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TRILOGY 933
HEADPHONE AMP



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- HIGH-RESOLUTION
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A LEGEND IS REBORN



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

Now David A. Wilson has reengineered the speakers that defined audio excellence for a generation. The Sasha W/P boasts the same uncompromising approach to design as its illustrious predecessor but with newly devised innovations such as the resonance minimising material that has been specially created for the cabinets, a revised motor/magnet assembly to bring new dimensions to the bass and a redesigned crossover that dramatically increases midrange clarity.

The result is a loudspeaker with holographic imaging, free-breathing dynamics and unrestricted sonic detail. A speaker that takes sound onto a new and rarefied plane. A speaker for people who don't know the meaning of ordinary.



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editorial

Just as this issue went to press, the last major hold-out in the great download migration, AC/DC, announced that it has thrown in the towel and will now sell its music through Apple's iTunes service. This represents a small, yet significant, tipping point in the way people view physical music media.

The Aussie metallurgists were famously no fans of iTunes from a commercial and – albeit to a lesser extent – sound quality perspective. The band's acquiescence marks one of the last mainstream objections to the service, and is yet another sign of CD's declining significance in the music market. While CD remains strong in some genre – folk and country in particular, it's hard not to see a bleak future ahead for the senior digital format.

This is a shame, because there has never been a better time for CD player performance. Especially at the high-end. While the value of investing in an entry level CD player today is at best questionable, up where the air gets thin and clean, products like the Krell Cipher CD/SACD player tested in this issue continue to push the envelope of what can be had from digital audio playback.

Not that the post-CD world marks the end of the great audiophile journey. If anything, the transition from disc to download has seen a resurgence in interest in all things audio, and sometimes in unexpected ways; with downloads offering nothing tangible to own, hold and possess, we've seen the turntable become cool again, and for the first time in years, buying hi-fi is very fashionable in the sort of circles no-one might have expected five or more years ago.

Perhaps, we have the best of all possible worlds today. It's possible to spin a disc from the 1950s, a CD from the 1980s and download a music file from right now and get excellent sound from all three; they are just shelves on the equipment stand. The only fly in the ointment is our propensity to get dogmatic about such things. People using a CD player today aren't Luddites, anymore than someone with an iTunes account isn't a deaf philistine, or someone who listens to vinyl loves the sound of pops and crackles. We all make our choices, why not respect the choices of others?

Hi-Fi Plus is saddened to learn of the passing of the noted audio electronics designer Richard Hay. From his early days with Truvox and Radford, through Nylech and Ion Systems and more recently as design consultant for Heed Audio, his understated yet musically satisfying designs were a reflection of the friendly, unpretentious man he was in life. Richard is survived by his wife and three sons. Our thoughts go out to his family and friends at this difficult time.

Alan Sircom
editor@hifiplus.com

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Absolute Dream

by



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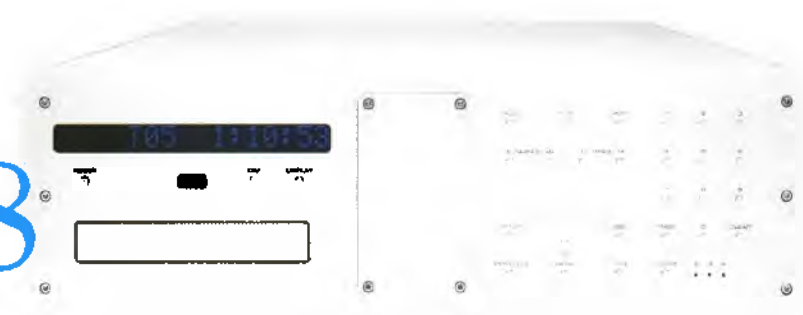
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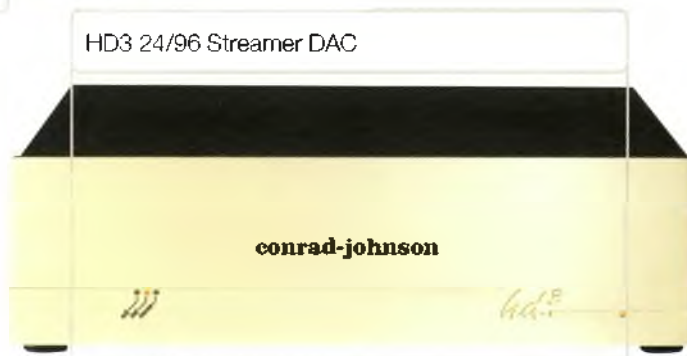


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incoming!

Not as easy as it looks

You were kind enough to advise me on setting out on the discless trail and I thought it might be helpful to report back my progress.

I opted in the end for a Synology twin NAS feeding through a wireless router to a modified Mac Mini from Item Audio, into an Ayre QB9, controlled by an Apple iPad. Mark from Item Audio already did a lot of the set up for me, including adding Audiovana plus to the Mini. Despite that – and a lot of help from Mark and the younger, computer literate family members – I have just got sound out of the darn thing after three weeks of hard work.

I would just say to your average 60 year+, computer using, but non-expert, reader, it isn't necessarily that easy. I doubt if others would run into the range of problems I had, but still, it proved a real challenge.

Here is a list of some of the steps along the way, good and bad:

- Loading the wireless router, not too hard, but I still have to switch from a dynamic to fixed IP address, to make sure my computer recognises my NAS each time I turn it on.
- Loading the NAS onto my PC, again not too difficult.
- Loading dbpoweramp onto my computer, again pretty easy and a good intuitive ripping process to follow and easy collection of metadata.
- Getting the iPad to connect to the router, a real problem. Eventually the Mac helpline found I needed a software update on the iPad through iTunes, before I could make a connection.
- Setting up the Mac Mini, another difficulty, starting with connecting my computer's monitor, which needed a trip to PC World to buy an adaptor. Using the PC keyboard was hard too. It isn't the same as a Mac keyboard. The real difficulty was accessing the '@' icon, not easy with a PC keyboard.
- Making the iPad to Mac Mini wireless connection, again hard for me, particularly in using the right passwords, both the Mac and router passwords were needed.
- Getting the set up to make music, I have just solved that after a week, with Mark's help. It just needed the Audiovana program to recognise the Ayre as the DAC in use.

I certainly couldn't have got this far without the help of Mark from Item. He was very patient with me, but trying to sort out problems over the phone isn't easy. So that little lot took about three weeks of hard work. I have certainly found out a great deal about computers in that time, but still, an experience I could really have done without.

“That little lot took about three weeks of hard work. I have certainly found out a great deal about computers in that time, but still, an experience I could really have done without.”

Like many of your computer phobic readers, I would like to have gone with a music server, but after auditioning the market leader, I wasn't impressed. Now, the system is certainly as good as my Leema Antilla, without the chance of a good warm up, and that is all I was looking for.

I would be interested in how many others have had similar troubles, I know of at least one. A few weeks ago there was a one month old Naim UnitiServe for sale on eBay. The seller reported he hadn't been able to set it up.

David Wise, via email

Ouch! Some of us have a learning curve with computer audio. It looks like yours was more of a learning climb up the north face of the Eiger. I'd imagine the simplicity of find disc, play disc, find another disc of CD does have its appeal after that ordeal. In fairness, many of the problems you've faced here are one-offs that you will not encounter again (although I share your frustration at trying to recall strong passwords, especially easy-to-remember ones designed to avoid being hacked, like '00ogTM7zGWW237ByAt').

I just hope the end result is worth the effort you've put into the process, but given the components you are using in that system, I suspect you'll be so thoroughly smitten with the whole computer audio concept, you'll have forgotten this ever happened in a few weeks – Ed.



“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



► Magnetic charm

In the last 30 years my hi-fi has changed a bit, but I always had a good turntable: 1979 to 1981, a Pioneer 12d; 1982 to 1988, a Dual 505. I heard a Linn but did not like it (shock horror). I even had a second-hand Elite Rock, but I made a decision in 1990 to buy a Roksan Xerxes, which was terrific until eight years later, when the power supply went faulty and they wanted to charge me £300 for a new one! What I did instead was buy my friends Michell Gyrodec in 2000 for £300 and part exchanged my Roksan for a Sumiko Blue Point Moving Coil Cartridge. Most of my collection is very good condition second hand.

On a perfect pressing and with certain records, the Sumiko sounded outstanding; but on a second hand record it sounded way too coarse. I felt that only about 30% of my collection was playable. That was unacceptable. I ousted it for a Denon DL304. This was probably the best cartridge I'd heard at the time (apart from my mate's Kotesu Red Signature). Despite this, 25% of my collection still sounded rough. Before this, in the late 1980s early 1990s, I used Audio Technica ATF5/OC9 & OC5 and got similar results.

After only three years, the Denon died on me, but could not afford a new one as the price rose from £210 To £368. I tided myself over with a Stanton 500 v3 for a few months (a bit overblown in bass but not as bad as you think), until one day I decided to buy an Ortofon 2M Red. It took a while to burn in, but all I can say is WOW!!!! Is it just me or, despite Moving Coil's three-dimensionality and silky treble, they just seem to emphasise clicks, pops, scratches and pressing faults over the music on the disc. In other words, is Moving Magnet better than Moving Coil?

OK so maybe it doesn't have the ultimate fidelity of the Denon, but it plays ALL 100% of my collection, it has to be said Moving Magnet gives a gutsier sound, no problems playing end of side, and clicks and pops are in the background. The treble quality is more than acceptable. My friend bought a 2M Red for his Micro Seiki DQX 500 and it sounds fantastic. £80... what a bargain! This is easily the best cartridge I have used.

The point of this letter is to say use your ears and save some money. The point of hi-fi is to enjoy music, not fret about imperfections and the reason I wrote this was as a response for people frustrated with vinyl's faults. Get one of these, start enjoying your music and screw computer audio.

Nass Khan, via email

The Ortofon 2M Red is an excellent cartridge. It tracks like a dream, and has a very fine balance indeed. There are many supporters of moving magnet cartridges at all levels, even if the high-end is made up of a lot of people listening to expensive Benz, Dynavector, Koetsu and Lyra designs, there's still a lot to be had from MM. That being said, at the moment, a lot of people are rediscovering the joys of the 50 year old DL103 moving coil from Denon too. It makes a fine lower priced cartridge alternative. It's all good – Ed.

“I decided to buy an Ortofon 2M Red. It took a while to burn in, but all I can say is WOW!!!! Is it just me or, despite Moving Coil's three-dimensionality and silky treble, they just seem to emphasise the pops, scratches and pressing faults over the music on the disc. In other words, is Moving Magnet better than Moving Coil?”

► Atlas Agreement

I just thought I'd confirm your findings with the Atlas Ascent interconnects. With my Sondek/Cyrus 8SE/Sugden A21SE and Sonus Faber Signums, I found exactly the same as you. Transients and dynamics are stunningly fast.

A piece of good news for those without deep pockets - the family synergy works with other Atlas speaker cables. I'm using Apex 1.5. Having listened to a pair of Wilson Benesch Curves with this set up, I can confirm that the performance is superb, and if there are limitations, the cost saving more than makes up for them (though not a concept which often troubles the pages of *Hi-Fi+*!)

Oddly, I can also corroborate your findings with the REL subs. I'm running a Q200E. As you say, you can tell when it's working because you can't hear it, but the rest of the frequency spectrum and soundstage snap together. It all sounds tighter and more integrated. This provided a great compromise between wanting the speed and resolution of stand mounts, while also having the bass extension only found in good floorstanders like the Curves.

Giles Morrison, via email

That's all good to know, thanks. The whole cable 'family' thing is oddness on stilts, if you think about it. You are playing with a whole different set of input and output impedances on a range of different products and there's no way something as small as using electrically similar wire throughout a system should have any overarching compatibility benefits whatsoever. It should be about as relevant to the sound as the colour of bootlaces is to the performance of a football player. And yet, for some strange reason that never ceases to amaze those of us in hi-fi that play around with cables from time to time, it does. It can make a significant difference. It's just... weird. And I wouldn't have it any other way – Ed.

It's Tube Time

I've been into hi-fi for many years, first very 'flat earth' with my Rega Planar 3, Naim Nait and Linn Kans. Over the years, I've chopped and changed the system until I think I've got a system I'm happy with again (Meridian G08.2, Moon i-5, ProAc Response Two, Nordost Frey cables). Trouble is, 'happy' is not the same as 'content', and I have the itch to try something new.

The logical step would be to go for a computer audio source, but I know I'll never be bothered to rip my way through all 800 discs I own, so for now I'll stick with CD, which also just happens to sound absolutely bloody marvellous! I've been told Frey 2 is a lot better than Frey, but I think I want a change of direction, rather than small improvements on what I currently have. I've been thinking about going with tubes in place of the Moon amplifier, but I've never experimented with valves and I am concerned about the compatibility with the rest of my system. What do you suggest?

Danny Oliver, via email

Don't discount the improvements Frey 2 brings over the original Frey. It's apparently quite a jump ahead of its predecessor. However, if you are hankering after a technology change, you are perfectly fine in switching from solid to hollow state. Indeed, you'll find your loudspeakers were likely auditioned in the design stage with tube amps, because ProAc's designer is a big fan. In particular, ProAc and Audio Research go together beautifully. If you want to keep the number of boxes at the same level, check out the VSi60 integrated amplifier, or if you want to go a little deeper into ARC waters, check out the LS17SE preamp and VS115 power amplifier. Or if you fancy some cheaper, basic and home grown equipment, check out the Croft Micro 25 preamps and Series 7 power amps – Ed. +

"The logical step would be to go for a computer audio source, but I know I'll never be bothered to rip my way through all 800 discs I own, so for now I'll stick with CD, which also just happens to sound absolutely bloody marvellous!"

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QUAD

the closest approach to the original sound

SHOW REPORT

Can-Jam USA 2012

By Chris Martens

The Rocky Mountain Audio Fest in Denver has in recent years cultivated a show-within-a-show called Can-Jam (the brainchild of our friends at HeadFi.org), which focuses on all things pertaining to high-performance headphones, earphones, and the specialized electronics components required to drive them. Can-Jam represents a fast-growing community of music lovers whose high-end audio universe runs parallel to our own, but where the preferred “listening room” is of course the space between one’s own two ears.

Below, I provide a condensed survey of promising new components seen at Can-Jam—a survey focus on products of likely interest for *Hi-Fi Plus* readers. Find our full-length Can-Jam report online at avguide.com.

High-End Portable Amps, DACs, and Amp/DACs

Can-Jam saw the release of a large number of ultra-ambitious portable amps, DACs, and amp/DACs. Examples would include the:

- **Apex Audio Glacier portable amp/DAC** from Todd the Vinyl Junkie (\$499), which combines a high res DAC with an amp that channels some of the sound of Apex’s award-winning \$10,000 Pinnacle headphone amp/preamp. The little Glacier offers impressive functionality when you consider that it is only about 9mm thick with a footprint similar to an iPhone.



- **ALO Audio PanAm portable tube amp/USB DAC** (\$599) with **matching Passport battery power supply** (\$189). Though not geared for mobile listening, the compact, easy-to-transport PanAm/Passport combo lets travellers enjoy sophisticated tube-powered sound wherever they go. ALO offers a “travel wallet” for the PanAm complete with heavily padded chambers that allow tubes to be removed from the amp and packed away during transit.
- **CEntrance HiFi-M8 balanced-output amp/iPod & USB DAC** (\$699), which offers a combination iPod DAC/high res USB DAC married to a beefy amp that provides both single-ended and balanced outputs. Moreover, the amp provide extensive control including user-selectable output impedance, master gain levels, bass and treble EQ-shaping option, and capabilities for switching between wall-wart and onboard battery power supplies.
- **Cypher Labs AlgoRhythm Solo -dB portable iPod and USB DAC** (\$699); Cypher Labs pioneered the concept of high performance portable DACs, and the new AlgoRhythm Solo -dB takes the concept further with a combination iPod DAC/high res USB DAC that provides single-ended and balanced outputs. What is more, the Solo -dB provides a S/PDIF output and can function as an iDevice charger.
- **Ray Samuels Intruder fully balanced amp/DAC** (\$650), is based on the firm’s popular SR-71B amp, but provides revised gain settings that help the amp better handle difficult loads, while also including a basic 16/44 DAC—all of this with no increase in price vis-à-vis the original SR-71B.

Not yet ready for release, but definitely a product worth watching is **HiFiMAN’s upcoming HM-901 high res portable music player**, which—via an optional docking platform—can also serve as a high-res DAC in traditional high-end audio systems. Projected price: approximately \$1,000, not including dock. The HM-901 neatly bridges the gap between portable, desktop, and rack-mount audio components.

High-End Desktop Amps/Preamps and DACs

Desktop DACs and headphone amps (some of which can serve as conventional stereo preamps) now aspire to levels of performance that place them squarely in the hunt with traditional high-end audio components. Examples seen at Can-Jam included:

- **Abbingdon Music Research/iFi Micro iCAN headphone amp** (\$249) and **iDAC compact 24/192 DAC** (\$299). The well-respected high-end manufacturer AMR has launched iFi Micro—a sub brand whose components are very well-made and surprisingly affordable, yet offer unmistakable AMR high-end design DNA.
- **Alpha Design Labs Esprit headphone amp/high res DAC/high res ADC** (\$999). More than many manufacturers, ADL creates computer audio equipment that can be used either for playback or as input devices to be used when archiving precious analog music materials in digital format.
- **Burson Audio Conductor headphone amp/preamp/high res DAC** (\$1850), is a precision-made Australian component built to rigorous quality standards and that simply sounds terrific. Better still, the Conductor is at much at home at the front-end of high-end home systems as it is driving headphones.
- **Cavalli Audio Liquid Glass headphone amp/preamp** (\$3750), which is a high-end hybrid tube/solid-state headphone amp/preamp targeted toward “tube rollers.” To accommodate multiple types of tubes the amp offers both 8-pin and 9-pin tube sockets, auto-biasing, and user selectable 6V or 12V tube plate voltages. Based on a brief listen, we’d say the amp is capable of as many diverse shades of musicality as there are available tube sets to sample, which is really the whole point.
- **Fosgate Signature headphone amp** (\$1,500), which is a sibling product to the firm’s famous Signature phonostage. This impressive tube-driven amp provides useful bass and gain trim controls, plus an innovative Fosgate designed “surround” circuit.



- **Fostex HD A8 headphone amp/DAC** (\$1,999), which emphasizes versatility by combining a solid headphone amp with a 32/192-capable DAC that sports a plethora of digital inputs and powerful digital filtering options. Interestingly, the DAC section can also play DSD files from SD cards.
- **KingRex Headquarters Class A headphone amp** (\$899), **UD 384 32/384-capable DAC** (\$499), and **uD2 uPower battery pack** (\$199). This trio of components stands as a complete, high-resolution headphone playback system—one whose performance belies its relatively modest price.
- **Sennheiser HDVA 600 balanced output headphone amp** (\$1,599), which stands as the most ambitious headphone amp the German firm has offered to date. This gorgeous component was created as the perfect partner for use with the firm’s top-tier HD 600, HD 650, HD 700, and especially HD 800 headphones.
- **Schiit Audio Mjolnir fully balanced headphone amp** (\$749) and **Gungnir balanced output 32/192 DAC** (\$749, \$849 with USB inputs). Despite the company’s edgy and potentially off-putting name (which is pronounced in keeping with the best of potty-humor traditions), the fact is that both components aim to deliver serious upper-tier performance at a mid-tier price, and both feature innovative circuit topologies.

The Mjolnir amp, for example, uses a relatively uncommon “circlotron” circuit, while the Gungnir DAC features an “adapticlock” adaptive re-clocking circuit that analyzes the jitter characteristics of incoming data streams and then selectively applies one of two onboard re-clocking circuits, as needed. Humorously, the DAC even sports a faceplate-mounted “you-need-a-better-digital-source-component” warning light if it encounters a source with truly horrible jitter characteristics. Hey, “Schiit happens.”



Beyerdynamics T90 headphones

- **Woo Audio WA7 tube-powered headphone amp/preamp/DAC** (projected price, under \$1,000), which is a visually stunning, cube-shaped component that can be used with headphones only, or can serve as the front end of a desktop audio or full-sized home audio system. The sound is crisp, clear, and full of dynamic life, in keeping with Woo Audio tradition, while the look would almost certainly make the late Steve Jobs smile.

High Performance Transducers

This year's Can-Jam seemed to highlight electronics more so than headphones or earphones, though there were some notable new releases that bear watching:

- **Beyerdynamics T90 headphones** (\$649), which take their place as the most affordable of the firm's top tier Tesla-series headphones—a range that emphasizes neutral, evenly balanced frequency response and overall purity of timbres. A good friend of the magazine and experienced headphone veteran volunteered to *Hi-Fi Plus* the opinion at the T900 might conceivably be “the best dynamic-driver headphone ever.” But do go hear the T900 and see what you think.
- **Fostex T900 headphones** (\$1,999) are more than a little reminiscent of Beyerdynamics' flagship T1 Tesla headphones, but they ante with dynamic drivers whose motors offer a whopping 1.5 Tesla of magnetic flux density (as compared to the T1 Tesla's 1 Tesla drivers). We felt the T900s showed a lot of performance potential, but that it—like many top-tier headphones—seemed to require a very special headphone amp in order to give it its best (meaning a merely “very good” amp just won't do).

- **Mr. Speaker Mad Dog headphones** (\$314). Don't let the punk-ish name fool you; the Mad Dogs are extensively modified Fostex T50RP headphones offering both sonic and comfort-oriented improvements for sound quality so sophisticated you would think they cost far more than they do. Besides, what was that old line about “Mad Dogs and Englishmen”?
- **JH Audio next-generation JH16 PRO custom-fit in-ear monitors** (\$1,149), which feature patent-pending “freqphase” technology said to give the monitors nearly ideal time/phase response across the entire audio spectrum. The difference is plainly audible with the next-gen version offering much greater focus and top-to-bottom coherency than the originals did.
- **Ultimate Ears UE-900 universal fit earphones** (\$399), which feature four balanced armature-type drivers per earpiece and are intended as ideal transitional models that serve to bridge the gap between top-end universal fit earphones and entry-level custom-fit in-ear monitors.
- **Unique Melody PP6 fully integrated, self-powered, in-ear playback system** (\$2,280), comprising custom-fit in-ear monitors featuring six balanced armature-type drivers per earpiece, plus a dedicated, portable, DSP-controlled tri-amplification module with a built-in DAC.

Still under development, but slated for release in 2013 is the new Abyss AB-1266 planar magnetic headphone (projected price, \$5,000), which represents a very serious attempt at building the finest cost-no-object headphone on the planet—one that explicitly seeks to de-throne the Stax SR-009 electrostatic headphone as the reigning “king of the hill.” Does the Abyss have what it takes? A brief listen suggested that the design has great potential, but only time will tell. +



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Magico S5 loudspeaker

By Alan Sircom

What happens to an *enfant terrible* when they grow up? Do they continue to be outspoken or rest on glories past? This is the dilemma Magico has faced, and overcome brilliantly, with the S5. The company has already shown what it can do, time and again, with products like the Q1 and Q5, producing models that redefine what was thought possible from a loudspeaker. The S5 is a mark of increasing maturity, and depth of understanding about the wider loudspeaker market.

The Q series shows what Magico can do without a safety net. Unconstrained by the limitations of price at any given point, the Q models are exercises in loudspeaker engineering excellence. Which is why a two-way standmount loudspeaker ends up costing as much as the Q1. Not to denigrate the design process that came up with the Q-series one iota, but when you start introducing the constraint of building down to a price – even when that price is far removed from what might constitute ‘budget’ – you quickly separate the truly innovative designers from those who simply throw money at a project. The S5 strongly points to the former.

Not that there's much sign of being built down to a price. Replacing the V3, the S5 loses the stacked birch ply cabinet of its predecessor, but goes without the elaborate alloy-Meccano skeleton of the Qs. Instead, it sports heavily braced half-inch thick aluminium extrusions throughout, in more of a curve than a boat-back; making for a ‘none more dead’ cabinet and sore knuckles if you try rapping it. A radical departure for Magico, the S5 marks the beginning of the end of the Henry Ford school of colour choice. The S5 doesn't just come in black; but gloss and even matt colours as standard, as well as any automotive high-gloss you can think of for a premium. However, I somehow doubt

there will be many orders for these loudspeakers in British Leyland Harvest Gold. It even comes with (Shock! Horror!) a protective grille.

The single-wired, sealed box loudspeaker is a three way design, all using Magico-spec drive units: a 25mm beryllium dome tweeter, the 150mm Nano-Tec midrange unit derived from the Q series and a pair of 250mm hybrid Nano-Tec bass units. These last differ from the more exotic units seen in the flagship range, by virtue of a separate dust cap in place of a one-piece cone. In theory, the inclusion of a dust cap should cause some phase cancellation directly in front of the cone compared with the one-piece drivers, but if this is the case it is negligible in the extreme.

With a pair of 250mm bass drivers and a whole loudspeaker system capable of coping with 1.2kW, Magico claims it's possible to hit a clean 118dB in room, and reach down to an impressive 22Hz. That's not just ‘impressive’ in a headbanger sense (although 22Hz does mean that dropped D tuning so beloved by metal guitarists is so far within the loudspeaker's remit, you get to hear everything); it means if suitably partnered, it has a dynamic range that comes closer to both the source material recorded and the real-world force of the instruments making that recording. That means revisiting old, well-trodden favourites like the Kleiber/Beethoven 5th Symphony anew, being shocked once again at the sheer energy of that first movement everyone knows so well. It's possibly the most well known sequence of notes in music, and yet what everyone forgets when playing it through a stereo system is it's actually the sound of an orchestra being flung at you, loud, forcefully and insistently. You get that with the S5. And as a result, music played through these speakers has a stunning capacity; not only in the superlative sense, but in the deer in the headlights manner. Music here – if you hook these babies to something with the guts to let them fly – is all about guts and passion and drama. You engage with the music on a very deep, caveman level, and that applies just as much to something like Paul Simon's *Graceland* as it does to sounds red in tooth and claw.

We have an embarrassment of riches when it comes to music today. An impoverished student with a laptop and an internet connection is capable of hearing in an evening more music than Cosimo de' Medici could have heard in a year. But with that wondrous accessibility comes complacency, and the S5 short-circuits that complacency. The S5 reminds us that music is not a disposable thing, but something to be engaged by and cherished. Play dinner jazz through these and dinner is spoiled and forgotten as you muse over the merits of Wes Montgomery's octave-laced solos. Play Billie Holiday singing ‘Gloomy Sunday’ and... well, just don't leave any sleeping pills lying round.

Describing the Magico's overall performance is fairly easy. It doesn't put a foot wrong. It has a taut, yet powerful and deep bass, an exceptionally fluid and open midrange and an extended, airy treble with absolutely no sense of sharpness or ringing. You could roll out practically every recording in your collection and the S5 will give it its best shot. The S5 is no magic wand; thin, weedy and compressed sounds will end up thin, weedy and compressed. ▶



"The S5 reminds us that music is not a disposable thing, but something to be engaged by and cherished. Play dinner jazz through these and dinner is spoiled and forgotten as you muse over the merits of Wes Montgomery's octave-laced solos."

MAGICO

► But the sound is not unlistenable, unless the studio engineer irretrievably punished the music. In this respect, the S5 even outperforms its bigger brothers, which don't take prisoners in the loudness war. By pulling back from the absolute definition of the Q models, the S5 can make something like Oasis still playable (whether you still want to play Oasis today is another matter entirely). Best of all though is that bass. It underpins and grounds the music in the real world and when you play something like 'Surfin' from *Below The Bassline* by Ernest Ranglin, you begin to realise just how important really gutsy bottom end is. This plays that beautiful, reggae bass like it was in the room, with all the rhythm and energy it needs to sound live and exciting.

The bass is worthy of an observation. It needs control. The S5 may have a sensitivity rated at 89dB and be a relatively stable four-ohm load, but that doesn't tell the whole story. Those 250mm bass drivers go long, deep and powerfully so, and to make them give of their all takes a lot of driving force. The loudspeakers need a big room and they like to be driven hard (I'm working on cashing in on the whole *50 Shades of Grey* thing). I'd recommend a few hundred watts, good current delivery and something fast sounding; this is perhaps why Magico often ends up being used with DartZeel, Spectral and VTL.

Once that box is ticked, the performance is outstanding. It sort of deals with the critical questions asked of an audio reviewer by highlighting the shortcomings of other devices; not in a 'loudspeaker in search of an amplifier' way, more in a 'oh, that's what it should sound like' manner. Like many

UK reviewers, when it comes to faintly nebulous, hard-to-pin down terms, I'm less attuned to microdynamics than my American counterparts, but the S5 is rather like taking an Open University course in 'Understanding Microdynamics'. It shows you precisely what the term means, and why those fine changes within the dynamic whole are so important. It's not the springs across the bottom of the snare, it's the squeak of the fixtures holding that snare spring in place, normally lost in the mix, which the S5 is so adept at that makes all the difference.

This isn't a panacea, because there is no panacea. There will be those who found their loudspeaker happy place years ago and have no intention of leaving it. There will also be those who demand something different from their loudspeakers than Magico will ever offer. And there are those who seem to have an ideological connection with rival brands. But there will also be a lot of swearing going on, as people come to terms with a loudspeaker that

fells some of the real giants in audio, at its price and way, way beyond.

In the introduction to this review, I mentioned that I consider the S5 to be an expression of Magico's maturity as a high-end loudspeaker builder. Here's why. Products like the Q-series are uncompromisingly excellent, and as a consequence demand an equally uncompromised level of understanding on the part of the listener. While those who simply want a completely honest musical transducer will find the Magico Q concept to be the best loudspeaker range they have ever heard, if you want your music gently warmed up, cooled down, brightened, heightened or smoothed over, then you'll end up buying pretty much any loudspeaker apart from a Magico. The S5 is the exception, and as such it's the transition or the gateway into that extreme honesty that Magico brings to audio.

Many of us have unknowingly cut our audiophile teeth on products that make music sound different than it is in reality, like the LS3/5a's 'fuller than the real thing' piano sound in the middle register. As a consequence, when faced with the bare truth, some find it a touch too bare. They have to unlearn the years of audiophile loudspeakers before they make the jump to the Qs. And that's what the S5 does so well. It has all the Magico traits (exceptional mid-range clarity, wide bandwidth, powerful solidity of a broad-as-the-room image and that snap-focus in on the music), but it also has some of the characteristics of those speakers we were weaned on. So it has the sort of effortless, inviting transition across frequency ranges of a good panel loudspeaker, the big, powerful, solid and deep bass of the best American dynamic boxes, and that flyaway, clean and insightful treble found in the most popular Euromasters (oddly, this identifies itself by





the comments of those who hear the loudspeaker, "it's like such-and-such loudspeakers, but more so"; the fascinating part of this is the diverse range of loudspeakers the S5 ends up sounding like). In the process of sounding like a better version of what you currently use, the S5 gives us a sweet taste of what can be on offer if we make the grade and the jump upwards. There's no urgent drive to go Q; the S5 is an end in itself, not simply a means to a higher end. And in many cases, I can see people being more comfortable with the S5 than its bigger brothers, because the sound is less uncompromising. But I imagine there won't be many people who could go back from Magico, once they really get under your skin.

We audiophiles can be a contrary bunch, at times. We sometimes set our sights on buying a less-good flagship instead of a product like the S5, simply because it's not the top of the range. We want the best, and if that is financially unattainable, the next one down the range is sometimes viewed as a compromise too far. This is deeply flawed thinking; to many audio companies, the S5 would represent design without compromise. In fact, to many audio companies, the S5 would be so uncompromising a project that it would never leave the prototype stage. Instead think of it this way; the S5 is that £100,000 full-range behemoth loudspeaker you always dreamed of in the 1980s, just made smaller, cheaper, more compatible (both with amplifiers and with modern life)... and better.

One of the great things about audio in the second decade of the 21st Century is all bets are off. In the last few years, we have seen amps the size of a pizza box outperform a floor full of electronics and clever, cheap little DACs take down many a top-class digital player. And we've also seen a crop of loudspeakers priced from around £20k to £35k capable of confidently outperforming every 20th Century loudspeaker known to man, irrespective of cost. The Magico S5 easily joins and – thanks to that near 20Hz bass

performance – likely tops that illustrious list. The only ugly truth about its performance is if you are clinging on to a pair of nine-foot-tall, cost as much as a house loudspeaker designs from the 1980s or 1990s, they just met their match. **+**

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Driver Complement: 1x 25mm MB30 beryllium dome tweeter; 1x 150mm M380 Nano-Tec cone midrange; 2x 250mm hybrid Nano-Tec cone bass

Sensitivity: 89dB

Impedance: four ohms

Frequency Response: 22Hz-50kHz

Recommended power: 50-1200W

Dimensions (WxHxD): 38x122x36cm

Weight: 86kg

Price: £30,000-33,000 per pair (depending on finish)

Manufactured by: Magico

URL: www.magico.net

Distributed by: Absolute Sounds

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

Tel: +44 (0) 208 971 3909

Wilson Benesch Vector loudspeakers

By Alan Sircom

Wilson Benesch's Geometry Series is a real grower, in both senses. If you play a pair, they quickly grow on you, and where first there was just a Vertex, now there's a Vector, a Fulcrum centre channel and even a Cardinal. There's a clever play on words here, because W-B's previous flagship was called the Bishop. Mixing mathematics and religion... how very Pythagorean.

The Vector is the floorstanding bigger brother of the Vertex we liked so much in issue 88. It retains the same boat-tailed shape and the monocoque ACT/poly alloy bodyshell structure that has more in common with Formula One design than the gluin' and screwin' woodwork that often passes for speaker engineering. The advantage to this is it means the rear-ported tower is so damn stiff, it needs no internal bracing, which means the internal volume is dramatically increased. It's not bigger on the inside – this is the application of science, not a treatment for a Dr. Who episode – but it does mean a larger sounding loudspeaker in a smaller than expected cabinet. It also gives the Vector a powerful physicality for what is

a relatively small floorstander. This is a pseud's way of saying "it looks the business", and it feels the business too. Sitting on four well-constructed feet on a skeletal, yet solid plinth, and offset by the glossy top plate, the whole Vector loudspeaker looks purposeful and elegant.

If you read the Vertex review in issue 88, two of the two-and-a-half way loudspeaker drivers are familiar; the 170mm Tactic II mid-bass unit and the 25mm Semisphere tweeter. They are successfully redeployed here, with a second, but not identical 170mm Tactic II unit used purely for bass purposes. Here's where it gets really clever: the Tactic II units crossover at an extraordinarily high 5kHz, meaning the tweeter really does just do the job of tweeting (in the birdy, rather than the social media, sense) and the minimalist 1st order crossover at the top and at the bass roll-off, means a simple crossover network. Saying goodbye to most of the crossover network also says goodbye to phase distortion and – because they are designed to work this way – integration issues. It's also like having one big active loudspeaker! Of course, this means there's a lot of onus on getting the mid and bass units absolutely right.

Just because the tweeter has less of a job to do, doesn't mean it is an afterthought. In fact, as I discussed with the Vertex, it took Wilson Benesch a decade of R&D to realise. It's a tweeter dome material with a very low mass, sitting in a very high mass assembly, with both side-and-rear venting into a silencing chamber, a first resonance point at nearly 6kHz and with no distortion in the audible band. The loudspeaker tops out at around 30kHz (just enough to keep the high-rezzers sweet) and hits a realistic 35Hz in room. ►

"This is a pseud's way of saying 'it looks the business', and it feels the business too."

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The specs make it seem like a reasonably easy load; 89dB sensitivity, six ohm nominal and four ohm minimum impedance, and no big, scary phase angles and not much of a crossover in the way all point to a loudspeaker that is a friend to amplifiers worldwide. But in reality that's not the whole story. Yes it's easy to drive, but easy doesn't mean it also forgives electronics that don't sound up to the mark. You might not need an amp the size of a Buick to drive the Vector, but you do need an amp that is either fundamentally neutral, or one that makes a sound you are really, really sure you like. Too much one way and the sound is very uneven, too much the other and it's bland. This is not a fault of the loudspeakers and in fact they should be praised for being so open and honest that they show up the limitations of what comes before them. But it does mean you can't build a random and haphazard system without it sounding, well, random and haphazard. The loudspeakers spent their first couple of days in the company of a Naim SUPERNAIT; a fine amp, and one that sounds good on the Vector, but you can do better. I moved over to the Devialet D-Premier and the speakers came to life, and they stayed there when I moved over to the Edge G3 integrated. You could clearly hear the benefits and limits of the SUPERNAIT, and you could even hear something close to the integration point between Class A and Class D amplifiers on the D-Premier too.

The Naim amp gave the sound a taut sense of rhythm and a deep, powerful bass, but it also gave the midrange some grain and shine. Swapping to the D-Premier sacrificed some of the timing precision, but gave the mid and top a clean and open presentation that on balance won the day. The Edge (the amp not the guitarist) then managed to do the Goldilocks thing and have a just right balance between the two. It's a mark of how little the Vector holds things back that these differences in amp were thrown into sharp repose.

In some respects, this is unimportant next to the final result. The way it highlights the performance of the upstream electronics is fascinating for a reviewer and good to know when building a system, but when it the system-building is done, the demand switches to how good it is at playing music. And the Vector doesn't disappoint.

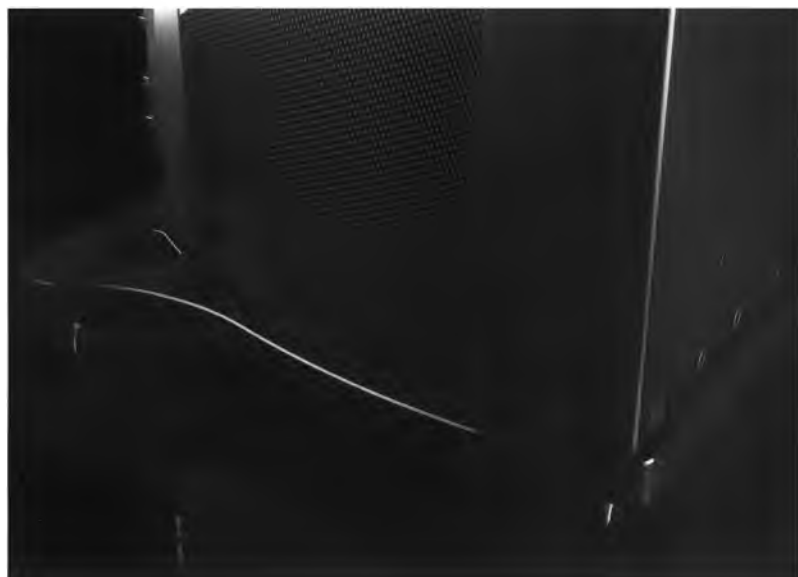
Wilson Benesch loudspeakers are detail extractors. They give you near enough the unvarnished truth when it comes to extracting information from record, disc or disk. And the Vector is no exception. The loudspeaker is extremely detailed, a profound insight into what was going on in the studio, concert hall and control room. It's odd, but the noise floor of a loudspeaker shouldn't be a major concern compared to electronics, but this one seems quieter than most (this might also be why the SUPERNAIT wouldn't be my first choice of amps, you can hear the baseline noise of the amp that would usually be below the threshold of audibility from the loudspeaker itself).

You want big imagery, find a disc that throws out a big image. You want effortless edge of the seat dynamics... buy the Ring cycle. You want a loudspeaker that plays along with the music... go look for something else. For me, the greatest strength of the Vector, like the Vertex before it, is it has no strengths. Or weaknesses. It simply gets on with the job of playing what it is given, without grace or favour.

While that kind of honesty makes the job pig-difficult for a reviewer (put disc on, disc sounds like disc, repeat until frustrated), it does make for one heck of a loudspeaker. That naturalness and honesty creeps up on you from the bottom up; you notice it first on basslines and the resolution of the left hand of the piano. Musical intervals in those last octaves seem more clearly defined, not simply an amorphous low clang, but very obviously a low note that was a whole tone apart from the last one. Not only could musos use the speaker for ear training, but it means bass notes are clearer and more defined. Then you begin to notice the same across the frequency range. No moments of revelation, no obvious musical examples, just pulling ahead of the pack cleaner.

Given the proximity of the reviews in print, in fact the performance of the Vector is very much in line with the Magico way of thinking. It's not hard to imagine someone trying on a pair of Magicos, and choosing the Vector and a nice car instead. Both have got the same sense of rightness to the sound, both need some energy behind them to make them sing, and both give good bass. Of course, in this case that bass is constrained by the sheer physical nature of the Vector's size and lack of a pair of 250mm drivers, but while it loses a few notes from that last octave, and a lot of the resolution of the bigger speakers, they have a lot more in common than they have apart. Most notably, lack of distortion.

The Wilson Benesch Vector is an outstanding loudspeaker. You need to take some care in what it works with, but when suitably fettled, the Vector tells you the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. If you want to know how your music sounds, it sounds like this. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

2.5 way linear phase, free-space ported floorstander

Drive units: 1x 25mm Semisphere soft dome tweeter; 1x 170mm Tactic II mid/bass driver; 1x 170mm Tactic II bass driver

Frequency Response: 35Hz-30kHz (± 2 dB, on axis)

Sensitivity: 89dB

Impedance: six ohms nominal, four minimum

Input connections: bi-wireable, block manufactured in house

Internal volume: 44 litres

Dimensions (HxWxD): 91x23x37cm

Weight: 31kg

Price: £8,059 per pair (standard finishes); £8,575 (wooden finishes)

Manufactured by: Wilson Benesch

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Tellurium Q Graphite loudspeaker cables and interconnects and Black mains cables

By Steve Dickinson

Some time ago, I reviewed various cables from Tellurium Q, a new name whose affordable wiring has been getting itself noticed for all the right reasons.

Since that review, TQ has launched the high-end Graphite interconnects and loudspeaker cables, and also introduced mains cables.

After my previous positive experience, I was keen to sample the new products and the Graphites duly arrived, accompanied by a set of the Black mains leads. The Graphite loudspeaker cables are chunky and substantial affairs, sleeved in black braided outer sheathing and terminated neatly with secure, locking, 4mm plugs. Likewise the interconnect, which is also sleeved in a braided outer sheathing and terminated with locking phono connectors. Both are well made and nicely finished, but broad of girth and hard to hide, these are not cables for the feeble, or those of delicate constitution.

Not to put too fine a point on it, I'm sorry to say that I have found the Graphites rather disappointing. I don't have the more affordable cables around for comparison, but the Black got the basics right in a way which similarly priced cables didn't quite match, while the Ultra Black built on those foundations, offering even more of the same qualities, albeit at a considerably higher price. Both provided something worthwhile at their respective prices but I find I can't say the same about the Graphite, which, at around twice the price of the Ultra Black, comes with a distinctly high-end price-tag and deserves to be judged accordingly.

Tonally, both the loudspeaker cable and interconnect are quite dark and heavy. This adds a pleasant weight, and offers a notable alternative to something like the original Nordost Tyr, which provides much more energy in the upper frequencies. But it's not as simple as "if you don't like Nordost, you should check out the TQ Graphite". If you do, you may well find, as I did, that all that solidity at the bottom end drags the music down, rather than providing it with a firm support. There is also a sense that the frequency extremes are mildly rolled-off; the bass, despite its apparent mass, just sort of peters out, while the treble lacks the luminescence you find in better cables at this price. The effect is to leave music sounding sluggish and leaden, lacking agility and lightness of touch. There is still the spaciousness in the midrange that's so attractive in the less expensive TQ cables, but without the sense of pace and timing to match, it's not enough to hold this listener's interest.



▶ The slightly ponderous character is perhaps most noticeable on jazz, which can sound somewhat slow and congested; lacking in the nuance and vitality which makes it, for me, one of the most compelling of musical forms. As an example, Stanley Clarke's 'Bass Folk Song No. 10' from *The Stanley Clarke Band*: much is made of the depth and power of Clarke's bass, but less of his signature speed and attack. With the Graphites installed those qualities are submerged, leaving the bass lines not as tuneful or shapely as I'm used to. The funky middle section lacks some of its essential sense of 'push', feeling inhibited and held back. Another track, 'No Mystery' features Hiromi on piano, and her playing is not as dextrous as I know it to be. Both these musicians have stellar reputations, their sheer speed, articulation and uncanny ability to measure their notes with such precision having produced a phenomenal album full of outstanding, exciting tracks. But listening with the TQ cables there is a sense of undertow, a drag that limits the vibrancy that should make this music such a compelling listen. Similarly in 'Feeling of Jazz' from *The Magic Hour*, Winton Marsalis' trumpet sounds more like a trombone, and the whole thing lacks the exuberance I expect to hear. 'Big Fat Hen' from the same album comes across as plodding and turgid, with none of the effervescence and sense of nimble-footed balance I'm used to.

Compared to its peers, TQ Graphite sounded subdued, lacking the sense of freedom and musical enthusiasm I was hoping for. The weight comes with a corresponding impression of inertia. I found myself listening

to my system less for pleasure, and more for duty. This may all sound rather stern, but this is an indisputably expensive cable and it can expect to be judged against the highest standards. Disappointingly, while it intimates much and promises plenty, it didn't deliver it for me. Whilst I wouldn't suggest mixing and matching cables anyway, it's interesting to note that the overall character of the Graphites was spread across both signal and speaker leads, with a big, weighty sound, but lacking in energy and obscuring instrumental textures.

These TQ cables do deliver that open and spacious midrange, with great depth and solidity, so I don't therefore dismiss it entirely. There are hints of its potential, but something simply isn't working. If you're considering it, audition carefully. You, dear reader, may have different requirements (or a very different system) to me, and TQ Graphite might just fit the bill. As for me, I found little to prefer over the Ultra Black – and the downsides are not worth the trade.

Happily, the Black mains cables were somewhat more successful. They replaced Nordost Valhalla in my system, always a tough act to follow, and I was prepared to forgive them. As it happened, there was no real need. The TQ leads lack some of the Valhalla's ultimate focus and sense of purpose, but at around £800 they are under a third of the price so this isn't really a criticism. I suspect they owe some of their



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- effectiveness to the use of the excellent Furutech UK and IEC plugs, fittings that also contribute substantially to the price of the leads themselves.

Sinatra's 'Blues in the Night' lacked a little of its poise and tension, the orchestral swell at the opening gaining in loudness but without quite the sense of energy and purpose I know to be there, but the system still gave a worthwhile and satisfying performance nevertheless. Ultimately, compared against one of the very best, and most expensive, mains leads I've used you lose a little in terms of absolute precision: timing and accuracy of leading edges is a little more blurred, dynamics are less freely conveyed and textures lose some of that finer detail. But these are almost nitpicking observations and it's not as if these abilities are absent, they're merely not in the top echelon of performance.

When compared to the Nordost cables, the overall impression is of a benign and subtle soft-focus effect, but there is a good deal of warmth and weight to the TQ Black mains cable, which is entirely pleasing and a significant step up from more modest mains cables.



“When compared to the Nordost cables, the overall impression is of a benign and subtle soft-focus effect, but there is a good deal of weight to the TQ Black mains cable, which is entirely pleasing.”

The earlier Black and Ultra Black signal and speaker cables made a strong case for themselves and the mains leads stand right alongside them. For me, the Graphite interconnects and speaker leads simply fail to justify their step up in price when it comes to performance returns. While they add certain hi-fi attributes, especially in the midrange, overall they don't make music as convincingly as the more affordable models. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Tellurium Q Graphite interconnect

Single-ended

1 metre pair: £660.00

1.5 metre pair: £805.00

Balanced

1 metre pair: £760.00

1.5 metre pair: £905.00

Tellurium Q Graphite loudspeaker cable

£462 per linear (mono) metre, made to length, terminated with locking plugs

Tellurium Q Black power cables

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2.0m: £988.00

2.5m: £1178.00

Manufacturer: Tellurium Q Ltd

URL: www.telluriumq.com

Tel: +44 (0)1458 251997

Distributor: Kog Audio

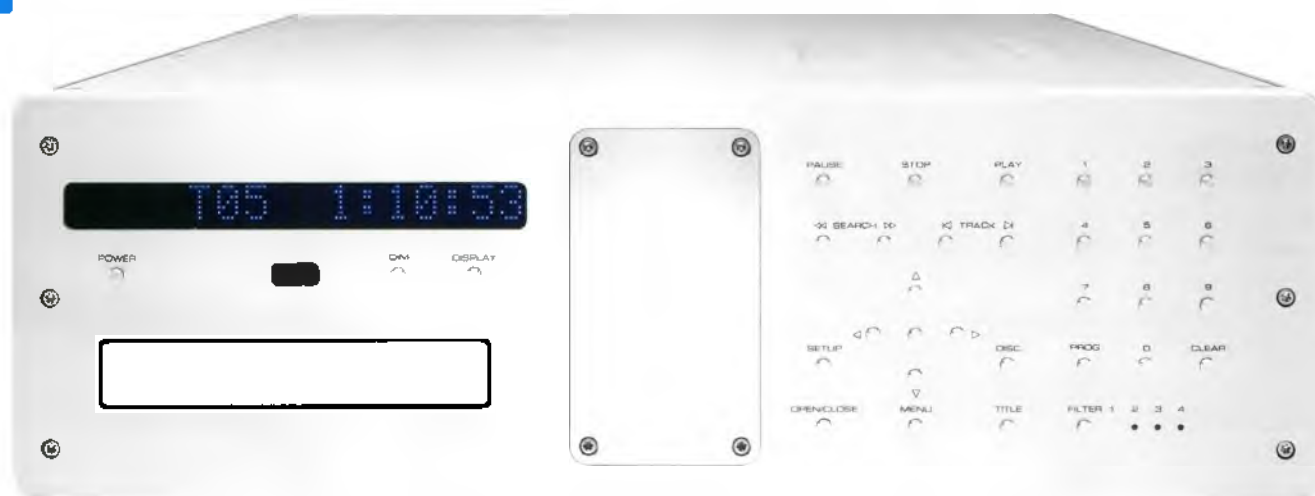
URL: www.kogaudio.com

Tel: +44 (0)2477 220650

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Krell Cipher SACD player

By Alvin Gold



Krell has been a steadfast supporter of the SACD format longer than anyone, first with the Standard, then the Evolution and now the Cipher player, which will probably see out the SACD era. New models have been effectively forced by the unplanned obsolescence of player mechanisms. In the nature of the technology, it is not usually possible to slot in new generation mechs without compromise to other elements of the design or a complete redesign. As their watchers will know, Krell has never had much truck with compromise.

The Cipher is a standalone player, with tips the scales at an impressive 13.2kg, and which plays single layer (SACD only), hybrid dual layer SACD and CD-DA audio discs and CD or DVD based data discs. Remember that in most cases it doesn't play DVD audio discs, but if this is important to you there is still a handful of so called universal players around, of which probably the best known and most affordable are from the Oppo stable.

The new generation Krell SACD player has barely changed physically externally from its predecessors though there are a number of internal modifications and updates. Key features include a similar heavy duty, well damped aluminium carcass of exquisite build and finish. The unit is physically imposing at 15cm tall and is available in black or silvered finishes. It looks all but identical to previous players in the range such as the SACD Standard and the EV505, and uses a barely altered matrix of 33 miniature front panel control buttons, of which the most unusual are a set of four digital filters for SACD and two dedicated to the CD standard. These have some influence near and also just above the upper frequency extreme, though the first filter settings appears to give the best overall balance in most cases for both CD and SACD recordings alike. The Cipher is supplied with a heavy duty aluminium-clad remote control handset that if well aimed looks 'man' enough to ward off intruders single-handed if called upon to do so. The control buttons and associated labels are tiny, and you may find as I did that it takes some time to acclimatise yourself to their layout.

The back panel of the player is equipped with much like its predecessors and includes single ended phono outputs for five channels, though it wasn't tested in multichannel form. Other socketry includes XLR based stereo balanced outputs, and various triggers and IR sockets, even a pair of RJ45s which talk to other similarly equipped Krell components. A pair of stereo only CAST outputs completes the roster. CAST is a proprietary current mode interface which when linked to similarly equipped Krell components allows the internal signal path to operate as a single gain stage, which had a very significant impact by reducing susceptibility to cable differences and also by simplifying the signal path. There are no real downsides to CAST, but I am not aware of any other manufacturer adopting the technology, though I believe there was some talk of this happening when it CAST was first introduced.

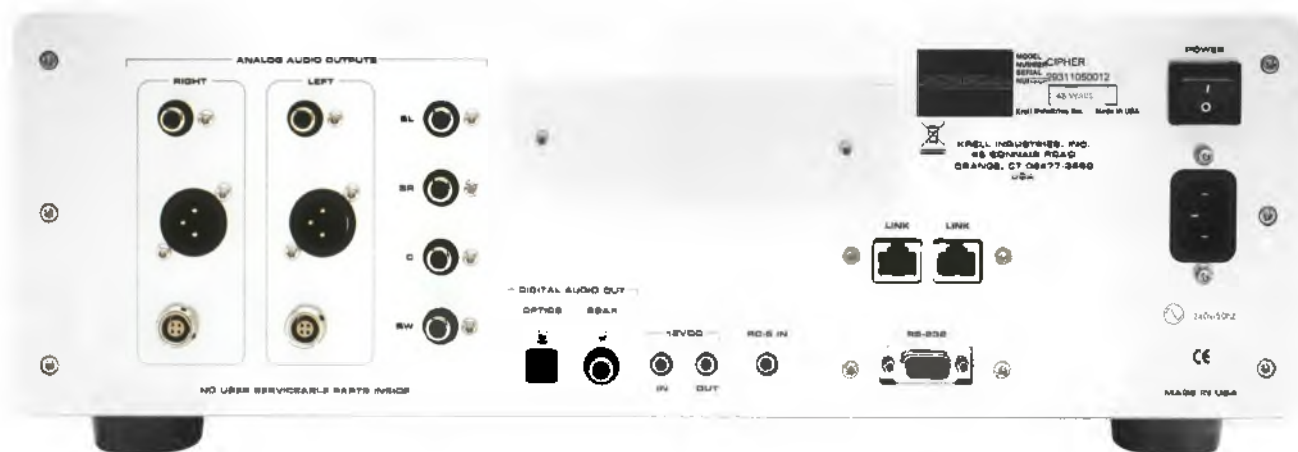


The Cipher is recognisably of the same parentage as its predecessors, a chip off the old block if you will. It is primarily a purist state of the art audio player (there is no video support), which is dedicated to delivering the best possible sound quality from 12cm audio discs, primarily Red Book CDs and SACD's in two channel and multichannel form. It has no external digital inputs (unfortunately) although it will play the stereo audio tracks of some (eg dts) DVD audio discs. Compact disc covers all musical genres of course, but this isn't so for SACD, whose catalogue is primarily classical (mostly from smaller specialist labels) and to a lesser extent jazz. Rock and other popular genres are barely represented in the SACD catalogue.

Particular attention has been paid in the Cipher to the mechanical isolation and damping of the disc mechanism from the chassis, which runs quietly (not always a given with older generation of SACD players). An anti-jitter module is fitted to complement the separate CD and SACD read lasers and a great deal of effort has gone into the power supplies, which is nothing less than you'd expect of Krell.

"The Cipher is supplied with a heavy duty aluminium-clad remote control handset that if well aimed looks 'man' enough to ward off intruders single-handed if called upon to do so."

Sound quality is exceptional, and not just with SACD. Exceptional CDs such as the Christian Thielemann/Vienna Philharmonic version of the Richard Strauss Alpine Symphony that I acquired on disc the day after seeing a Promenade concert performance of the same work at The Royal Albert Hall with the same orchestra, but conducted by Bernard Haitink, was stunning in the flesh and barely less so on CD. In this case, the SACD recording of the work played by the LSO in a live Barbican recording under the baton of Bernard Haitink is not of the stature of the work by played by the Vienna Philharmonic under Christian Thielemann. Despite the superior recording technology it sounds warmer and looser and for that reason less thrilling in the Barbican disc. In the end, the Vienna Phil recording is clearly more compelling and has greater stature. The richly varied orchestration includes such delights as a wind machine, an organ and off stage brass instrumentalists which frames the music better with a more physical, almost Mahlerian presence. If this proves anything it is that the nature of the enabling technology that it doesn't trump the recording and interpretation, which should come as no surprise. For what it's worth, the Vienna recording is apparently available on SACD though I have been unable to find a copy. ▶





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► Despite exceptional results like this, it was almost invariably SACD that gave better results, with clearly superior resolution and soundstaging, and the Cipher lives up to its billing with a wide range of the several hundred SACD recording on my shelves, from Mozart to Mahler and Schoenberg via Beethoven and Wagner, and also some of my fairly sparse collection of non classical SACD discs – including titles from Jennifer Warnes, Eric Bibb and others. In each case SACD gave a perceptibly rounder and sweeter view of the music. There was also a clear benefit in the use of balanced interconnects – Nordost Valhalla was used for test in single ended and balanced varieties.

Low frequency quality, and in particular the sense of weight and scale, are transformed in the best cases from SACD, with none of the rather airless dryness that is sometimes associated with compact disc, but it is the other end of the spectrum that shows the greatest musical benefits over CD. Imagery is very expressive and three dimensional, even in plain vanilla two channel stereo – no appropriate multichannel system was available for this test so the listening here was exclusively two channel based. Treble quality can be delicate, subtle and ethereal and is generally a clear step up from that you'd normally expect from compact disc. Because most of the test discs were CD/SACD hybrids, it was easy to change between layers to confirm the audible differences between the two formats, CD and SACD, and although there are some pratfalls when making this kind of comparison due to the way different layers are mastered, over time a picture was built up of a clearly more sophisticated sound from the higher resolution format. With lesser players it is not always immediately obvious which is CD and which is SACD, but this is not the case here. SACD was clearly the better musical deal in almost every

Each of the main types of compatible disc handled extremely well by the Krell flagship disc player. It took a quite badly pockmarked or scratched disc to fail to load or to play cleanly through this player and there were almost no signs of dropout or muting. Although the ergonomics of the players are slightly ill conceived – it surely wouldn't have been too

difficult to contrive an easier control layout, it is difficult to think of any other negative points with this player, though it does run quite hot when under power for an extended period. Other than this there is of course the elevated price tag. Nobody could reasonably suggest that price is not an issue. You will need to be seriously well heeled to afford this player, but if I had the means I would not hesitate to invest in the Cipher, not least because I have quite a lot of SACDs in my collection, and I would welcome the opportunity to make the most of them on a daily basis. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

SACD/CD player compatible with CDR, 44.1 WAV, DVD-R/RW/+R.

Class-A balanced, zero-feedback.

Krell Current Mode topology from input to output (using CAST).

D/A conversion: 2 DSD1794 DACs (1 per channel, 2 per pair of surround channels)

Digital outputs: 1 S/PDIF via RCA, 1 S/PDIF via Toslink

Analogue outputs: 1 pair CAST via 4-pin bayonet connectors, 1 pair balanced via XLR, 6 single-ended via RCA

Control inputs: 1 RS-232 port via 9-pin D-subminiature connector, 1 12VDC trigger input, 1 Krell CAN Link (2 x RJ45).

IR remote control included

Dimensions: 438mm, 153mm, 438mm.

Weight: 13.2kg nett

Price: £12,000

Manufacturer: Krell Industries

URL: www.krellonline.com

Distributed by: Absolute Sounds

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

Tel: +44(0)208 971 3909



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Alan Sircom, Hifi+ issue 78

IDEA

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

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

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

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

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

Alan Sircom, Hifi+ issue 84



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Chord Electronics QBD76

Chord's QBD76 HDSD offers listeners the chance to play downloaded DSD material. Smart, Huh?

By James M Hughes

It was as long ago as November 2001 that I reviewed Chord's DAC64 – forerunner to the QBC76 HD. It made a profound impression. After hearing it, I finally felt CD had come of age. Prior to the DAC64, it was as though CD had a 'glass ceiling' that limited it, sonically.

For me, the DAC64 represented a turning point. What made it special? In a word, the WTA (Watts' Transient-Aligned) filter with 1,080 Taps, and a buffering circuit that reduced jitter. The result was a clarity and holographic dimensionality rarely achieved with CD.

Chord's QBD76 replaced the DAC64 in 2008. The QBD76 extended the number of filter Taps from 1,080 to 14,832 using 18 separate DSP cores. It also offered compatibility with high resolution digital sources – up to 24bit/192kHz PCM, and an improved power supply.

The QBC76 was also usable with Bluetooth devices, and offered dual DAC inputs to suit Chord's Blu CD transport. It sounded better than the DAC64, in much the same way the DAC64 had improved on its peers. A USB input was also offered.

Back in 2001, those choosing a DAC64 would have bought it to partner an existing CD player or transport. It was a means of improving the sound of your CD player, simple as that. The QBD76 essentially offered more of the same; better sound, and added versatility.

The QBD76 HD carries on this tradition, and allows users to experience an even wider range of sources. The Bluetooth option has been sacrificed, but in its place there's an HD USB input with the option to decode DSD material using a special chip set.

As most of you will know, SACD playback is not possible with a transport and separate outboard DAC – a prime example of the industry shooting itself in the foot due to record company paranoia over home copying. So the QBD76 HDSD cannot

be used for SACD playback.

But it can work with DSD recordings downloaded from internet sources. At the time of writing, this is very much in its infancy. But a number of small Jazz and Classical labels now have DSD material available to download, and the QBD76 HDSD can take advantage of this.

Of course, Red Book CD remains the dominant medium in terms of music available, and the QBD76 HD maximises the results possible from regular compact disc. It's also outstandingly good when asked to play CDs ripped to a computer hard-drive through its USB connection.

Via the four-second buffer, the sound has excellent clarity and purity, offering a big, solid Presence that's powerful and dynamic. The QBD76HD makes the most of 16bit 44.1kHz CD, and disguises its limitations with a panache that borders on alchemy.

But it's with hi-rez material that Chord's new DAC really comes into its own. While the QBD76 HD gets close to turning the base metal of CD into gold, there's no denying the extra naturalness and refinement of the real thing. It's something unmistakable.

CD's slight tonal hardness vanishes, being replaced by an easy effortless open clarity. Playing the 24bit/96kHz Dunedain

Ensemble's recording of Handel's Messiah on Linn Records, the sound had a beautifully sweet yet crisp incisive quality that was impressively natural.

But even this yields to 'proper' DSD material. Again, the sound is even more relaxed and natural, yet at the same time



- ▶ very incisive and effortlessly detailed. It was almost too good; spoiling your enjoyment of CD because it is so patently lacking in these special qualities!

On a recording featuring a classical string orchestral, I was taken by the combination of immediacy and effortless transparency. The string tone sounded burnished and rich. It was sharp and immediate without being bright or harsh. In other words, it sounded real.

I used J Rivers Media (a chargeable computer programme that can be downloaded) to play DSD material, and the results were very alluring. In terms of purity and sheer unexaggerated naturalness, good DSD downloads seem to be in a sonic class of their own.

The downside? Limited availability of titles, and the large size of DSD files are the main drawbacks. Even with a fairly big hard drive, you'll probably run out of space fairly quickly with only a moderately-sized music collection.

Of course, hard drives are getting bigger and cheaper all the time. So while large file size is a consideration, it isn't necessarily a deal-breaker. The restricted choice of music is more of a concern, but there's a good choice of classical and jazz from certain specialist labels.

Of course it's perfectly possible to play music encoded in lower-rez formats to fill in the gaps. But there's a danger that exposure to higher-rez material will leave you dissatisfied with the sound produced by bog-standard 16bit 44.1kHz Red Book CD.

By virtue of its superior digital processing abilities, the QBD76HD definitely enables formats like CD to punch above their weight. But it cannot work miracles, and inevitably there's a gap between 16bit 44.1kHz stuff and higher-rez material.

The QBD76 HD offers a choice of balanced and unbalanced fixed analogue outputs that deliver around 6V and 3V respectively. This is higher-than-average, and helps foster the impression of a 'big' powerful full-bodied sort of musical presentation.

I've already alluded to the built-in digital buffer. It improves clarity and cleanness by lowering jitter. The buffering time is selectable by the user, and can be either one second or four seconds. In most situations, the full four second buffer delivers best results, sonically.

But do experiment with the one second and 'off' options before deciding, as there are circumstances where having minimal or no buffering sounds better. When set to maximum, the sound is delayed by around four seconds, which can be a bit disconcerting at first.

In typical Chord fashion, the various input/output sockets and controls are not marked regarding what they are or do. This can be confusing. It would

also be helpful, for example, to have some indication as to whether or not the QBD76 HDSD is receiving a true DSD signal.

Agreed, the display indicates sampling frequency. But, it sometimes showed 192kHz when I knew the native sampling frequency was actually 44.1kHz. Clearly, some kind of up-sampling had taken place. It's easy to be fooled into thinking you're listening to hi-rez when you're not.

Build quality is everything you'd expect from a Chord product. The QBD76 HD is very solidly made from aluminium, and beautifully finished. The review sample came in silver and had a brushed finish, but black is also available.

The glass portals are a striking design feature, allowing users to see the circuit boards. The internal lighting changes as you select different options – another attractive feature. During use, the unit gets moderately warm to the touch, but not hot.

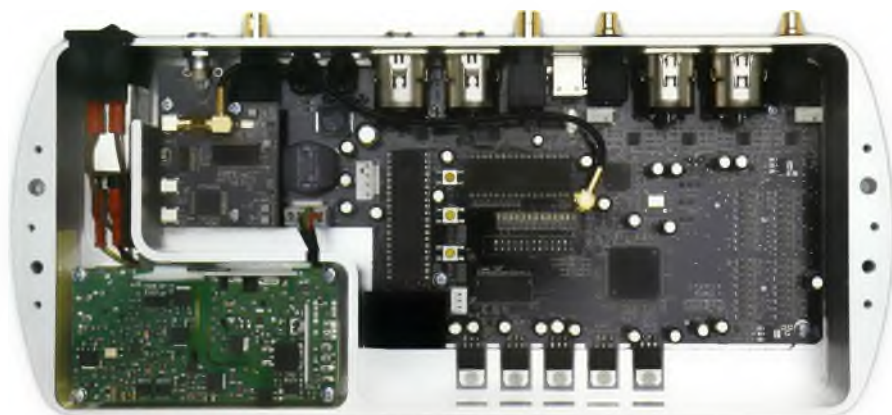
Those owning the earlier QBD76 may be tempted to upgrade. However, unless you intend to exploit the QBD76 HDSD's DSD capabilities, there's not really much point. Via CD and USB sources, the two DACs sound virtually indistinguishable.

In many ways, the QBD76HDSD is a product ahead of its time. As increasing amounts of high-rez material become available, it will come more and more into its own. It's a terrific component that must be auditioned by those interested in state-of-the-art digital playback.+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Digital inputs: 2x S/PDIF BNC coax, 2x AES/EBU, 2x Toslink, 1x USB (B-type, 44-48kHz), 1x USB (A-type, 192kHz)
Analogue outputs: 2x phono, 2x XLR
Dimensions (WxHxD): 33.8x6x14.5cm
Weight: 7kg
Price: £4,995

Manufactured by: Chord Electronics
URL: www.chordelectronics.co.uk
Tel: +44(0)1622 721444





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



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Pass Labs XP-25 phono preamp

By Alan Sircom

Pass Labs is a firm favourite among our US counterparts. One of our sister title's mainstay reviewers – Tony Cordesman – owns several Pass Labs products in his system, including this – the XP-25 flagship two box phono stage. On the basis of its performance, it's not hard to see why.

Pass Labs has always stuck to its guns. It makes amplifiers, and although it does list two loudspeakers in the range, it's an amplifier brand first and foremost. The brand is the high-end expression of Nelson Pass, one of this industry's best respected electronics designers who, when not only builds 'em big, but builds 'em small (First Watt) and invites others to build 'em too (Pass DIY).

Pass (the man) is something of a visionary in amp design, and that means his designs have an ethos behind them, one that's common to all. Put simply, it's a kind of Occam's Razor of circuit design; a simpler design is better than a more complex one. This means the right number of components in the signal path (too few and the product performance begins to suffer, too many and it might look good on the test bench, but not sound as good in the listening room). To this end, the circuit must exhibit the maximum linearity long before any application of local or global feedback is considered. And in practice, this means careful selection of components in that signal chain, both in terms of the right device for the specific task, and careful matching and evaluation

of components before they go on to the PCB. And this set of ground rules have been handed from Pass (the man) to Pass (the brand) and even on to Pass protégé Wayne Colborn, who designed this particular model

Pass Labs is resoundingly solid-state, and recognises a good power supply when he sees one, and the XP-25 is a two box affair; the off-board power supply module feeds the phono stage proper through a DIN-25 connector. Keen eyed types might notice two DIN-25 connectors on the power supply; this can be used to also feed the XP-20 line preamplifier. Pass recommends a separate power supply for both devices where possible, but that the manual discusses the requirements of aftermarket DIN-25 cables is more likely to mean people have asked the question rather than Pass thinks the cable it supplies is underperforming.



When it comes to high-end phono preamps, they seem to fall into two categories; preamps that allow adjustment of EQ curve, and those that allow fine tuning of cartridge loading. A few do both. This one stays firmly with the RIAA curve, but affords the user a wealth of adjustment over the loading of the cartridge. This does demand some careful thought on the part of the listener. The XP-25 is the sort of phono stage that has simple 'Moving Magnet', 'Moving Coil' settings; you need to know the basic parameters of your cartridge before you start twiddling knobs.

The front panel of the XP-25 (the business end, at least; the power supply just has one blue LED in the middle of that thick front panel) has three large control dials, similar to those found on Copland and – if you can remember this far back – Cello. From left to right, these adjust resistive loading, reactive or capacitive loading and gain. There's also a row of smaller buttons, to select input (there's provision for two decks, as well as balanced and single-ended output), a low-pass filter setting and a mute button. With nine different resistive settings, six capacitive and three levels of gain setting, if you think you just can 'wing it' with 162 different permutations, some of which will deliver a very loud sound through your loudspeakers, good luck with that. My take on this: RTM (Read The Manual).

OK, so if reading a manual brings you out in hives, here's the basic tale. You are on reasonably solid ground to assume the combination of resistive at 47kOhms and 100pF of parallel capacitive and gain of 53dB loading spells 'moving magnet' (I'm not sure how many MM enthusiasts will use a £10,000+ phono stage, but the settings stand regardless) and pretty much the same with a 66dB loading puts you in moving iron territory. If you are using a moving coil, you need some records you are familiar with, some intellectual rigour, and time. Mute your preamp, turn the gain to 66dB or 76dB



"With nine different resistive settings, six capacitive and three levels of gain setting, if you think you can just 'wing it'... good luck with that."

(depending on output of your moving coil cartridge), the resistive load to 100 ohms and 100pF reactive. Unmute the preamp. Give it a couple of minutes to settle down and play anything between 10 minutes and an hour's worth of music you know well. Move to 50 ohms, and think like an optician (better or worse?) only listening out for indistinct bass or sharp treble. Repeat the process until you find a spot where the sound seems at its best. Now do the same with the reactive settings. Use a variety of albums to ensure you aren't setting the XP-25 too specifically for the sound of an LP instead of the sound of all your albums. This whole process could take a day or more, but eventually you'll find your cartridge's happy place and when it's done, it stays done. Note, this might be somewhat different to the data provided by the cartridge manufacturer, because different wires between cartridge pin and phono stage input can alter the capacitive loading required in the phono stage itself. Just remember when you are done to jot down the settings, just in case some passing three year old plays 'safecracker' and messes them up.

Once setting is over, you are left with a remarkably silent background from which to play your music. There's virtually no gentle hush from the electronics or self-noise from the cartridge, just near silence. Then you put a needle in the groove, and all the struggle of setting up the right loading just melts away. This has one of those sounds that makes you long for more legato in the word 'satisfying'. It's not lush or thick or woolly sounding, but it has so a complete an absence of grain, hardness, stress or solid-state edge that you might be mistaken for thinking there are some triodes in there. And yet, it doesn't sound like a valve amplifier, it's not warm or dark or rich or any of those descriptors often appended to hollow-state designs. It's something between those two poles.

In a way, it's a very American sound; inviting, expansive, incredibly detailed, focused on the flow of music from bar to bar rather than necessarily ►

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs: 2x RCA inputs for phono, earth tag

Outputs: single-ended RCA, balanced XLR

Gain options: 53dB, 66dB, 76dB

Resistive loading options: 30 ohm, 50 ohm, 100 ohm, 160 ohm, 250 ohm, 320 ohm, 500 ohm, 1k-ohm, 47k-ohm

Reactive loading options: 100 pf, 200 pf, 320 pf, 430 pf, 530 pf and 750 pf

RIAA response: ± 0.1 dB 20Hz-20kHz

Distortion (MC): < .005 % THD @ 1mV (MM): < .002 % THD @ 10mV

Unweighted noise: -93 dB ref. 10 mV (MM), -85 dB ref. 1 mV (MC)

Dimensions (WxHxD, per chassis):

43x10x30cm

Weight: 25kg

Price: £12,000

Manufactured by: Pass Labs

URL: www.passlabs.com

Distributed by: Select Audio

URL: www.selectaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1900 601954

its time signature and tempo. It doesn't underplay these aspects of musical performance – it expressed the dynamism and pace of Surfer Rosa by the Pixies with all the drive and intensity this piece of music needs – but it accents the orchestration and majesty of a recording rather than its abrupt passages. It's perhaps no surprise then that many of the XP-25's strongest supporters tend to be those from the jazz and classical loving end of the spectrum. Don't be fooled into thinking this is a phono stage designed only for classical or jazz; instead think that its refinement, its complete absence of grain and its ordered sense of musical flow are the first things music lovers of these genre seek from a phono stage, and they find it here in droves.

The one slight caveat with the phono stage part of the two box XP-25 is that it is so sensitive, you need to be a little aware of potential hum-fields around the device. It's not the kind of phono stage that can sit too close to a big turntable power supply and even its own PSU is best given some distance. This is more a 'shelf management' issue than a problem per se, because the benefits of the XP-25 are so great, it's worth taking the trouble to get it right. But if you are the kind who treats their system with slapdash and reckless abandon, you need to be more careful with the XP-25 than some. Mind you, a £10,000 phono stage with more than 150 different setting options isn't likely to be used by someone who has the word 'slapdash' in their regular vocabulary.

The Pass Labs XP-25 is a real keeper. Careful setting makes it bring out the best in your turntable system and brings out the majesty in the music on the platter. It's expensive, yes. It's got character, too. But you can't help but be impressed by the sound it makes in the process. Highly recommended. +





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April Music Eximus DP1 DAC/headphone amp/preamp

By Alan Sircom

First there was Aura, then came Stello. And now, the South Korean based April Music has a high-end brand on its books by the name of Eximus. Once, Eximus made CD players, but with the current changes in the spinning disc's fortune, it's little wonder the brand turned to a multifunction DAC, the DP1. Eximus currently also produces a matching ICEpower 125W power amplifier, alongside the products from Stello and Aura. Although Stello's handy U3 digital standards converter will be the subject of a later review, it's the DP1 we're interested in here.

This is a lovely little design, beautifully finished with a leaf motif set into the top of the Alex Rasmussen designed alloy case. If high-end audio is about look and feel, this has loads of both and has a look reminiscent of a less utilitarian Nagra. Whether or not it has any bearing on sound quality, there's a lot to be said for a product you feel the urge to stroke. It bespeaks quality.

Under that alloy case, the DP1 is all business. The six digital input converter uses a pair of PCM1794A DAC chips in dual mono mode and separate oscillators for multiples of 44.1kHz and 48kHz. As well as asynchronous USB Class 2.0 input, AES/EBU, Toslink and a pair of Coax S/PDIF digital links, it even features an I2S input, if you are lucky enough to have a digital source that supports this (such as PS Audio's PerfectWave player). USB Class 2.0 allows higher than 24/96 precision files to be transferred across a USB cable, and requires a driver install for Windows computers (Class 2.0 USB comes as standard with a modern Mac).

By default, the DP1 upsamples to 192kHz, 24bit precision. The way you tell is the LED next to the 'Upsample' button on the front panel: green for 24/192, red for 24/96 and no LED glowing for pass-thru. Similarly, the lock LED (next to the source button) glows yellow if it's a 44.1/48k signal, red if it's an 88.2/96kHz sample or green if it's a 176.4/192kHz signal. This does mean that you might end up with an input signal at 192kHz upsampled... to 192kHz,

although I tried upsampling to 192kHz at source (via Pure Music) and 'reupsampling' to 192kHz and it didn't seem to upset the sound. April Music suggests setting it to Bypass as a starting point, but every time you power down the DAC, it will default to 192kHz upsampling. Not a big pain, but something you might need to remember time after time.

There are three ways of thinking about the DP1. It's a DAC, a DAC with a preamp, and a DAC with a headphone amp built in. The three ways of the DP1 potentially ally it to three very different end users. From a writer's perspective though, this is relatively easy to process. With just the one analogue input (well, two... one a front-mounted mini-jack, the other single-ended line-level), no balance control and no remote handset option, the DP1 is not a big winner in the full-function preamp stakes. However, it sounds excellent when hooked to an amp as a pre (especially through the balanced outputs, I found), and if you can live with the limitations described above, you get the sound of a stripped down £2,000 line preamp, as well as a damn good DAC. But I suspect most of its time, it will either have the volume maxed out and used



as a standalone DAC, or used as the mother of all headphone solutions, and in both cases it works brilliantly.

There's a consistency, a commonality of sound both through the main and headphone outputs. Whichever way you shake it, there's a lot of taut, tight and controlled bass, a midrange that is just a step forward of neutral, sweet upper mids and a treble that is extended and natural. All of this can be summed up in one word: 'big'. Playing the Belcea Quartet playing Debussy's String Quartet in G highlighted the scale of the system. Usually, when played through headphones this can sound a trifle small, as if the cello is small and distant (part

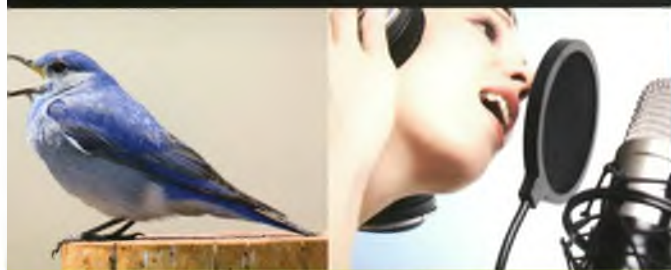
"There's a lot of taut, tight and controlled bass, a midrange that is just a step forward of neutral, sweet upper mids and a treble that is extended and natural. All of this can be summed up in one word: 'big'."

of this is down to lateralisation effects – it sometimes sounds as if the cello is playing just behind your left eye). Here, it sounds like real-sized instruments playing, and playing well.

Moving over to 'Superstition'; by Stevie Wonder, the acid test of any good DAC is the way it handles that hi-hat in the introduction. It's a deceptively complex rhythm, and usually something that is either swamped by the mix or reduced to a simple 4/4 root time signature. In fact, every bar that normally metronomic hi-hat is slightly different to the one before, and this crucial, but subtle detail is usually lost (like the squeaky drum pedal).

I briefly borrowed a pair of HiFiMAN HE-6 headphones, not just because they are some of the most revealing cans on the planet, but also because they are notoriously difficult to drive. And the Eximus DP1 treated them as if they were Just Another Headphone: OK, so the volume dial needed more of a yank than usual, but rather than just hide clipping and terrified from the nasty load, the DP1 sailed through the test without a single scar. Granted, the Trilogy 933 headphone amp showed up the limitations of the DP1 both in terms of dynamic range, more definition, ultimately higher volume levels without distortion and low-level volume control, but despite of all this, the DP1 didn't let itself down, and if it can drive the HE-6, it can drive practically anything this side of a pair of Stax electrostatics. Bear in mind that the Trilogy 933 is about the best headphone amp I have ever heard, and you'll get an idea of how good the DP1 is by comparison.





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- There's a hugely interesting observation with the DP1. I've not encountered a system so ruthlessly revealing of data reduction before. I have a very pragmatic approach to the likes of AAC and MP3 – put simply, as

storage is cheap, go with the best possible format you can, but if you can only buy the album as an AAC or MP3 download, don't sweat it. Had I been using a DP1 all this time, I wouldn't be so pragmatic. The difference between lossy and lossless (or uncompressed) files was exceptionally clearly defined through the DP1, especially through its headphone output. The wishy-splasy sound of piano notes blurring together, the hashy fuzzy sound that overplays a drummer riding a hi-hat, a sense of added 'sizzle' to a solo female vocal... all those elements that highlight less-than-transparent data reduction algorithms are more noticeable than ever on even high-rate MP3. Once you get past 192kbps VBR (variable bit rate) AAC, the data reduced signal is commonly considered to sound functionally identical to the original, but if those who commonly considered such things routinely used something like the Eximus DP1 and even a pair of Sennheiser HD-25 IIs, they'd be lobbying for less intrusive data reduction.

I suspect this is down to exceptional digital processing performance on the part of the DP1. Why? Because it doesn't make a hash of less-than-perfect recordings. It shows you what is going on in the studio or stage. So, when you are listening to something like 'The Bard Lachrymose' from Bradford Marsalis & Joey Calderazzo's *Songs of Mirth and Melancholy* played losslessly, you get the sublime recording and the excellent performance shining through. Play Lifts to Experience and the music's great but the lo-fi sound is harsh, but still insightful. Do the same on AAC versions of the same and the first is peaky, the second almost unlistenable.

If you do have a lot of AAC recordings, April Music does have an ace up its sleeve in the guise of the U3 standards converter. This will be the subject of a review next issue, but the little box, fed properly through its USB port and outputting to AES/EBU softened the AAC blow considerably and made the music sound good again. The combination of Mac, U3 and DP1 was more than the sum of its musical parts, and while we've considered the DP1 as a standalone device, the U3 shouldn't be overlooked as the ultimate performance enhancer for the DAC.

Cut to the chase: the Eximus DP1 is no 'me too' product. It's one of the best of the best money – any money – can buy. It's an outstanding headphone amp, a fantastic DAC and a none-too-shabby basic preamp in one. If this is the future of audio, tomorrow's looking damn fine! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Digital Input: 1 USB 2.0, 1 I2S 100 Ohms
TTL Level, 2 COAX 75 Ohms, 1 AES/EBU,
110 Ohms, 1 OPT

USB 2.0 PC OS: Windows OS with Driver,
MAC OSX

Input Sampling Frequency: USB 2.0, I2S,
DIR(AES/EBU, COAX, OPT) Max 192kHz

UpSample: TI SRC4192

DAC: TI PCM1794A x 2 (Dual Mono)
192kHz/24Bit

Dynamic Range: 132dB TYPICAL

THD+N: 0.0004%

Frequency Response: 2Hz to 95kHz -3dB

Analog Input: 1 RCA, 1 minijack

Analog Output: 1 RCA, 1 XLR, 1 1/4"
Headphone Jack

Dimensions (WxDxH): 20.8x29.1x6.2cm

Weight: 3.6 kg

Price: £1,995

Manufactured by: April Music

URL: www.aprilmusic.com

Distributed by: Igloo Audio

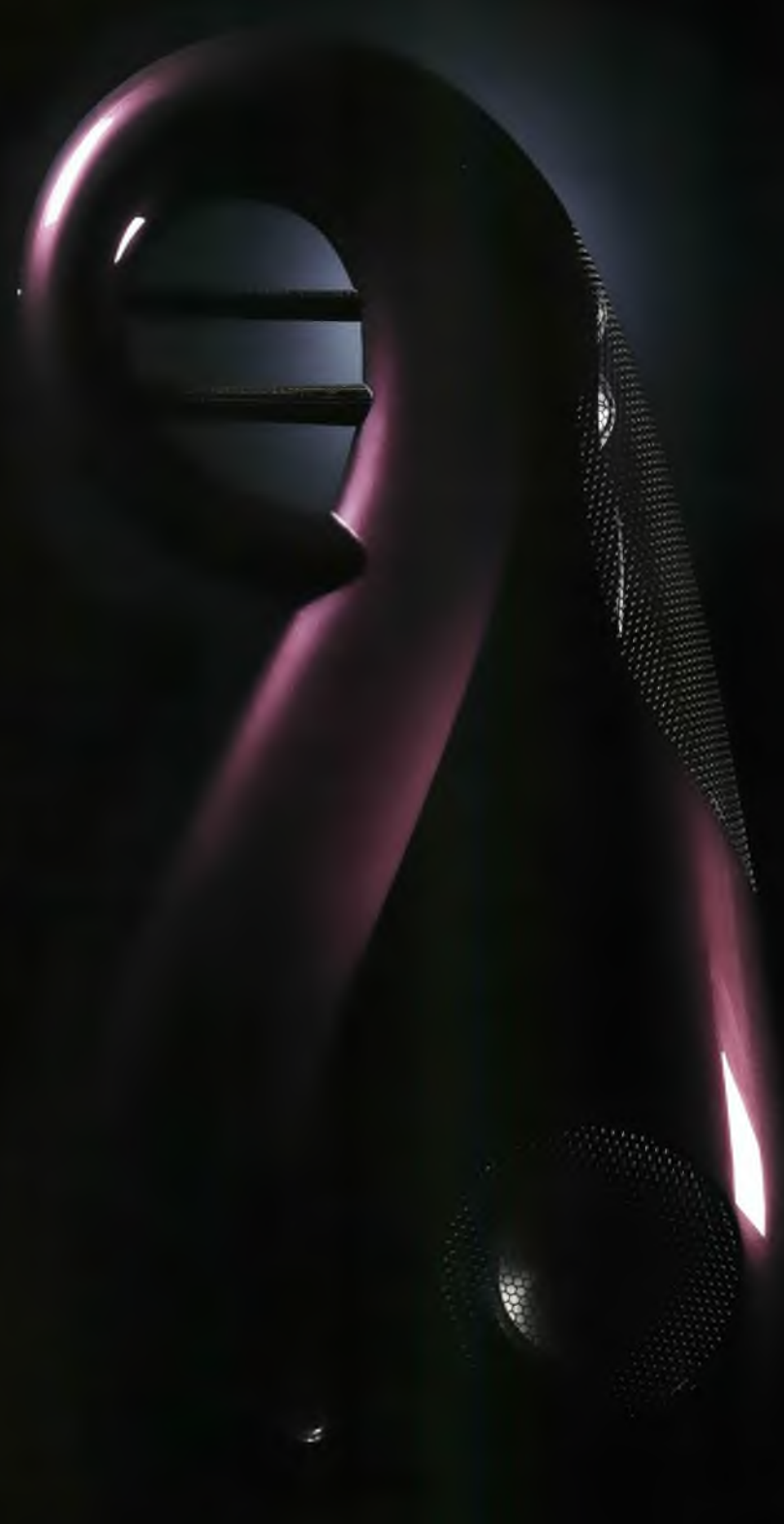
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Origin Live Zephyr tonearm

By Alan Sircom



In the UK, Origin Live is known as a provider of all things turntable, but the company's reputation extends beyond the shores of Blighty mostly for its tonearms. That reputation is built on products like the Zephyr.

Common to Origin Live tonearms, the Zephyr is built on the original Rega arm mount (which also fits the newer three-point Rega mount), with Technics, SME or even Linn adaptors also available. The arm is the cheapest in the Origin Live range that also comes with built-in VTA adjustment, which is as simple as it is effective (it's just a ring around the arm base – if you can tighten a set of speaker spikes, you can adjust the VTA on the Zephyr).

The arm itself looks a bit like the love-child of a Linn Ekos and a Rega RB300. It's a gimballed bearing design, with a wide yoke similar to a Linn arm, but tracking force adjustment is purely down to moving the counterweight. In use, the counterweight is extremely hard to move; making it great once the downforce is set but difficult to fine tune without feeling like you are engaged in some heavy-handed operation. In addition, because of the deliberate way the dual-pivot bearing housing is designed, allowing the arm tube to float, the whole arm feels like there's too much play, and when you are adjusting the counterweight, the freedom of that arm tube means it can clatter around the yoke. This is deliberate on Origin Live's behalf (essentially, it behaves like two bearings in one, a high mass one in the horizontal and a low mass one in the vertical, which is notionally precisely what you need from a set of tonearm bearings), and there's no bearing chatter.

Anti-skate is applied by a hanging weight and outriggers. In use, you generally need to place the bias cylinder very close to the yoke, otherwise the weight can foul its wire outrigger, but you would be unlikely to need that much anti-skate (Origin Live calls it 'side bias') anyway. The alloy arm tube itself has captive cartridge tags and good quality captive leads coming out of the end of the arm base. A P-clip is supplied for the arm to be attached to the turntable it is designed to work with. Overall finish is very good, with the metacrylate arm plate adding some contrast to the shiny chrome yoke and counterweight and the black anodised arm tube. It's not SME or Graham-grade finish, but neither is it SME or Graham-grade price. Effective mass of the arm is 12g, making the arm a shoe-in for moderate to low-compliance cartridges (in other words; the majority of modern cartridges).

The good thing about the Zephyr is it's remarkably free from voodoo. The manual (half a dozen pages of A4, stapled together) is clear and informative, and installation and set-up is quick and easy. There's not many parameters to mess up, and the alignment protractor supplied does the trick (it's got a series of parallel lines printed on it, too; doesn't sound like a big deal, but these can be used as sight lines when adjusting VTA). All you need is a stylus gauge to check downforce and a test disc to set side bias. Origin Live recommends setting by test tone from the test disc rather than trying to compensate on a blank record. I tend to agree. The only marks against Origin Live's set up instructions is it discusses azimuth as already set, but there doesn't appear to be a method for adjusting azimuth. This could cause confusion.

In essence, the arm gives a 'best of all possible worlds' performance, seeming to couple the sense of freedom and sheer lyricism of a unipivot with the frequency extension and dynamic range of a gimballed arm. It's also an exceptionally detailed and expansive presentation, big-boned but not overblown.

This has to be one of the smoothest high frequency sounds from a tonearm; not squashed or too polished, but just smooth. This doesn't just mean Bob Dylan's harmonica sounds less thin and bright it means Dylan's voice itself extends itself past his own nasal cavities, when playing 'Hurricane' on Desire, and it means Beck's

► backing synth chimney sound soars off into the aether in 'The Golden Age' on *Sea Change*.

The very next track also had something to offer. It highlighted the Zephyr's free and open bass. It's deep too; playing an ancient Decca SXL of *The Pirates of Penzance*, you easily could hear the floorboards deep creaks and groans as the singers climbed the aging stage. That's hard to dig out through many arms (it's an SME V thing and beyond, generally) but resolved here well. Yes, a SME would have fuller and deeper bass, and a Funk FX•R would have the more neutral and natural (absence of) tone, but the Zephyr gets mighty close, and sounds like it's enjoying playing the music while doing so.

When put up against some serious competition, the Zephyr holds its own well. OK, so it's not got the sumptuous finish of a Graham or an SME, it doesn't have the sense of flow of the Artemis Labs/Schroeder arm or is capable of the disappearing act that the Funk arm is so adept at, but it has an organic sense of order it bestows upon the music that marks it out as a high-end arm without the high-end price tag.

This is a very good arm at a very, very good price. It's an enthusiast's arm, made by an enthusiast for an enthusiast; one who is prepared to overlook the fair-to-good finish and the entirely explicable but nonetheless disconcerting rattling bearings. I can imagine they will partner this with a cartridge costing as much as the arm, on a good turntable and getting a sound quality that anyone would fall in love with. If you think the high-end begins with high price and ends with bling, the Origin Live Zephyr will prove a breath of fresh air for vinyl lovers. A strong recommendation. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Effective Length: 240mm
 Effective Mass: 12g
 Overhang: 17.24mm
 Offset angle: 23°
 Length of external cable: 1.2m
 Weight: 620g
 Price: £950

Manufactured by: Origin Live
 URL: www.originlive.com
 Tel: +44(0)2380 578877



EQUIPMENT REVIEW



Trilogy 933 headphone amplifier

By Alan Sircom

As a Londoner, it's a moment of rare joy that I come across a product made in my hometown. With the inevitable drift eastward, making things in one of the most expensive cities in the world seems untenable, despite the infrastructure and availability of skilled workers London brings to the table. Trilogy Audio is one of the few exceptions; its products are designed and built in London to uncompromising standards. The new Trilogy 933 headphone amplifier typifies that stance.

The headphone amp is a two-box design. The business end is made out of a solid billet chassis, designed to look cool and reduce any potential deleterious effects caused by resonance and microphony. By making the top, sides front and rear from a single billet of aluminium, it looks fantastic, and the device has just two sets of stereo phono inputs, a ¼" jack output and a captive lead reaching to the power supply.

This second box is more blunt in design, a folded aluminium case with two green LEDs at the rear and not a lot else. There isn't even a power switch. Nic Poulsen, Trilogy's chief designer, is very much a valve man, and very much a power supply man (his other business is ISOL-8). So, when it comes to designing a power supply for a device, he doesn't just go for the simple switch-mode PSU or even a transformer-coupled device. He goes for full choke regulation. This is basically an inductor that, because it tends to resist any short-term changes in current flow, a choke will smooth out ripples in the voltage waveform. Think of it like a really good filter, feeding the main circuit exactly what it needs to sound good. It's essentially the same choke regulated power supply used by Trilogy for its phono stage, but with different voltage demands.

Back to the amplifier box. Under that case is a pure class A, fully single-ended design, with just one output device per channel. Unlike many – even many surprisingly expensive – headphone amplifiers, this is an all-discrete design, without an op-amp in sight. Trilogy doesn't just laugh in the face of op-amps, it tweaks the nose of component quality. There is no such thing as 'good enough' inside the 933. Every component on the board – as well as the board itself – is of the highest quality and closest tolerance. This is because through a barrage of listening tests through a range of headphones, Trilogy found that even more than in conventional audiophile components, the smallest changes yield massive differences in performance. So swapping out those expensive Mundorfs with cheaper capacitors might lower the cost, but it slightly undermines the performance at the same time, and if you are looking at just shy of two grand for a headphone amp, any use of the word 'undermines' is unacceptable.

Perhaps the most controversial choice in the product design involves the absence of controls on the 933 itself. If you lose the remote, the 933 will just sit there like a brick, because there is no on-amp volume, balance, source selection, mute or even standby button; it's all on the remote and the remote



▶ only. Aside from the headphone jack, all the front panel has is a simple red LED volume display (which ramps up and down when the amp is warming up), a remote eye and a source indicator light. Not even a power switch: minimalist in the extreme.

The logic behind this is three-fold. First, fitting such things to the front panel would necessitate a bigger case, which means a higher price to the end user. Second, Trilogy looks upon this as a headphone upgrade for an existing system, rather than the ultimate desktop amplifier, so it's likely to be in situ in the equipment stand rather than within arm's length. Finally, the current crop of motorised volume pots just didn't sound as good as the 933s system; I guess you could go to an exotic ladder-resistor array, but with that also comes extra expense. When it was field tested among the desktop warriors who frequent deep-geek headphone sites, this wasn't seen as a negative element to the design, despite many holding the remote inches from the remote eye. It's more of a bold step than a deal-breaker, in my opinion.

From the get-go, Trilogy wanted to make the 933 the headphone amplifier that can drive even the toughest headphones. OK, so not electrostatic headphones (which require an energiser/amplifier, not simply an amplifier). The company didn't want the amp to be phased by 'the sound of clipping' beast headphone loads, so it made sure it was capable of driving the infamous HiFiMAN HE-6 headphone, figuring that if you can make a decent noise from these headphone amp crushers, you can make two half-bricks with a headband come to life. While there may be some notional future headphone that has a load so punishing that it needs a kilowatt power amplifier to move it out of first gear, in the real world, the Trilogy 933 can power absolutely anything with ear buds or headphones that isn't a Stax.

To demonstrate this, Trilogy supplied a pair of the aforementioned HiFiMAN HE-6 headphones-in-search-of-an-amplifier and it jumps that particular hurdle without a care in the world. It not only controls them, but can happily play them at high levels without either a change in tonality or smoke billowing out of the nearest vent. Most headphone amps will either sacrifice volume, or make the tonal balance tilt out of kilter, or simply give up the ghost faced with trying to play the HE-6 at a fair lick. This simple 'play Metallica's 'Enter Sandman' at high volume and see what happens' test is a surprisingly sure sign that the Trilogy 933 can take anything and everything you throw at it without even the slightest grumble. On more 'real world' cans – including semi-pro and pro studio and location models from Sennheiser and Sony, as well as less punishing HiFiMan models – the 933 simply allows them to do what they were made to do, and end up sounding better than you expect them to sound. That said, I suspect most people will end up using the 933 with top end headphones and the amp's ability to let them fly too makes it a default choice for serious in-head listening.

It's a supremely clean sounding headphone amplifier, albeit ever so slightly pitched more toward the warm/clean rather than the etched/clean. In fact, I'd be more ▶



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- comfortable with classing this as accurate or neutral and clean, just with enough body to prevent incredibly detailed (or very dark sounding) headphones dominating the sound.

It's also supremely reactive to the music playing. It needs to be; compared to a loudspeaker amplifier, those headphone transducers are very low distortion and extremely lightweight, and as a consequence they frequently have the speed of an electrostatic loudspeaker and the dynamic drive of cone and dome designs. The 933 reacts accordingly, and this gives the headphones on the end of the amp a sense of freedom and insight and balance that can sometimes be found wanting.

The thing about the 933 is it isn't an amplifier that leaves its mark on the music. It lets the source and the headphones do that. Which is precisely what any good headphone amp should do. The difference being the 933 can do it with any headphone you plug into it, which is precisely what most headphone amplifiers don't do. There is a house 'Trilogy' sound – extremely musically engaging, detailed, dynamic and controlled, especially in the very full bass – but most of that is just another way of saying 'uncoloured'. If there is a characteristic aspect of the sound, it's in the imagery. The 933 limits the lateralisation effects inherent to headphones (where sounds appear eerily inside your head... although most of this is a function of the headphones rather than the amplifier), but it doesn't have pin-point precision of image. Instead, the Trilogy sound goes for the whole instead of the sum of the parts. The sense of staging is natural and enveloping, not broken into its component parts. The 933 needs a good signal – the Eximus DP1 was a perfect partner – but when suitably partnered gives a performance that is likely all you'll ever need from a headphone amp, unless you have a burning desire to go balanced.

It's odd. Two grand doesn't buy you much in the way of amplifiers in the high-end arena these days, but with the Trilogy 933 you get one of the best – if not *the* best – headphone amplifiers money can buy. Audiophiles are slowly coming to realise the potential of in-head sound and headphone users are beginning to understand what high-end values can do for their listening pleasure. And straddling those two factions is the Trilogy 933. Try it, your ears will thank you. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs: 2x RCA single-ended

Output: 1/4" headphone jack

Input impedance: $\geq 20k\Omega$

Output impedance: $\leq 3\Omega$

Gain (max): 19dB

Power output: 800mW into 300 ohms

250mW into 60 ohms

Frequency response: 15Hz-120kHz
 $\pm 0.5\text{dB}$

THD: $\leq 0.05\%$ 10mW into 300 ohms

S/N ratio: $\geq 85\text{dB}$, A weighted

Phase: Phase correct, non-inverting

Dimensions (933 amplifier, WxDxH):

15x22x3.8cm

Dimensions (PSU, WxDxH):

13.2x22.5x5.7cm

Weight (package): 5.7kg

Price: £1,995

Manufactured by: Trilogy Audio

URL: www.trilogyaudio.com

Distributed by: Symmetry

URL: www.symmetry-systems.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1727 865488



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SME

“The best pick-up arm in the world”

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Anthem Statement M1

By Paul Messenger



A year or so back I purchased a pair of monoblock power amps. Each has a solitary output PX4 triode valve, originally introduced in 1929, and each amplifier was reputed to deliver around 3.5W. Needless to say, I didn't buy them for their power output, but rather because they sound quite delicious, especially through the midband.

Conceptually such an amplifier couldn't be much further from the subject of this review. The Anthem Statement M1 is also a monoblock power amplifier, but it features the very latest Class D solid state technology and delivers a positively humungous maximum power output of more than 2kW, depending on the load. (In fact it's rated at 1kW into 8ohms and an astonishing 2kW into 4ohms!)

Indeed, the enormous available power output does seem to be a major rationale behind an amplifier that's clearly aimed primarily at the AV customer – the web address is www.anthemav.com, and Anthem is part of Paradigm, a well established Canadian operation known primarily for specialising in AV. However, the M1 has also garnered something of a reputation as a top class power amplifier full stop, and the associated brochure makes much of its performance superiority over earlier Class D implementations. Indeed, one is inclined to wonder whether Anthem might be protesting the M1's innocence of alleged Class D failings a little too vigorously, as it discusses a number of criticisms that hadn't even occurred to me.

The M1s certainly aren't the sort of cheapo confections that seem to have given Class D amps a dubious reputation amongst audiophiles. The UK price is £3,500 each, so that a £7,000 stereo pair is well up there in serious audiophile amplifier territory, and well above that normally expected for AV products. One key question for this review must therefore be whether this amplifier is really able to compete with more obviously audiophile oriented components.

However, there are at least two other important issues to consider. There's no denying that the power amplifier does play a role in the sound, but because it's near the end of the chain it doesn't have the biggest impact on the total sound of the hi-fi. One should therefore perhaps question whether it really deserves as much attention as it usually receives.

More significantly maybe, do we really need an amplifier capable of such a massive power output? I can understand this being useful for a PA system required to fill a large space, and I guess some movie special effects (like explosions) might also make heavy power demands, but 2kW/4ohms does seem rather excessive for replaying music program with normal loudspeakers in a domestic setting. Perhaps personal prejudice is playing a part here, as experience has tended to make me suspicious of the most powerful conventional Class AB amplifiers, and I've long felt that the first Watt is by far the most important one.

Still, prejudice shouldn't be allowed to get in the way. The fact that this is an immensely powerful amplifier certainly needn't be a bad thing, nor that it operates in Class D. After all, the only thing that really matters is how well it sounds. But before going there, it's time to curtail this opening rant and get on with a description of the device in question. ▶

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▶ Although the plan dimensions are close to standard, given its power output, the M1 is an extraordinarily lightweight (9kg) and slim design (height is 5.7cms inc feet). That's mainly because it doesn't have the massive transformer and hefty capacitors associated with a conventional linear power supply, using instead a much smaller high frequency switch-mode supply. Anthem stresses that the 'D' in Class D has nothing to do with digital audio per se; rather it appears to use some proprietary variation on the PWM (pulse width modulation) theme. Each unit operates in balanced mode, using eight MOSFET power transistors, which not only run in a high efficiency 'power factor correction' mode, but also have a heat extracting pipe arrangement connected to the external side fins.

However, standing the amplifiers on a flat surface revealed that neither was itself quite flat (possibly because these demonstrator samples had done a lot of travelling). The optional rack-mounting 'ears' might be useful if a rack is available, but in fact we opted for specialist tripod supports for the listening tests (see later). The unit has rather more features than most of the type. Input connections are provided on both single-ended (RCA phono) and balanced XLR sockets, the latter with a 0/-6dB option, while the power amp may be activated in three ways – via a conventional front panel switch, a current sensor, or an AV-style trigger arrangement.

Anthem claims that the M1 has a high conversion efficiency, which was borne out by the fact that although the units did get quite warm, the temperature seemed to remain pretty constant, largely irrespective of the power levels the amplifiers were asked to deliver.

Listening tests began by stacking the two units and placing them onto a flat granite slab, simply substituting them for the Naim NAP500 that is normally used in the system. The rest of the system in use at the time consisted of FM radio (Magnum Dynalab MD106T), vinyl (a hybrid Linn/Rega turntable with Soundsmith SG cartridge) and a Naim NDX/UnitiServe digital source, all feeding a Naim NAC552 pre-amp with DR power supply. Speakers were Bowers & Wilkins 800 Diamonds, chosen not only because of their fine sound quality but also their prodigious power handling capacity. (And yes, they did survive!)

First impressions were generally very positive, with an exceptionally low (effectively inaudible) noise floor, and a crisp, clean sound with notably explicit vocal delivery. This is partly because the bass region is not only very clean but also on the dry side, while the extreme top end of the audio band sounds a little rolled off and lacking in air and transparency.

“Anthem stresses that the ‘D’ in Class D has nothing to do with digital audio per se; rather it appears to use some proprietary variation on the theme of PWM (pulse width modulation) theme.”



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H300



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www.hegel.com

- That combination of these two observations probably explains the amplifier's mild tendency to emphasise the midband and presence parts of the audio spectrum. Intriguingly, this has the dual effect of simultaneously emphasising and dulling speech, so that the end result projects a voice strongly, but without the full crispness that assists intelligibility. While this might deliver fine midband dynamic expression, it also somewhat reduces speech intelligibility at very low volume levels.

As I turned up the wick, the sound certainly got louder...and louder, until I feared for both the speakers and my ears. However, it also seemed to become progressively harsher as the volume was gradually increased, and I noticed that the top of the uppermost amplifier was vibrating quite significantly. Mindful of the fact that neither amplifier was precisely flat, I decided to use tripod supports – a Vertex AQ Kinabalu underneath the lower one, and (so as not to scratch its top with spikes) Synergistic MIGs between the two amps. Now securely tripod supported, vibration in the casework seemed much reduced, and so was most of the high level harshness.

There's no arguing with the imaging here, which seemed precise and well focused in both left-to-right and depth dimensions. A distinct difference in character seems to exist between solid state and valve equipment, and if one draws a line that goes from 'extreme valve' (single-ended triode) via the hybrids to 'extreme solid state', the M1's essentially dry delivery, alongside its exceedingly tight sense of control, places it firmly at the solid state end of the spectrum.

The Anthem Signature M1 does a number of things very well indeed. It's immensely powerful, and goes exceptionally loud without any obvious drama, even when driving a known 'difficult' load, while the casework and heatsink fins remain merely warm at all power levels. Some care needs to be taken over supporting the amplifiers, as our samples didn't sit properly on their four fitted feet, and certainly sounded better when using proprietary tripod arrangements. The overall character is clean and dry with a wide dynamic range, though some lack of top end sparkle and 'air' also seemed audible under our conditions. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Class D monoblock power amplifier

Input sensitivity: 3.2V for 1,000W/8ohms

Input impedance: 10kohms (RCA), 20kohms (XLR)

Rated power outputs: 1,000W/8ohms; 2,000W/4ohms

Power consumption (typical in use): 300W

Dimensions (WxHxD): 49x5.7x47.6cm

Weight: 9kg

Price: £3,499 per channel

Manufactured by: Paradigm Electronics Inc

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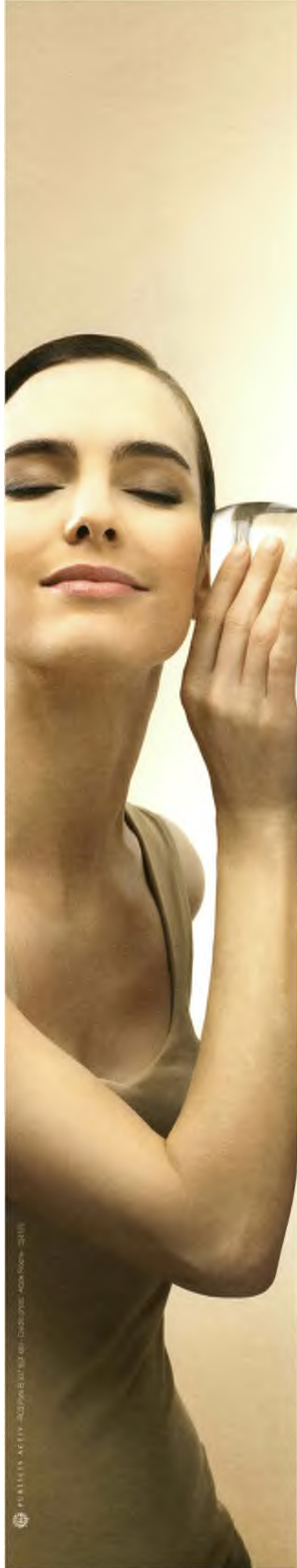
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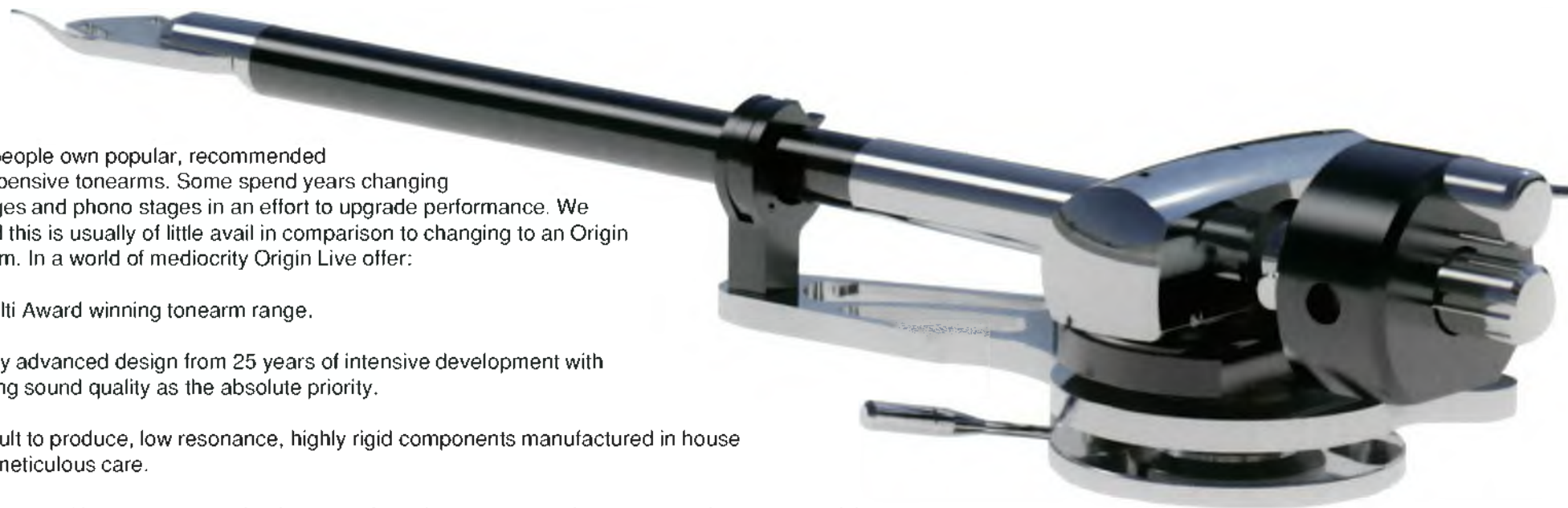
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Music First Audio Baby Reference preamplifier

By Alan Sircom

There's a move within all digital audio circles to suggest the standalone preamplifier is next for the chop. An increasing number of digital devices now sport some kind of source selection and attenuation system – analogue or digital – built into the output stage, obviating the need for a separate preamplifier stage.

The Music First Audio Baby Reference is the preamplifier's case for the defence.

It's not hard to see why the preamp is the focus for such negativity. Most of them, frankly, suck. There's a degree of forgiveness of the preamp's iniquities at lower price levels, but when you go up to the rarefied atmosphere at the top end of things, good preamps are relatively rare beasts. Very few of the top-enders could name more than half a dozen preamps that fit their needs, and generally the same two or three names feature in all of their wish-lists. Things go awry somewhere in the process of taking a line level signal and adding gain to that signal. It's like adding salt to cooking; too little and the flavours in the meal never live up to their potential, too much and the salt overpowers the taste (and your blood pressure spikes).

The Baby Reference – like all of MFA's 'preamps' – does things differently. They have no active gain stages, no juice (mains or battery) feeding those line stages to undermine the signal. It's a passive preamplifier, but not in the way passives used to be passive. The old way of doing this was either buy the best potentiometer you could afford, or make a ladder array of good quality resistors to act as an attenuator. Both had their fans, but neither worked properly; practically every audio nerd (including this one) has at some time or another

soldered a decent potentiometer into a RS box with a knob on the front, a few wires on the inside and some phono sockets on the back. And we've all been hugely frustrated at the potentially wonderful sound undermined by having to keep signal paths and cable lengths measured in inches to prevent attenuation, or by having the passive pre so close to the power amp it picks up hum from the transformer.

MFA's big advantage is its parent company is Stevens and Billington, a transformer manufacturer of some not inconsiderable repute. So, when it came to making a passive preamplifier, Music First Audio's logical choice was to go with a transformer attenuator – first the TX101 and then the TX102 (used here in its Mk IV 'Nickel Brick' guise). This is a hand-crafted transformer formed of layers of wire and paper around a large core, with twenty three taps coming off it, allowing for 24 volume levels, from mute to -60dB to unity gain. The preamp can accept four unbalanced and two balanced inputs and has both balanced and single-ended outputs.

The big and obvious advantage with using a transformer as a volume control is it effectively impedance matches source component to power amplifier. The big, but almost overlooked, advantage to transformer volume control is it acts as an isolator between source component and power amplifier too.

I have to confess some personal concerns about passive preamps, based on old prejudices. I thought that a passive is a wonderful-sounding, but bass-restricted, device. Judging by the performance of the Baby Reference that was pure prejudice, because this preamp delivers a full-fat, full-range, deep and dark bass sound to any decent amp and speaker system.

And what a sound! Or rather, what an absence of sound. This preamp doesn't have a sound, it has a complete absence ▶

▶ of character. In the way you always wanted from good audio, but lost somewhere in the process of getting into 'hi-fi'. It's like getting your ears syringed, or listening to a piece of music for the first time. Nothing is getting in the way between you and the music it seems and the result is a lack of artificiality that is as addictive as it is beguiling.

This makes it hard to pin down, sonically. You keep finding elements of the sound and then thinking to yourself "Oh wait, that was the streamer", or "no, that's in the mix". Moreover, those hackneyed clichés about 'good for classical' or 'great for rock'... you begin to discover that a lot of that has to do with the preamplifier itself. If I had to limit the scope of the Baby Reference to a genre, I'd have to say it's good at reproducing 'sound'. It works refined classical music sound and thrash metal alike with absolute ease of delivery.

The Baby Reference suggests we got the whole active gain stage thing wrong. They get in the way. The best active preamps are those that try to limit the effect of a gain stage in the chain, but the best way of doing that is not to have a gain stage in the first place. When it comes to preamps, that whole 'straight wire with gain' goal of amplification is best done without the gain part, it seems. The Baby Reference proves that from almost the first bar you hear. It parades the iniquities of lesser preamps before your ears, and it makes you wonder if even the best active preamps are actively damaging the sound quality.

It's a great leveller, too. Because, it transpires, a lot of what makes a good front-end 'good' is its ability to keep a lot of power-line nasties from enfeebling the feed to the preamplifier. By taking the ground loop out of the equation altogether, you seem not to need to spend so much on the front end to get good digital performance. My trusty, now-discontinued Lyngdorf CD-1 is already pretty good, but through the Baby Reference showed just what it's capable of. And it's one heck of a lot. You didn't waste your money on that exotic CD player or streamer, but some of the reasons why it's so exotic are surplus to requirements with the Baby Reference.

Audio enthusiasts sometimes tread a thin line between 'purist' and 'puritanical'. This is one of the few products that straddles that divide. OK, so there are puritanical elements to the MFA design (no balance control, no remote, no mono switch, no tone controls and no bright shining blue LED), but this is true to the music through and through. This does hint at the 'downside' (I'd prefer to call it 'limit') to the MFA's use in the wider audiophile world. It's not a preamp for the audiophile everyman; there will be systems where extra gain from the preamplifier is both expected and required. There will be systems where MFA features like a balance control are important. And, despite all but nailing the cable attenuation problem that beset 'pot in a box' passives, it's not the kind

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs: 4x unbalanced RCA, 2x balanced XLR

Outputs: 2x unbalanced RCA, 2x balanced XLR; 2x ground selector toggle switches (one per channel); 24 position level control; "Nickel Brick" (TX102-mkIV) transformers

Dimensions (WxHxD): 25x8.8x26cm

Price: £5,000

Manufactured by: Music First Audio

URL: www.mfaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0) 1424 858260



of preamplifier that should be first choice for those with long runs of unbalanced cables. A few who have learned to love the sound of active gain stages will never quite come to terms with the disappearance of that coloration. I'd contend the MFA is the right way to go if they really want 'high fidelity', but personal taste plays its part.

Music First Audio took a bold step with the Baby Reference. It took all the good stuff from its Reference preamp, put it in the box of the standard MFA preamp and shaved £2,500 from the price tag. In essence, it became its own competition in order to make a product more readily accessible to a wider audiophile market. I've never had the full-blown Reference, but reports from the field suggest the difference between the two in sonic terms is relatively slight in most systems. The difference between the two seems to come down to yet more transformer isolation (record, auxiliary input and main output each have their own transformers), looks and the extra fortnight it takes to build the flagship. On the other hand, those same reports say the jump between the Baby Reference and the Classic v2 is more than substantial enough to justify the £2,800 price differential.

I started this review with the notion that digital can spell the end of the preamplifier. The Music First Audio Baby Reference exposes this as abject nonsense. It's a fantastic device, a no-nonsense design that just might be the best preamplifier I've ever (not) heard in my system. +

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

PSB M4U 2 Active Noise-Cancelling Headphone

By Chris Martens

With the introduction of its M4U 2 active noise-cancelling headphone (£270), the well-known Canadian firm PSB Speakers becomes of the latest entrant in a growing group of speaker makers who have decided to enter the headphone marketplace. But, while PSB is not the first speaker maker to take up the headphone gauntlet, they may be one of the first to turn

a designer of company founder Paul Barton's formidable talents loose on an all-new, clean-sheet-of-paper design—a design that makes a concerted effort to put music first.

It would be fair to say that the M4U 2 was designed to please most of the people (including jaded audiophiles), most of the time. To this end the M4U2 is an active, self-powered headphone that also offers an unusually good passive mode, is designed to serve both as a headphone or as a headset for use with smartphones, and provides—get this—switch-selectable *analog* (not digital) noise-cancellation features. What is more, the M4U 2 pays attention to the little details many competitors overlook, such as ergonomics, beautiful industrial design, self-evident build quality, and exquisite packaging. But even with all these plusses going for it, we think the biggest plus of all is the M4U 2's sound quality. ▶



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► In simple terms, Paul Barton has poured everything he has learned through decades of PSB speaker design directly into the M4U 2, with sonic benefits you can readily hear. Thus, Barton designed the M4U 2 so that it not only measures well in empirical lab tests, but also sounds good, as verified through carefully controlled listening tests. He also voiced M4U 2 to provide what PSB terms an “in-room” feel, meaning the M4U 2 response curve closely matches the *in-room* response characteristics of high-quality loudspeakers—complete with a certain amount of low-frequency “room gain.” Since most records are mixed for playback through loudspeakers, Barton reasoned that it made sense to give the M4U 2 a degree of bass lift similar to that enjoyed by typical loudspeakers. Finally, Barton gave the M4U 2 a feature that, to our knowledge, no other noise cancelling headphone provides: namely, the ability to switch on headphone’s amplifier section *without* engaging the noise-cancellation circuitry, a step that reduces distortion considerably. This, too, is a feature audio purists can easily hear and appreciate. But enough of technical descriptions: how does the M4U 2 sound?

Let me come right out and say it; PSB’s M4U 2 is hands down the best sounding noise-cancelling headphone I’ve yet heard, and it is the only one that invites side-by-side comparison with today’s best mid-priced passive headphones, which is saying a mouthful. This statement implies several things.

First, the voicing curve of the M4U 2 is wonderfully smooth, evenly and accurately balanced, and blessed with a judicious touch

“Barton designed the M4U 2 so that it not only measures well in empirical lab tests, but also sounds good, as verified through carefully controlled listening tests. He also voiced M4U 2 to provide what PSB terms an ‘in-room’ feel.”

of bass lift that, as advertised, conveys the sense of hearing a fine loudspeaker in a real-world listening room. I would argue, though, that the M4U 2 in several respects outperforms even the best of PSB’s loudspeakers. For example, the M4U 2 offers a more transparent, detailed, and focused sound than most loudspeakers do—a sound that gives the headphone an effortlessly vibrant and engaging quality. The M4U 2 also serves up deeply extended, powerful, and yet well-defined bass, bass that few sensibly priced loudspeakers could ever hope to equal. But the most important differentiator of all may be that the M4U 2 is easy to drive—both in passive and active modes—so that it provides vigorous, expansive dynamics without ever sounding like it is working hard.

Some headphone aficionados might argue that open-back headphones often enjoy a small but worthwhile edge in terms of openness and transparency—a stereotype with which I might generally agree, but the M4U 2 seems for the most part an exception to the rule. It has none of the compressed, closed-in sound that some listeners associate with closed-back designs; on the contrary, it sounds unfettered and alive.

Is the M4U 2 fully the equal of today’s best mid-priced passive headphones? When push comes to shove, I think it is not, though the gap is amazingly narrow. Two great mid-priced passive headphones that might to a degree outperform the M4U 2 are the HiFiMAN HE-400 (with Rev2 drivers) and the Shure SRH1440. At their best, both competitors potentially offer a bit more midrange and treble detail, more open and extended highs, and a difficult-to-describe quality of heightened resolution and focus. But here’s the catch: those competitors demand good outboard amps to work their full magic, whereas the M4U 2, which comes very close to matching them in overall performance, comes with a built-in amp and arrives ready to perform optimally. Add in the fact that the PSBs offers noise-cancellation with headset features, and you can see why the M4U 2 might be the go-to choice for pragmatic, real-world listeners (especially those who would rather not invest in outboard headphone amps).

I found the M4U 2s were at their best with their active mode enabled and noise-cancelling features turned off. But with that said, let me mention that the M4U 2 also offers an unusually good-sounding (and easy-to-drive) passive mode; should your batteries die, rest assured that the passive mode ►

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► is eminently listenable. Nevertheless, audio purists will find the M4U2 sounds purer, more vibrant, detailed, and alive with its amp switched on.

The M4U 2's active noise cancelling mode sounds similar, though not identical, to the active mode; in particular, bass and lower mids are not quite as free flowing and expressive once the noise-cancellation circuitry is engaged. I suspect this is because, as PSB specifications indicate, distortion is somewhat higher when noise cancellation is turned on. Overall, the M4U 2's noise cancellation capabilities are very good, though quite as effective as the class-leading Audio-Technica ATH-ANC9. But the tradeoff is that the M4U 2 is by far the most refined musical performer of any of the noise-cancellers I have yet heard.

One way to get the measure of the M4U 2 is try it on the cover of the Rolling Stones' "Under My Thumb" from saxophonist Tim Ries' *Stones World: The Rolling Stones Project, Vol. 2* [Sunny Side Records]. On this album, as on Ries' earlier *The Rolling Stones Project*, the objective has been to provide wildly inventive and yet still quite recognizable jazz/world-music re-creations of popular Stones rock classics—old and well-loved songs made brand new again. For "Under My Thumb", which was recorded in Puerto Rico, Ries tapped the talents of an all-star Latin jazz ensemble and the results are, through a capable headphone at any rate, simply breathtaking.

The song is driven forward by an intensely syncopated, very high energy Latin percussion section and electric bass guitar, with melodic lines supplied by a red-hot horn section and Ries' sax, with the whole works capped off with snarky Latin vocals served up with just the right amount of Jagger-esque swagger. Right off the bat, you notice that lower frequency instruments have plenty of weight, depth and punch, yet are not even vaguely loose or sloppy-sounding. On the contrary, bass transient are—please pardon the pun—"tight as a drum" with tons of crackle and snap. The horn section in general, and Ries' sax in particular, have excellent tonal purity and a lovely burnished glow, but what is particularly gripping is the sheer amount of "bite" and dynamic energy they provide—qualities the M4U 2 captures with impressive vividness and transparency. Finally, we come to the vocals, which are so jaunty and irreverent that seem almost to have the feel of Antonio Banderas channeling the spirit of Jagger himself. Again, the M4U 2's do a great job retrieving each little inflection and point of emphasis, making the vocal lines sound much more lively and realistic. Can the M4U 2s do low-level details? Yes, they can as you'll see if you listen to the very end of the track, where you'll hear the now distant voice of the vocalist (who has stepped away from his mic) saying softly, but with palpable satisfaction and pride in the ensemble's performance, "Yeah, man... ...that's what I'm talkin' about."

Summing up, SB's M4U 2 is one of the most cleverly conceived, well executed, versatile, and good sounding headphones in its price class. It offers purist-grade sound quality; cool-looking industrial design and great fit and finish, terrific comfort and ease of use, headset functionality for smartphone users, and effective noise-cancellation for those constantly on the go. This is why we call the M4U 2 a "headphone for all seasons." Well done, Mr. Barton.+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Circumaural (over-the-ear), closed-back headphone with active noise-cancelling capabilities.

Accessories: Spare set of Leatherette-covered ear pads, airline adapter, 3.5mm mini-jack plug to 6.3mm phone jack plug adapter, two 1.2m signal cables with 3.5mm mini-jack plugs on the headphone side (a monitoring cable for purists, and a headset cable for smartphone listeners), cleaning cloth, zipper closure carrying case made of molded EVA.

Driver complement: 40mm dynamic driver in closed-back housing

Frequency response: 20 Hz – 20kHz, $\pm 1 \frac{1}{2}$ dB

Distortion: Active Mode: 0.25%; Active Noise Cancelling Modes: 0.5%

Sensitivity: 102 dB

Impedance: Passive Mode: 32 Ohms; Active & Active Noise Cancelling Modes: 10k Ohms

Weight: 363g

Price: £270

Manufactured by: PSB Speakers International
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Meet The Ancestors...

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

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

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Ferguson Hill FH009 home theatre system

By Alan Sircom

We don't do home theatre systems!" was the terse initial response to the Ferguson Hill FH009. Thinking it was a full surround sound package, and the reception those products traditionally get from the readers of hi-fi magazines, I thought putting this package into the magazine mix would be a waste of pages. But then I looked a little closer...

Among audiophiles, Ferguson Hill is perhaps best known for its large transparent horn loudspeakers and active subwoofers. Outside the audiophile community, the company has a great reputation for making computer speakers, featuring a cube power amp/subwoofer and a pair of much smaller transparent horn loudspeakers. And the FH009 is – depending on

your viewpoint – a scaled-down version of the former or a scaled-up version of the latter, with transparent horns and – in this case – what looks like a centre channel loudspeaker but is in fact the combined amplifier and subwoofer. The black or white box itself is large enough to rest a TV on, but would look good anywhere a centre speaker looks good, and – because it doesn't have a tweeter or midrange – it is just as happy vertical as horizontal (although the display will look a little odd that way round). It's all very 'designer', in the sort of timeless manner of a Dieter Rams or a Jony Ive design, not something glitzy and gilt out of TOWIE.

Inside the cabinet is two sets of 64 watt class AB amplifiers, one pair for the one-way horn mid-tweeters, another for the subwoofer drivers. At just 13cm across, these aren't the deepest subs around and the bass response is closer to a reasonably large two way standmount, but they do the bottom end job well, leaving the custom inch-high compression driver in the clear acrylic horns to cover the range from 340Hz-20kHz without impediment.

It's installation is easy, because everything apart from source component is in the box. The horns come with a set of thin column stands that double up as cable management (the FH009 comes with it's own very thin silvery twin-core loudspeaker cable, which is so small it's unfortunately easy to wire out of phase), and it sports a remote control too. There's provision for two line inputs at the rear, plus a minijack socket and a USB input at the front. This last is relatively limited in use, neither having Apple Authentication (so no iDevice will see it) nor offering control over files held on a thumbdrive, but it will take a feed from the output of a computer.

Set-up is relatively straightforward. Two small grub screws lock the horns in place atop the stand (or optional wall bracket) and ▶





► if you can screw together something like a uplighter, you are more than qualified to assemble the FH009.

The fascinating part of this is you'd expect those horns to quack like a duck. The clear acrylic horn itself makes a dull thwacking sound when flicked and it sounds like the least vibration – like, say, from putting some energy into the drive unit at its centre



– would kick that thwack sound off. But somehow it doesn't. Yes, there's still that distinctive horn sound, best described by cupping your hands around your mouth and speaking, but in this instance, it's more like your hands are to the sides of your mouth rather than trying to replicate a trumpet's horn.

And this is what makes it a worthwhile inclusion into a hi-fi magazine that, frankly, gets a bit snooty about home cinema products. It makes sound fun. The FH009 is enjoyable, whatever the source. It projects sound

into the room, which is especially useful, given its primary task is to convey voices 'off the telly'. Those sounds are always exciting, energetic, attractive and, well, just fun. OK, so if you are wanting filigree detail and pin-point precision, this isn't ever going to be your thing, but that's not the point. If you have ever said, "Ooh, that sounds nasty, play it again!" or "Hmm, I'm feeling in something of a Dee-light meets Black Sabbath mood today", you'll love the devil-may-care approach it takes to music the FH009 has. It's dynamic too. Music has an effortless quality from the FH009 and reacts to the swells and calms on a score extremely well.

Set with the two horns firing down the room and the listener smack in the sweet-spot, the FH009 gives very good stereo imagery, albeit more width and forward projection than sound behind the loudspeakers. However, it's also surprisingly good off axis; you lose the stereo soundstage precision and far off axis even some of the treble, but once again its role as a stereo speaker set for TV users wins out. It plays well to the room, not just one lucky listener. That fun factor especially reaches round the room.

Part of the attractiveness of the overall sound seems to come from one drive unit taking over the bulk of the frequency range. There's no crossover distortion to get in the way and the overall frequency response is good, although it does suggest a slight roll-off in the highs. This is nothing to get het up about, and as it's somewhat at odds with the current trend toward bright-sounding loudspeakers, it may come as something of a welcome change for many. The integration between horn and sub is good (it does have a boost/cut control on the remote to help it integrate), although the speed of the horns are always going to leave any dynamic driver sound a trifle slower by comparison. In the main, this is not an issue, but those who run the whole gamut of electronics from Naim to Naim might not approve of its take on timing.

In the main though, I found the FH009 an enjoyable and entertaining little system. It's never going to be to everyone's tastes, but I'm one of those people who isn't fond of horn systems and I still liked it, which strikes me as it's doing a lot of things right. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Satellite/Subwoofer/integrated amplifier system

Main loudspeakers: eight home, clear cast acrylic horn

Subwoofer: 2x 130mm bass drivers, eight ohm

Amplifier section: 4x 64 watts, class AB design

Inputs: 2x single-ended RCA, 3.5mm mini-jack, 1x USB

Frequency response: 45Hz-20kHz

Price: £795

Manufactured by: Ferguson Hill

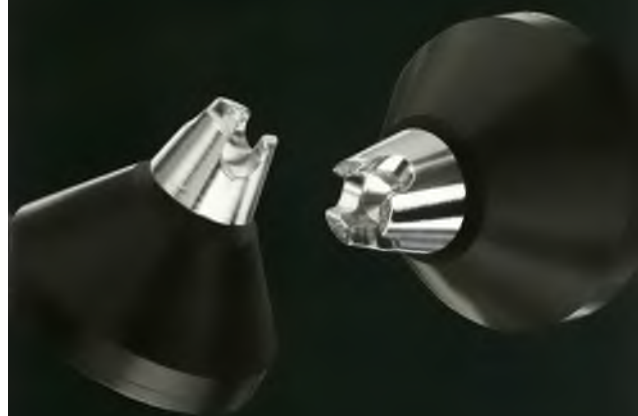
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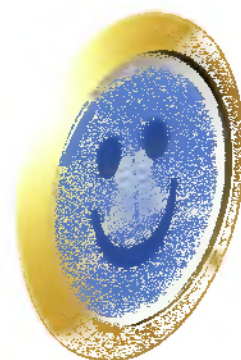


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Alan Sircom hifi+ 87

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Oriton Black Bullets

By Alan Sircom

A 'schoolboy error' nearly scuppered this review. I was inserting the Oriton Black Bullets between cable and connector in a system. Nothing. Back in the bag they went and the product was about to go onto the 'no thanks' pile. Realising I'd inadvertently made a special case where the Black Bullet effect is minimised in different ways I tried it in a more conventional hi-fi setting. Oops!

You see, the BBs are billed as vibration control devices. They sit on the end of an interconnect cable, clamping down on the plugs at the component end and creating effectively a vibration barrier between one piece of electronics and another. OK, so it's impossible for such a vibration control barrier to exist without completely divorcing one device from another, but the Black Bullets give it their best, ahem, shot. It's more "a select few will pass" rather than "none shall pass".

Unfortunately, the people at Oriton are not exactly helping their corner by saying, "these vibrations which we call monsters just sit below the surface". A better description would be "these vibrations are caused by self-noise from a transformer in one device leaking into another". And that's the reason for the first schoolboy error almost ending the review. I used them with the excellent Music First Audio Baby Reference preamp, probably the one audio component on the planet designed to eliminate the song of the transformer in the chain. Something more descriptive than 'monsters' might have helped here!

Used between the Eximus DP1 DAC and an Edge G3 integrated amp was a very different matter. Any notional negative effects that come from introducing an extra component in the cable path are more than mitigated by the way it helps delineate leading edges, and the effect that has on the presence region. The effect isn't a powerful one, but it helps delineate the attack of individual notes, making them sound less indistinct (and often less peaky if the recording is compressed) and that makes the upper part of the midband just a bit more open in the process. The BBs are also extremely consistent, making the same performance enhancement in almost any setting, the MFA being the exception that proves the rule.

Oriton also claims airborne vibration undermines the performance of a system and that too is helped by the Black Bullets. I'm not so convinced by this: the performance would be less noticeable when I switched from the G3 integrated to the Trilogy 933 headphone amp (and it wasn't), and there would have been a mild effect when used with the MFA (and there wasn't). I think the BBs work primarily on eliminating any potential self-noise 'rattling' from one device rattling down the cable to the next. I'm prepared to give this some benefit of the doubt, because if used with a power amp between a pair of loudspeakers playing at full tilt, airborne vibration is likely to be at its worst, and the BBs might just help here.

Of course, such things irritate the hell out of a certain section of the online audio community. As cables can't make a difference to them, things that



glom onto those cables have them foaming at the mouth. No need to actually try the things, the online drumhead kangaroo court has spoken! I'd say, give them a go – if you can't hear a difference, there's a two-week no-questions asked returns period. In most cases, I'd guess Oriton will get to keep the money, and you'll get to have better leading edges to your music.

Finally, there's a sneaky cheap bonus here: Naim users lusting after a Hi-Line interconnect, but either don't have or don't want to spend the £600+ required can instead spend £55 on Black Bullets and get most of the same from their existing cables. Result! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Price: £54.95 per pair

Manufactured by: Oriton

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"...So, be warned; it's quite likely that - having heard what one PAB stand can do for your sound - you'll start thinking about buying more platforms. I speak from bitter experience here; I'm so impressed with what one does, I'm looking at buying two or three more!" [Jimmy Hughes HiFi+ issue90]

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What makes good hi-fi sound bad?

music matters

By Alan Sircom

It's an all-too-common problem with audio equipment. Some systems, even those comprising the very best products on the planet, end up making a sound like someone tipping a sack of spoons down a fire escape. It's the high-end's dirty little secret, but the simple acquisition of these fine audio pieces does not automatically confer wonderful sound upon the listener.

It's perhaps understandable. These are the aural equivalent of Formula 1 cars, with all the fine-tuning and finessing that entails. The trouble is, with the network of high-end dealers slowly unraveling worldwide, a lot of the skills of the past masters of the install are disappearing. And the results are frequently disappointing.

Synergy – or the lack of it – is part of the problem, albeit often more of an excuse than an explanation. Although on-paper specifications suggest that practically any product can work with practically any other product, in reality there are some matches that work better than others. Gross mismatches (usually between arm and cartridge, or amp and loudspeaker) are rare these days, but the difference between a so-so match and something magical is best determined by listening. A good dealer or distributor should perform some of that selection process in advance. Sadly, few still do this.

The biggest obstacle to extracting good sound out of any system is the interaction between speaker and room. The extremes – huge speaker, tiny room or tiny speaker, huge room – can sometimes prove remarkable but can also end up sounding terrible. British audio systems have often fared better than their larger American high-end counterparts because they rarely push the frequency or dynamic range envelope; a small loudspeaker (like the LS3/5a) with a lovely midrange, a distinct sound pressure ceiling and an 'unthreatening' bass and treble will never 'set off' a room and can be used in many settings without too much trauma.

What seems odd to me is just how few audio systems feature room treatment to tie the knot in the marriage of speaker and room. This lack of interest in room treatment extends even to show demonstrations, where the company is demonstrating in a hotel room; effectively playing music in an oversized cardboard box coated in reflective paint. This is changing, but changing slowly. While the best way would be to measure and then treat the room on a case-by-case basis, simply inserting a few bass traps in the corners and some absorption on the first reflection points and a combination of reflection and diffusion along the front and rear walls as a 'one size fits all' approach would be better than nothing.

Another crucial step is the installation and the listening required to bring that installation to life. Generally, the manufacturers instructions give the end user a guideline to installation... and most people stop right there. The first piece of music is often played at this point, and it is here things go awry. That first piece of music should be used to inform the listener what is good or bad about the sound, not simply be used as a

final check to ensure everything works well.

Small, precision changes and adjustments in the system at this point – evaluated by using a consistent variety of pieces of music you know exceptionally well – can make significant differences in performance.

These evaluation discs need careful selection in their own right. The danger is setting up a system with 'demo' discs will make it sound wonderful... right up until someone wants to play something normal. Use music that challenges the system instead.

There is a large caveat here – it's the music, not the sound of that music, which is key in this installation process. It's all too easy to get so carried away by listening to the articulation of the singer and trying to perfect that aspect of the recording that you forget the whole piece of music. It's also possible to do the same in reverse, and make a sound that is sublimely coherent and inherently musical, but hard to resolve fine detail. If one at the expense of the other is what you crave, fine, but in most cases a sense of balance is in order. Listen for the details, take a break, then listen for the music. Then do it again. If you can involve a few quasi-interested third parties unconnected with the installation process, so much the better. Then when you are happy, sleep on it and listen again the next day, as objectively as possible.

Skip any of these stages at your peril.

I've been painting with a broad brush here, but I am concerned that the lost art of the install is undermining our hobby. And the recent round of shows did little to dissuade me of that position. So it's time to do something about this.

Watch this space... +

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record reviews

How To Read Them

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

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

This issue's featured reviewers are:

DD – Dennis D Davis

AS – Alan Sircom

PT – Pete Trewin

	CD		120g LP
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	DVD		Availability As S/H LP
	SACD		Vinyl Double Album
	Hybrid SACD		45 RPM
	Multi-Channel		



Beth Hart

Bang Bang Boom Boom

Provogue



Beth Hart is no stranger to the pages of this magazine. She's been the subject of review and interview alike, documenting her life and work. But, for someone who's already had a career that defies categorisation marks yet another change in direction.

After her last solo venture, Hart collaborated with blues guitarist Joe Bonamassa and did a little work for charity with rock god Slash, but *Bang Bang Boom Boom* deserves to be Hart's breakthrough album; a more polished, lavish, upbeat and commercial venture than *My California*, her last solo album. Tracks like the title track or the opener 'Baddest Blues' have show her vocal range and songwriting talents remain undimmed (a very fine rendition on Jools Holland's show helps here too).

It's an album of two halves, and uniformly excellent for that. After the fine blues-rock of the first few tracks (especially the powerful slow-blues of 'Caught Out In The Rain'), Hart goes eclectic, whether it's the big band jollies of 'Swing That Thing Back Around', the neo-Gospel of 'Spirit of God' or the excellent 'The Ugliest House on the Block', with its reggae-complaint-rock feel... they are all showstoppers. The crisp, in-the-studio sound from producer Kevin Shirley is the icing on the cake. **AS**

RECORDING

MUSIC



Diana Krall

Glad Rag Doll

Verve



Most audiophiles are men of a certain age. Some audiophiles like Diana Krall. Some men of a certain age like pictures of women in their undercrackers. So, a Diana Krall album featuring the said Mrs Costello displaying a discreet amount of gusset is a sure fire winner.

Glad Rag Doll is a baker's dozen of vaudeville and jazz tunes from the 1920s and 30s (with one notable exception) and given a thorough going over, by Ms K, T-Bone Burnett at the faders and a fine assembly of musicians in the studio (and Elvis Costello, who seems intent on sounding like a carney barker). Krall loses some of that aloof, detached quality in the process.

She seems most comfortable with a minimal accompaniment, especially if it's just her at the piano, but Burnett's influence runs deep too, with a more swampy, bluesy backing to tracks like 'I'm a Little Mixed Up', and that notable exception, an overlong reworking of Doc Pomus' 'Lonely Avenue'.

Diana Krall's followers have given *Glad Rag Doll* a mixed reception. That's the problem with playing it safe: when you try something different, your fans don't like it. Personally, though, this is one of the few Diana Krall albums that I could listen to without coming out in hives. **AS**

RECORDING

MUSIC



**Field Music****Plumb**

Memphis Industries

CD 180_g

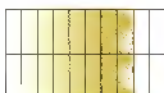
The fourth cut from Sunderland's Brewis brothers is one of those uniquely British oddities that make our musical landscape truly wonderful. There's something remarkably early-70s about Peter and David Brewis's work here. Quirky doesn't cut it.

My concern was this would quickly pall and sound very arch, as if a couple of art students happened upon a Syd Barrett album and decided to copy it. But it doesn't. OK, there are some less than perfect tracks in the middle section of the album – 'A Prelude to Pilgrim Street' is a bit of a dead end and it's followed by 'Guillotine', which sounds like filler – but in the main it's an album of rare charm and sophistication, and kind of what you might have happened if XTC had formed ten years earlier, and practiced in The Move's basement. Only without all the folk and recreational pharmaceuticals.

The sound is good too, although the sheer randomness of the whole album means it's pretty far from 'acoustic instruments in a live setting'. Nevertheless, it's not cut hot and is generally very well produced.

I'm not sure how well this album will fare outside of the UK, because it has a very high 'WTF' factor. It almost needs subtitles. But who cares... it's eccentric and you'll love it for that. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC

**Godspeed You!
Black Emperor****'Alleujah! Don't Bend! Ascend!'**
ConstellationCD 150_g

These are three words I never expected to put in print: 'new Godspeed album'. Then the 'band' reformed to tour in 2011 and then a new album – '*Alleujah! Don't Bend! Ascend!*' – arrived seemingly out of nowhere. It's the first Godspeed You! Black Emperor album since 2002's *Yanqui U.X.O.* and it's a belter!

The Canadian experimental post-rock collective creates not quite ambient drone music. It's Frippertronics played by Hawkwind; indefinable stuff.

Alleujah! is just four tracks; two around twenty minutes long and two about six minutes long (the LP is made up of one 12" and one 7" platter, changing the running order, but reflecting the music itself). The two long tracks – 'Mladic' and 'We Drift Like Worried Fire' were being played live by GBYE before the band went into hibernation.

As ever, instruments are obscure, treated, crunked up. Personally, I think it's marvellous, thrilling, moving and edgy; perhaps not as breathtaking as *Lift Your Skinny Fists Like Antennas To Heaven*, or quite as good sounding as the Steve Albini-produced *Yanqui U.X.O.*, but this is seminal, must have stuff. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC

**The Kennedys****Closer than you know**
The Kennedys

CD

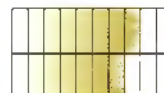
Originally out of Austin, Texas (via New York), this indie rock duo of Maura and Pete Kennedy have been doing the rounds successfully in the US for two decades, but have had little commercial success in the UK. *Closer Than You Know*, their 11th album, looks set to change that.

The dozen tracks demonstrate the duo have honed their craft over the years, these are hook-laden, jangly-guitar pop tracks that are very easy on the ear. Maura's voice especially has that lilting quality reminiscent of someone like Natalie Merchant or Charlotte Gainsbourg, and the guitar parts are very much Byrds-inspired. And let's face it, any group that writes a song about the passing of Alex Chilton of Big Star gets a free pass, and 'Big Star Song' does just that.

For all the polished performance, these songs are remarkably pure, unadulterated pop. It's Sophistipop, of the sort that never went away and doesn't age. Good sounding, intelligent and very, very catchy.

It's also very well recorded in places, especially given its poppy nature. Most tracks are a wall of sound, but even here they are not clipped or compressed. A few – like 'Winter Lies' or 'Marina Dream' are just excellent recordings of voices, guitar and not a lot else. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC



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Ben Webster & "Sweets" Edison

Wanted to do One Together
ORG 17/Columbia CS 8691

There are only so many Ben Webster albums, and a good many of them are indispensable. This is one of the finest sessions and among the better sounding Webster albums, capturing the amazing sound of Webster's warm tone rich in overtones on this set of ballads and swing tunes, with Sweets Edison's sympathetic trumpet sharing the front line. In this 1962 release, Ben and Sweets are supported by a rhythm of Hank Jones, George Duvivior and Clarence Johnson. Webster's famous balladry is in full flower in *How Long Has This Been Going On* while Edison's long tenure with the Basie Band shows through in the alternating swing tunes such as 'Better Go'.

Although just a quintet, this is a big sounding record and at times it's hard to believe that there are only two horns on the front line. The piano is in the right channel with drums and bass in the left, with the two horns filling in the center without too much spotlighting. On the ballads, Ben takes over center stage and all else fades into the background. Bernie Grundman mastered this ORG release. The handsome foldout cover holds the two 45-RPM LPs which bear the historically accurate lack "360 Sound" labels. I used to prefer this LP in mono but this stereo is now my preferred version. DD

RECORDING
MUSIC

Duke Ellington
Ellington Indigos

Impex 6010/Columbia CS 8053

Next to *Kind of Blue*, Ellington's *Indigos* may be the biggest jazz audiophile chestnut, an LP every record collector worth his or her salt has made a top priority of bagging. It's a recording made by Columbia in 1958 at the height of its recording prowess, and the fabulous sound achieved in this recording is among the very best things Columbia ever recorded. Ellington was being "rediscovered" in the 1950s and while some may carp that he wasn't up to his earlier standards, the sessions he recorded for Columbia are still among recorded music's highest achievements.

The arrangements and song selection on this album are out of this world. Paul Gonsalves' solo on *Where or When* is one of the most beautiful recordings he ever made. This reissue by Impex, mastered by Kevin Gray. The highs have not disappeared from the tapes—cymbals retain their shimmer, and the upper registers of the piano have not suffered from tape degradation. Indeed, in the high frequencies the Impex has more information than my original pressing. Improvements can also be noted in the middle registers, where the instruments have a slightly fuller, more textured sound than on the already fine original. This is ear and soul candy wrapped in a tidy package. **DD**

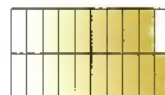
RECORDING
MUSIC

Gram Parsons
Grievous Angel

Mobile Fidelity/Reprise UDSACD 2059

Gram Parsons is best known for bringing country music to the Byrds on their album *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*, but for me his masterpiece is *Grievous Angel*, his second solo album for Reprise, released after he died at 26 in 1973 of a drug overdose. Parsons had befriended Emmylou Harris in 1971 and she sang on his first album *GP* and learned country music from Gram, singing harmony on all but one of the tunes on this album. Her crystalline voice is a perfect match for Parsons, and the collaboration started a lifetime of Harris carrying the torch for Parsons' 'cosmic American music'. The album has influenced musicians ever since, earning Parsons the title father of country rock.

The music still sounds fresh today. When Dylan teamed up with Johnny Cash in the late 60's to record *Nashville Skyline* he was accused of being a traitor for melding rock and country. For Parsons, country was a lifetime (albeit a short one) obsession that keeps on giving. Although there are a number of classic tunes here, *Love Hurts* stands as one of the most beautiful rock duets of all time. Shawn Britton mastered the album for SACD and did a beautiful job. If not for Mobile Fidelity's contract do reissue Dylan and Miles; this could stand as the pinnacle of their achievements this year. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Illinois Jacquet

Swing's The Thing

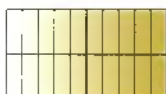
Analogue Production/Verve MGV-8023

45 rpm

This is hard swinging jazz blues played by some of the greatest artists to ever record jazz. Along with Jacquet for the ride are Roy Eldridge, Jimmy Jones, Ray Brown, Herb Ellis and Jo Jones. By any standard this is one of the great treasures of jazz history. Each of the jazz legends play at the top of their form, and the recorded sound is about as good as it gets. If you have never quite grasped the term swing or the phrase "hard blowing" don't bother trying to learn them from books. All that's needed is one play through of this great record. This 1956 session holds its place with Buck Clayton's Columbia recordings from a couple years earlier as the cream of the late swing era recordings.

Originally released on the Clef label in 1956, original copies are incredibly rare. But even the Verve issues have been sought after for years. Speakers Corner issued a nice sounding 33-RPM version, but this new mastering done at Sterling by the late George Marino takes things to an entirely new level. The entire series of recent 45-RPM Verve reissues from Analogue Productions have been impressive, but this one is a knockout among that select group. Even if you think you don't like jazz, get this LP—its that good. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Nina Simone

Nina At The Village Gate

Pure Pleasure/Colpix

33 rpm

Nina Simone brings her eclectic mix of jazz, folk and protest music to Manhattan at the Village Gate in this 1961 live recording, where she digs deeply into a collection of material familiar to any Simone fan. When she sings 'Brown Baby' the plates stop clattering and the audience stops coughing as they hold their collective breath. Her rendition of 'House Of The Rising Sun' is like no one else's version, and when Nina talks about not doing what she done, you really get it. In Nina's hands 'Bye Bye Blackbird' reminds us of her classical training as a piano player. Her backing jazz trio follows her effortlessly — not something easy to accomplish with an artist like Nina Simone. She recorded and released many live performances, but this is early Nina Simone at her peak and among her best records.

The recording, like many club sessions, brings out all the flaws of the club piano, and overall does a credible job of capturing the vocals and trio, placing them in a nice central position with some depth. Sean Magee mastered the LP at Abbey Road Studios and I don't expect you will ever hear it sounding better. It has body and substance missing from any CD issue. Kudos to Pure Pleasure for issuing such great and unappreciated music that explores emotions on a level rarely matched since by any other artist. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Wayne Shorter

Speak No Evil

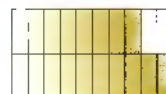
Music Matters/Blue Note 84194

45 rpm

On his third date for Blue Note recorded Christmas Eve of 1964, Shorter brought in Herbie Hancock and Ron Carter, and along with Freddie Hubbard and Elvin Jones, created a new sound for himself on Blue Note. Something new and accomplished here, no doubt influenced by his Shorter's entirely sympathetic relationship with Hancock. Each song on the album a mix of modal and hard bop music that highlights the perfect synergy between Hubbard and Shorter.

This is Shorter at his very peak, and is one of the great Blue Notes, indeed one of the great recordings of the 1960s. The team at Music Matters agonized over this LP, rejecting a mastering done several years ago as not up to snuff. With the recent improvements in Kevin Gray's mastering chain they decided to take another run at it and decided they had nailed the sound. This was not one of Van Gelder's best efforts, and Freddie Hubbard in his prime blowing period always placed a lot of demands on the recording VU meter. Music Matters has managed to tame the upper end and salvage their earlier effort. The decent but not stellar sound notwithstanding, this is a masterpiece that earns my highest recommendation. **DD**

RECORDING
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Advent at Merton, Choir of Merton College, Oxford CD
Peter Phillips & Benjamin Nicholas
Conductors
 Delphian Records (DCD34122)
Anna Steppler Organ

It seems appropriate as Christmas approaches to listen to Advent music. Peter Phillips and Benjamin Nicholas, both of whom have glittering musical backgrounds, lead the Choir of Merton College, Oxford. The album covers a vast array of genres, from 16th century William Byrd and Tomás Luis de Victoria to modern day John Tavener and Gabriel Jackson. Each track has its own symbolic reference to the preparation and coming that is made at Christmas time.

There are seven tracks which have been commissioned by the Merton College Chaplain, one of which is Howard Skempton's 'O Sapientia', a beautiful short piece, sung with great feeling. My favourite without a doubt is 'Es Ist ein Ros entsprungen', by Praetorius, arr. Sandström. This beautiful arrangement of the well-known piece encompasses all of the main components in the build up to Christmas, from the anticipation to the hopes and fears of what will come.

The choirs' diction is excellent; the listener can hear the words! This can be a rare occurrence on choral music recordings.

If you are stuck for a present this Christmas, ask for this. **PT**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Britten's Orchestra SACD
Michael Stern and the
Kansas City Symphony
 Reference Recordings (RR-120SACD)

This album is not a new release, however it deserves greater recognition. The three works here are The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra, Sinfonia da requiem and Peter Grimes: Four Sea Interludes & Passacaglia. The Young Person's Guide was written as a response to a request to write music to play alongside a documentary introducing children to all the instruments within an orchestra. The recording quality is such that it is very easy to distinguish the individual instruments.

Sinfonia da requiem was first performed in 1941 and was Britten's first full orchestral piece written without a soloist. As a conscientious objector in the Second World War Britten wrote this piece to portray his feelings about conflict. He chose to set it as a Requiem as this is a symbolic Mass for the departed in the Christian Church. Peter Grimes was written as a commission following on from the success of the Sinfonia. The four sea interludes are inspired by Britten's appreciation for the sea and for 'the perpetual struggle of men and women whose livelihood depends on the sea'.

Yet again Reference Recordings have done a marvellous job of recording and producing this album. It is available on both CD and SACD. **PT**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Dvorak Symphony NO.9 CD
'From The New World' Cello
Concerto
Mario Brunello, Cello
Orchestra dell' Accademia
Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, Antonio
Pappano

EMI Classics (5099991410221)

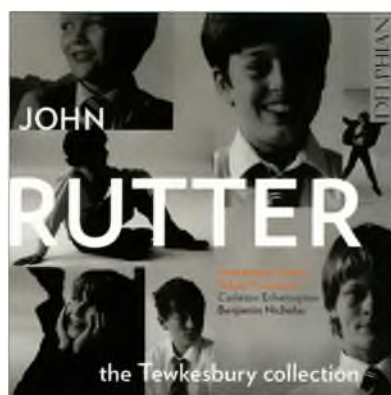
The album offers two works, Symphony No. 9, popularised as the New World Symphony which Dvorak composed in 1893 and the Cello Concerto in B Minor, Op. . B. 191 composed in 1895.

Antonio Pappano has been the principal guest conductor of many orchestras and his command of the musicians is very obvious, particularly towards the end of the Largo, as Dvorak gradually introduces the instruments back into the piece whilst gently teasing the listener with recapitulations of the themes that he has introduced throughout. Pappano is extremely good at ensuring this is adhered to as per Dvorak's direction, to the point where at times the orchestra is so quiet you would be forgiven for thinking that the track had ended.

Brunello's exquisite mastery of the cello, is clearly apparent in the opening movement of the Concerto in B Minor, his accuracy throughout the phrases which demand extremely precise fingering is very impressive. His ability indeed brings out the mellifluous tones of the Maggini cello on which he plays. **PT**

RECORDING
MUSIC





John Rutter: The Tewkesbury Collection



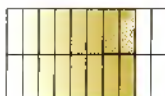
Tewkesbury Abbey Schola Cantorum / Benjamin Nicholas
Delphian Records (DCD34107)

This album is the final recording for Tewkesbury Abbey Schola Cantorum under the direction of Benjamin Nicholas. The selection of Rutter music has been well chosen and consists of some of his lesser known works as well as some more popular ones including *This is the day* which was written for the wedding of TRH The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge.

Some of the works are accompanied by the talented Carlton Etherington on the recently refurbished Milton organ and in addition to some beautiful vocal solos, there are some instrumental solos. The boys of the choir sing with great confidence and accuracy, too. Tewkesbury Abbey has a very fine acoustic and its used to great effect.

The album ends fittingly with an *Amen* which lasts more than a minute. This dramatic double choir piece explores traditional polyphony and is full of suspensions and cadences which are absorbed by the Abbey's acoustics with inspiring results. The combination of the music written by one of the greatest living composers and the well-developed tone and vocal strength from the boys and men of Tewkesbury Abbey Schola Cantorum, is not to be missed. **PT**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Lang Lang: The Chopin Album



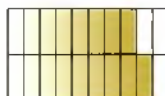
Lang Lang, Piano
Sony Classical (DDD-LC 06868)

This album contains 19 tracks of which 12 are Etudes. Each are very demanding and technically challenging. Lang Lang plays with great ease not only in the Etudes but also in the other tracks which include a Waltz and Nocturnes.

His ability stems from his early years where he began learning the piano at the age of three influenced by an episode of *Tom & Jerry!* At the age of nine his teacher refused to teach him any further through lack of talent, however, this appeared to give him the determination and drive to succeed, and that he has certainly done!

Already one of the great pianists he takes a special interest in encouraging young people to get involved with classical music. Chopin has played a key part in the development of Lang Lang's career and this album is released as a celebration of Lang Lang's 30th birthday. The sheer genius of Chopin is particularly evident in the *Grande Polonaise*, which is a triumphant, forthright piece. The album explores all aspects of Chopin's ability as a composer. The *Andante Spianato* is a wholly relaxing piece that takes you off to that calm relaxing place where all is well in the world. Surely reason enough to purchase the album! **PT**

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Villazon Verdi



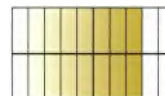
Rolando Villazon & Orchestra del Teatro Regio di Torino & Gianandrea Noseda

Deutsche Grammophon (DG 0289 477 9460 8)

This album celebrates Verdi's works, and includes acts from *La traviata* and *Falstaff*. Rolando Villazon is a Mexican born tenor who has since taken French citizenship. Since recent surgery on one of his vocal cords, his tonality, control and range are better than ever. He was discovered by a baritone friend who over heard him singing in the shower and encouraged him to go to the music academy in Mexico City, there he went and fell in love with opera. He has appeared all over the world from St Petersburg to the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

This album contains a diverse range of Verdi's works from the operatic drama of *Rigoletto* to *Dies Irae* from the *Mass for the dead*. The orchestra are under the direction of Noseda who is one of the leading conductors. The orchestra are directed by him with great expertise, the listener can feel the drama coming through in the music from the orchestra as well as from Villazon. Deutsche Grammophon yet again has produced a great album which presents a pleasing mix of excerpts from Verdi's extensive collection of works. Whether an opera lover or not, this is well worth a listen. **PT**

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Every Home Should Have One

Leonard Cohen –

the complete studio albums collection

By Alan Sircom

Continuing our round-up of the must-have box sets of the moment, 2011 saw the remastered release of all eleven studio albums by ‘laughing’ Leonard Cohen. Normally the word ‘remaster’ sends chills down the spine (and not in a good way), but these ones are really good.

Canadian Leonard Cohen has a remarkably loyal following, one that has – if anything – grown since he started touring again in his 70s, following his well publicised 2005 financial fracas with his former manager. Almost all of his 11 (now 12) studio albums have been in print since first published and have been the subject of many, many cover versions over the years. Financial adversity has been the making of the man it seems, judging by the reception of his recent near endless tour, but it all comes down to the sheer excellence of his songwriting, which has been consistently excellent and often unsurpassed in more than 45 years.

His 1967 *Songs of Leonard Cohen* debut album set the scene; sparse poetry set to music. His songs of love and loss are strangely uplifting in spite of Cohen’s dour delivery, several songs ended up having a life of their own with other artists, and his album did better here in the UK than in the US. Subsequent albums were just as well received, and several – including *Songs from a Room*, *Songs of Love and Hate* and *I’m Your Man* have become must have albums for hi-fi enthusiasts and collectors of surprisingly upbeat maudlin music. It’s a dead cert that where you find Nick Drake albums, you’ll find Leonard Cohen cuts nestling close by.

OK, so a complete studio discography has to include *Death of a Ladies Man*, the 1977 album where Phil Spector’s wall of sound seemed to crush Leonard Cohen, making him all but disappear into the mix. Even Cohen himself seems to want to put some distance between himself and his least covered album. In hindsight, it’s not too bad in a kind of neo-punk shouty better kind of way, but it’s not too good either and completely out of step with the normally sparse production and the laconic Leonard. Consider this a 10 album set with an oddball included for good measure.

From an audiophile perspective, his original albums and subsequent remasters have always been pretty good, but this box raises the bar. They are excellent, and the team behind the remastering process deserve high praise for resisting the temptation to add too much sparkle to these already sparkling recordings. In particular, as several of the albums were successfully remastered recently, it was decided to repackage the set in cardboard mini-album sleeves (think the Beatles mono set) and only remaster the ones that didn’t get the 2007 treatment.

There is also a 17 album box that includes several of Cohen’s live albums along the road, but this is possibly taking things too far. Some of those older live sets weren’t that good, and both the performance and recording quality leave much to be desired at times. Instead, partner this 11 album box with his most recent *Old Ideas* album and a couple of recent live sets – *Songs from the Road* or *Live in London* – and you have virtually the complete canon of songs of an artist who has been at the top of his game almost constantly since he began his career. This is a collection to be proud of. +

LEONARD COHEN – THE COMPLETE STUDIO ALBUMS COLLECTION

Released: October 11, 2011

Columbia Music

Album List:

1. Songs of Leonard Cohen (1967)
2. Songs from a Room (1969)
3. Songs of Love and Hate (1971)
4. New Skin for the Old Ceremony (1974)
5. Death of a Ladies’ Man (1977)
6. Recent Songs (1979)
7. Various Positions (1984)
8. I’m Your Man (1988)
9. The Future (1992)
10. Ten New Songs (2001)
11. Dear Heather (2004)





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