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editorial

Having tarted myself around a number of hi-fi shows around the world recently, I've come up with some important observations. First, if there is a Hell, it probably looks a lot like an airport terminal (specifically Washington Dulles' B-gates). Second, even in the face of a small, but distinct, recovery in the world of audio, there are still plenty of people in the audio industry around the globe with faces that all look like a bulldog chewing a wasp.

But perhaps most importantly, it seems there is the beginning of a touch of mojo returning to the audio world. This appears to be happening in all sectors of the market at the same time, just in slightly different levels. In the last few shows, there has been a buzz that simply wasn't there this time last year. It's the buzz of companies making new products, of new and clever ideas. It's the buzz of people coming together and sharing ideas. But most of all, it's the buzz of people, old and new, discovering either what's new in audio or even what this new thing called audio is all about...

Every audio show I have ever attended has had a disproportionate number of middle-aged men with bad haircuts and poorly fitting clothes, even before I joined those ranks. Time changes, but audio remains an older man's sport. Expecting an army of twentysomethings to start buying high-end audio is folly because they never did before. However, at the last few shows, there have been some newcomers looking at what our little world has to offer with keen eyes. Granted, not many, but numbers seem to be slowly growing.

I suspect Napster and the iPod might have something to do with this. Far from killing off the industry, some 13 years after Napster first hit the desktops of the file-sharing twentysomethings of the late 1990s, that so-called 'lost generation' always took interest in music and is now starting to take interest in music quality just as we did. OK, so their interest right now is focused on headphones and headphone amplifiers, but it's a short hop from high-end electrostatic headphones to electrostatic loudspeakers. And one I am hopeful people will be beginning to make again.

So, maybe our little world is not exactly rosy and restored. Nor will it likely be any time soon. But the sky is not falling, either. We should stop listening to our inner depressive, at least for a while.

Alan Sircom
editor@hifiplus.com

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by



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contents ISSUE 93 EQUIPMENT+

COMMENT

- 5** **INCOMING!**
Your letters and email

FEATURES

- 10** **CHRISTMAS GIFTS**
Top toys for audiophile boys
- 12** **NATIONAL AUDIO SHOW 2012**
The UK's high-end affair
- 16** **UPGRADING PART TWO**
The loudspeakers
- 20** **ROCKY MOUNTAIN AUDIO FEST**
The #1 high-end show in 2012

8 COMPETITION

**WORLD
WIDE WIN!**
Antelope's
Zodiac
DAC/
preamp
must be
won!



MUSIC

- 86** **CONTEMPORARY,
AUDIOPHILE AND
JAZZ MUSIC**
- 93** **EVERY HOME SHOULD
HAVE ONE SPECIAL**
Coup d'Archet records

+

- 48** **SUBSCRIPTIONS**
- 78** **ADVERTISER INDEX**

- 26** **NAIM AUDIO NDS**
network streamer
- 31** **AUDIO RESEARCH LS27/REF 75**
valve line preamp/power amplifier
- 38** **REFERENCE 3A VEENA MK II**
floorstanding loudspeaker
- 42** **AA ACOUSTICS AA34**
integrated valve amplifier
- 46** **NEAT ACOUSTICS ULTIMATUM XL10**
floorstanding loudspeaker
- 54** **ELAC FS 509 VX-JET**
floorstanding loudspeaker
- 60** **ATOHM GT1**
standmount loudspeaker
- 66** **AUDEZE LCD3**
planar magnetic headphones
- 73** **REL T-ZERO**
active subwoofer
- 77** **VERTERE D-FI**
minijack-phono interconnect cable
- 79** **TRACK AUDIO PRECISION 600**
loudspeaker stands
- 80** **ATLAS ASCENT AND EOS**
interconnect, loudspeaker and
power cables

31



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Or email them to editor@hifiplus.com

incoming!

Disc delivery depression

I really don't like digipaks and other flimsy cardboard packaging that some albums only seem available in. I much prefer jewel cases or at least something reasonably substantial (like small hardback books). The card-style packaging doesn't age or travel well and it's nice to have something you can take in the car. Plastic jewel-cases can be cannibalised and you can recycle plastic as well as card.

Also, a bugbear of mine is bonus tracks tacked on the end of albums, which ruin the flow of records. I'd prefer them on a separate disc or maybe hidden on the pregap. And inlay booklets designed as posters seem designed almost never to fold back into position. Also sometimes older compilations or foreign versions of albums have better tracklists...

The original release of Damien Rice's *O* album were packaged in small CD-sized clothed covered hardback books (that would fit into one's record's collection just nicely)...

John Thompson, via email

Ever since CD appeared, people have been trying to find a better way of packaging the things. Some work better than others, but the result of all this different packaging makes a heck of a mess of your tightly-packed shelves. I'm not sure I totally agree about the Joy of Jewel-cases; anyone who's ever dropped one on a hard wooden floor will know how rugged they aren't.

I suspect sooner or later however, this will be about as old fashioned an argument as discussing the best place to build a coalshed. Many people are now treating their CDs as a one-time data carrier and the manufacturers are responding with ever cheaper ways of getting the disc to you – Ed.

“Ever since CD appeared, people have been trying to find a better way of packaging the things. Some work better than others, but the result of all this different packaging makes a heck of a mess of your tightly packed shelves. I'm not sure I totally agree about the Joy of Jewel-cases; anyone who's ever dropped one on a hard wooden floor will know how rugged they aren't.”

New Moon, New Speakers

A few years ago, you advised me about speakers for my Cambridge 650 CD and amplifier. Later I had an Audiolab CD, which was an improvement at £700.

Now I have a CD player from Canada, the Moon .5 (about £1,000) and a Moon i1 amplifier (£1,600) and they are so good and organic and very forgiving of most CDs.

I have KEF iQ30 speakers and Chord Carnival silver screen cables. I also have a wonderful Chord interconnect which cost me £220 and is worthy every penny.

If and when I upgrade the speakers what would you suggest, say between £1,000 and £2,000.

Barry Carroll, via email

I guess it comes down to what you like about your existing system and what you don't like about your KEFs. In many respects, the easy answer if you like your KEFs is “get a bigger pair of KEFs” and loudspeakers such as the KEF R300 (if you still want a standmount) to the R700 (my personal choice in the R-Series floorstanders) might be a good place to start. You could also try looking at the ProAc range (Moon and ProAc being an ideal match for one another) or DALI, Totem or practically any model between your price points. That's the ‘problem’ with Moon electronics; the 230D and 250i (the new names for your CD and amp respectively) exhibit no fussiness toward loudspeakers and the world of speakers really is your oyster. Sorry to sound like I'm sitting on the fence, but go experiment! – Ed.

[sometimes]
technology meets art...

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► Damascene audio conversion

With reference to Mr. Seething of Hants (issue 87), I would like to air my views on my music listening experience and how it differs with his.

I also have loved music since I can remember and have performed on stage singing opera in the chorus of a local opera ensemble and fronting a jazz/funk band for a bit as well. Loads of attending live concerts of all kinds to be included.

My academic specialty was in Optics (I was an optician), but my technical knowledge was gleaned from reading the likes of *Hi-Fi*, *Studio Sound* back in the day and *Hi-Fi News & Record Review* since I can remember.

I had a 'road to Damascus' moment in 1969/70 when some friends of mine who had a simple hi-fi of the time – Garrard SP25 and bookshelf speakers on the floor – introduced me to Stravinsky's *Firebird* and *Rite of Spring*, Gary Burton's vibes album *Throb* and Miles Davis being seriously cool on *In a Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew*. The difference in sound quality compared to my Dansette was vast, I could hear into the music and my appreciation of music grew. Out went my Dansette and in came something new, I can remember an Audio Technica arm, Garrard 401 turntable, Leak Stereo 30+. I must have been ahead of my time because, in no time at all, I realised that my speakers needed stands, careful placement and a gut feeling that things could be improved if I bought the thickest copper cable I could buy. This was seriously earth moving.

About three years ago I became absolutely fed up with playing vinyl. I had a really well respected vinyl front end, moving coil cartridge, arm, turntable, phono pre amp and cables all carefully auditioned, installed and set up by my friends at Senso Systems here in Truro. I played this for about three years, but apart from the appreciation of the artistry of the vinyl packaging, I can see why some might love it but for me trying to keep records clean, storing them carefully to stop them getting warped, LP's of different thickness varying the VTA, the unavoidable clicks and pops, never having a silent background and knowing that there is a noise floor under what ever is being listened to, the thick sound of distortion which has to be there because cartridges by their design distort, record wear, grot in the grooves and I could go on. This system was not cheap and the money when it was traded in went towards a well auditioned Scandanavian CD player supplied by my friends again. Now an evenings home concert is thrilling and looked forward to, stress free and sometimes dare I say it, I can feel my hair stand on end with the thrill of it all.

We are all different and can appreciate the same thing in different ways and I think this is good, but as I wind this up I am sure I can hear the deep roar of massive jet aircraft engines being spooled up and GPS systems are being locked on to my listening room as I expect the arrival of JDAMS.

Incoming, I'm scared!

Hartley Pascoe, via email

"You might have inadvertently angered an army of measurebators and object-to-it-all-avists, so be very careful, so be very careful... especially if they start erecting a massive wicker phono plug on a nearby hillside."

If you were playing round with different cables in the early 1970s, you get the record. Although you'd probably prefer the CD now. Most people didn't start thinking there was a difference in cable performance until Jean Hiraga's work in the late 1970s. If you were doing this kind of tinkering half a decade or more before Hiraga, pat yourself on the back. Just beware that you might have inadvertently angered the army of measurebators and object-to-it-all-ivists, so be very careful... especially if they start erecting a massive wicker phono plug on a nearby hillside.

I think a number of people have an on-again, off-again relationship with LP. I know many people who swore off the format years ago, only to adopt it in recent years simply because they want to have something physical to possess... and no matter how good they might sound, you can't rest a FLAC file on your lap – Ed. +

COMPETITION

World-wide Win!

Your chance to win a superb Antelope Audio Zodiac DAC/preamp, worth ££££s, €€€€s, \$\$\$\$s or ¥¥¥¥s!

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 are 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 Antelope's 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. Here's your chance to win one.



Competition Question

What is the secret of Antelope Audio's clock?

- A. It is deep fried**
- B. It is oven controlled**
- 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.



“Born in the USA...”

The “one cable does it all” approach of HDMI might seem like simplicity itself – until you look inside that cable. With no fewer than 19 individual conductors, each with critical termination and transmission requirements, it should come as no surprise that not all HDMI cables are created equal.

With wide-bandwidth data, analog signals and even DC all running through the same connection, balancing those conflicting requirements and preventing interference is no simple task. The Blue Heaven HDMI cable uses Nordost’s proprietary Micro Mono-Filament, virtual air dielectric technology to create a precision wound cable with exceptional geometrical accuracy and consistency, electrical and mechanical characteristics.

Designed, manufactured and hand-terminated in the USA, the cable is double shielded and uses gold-plated, fully shielded, metal jacketed connectors to guarantee signal quality and connection integrity. This combination of superior technology and parts quality with painstaking attention to detail is what makes the difference. The result is clearly superior performance

that easily exceeds the HDMI standard and has gained the demanding DPL Seal Of Approval.

You want the best picture, the best sound and you need complete reliability. You want it all in one cable – a fit and forget solution. Well, now you can have it, because we have sweated the details. Nordost’s Blue Heaven isn’t like other HDMI cables – that is why it sets the gold-standard for audio and AV performance.

**Nordost Blue Heaven HDMI –
because the Devil is in the details.**

NORDOST
MAKING THE CONNECTION



FEATURE

Top Christmas gifts for the audiophile

By Alan Sircom

Christmas is coming and now is the time for the audiophile in the home to drop some subtle hints at what Santa Claus is going to lob down your single-ended chimney on the 25th December. Here's some of our top tips for Xmas satisfaction:

Mercury Living Presence Box Set

There's nothing quite like a good ol' classical CD for Christmas. Except when there are 50 of them (plus an interview disc with the late Wilma Cozart Fine) in one box! Mercury's Living Presence albums have long been audiophile faves, and this collection would have once been worth thousands



Aberlour A'bunadh

Back in the late 1980s, archbishop of tweaknology Peter Belt used to suggest drinking a glass of 'polarised' water before listening to music. Try a glass or two of A'bunadh instead. I find this useful for listening on Christmas Day, when I can get as polarised as a newt. A'bunadh (Gaelic for 'origin' or 'original'), this rich, powerful whisky is sold in batches and frequently tops 60% ABV/120° proof, so drink in moderation... with some polarising water

www.aberlour.com



AudioQuest Dragonfly

The tiny USB DAC that has taken the world by storm, Audioquest's Dragonfly DAC is super small, super cool and super good sounding. We plan to test it formally soon, but until then what better way of spending just over £200?

www.audioquest.com



AQVOX USB Low-Noise Power Supply

If you already own a USB converter, the wonderfully named AQVOX USB Low-Noise Power Supply does exactly what it says it does – it provides a useful and quiet boost to the voltage line on USB for self-powered DACs. And, in most cases, it also transforms the sound of that DAC for the better. The best £90 you can spend on your hi-fi

www.itemaudio.co.uk

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Pro-Ject USBbox

There's value, then there's *value*. And the Pro-Ject USB is both of these things. It's a great and unassuming little USB-powered DAC. It might not be capable of 24bit, 96kHz conversion, but it's dinky enough to fit in a pocket (or a stocking) and cost just £69. At that price, it's a knockout

www.henleydesigns.co.uk





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The perfect product for the vinyl lover. A chance to give your beloved works of art the gallery space they need – your walls. The ArtVinyl holds a classic LP behind glass and allows you to remove the album quickly if you want to play it or cycle your musical art. Priced from just £39, you might end up with a whole wall full
www.artvinyl.com

Apple iPod Touch

The latest fifth generation of iPod Touch (priced from £249) brings a faster processor, bigger screen and up to 64GB to the party. For the audiophile, it's doubly useful: not only as a portable player in its own right, but as the remote handset of choice for an increasing range of products. And, there aren't many remote controls that allow you to play Angry Birds
www.apple.com/uk



Dr Feickert Mk II Cartridge Alignment Tool

What is undoubtedly the most useful invention in the whole world (if you are a vinyl lover, everyone else says 'iPad'), Dr F's £150 alignment tool is a protractor that combines accuracy with real-world use. Simply extend the arm to the centre of the bearing and align the cartridge to Lofgren, Baerwald or Stevenson equations
www.angelsoundaudio.co.uk



Finite Elemente Ceraone

OK, so asking for thousands of pounds' worth of Finite Elemente Cerabases might be a bit rich for a Christmas present, but the little Ceraone feet – designed to work with most audio electronics – give you a taste of the really big stuff for under £100. But beware... you might get hooked
www.audiodfreaks.co.uk +



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SHOW REPORT

Wonders of Whittlebury

By Alan Sircom

The only major high-end audio show in the UK has taken a few knocks over the years, but the National Audio Show 2012 saw the start of those green shoots of recovery as the first day saw many people asking serious questions about all things hi-fi. Here are some of the highlights...



Biggest launch of the show (part one)... Tannoy's new Atinco-powered Definition DC10A dual-concentric loudspeaker, driven by dCS; Albarry and MusicWorks



Smallest launch of the show (part one)... Boston Acoustics' remarkable new M-Series bargain boxes sounded amazing, thanks in no small part to design input from Marantz Brand Ambassador Ken Ishiwata



Biggest launch of the show (part two)... the new dCS Vivaldi four-box digital replay system, played through VTL, Vivid, Stillpoints and Nordost. If you have to ask the price, you can't afford it!



Biggest launch of the show (part three)... the new Avalon Compas loudspeaker. Shown for the first time in Europe, thanks to new UK distributor for Avalon, KOG Audio



Smallest launch of the show (part two)... DPA's new Minuet range of DAC, phono stage, filter and (soon) a power supply upgrade. All priced under £500 and looking very competitive



The NAS had a dedicated room for headphones and headphone amplifiers, which was constantly packed. Rubbing shoulders with die-hards like Stax, Just Audio showed a range of high-value headphone amps and DACs that were as well built as they were inexpensive



The hand-made Palmer turntable now has a bigger brother that can take a 12" tonearm. In a show with mostly disappointing sound, this unassuming and relatively inexpensive system was a rare gem. Playing good music (and not just plinky plonky jazz) was a bonus, too



Pulling surprisingly excellent sound from adversity, Brodmann Acoustics (née Bösendorfer) found the shipping company lost the stands for its Model FS. Who cares?... an Electrocompaniet amp does just as well!



Moon's outstanding 180MIND is capable of turning anything with a digital input into a full function network streaming device. Seen at CES, heard at Whittlebury. Clever stuff!



Prometheus Audio is another UK custom turntable maker, albeit with sights set on a far higher end of the market. This fine looking deck sounded good too, through a pair of new active Focal studio monitors

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Upgrading Part two – the loudspeakers

By Alan Sircom

In issue 91, we discussed the importance of upgrading, and how you can take a perfectly good set of electronics and – through a step-by-step series of upgrades – build something remarkable. But it's also possible to do the same thing with loudspeakers.

Danish loudspeaker brand Audiovector has been doing this for years. We touched upon the upgradability of the brand in Paul Messenger's review of the SR6 in issue 87, but instead of just mentioning it in passing, we went the whole hog; we went to Audiovector's Copenhagen factory to see what makes up every one of those five steps in the chain from standard loudspeaker to the top-flight performer, using the same basic Si3 tower loudspeaker core.

To assess all five versions of the same loudspeaker, we kept the system constant – we used a very good Naim system (Audiovector being Naim's Danish distributor) with Audiovector's own loudspeaker cables and began the process. Yes, it could be argued that top-notch Naim is overkill to evaluate a pair of £2,100 loudspeakers, but as we go up the Audiovector ladder, so the need for the highest-quality electronics becomes more important and rather than make some kind of clunky mid-way electronics adjustment, this is the most consistent way to evaluate the loudspeaker upgrade path.

The base Si3 model uses a silk-dome tweeter and two bass units in a genuine two-and-a-half way configuration. The ported (rear and base) cabinet's construction is designed to be non-parallel and the drive units attach directly to the front baffle. The cabinet itself sits on a cheese-wedge base and the design is tri-wired. From the outset, the Si3 has those classic Audiovector traits of being very fast, very clean and tight in the bass. It's perhaps not the biggest, deepest bass you could get from a tower loudspeaker of this volume, but it's easily one of the most attractive and tuneful sounds you could get for the money.



Some of the component parts that go into the Audiovector upgrade process

Next in line is the Si3 Super. The big changes here are the use of Audiovector's Carbon Composite Sandwich units and a rigid additional front baffle panel. From the outside at least, everything else stays the same. Keen eyed types might note the number of screws holding the drive unit to the baffle goes down from six to three. This is thanks to Audiovector's strong listening test policy – in listening tests, the move to halve the number of screws actually improves the dynamics of the drive units in situ. While it's not a massive change, it's an incremental step toward making a better loudspeaker, and one that couldn't happen without that additional front baffle panel. The overall sound of the upgrade from base model to Super is marked; the bass fills out and is deeper. It seems more tight and cohesive, and it's like the whole band is playing together a little better. It's not the biggest change in the whole upgrade path though. This is more of a step, than a jump.

However, one of the jumps comes when moving up to the Signature. This replaces the standard silk dome tweeter with the company's Evotech design, which is essentially a silk dome in a doubled-up magnet arrangement with no back to the tweeter, to give it greater power handling. It also uses what Audiovector calls its 'No Energy Storage' system, which replaces the rear panel block and plinth with milled aluminium... actually three separate plates of milled aluminium in the plinth, to make that distinctive fan shape. This distributes the mass of the whole loudspeaker more evenly, thereby minimising the amount of that mass 'carried' by the loudspeaker drive units themselves. Once again, this necessitates a new crossover too. And the results of such a change are substantial, making the soundstage wider, deeper, making instruments at once more delineated and yet making the band seem more cohesive, and

the attack of the leading edges of musical notes are significantly more ordered and precise. It's a big change, taking the Audiovector concept to new levels.

The next upgrade, from Signature to Avantgarde might be more of an evolution than a revolution, but it's possibly a function of the last being so substantial sounding. However, the move is significant because it involves moving to Audiovector's third generation AMT tweeter. This is a version of the Heil Air Motion Transducer ribbon tweeter used by Burmester, ELAC and others, although the transducer is built in house to Audiovector's own design. This makes the treble seem effortless and far more extended, adding a touch of pep in the Si3's already peppy step. But, given the design is already delivering the goods when it got to Signature levels, the change is one of building on strengths.

It's also worth noting there is a delicate and distinct shuffling of bass driver units as you go up the range. Once you get to Audiovector's own carbon drivers, there are changes best noted by whether there is a phase plug or just a cap. The end result has the two and a half way sporting near identical drive units in the bass. This shows that each step in the upgrade process is not merely an additional set of parts leading up to the ultimate conclusion, but a destination in and of itself. ▶



Caption left to right: Audiovector's Si3 loudspeaker in standard, Super, Signature and Avantgarde/Avantgarde Areté versions

► But that ultimate conclusion is the Avantgarde Areté. This is almost dismissed in the literature as being what the company calls 'NCS Freeze Technology' and the rest of the audio world calls cryogenic treatment. In fact, the bass driver and crossover are also changed and further internal cross-bracing (using special vibration absorbing pads at either end of the brace) are inserted into the loudspeaker cabinet.

This last is one of the bigger changes, moving the loudspeaker into a new arena. It not only makes that tight, entertainingly musical Audiovector sound, but it adds the sort of soundstage openness and extremely fine detail so beloved of traditional high-end lovers. It becomes an all things to all people loudspeaker in effect. Very, very satisfying.

What you don't see behind the scenes is that each step comes with its own crossover, a subtle variation on the same theme that includes different components (not necessarily component values) to determine the best network for each design change. The level of nuance here is remarkable; different gauge wire is used to connect treble and mid/bass and bass units. Even the amount of torque put on the screws holding the drive units to the baffle is preset, and determined by empirical means. Which means all of this is predicated on a lot of listening tests. Having had a short but enlightening demonstration of just how much performance is lost through overtightening the bolts holding the drivers in place (something no measurement protocol can currently parse) it's clear the company's policy of backing up every objective measurement with a lot of listening pays dividends.

The direct results here are that Avantgarde takes a perfectly good floorstander capable of reaching from 29Hz to 23kHz @-6dB) and ends up with a loudspeaker that reaches down to 24Hz and goes up to 52kHz. In the process, the cross-over points are refined to push them even further out of harm's way, the power handling is improved and the speaker puts on a few kilos. It's all good.

There are some easy mistakes to make here, mostly built on a lack of listening by the end user. The first is to think this is just a way of disguising a poor base model loudspeaker with the promise of later improvements, to which the obvious answer is 'shut up and go listen to the base model'. And there are always going to be nay-sayers; those who think this whole exercise could be dubbed 'Pimp My Loudspeaker', but this argument evaporates – or begins to sound very clunky – after about 10 seconds of listening to one of the upgrades. Finally, there will be others convinced that you should be able to get Avantgarde Areté performance for standard Si3 prices, neatly forgetting that the cost of the drive units in the top model cost almost as much as the whole basic loudspeaker. Once again, a quick listening test to the base Si3 and its price rivals, and one of the more up-market models and its price rivals and you'll see nothing's out of place.

Too many companies sell 'vertically' today. If you want better, you need to buy bigger. Audiovector is one of the few that offers a viable and logical alternative; chances are, you chose the original model based on fitting it into your room. Fitting a bigger loudspeaker into the same room will frequently come up with very different results. And, with the economy meaning people aren't moving as often as they used to, the room might be a constant for a decade or two. Audiovector's way allows the user to improve their loudspeakers with every bit as much finesse as they get to upgrade their electronics. Given that none of the intermediary steps sound like a halfway house, this is a winning formula.

Why don't more loudspeaker companies do the same thing? +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Prices per pair

Audiovector Si3: £2,100
Si3 Super: £2,900
Si3 Signature: £3,900
Si3 Avantgarde: £5,900
Si3 Avantgarde Areté: £7,100

To upgrade from one Si3 model to a higher one involves the cost of the difference between the two models plus an additional 30%, to cover labour costs, shipping, etc.

Manufactured by: Audiovector
URL: www.audiovector.com

Distributed by: Henley Designs
URL: www.henleydesigns.co.uk
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SHOW REPORT

Rocky Mountain Audio Fest 2012

By Alan Sircom

Rocky Mountain Audio Fest in the Denver Marriott Tech Center has grown from just another local show into one of the highlights of the audio calendar. With hundreds of rooms to cover – and a busy seminar schedule – there was not enough time to see everything, but here's some of the best Colorado has to offer...



Wilson Audio's new \$48,500 Alexia loudspeaker is designed to deliver MAXX-like performance in a speaker that can go everywhere a Sasha W/P can. Watch out for the infinite set-up possibilities of the fully modular system



The new \$1,995 DAC2 HGC converter/preamp from Benchmark adds DSD-over-USB streaming, Asynchronous USB conversion and enhanced preamp facilities like home theatre bypass. It could be all you need...



Taken straight from the Mad Men school of design, Ayre re-skinned a room giving it an early 1960s feel, complete with martini glasses. Oh, and a centerpiece of a new \$10,000 integrated amplifier, the AX-5, with its new Diamond output stage. Sounded truly fab through Vivid Giya G3 loudspeakers

Show special: Running alongside the RMAF, CanJam is the headphone event that cannot be missed. Our roving reporter Chris Martins spent days investigating the in-head world. More next issue!



An exciting new venture from the Abbingdon Music Research team, iFi is a modular range of small DACs, headphone amps, phono stages and power supplies. They were playing the \$400 phono stage through some really meaty high-end equipment and it sounded fine!

Now here's a system you won't hear in the UK – luscious Zanden valve electronics playing through one of two sets of Neat Acoustic loudspeakers. The sound was excellent, even through the tiny Neat lotas. You know the world is in order when more than \$80,000 worth of dedicated high-end audio squeezes out of a speaker about the size of a potato!



Not a lot is known about these prototype Sony ES loudspeakers. The name, the specs, the price are all kept under tight wraps at the moment. One thing's clear. They sound almost as good as their bigger brothers, especially on SACD



Peachtree Audio is moving upmarket, with pre-powers in its standard and Grand livery, all the while retaining that optional triode operation. Of course, the top \$3,299 preamplifier had to be called the Grand Pre



Magnepan has one of the most loyal followings in audio, for good reason. The new MM1G loudspeakers (with optional bass panel) sound sensational, especially for just \$599 per pair. If there is such a thing as a bargain in audio... this is it



NOLA's Carl Marchisotto has done it again with his new KO loudspeaker. The top of the Boxer line, this \$10,000 loudspeaker was producing some of the best sounds of the show. They can fill a very big room too

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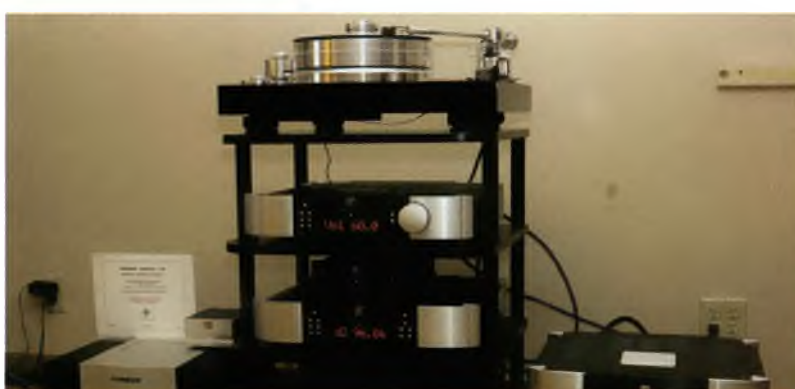


Funk's new Little Super Deck turntable comes supplied complete with the new F5 arm for \$2,095. Both feature Arthur Khoubassarian's new and ground-breaking take on turntable design, but in a deck that doesn't look like it's out of a sci-fi movie

Meitner Audio – the 'entry-level' end of EMM Labs – has announced a new MA-2 integrated playback system. The \$11,000 slot-loading CD stage is met by 24/192 Asynchronous USB and streaming DSD-over-USB, upsampling the signal to 5.6MHz in the process, and more



Finally seen in the flesh, the new \$30,000 Reference 10 two-box preamp from Audio Research has a huge display, a right-offset volume knob (an ARC first) and even the display colour background and script can be altered as you think fit. It sounded magnificent in the Audio Alternative room, with more ARC and Vandersteen 7s



Simaudio chose RMAF to launch a slew of new products, including a 740P line preamplifier an 860A and 870A stereo power amplifiers from its Evolution series, and a 380D DAC from the standard Moon range



The Beat turntable is always worth a listen... especially when it has Frank Schroeder's new \$9,000 tangentially tracking tonearm tracking the grooves and pushing the limits of the vinyl frontier



Sonus faber's new low cost Venere loudspeaker range has the Lyre styling reminiscent of the company's Aida flagship



Zu Audio has always been something of an audiophile maverick, and its chill-out zone at RMAF did nothing to disabuse that concept. Its new dual concentric Union loudspeaker and Cube version of the same were making some good sounds from some very odd vinyl!



Kings of 'how can they do that', Silverline builds in the USA and makes tiny loudspeakers with a big sound and enough quality to let the performance of good Conrad-Johnson and Kuzma pass unimpeded. A truly excellent speaker for the money, and at \$700, that isn't much money



JMR's first loudspeaker since the death of Jean-Marie Reynaud himself, the Abscisse shows the baton being successfully passed to his son, Jean-Claude. Partnered with Crimson electronics, and playing some intense Eric Dolphy, this system was one of the most effortless sounding, and doesn't cost a fortune



Although best known for its Strain Gauge and moving iron cartridges, SoundSmith also makes some mighty fine phono stages too. The newly revised MCP2 'Firefly' features infinitely variable cartridge loading so that you can tailor your high-frequency response to your needs, and excellent value at \$700



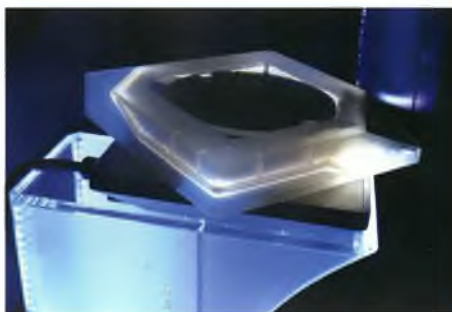
While nothing on the system is 'new' per se, VPI's Traveller turntable, partnered by a Cayin valve integrated and Aurum Cantus loudspeakers, was designed to make a great sound for less than the cost of most audiophile cartridges



Always one step ahead of the game, Cary announced a 'diffusion' range, still made in the USA brand and called Audio Electronics by Cary Audio. The new line – all named after US fighter aircraft – currently features the \$1,195 Nighthawk headphone amp, with a line pre, power and DAC to follow



Boulder's \$24,000 1021 Disc Player can connect to the Ethernet, as well as to the \$12,500 865 integrated amplifier. These sounded extremely fine, when playing some distinctly un-audiophile music through a pair of \$4,500/pr Vienna Acoustics Baby Grand Symphony loudspeakers



The \$20,000 Light Harmonic DAC was causing a stir, and not just down to the price. It sounded excellent (through a Kronzilla SXI amp and Von Schweikert VR-44 speakers) and, in its denuded, back-lit form, lived up to its name too

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Naim Audio NDS digital network player

By Alan Sircom

There is a distinct difference in approach to dealing with what comes next in digital, depending on where you live. In the US for example, a lot of systems rely on the use of a DAC with a computer, either a laptop put to the task or a custom PC built as a dedicated media player. Whereas here, the system is more integrated, as typified by Cyrus, Linn, Naim and Revox's network players. The Naim NDS is Naim's top of the range 'streamer'; a sophisticated media renderer that can be used to play ripped CDs, high-res files or access the wonders of internet radio and more.

This is in Naim's Classic Line, full size products that don't necessarily come with the cost-no object approach (and the five-figure price tags) of the 500 Series products, but offer a high degree of sophistication and performance in their own right. Nevertheless, in the NDS, there is a lot of the same kind of thinking that went into the creation of the 500 series. And a big part of what was learned from the 500 series includes the level of screening and isolation that goes on inside the NDS.

The main analogue and digital circuit boards sit on their own springy isolation platforms, which is why a product with no moving parts comes with transit screws! Unscrewing them is not the easiest of tasks, because the player has to be level whenever the transit bolts are removed, so you need to have the NDS half hanging off a table and unscrew the four bolts with your free hand. The suspension system is a combination of brass base plates and leaf springs and is said to push any potential mechanical resonance too low for audibility (at 4Hz). In addition, key sections of the circuit (streamer itself, DSP chip, DAC) are fully screened in isolation cans to prevent noise of any kind from polluting the rest of the circuit.

The network streamers are not intended as a replacement to CD, but instead an increasingly popular alternative to disc-based replay. That being said, they are proving popular in places where CD's popularity is on the wane, and Naim like many such brands is finding it is selling more streaming products than CD products today.

Like all streamers, Naim's NDS requires a degree of forethought in terms of system design. It connects to the audio world via the internet. This can scare off a few more used to simply plugging a CD player into a system, but the end result pays dividends. And, as your dealer best sorts this, the system should end up plug and play.

The right way to make a network system is to take a dedicated 'feed' from your internet router into what's

commonly called a 'residential gateway' – Apple's Airport Extreme being a perfect example. Naim recommends a belt and braces approach to the next step, adding a dedicated network switch, such as an eight-way Netgear GS108. This switch connects to a dedicated network attached storage device, a computer used to rip discs (a Naim UnitiServe does a fine job in both contexts, if you bring some backup to the party) and the NDS. Naim supplies a pair of apps (now free) to control the UnitiServe and the NDS, and the tablet should connect to the wifi of that residential gateway. It all sounds a little complex from the outside, but the end result is a system that will see out the twilight years of CD, and can be upgraded into a multi-room system with just another network cable and something like a Naim UnitiQute. For some inexplicable reason, Naim followers seem to prefer using Cat6 to Cat5e network cable, but I remain unconvinced by this; network data is sent in packets, not as a datastream and the likelihood of this causing a sonic difference is minimal. It's not a big thing, nor a substantial price hike and stores are switching to Cat6 anyway, so it's nothing to get hung up over, but in my



system, a brief flip between Cat5e and Cat6 brought no changes to performance. In fairness, the lengths of cable between the individual components in that data network are not significant, and perhaps the differences become more apparent when you are talking in terms of tens of metres of cable. My take – go for Cat6 to keep Cap'n Paranoia happy and don't sweat it either way.

But using its own network is a good idea. By giving the music system its own dedicated network, you limit the potential for dropouts and freezes (the last thing anyone wants is your music to come to a halt mid-bar, because your son is grinding through an online *Gears of War* session, or your daughter's watching that Justin Bieber YouTube clip for the 900th time). Naim doesn't like wireless connections for a similar reason, especially as if you are trying to push a massive high-res music file across a wifi network, chances are you will be the one causing all the buffering problems.

Naim's top products aren't supplied with power supplies as standard. The NDS is no exception. The NDS

requires an XP5 XS, XPS or a 555 PS power supply. Or, if you are feeling exceptionally frisky, a pair of 555 PS power supplies. This must be factored into the system (at least two full shelves are required, and the cost must be considered). My sample came with the 555 PS, and its two large Burndy connecting hawsers can be a bit of a pig to wrangle.

It's worth the effort. This is, quite simply, the best sound I have yet heard from a post-CD streaming source. Although I haven't formally heard the Linn Klimax DS yet, this sets the bar high. Whether it's from a passing USB stick full of music, music files of all kinds stored on a NAS drive, or simply pulling in music from internet radio sources, the NDS never sounds anything less than outstanding.

It does all the Naim strengths with great ease; it will extract a beat from even the most recalcitrant piece of music and play it with great insight and temporal precision.

There's an assumption that this only applies to rock music, largely because a lot of Naim folk play rock. It's not necessarily so – music of almost all kinds has a rhythm and while ▶





▶ it might not make a difference to something like Messiaen, practically everything you can think of listening to will sound good through the NDS.

That being said, the NDS doesn't impose a beat on the music, just extracts the beat from anything it can. Nor does it overlay that beat (this is something non-Naim people find hard to take with Naim equipment, especially when they have to invent that overlaying for the sake of argument), it merely makes the music sound like music. I played a whole bunch of tracks through the NDS, everything from Richard Strauss via Richard Hell, to Richard Thompson, Richard Hawley, Cliff Richard and Little Richard. And some music not made by Richards. And nothing phased it.

There is a Naim-ness to the overall sound though. A sort of immediacy and focus to the sound that can make it seem both clean and detailed in some systems and possibly a little strident in others. In the case of the NDS however, that stridency is kept to an absolute minimum and as a consequence the player just sounds clean and detailed. This works surprisingly well with internet radio sources and high-res sources, because it brings the former to life and brings out a lot of the detail in the latter. The better the radio source, the better the life of course.

Its key strength, though, is an ability to shock you with the sort of dynamic range that few other sources can resolve. And that's part of the NDS's abilities; it brings out a lot of information that didn't make it out of digital players of any kind. It's not overly dynamic; just that other players in contrast sound undynamic and uncoordinated. This isn't just the big stuff that makes a difference; listening to those late Johnny Cash recordings is always at once a brilliant and painful experience, but hearing the same cut on the NDS is a heart-stopping, searing sound of a man at the end of his time.

Couple that with a sound that's as graceful as it is dynamic and you get a player that doesn't just play the Naim Audio card... it works well throughout audio. You can happily slot the NDS into a distinctly non-Naim system to good effect. I began this review by discussing the difference between streaming solutions from the US and UK. This is because they do sound slightly different in reality; the 'Mac 'n' DAC' solution (it doesn't

have to be a Mac, but it scans better than PC 'n' DAC) does imagery and detail well, streamers are more temporally communicative. The Naim NDS, however, is the bridge between the two, giving the expanse and imagery of more ad hoc computer solutions, but retaining the musical communication network streamers have become so good at. This means not only will the NDS shine in a Naim system, it sounded extremely good (in all the Audio Researchy ways) on the end of the ARC LS27/Reference 75 tested in this issue.

I've heard Naim components (especially sources) taken out of context before. They act like conquistadors, gradually spreading the Word of Naim throughout the whole system, imposing a strong character on the system sound that makes it difficult to mix and match. It often seems like if you insert a single piece of Naim electronics into your system, then either it makes the whole system Naim in waiting, or it is soon replaced. The NDS is genuinely different in this respect. It's not a gateway to a world of Naim (although that is a distinct possibility), it's just a damn good source in and of itself.

There are minor observations. The biggie is while the NDS is outstanding at playing everything you can throw at it, but it's what you can't throw at it that counts. Things like Pandora or Spotify, for example are not supported directly (you can get around this by using things like Nicecast for the Mac that can rebroadcast your Spotify account in MP3 form to the NDS's Shoutcast radio service). Also, Apple AirPlay support would be very nice.

The smaller observation is a philosophical one; Naim is currently making a lot of different streamer-based products to fill practically every niche in the market. This is currently the top of the tree (I can't help thinking there's a 500 Series streamer somewhere in the pipeline) but there are now 10



“There are people who object to anything to do with computers costing as much as this, or that all streamers basically sound the same and there is nothing here that couldn’t be replicated for less. Well... you’re wrong!”

different network-based devices in the Naim line. This could get a bit bewildering!

You’ve just worked through page after page on the Naim NDS, all of which can be neatly summed up into a single word; captivating. There will be people who object to anything to do with computers costing as much as this, or that all streamers basically sound the same and there’s nothing here that couldn’t be replicated for less. Well... you’re wrong! Pop this in front of one of the sceptics for five minutes and watch the scepticism melt away. There will also be people who think Naim only works with Naim – ditto; a few minutes with this in their system and the reprogramming begins to take place.

In short, this is a world-class music player on any terms. Its sense of musical poise, its almost frightening dynamics and the resultant sense of drama it brings are almost to be expected – Naim’s sound is always exciting. But this brings more to the table; a refinement and intellectual depth to the sound that makes it one of the best source components I have ever used... and one that demands to be heard in a wider array of systems than just Naim. The future of music is in safe hands.

When it finally goes, I’ll seriously miss the NDS... it’s been emotional! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs: 1x BNC, 1x RCA, 1x optical, 1x USB (front), 1x Ethernet, WiFi connection, 2x 3.5mm RC5 jack, DE0 RS232 connection for software updates

Sample rates supported: S/PDIF to 192kHz

Formats supported: WAV and AIFF (up to 32bit/192kHz) FLAC (up to 24bit/192kHz), ALAC (up to 24bit/96kHz) Windows Media-formatted content (up to 16bit/48kHz) must be WMA 9.2, Internet radio (Windows Media-formatted content, MP3 streams, MMS, Ogg Vorbis)

iRadio Service Provider: vTuner 5* full service

Outputs: DIN and RCA (analogue), BNC (S/PDIF)

Output Impedance: <20Ω minimum

Frequency Response: 10Hz-30kHz, +0.1/-0.5dB

Phase response: Linear Phase, absolute phase correct

External power supply required: XP5 XS, XPS, 555 PS (double Bundy connection for 555 PS) 2x 555 PS.

Dimensions (WxHxD): 43.2x8.7x31.4cm

Weight: 1.4kg

Price: £6,250

Manufactured by: Naim Audio Ltd

URL: www.naimaudio.com

Tel: +44 (0) 1722 426 600





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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Audio Research LS27 preamp/ Reference 75 power amplifier

By Alan Sircom

There's an odd – but altogether understandable – sense of reverence and respect that falls upon Audio Research's Reference series of products. In today's market, that has an obvious downside; people only tend to use Reference products with other Reference products. While that's an easy way of getting excellent results, it's not the only way.

The new Reference 75 power amplifier is a perfect example of this dissociated thinking. Yes, of course it sounds fine on the end of an all Reference system (NOLA's excellent demonstration of the KO loudspeaker at RMAF used the Reference 8 CD player, Reference 5 preamp and the Ref 75 amp, to 'best in show' winning effect). But it also sounds excellent when used with the LS27 preamp (in fact, this test was going to go a rung lower and use a LS17 SE, but this preamp was out on demonstration at the time of review).

The new star of the show is the Reference 75, a balanced only, stereo valve power amp delivering – as you might expect – 75 watts per channel, from a brace of KT120 power tubes per side, all in a case about the size of one Reference 150 chassis. It's a dual mono design, with only the power transformer and solid-state regulation shared to both channels. The power supply and its dozen storage capacitors take up a single board to the centre of the chassis, with the identical power amp PCBs (complete with a JFET input stage, a 6H30 driver tube and a pair of KT120s) either side.

The front has two power meters, that glow light blue if you flip the switch at the back, and a 12V trigger if you want to power the tube amp up with the preamp. The front panel has an on-off main switch and two front screw bias controls, one per channel; flip between them and the centre 'operate' position to have the KT120s running perfectly. It uses a 20A power cord (supplied).

It's met here by the LS27 line only preamplifier. This one-box, remotely controllable pre replaced the LS26 that we loved so much we gave it an award. Like its predecessor, it uses a hybrid JFET/valve circuit featuring a pair of 6H30 dual triodes as input drivers. It's both balanced and single-ended in operation and can switch between the two with alacrity. It has a



nice large 'no need for reading glasses' display (as opposed to the cataract-proof super-sized displays of the Reference 5 and now two box Reference 10). It's the archetypal good ARC preamp: easy to use, good sounding, a combination of refinement and detail.

ARC recommends a 600 hour break in on all products now. The pre arrived with enough miles on the clock, the power amp was new out of the box. I don't think I've even got remotely near the 600 hours yet. I don't mind or care. It's good enough. If the caps bed in still more, it should reach an even happier place than it currently does, but almost from the moment those tubes were inserted and the biasing finished, the magic happened.

There has always been an ARC 'sound': a midrange that is remarkably clean and clear, a bass that rivals the best in the world for depth (if not for speed), good dynamics and a mid/top-end bloom that is always attractive. Little wonder that some of the best loudspeakers in the world ended up being used with ARC, both in homes and in test facilities. ▶



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Xtension 10

The Hi-Fi News 'Highly Commended'* Xtension 10 turntable from Pro-Ject Audio puts you at the centre of the musical performance. Whether it's recreating a rock concert, an orchestral symphony, or whatever else you have in your record collection, the Xtension 10 turns any vinyl recording into a captivating, 'live' experience.

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Audio Venue (Ealing, London) - 02085 678703
Hi-Fi Gear (Hereford) - 01432 354921
Paul Roberts Hi-Fi (Bristol) - 01179 429370
Sevenoaks S&V (Exeter) - 01392 218895
Vickers Hi-Fi (York) - 01904 691600

Audio Destination (Tiverton) - 01884 243584
Cranfield Audio (Bedford) - 01234 853044
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But there was a fly in the ointment; the smaller power amps (with a few notable exceptions, like the VSi60) haven't had the same authoritative sound as the big ones. Ever since some of the classic ARC amps like the D79, smaller amps have had a power delivery akin to trying to blow out a candle while yawning; the energy was there but the dynamism was lacking. The Reference 75 brings large-scale ARC thwack to a more down to earth level, without sacrificing the qualities of grace, poise, clarity and scale inherent to ARC designs.

But let's start with the LS27. It's a truly great piece of equipment. It has an ability to disappear in the way all good preamps are supposed to do, and does so with outstanding image size and width. That means it's resolving enough to highlight details in changes elsewhere up-stream, yet does not lay the sound so analytically bare as to devastate the chances of it ever sounding good. It's been some time since I reviewed an ARC preamp and it's clear the performance has moved ahead several notches since last I set my system's watch to Minnesota time. It's kind of in a sweet-spot musically; not so unresolving as to smooth over the cracks in the music, not so resolving as to highlight the wrinkles. A happy Goldilocks.

And it has a perfect partner in the Reference 75. It's a siren of an amplifier, seducing all who listen to it, whether they are tube types or solid-state specialists. Starting with a simple test – *Tony Bennett and Bill Evans* – the sense of presence projected that wonderful vocal into the room, all the while giving the tonal beauty and energy to Evans piano playing. It was a masterful presentation of a masterful piece of

singing and playing that never gets the coverage it deserves. I stayed on the simple side and played *Harvest* by Neil Young from his recent Official Release series box set. On the painful 'The Needle and The Damage Done' from *Harvest*, and the syncopated guitar part should be easy to reproduce, but frequently isn't. On the Ref 75, it becomes a natural down-beat to accent the anguish written into those lyrics.

I moved onto rock, dance (James Blake's cool dubstep sounds particularly potent through the Ref 75) and through the full spectrum of classical music, from delicate string quartets to Solti throwing an orchestra and choir through its Mahler paces. Nothing phased the Ref 75. Practically nothing phased the LS27 either but really nothing troubled the Ref 75 at all. Imagine an amp that combines the grace and liquidity of tubes with the speed and temporal precision of a good solid state and you begin to see why the Ref 75 is so special. Quite simply, this is valve mastery!

I briefly swapped out the LS27 for a Music First Baby Reference passive magnetic preamp for an upcoming test. This proved a fascinating experience; the two went toe-to-toe for the most part, the MFA having the edge in terms of musical focus and solidity, the LS27 winning the day when it came down to resolving the most complex pieces of music. But this experiment confirmed two things; how close to neutral (and a passive preamp practically defines 'neutral') the LS27 really is and just how good that Reference 75 sounds on almost anything. It's one of those rare products that comes with no real downsides, as long as you are not desperate for more power. ▶



► And at this point, the Ref 75 invites a difficult question of the listener. Do you need more than this? The answer is frequently 'no', especially in places like the UK where real estate is at such a high premium. That it can drive comparatively difficult loads with ease makes it the kind of device that seems more powerful than its output suggests. The result it delivers has won over at least one UK reviewer who bought the review sample, and it's doing a fine job in converting this one to the cause too. Although the LS27 is an excellent preamp, and a fine match for the Reference 75, the latter is in a class of its own. Decades from now, audiophiles will remember this power amp in the same hushed tones as we now bestow upon classic ARC products like the D79. Only thing is... I think this might be better than the lot of them.

Three conclusions fall out of this. First, the difference between 'standard' and Reference Audio Research is noted, but proves no impediment to producing good sound from combinations of components. Next, the hackneyed transistors vs. tubes, single-ended vs. balanced petty wars

"Decades from now, audiophiles will remember this power amp in the same hushed tones as we now bestow upon classic ARC products like the D79. Only thing is... I think this might be better than the lot of them."

are in essence valueless; it's just good stuff versus not so good stuff, and there's a lot of good stuff here. Which brings me onto the final conclusion; we are living in a golden age of audio. We need to stop living in the past; this current crop of products sound better in some very fundamental ways to any of the sacred cows of the past. In valve world, it gets no better than this. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

LS27 line preamplifier

Inputs: Eight (XLR and RCA)

Outputs: Three (XLR and RCA), two main, one record, 12v trigger

Valve Complement: 2x 6H30

Dimensions (WxHxD): 48x13.4x37.6cm

Weight: 7.4kg

Price: £6,498

Reference 75 power amplifier

Inputs: XLR only, 12v trigger

Outputs: multiway posts, 4 ohm and eight ohm taps

Power output: 75W per channel

Frequency response: 0.7Hz-75kHz (± 3 dB)

Valve Complement: 2x 6H30, 4x KT120

Dimensions (WxHxD): 48.3x22.2x53.3cm

Weight: 21.3kg

Price: £8,495

Manufactured by: Audio Research

URL: www.audioresearch.com

Distributed by: Absolute Sounds

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

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Editor - Hi-Fi+. August 2011, issue 82

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Positive feedback online. May 2011

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MICHAEL TREMER

Stereophile. June 2011 issue

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France, November 2011 issue

"There's something about "armonico" sound personality, in his soul that makes them different ... and sublime. We're talking about material outside parameters."

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Hi-Fi+. October 2012, issue 92

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Stereo Times

Reference 3a Veena Mk II loudspeakers

By Alan Sircom

The Canadian Reference 3a is one of those 'under the radar' brands that deserve to be treated otherwise. The loudspeakers do everything good high-end audio is supposed to do, except cost a fortune. They work in a wide range of rooms, with a huge range of equipment, it's hard to get a bad sound out of them and the boss, Tash Goka, is the kind of hard-core listener and tinkerer that all good audio enthusiasts are supposed to love on contact. Which means the Veena Mk II should be one of the most popular loudspeakers in the high-end firmament. So why not?

Perhaps part of the reason is it's an enthusiast's loudspeaker, designed by an enthusiast for enthusiasts and needs to be sold through enthusiast dealers. That last part is, unfortunately, hard to come by these days, and the looks of the loudspeaker will never appeal to those who view hi-fi as some kind of fashion parade. It's also possibly down to Tash's willingness to put ears above meters, which could put Reference 3a in the cross-hairs of audio's measurement Taliban. Or maybe it's because Reference 3a deliberately stays a small operation to ensure good performance from each speaker. One thing is clear though; it's got absolutely nothing to do with the sound quality loudspeakers like the Veena.

This loudspeaker – the entry level floorstanding model in the range – is a moderately tall, slim loudspeaker. It's wedge-shaped... strongly wedge-shaped in fact, meaning the top of the loudspeaker is just a few centimetres deep. It's a handed two-way, with the tweeters (generally) closer to the outer edge of the front baffle. The drive units are a 177mm fiberglass/Kevlar sandwich mid-bass unit coupled to a 25mm silk dome tweeter. It's rear ported, bi-wired, rests on three large brass spikes and is finished in a rich gloss epoxy finish in red cherry, maple or piano plack. The net result is not a timeless look, however, and the Veena does look a touch dated.

Reference 3a's programme of continuous assessment, experimentation and modification means the Veenas of today are subtly yet significantly different to Mk I models. Side-by-side, the big changes are the slightly taller cabinet and some strange stepped white doo-hickey in the middle of the mid-bass unit. This last is known as a Surreal Acoustic Driver Lens, designed by Ricky Schultz of Surreal Acoustics. It's actually a set of rings that move with the bass driver – like a dust cap – but has the wave-cancellation properties of a phase plug and vents air like an exposed voice coil. This is claimed

► to work across a wider frequency range than a standard phase plug, with a suggested result of a more natural sound. The voice coils sport Faraday rings, suggested to improve voice coil linearity and improved mechanical grounding, to sink vibration or resonance into the cabinet. The crossover – if you can call it that – is a single paper-in-oil capacitor acting as a low-pass filter for the tweeter, and the bass unit is entirely direct-coupled to the amplifier.

The nuanced listening continues with a change from stainless steel nuts and bolts to brass ones, and from gold plated brass to gold-plated copper conductors in the binding posts. It even comes down to using different thickness wire for treble and bass drivers (0.8mm thick for the tweeter

and 1.2mm for the bass) and this wire is continuous cast, single crystal high purity copper, sheathed in a PTFE dielectric. Even the Cardas jumpers used in the previous model have been replaced with lengths of continuous cast copper wire. Finally, everything metal gets cryogenically treated in the factory. All changes that on their own could be described as 'subtle', but such subtleties accumulate the more you include.

The good news with the Veena – in fact with all Reference 3a loudspeakers it appears – is that they are not insane loads. This one has an easy 89dB sensitivity and a just as easy eight ohm impedance load. While they demand quality of electronics, they don't need quantity of amplification, which makes them an ideal partner for low to medium power amplifiers. I'd steer clear of single-ended triode amps (unless in a small room), and behemoth kilowatters (because it's overkill), but everything in between would be fine. Reference 3a recommends amps in the 20-120W range and that seems incredibly sensible.

What also helps a lot for European listeners is the Veena Mk II works well in small rooms; better in fact than the Veena Mk I. OK, so there needs to be some air between those back-firing ports and the wall behind them (at least a foot), no toe-in and the more care and attention you give the speaker the greater the rewards, but this is a loudspeaker that you'd struggle to make sound bad. Reference 3a suggests you can use the brass feet as a form of tilt control for smaller rooms. Despite – or perhaps because of – all the tweaking, has made a remarkably pragmatic loudspeaker solution that doesn't demand micrometer-grade installation. Apparently, this doesn't apply across the Reference 3a range; the Grand Veena is reputed to be incredibly position sensitive and the smaller stand mounts need some careful care and feeding. But the Veena Mk II at least... fine and easy to use.

What these speakers do is pass the 'absolute sound' test with flying colours. Not our sister title in the USA, but the 'absolute sound' ideal espoused by The Absolute Sound founder, Harry Pearson decades ago. ►





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- What this means is the loudspeaker is excellent at retrieving the sound of live musicians playing unamplified instruments in a natural acoustic space.

Play something like John Rutter's *Requiem* (Reference Recordings) or live recordings like the *Rare on Air* series and you have an architectural hologram appearing in your room. Voices soar in a soundstage that is wide, deep and detailed. It doesn't sound like you are in the studio; you are in the audience. It's an uncanny experience for those used to a more mannered (or more wild), studio approach.

I've got a bootleg of the Rolling Stones in the *Exile on Main Street/Sticky Fingers* era. And one of the recordings on that album is an out take of 'Sister Morphine' that is a live and fascinating, almost visceral musical experience. The sound of that through the Veena is at once painful and masterful. Other speakers don't replicate the same insight.

Do the same with some cool 1950s/1960s jazz and the same happens. I used to listen to a lot of Grant Green, in part in the forlorn hope that some of his cool jazzy brilliance would rub off on my own guitar playing. Sadly, it didn't... but the Veena unlocks the recording so well and so naturally, I felt like it was worth trying to learn his licks once more.

I'm not a big fan of the term 'microdynamics'. It describes the subtle gradations in dynamic range within a piece of music (guitarists sometimes describe 'picking dynamics', which amounts to more or less the same thing). I dislike the term because it makes no sense to most people and in most loudspeakers this subtle sonic vector doesn't seem to escape the cabinets. Here, however, you can't fail to hear those subtle gradations in the listening experience. And once experienced, it's a hard thing to give up easily.

In some respects, the Veena's weak spot is a slight lack in those fast, boppy rhythmic properties British boxes have a reputation for. Some of this is down to the bass, which errs on the side of 'rich' instead of 'taut', but it's also down to the speaker's bass limitations. There's a very definite lightness of step and a softening as you go down into the lower registers. In European grade small-to-medium rooms, this isn't a big deal, but in American big barns, you'd probably find this almost bass light. The net result is it makes a good fist of the likes of Black Sabbath, but there are better loudspeakers for this task.

It's possible to get very blazé in this job. There are some very good loudspeakers around and most of them are expensive (that is not a reversible statement; expensive does not automatically equate to high performance), so you end up making in head comparisons with the kind of speakers that should never be compared. And it's when you make those comparisons in head that you know the good not so expensive one is something really, really good. So when listening to a loudspeaker costing the right side of £4,000 and thinking about comparisons to Wilson Sashas and the rest, it's pretty obvious the Veena Mk II is on to a good thing. +

"So, when listening to a loudspeaker costing the right side of £4,000 and thinking about comparisons to Wilson Sashas and the rest, it's pretty obvious the Veena Mk II is on to a good thing"



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Efficiency: 89dB

Impedance: eight ohms

Frequency Response: 42Hz-20kHz ±3dB

Maximum power handling: 120W

Dimensions (WxDxH): 21x33x92cm

Weight: 15.5kg

Finish: red cherry, maple, piano glass

Price: £3,674 per pair

Manufactured by: Reference 3a

URL: www.reference3a.com

Distributed by: Absolute Analogue

URL: www.absoluteanalogue.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)20 8459 8113



AA Acoustics AA34 integrated amplifier

By Alan Sircom

I'm a big fan of the one-line summary. Here's the one for the AA Acoustics AA34: It's a Dynaco ST70 with an input selector, a volume control and a remote.

That's it. Job done. The show's over, almost no need to read the rest of the review.

Some outside of the US might not have heard of the Dynaco ST70, however. Back in the mid-1950s, David Hafler and Ed Laurent's Dyna Company started producing ultralinear tube amp designs based on the Williamson amplifier. Then in 1959, the company released its Stereo 70 power amplifier, a 2x 35W EL34 based stereo chassis built with good transformers either as a completed product or a full kit. The amplifier proved to be the biggest hit in tube history, with more than 350,000 units sold over the years. Although Dynaco is long gone, the ST-70 is still one of

the most popular seed circuits for today's tube amplifiers. It's still one of the amplifiers to beat, even today and is loved by our American cousins.

In fact, it could be argued that the high-end audio industry sprung out of the ST70, because before there was an Audio Research, the late William Zane Johnson built his early reputation on modding the ST70.

The AA34 is the first of a new line of products from AA Acoustics. Which is another way of saying it's a UK-specced version of the Dynaco ST70 made by the Chinese company that makes Consonance. AA Acoustics (the UK company) used to be known as Alium Audio. It's virtually identical to the ST70, with a valve roll-out of a pair of ECF 82s in the input stage (the original used the 7199, a different pin-out variant that is rare today), a single 5Z4P as a rectifier and two pairs of EL34s. AA Acoustics suggests this delivers 40W per channel (with four and eight ohm terminals) at less than one per cent distortion and low overall feedback from two feedback loops. It's self-biasing too.

There is a huge potential for tweaking this amplifier, because of its ST70 heritage. If you are handy with a soldering iron and prepared to tinker, you can

find all manner of upgrades, mods and suggestions to bring out the best of the ST70. OK, some of these mods will not apply here (the most popular one is to swap out the input PCB to find an alternative to the 7199s), but it leaves the door wide open for changes like triode operation, parts substitution and more. To be honest, I'd leave as is.

There's also tube rolling. You could end up spending hundreds substituting good tubes with better, NOS (new old stock) valves, especially in the input and rectifier stages. The original Dynaco used a 6Z34 in place of the 5Z4P, but these too are getting rare in the UK. You could try a 5V4 (reputed to be a beefier rectifier), but I think the basic rollout of valves is good enough.

Unlike the original ST70 with its shiny chrome chassis, the amp has a rich combination black powder coat and brushed aluminium finish. It also has a remote control (which looks perhaps unsurprisingly like a Consonance remote) that operates channel adjustment and volume. Aside from a side-mounted power switch, that's all you can control. The amp comes supplied with a CE-chummy valve cage, but this is easy to remove if you want to expose yourself to un-European levels of sheer danger.

The thing about the Stereo 70 was that it was only as good as its transformers, and AA Acoustics has been working with the same Chinese company for the best part of a decade, so the specifications are very well adhered to, and the power supply transformer seems beefier than the original. While I haven't had as much exposure to Dynaco amps as those working on our sister title *The Absolute Sound*, it's clear the basic Stereo 70 sound is also well adhered to.

It's perhaps the valve amp that most sounds like a valve amplifier, and that holds just as much here. Don't expect high resolution, extended highs or tightly defined lows. Instead, think that rich, lush midrange that seduces and makes you overlook the limitations. It's also a big, broad-scale sound that's as comfy and as inviting as putting on an old pair of slippers in winter. It's kind of what people who don't listen to classical music regularly hear when they listen

to Schubert; a lovely, refined sound, well mannered to the point of sounding almost too polite.

Modern high-end amplifiers – even modern high-end tube amplifiers – end up sounding more detailed and revealing of the music playing. That can be a double-edged sword; I'd happily trade some resolution if it made Oasis or Muse sound listenable, but I'd hate to sacrifice that insight into the studio you get when listening to Tool or Donald Byrd. However, there's something truly magical about sticking on some Blue Note masterpiece from the late 1950s and letting the AA34's satisfying sound just wash over you. Modernity be damned, the early 1960s were the Golden Age of Hi-Fi, and the AA34's sound shows you just why that was.

What I find very good about the AA34 is it covers its tracks well. In this respect, it's like the LS3/5a – and perhaps unsurprisingly the quintessential British loudspeaker and the archetypal American amplifier are commonly considered to be a marriage made in the mid-Atlantic. Both products have some significant limitations at the frequency extremes, and neither is stymied by those limitations. So, on the AA34, that top end is very easy on the ear, but doesn't appear to extend far into the brilliance region, and anyone feeling the

love for high-resolution sound files reaching up into the bat-troubling 192kHz zone will not be too enthused with the extension or excitement of the upper treble. ▶





► Similarly, the bass is nicely rolled off in an untroubled manner. Dynamic swings – especially those subtle changes in dynamics that represent the playing style of a musician – aren't a strong suit, but it sounds more like an amplifier bringing music into its comfort zone, rather than actively suppressing the dynamics of the sound itself. It sounds contradictory, but this is actually to the AA34's benefit – you seem to spend more time listening to the music than its sound.

It's what's left though that makes the amplifier – the midrange. It's got all those qualities that get people into valve amplifiers in the first place; it's liquid, articulate and always inviting you to play just another album. And you do end up listening to a lot of choral music as a result; the *Lamentations...* by Thomas Tallis (from the Tallis Scholars on ECM) sounds harmonically beautiful, and the presentation of space around the singers it gives is huge and engaging.

Not everything in the garden is rosy, though. That lush sound can sound too lush when it's not needed and if you find yourself playing the stark moodiness of Joy Division's *Closer*, the last thing you need is making it sound cheerful and engaging. You want that bleak sound to be bleak and upsetting, not mellow and listenable. How big a concern this gets does depend on how much of that kind of music you really listen to.

In fact, many of the observations about the AA34 are going to attract as many people. And there's one extra obvious observation I've left out... the price. In the world of high-end, where £850 barely buys you a set of special feet for an amplifier, this represents excellent value. Partner it with a pair of reasonably efficient, easy driving loudspeakers that don't go in search of the bottom octave and you'll find this a very happy place where the endless cycle of audiophile unrest comes to an easy, natural sounding halt. It's a 'happily listen for years' amplifier, not a box-swapper's temporary delight.

It's a pity the Dynaco Stereo 70 isn't as well known in the UK as it is in the US. The AA Acoustics AA34 might go some way to address that. It's the perfect partner for good, small loudspeakers that we British love so much. OK, so this doesn't have the 'now' sound that's popular today, but not everyone loves the bright and zingy sound of today's audio. Not all of those people will

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Tubes used: EL34 x4, 6U8/ECF82 x2, 5Z4P x1

Inputs: RCA x4

Outputs: RCA x1

Control Functions: Input Select, Remote Volume.

Power Output: 40 watt x 2, RMS 1kHz

Total Harmonic Distortion: less than 1%(10watt, 1kHz)

Frequency Response (-3dB points at 10 watt): 8Hz-60kHz

Input Sensitivity: 350mV

Input Impedance: 100k ohms

Output Impedance: 4, 8 ohms. (User selectable.)

Signal-to-noise ratio: 90dB

Dimensions (HxWxD): 15x43x31cm

Weight: 20kg

Price: £850

Distributed by: AA Acoustics

URL: www.aa-acoustics.com

Tel: +44(0)1273 325901

want to own vintage equipment and not all of them will have the sort of money needed to buy a vintage Dynaco or the time to restore or modify it. For those, the AA34 is the ideal choice. +

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



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(Chris Thomas - HiFi + Magazine)

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Neat Ultimatum XL10

By Malcolm Steward

Last year I was invited to hear the ultimate member of the Neat Acoustics Ultimatum series, the as then unheard XL10, being launched in Milan... on the end of quite the saddest high-end system the Italian importer could assemble. Regardless, the XL10 overcame the turntable and electronics that strove to hold it back and revealed its potential by sounding rather damned fine. I just knew, however, that the XL10 would sound so much better on the end of a well-sorted Naim electronics system – Neat speakers appear to have a magical synergy with Naim Audio's electronics – such as the one sitting, waiting impatiently in my music room. Shortly after my system had undergone a major, ground-up rebuild, Mr Surgeoner's MPV pulled into my drive and he unpacked the crates containing a brand new pair of XL10s.

The XL10 is a big loudspeaker. Once parked on its spikes it nearly stands taller than me. That is not saying much but it does indicate, at least, that setting them up in one's room is probably a task better saved for when one has a friend who can manhandle heavy weights available to assist.

Recently, the Editor and I were discussing how many times one gets to audition a piece of equipment that one genuinely feels one cannot live without: something so exciting and vital that life without it appears unthinkable? The answer, we decided, was very rarely. Sadly, few reviewers are entirely honest about just how mundane most review subjects are. Most writers tend to find it easier to shy away from giving readers the absolute truth and instead search out facets about which they can enthuse. I do not like damning with faint praise nor using terminological inexactitudes like Ivor Tielenbrun's famous answer when another manufacturer asked for his opinion on their product: *"That is great hi-fi..."* with the following conclusion being muttered quietly under one's breath or left unspoken... *"but it could not play music with the benefit of divine intervention."*

Regardless, it seems that there are one or two manufacturers that do not churn out humdrum products that purport to be exciting with monotonous regularity but instead release components only when they have been tweaked to near perfection; painfully and painstakingly laboured over until such time as they are able to get out of the way and allow the music to communicate near directly to the listener. One such manufacturer is Neat Acoustics, and that company has twice blessed us this year with products that I cannot imagine living without.

The first of these were the newest occupants of my office desktop, the diminutive, two-way, £600 lota loudspeakers that make my working day so much more bearable. The second arrivals, even though they came from the same factory, could not have been more physically different.

Having been manhandled into my music room, the superb and magnificent Neat Ultimatum XL10 loudspeakers were duly connected to my waiting Naim NAP250 power amplifiers. Subsequent experimentation over the next week or so demonstrated that ages-old Naim NAC A5 seemed to be their preferred speaker cable, sounding more coherent and persuasive than the TelluriumQ Ultra Black that I had been using very successfully with the smaller Ultimatum

XLSSs. I had been quite taken by the relatively inexpensive XLSSs and the XL6s: their larger than their boxes style of presentation and their ability to communicate music with a near effortless grace truly had me won over. I was sad to see them depart... but I soon overcame my discomfiture when I cast eyes upon the imposing grandeur of £15,000 worth of majestic XL10s spiked into my floor.

The XL10 uses a nine-driver per enclosure configuration, but a seated listener will only be aware of the five of these that are visible – two 168mm mid-bass drivers, two 168mm bass drivers, and a single 26mm high frequency driver. Hidden from view are the two upward-facing EMIT super-tweeters on the top panel of the cabinet, and the interior-mounted bass units, which combine with the visible bass units and internal cavities to provide an isobaric loading for the low frequencies. These drivers are affixed in their own, individual sub-enclosures designed to enhance their performance and reduce their ability to affect or be affected adversely by the operation of the other drivers.

The 1.5metre tall enclosure housing these drivers is not the typical MDF confection but is constructed from damped 18mm Birch plywood. MDF is used along with Polyethylene in a sandwich arrangement to form the rigid, non-resonant baffle structure. Each of the two separate isobaric loaded sub-bass sections features its own enclosure volume and tuning, and houses the latest version of Neat's 168mm bass drive unit, which the company has developed and refined over a twenty-year period. These sub-bass sections are critically tuned independently to maximize room location flexibility for the speaker. Indeed the XL10 was not a difficult speaker to optimise in terms of placement in my room, requiring no more than slight adjustment to maximise its musical coherency and to refine its cosmetic performance – focussing its presentation of the sound stage on appropriate material. ▶

"The XL10 is a big loudspeaker. Once parked on its spikes it nearly stands taller than me. That is not saying much but it does indicate, at least, that setting them up in one's room is probably a task better saved for when one has a friend who can manhandle heavy weights available to assist."



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► The crossover network, which is positioned in the base of the enclosure, is a minimalist five-element type (along with damping and attenuating resistors) employing precise-tolerance, low-loss air-cored inductors and newly developed polypropylene film and foil capacitors. The speaker uses predominantly first-order crossover slopes and mechanical roll-offs to deliver a natural, uninhibited performance, and sounds delightfully open and free of the usual crossover network ills.

I am obliged to state that there are honestly few loudspeakers today that are truly bad – and most of those, I often jest, are instantly recognisable by being circular-horn-loaded – so it becomes increasingly hard to discriminate between the merely good, the exceptional, and the outstandingly brilliant. I, for example, think the XL10s go way past being brilliant while the majority, even those from famous name producers, rate no better than averagely good. But what makes that difference – gigantic though it is – is hard to define. Most loudspeakers manage to play in tune and in time, and few are so horribly coloured that one cannot recognise the instrument or instruments that are playing or the performer's voice. Some, a very small number, can go that step further and produce sound so realistic that it can almost convince the listener that he has been transported to the site of the original recording, so believable is the sound. What is more, the sound must also be compelling: it must invite the listener into the performance and virtually take him by the hand and lead him through the arrangement or score, effectively enabling him to understand why the music progresses the way it does and the relevance of the performers' interjections, and how they contribute to the music as a whole. They make it all too easy understanding why, say, a band such as the Allman Brothers, was truly ground-breaking, and how each of the players contributed to the band's overall mastery of the Southern Rock genre: listen to their emotion-packed *Live at Fillmore East* album version of "Stormy Monday" and you realise

instantly why it is so vastly superior to the versions you will have heard over the years by myriad other artistes. The way the Allmans' two drummers and bass guitarist worked together to keep the rhythmic impetus aflame is subtle but utterly magical and compelling.

It is important to acknowledge what the designer was aiming to achieve when one assesses the success or failure of the loudspeaker he has produced. Bob Surgeoner who is responsible for the XL10 and its predecessor, the MF9, is also an active semi-professional musician. He plays a multitude of instruments... and plays them far better than his modesty allows him to admit. He and his right-hand man at Neat – also an active musician, songwriter and engineer – have made recordings at gigs and in the factory demonstration room against which they can compare their speakers. Furthermore, they keep a range of acoustic and electric instruments at the factory to provide some sort of absolute reference should that be required. It doesn't get much more real or accurate than that!

'Hi-fi sound' makes all the right noises. It delivers dynamics. It has wide bandwidth, too: It plumbs the depths to deliver bowel-moving bass, and is similarly extended at the other, hair-parting end of the spectrum. All too often, though, it fails to stitch all these elements together in any meaningful way. The Neat XL10 manages this task with consummate ease. Regardless of my disliking audiophile recordings for their often clinical presentation and lack of soul, I dug out some audiophile hi-fi rips and gave them a thorough auditioning through the XL10s. Much to my surprise, I found several of them were almost palatable, even pleasant and approaching enjoyable.

The XL10 fared well with tracks from a 16/44 rip of the Ernest Ranglin CD, *Below the Bassline*. The bass guitar appeared rich in timbre and weight, with appropriate snap to the leading edges of notes. It pushed cleanly through the mix and was harmonically rich but dry so there was no smearing to add any lack of clarity or murkiness to the proceedings. The drums were equally well treated and displayed real attack and impact. The kit cut through the mix especially well: in particular, the likes of snare and rim shots had sometimes alarming and startling presence. Cymbals had similar attack along with credible timbre and note-shape [ASDR] envelopes, adding to the naturalness and conviction of their presentation.

Jazz singer, Cassandra Wilson ably demonstrated how accurately and sympathetically the XL10 handled voices. On a 16/44 rip of her album *Belly of the Sun*, songs like *The Weight* and *You Gotta Move*, her voice sounded natural, convincing and realistically detailed, and finely resolved with nuances such as her breathing being clearly disclosed. She and her band occupied a ►

"Regardless of my disliking audiophile recordings... much to my surprise, I found several of them were almost palatable, even pleasant and approaching enjoyable."

- wide, deep arc of a soundstage with the players distinctly positioned in it and not constricted by the loudspeaker enclosures.

Also beloved of the high end fraternity because their music is fundamentally tinkle and slam (albeit with a groove) laid out within a spacious three dimensional soundstage, Afro Celt Sound System's *Anatomic* album delivered the band's Celtic fusion replete with throbbing, weighty, low frequencies free of any slurring, punctuated by percussion (toms) with gunfire-like, staccato attack. All this precision and scrupulous delineation of instruments was presented with their natural harmonic characters unaltered – they still sounded one hundred percent like the band that I heard making the ground tremble at the Fleadh in London back in the 1980s.

Similarly, the 1997 *Buena Vista Social Club* album – the 24/96 rip – which manages to be musically rewarding while ticking all the high-end boxes, sounded no less than truly glorious on the XL10s. The bass, while not appearing over-blown, had plenty of natural weight and impact along with crisp definition and precise timing. Dynamics were, on occasions, quite startling; it was as though someone had surreptitiously cranked the volume control before a transient arrived. But the most outstanding characteristic was perhaps the purity and timbre of the vocals: the tonal qualities of even voices at the back of the mix were explicitly revealed, allowing near scrupulous access to the contributions of supporting singers as though they were at the front of the stage. This imbued the performance with genuine vibrancy – a true vitality and life that is so rarely experienced with recorded music. This exquisite recording played through the XL10s managed the near-impossible task of allowing the speakers to satisfy both the roster of hi-fi and musical requirements. Their flawless portrayal of the sonics allowed the music to gel and cohere so convincingly that the result was the most persuasive I have encountered in my room to date.

Indubitably, the Ultimatum XL10 makes an unwavering statement regardless of the music one chooses to play through it. Suitably powered, the XL10 presents all manner of music with a rarely experienced ease, control and coherence.

Ultimately, if you crave a musically persuasive performance but also desire the scrupulous insight of a high-end loudspeaker, be certain to put the Neat Ultimatum XL10 at the top of your list of models to audition. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Drivers: 2x EMIT 25mm planar/ribbon supertweeters, 26mm Sonomex dome tweeter, 2x 168mm NEAT mid/bass, 4x 168mm NEAT bass

Sensitivity: 88dB

Impedance: 6 ohm (nominal) 4 ohm (minimum)

Dimensions (HxWxD): 1500x22x37cm

Weight: 65kg per loudspeaker

Price: £15,245 per pair (£17,080 premium finish)

Manufactured by: Neat Acoustics Ltd

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

ELAC FS 509 VX-JET loudspeakers

By Alan Sircom



Some of the most innovative things done with a loudspeaker box today come out of the ELAC factory. The company's use of Heil Air Motion Transducer tweeters, 'Crystal Membrane' aluminium composite mid-bass units and now the VX-JET dial on the tweeter makes for a loudspeaker that is state of the art. Of course, this is the preserve of the company's Line 500 big guns, and those big guns don't come much bigger than the FS 509 VX-JET.

This is a tall, thin and perfectly glossy loudspeaker, perfectly black glossy that is; it seems ELAC applies Henry Ford's Model T maxim to flagship loudspeaker colour schemes. A four-way design, with a down-firing bass port, the 509 features ELAC's own drivers throughout. Given the drive units (apart from the AMT tweeter's gold-like finish) are gloss black too. There is a splash of colour from the speaker base spikes and the rest, and the rear panel features the VX-JET adjustment, as well as bi-wire terminals linked with short runs of van den Hul's The Wind Mk II speaker cable.

The VX-JET system connects the JET III AMT ribbon tweeter to a small vernier dial at the rear of the loudspeaker. Turn the dial clockwise or counterclockwise and you can change the time alignment of the loudspeaker slightly. This does allow a degree of fine tuning, adjusting the loudspeaker's stage width and presence as you see fit. Perhaps more importantly, these can be used to help reduce inconsistencies in the room itself, adjusting each VX-JET control carefully to change the side wall reflection pattern. It works surprisingly well, but remember two key things. First, this must be done with a buddy. Getting up, adjusting, sitting down again will wreck your short term audible memory, while another person can adjust the dial while you sit and assess the performance. Second, it's not meant as a way of correcting less than ideal installs; put the speakers clear of the sides and rear walls with a slight toe-in as you should (almost) always do and do well. Then and only then should you adjust the VX-JET system.

The speaker itself uses all-ELAC cones through the mid and bass too. The JET III tweeter sits in the acoustic centre of a special AS-XR ring radiator midrange. The drive units are totally disconnected from one another and this does make the treble and mid act as a form of point source. Below that is the second midrange, a 180mm 'crystal' aluminium sandwich design, which is backed up by a pair of 220mm units of the same construction. All of these drive units are housed in a basket of cast aluminium, chosen for maximum rigidity without maximum weight. The crossover points are key in any loudspeaker, but in a four-way, they become vital. Here, they are at 120Hz, 600Hz and 2.8kHz respectively, managing to keep crossover points outside the worst possible places.

There's a classic ELAC sound. These speakers are fast, free from any kind of overhang and incredibly detailed. In many ELACs, that comes with a suffix, "... and perhaps too much of a good thing". Because many ELAC speakers go for so much detail the sound borders on brightness. There's a great loudspeaker inside any ELAC design, but sometimes you have to struggle to find it. ▶



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The 509 makes that less of a struggle. While the FS 509 is never going to be the kind of loudspeaker one might use with stark or forward sounding electronics – because the sound of the speaker is very clean, well into the brilliance region – this is a loudspeaker that is highly satisfying and insightful. Use it with a valve amplifier – at 89dB and an impedance that swings between four and eight ohms, it's OK with almost anything that isn't a SET, and although it was a trifle underpowered, the balance and the inherent warmth of the Dynaco-like AA34 and the ELAC is a fine match.

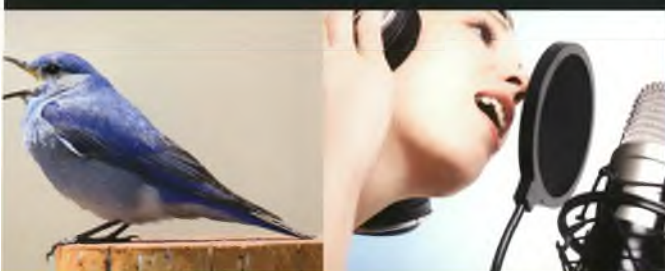
If there's an overarching characteristic of the FS 509 it's that it creates a very dry sound. There's no stray resonance or added thickening, no syrup or overhang. This means you get to listen into reverb tails and panning accuracy. It's a precision that so many people crave, although those who seek something overly romantic from their loudspeakers might not like what the FS 509 does so well. There's an interesting and obvious comparison to make with the Reference 3a Veena Mk II also tested in this issue, because they are almost diametrically opposed on almost everything that goes with voicing a loudspeaker. The FS 509 is very definitely for the person who wants a precise portrayal of what's on the recording, rather than a possibly slightly romanticised version of the same.

There's a Four Tet/Fabric album that I occasionally listen to. It's the kind of thing loud clubland PA systems do very well, but the subtlety of hi-fi speakers makes it sound a bit of a mess. The 509s took it in their stride, because of the depth and precision of the bass and the dryness of the sound. Moving over to the Haydn Nelson Mass (the classic 1962 Decca recording with Sir David Willcocks and the Kings College, Cambridge Choir) and then on to the Hilliard Ensemble's *Audivi Vocem*, it became clear the FS 509's precision and depth apply universally, and very successfully.

The downside to the clean, sophisticated sound of the 509 is that sometimes that dryness can pull a recording apart. On good recordings, this is a wonderful experience, like listening into the mix in a way few people get unless they are in a studio control room. However, on those recordings that make you wonder if it was mixed by someone wielding a chisel or two, poor tracking, bad microphone technique, too much or too little compression, reverb or EQ, and even poor pan pot use will be all too apparent. If the recording industry anticipated thousands and thousands of ELAC 509 listeners as their audience, we'd all be getting better sounds.



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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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► The other problem with the 509 is a headroom issue. Yours, not the loudspeakers. Clean loudspeakers that can take an almost infinite amount of power are easy to play at surprisingly high levels. If the amp and the speaker don't complain, your ears tend to stay blissfully unaware of the volume levels until the sound levels have reached the threshold of pain. I nodded along happily

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: four-way bass reflex floorstanding loudspeaker

Drive unit compliment: 1x JET III AMT tweeter, 1x 50/105mm AS-XR ring radiator upper-midrange, 1x 180mm AS-XR midrange driver, 2x 220mm AS-XR bass driver

Crossover Frequencies: 120Hz, 600Hz, 2.8kHz

Frequency Response: 24Hz-50kHz

Sensitivity: 89dB

Nominal impedance: four ohms

Minimum impedance: 3.1 ohms at 75Hz

Dimensions (HxWxD): 137.3x33x46.6cm

Weight: 57.2kg

Price: £15,000 per pair

Manufactured by: ELAC

URL: www.elac.com

Distributed by: ELAC UK

URL: www.elac-audio.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1455 283251



playing Tool at a level far louder than is healthy without any perception of how loud it actually was. Take note... these speakers are better than your ears in this respect.

I think ELAC has done the right thing for the wrong reasons in its VX-JET control. It's not a tone control or a 'studio/domestic' control, it can be used to make the installation of the loudspeakers so much easier than usual. Have the loudspeakers positioned in the room (each speaker a metre and a half from the centre-line of the room and a metre from the rear wall is perfect), and instead of minute adjustment of the whole loudspeaker, moving the vernier scale on the VX-JET allows incredibly precise tweeter time alignment in room. It's best done with a solo female voice in the middle of the image and having you in the listening chair while a friend adjusts the scale forward and back slowly, until everything snaps into focus.

A hidden joy of this – plus the overall taut bass presentation – means the loudspeaker can slot into some surprisingly small spaces without complaint. Of course, a loudspeaker as physically big as the 509 doesn't necessarily make for an easy installation into very small rooms, and even the best installation doesn't solve the intimidation factor of staring down very big, very black loudspeakers in a small room, but dedication to audio can overcome all sorts of things.

The ELAC FS 509 VX-JET is an uncompromising loudspeaker. It's the rare combination of flagship design and a loudspeaker that can act as everyman; it's not the kind of loudspeaker that limits your musical tastes. The loudspeaker does have its character – and that clean character defines the sound – but that does not affect your choice of music. In fact, it makes that music appear impressive no matter what's playing. If the musicians and recording engineers know what they are doing, the recording will sound remarkable, whether that music was written in a church a thousand years ago, or on the back of a tour bus last week. In other words, an all-round goodie that comes strongly recommended. +



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Atohm GT1 loudspeaker

By Alan Sircom

£179

Atohm is a brand better known than people know about. If that sounds like a contradiction, think on this: when it's not making drive units (already a rarity) for its own loudspeakers like the GT1, Atohm's parent company makes drive units for fellow French loudspeaker brands, such as Triangle, Elipson and Waterfall.

Atohm is the brain-child of Thierry Comte, one-time technical director of Triangle, who used those years of driver design skills to go it alone and create one of France's premier OEM and DIY suppliers of drive units. More recently, however, Atohm has made its own complete loudspeakers. The great advantage driver makers have is generally they bring a highly scientific approach to the loudspeaker building craft. If you make loudspeaker drivers by the thousand both for your company and others, you need a thorough

background in the physics and engineering involved in the task, and the 'fairy dust' element that permeates some loudspeaker designs never makes it to the drawing board. The downside is this can result in loudspeakers designed by engineers for engineers, that real people cannot or will not take to. With one notable caveat, Atohm has avoided the engineer's folly elements of design.

The smallest of three models, the GT1 is an elegant rear-ported two-way standmount loudspeaker, finished in either a rich rosewood, black or white lacquer. The drivers in the GT1 are from Atohm's Absolute Series, meaning they are the best specification it's possible to get from the company. The tweeter is the company's SD28 ND 04RD model, a 28mm soft-dome design. Unlike most tweeters, this is a direct radiating design that relies on sheer magnet (17,000 gauss, apparently) – rather than horn loading or compression chambering – to deliver a very high sensitivity driver. The dimples in the tweeter surround – where the horn usually resides – is designed to improve off-axis performance while limiting stray HF reflections. It's partnered with the LD150 CR 04, a 150mm mid-bass unit using a light but stiff alloy cone with a nomex/kapton former on the 25mm voice coil and a rigid aluminium basket. It too achieves high sensitivity, and as the GT1 uses a relatively simple first order crossover, the GT1 is conservatively rated at 89dB sensitivity and a comfy six ohm ►



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- impedance load. Because of the nature of the drivers, Atohm puts the crossover point at a relatively high 2.5kHz.

At the single-wire rear terminal is a three position knob, that puts a 1.5dB boost or cut from 1.5-30kHz, allowing a little bit of room tailoring or – as Atohm considers it – a smoother (-1.5dB) or high-definition (+1.5dB) presentation. I think considering it a function of tonally matching to the room is a better option than a rudimentary tone control.

If you read the brochure (it's in French, so 'read' was more like 'get Google to break it down into quasi-readable chunks') it's clear this isn't some airy-fairy speaker brand. Rather than a slick sales catalogue with expensive photography and pithy, vapid quotes from reviewers or owners, it's explanations of the coefficient of stiffness, and Kippel-derived charts (Kippel is a sophisticated loudspeaker measurement suite), or images of laser interferometry graphs and their relevance. Not so much a 'white paper', more an 'end of term paper for loudspeaker engineers'.

The worry with loudspeaker driver makers that turn hands to making complete loudspeakers is that sometimes the transition goes awry. You can end up with a 'nice drivers, shame about the cabinet' scenario; this might be the inverse of the norm, where the cabinet brings out the best from cheap, off-the-shelf drivers, but it still leads to a less than perfect result. Fortunately, the GT1 exhibits none of this. Instead, clearly someone's put time and energy into designing a box that can bring out the best in those drive units.

The GT1 lives up to its name; it's fast. Really fast. Sounds have a sense of urgency to their attack and release; not rushed or forced, just right. But unlike many a fast-

“Being a small design, the stereo performance is always likely to be good, but this one was exceptional. It tended to project images into the room rather than giving the impression of pushing back the rear wall, but the stage it projected was wide and open.”

paced loudspeaker, it copes well with very complex orchestral and dance music work with ease. Personally, in room and with an Electrocompaniet CD and integrated amplifier in balanced mode, I felt the +1.5dB lift helped significantly, and the flat and especially -1.5dB fell into the 'soft' and 'laid back' territories.

Being a small design, the stereo performance is always likely to be good, but this one was exceptional. It tended to project images into the room rather than giving the impression of pushing back the rear wall, but the stage it projected was wide and open.

It's the detail that really starts to get to you though. There is a lot of information being disseminated here. In this case, that means detail both of the quality of the upstream electronics, and of what's on the disc. Interestingly, however, that detail does not mean it's impossible to play anything bar the best through these speakers; it tells you what's on the disc or in the player, but it doesn't judge. Compressed and limited music still sounds pretty harsh and forward, weaknesses in system selection shine through, but these are more like observations rather than poison pen letters. You can listen to victims of the Loudness War easier through these loudspeakers than many direct and indirect rivals.

Now comes that caveat described earlier – the bass, or rather the lack of it. In fairness, the GT1 has no more or less bass than something like an LS3/5a, and practically everywhere the BBC-derived loudspeaker works well will be a fine place for the GT1. And, in fairness, the GT1's roll-off is gentle and benign, but although the end point is said to be around 45Hz, it seems higher because of that gentle roll-off. This makes for a recessed far left hand on piano pieces, and not much going on at all on dance music with some bass. But like the LS3/5a, this French speaker is not exactly full-range. That being said, the simple expedient of a subwoofer (the obvious engineering solution) would fix this perfectly. Although I am a strong supporter of subs as bass reinforcement, I recognise this solution is not popular among audiophiles. It's a regret that some will miss out on such good midband, treble and even upper bass in the search for deeper bass.

However, don't think that because the GT1 treads lightly into the bass that it's some kind of thin and lean sound. The GT1 has all the richness of harmony and physical structure to the harmony needed to portray music with ►

► verve and élan. And that reaches down to the lower registers. It even has a fine sense of dynamic range, albeit limited by the bottom end. The easiest way to describe the dynamics is 'where it tries, it wins' and 'it ignores its weaknesses', which is a fine way of doing things with audio. Sins of omission being better than sins of commission, an' all.

There are two ways of looking at the GT1. The first – and perhaps most naïve – is to think of this as a lot of money for a loudspeaker that has bass limitations. The second is to think of this as a loudspeaker that delivers some of the best midrange and treble around, but needs some bass reinforcement as a result. It's a glass half empty, or half full, statement. My feeling is for the money, even factoring in £1,000 or so for a subwoofer, you are going to struggle to find a loudspeaker that does more bass and that doesn't ruin the mid and top in the process. But you need a good sub, one that's fast enough to keep up with the GT1s.

That the Atohm GT1 is something of a pleasant surprise is an understatement. It's the kind of loudspeaker you could happily listen to for years without the slightest complaint. It's fast, dynamic, yet sophisticated, very open sounding across the midrange and extends nicely into the battered part of the treble without complaint or break-up. It extends that unforced, fast and open sound down into the upper bass... and then stops relatively quickly. If you use it with a subwoofer – or use it in a very small room – there's nothing to worry about. That puts it in the realm of the niche product – it's effectively one of the best satellite loudspeakers I've ever heard – but what a niche! Why isn't this fabulous French loudspeaker distributed here in Blighty? +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: two-way bass reflex standmount loudspeaker

Drive unit compliment: 1x 28mm fabric dome tweeter, 1x 150mm alloy cone mid/woofer

Frequency response: 45Hz-30kHz

Crossover frequency: 2.5kHz

Sensitivity: 89dB

Impedance: six ohms

Power handling: 100W

Peak power: 200W

Dimensions (HxWxD): 33x20x26.5cm

Price: €2,500

Manufactured by: Atohm

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hi fi 65 ISSUE 93

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Audeze LCD-3 headphones

By Chris Martens

The LCD3 is – quite simply – Audeze’s attempt to build a headphone that offers (according to the company), “the highest level of audio quality, unsurpassed bass extension, exceptional treble and the best mid-range you will find in headphones.” That’s an ambitious sonic goal. Does it achieve that, and if so, does its healthy price tag represent true value for money. Well, not wishing to spoil the review from the get-go, we’ll offer you this introductory hint; the LCD3 is arguably one of the two best headphones that money can buy at this point in time.

Unlike Audeze’s original LCD2 model, the LCD3 features next-generation planar magnetic drivers using a proprietary thin-film ‘Lotus’ diaphragm that Audeze claims is made of a special alloy for greater control and lower distortion. The diaphragm itself is held between neodymium magnets in push-pull (allowing for an impressive 2.5mm maximum excursion) and the whole 6.17 sq in transducer unit is said to be sensitivity and frequency matched to exceptional $\pm 0.5\text{dB}$ tolerances. As this is tested extensively, customers are given a frequency plot of their own headphones in the box.

Its open-back, circumaural (surrounding the ear) design has distinctive sloped lambskin-leather ear pads (meat-free options are available for the ear cups and the pad covering the spring-type headband frame). Meanwhile, those ear cup housings are made from a tasty shade of hand-selected zebrano wood.

The LCD’s ear cup housings are carried by sturdy metal yokes that allow the ear cups to swivel in both vertical and horizontal axes for an optimal fit. The yokes attach to the headband frame via polished metal shafts cut with precisely spaced grooves that serve as click stops, allowing listeners to dial-in precise and repeatable amounts of clearance between the tops of the ear cups and the arched surface of the headband. Plainly, Audeze takes precision fitting and wearer comfort quite seriously.

Audeze also packs the LCD3 box with some handy goodies. It includes two high quality, quick-disconnect signal cables, one equipped with mini-XLR connectors on the headphone end. One cable is fitted with a ¼-inch phone jack-type plug and the other fitted with a 4-pin, XLR-type connector for use with balanced output amplifiers. There’s also a vial of wood polishing fluid and a lint-free polishing cloth, plus a choice of case; either a Caribbean rosewood presentation affair or a rugged and heavily padded SKB-type travel box.

The LCD3 is somewhat heavier than many of the open-back headphones we’ve tried—not heavy enough to be uncomfortable, but heavy enough to remind you these ‘phones do have a good bit of mass to manage. Also, the LCD3’s clamping pressures fall somewhat above the median among ‘phones we’ve tried, which can potentially cause problems for glasses wearers. Neither of these points undercuts our appreciation for what the LCD3 is and does, but they are worth knowing about up front.

The LCD3 builds upon the many strengths of the LCD2, while addressing what some perceived as the LCD2’s shortcomings. In the bass region, the



LCD2 was rightly regarded as an excellent performer, with extremely good low-frequency extension, good measures of weight and punch, and plenty of detail. Even so, the LCD3 offers even better bass, with equally good extension, but noticeably better low-end transient speed, focus, and resolution. Where the low end of the LCD2 was excellent, the LCD3 now pushes the performance envelope even further, to a point where we think it delivers the best bass we have yet heard from any headphone.

Through the midrange, where most music really lives, the LCD3 again raises the bar with what sounds like a broad band of evenly balanced midrange response with extremely pure timbres, transient speed, and rendering of low-level sonic details. ▶



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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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► The upper mids and highs of the LCD3 are noticeably more prominent than its little brother, and for that reason more accurately balanced, than those of the LCD2, though if you look at the frequency response test charts for the two models you'll discover the differences in tonal balance appear more subtle on paper than they sound in reality. Still, Audeze did not go overboard with its voicing adjustments, so that the LCD3 preserves elements of the classic Audeze "house sound". But even so, the voicing of the LCD3 is now more similar to that of its top-tier competitors. What is more, the upper mids and highs of the LCD3 also show the same across-the-board improvements in speed and transparency that we've observed in the LCD3's bass and midrange performance, which is all to the good.

The LCD3 exhibits the desirable qualities of turn-on-a-sixpence musical agility and all-around responsiveness as if to suggest that the LCD-3 can effortlessly track with even the quickest or subtlest shifts in the music. These qualities also pay huge dividends in terms of the LCD3's ability to faithfully reproduce both large and small-scale dynamic shifts in the music. Frankly, I know of only one headphone that can better the performance of the LCD3 in these areas, and that would be the Stax SR-009.

To put things in perspective, consider that the SR-009 costs more than twice what the LCD3 does and that the Stax will require a dedicated electrostatic headphone amp that costs still more. In contrast, the LCD3 is surprisingly easy to drive as planar magnetic headphones go (93dB sensitivity), meaning that you can get good results with well-designed mid-priced conventional headphone amplifiers (though the LCD3 certainly justifies investing in the best headphone amp you can afford).

In a 'big picture' sense, the LCD3 is that rare audio component that does literally everything well, and that offers state-of-the-art bass reproduction and near state-of-the-art midrange lucidity. With the LCD3 you never have to worry about tradeoffs or drawbacks because, apart from a very slight degree of upper midrange/treble reticence, there aren't any. Instead, the LCD3 takes you as far up the performance ladder as most of us will ever want or need to go.

I've said that the LCD3 offers state-of-the-art bass, extraordinary midrange lucidity, and powerful and expressive dynamics. To hear all three sets of qualities on display in one relatively short piece of music, try listening to the second (Scherzo: Allegro molto) movement of the Copland Organ Symphony as performed by the San Francisco Symphony conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas, with Paul Jacobs as organist [SFS Media, SACD]. This beautiful, angular, contemporary piece often begins themes with one or two group of instruments, then adds layers of instrumentation, and in the process weaves in the voice of the pipe organ—more as a member of the orchestra than as a solo instrument. As I listened to these passages unfold, I was struck by how pure and richly evocative and detailed the voices of individual instruments—be they woodwinds, brass, strings, or the upper registers of the pipe organ—truly were. But what was impressive was the effortless way the LCD3 took in its stride the addition of more and more layers of instruments, as if it always had reserves of clarity and definition sufficient to handle any musical challenge I might throw its way.

"With the LCD3 you never have to worry about tradeoffs or drawbacks because, apart from a very slight degree of upper midrange/treble reticence, there aren't any."

But at several distinct points in the movement the overall dynamic tenor of the music become dramatically more forceful, with notes and phrases punctuated by brilliant, blaring brass lines, insistent concert bass drum thwacks, and both the upper and lower registers of the pipe organ holding forth (including, at times, very loud, low-frequency pedal notes). As you can probably imagine, these passages pose stiffer dynamic challenges than many earphones and headphones can meet, yet the LCD3 seemed complete unfazed by them, as if playing at high volumes with extreme subtlety and clarity were—for this superb headphone—no more difficult than handling simple musical lines at low volumes. One of the coolest aspects of the LCD3 is that its performance envelope seems to stretch (that is, to expand or contract) to match the demands of any given piece of music. Precious few headphones can do this kind of dynamic "shape-shifting" as gracefully as the LCD3 can.

As if to make this point even more dramatically, the first large-scale dynamic outburst in the Organ Symphony's second movement is followed by a much more simply orchestrated passage played at lower volume levels, with minimal woodwind and brass voices initially carrying the melodic theme. Right on cue, the LCD3 "downshifts" from the powerful, bombastic levels at which it has just been playing to present instead a hushed, intimate, up close and personal rendering of the quieter themes as they unfold. I found the LCD3's handling of the upper register of the organ in this section simply riveting, because the voice(s) of the organ—and in particular its delicate reed-like sounds—seemed shockingly pure and realistic (almost as if I could hear air flowing through pipes and then beginning to resonate within them to produce sounds). This ability to shift back and forth from full-on orchestral crescendos to quiet intimacy is, in my book, a rare and beautiful thing.

The LCD3, unlike some top-tier headphones, proves able to work and play well with non-audiophile-grade recordings, so that it maximises whatever ►

► is good while report sonic flaws honestly but without "malice." A great example of such a recording would be the title track "She's So Scandalous" from Black Joe Lewis & The Honeybears' *Scandalous* [Lost Horizon]. This hugely funky neo-R&B track has, thankfully in the service of the music, some overblown elements such as a huge kick drum and bass guitar sound offset by semi-realistic but somewhat extra-crispy sounding guitar notes and vocals. But the track also has beautifully recorded horn section and percussion elements, all holding forth with real gusto. The LCD3 is accurate enough to show which elements are realistic and which are little juiced up, but presents them in a rich sounding and well-organised way that, I presume, conveys the producer's desire to provide a somewhat "larger than life" sound that nicely captures the energy and feel of a live R&B performance. My point is that the LCD3 finds a way to faithfully show what the recording is really like (warts and all), while letting listeners find as much to enjoy in their records, even their imperfect ones, as possible.

At every step along the way, the LCD3 proves capable of showing new elements, even in recordings one knows well. Of late, I've been using John Hammond's incredibly well recorded solo acoustic blues album *Rough & Tough* [Chesky, SACD] for some of my listening tests, partly because it contains great music, but partly because it can—at its best—sound tremendously lifelike and real. The disc sounds good through most headphones, but its sound jumps to whole new level through the LCD3. I particularly enjoyed the title track 'She's Tough', which is jauntily paced blues shuffle that's full of great acoustic guitar and harmonica work, plus vocals loaded with sly, sardonic humor. As Hammond sings about his "baby," the chorus becomes a real treat as these lyrics sweep past: "Now when she walk past the clock/the clock don't tell time/ walk through the college/the professor lose his mind/'cause she's tough/...ooh, ooh baby you tough/ my baby touch/she's rough and tough." Hammond sells these lines partly by delivering them with sincere conviction seasoned with just a hint of grit, but also by inserting sly, just barely audible spoken side comments in between the words being sung. The uncanny impression you get is of being present in the interior of St. Peter's Church in New York as this recording was being made, seated perhaps a few feet away from Hammond as he sings and plays. This sort of realism is what makes the LCD3 so musically satisfying and, we think, well worth its asking price.

The LCD3 is one those headphones that seems very impressive right off the bat, but even more so after you've spent long hours listening through it and to it. The headphone finds that oh-so-elusive balance point between being accurate and highly revealing on the one hand, yet capable of bringing to light all that is good and right in less-than-perfect recordings. In an absolute sense, we think this is one of the two best headphones available today (where the other would be the Stax SR-009 electrostatic headphone—a headphone we regard as the benchmark to which all other top-class 'phones must be compared).

In pragmatic, real-world terms, however, Audeze LCD3 may be the best of the best, partly because it works so well with moderately-priced, high-quality headphone amps, and partly because its prices falls thousands of dollars below that of its closest competitor (namely, the SR-009). Add to this the fact that the LCD3 is lovely to look at and beautifully made, and you can see why the LCD3 is likely to take its place at the top of many serious headphone enthusiasts' "most wanted product" lists. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Open-back, circumaural, planar magnetic headphones.

Driver complement: Full-range planar magnetic drivers with thin-film diaphragms and premium-grade Neodymium magnets.

Frequency Response: 5 Hz – 20kHz, with useable frequency extension to 50kHz

Sensitivity: 93 dB

Impedance: 50 Ohms

Weight: 550 grams (without cables)

Warranty: Not specified.

Price: £1,700

Manufactured by: Audeze Incorporated

URL: www.audeze.com

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REL T-Zero subwoofer

By Alan Sircom



As with heads and exciting sexual encounters, when it comes to subwoofers, two is better than one. The difficulty is two subwoofers can be big and expensive, and this can be a major obstacle when bringing some extra bass to small loudspeakers – which is arguably where they are most needed. Which makes the REL T-Zero all the more vital.

These are small, powered subwoofers, benefitting from all the high-performance system integration and control you get from REL designs, but in a cube not much larger than a couple of shoeboxes. The down-firing sealed box sports a 165mm long throw bass driver with a steel chassis, fed by a 100W Class D power amplifier, and featuring the full control set of the bigger RELs (although not the remote control of the really big REL devices). The gloss black or white box is well constructed, although it's not the richest, deepest gloss finish.

The big thing about the box though is the size, or the lack of it. It's small enough to nestle near or behind the loudspeaker without ruining the appearance of the room.

The installation of two small subs is relatively easy. Put them in line with the front baffle of the loudspeakers (if your speakers are back-swept, put them in line with the acoustic centre of the bass unit) and try to keep them as near as possible to the loudspeaker itself. Use the high-level connection wire, joining the red and yellow wires for the positive speaker terminal for that channel on your amplifier and the black to the negative. Leave them in phase.

Integration is tougher, but as with all RELs, start low and stay low. Your subwoofer should be almost never seen and hardly ever heard. With twice the set of level controls, you get twice the fun and games and it's all too easy to set one higher than the other. You'll notice this by a slight 'pull' to one channel. My advice. Set them up as per any good subwoofer, but be prepared to revise your initial installation later.

What you get when properly installed is an enhancement across the board. Bass gets a little deeper, of course, but this seems like a natural extension of the loudspeakers rather than additional bass energy added to the system. But that's just the starting place, because it's what the T-Zeros do to the midrange and treble that marks the subwoofers out as something special.

Put simply, the T-Zeros increase the clarity of the midrange and the articulation of voices. This is no small measure; well set up and suddenly your loudspeakers begin to sound more like they should sound. It's as if freed up from trying to deliver deep bass, the loudspeakers rise to the occasion. A handy by-product from this is the perception of a larger, deeper image.

The other big and strange change this does to loudspeakers is it makes them sound faster. Percussion, even cymbals (which don't have that much



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- low-end extension) seem taut and more precise, and possibly more dynamic. This is not quite as profound as with bigger subwoofers, but it even managed to speed up the extremely fast Athorn loudspeakers, when playing some Faithless.

It's something you possibly need to experience rather than experiment, because if you try this without hearing what a well-set-up T-Zero pair can do, you might settle for just more bass. A good demonstration or home installation will show how much faster, cleaner and deeper your loudspeakers get. If you take these home and apply a more hit-and-miss imprecision to the install, you'll either end up with too much bass (the most common problem with adding a subwoofer) or too little improvement to the midrange and treble. Either give the install more time and care, or call for backup. This is all fairly obvious to those who've already gone down the REL route, but the problem of poor installation compounds with two subs, and as this is likely to be many people's first experience of good subwoofery, it's worth ramming this home once more. I don't want to scare people about the install process – good bass is fairly obvious and easy to integrate – but when you hear what a good sub can do to a female voice, it's counter-intuitive and yet extremely attractive.

Of course there's a pretty obvious limit. A 165mm bass unit, no matter how fast acting is never going to go really, really deep. Two little 'uns do well against one big 'un in the agility stakes, but there are times when the big 'un delivers. This has perhaps less of the drive needed for full bass nutcase, turn-everything-to-eleven boom-fun that everyone seems to go through when installing a sub. Because, even turned to the max, they don't have that dub remix effect other subs can have on the music. But that's not their point. These are subwoofers for people who want to start on the road to better bass management and improving the lot of those with very British sounding (as in, slightly bass light) small box loudspeakers.

The big question is if you have £600 to spend, is it better to spend it on two small subs, one big sub, or better loudspeakers? It's not an easy question and it largely depends on your current loudspeaker system and listening space. If you have two small, but decent standmounts in a small room, the move to a bigger loudspeakers may not prove successful and the big sub might not prove appropriate. In such cases, the T-Zero option is a great one. Bigger rooms in bigger speakers are more likely to go with the big sub option. And if you are starting completely afresh, then putting that £600 to a better speaker is the right answer.

But there's another concept. Take someone with a good starter system with a pair of standmounts, and a single REL T-Zero will transform its sound. Then another one can

do the same at a later date. This is a step-by-step way of achieving proper bass management without the need for expensive and possibly mis-managed upgrades. And under such circumstances, the improvements are significant and profound. Highly recommended. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

- Type: Sealed, down-firing active woofer
- Drive Unit: 165mm long-throw, steel chassis
- Lower Frequency Response: 38 Hz at -6 dB in room
- Connections: High-Level, Neutrik Speakon, Low-Level single phono, LFE phono
- Amplifier: 100W Class D
- Dimensions (WxHxD): 216 x 241 x 260 mm
- Weight: 6.8kg
- Finish: Black or White Lacquer
- Price: £299 (per subwoofer)

Manufactured by: REL Ltd

URL: www.rel.net

Tel: +44 (0)1656 768777

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"For less than \$300, these headphones are hard to beat. HiFiMAN's HE-300s sound excellent and would be a great choice for in-home headphone listening." **Bob Archer, CExPro**



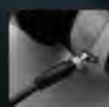
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Vertere Cables D-Fi minijack-phonon cable

By Alan Sircom

This is perhaps the single most important cable *Hi-Fi Plus* has ever reviewed. That's a pretty bold statement, but it's true, because the D-Fi is not so only a cable – it's a generational gateway.

Vertere's D-Fi is an entry-level audio cable range, and the one we're so excited about takes the output from the headphone socket of a smartphone into a stereo system. This means it is a thin two in one cable, with a good mini-jack at one end and a pair of equally decent phono cables at the other. The thin wire is a Teflon coated multi-conductor affair fitted in a neat silver braided jacket and a PVC outer. You could easily trail a long cable along a skirting board and it effectively disappears, because it is thinner than most single interconnects.

Rather than go the normal route of plugging to the 30 pin iPod connector, Vertere chose to go for the headphone output. This is not simply to avoid paying Apple licenses, Vertere's founder Touraj Moghaddam – yes, that Touraj, formerly of Roksan – believes the performance through

the headphone output is better than most people expect. It also means the D-Fi doesn't become pointless if someone pitches up with another brand of phone and didn't become out of date when Apple changed its connector.

I tried a 5m version, with an 80GB iPod Classic from a few years ago packed full of both lossless and AAC files into all manner of systems. To say it did well is a Gold Medal understatement. The iPod through the D-Fi proved itself a perhaps unsurprisingly up-beat and natural performer, both detailed enough to pass muster with all bar the snootiest of audiophiles and entertaining enough to keep the beat-hounds tapping their foot along. What I expected was a clean and tidy sound, but what I didn't expect was that deep and boppy bass that comes with it.

I think the best accolade I can put to the D-Fi was that it was unexpectedly good. I intended a few hours listening, and giving the cable a few tracks. I didn't expect to listen to whole albums at a stretch. I certainly didn't expect to use it with my laptop's headphone output, and use it in place of the normal USB DAC arrangement without ever once finding fault with the sound. There's more space around the instruments and a generally wider soundstage with the USB DAC, and the D-Fi seems to bring out the presence region more than the Mac+DAC arrangement, which made the sound through the D-Fi an always entertaining and musically satisfying experience. Going back to the iPod made me think just how lucky we all are today, to have that kind of performance able to go with us everywhere is amazing. In short, the Vertere D-Fi makes grumpy old audiophiles realise just how good the iPod really is, and that can't be bad.

No, I won't be using the iPod as my sole source, but this shows that unless the piece of music was recorded on a potato and data compressed into oblivion, there's nothing wrong with in-pocket sources, provided they are given the right care and feeding. Which is precisely where D-Fi fits in.

So, why the 'generational gateway' comment at the beginning? Because Vertere's background and the designer behind it gives it audiophile credibility without breaking the bank, and yet it makes it possible for people who might think audio begins and ends with headphones discover the joys of good audio without too much hassle. The fact it also sounds damn good is perhaps merely the icing on the cake, but it's damn good icing at that. Highly recommended? This goes far beyond that – you'll be surprised at how good an iPod can sound, and if Vertere makes the iPod sound this good, I can't wait to see what it does with interconnects and speaker cables... +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Price: 3.5mm jack/teeo-phonon £105/m
£12 per additional 0.5m

Manufactured by: Vertere Ltd

URL: www.vertereacoustics.com

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Alan Sircom hifi+ 87

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Track Audio Precision 600 stands

By Alan Sircom

Of all the products tested in recent months, this one must have taken the shortest possible time to run. Here's how the process works. Take the speaker – in practice, virtually any standmount speaker with drive units in it that are actually working. Remove it from its existing stand. Put the Track Audio Precision 600 stands underneath said loudspeakers. Exclaim loudly. Try to prevent hyperbole in write-up. The same thing will happen to you, except the 'try to prevent hyperbole' part becomes 'try not to force the credit card through the reader'.

OK, so this stand doesn't come cheap, but the quality of the engineering involved explains why it costs what it costs. It uses three of Track's special isolation feet, and has a trio of pillars made up of individual 100mm aluminium uprights separated by a series of hydraulic dampers to turn any resonance in the audio band into heat. One of the three feet in the base plate has a built in spirit level, and you can specify one of two top plates to match your speakers. There's even a baseboard designed for floorstanders, which includes the feet alone. The net result of all this is a stand that uses more than 160 component parts per pair (in contrast, most three-pillar speaker stands might use 22 individual parts per pair). Even so, such engineering fabulousness is as nothing if the end result doesn't make the speakers sound better.

The net result of all of this makes for an easier installing loudspeaker stand. The viscous-damped feet have a large set of collars that allow you to adjust and lock off the fierce-looking spikes perfectly, without the need for bike spanners and swearing, while the spirit level is sensitive enough to speed the leveling process.

The choice of connecting material between speaker and stand is up to you. But, with so organised a stand, it might be worth experimenting with something a little more consistent than a blob of goo. The stand is good enough to shine through if you do rely on Blu-tack, but the improvement is



so noticeable with the Track stand, you may feel the urge to upgrade your thinking universally.

This stand gives the loudspeaker no excuse. When you hear the Track stand in place, you begin to understand what good engineering does for a loudspeaker, because this brings it out. You also begin to realise just how large an impediment to that realisation of good sound comes from the stands. The loudspeaker has a lower noise floor, lower distortion, larger dynamic range, better bass. Or rather it doesn't; these elements are masked by the other speaker stand getting in the way of the sound. Which is how it should be; a speaker stand should have no influence on the sound, but sadly they do. Track just has the least amount of influence than the rest, or at least the rest I know about.

Perhaps the great thing about the Track stand is it ends at a stroke the high-mass/low-mass arguments. Unless you are ideologically linked to one kind of stand or the other, the answer to the majority of cases now is the Track Audio Precision. Highly recommended, for those wanting to take their speakers to the next level. +

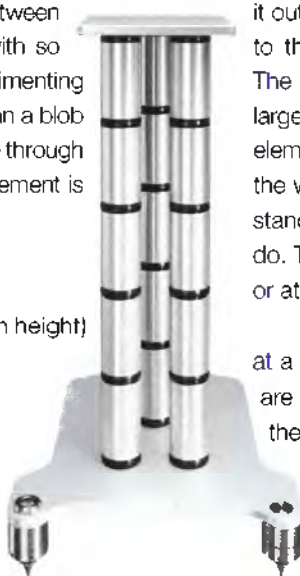
PRODUCT DETAILS

Prices: from £650-£1,380 (depending on height)

Manufactured by: Track Audio

URL: www.trackaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1494 273755



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Atlas Ascent cables/ Eos power cords

By Alan Sircom

In the past, we were very taken by Atlas' range-topping Asimi interconnect and speaker cables. But they are 'spendy'... is there something more affordable that gives a sweet taste of the Asimi without breaking the bank? Enter the Ascent range.

Nestling between Atlas' Hyper Symmetrical and Mavros ranges, Ascent is the entry point to the company's Reference line. The interconnect features a pseudo-balanced symmetrical design. It uses Ohno Continuous Cast high-purity copper throughout, this time with a screen in Mylar for RFI rejection. The conductors within that screen are also high-purity OCC copper, laid concentrically and held in a PEF dielectric. The whole cable is held in a PVC sheath, then woven in grey fabric. With the gunmetal grey plugs, Ascent has a business-like look to it.

The plugs themselves are pivotal to the Ascent performance. They are custom made for Atlas, feature solder-free connections, and the collar of the rhodium plated RCA plug section itself is made of asymmetrical leaves. These effectively self-clean the plug and socket; instead of contact cleaner, simply plug and unplug them a few times to clean.

The matching speaker cable is in fact two matching speaker cables; Ascent 2.0 and Ascent 3.5. The number denotes the thickness of the conductor (in square

millimetres), and Atlas suggests the Ascent 2.0 is best used 'where bass is not a prerequisite'. As far as I can gather this means used as a HF-only cable in bi-wire scenarios. To make matters easy, the Ascent cables both include expanding 4mm plugs that will also accept the 4mm plugs of the other Ascent cable, if your amp only has one set of loudspeaker terminals (or you fancy a spot of 'shot-gunning'... more on this later). Once again, the conductors are high-purity OCC copper in a PVC dielectric. Both cables sport Atlas' 'High V' design – the company believes insulators are a necessary evil, slowing down the signal as it passes through the cable. Using very low capacitance insulators improves the velocity of propagation, thereby allowing transients to arrive at the appropriate times in the music.

We tested these – plus a pair of Eos power cords (2mm² OFC twisted twin and earth, with a Teflon insulation and Furutech-like connectors) in a couple of good systems; the combination of Lyngdorf CD-1, Sugden A21SE, and either a pair of ProAc Studio 150s or Raidho C1.1 quickly became the systems with the most obvious ability to spot changes. All the signal cables came with a burn-in disc (Atlas supplies one as standard at this level) and a burn in – either with the disc or a burn-in device – is recommended to condition the cables, according to Atlas.

"The company believes insulators are a necessary evil, slowing down the signal as it passes through the cable."



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► These are extremely high-resolution cables, ones that (mostly) work together in a family setting. The 'mostly' part regards the Eos, which offers a more subtle action. The Eos works to make the sound a little more smooth and refined through EMI control. This is something altogether needed in most 'bathed in wifi' systems with all manner of computer parts potentially gumming up the power socket. But while its action is beneficial, the order of magnitude of that action and its relation to the other cables in this test means it's not a mandatory part of the equation.

PRODUCT DETAILS

Atlas Ascent Symmetrical interconnect
RCA-RCA 1 metre pair £500
Atlas Ascent 2.0 speaker cable 2.0m pair
with rhodium 4mm locking plugs £600.00
Per additional stereo metre £120.00
Atlas Ascent 3.50 speaker cable 2.0m
pair with rhodium locking plugs £795.00
Per additional stereo metre £190.00
Atlas Eos 2.00 power cord 1.5m £172
Per additional metre £24

Manufactured by: Atlas Cables
URL: www.atlascables.com
Tel: +44(0)1583 572666

On the other hand, the wide-bandwidth sounds of the Ascent interconnect need something equally wide bringing up the loudspeaker rear. The Ascent is all about the detail. If there's a shred of information coming off the source component, the Ascent will resolve it no matter what. That makes for a sound virtually unimpeded by the cables in detail-resolution terms, and shows just how much information (read: music) is lost when listening to your system through regular cables. It's also fast; not quite Nordost fast, but fast and exciting enough to make listening an exciting pleasure.

The difficulty with all this speed and detail is it can make some music sound awful, but I suspect this is the unvarnished truth at play, rather than some tweak to expose the horrors of signal compression. But the sort of bright and thin sounds that constitute 'made for iTunes' recordings, are resolved perfectly in all their bright and thin detail. On the other hand, if there's a good recording in the mix, the Ascent will help find it.

Good cables seem to divide into three; those that soften the truth, those that exaggerate the truth and those that tell the truth. The Ascent cables fall firmly in the latter camp. As a consequence, once you get past that speed and detail, the rest of the Ascent's performance is constrained by the recording and ultimately the equipment itself. Put another way, it's very, very good.

And finally, using the Raidho with a 'shot-gunned' set of both Ascent cables (as in connecting both cables at both amp and speaker end) made a significant difference. I couldn't really spot a big difference between Ascent 2.0 and 3.5 in the context of the Raidho's single wired input (in fact, I mildly preferred the 2.0, finding the 3.5 on its own a bit heavy-handed), but using both together sounded a lot fuller and richer and yet brighter than either on its own. I suspect, however, that a bottleneck is forming at this point. There's so much detail resolution on offer, the rest of the system is never going to keep up. In this case, it made the little Sugden – good though it is – sound a trifle underclass and its soft-edged approach became all too noticeable.

There's a lot to like about Atlas Ascent. It doesn't require the input of the Eos power cords to bring the system up to snuff, although the Eos does help matters. Yes, Asimi is better in every way... including better at pummeling your bank account. However, Ascent is phenomenally detailed and insightful in its own right and will make almost any system sound like it's just gone hires. If you are thinking of a toe-in-the-water approach, though... forget it. The resolving power of one Ascent needs another to let all that bandwidth through. In short, this is very exciting stuff. +





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hi-fi+ ADVERTISING INDEX

AA-Acoustics.....	74	Burmester Audiosysteme GmbH.....	47	Fono Acustica.....	36 & 37	Nordost Corporation.....	9 & 81
Absolute Analogue.....	95	Choice HiFi.....	83 & 84	Heatcote Audio.....	95	Oranges and Lemons.....	85
Absolute Sounds.....	IFC	Clarity.....	11	Henley Designs.....	32 & 55	Origin Live.....	72
Alternative Audio.....	84	Cloney Audio.....	76	HiFi Sound Ltd.....	61	Progressive Audio.....	85
Analogue Seduction.....	78	Conerent Systems.....	84	HiFiMAN.....	76	Walls of Sound.....	57
Angelsound Audio.....	84	Cool Gales Ltd.....	68	High End Cable.....	67	Rock Solid Sounds.....	85
Another Planet AV Limited.....	84	Crystal Cable BV.....	2	High End Unterhaltungselektronik Vertriebsgesellschaft m.b.H.....	53	Select Audio.....	59 & 81
Argento Audio.....	6	DCS Ltd.....	15	Infidelity.....	85	Signals.....	85
Atlas Cables.....	91	Diverse Vinyl.....	91	Kaiser GmbH.....	22 & 23	SME Ltd.....	71
Audience AV.....	62	Doug Brady Hi-Fi.....	84	Kog Audio.....	IBC	Sonata Hi-Fi.....	88
Audio Destination.....	84	Electrocompaniet.....	OBC	Lindemann audiotechnik GmbH.....	92	Sound Foundations.....	50
Audio Salon.....	84	Emporium HiFi (Kent Branch).....	84 & 88	Midland Audio Xchange.....	84	Sound Location.....	74
Audio Venue.....	65	Enjoythemusic.com.....	65	Music First Audio.....	92	StoneAudio UK Ltd.....	85
Audiotreaks.....	4	Ensemble AG.....	78	Naim Audio Ltd.....	35	Symmetry.....	19
Backes und Muller.....	45	Epiphany Acoustics.....	91			The Chord Company.....	30
Basically Sound and Vision.....	84					Vivid Audio Ltd.....	40

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

AS – Alan Sircom

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	DVD		Availability As S/H LP
	SACD		Vinyl Double Album
	Hybrid SACD		45 RPM
	Multi-Channel		



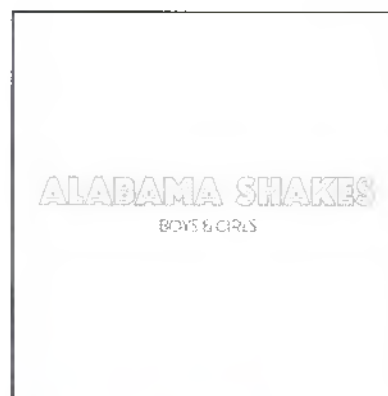
Don't Hear It... Feat it!
Admiral Sir Cloudesley Shovell
 Rise Above/Metal Blade Records

Let's face it, any band named after a late 17th Century Admiral of the Fleet – whose death created the rush to find accurate marine chronometers to measure longitude – has to be a little odd. Sod odd... Shovell rocks!

This is epic, unpredictable rock-god power-trio material, straight out of the early 1970s. The band has shades of Black Sabbath, the Groundhogs and practically every other heavy rock band of that period, and it all works together brilliantly. A mark of just how rocknological this band has become is that Tony McPhee of the Groundhogs plays on 'Scratchin' And Sniffin'. This is not the stand-out track. They are all heads-down, nonsense-free rock tracks. As a consequence, it sounds raw and rough – would you want anything less?

This is the sort of album that was made for LP. It should be played in your bedroom loud with your parents banging on the ceiling. It should have a worn-flat single that plays in the jukebox of the pub you sneak into to drink snakebite and play pool with a wannabe Hells Angel called Spider. And this is not said – nor is it played – with any irony. Shovell must have been caught in a temporal vortex that punched them 40 years ahead of time, like the TV series *Life On Mars* in reverse. **AS**

RECORDING
 MUSIC



Alabama Shakes
Boys and Girls
 Rough Trade

Is the hype about Alabama Shakes deserved? Now joined by guitarist Heath Fogg, the three-piece became a four-piece this year and have received high praise from everyone from Jack White (always a good thing) to Jamie Oliver (er?). This is their first album, and very fine it is too.

Their rootsy, southern rock sound is perfectly offset by Brittany Howard's soul-singer vocals (she's been compared – with some considerable hype – to Amy Winehouse, although tracks like 'Rise to the Sun' and 'You Ain't Alone' make a good case).

There's something really good about listening to *Boys and Girls*. It's like discovering a lost Motown tape or stumbling across a bootleg Janis Joplin album. No, her voice isn't *that* strong, but the same musical sentiment is there, and according to the hype in the music biz, the live gigs have the same intensity and passion. Some of that comes across on vinyl or CD – such as on 'Heartbreaker'.

The only problem is it's deliberately a lo-fi recording. It's dirty, harsh and cut loud, a bit like some Northern Soul cuts of the 1960s.

Whatever. Ignore the hype and listen to the album. It's a good 'un. **AS**

RECORDING
 MUSIC



**Henrik Freischlager****Still Frame Replay**

Cable Car Records

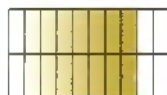


Have you ever had one of those albums you end up forgetting to listen to and realise, retrospectively, that you missed out on something special? Well, that happened with *Still Frame Replay*. It arrived on my desk a couple of months ago and I did nothing with it. Idiot!

Henrik Freischlager is one of those absurdly talented individuals. A fully self-taught multi-instrumentalist who has opened for and played with blues royalty. The 30 year old German 'bluesman' has got all the chops too, playing in a style that blends funk, soul, jazz and rock with his happy place in the blues. And it does this extremely successfully. He's also got a good producer in place, because this sounds as sweet as a nut.

This – Freischlager's seventh, but fourth album on his own Cable Car label – is polished and professional, but not so polished as to lose the raw element that his ever-shifting musical stylistics demand. Although heavily influenced by the late Gary Moore, he's a more economical player and the whole album is mostly free of widdly-wee guitar soloing. Standout tracks include the surprisingly John Mayer-like 'Gentlemen', the slow blues of 'The Memory of our Love' and the title track. Buy it! **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC

**Muse****The 2nd Law**

Helium 3/Warner



Geek-proggers Muse continue in the stadium sci-fi scream mode with *The 2nd Law*. Geek-prog? Any album named after a law of Thermodynamics shows the trio to be at the acme of geeknocity. The hope is Matt Bellamy, Christopher Wolstonholme and Dominic Howard aren't taking this all seriously, because if they are... they need some serious help.

Even Rick Wakeman in his *Six Wives of Henry VIII* period would hesitate before releasing an album this camp and pretentious. In interviews before the release of this, Muse's sixth album, they said it would be "something radically different" but did anyone really expect something like Gloria Gaynor meets Scott Walker for the Olympics official song 'Survival', or Queen meets Erasure on 'Madness', or even robo-dubstep meets the ABC News theme on 'The 2nd Law: Unsustainable'. And, as ever with Muse albums, it moves from out too loud to clipping as the slow build grows and grows.

Trouble is, despite all that, I can't help liking the album, because of all its wig-out campy space-cadet nonsense. It's as if Bellamy managed to fit a dodecahedral peg into a nine-dimensional round hole by sheer weight of madness, genius and talent. It's a mixed bag, but it all kind of works. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC

**The Brew****The Third Floor**

Jazzhaus



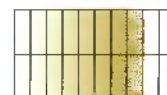
It used to be inner cities that grew the best bands, now it's the coastal towns. The Brew, for example, are possibly Grimsby's only non-fish-related export. The power trio are a tight indie blues-rock band, and this, their third outing, is produced by Chris West (best known for his work with The Verve and Status Quo).

Once again calling upon the ever-fashionable 1970s, with a blend of influences that covers everything from Led Zep to Hendrix ('Crimson Crystal Raindrops' could be a tribute) to The Black Keys. Playing together since 2004 and with a reputation for being a killer act live, it's clear the band is writing and playing tight rock numbers. There's not one duff track on the whole *The Third Floor* album, although 'Sirens of War' and 'See You Again' are perhaps the breakout tracks. And it's all very well recorded too.

This band is growing in popularity in Europe, but is almost unheard of at home or in the US. Do yourself a favour and try to change that. This is good stuff.

Instant trivia bonus point: There aren't that many father and son combos in rock; but The Brew features Kurtis Smith on drums and his father Tim brings up the bass. Front-man guitarist Jason Barwick is not even a distant relative. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC





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**Harry Belafonte****Belafonte Sings The Blues**

RCA/Impex Records IMP6012-45

180g

This 1958 release was Belafonte's first stereo release, and 1958 was the dawn of the RCA Living Stereo sound. It featured a great example of well done stereo, and Belafonte's later Carnegie Hall albums became audiophile standards. *Sings The Blues* has often been compared unfavorably to his other work as understated, but given the range of expression Belafonte brings to these tunes, I don't consider that a negative. He sings three Ray Charles tunes, a Billie Holiday standard ('God Bless The Child'), a couple of Charles Carter tunes that were Belafonte staples. Belafonte nails every song on the album, with the exception of the Johnny Mercer tune 'One for My Baby'. I just don't see Belafonte drunk at the bar spilling his heart to a bartender. But Belafonte's version of 'Cotton Fields' is as good as there is, and his 'God Bless The Child' is outstanding.

This reissue was mastered by Kevin Gray at Cohearant Audio and the 45 RPM set pressed at RTI in California. A few reissue companies have taken a stab at the RCA Living Stereo catalog, but this is the most successful execution yet. I was struck by how much more emotional impact this issue has. The two LPs are packaged in a handsome fold-out cover with lyrics inside the fold and an insert bio of Belafonte inside the sleeve. Top recommendation. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC

**Herbie Hancock****Inventions & Dimensions**

Blue Note/Music Matters 84147

180g

Herbie Hancock's Blue Note recordings in large part ushered in a new phase of the Blue Note sound. It was a new jazz age and Ornette was shaking things up at Atlantic and Coltrane at Impulse. Hancock's nervous energy and bursting creativity was making itself known with each new Blue Note album. In his third Blue Note effort recorded in 1963, he experimented with a unique latin blend—quartet of drummer Willie Bobo, percussionist Osvaldo 'Chihuahau' Martinez and bassist Paul Chambers.

So you get lots of rhythm and of course all Hancock compositions, which left lots of space for improvised melody. Hancock's more familiar and later work with Miles Davis shows the fruits of these slightly earlier explorations. While it may not rank as the best of Hancock's Blue Note efforts, the least of these albums is essential. Hancock's Blue Note albums were recorded by Rudy Van Gelder, and they were not among Van Gelder's best efforts. The acoustic is on the dry side and the instruments are panned a bit hard left, right and center. Originals are rare and reissues have emphasized the recording's weaknesses. Kevin Gray, along with Ron Rambach and Joe Harley have restored this masterpiece to the best sound yet. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC

**Paul Simon****Graceland**

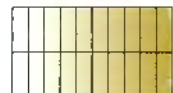
Sony Legacy 88691914721

180g

There must be millions of copies of the original Warner Brothers release available, easily available for very small change. For that reason, the reissue sat in my stack of things to listen to for months without breaking the outer baggie seal. This 1986 Grammy winner was recorded by famed recording engineer Roy Halee, and has been used as a demonstration record ever since. Sony Records acquired all of Simon's solo work and has embarked on a reissue program.

Mastered at Sterling Sound by Ryan K. Smith, with the help of Halee, and pressed at RTI, the new version is packaged in a replica of the original cover, with the lyric inner sleeve and huge folded poster inside. A small insert supplies a code to order a free MP3 download if you are so inclined. There is nothing subtle about the improvement Halee and Smith pulled off the tapes. About the only thing this reissue can't claim to improve on over the original is focusing public attention on Apartheid. But in the sound department, it easily improves upon the original in bringing out more detail while at the same time taming some harshness in the original. Bass is deeper and soundstaging improved. Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes never sounded so good and 25 five years the music is as fresh as ever. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



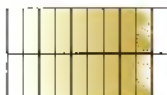
**Dave Douglas Quintet****Be Still**

Greenleaf Music GRE 1029

180+

Dave Douglas plays with a lot of different configurations of musicians, but this is his first release with a vocalist. Aoife O'Donovan sings and plays guitar, and the quintet is filled out with Jon Irabagon on tenor, Matt Mitchell on piano, Linda Oh on bass, and Rudy Royston on drums. The songs on the album are mostly hymn songs suggested by Douglas' mother who passed away last year, performed by Douglas as a celebration of her life. It's a beautiful album and something of a change up for Douglas, although there is always an elegiac quality to his tone. O'Donovan, a singer-songwriter who has folded American folk music into her background of Celtic folk, is a perfect blend. It's also a particularly well-recorded album.

Recorded at Avatar Studios by Joe Ferla in April of 2012, the recording has plenty of depth and you can pinpoint the instruments spread around the wood paneled studio. After dozens of Douglas CDs, it's nice to hear his sound open up on vinyl. The LP was pressed at Pirates Press, a small press located in San Francisco that is new to me. The 180-gram pressing appears flawless. Although it had a few minor ticks, it's an awfully good product for a small plant. The record jacket is a foldout cover with spectacular artwork. A fabulous LP not to be missed. **DD**

RECORDING**MUSIC****Syl Johnson****Total Explosion**

Hi Records/Pure Pleasure SHL 32096

180+

Syl Johnson never hit the big time like his Hi Record stable mates Al Green and Ann Peebles. Hi Records was a hit factory for the Memphis sound in the 1960s and into the 1970s, blending world class horn and rhythm sections with the production genius of Willie Mitchell, who also proved to be a first class recoding engineer at his Royal Recording Studios, which has been continuously in operation since 1956 and is a Mecca for artists seeking to bring the Memphis Sound to their recordings. Before signing with Hi Records, Johnson had backed Junior Wells, Howlin' Wolf, Jimmy Reed and Magic Sam. He blended this blues experience with Memphis soul to assemble this collection of down and dirty songs about misbehaving.

The 1973 album includes his biggest hit 'Take Me To The River' as well as one of his best performances 'Watch What You Do To Me'. Anyone looking for a total explosion of pure soul music needs look no further than this fine album, one of the finest examples of Hi Records at its prime. Thanks to Pure Pleasure and Speakers Corner, the best of the catalog is now available on vinyl. In the case of *Total Explosion*, we get a particularly fine reissue with mastering work from Kevin Gray. Don't let lack of recognition get in the way—this is an outstanding release. **DD**

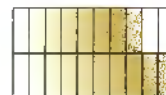
RECORDING**MUSIC****Thelonious Monk****It's Monk's Time**

Columbia/Speakers Corner CS 8984

180+

Between 1962 and 1968, Monk worked with Teo Macero at Columbia and recorded the albums that would bring him significant public attention. Although he did not repeat the compositional frenzy of his Riverside years, he played with a stable group of musicians who were sympathetic to his music and tenor man Charlie Rouse was as good a Monk player as anyone since. *It's Monk's Time* is certainly a fine choice to delve into the Columbia catalog and is among Monk's best sides, with his unique sense of time handled perfectly by Rouse, and Butch Warren and Ben Riley in four studio sessions taped in 1964.

The LP includes the original album running order without the two bonus tracks included on the 2003 CD. A mix of Monk compositions and Monk twists on standards, the reissue does a fine job of reproducing the original warts and all. The mid-1960s saw Columbia going to solid-state boards and banging the stereo image hard right/left. None of which should detract from this late Monk masterpiece, because you can't go back and get a do over. If only we could have Monk back to play *Shuffle Boil* again, but none of his many followers have been able to fill that void. **DD**

RECORDING**MUSIC**

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Every Home Should Have One Special



A Cut Above:

Why Coup d'Archet records really are 'to die for'

By Roy Gregory

When it comes to re-issuing collectable records in super-duper, 180g 'audiophile' pressings, there's no escaping the degree of cynicism that infects the process. As each re-issue label grows in size and popularity, it starts an almost inevitable slide towards choosing repertoire based on what it assumes will sell, rather than on the musical merit of the recorded performance. The original Mobile Fidelity – not to be confused with its current incarnation – slid towards its slow demise on a wash of Greatest Hits albums, while Classic Records' trawling (and re-trawling) of the RCA Living Stereo back catalogue took cynicism to a whole new level: "You mean you have already bought the 180g version? Well now we have 200g editions (with or without Groove Guard) – and if you've got that, how about a 45RPM single-sided, four-disc set. Then there are the numbered stamper box sets to consider..." Yep – cynicism is a nasty attitude – but it can be hard to avoid when it comes to pricey, re-pressed records. Fortunately, for every Classic or early Mo-Fi, there's a Pure Vinyl, an Acoustic Sounds or a Coup d'Archet.

Coup d'Archet? Just who on earth is Coup d'Archet? Well, in physical terms that's easy. Coup d'Archet is Glenn Armstrong, a one-man band – but a one-man band on a mission. If re-issued records (at least as we know them now) started with the likes of Linn's Re-Kut label, the original Chesky issues or even the Practical Hi-Fi Super Cuts – which really take me back – then the motive was to make great recordings more accessible. Linn re-issued the Kleiber Beethoven Fifth, while Chesky were the first to make a concerted assault on the Living Stereo back catalogue. In their original form these records were becoming harder and harder, more and more expensive to find. At the same time, the quality of mainstream record production was plummeting, meaning that if you wanted to hear what a record player could really do, those older (increasingly rare) recordings were what you needed to hear.

On that level, the quest to increase access to these musical documents is laudable, if open to opportunistic exploitation. As I've already observed, some of those engaged have stayed truer to that ethos than others – while there's no escaping the fact that quality varies pretty dramatically too.

Then there's a higher plane altogether – a level of artistic commitment where the economics make little or no sense at all and the musical performance is all that counts. That's where you'll find Glenn Armstrong – and that's where you'll find the Coup d'Archet records: records that are, for the most part, not re-issues at all. Yes, they feature historical recordings and yes, they are beautifully pressed on pristine 180g vinyl, but these discs contain music never before committed to record, by artists many of you will never have heard or heard of.

As a serious classical collector, Glenn became aware of a whole range of recordings far beyond the scope of the Decca SXL back catalogue and Harry Pearson's Super Disc list. The high prices paid for the most highly sought examples of those early stereo LPs paled into insignificance when compared to the money changing hands for some microgroove mono discs of obscure artists with little or no public profile at all. Of course, some of that could be down to sheer rarity and the explosion in record sales and home audio ownership in



► the '60s, but there was clearly something more than that at work. The more of these records he heard, the more he realized that their appeal lay in the sheer quality, the musical integrity of the performances.

There are a number of historical and cultural reasons why these artists never became stars in the stereo era, but they had nothing to do with musical ability. Violinists like Camilla Wicks and Johanna Martzy left behind a tantalizing glimpse of musical brilliance that once heard left the young Armstrong hungry for more. The problem was that there simply weren't that many titles to chase. Even Martzy, who 'enjoyed' a short-lived contract at EMI, left only a handful of recordings behind. It was while Glenn was researching his Martzy biography that he first stumbled across these tapes – and the rest, as they say, is history... What he'd found was gold, pure and simple. Martzy might not have got along with the autocratic and overbearing Walter Legge at EMI – and he might well have effectively black-balled her from the record industry – but that didn't stop her playing in an era when live classical concerts were a staple part of the European radio diet.

The result was the first tranche of Coup d'Archet records, starting in 1997 with a Martzy disc featuring a pair of Franck and Ravel recitals drawn from the archives of the VARA Broadcast Organisation in Holland. Others were to follow, unearthed in Germany, Switzerland and France, featuring further Martzy repertoire but later also the brilliant Yvonne Lefebure, Michele Audclair and Jacqueline Bonneau. Many traditional audiophiles were nonplussed by the Coup d'Archet discs: they weren't just expensive, they featured unfamiliar (or at least, unfashionable) music, unfamiliar artists and they were mono. It's fair to say that more than a few of the audiophile record buying public really didn't get it. Yet enough die-hard collectors and music lovers heard and/or recognized what they were being offered to mean that those first issues are virtually all sold out.

With such small-scale pieces (most of the discs are for solo violin, solo piano or violin and piano accompaniment) the 'lack' of stereo is of little importance, while the vitality of the mono recordings and the virtuosity of the live playing is a revelation. You'll rarely hear your system sound so musically direct and communicative, or have such an intimate sense of the player and their playing. If hi-fi is about bringing music into the home, this is about as good as source material gets.

Armstrong's next project was a range of three subscription only box sets under the L'Archet d'Or banner. Limited editions of 250 each, these featured even more eclectic and obscure material and even more sumptuous presentation, with cloth covered slipcases and dramatic original, hand screened artwork on the individual LP sleeves. Again, they were snapped up by the cognoscenti and are all but sold out, although there will be a final set of L'Archet d'Or is planned for next year.

Which brings us up to date, and the latest releases from Coup d'Archet; a pair of Martzy box sets that mark a significant evolution in the Coup d'Archet product line – and help to explain this protracted history. One box groups together all the previous Coup d'Archet Martzy discs, now long sold out as individual albums, not just making them available once more, but adding a new recording as well. This features a 1962 recital of the Mozart B Flat Sonata for Piano and violin, performed for Rundfunks Berlin Brandenburg with long term accompanist, Jean Antonietti. (Although she obviously enjoyed playing with Antonietti and the pair were recorded many times, she later found Istvan Hajdu infinitely more exciting and satisfying) It's a sparkling performance that perfectly showcases Martzy's feel for the music and her close relationship with Antonietti. The instrumental balance is perfect, while Martzy's poise and precision, her technique and the sheer power she produces never impose on the lightness of Mozart's music.

It's another musical tour de force, a welcome addition to the Martzy canon and a further reminder of what the world missed ►

► when she fled from EMI. With recordings drawn from so many sources, their quality varies, but it's never less than good, is generally outstanding and the majesty of Martzy's playing more than compensates.

The second box is, if anything, even more startling. For the first time, Coup d'Archet have embarked on re-issuing previously available records – in this case, everything that Martzy recorded at EMI. The ten discs (two of them single sided – by spreading the music over three sides, Armstrong allows the music to breathe rather than cramming over half an hour onto a single face) cover the Mendelssohn and Brahms concertos, the Beethoven Romances Nos 1 and 2, the Bach Sonatas and Partitas and the Schubert Sonatas and Sonatinas. With so much of the core repertoire included, the collection offers a stunning musical journey. There are those who will miss the spread of stereo on the orchestral recordings, but I say listen to the tonal honesty and timing integrity of the mono sound; it's a more than fair trade off, believe me. Nor do you need a mono cartridge to really enjoy these discs. Cut with a stereo head, a stereo cartridge performs just fine.

I don't have the 1950's EMI originals, but I know a man who does, and he assures me that the Coup d'Archet pressings surpass them in every respect.

But the best thing about these boxes is that you can't appreciate their physical quality, the care that's gone into their every detail, until you hold them in your hands. The first thing that will strike you is the look and feel. They've inherited the lovely, cloth wrapped cases of the L'Archet d'Or series, combined with

beautifully executed individual sleeves for the albums. In the case of the Radio Recordings each album is treated to a beautiful new sleeve, with clean white ground, elegant graphics and colour coded, original artwork. The second is the sheer quantity of material on offer. One box contains 10 discs and the other nine: That's twice as many as the L'Archet d'Or sets – for the same price. Ahhh yes – the price; each box will set you back £300, which isn't exactly chicken feed (you can also get the Radio Recordings as an 8CD box, just as beautifully presented, for £80). But before you choke in indignation, consider this: An original pressing of any one of those EMI discs would start at around £500 and go to £1,000 – and at that price they don't hang around! That's for a used disc which you'll need a mono cartridge to enjoy, with all that entails. Coup d'Archet offers you the same performance, superior sound and beautiful presentation, for £30 a disc...

The Coup d'Archet Martzy boxes must be one of the best presents possible for any music lover. Fantastic to handle and fantastic to listen to, you should go ahead and treat the audiophile in your life – even if that

means buying one for yourself. These boxes aren't just things of beauty. The musical performances are so powerful and communicate so directly they'll serve as a constant reminder of just what made hi-fi so fascinating in the first place. Records really don't get any better than this. +

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Lots of connections give great flexibility both for use in a surround or stereo set-up, or a combination of the above. The EMP 2 is a real multiplayer that works perfectly as a Blu-ray player in a multichannel set-up and as a two-channel CD/SACD player. For connection to your surround system you can choose HDMI or 7.1 RCA connectors.

We have equipped the EMP 2 with our newest DAC and analogue output section. The connection to your stereo system is by balanced XLR connectors, the way you would expect from Electrocompaniet.

In addition to playback of all available disk format the player also works as a streamer for music and pictures that are stored on your computer, USB memory stick or E-SATA disk.

Made in Norway

www.electrocompaniet.no