www.hyperion.co.uk/>

RECORDING
MUSIC



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Paris and Vienna, A tale of two cities.

SA 5.1

Gottlieb Wallisch, piano.
Linn CKD-407.

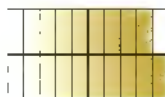
Way back in Issue 73 I was very impressed with Wallisch's first Mozart disc-also on Linn. Here we have a continuation of several andantes, allegros and sonatas, which also offers great sound. The performances are exceptional too.

The compositions offered here are from some of Mozart's most creative period where he composed operas, symphonies, concerti and several works for keyboard. This disc offers an expressiveness that is missed by some Mozartian soloists. Wallisch displays a swagger and confidence that tends to make this disc one to own. One of the profoundest works by Mozart is the B-minor Adagio, based on a key so important to Sebastian Bach, and here imitated in its melancholy by Mozart even when it turns into the saddest B-major you will ever hear. The Six Variations are short pieces taken from an opera by Paisiello, unknown today but admired by Mozart in his time. They are finely-wrought and even demanded an encore and extended improvising when first performed. These are lovely performances of some exceptional Mozart and a disc not to be missed.

RSF

<http://www.linnrecords.co.uk/>

RECORDING
MUSIC



Tchaikovsky: Piano concerto No. 1 in B flat minor, Op.23.

Various works by Chopin, Liszt, Schubert and Schumann;
Danil Trifonov, piano.

Mariinsky Orchestra conducted
by Valery Gergiev.

Well bring out the war horse, that good old Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto and yet it's here and oh so new. Trifonov, 21, has played internationally he is a top prize winner of several major international piano competitions, including the Rubinstein competition in Tel Aviv, the International Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw and the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow. At the age of 21, he is quickly emerging as one of the most outstanding pianists of his generation, having the potential to build a major international performing career.

The works on this disc show a wide range of his talents. He is in complete control and works well with this orchestra. Trifonov is and outstanding young talent, one whom we are going to hear much more about in the future.

The SACD layer is excellent, rich, spacious capturing much in the hall he was recorded in. The CD is of demonstration quality and I have no qualms about giving this a top recommendation. RSF

www.mariinskylabel.com

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MUSIC



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To buy IsoTek products online, simply visit IsoTek's regular website, at www.isoteksystems.com. From there, browse the available products and if you find something you want to buy, click on the link provided. This will allow you to place an order and make payment securely online.

Your local authorised IsoTek dealer fulfils your order, so you can be sure you are buying a genuine IsoTek product, complete with the after sales backup provided by IsoTek's official dealer network.

Discover IsoTek

Entry-level mains conditioning components form the core of IsoTek's great-value Discovery series

This autumn sees the launch of two new, eminently affordable yet highly effective power-conditioning devices from IsoTek.

The first, Polaris, is IsoTek's new entry-level mains distribution block, designed to enhance the performance of a complete audio system. A unique delta filter topology delivers super-clean power to six outlets – each one fully independent to prevent cross-contamination – while 13,500A

of instantaneous protection safeguards valuable equipment via IsoTek's unique sequential protection system. With sturdy aluminium casework and a price tag of just £250, Polaris will improve the sound quality of every component in your system,



making it unquestionably the most cost-effective upgrade you can buy.

Also new is the Mini Mira, a mains filtration device developed specifically to enhance picture performance in

AV systems. Based upon IsoTek's already highly acclaimed Mira circuit, Mini Mira packs the Triple Resonant Filter, designed specifically to handle frequencies that are critical to video quality, into an even smaller, more convenient

package with two outlets – one for a TV or projector, the other for a partnering device such as a set-top box or Blu-ray player. Priced at just £195 and offering class-leading surge/spike protection to boot, Mini Mira is a must for any movie buff that cares about picture quality.

One Cord Wonder

Low-cost power cable delivers high-end results

IsoTek's latest high-performance power cord – the Premier – is also its most affordable, with an advanced construction using premium-quality materials that sets it apart from other sub-£100 cables.

At the core of each cable are three 2sqmm conductors made from 99.9999% oxygen-free copper, coated in silver and twisted together to aid RFI and EMI rejection. An FEP dielectric is extruded over the conductors, held in cotton filler and secured using a paper wrap, with a flexible, non-flammable PVC outer sheath. The cable is priced at £80 and is finished with high-quality moulded 24ct gold-plated connectors, available in a variety of plug types, including UK (BS1363).

IsoTek is also launching an all-new range of audiophile-grade power cord connectors, available individually as an upgrade option for owners of cables from IsoTek and other brands. All connection surfaces are fashioned from pure copper and coated in 24ct gold, while the detachable main body is formed from injection-moulded polycarbonate with a nylon front assembly. With a price tag of just £40 each and a wide range of plug options (including IEC C7, C15 and C19), IsoTek's new connectors offer exceptional value for money. ☺



On Tour with IsoTek



From the company's base in Hampshire, England, the IsoTek team travels the world to conduct public demonstrations, dealer training and product seminars – a vital part of the company's commitment to support each of the 51 countries in which IsoTek products are sold. Thus far in 2012, the company's travels have encompassed large swathes of Europe; but the journey began in Bristol, as Keith Martin, IsoTek's founder and managing director, recalls.

UK

The UK's most popular hi-fi show, Sound & Vision in Bristol, remains a key fixture in the IsoTek calendar. We've been conducting live demonstrations at the show for the last nine years, demonstrating the benefits of IsoTek cables and conditioners via carefully controlled A/B demonstrations. I'm pleased to say our room is always packed, and this year was no exception as, among other things, we delivered the first public demonstrations of the Genesis dual-cell power conditioner.

In addition to our own demonstrations, IsoTek products could be heard in the room occupied by *Hi-Fi Choice*, the respected audio publication. The magazine's Editor, David Price, approached us to supply power conditioning to enhance his system's sound and thus aid his comparisons between CD and various digital file types up to 24-bit/192kHz. We delivered an Aquarius conditioning unit, several Premium cables and the DC-cancelling Syncro cable: the improvement brought by the IsoTek equipment once installed was emphatic.



Czech Republic

High End Prague is firmly established among Europe's premier showcase events for the finest audio and AV equipment money can buy. IsoTek was present in force, conducting initial demonstrations with Arcam FMJ electronics and midrange KEF speakers, then graduating to top-end Burmester electronics and KEF Blade speakers for a full-blown dem of the Genesis and Super Titan – IsoTek's flagship power optimisation components. More packed rooms, more new fans; from Bristol to Prague and beyond, all you need to appreciate IsoTek is a love of music and have a passion for great sound.

Germany

Munich's High End show is an annual celebration of high-performance audio equipment, Europe's largest event of its kind. This year's show was another tremendous success as we introduced our restructured product range to trade and public alike, from the entry-level Discovery series to the top-end Ultimate series, securing new distribution deals for North America, Norway, Korea and Israel in the process.

Russia

A flying visit to Moscow saw us entertain around 40 Russian dealers at a special event organised by IsoTek's Russian distributor, Qvinta-Audio Company. Using a

system containing a top-notch dCS front end, we conducted A/B demonstrations and explained how IsoTek products tackle both Common Mode and Differential Mode noise in a uniquely effective way. By the time the event ended, IsoTek's retail presence in Russia was considerably enhanced!

The Netherlands

From Russia we flew to Amsterdam, conducting demonstrations to both public and trade using Roksan Caspian electronics and Monitor Audio speakers. Working through various IsoTek components, we concluded with the Super Titan, the effect of which brought gasps from the audience. Truly, these components catapulted the sound of this relatively humble system into the stratosphere!

Sweden

After a short period back in the UK, we travelled to Sweden for a substantial dealer training tour. We were collected from the airport by our Swedish distributor in a white Nissan – our tour bus, of sorts. Six days, six towns, six dealer visits, each with comprehensive A/B dems to showcase the clear sonic advantage that IsoTek products bring to audio systems at all price levels.

The systems we encountered were different at every dealer, ranging from modest Marantz components to higher-end systems from Audio Analogue and Passlabs, and even a valve-based set-up from Sugden. Each time, we ran through various levels of IsoTek equipment, from the Sirius six-way mains block to the Aquarius conditioner, Syncro DC-cancelling power cable and, towards the top end of the range, the Titan conditioner. Each step brought clear sonic improvements – added depth and detail, greater front-to-back layering, increased dynamic contrast... The best way to discover the benefits of IsoTek's clean-power technologies is to listen – then there's no going back! ☺

"The IsoTek Aquarius conditioner and power cables made a profound difference to the sound of the *Hi-Fi Choice* hi-res dem system, bringing smoothness, depth, sweetness and subtlety. Thanks IsoTek!"

David Price, Editor of *Hi-Fi Choice* magazine, at Sound & Vision – The Bristol Show 2012

Power to the People

There's something for everyone in IsoTek's product range. If you've yet to discover what clean power can do for your system, here's the place to start

The first input into any audio or AV system is electricity. It flows through the system, utilised by each component in turn to create the signal that eventually moves the speakers' drive units and delivers the pixels on-screen. What we see and hear is ultimately fashioned from, and by, mains electricity – it's the 'raw material' from which the 'art' is created.

The mains supply is polluted by numerous contaminants. We are bathed in a sea of RFI and EMI, which corrupts the electricity supply and degrades the performance of audio and AV components. What's more, all the electrical items you use in your home, from computers to washing machines, affect the supply and erode your system's potential.

As the electronic devices we use proliferate and the demand for electrical power escalates, the quality of the electricity we feed our systems continues to slide. Running an audio or AV system on unconditioned mains is like running a car on dirty petrol; performance is degraded and the engine's longevity is reduced.

For people who care about sound and picture quality, it's a serious problem. But thanks to IsoTek, the leaders in clean-power technology, there's a solution to suit every system and every pocket.

IsoTek's product range for 2012/2013 is arranged into five distinct groups – Discovery, Performance, Select, Ultimate and Essentials – all of which benefit from IsoTek's unique, proprietary, performance-enhancing technologies.

Discovery Series

IsoTek's entry-level product series delivers highly effective yet eminently affordable solutions to enhance sound and picture quality, whilst also protecting your valuable system components from damaging spikes and surges in the mains supply.

There are two mains conditioning components in the Discovery series, both of which are new for autumn 2012 and incorporate all the technological advances of IsoTek's latest EV03 platform. The Polaris is IsoTek's entry-level six-way distribution block, precision engineered to remove both Common Mode and Differential Mode mains noise, while the compact Mini Mira is specifically designed for AV systems and sports a unique circuit to enhance the picture performance of any TV or projector (see page 2, News, for more information).

Also part of the Discovery series are the IsoPlug and NeoPlug: ingenious little devices that plug directly into a wall socket to eliminate mains noise created by common domestic devices, like computers, fridges, microwaves and so on.

Performance Series

The next step up from Discovery is the Performance series – a collection of components tailor-made to enhance the performance of any high-quality audio or AV system. The range includes three mains conditioning devices, each with six outlets to deliver clean power to a complete separates system and each the subject of critical acclaim from respected audio publications around the world.

The most affordable of these conditioning devices is the Sirius, a six-way mains block described by *Hi-Fi World* magazine as "a great, real world product" and by *Hi-Fi Choice* as "an effective upgrade for any system". Next comes the Solus, an advanced, rack-width conditioning component; "excellent" says *Hi-Fi World* in its review of the Solus, while *Hi-Fi Choice* suggests, "try it... we're convinced you'll be hooked".

Finally, there's the Aquarius: top conditioning component in the Performance series and spiritual successor to the discontinued Mini Sub, the product that put IsoTek – and mains conditioning in general – firmly on the map. Aquarius improves upon the Mini Sub in every critical area, its performance leading to tremendous acclaim and a string of awards. "The lift in performance is remarkable," says *Hi-Fi Choice* in its assessment of Aquarius, while *Hi-Fi+* declares that it "raises the game for hi-fi" in its 2011 Annual Awards.

Another important – and utterly unique product is Syncro, a top-quality mains cable with DC-cancelling electronics. Syncro is designed to synchronise the mains supply to promote a perfectly symmetrical sine wave, heralded as "highly impressive" by *Hi-Fi World* and a product that "takes things to a new level" by *Hi-Fi+*. Combine Syncro with a mains conditioning component like Aquarius for quite extraordinary results.

Select Series

The Select Series contains premium-quality mains conditioning components designed for the most discerning of listeners. First, there's the Sigmas, a rack-width, six-outlet, full system conditioner that builds upon the Aquarius blueprint to deliver a performance worthy of multiple awards including 'Best Accessory' in *Hi-Fi News* and 'Best Mains Conditioner' in *Hi-Fi Choice*.

After Sigmas come Nova and Titan. Both these devices are acknowledged as game-changers within their field, the Nova purpose-built to deliver clean power to front-end components and the Titan optimised for current-hungry devices like power amps and subwoofers. "This mains filter singly redefines what is possible for cleaning mains quality," declares *Hi-Fi News* when describing the Titan, while *What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision* simply calls it "a revelation".

DISCOVERY



EV03 Mini Mira



EV03 Isoplug and NeoPlug



PERFORMANCE



EV03 Aquarius



EV03 Sirius

EV03 Solus



EV03 Syncro

SELECT



GII Titan



The final Select series product is the Multi-Link, an additional unit for the Titan that expands the number of high-current outlets from two to eight – perfect for set-ups with multiple current-hungry devices like high-end home cinema systems.

Ultimate Series

Born from a desire innovate, IsoTek is a company that continually strives to push boundaries and deliver new performance benchmarks. The Ultimate series contains two groundbreaking components that take power optimisation for audio and AV systems to a new level: Super Titan, the world's most powerful mains conditioner for high-current applications, and Genesis, the first dual-cell mains generator.

Together, these extraordinary devices form a uniquely effective mains optimisation system – a new benchmark in clean power for the world's finest audio and AV systems. The low-impedance, high-current Super Titan is built from the ground up to feed powerful, high-end power amplifiers, described as "extremely effective" and "worth every penny" by *Hi-Fi World*, and "awesome" by *Hi-Fi Choice*. Launched this summer, Genesis is Super Titan's perfect partner for front-end components – a device that doesn't just condition the mains supply, it builds an entirely new mains sine wave from scratch (see page 6 for more information).

IsoTek Essentials

In addition to the comprehensive range of power filtering, conditioning and generating components described above, IsoTek makes a range of performance-enhancing accessories that are essential for anyone who loves great sound.

There's a full range of high-performance mains cables, beginning in price order with the new Premier cable, followed by Premium, Elite, Optimum, Supreme and, for the most current-hungry power amps, Extreme. These cables are accompanied by a new range of 24ct gold IsoTek connectors of the very highest quality, for maximum conductivity and minimum signal loss.

An ingenious plug-in device called ProTek delivers intelligent, audiophile-grade system protection, while two specially compiled CDs contain scientifically derived tracks to boost system performance. The Ultimate System Set-Up Disc helps to optimise your system for the best possible sound quality, while the Full System Enhancer and Rejuvenation Disc delivers a complete workout for your audio system, to ensure it always performs at its best. 

 2011 Hi-Fi Choice Best of Best IsoTek Aquarius	 2012 Hi-Fi World 5-Globe Winner IsoTek Solus	 2012 Hi-Fi Choice Recommended IsoTek Ultimate Set-Up Disc	 2012 Hi-Fi News Highly Commended IsoTek Genesis
 2010 Hi-Fi World 5-Globe Winner IsoTek Aquarius	 2010 Hi-Fi Choice Highly Commended IsoTek Aquarius	 2011 Hi-Fi World 5-Globe Winner IsoTek Super Titan	 2011 Hi-Fi Choice Recommended IsoTek Solus
 2008 Hi-Fi Choice Best Buy IsoTek Sirius	 2008 What Hi-Fi? Best Cost-No-Object Ultimate Guide IsoTek Titan	 2008 Hi-Fi Choice Silver Award IsoTek Sirius	 2010 What Hi-Fi? Best Product Ultimate Guide to TV IsoTek Visual
 2007 Hi-Fi Choice Editor's Choice IsoTek Audio Grade IEC	 2007 Hi-Fi Choice Category Winner IsoTek Sirius	 2007 Sound & Vision Category Winner Hungary IsoTek GII Mini Sub	 2008 What Hi-Fi? Best All-Rounder Ultimate Guide IsoTek GII Mini Sub
 2006 T.A.S. Editor's Choice Nordost Thor by IsoTek	 2006 Hi-Fi Choice Category Winner IsoTek Sigman	 2006 Hi-Fi News Product of the Year IsoTek Sigman	 2006 Hi-Fi Choice Category Winner IsoTek Sigman
 2005 What Hi-Fi? IsoTek Titan	 2005 Hi-Fi News Category Winner IsoTek Titan	 2005 Hi-Fi Review Product of the Year Hong Kong IsoTek Sigman	 2006 What Hi-Fi? IsoTek Full System Enhancer CD
 2004 What Hi-Fi? Category Winner IsoTek GII Visual	 2004 Hi-Fi Plus Category Winner Nordost Thor by IsoTek	 2005 What Hi-Fi? IsoTek Genesis 6-Way	 2005 Hi-Fi Choice Editor's Choice Nordost Thor by IsoTek
 2003 Hi-Fi Choice Category Winner IsoTek Mini Sub (Mk1)	 2003 Hi-Fi News Category Winner IsoTek Mini Sub (Mk1)	 2004 What Hi-Fi? IsoTek GII Visual	 2004 Hi-Fi Choice Category Winner IsoTek GII Mini Sub
 2002 Hi-Fi News Category Winner IsoTek SubStation	 2003 What Hi-Fi? IsoTek Mini Sub (Mk1)	 2003 Hi-Fi Choice Editor's Choice IsoTek Mini Sub (Mk1)	 2003 What Hi-Fi? Category Winner IsoTek Mini Sub (Mk1)



GII Nova



GII Sigmas



EV03 Super Titan

EV03 Genesis



EV03 Protek

Full System Enhancer



24CT Gold Audiophile Grade Connectors



Ultimate System Set-Up Disc

ULTIMATE

ESSENTIAL



IsoTek Genesis: the Source of Great Sound

Mains electricity is distorted by numerous factors as it travels from power stations to be distributed throughout our homes, eroding the performance of high-quality audio and AV systems. For more than a decade, IsoTek has manufactured class-leading mains conditioning components that filter and distribute the mains supply to deliver pure, consistent power that instantly improves sound quality. But what if, instead of filtering the existing mains supply, a device could build an entirely new, fully optimised mains sine wave from scratch? That is precisely the role of IsoTek's new Genesis – the world's first dual-cell mains sine wave generator for audio and AV systems.

Unlike existing mains regenerators, Genesis builds a completely new sine wave within two identical, independent generation cells. An extremely low distortion, synchronous sine wave generator creates a fully optimised signal inside each cell, which is amplified by a 300W generation engine running in Class A/B and fed to a high-quality output transformer with copper foil between the primary and secondary output,

thus preventing distortion and noise passing through the unit. When both cells are combined, the result is 600W of continuous, newly generated power.

The end result is an extremely precise and consistent 230V/50Hz mains sine wave with vanishingly low levels of distortion, independent of the input quality of the power line. Whatever the level of distortion of the incoming mains supply, Genesis delivers exceptionally low THD (Total Harmonic Distortion) of between 0.05% and 0.17% with typical loads, remaining below 0.3% with even the most complex loads.

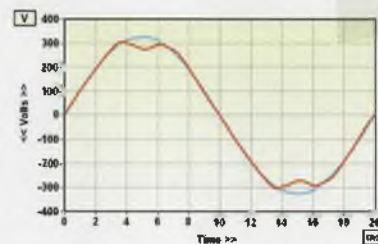
The Genesis joins Super Titan – the world's most powerful mains conditioner – at the vanguard of IsoTek's flagship Ultimate series. While Genesis is perfect for front-end components, Super Titan's huge current delivery is ideal for big, current-hungry power amplifiers. Together, they form a unique, and uniquely effective, mains optimisation system – a new benchmark in clean power for the world's finest audio and AV systems, resulting in terrifically enhanced performance. **ES**

LAB REPORT

Technical Excellence

The first in-depth technical review of the IsoTek Genesis was published in the October 2012 edition of highly respected audio journal *Hi-Fi News*. "I was blown away," said reviewer Keith Howard after conducting his listening tests, while the magazine's lab analysis delivered irrefutable scientific evidence of the dual-cell generator's exceptional performance, concluding thus: "As the results show, overall distortion from the Genesis is less than a twentieth of that from the mains supply and very close to IsoTek's claim of <0.3%. This, by any measure, is an excellent result."

The graph below, extracted from the Hi-Fi News lab report, shows the mains voltage waveform a wall socket (red) versus the output from the Genesis (blue). The mains waveform is distorted, but the waveform from Genesis is virtually perfect. You can view the lab report in full on the IsoTek website: www.isoteksystems.com



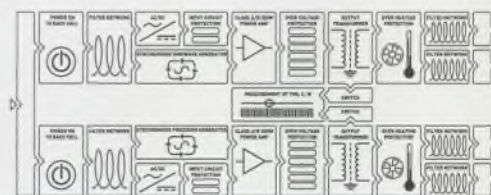
ABOVE: Mains voltage waveform, from wall socket (red) versus IsoTek EVO3 Genesis (blue)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Harmonic	Mains	EVO3 Genesis
3rd	4.35%	0.12%
5th	5.05%	0.06%
7th	2.09%	0.15%
9th	0.92%	0.17%



ABOVE & BELOW: Interior photograph and schematic of IsoTek EVO3 Genesis



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