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EDITOR
Alan Sircom
Email: editor@hifiplus.com

**CONTRIBUTORS THIS
ISSUE INCLUDE:**
Dennis D. Davis, Wayne Garcia,
Jason Kennedy, Pete Trewin

GRAPHIC DESIGNER
Alison Cutler
Fonhill Creative, Salisbury

PHOTOGRAPHY
The Hi-Fi Plus Team

ADVERTISING
Tom Hackforth
Tel: +44 (0)1425 655255
Email: tom@hifiplus.com

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER:
Pete Trewin
Tel: +44 (0)1425 655699
Email: pete@hifiplus.com

PUBLISHER
Chris Martens

**THE EDITORIAL OFFICE
CAN BE CONTACTED AT:**
Hi-Fi Plus Editorial
Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd
Unit 3, Sandheath Industrial Estate,
Sandheath, Hampshire
SP6 1PA
United Kingdom
Tel: +44 (0)1425 655255
Fax: +44 (0)1425 655477
Net: www.hifiplus.com

Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd is a
subsidiary of Nextscreen, LLC, Inc.
8868 Research Blvd., Ste. 108
Austin, Texas 78758, USA
Net: www.avgude.com
C. JARMAN AND C/O
Thomas B. Martin, Jr.

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Printed By
Advent Print Group, Andover

Hi-Fi Plus is published ten times a
year by: Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd

ISSN 1465 5950



editorial

Welcome to 2013! It's strange how much has changed in just a year, even in the relatively sleepy backwaters of high-end audio. The move to file-based audio continues unabated, but the backlash has started with those still protesting CD sounds better. Vinyl's resurgence has grown in magnitude and importance and despite the ever-present threat of economic gloom and doom, people still want to spend good money on great audio. Far from being a footnote to the iPod, people are starting to rediscover what good audio is all about, this time from the headphones out.

Although widespread optimism is still not on the cards for some time, a new year is the perfect opportunity to be upbeat about the future, rather than be ground down by more years of austerity. Our New Year's Resolutions are simple: one issue per month from here on in. That's right, *Hi-Fi Plus* is now a monthly magazine. It will still feature the best products, just more of them, the best writers (but hopefully less of me), more features, music reviews, show reports, interviews and all the other things that go together to make *Hi-Fi Plus* what it is today, just twice over.

We have also revamped our website. Prior to 2013, we were one of the few companies to have retained a coal fired website from the 1970s, but it was proving difficult to find smokeless web pages and we decided to follow our sister title *The Absolute Sound* into the 21st Century with a new-look web presence. With review reprints, the latest news, show reports, music reviews, features, blogs and custom content unique to the interweb all in the pipeline, go to www.hifiplus.com and see

what all the fuss is about. It's also the ideal place to subscribe to the magazine, whether you choose to subscribe to the paper edition, PDF or just keep taking the tablets, you can find more online.

It's not just changes to magazine and its website that are new for '13. This year, we plan to devote regular features to getting the best from any system. Starting with the equipment supports in this issue, over the months we'll be exploring every aspect of what could be considered the Philosophy of Hi-Fi, from personal ethos of system building and how to listen, right through to the importance of proper room treatment. Absolutely nothing will be off limits, from the 'too sensible for audio use' to the 'comes with its own medication'.

But, as with any New Year's Resolution, we reserve the right to forget everything we said a day after we said it!

Alan Sircom
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incoming!

Short but sweet

Which sounds better – a good system in a bad room or a bad system in a good room?

“AJ” via email

A very good question with no easy answer; apart from ‘it depends’, that is. Despite the time, money and energy many audiophiles spend trying to perfect their systems, a substantial proportion of what makes a good sound intrinsically ‘good’ comes down to the room in which that system resides. A good system in a really poor room – without any form of room acoustic treatment or signal processing to attempt to correct the iniquities of that room – can sound very bad indeed. However, a really poor system is always going to sound poor, no matter what the room is doing. The best balance is a good system in an appropriate – and appropriately treated – room.

Sadly, and there is some reticence among audiophiles to explore the benefits of room treatment. Some of this harks back to the time when it was the sole preserve of companies making products exclusively for studio use. One of the currently relatively untapped bonuses of the rise and fall of home theatre installations in the last two decades is room acoustic treatments have become far more domestically acceptable and practical. We intend to be exploring this important aspect of getting the best from your audio system later in 2013. – Ed.

Is iTunes enough?

I currently have a modest system that I am extremely happy with. It comprises my iMac into a Creek amplifier and a pair of small Epos loudspeakers. I know this might undermine my audiophile cred, but currently don’t even use a DAC, just a cable from the headphone socket into my amplifier. Until recently I ripped my music from CDs into iTunes, at first saving the files lossless, but after comparing into 256kbps AAC to save space. Recently though, I gave up buying the CDs altogether and instead just rely on iTunes to supply all my musical needs. While I have no immediate plans to upgrade, my concern is one day in the future I may have a system that is more resolving I’ll be able to hear the compression. What should I do?

Ed Grieves, via email

This one might be somewhat controversial. I’m not as dispirited by iTunes as some of my colleagues. Yes, the higher the resolving power of the system, the more noticeable the difference between file formats can become, but in many respects the differences between formats only become readily identifiable under close comparison and scrutiny. If you are not in the habit of comparing your iTunes purchases with the originals, in most cases you probably won’t notice anything significant.

The exception is classical music, especially classical music played through extremely high-resolution audio systems. From experience, classical

“Despite the time, money and energy many audiophiles spend trying to perfect their systems, a substantial proportion of what makes a good sound intrinsically ‘good’ comes down to the room in which that system resides. A good system in a really poor room... can sound very bad indeed.”

AAC files can sound somewhat thin and reedy when compared to their full-fat alternatives. Especially if played through systems that excel in full-range, high dynamic range reproduction.

If in doubt, one option is to seek out someone today who has an extremely high resolution system and do the same comparisons you did at home. At the very least, try a good DAC in your system to see if any differences in performance are being masked by the headphone output of the computer. If in doubt, keep ripping the music to the best possible format, and either keep buying CDs or become au fait with online providers of lossless files in your part of the world. That way at least you won’t need to re-rip or re-purchase your recordings. – Ed.


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► Futureproofing

I've been collecting LPs since the late 1960s. Some of my albums were made before then, and can still be played on brand new equipment. I've been collecting CDs since I first bought a CD player in 1985, so some of my discs are approaching 30 years old, and they too can be played on brand new equipment. Will downloads today be able to be played 30 or 40 years from now? It's unlikely it will bother me significantly then because I'll be in my late 90s, but it would be good to know what we buy today we can play tomorrow.

Terry Dysart, via email

There's a difference between 'programs' and 'data' that needs defining for audio purposes. A program is something like iTunes or J River, while 'data' is the music you play on programs like iTunes or J River. So long as your data is kept in formats that can be played by the latest programs (which in most cases involves converting either the packaging the data came in or converting the data to something more modern) it should be able to be played indefinitely.

Of course, data is only as robust as the backup systems you use to keep it alive. If you store a piece of music, at the very least consider investing in a backup scheme, ideally one that also backs up your backup to a separate location. Overkill... maybe, but ask anyone who's had to rip a few thousand discs if they'd smile sweetly at having to do it all over again – Ed.

"I've heard some extremely good moving coil cartridges at shows and bake-offs and – in most cases – still prefer the sound of a moving magnet. The only exception I've met is the Dynavector I heard on the end of a Well Tempered Amadeus GTA turntable. Now that was nice, but as it was thousands of pounds, so it bloody well should be!"

Shuffling off this moving coil

I read Nass Khan's comments in last month's Incoming with some profound satisfaction. I thought I was the only one to have moved back to moving magnet cartridge design. Moving coil cartridges are fine, but they aren't accurate. They either sound thin and bright (like Lyra cartridges always seem to sound to me) or fat and warm (like Koetsu). They can sound very pleasant indeed, but pleasant isn't accurate.

I made the switch back to MM years ago, on balance preferring the sound of a Roksan MM to an Audio Technica AT-OC7 I used prior to my conversion. The OC7 was more 'hi-fi' sounding, whereas the MM is more naturally musical to me. I've heard some extremely good moving coil cartridges at shows and bake-offs and – in most cases – still prefer the sound of a moving magnet. The only exception I've met is the Dynavector I heard on the end of a Well Tempered Amadeus GTA turntable. Now that was nice, but as it was thousands of pounds, so it bloody well should be!

I've not heard the Ortofon 2M Red, though. Perhaps it's time for a cartridge change. Thanks, Mr Khan!

Stuart Clifford, via email

Magnets? Nein Danke!

I respectfully disagree with Mr Nass Khan's suggestion that moving magnet cartridges are superior to moving coil designs. I would politely suggest that should he listen to some of the best moving coil cartridges on a truly high-quality turntable arm and cartridge combination with a top phono stage, he would quickly eat his words.

My own (all-Brinkmann) analogue front end is more than a match for any source, analogue or digital. I have ever heard. I don't think anyone would choose a moving magnet after hearing that source.

Dieter Brendt, via email ►

► No strain, no gain

I went on my own personal pilgrimage to find the best possible cartridge, just like Nass Khan in issue 94. However, my quest stopped as soon as I heard the strain-gauge cartridge by Soundsmith. While it's more money than I thought I would ever spend on a cartridge, there's no way I could ever imagine myself settling for anything less having heard it.

I understand the idea of choosing a turntable, arm and cartridge that are inexpensive and perform well, but sometimes you have to pay good money for the best, and the best is one heck of a lot better than the rest.

Name and address withheld, via email

Nass "Punk King" Khan's paean to the moving magnet cartridge has elicited a large response in all directions. While not everyone agrees with his cost saving measures, by downshifting to a moving magnet cartridge, it's obvious that the concept that moving magnets are automatically better than moving coil should be dispatched to the 'myth' pile.

I suspect the performance of a good moving coil design ultimately stands or falls on a sympathetic setting. Plonking a good cartridge in a bad deck is almost a guaranteed fail. On the other hand, a cheap cartridge in a good deck really has the potential to shine. Perhaps Linn got the whole source first thing right after all— Ed.

Downturn, what downturn?

Over the years, my relationship with my audio dealer morphed into a friendship. And he admitted to me recently that the only things that sell today are the really high-end pieces. He's all but given up on lines that cost hundreds or even thousands of dollars, because he's now more likely to sell a \$50,000 amplifier than a \$5,000 or even a \$500 amplifier.

While this is good news for my friend, isn't it potentially terrible for audio as a whole? If no one is buying a \$500 amplifier today, will there be a next generation of audio buyers spending \$50,000 in a couple of decades time?

Marc Ticotin, via email

I wouldn't be too concerned. The \$500 amplifier market is still quite buoyant, it's just moved around. It's now the preserve of the online retailer and the specialist low-enders (such as Richer Sounds in the UK). The part connecting this budget end of the market and the luxury-end audio pieces has shrunk considerably over recent years, but this is as much down to the 'squeezed middle' effect of the global economic downturn in the West as it is some overarching gloom and doom about audio going away.

The market is changing. Online retailers are becoming more of a force to be reckoned with, there's a renewed interest in headphone and turntable-based audio and a whole new set of DAC makers producing inexpensive, quality products. Plus some surprisingly renewed vigour from some of high-end's old guard, as they come to terms with an impending post-CD world. But this is change rather than revolt, and I wouldn't be surprised if that squeezed middle springs back in a few years from now — Ed.

Disc dilemma

Your recent discovery of the joys of the box set is nothing new. I've been collecting box sets for years, but I share your enjoyment of how they have morphed from being a five-disc symphony set to a 50 disc instant collection. It's interesting how little these sets are worth when they are available and how much they become worth when they are discontinued. I paid less than £100 for my DG 111 box and it's now rated at anything between £500-£1,000 new — I wish I'd bought three sets!

Lance Curry, via email

Whether the price of the 111 box is what people are paying or what some of Amazon and eBay's chancers are trying to get away with is a little unclear, but it's true that as such box sets fall out of the catalogue, their price soars. I suspect the rise of the big box set is a short-term thing, with labels attempting to try and sell their back catalogue on physical formats one last time. Which may mean, the next time we see such bargains, they will be downloaded from websites — Ed. +

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FEATURE

Standing Firm – the tables

By Alan Sircom



Over the course of 2013, we shall be looking at the aspects surrounding audio, as well as audio itself. We will be investigating a variety of different kinds of acoustic coupling, decoupling and uncoupling systems to bring your equipment to life. We will also be investigating the importance of room treatments of all kinds, because improving the performance of the room can significantly enhance the performance of the system in that room. We will also see how these important elements can be tied together to make a good sound great.

As ever with audiophilia, we will start back-to-front; although room acoustic treatment will produce the largest changes to the sound of a system, generally the treatment itself is best approached on a case-by-case basis; although there are some broad topics that can be described, the topic itself needs some understanding of the mathematics and physics involved, and this will be better sidled up to than ran into headlong. So, we start instead with what keeps the equipment in place.

There are almost as many concepts behind equipment supports as there are pieces of equipment to support. The days of everything defaulting to the 'light, but rigid' shelf are behind us; we now have mass-loading, decoupling, tables as low and high-pass filters, cones, cups, air bladders, squidgy hockey pucks, blocks of wood, rollers and more. There are resonance controllers, resonance absorbers, resonance channels, non-magnetic supports and even magnetic field introduction agencies. These devices can be made out of grass, tree, glass, plastic, rubber or unobtainium. Each one has its ardent supporters; each one has its febrile detractors. And there are those who reject all of this and go to Ikea.

Put another way, there are three kinds of equipment supports; those that just provide support, those that do something for the sound, and those that do the wrong kind of something. Our task as reviewers is to discover whether the last is actually worse than the first and whether it is a universal 'bad' or simply doing the right things to the wrong products.

We'll start this survey with what seems like the new kid in town, but one that's been causing a stir in more traditional high-end circles on the QT for some time; Artesania Audio Esoteric, from Spain.

Artesania's goal is to rid any component on one of its products from the risk of vibration, either from the surroundings or from other components in the signal path. And in some respects, the stand is also designed to prevent products from themselves. When used correctly, each 'shelf' (actually articulated steel arms) can be individually adjusted for the optimum height and a device rests on four neoprene and nylon feet, resting on upturned spikes in an adjustable frame that itself hangs from nylon bushes and is prevented from moving by neoprene coated screw heads at the bottom of the stand. In essence, each component on the Artesania is a decoupled device sitting on a decoupled platform inside a decoupled frame. Optional glass shelves fit on the neoprene/nylon isolation feet, and there is a large triple-dampened glass shelf, sitting on spikes and isolated by neoprene and nylon pads.

Finally, each component on the stand gets its own damper (which looks like a large-spool Super-8 film can) that sits as close to the centre of that device's top plate, and the whole stand sits on large neoprene and polyamide feet.

With careful measurement of each component needed to find the right places to seat the isolation feet, precise adjustment of each component's position in a three-dimensional space and just an all-round level of care and attention required to install and set-up the system, swapping over from an existing table to the Artesania is no 20 second swap-over. It's more like a careful two-man operation. The more free space around the stand the better. Nevertheless, it is possible to move from one stand to another in reasonably short order, and we compared the Artesania to the Finite Elemente Pagode Master Reference stand, a very popular choice round these parts. We concentrated mostly on devices that would naturally benefit from a change in stand – such as CD transports and valve DACs, where stray vibration could

“There are three kinds of equipment support; those that just provide support, those that do something for the sound, and those that do the wrong kind of something. Our task as reviewers is to discover whether the last is actually worse than the first.”

create potentially audible differences in performance – but also went to the other extreme, swapping a solid-state power supply from table to table. This last should elicit no change whatsoever in theory, being both notionally impervious to microphony (no valves) and lacking any active circuitry directly in the signal chain.

Moving from stand to stand did significantly change the sound quality of the system. There was more going on. A lot more. The F-E stand has been highly praised time and again for its musical structure and harmonic richness, but the Artesania takes those musical aspects and runs with them. Music sounded bigger, better recorded, you could hear more into the recording and the frequency extremes were as effortless and natural as the mid-band. It's worth remembering this wasn't playing through a mediocre system that was already running at half-mast. This was a state of the art system ending in full range loudspeakers that was already sounding pretty damn good on the F-E stand and sounded a good deal better when component after component moved over to the Artesania.

I suppose the easiest way of considering this is the F-E stand has a distinct sound it imparts upon the products that sit upon it. It's a slightly dark, very musical presentation. The Artesania doesn't do this at all. It strives to limit the sound of the table, instead relying on the sound of the components in the system to deliver the sonic goods. And that can make good things sound truly remarkable. When the best of the best sits on the Artesania, they raise their game. Even – and I have no idea why this should be – when moving the power

► supply of a two box CD transport from one stand to the other. Spinning discs, tubes... I get; getting the rest of the world out of the equation can give these items the chance to give their best, and when dealing with thoroughbreds, they need thoroughbred care and feeding. But a power supply??

Two interesting observations drop out of this. First, unlike many of the 'top table' contenders, this is a revolution, but not a coup. The Artesania 'sound' (more accurately 'absence of sound') is an addictive one, but it doesn't enforce other components to change to Artesania at a stroke. Yes, if all your ducks are in a row, so things get ever better (the improvements wrought by a power supply demonstrate that), but if in the transition to an all-Artesania system, you mix and match, the sound does not get worse, before it gets better.

Next, the Artesania might be a double-edged sword. By relying on the performance of the equipment and the equipment alone – something many equipment manufacturers talk about, but in reality few actually achieve – some components might not be as wonderful as their marketing claims.

Aside from the weight involved, building a 19" rack within a larger, rigid frame means – platform for platform – the Artesania support system is physically bigger than most. And although its dark grey or green uprights, its chrome, optional glass and white nylon bushes are not a problem for those fortunate enough to listen in their own dedicated man-caves, but might be a harder sell for those who share their listening space with family members.

It's also a demanding installation, requiring two people to extract, place and position the stand, and not just because it weighs close to 150kg all up for the biggest option. A nine-minute YouTube instructional video shows how to install the stand and it's not PR guff and filler. Have a space allocated in advance, a lot of room to unpack and build and a good day getting everything in place. If you have the system that can benefit from such an exercise though, it's more than worth it.

I've come to the conclusion that there is actually an easy – albeit totally arbitrary – price multiplier when it comes to 'proper'

supports: Spend no less than the price of the cheapest electronic product in your system, and spend no more than the average price of the products in your system, on the rack. If you view those two poles (the price of the cheapest component, and the average price of all the components) as your lower and upper limits, you'll likely find a support system that works well for your components.

And that's certainly the case with the Artesania. While it might transform the sound of an entry level electronics, this is functionally untenable for most people. On the other hand, for someone with a good Audio Research Reference system for example, the Artesania represents an excellent and obvious upgrade. It works! +

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conrad-johnson ARTsa stereo power amplifier

By Alan Sircom

Back in the mid 1990s, the high-end valve power amplifiers to own were the conrad-johnson Premier 8a monoblocks. Commonly considered to be the most musical amplifiers of their generation, the Premier 8a still commands respect and high prices to this day. At the time, the idea of a stereo Premier power amplifier was simply never put forward, and those lacking either the physical space or the financial commitment for the mono amplifiers never got to experience just what c-j at its best was capable of.

The company learned its lesson. The big ART monoblock amplifiers have a 'little' brother, the ARTsa. In many respects, the 140 watt per channel (rated into four ohms) stereo amplifier is in the sweet spot, especially for European listeners,

because it isn't two large chassis, we seldom require more than 250 watts in our smaller rooms and because it isn't north of £36,000 a pair. We felt this is the more comfy place for *Hi-Fi Plus'* audience.

The two models look virtually identical from the front, because there is a lot of common ground between ART and ARTsa (the ARTsa being an single mono ART split into two channels, requiring an extra input driver tube and a second set of inputs and outputs). It may sound strange when discussing amplifiers costing tens of thousands of pounds, but this shared chassis layout helps keep costs down. The chassis is a substantial affair, finished in a deep matt black crackle finish, with the distinctive contrasting gold front panel. The input tubes are encased in a lattice of acrylic wedges,





while the four KT120 power tubes per side are each enclosed in their own cover, leaving an almost inch wide channel down the centre of the top-plate from the end of the input triodes to the beginning of the transformer cover. The net result is actually very attractive in a sort of low modernist architecture style; think what Alvar Aalto or Mies van der Rohe would have done with an amplifier chassis. The one grumble (common to all c-j power amps) is that in order to keep those elegant lines, the power valve covers use spring-loaded chromed screws to secure the cover from the inside, and it's something of a dark art to learn how to do this without swearing.

Bias, as ever with c-j designs, is adjusted using a small screw and orange LED arrangement: once the amplifier has settled down for half an hour or so, adjust the bias screws on each tube until the LED goes out. It's a good idea to periodically – but not obsessively – recheck this every few months, because like baggage in the overhead locker, these things can move around in the journey. It's a simple, but effective method, although like all bias adjustment screws, it's designed to be a little fiddly, because you don't want little hands armed with screwdrivers rebiasing an octet of expensive tubes.

It's the electronic expression of Occam's Razor: "entities must not be multiplied beyond necessity". It applies to negative feedback (just 12dB overall, to help linearity and increase the

damping factor for today's reactive speaker loads) and even to the whole circuit itself. It's essentially just a voltage gain amplifier, direct coupled to a cathode-coupled phase inverter, which drives the output stage. Occam's razor blunts slightly at the power supply stage; the amplifier sports individual, low impedance discrete DC power supply regulation for both input and phase-inverter, keeping these sections completely isolated from the power feed to the output stage.

The ARTsa and ART are c-j's flagship amplifiers, and as a consequence both bristle with ultra high-grade components on the circuit boards. Bill Conrad and Lew Johnson must be on Vishay's Christmas card list, because the ARTsa is packed full of the things, and the same applies to the use of its own CJD Teflon caps, custom built for the company. They are everywhere, and the word 'electrolytic' is clearly banned from the ART production line. Even the power supply sports CJD Teflons, in parallel with large polypropylenes. If you add in the cost of those wide-bandwidth transformers, the chassis and even the cost of the terminals and wiring loom and the tubes themselves, the Bill of Materials entailed within every ARTsa is damn substantial.

Whether it's those components or the circuit itself is unclear, but the result of all this is uncanny, even before you play a piece of music. This is the quietest amplifier I've come across. Note that I said 'amplifier' not 'valve amplifier'. You ▶



► really have to put your ear to the tweeter to begin to hear anything approaching 'tube rush', and solid-state designs I've used have all had greater self-noise than this. Other parts of the signal chain are noisier than the ARTsa, and this leads to those comedy 'is this thing on?' moments.

When you do power it up, and give it half an hour or so to come on song, staring at that quartet of hidden yellow LEDs that wrap around the big front power button in the process, chances are you won't be spending too much time discovering the absence of background noise. You'll instead be spending a vast amount of time just enjoying your music collection. The ARTsa has a strange and wonderful effect, the 'rediscovering your music' cliché doesn't apply here. You listen to a piece of music, then reflect on that piece of music, and play another piece of music. Rather than pulling out disc after disc after disc, you kind of know what improvement is on the cards with each piece of music and instead concentrate on the music itself.

The midrange has a quality that is hard to pin down. It's not liquid, it's not fluid, it's sort of at once fruity, yet fast, in the way amplifiers like the Premier 8a always used to be so great at. Perhaps the best track to highlight this is 'Lazarus Man' by the late Terry Callier. The performance is sublime in its own right.

but played through the ARTsa is like direct-coupling the disc to your emotions. The amp gave a sense of a performance, right from the outset, rather than just a band coming in over the sound of water in the background. It's interesting to hear good recordings, but not the sort of audiophile approved tracks, to see just how good an amplifier like this will behave under real-world conditions, and it works exceptionally well. Curiously on this track, the vocals are back in the mix with the guitars in the foreground. This can fox many systems, either detracting the vocal or overstating the guitar parts. That fast and fruity sound gives everything the right sense of weighting. Callier's voice is still back in the mix, but it's an organic part of the recording, not fighting for position.

We are in a state of transition, moving from spinning disc to file-based music replay, and the biggest pocket of resistance to this transition is in the high-end. And often for good reason – many of the best disc spinners are still uncommonly difficult to better in the post-disc domain. The ARTsa eases that transition; not because it smothers the differences, but because it turns your attention away from the differences in file format and back on to the music. Yes, you can hear why someone who bought a Zanden or a Metronome or similar is still playing discs through

their top-end player, but it also shows how file-based music can sound... and it sounds better than many imagine.

This is the kind of music replay that also befits all genre. It doesn't suffer from that audiophile disease of 'slowing under Tool' – play *Lateralus* by that well-recorded heavy band and the sound remains just as tight when things get all dropped-D graunchy as it does when it's all moody chorus pedal and moaning about blood-letting. There's a distinct drum anchor that is easy to mess up. The drummer Danny Carey is one of the best in the business and some supposedly good systems reduce his playing to something metronomic or bland. This doesn't. It makes him sound properly.

Similarly, there's a tendency when dealing with dub lines for the bass line to dominate the presentation at the expense of the mid and top. Not here. Everything has its own space and energy, no matter how complex or deep somethings get. It unveils insights into recordings you know well.

Strangely, I'm reminded of those classic little valve amps from British companies of the 1950s and 1960s, only writ large. If you ever wanted to know what a Leak Stereo 20 would have sounded with seven times the power, more resolution and full 20Hz-20kHz bandwidth, the ARTsa is the amp to do it. And compared to what we can do today, those classic Leaks and Quads are found wanting at the frequency extremes (especially the top-end) and in the power delivery stakes. They also made that sweet sound at the expense of some dynamic range and clarity of presentation. None of which detracts from what they do best, but the ARTsa also does what they do best, with none of the downsides. It's a truly captivating presentation.

In short, the ARTsa gives a presentation that is effortless, simply effortless. It gives effortless dynamics, effortless flow, refinement, sophistication and elegance to the sound. There was simply nothing that could trip it up. It had all the bottom-end grip of a solid-state amp, and even when presented with something truly excellent to get its teeth into (like 'Un Bal' from the Munch/BSO *Symphonie Fantastique* on classic Living Stereo SACD) and enough power in reserve to cope with some dub and dubstep without complaint. It's perhaps not the first choice for those who only listen to heads-down rock, because they would trade that musical flow for sheer speed of attack, but anyone with more catholic tastes than just a one-genre fan will find the ARTsa an excellent performer.

With great power, comes great responsibility. The ARTsa's magic spell comes at a cost. It's so resolving that unless the rest of your system is absolutely Shipshape and Bristol fashion, it will make a fair to good sound, but not a great one. This is the destination, not the journey; use this with the superb c-j GAT preamp or similar, good intrinsically neutral choices of cable and good source material and more, and the amplifier will play an enticing and irresistible sound. Play it through a work-in-progress, mid way through the upgrade path and you'll find yourself upgrading faster or listening to less music. So, this could be the last product you buy, not only in a round of upgrades, but also in terms of it being the sort of amplifier you could comfortably live with for decades.

That was always c-j's big strength; although there is always a brisk trade in 'preloved' c-j preamps and power amps, the amps are often 'keepers' in

people's systems. They make a sound that invites you deeper into the music. But none more so than the ARTsa. It joins a range that points to that harmonically beguiling place the best of all c-j amps always took you, but without any of the lushness or softened leading edges the amps could descend into. Calling this amp the Premier 8a of the 21st Century is a massive compliment, but the ARTsa is so much more than that. This must be heard, as it joins the GAT as one of the world's best.

Only problem is, now I want to know what the monoblocks sound like and, for that matter, the forthcoming LP125M and LP125sa amps below it. I think its going to be a great year ahead. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Power: 140 watts per channel from 30 Hz to 15 KHz at no more than 1.5 % THD or IMD, both channels driven into 4, 8 or 16 ohms (standard setting is four ohms)

Sensitivity: 1.8V to rated power Frequency Response (at 10 watts): 20 Hz to 20 kHz, +/- .25 dB

Frequency Response (at 10 watts): 20 Hz to 20 kHz, +/- .25 dB

Hum and Noise: 108dB below rated power

Input Impedance: 100 kOhms

Tube Complement: 1 x 6189, 2 x 6N30P, 8 x KT120

Dimensions (WxHxD): 48.3x18.1x47.6cm

Weight: 37.2kg

Price: £18,995

Manufactured by: conrad-johnson Design Inc

URL: www.conradjohnson.com

Distributed by: Audiofreaks

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)208 948 4153

Focal Maestro Utopia loudspeaker

We're no strangers to the Focal Utopia range. Quite the reverse in fact; Chris Thomas uses a pair of Diablo, and we've tested every model in the current stereo line-up. Save one – the Maestro. The second of four floorstanders in the Utopia series, the Maestro stands between the Scala and Stella loudspeakers and fits a useful gap for those wanting full-range scale and drama in a large European listening room, but without the demands (physical and financial) of a loudspeaker designed for the sort of giant man caves often found on the other side of the Pond.

This is a major consideration. A great deal of the secret to making a good sound is matching loudspeaker to room, and models like the Scala EM and Grande EM are physically imposing loudspeakers that would dominate all bar the largest UK home. Although the Maestro isn't exactly invisible, it's the right side of one and a half metres tall,

and blended in well into Studio AV's lovely larger listening room in the middle of Eton (see above). This isn't a custom-made, fabulously treated room (although neither is it entirely untreated); it's a large first floor living room, built when high-fidelity meant competent piano playing, and mostly decorated and furnished in the way many of us might decorate and furnish a room of that size. And as such, Studio AV's room is a fairly perfect example of where the Maestro is likely to end up in domestic spaces in Europe.

The Maestro Utopia is a three-and-a-half way design, featuring the distinctive bellows-back arrangement used to correctly angle the mid, tweeter and bass arrays correctly without making the speaker look ugly in the process. This means the 165mm 'Power Flower' W-cone midrange sits in its own unit angled down atop of the 27mm IAL2 beryllium inverted dome tweeter, and the two 270mm mag-damped W-cone bass and sub-bass units sit in their own back-tilted cabinet. Far from looking like a haphazard collection of funny angles, this actually looks like an elegant way of making a large loudspeaker time-aligned. It's not exactly a shrinking violet (the top section is itself takes up more physical space than a Diablo in its own right), but the way the speaker is arranged does make it look less imposing in the flesh. A series of very fine finishes and a gloss black front baffle help here.

While the individual sections of the Maestro do not adjust to their surroundings in the same crank-handled way as the Grande EM, there is a significant amount of adjustment at the speaker terminals with a set of jumpers ►

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► to either include a 1dB and 1.5dB cut in treble and bass respectively, or a 1dB and 1.5dB boost to the treble and bass respectively, the centre '2' position leaving the frequency response flat. Given the Maestros are very demanding of positioning, require a lot of space between, beside and behind, and weigh 116kg each, this can help in a number of rooms. It's best done through the medium of 'installer' though, and a really good one should call upon every tool in the arsenal (including 1/3octave spectrum analysis, or at least some very well-trodden CDs the installer knows well) to get the install right. However, even with the best install known to man, there will be a lot of experimentation before you get to the Maestro's happy place.

Let's not overstate this, however. There isn't a dark art lurking here, and the Maestro isn't so fussy that an

"The Maestro isn't so fussy that an ångström in the wrong direction spells the difference between beauty and the beast. It sounds good in any suitably sized room with the bare minimum of install. It's just that a speaker offering this much potential, it is worth spending the extra time."

ångström in the wrong direction spells the difference between beauty and the beast. It sounds good in any suitably sized room with the bare minimum of install. It's just that with a speaker offering this much potential, it is worth spending the extra time getting it exactly right. This should be a front-end thing; spend time at the outset, rather than a constant search for the right amplifier, speaker cable and so on. Once suitably satisfied, leave well alone and focus on the music.

It is worth the effort though. This is a full-range loudspeaker in all bar the last couple of pedal notes on a 32' organ, with a very achievable 25Hz in room, and 21Hz limit on the bottom end. And that means in medium to large UK rooms it will do more music than most speakers. And do it with one of the most open midranges you can get. This speaker in that right-sized room delivers near text-book dynamic range, perfect soundstaging and a balance that is just the right side of being full and rich in the upper bass. Tonally, it has the potential of being the flattest speaker this side of an electrostatic, but with the dynamic energy of the best boxes. It's all good.

There's an elephant in the room. The last time we tested a Utopia loudspeaker, Focal and Naim were two completely separate entities. Now, they are part of the same big happy family. That has meant a subtle re-working of the way Focal loudspeakers might be auditioned in the UK. The old patterns were well-trodden; we already know Focal Utopia speakers work well with electronics from Moon, Vitus, VTL, Berning and so on. And we know that Naim Audio electronics works well with the Electra 1008Be, because we covered that ground successfully and the combination is proving a popular one. But what of Naim Audio and Focal Utopia? The worry was that the Utopias need plenty of watts, and no one was completely sure Naim provide the right care and feeding.

So, staring at a Naim Audio UnitiServe as source and an NDS/555PS streamer front end, NAC 552 preamp and NAP 500





power amp, all on Naim Frain equipment tables. A not insubstantial system, at a not inconsequential price, but the concern remained that the 140W per channel into eight ohms delivery of the NAP 500 would not be meaty enough, and whether Naim's distinctive tonal balance would find a merry bed-fellow in the Maestro.

In fact, if anything, the two balance one another out. The Utopia loudspeakers can sound a touch too 'hi-fi' in the wrong setting for some listeners, and the full-blown Naim system can prove a bit 'earthy' for those deeply dipped in more conventional audiophilia. Putting the two together, tempers those criticisms on both sides. The Focal shows itself to have far more musical order and focus than might be expected, and the Naim is far more refined and expansive than is normally thought of. The end result is a system of great balance and temperament.

This balance is not without its struggles. Typically, Utopia speakers of this ilk demand bigger amplifiers in part because that mellow upper bass hides some punishing load demands on the amplifier. There's some low impedance happening down there and that normally means a lot of power delivered. To prevent that making the system sound harsh (the slight warmth there helps) means very careful system installation and a lot of cable listening to get the choice absolutely right. There are no easy recommendations here, because this does seem to vary from room to room and system to system.

That beryllium tweeter can be a harsh mistress too. The smallest error in the system, the slightest scintilla of grain or brightness in the electronics and that tweeter will lay it bare. And it is that property that has led people to make the incorrect assumption that the speakers are inherently bright. In fact, the speakers are inherently honest; and show you just how many amplifiers – especially solid-state amplifiers – actually sound hard and harsh at the top end. And yet, when used in this context, the treble isn't strident or hard or harsh, it's just honest.

It's somewhat odd that Focal's best have a reputation for sounding bright and brash, in the UK and the UK alone. Practically everywhere else, if anything, the Focal HF sound is one of almost mellow reticence. And yet, in the UK, people have become almost programmed into thinking the tweeter is bright, when in fact it might have been a combination of other factors (one of which might have been using very zingy amps and cables with the speakers) might have been at blame. Certainly when used with the Naim system as described above, there was no great treble emphasis. Just, as stated before, honesty.

This treble honesty is hard for some to live with, because we are so used to soft-domed tweeters softening the high-frequency blow or metal domes adding their own unique zing to the thing. Faced with years of listening to such devices, something without this level of honesty can sound at once bright and

dull depending on your past purchases. Such is the price of progress. That being said, the Maestro Utopia is a revealing monitor loudspeaker. It's just not as 'ruthlessly' revealing as some have led us to believe.

At the end of it all, this is progress. It's why loudspeaker designers frequently look beyond fabric or aluminium dome tweeters with varying degrees of success; ribbon tweeters, Heil Air Motion Transformers and the use of ceramic, diamond or beryllium domes are all attempts to bring a bit more real-world sound to audio, lowering distortion in the process. Of course, the lower the distortion of the transducer, the more we become aware of iniquities elsewhere in the chain (it's infinitely fascinating as an audio enthusiast to find that a small lowering of distortion in the loudspeaker can highlight ►

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- order-of-magnitude smaller distortions in the rest of the signal chain; you'd expect these issues to be swamped by even the best loudspeaker).

Back to the Maestro. This is a sophisticated speaker sound. It has the drive, the energy, the balls if you want, to make music sound powerful, dynamic and energetic. Listen to 'Un Bal' from Berlioz' *Symphony Fantastique* (the Robin Ticciati and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra version from Linn Records this time – who said the Linn/Naim 'special relationship' was dead?) and the music dances around the room with a sense of effortless flow and dynamic ease. Then move over to 'Bangarang' by Skrillex (not exactly audiophile fodder) and the screechy backing, the sampled 'shout to all my lost boys, we roudy' and then the wig-out metal-like dubsteppy bass beats sound like there's a war going on between ear, amp and speaker, and the speaker wins. Between these two points lie Tony Bennett singing 'Young and Foolish' to Bill Evans piano and the Hilliard Ensemble singing Thomas Tallis' *Audivi Vocem*. I played these two albums to a few people at Studio AV while reviewing the speakers (in that kind of "Have a listen to this" musical ping pong session you get when things are really in the groove)... and I caused Amazon UK to sell out of one and almost sell out of the other in the space of ten minutes.

Put simply, there's a simple arbiter of good performance in audio equipment when not on your own turf. If the system makes so little imprint on the music being played that those who are in the room repeatedly hit their Shazam apps on their phones and almost everyone ends up about £100 in the hole from all the music they ordered, it's making all the right noises. And the Maestro was making all the right noises.

This is a world-class loudspeaker. It is in a world class range, but its secret recipe is it offers near full-range sound for us Europeans who lack the acreage to live with the really big hitters from Wilson... or even Focal. It's almost as uncompromising, but also proves the Utopia range can be driven by Focal stablemate Naim. How many Naim/Focal combos will actually make it into homes is a deeper question, but this is far more than just an academic exercise. It's an experiment into synergy... that works! Music Maestro, please! +

Thanks to Studio AV (www.studioav.co.uk) in Eton for providing the ideal location to test the Maestro Utopia.

"This is a sophisticated speaker sound. It has the drive, the energy, the balls if you want, to make music sound powerful, dynamic and energetic."

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: 3/5-way, floorstanding vented loudspeaker

Drivers: 1x 27mm IAL2 pure Beryllium inverted dome tweeter, 1x 165mm W Power Flower Midrange, 1x 270mm W cone woofer, 1x 270mm W-cone subwoofer with Magnetic Damping System (MDS)

Frequency Response ($\pm 3\text{dB}$): 25Hz-40kHz

Low frequency point: 21Hz

Sensitivity (2.83 V/1m): 93dB

Nominal Impedance: four ohms

Minimum impedance: three ohms

Crossover frequencies: 90Hz/220Hz/2.2kHz

Recommended Amplifier power: 80-600W

Dimensions(HxWxD): 147x45.5x77cm

Weight: 116kg per speaker

Finishes: Carrera White, Black Lacquer, Imperial Red. Other finishes on application

Price: £32,499 per pair

Manufactured by: Focal

URL: www.focal.com

Tel: 0845 660 2680 (UK only)



GÉRARD CHRÉTIEN INTERVIEW

Meet Your Maker

We spoke with Gérard Chrétien, Managing Director of Focal, on loudspeaker design, listening, installation, and more

Alan Sircom: What was the design brief behind the Maestro?

Gérard Chrétien: The purpose of the Maestro was to develop a compact speaker with huge performance in the low frequencies and high power handling. The Scala is a fantastic speaker for music lovers, but due to the single 270mm driver, there is obviously some limitation in the LF. The Maestro's target was to deliver a speaker with high SPL and to make it a speaker for mastering engineers.

AS: How did you achieve the LF goal without EM drivers?

GC: We developed a bass system for the Maestro using two woofers, one in a closed box, the other in a reflex ported chamber. This gives us huge bass, and then we worked on a system that, by adjusting a second voice coil, made it possible to alter the coupling with the room. The second voice coil allows us to adjust the damping in the low frequencies. This is in the same spirit as we do with the Grande Utopia, by adjusting the Q factor between the woofer and the room, by adjusting the magnetic field.

This was the hardest part of the Maestro design, requiring a lot of experimentation and blind testing. The sub-bass in the Maestro is in a bass-reflex cabinet, while the upper bass is in a sealed box. What was not so easy was that the slope of the first is 18dB/octave and the latter is 12dB/octave, so there is some potential phase opposition between the two at low frequencies, so we developed a charge by 'decompressing' the closed box, to maintain phase alignment down to 30Hz. I think you would call this 'decompressed' cabinet a 'leaky' sealed box.

AS: Do you have a specific method of installing the Utopia speakers in a room, that might also apply to other designs?

GC: If I have to start in a new room, I use the formula developed by Roy Allison, designed to avoid exciting the modes of the room. If you consider the woofer position, think of three dimensions from that position – one to the ground, one to the side wall and one to the wall behind the loudspeaker. You have to try to ensure that the square of one dimension is equal to the product of the other two ($A^2=B \times C$). We then have to do precision adjustment; azimuth, back wall fine-tuning. We then stabilise the speaker, with spikes or not, depending on the floor.

Usually when we tune a system in a room (as in a show), I try to get the first tuning over quickly, to get the tonal balance and soundstage right. Then I fine-tune at length, to best convey the musical emotion. That is after all, the magic of our business! The small things that help us understand the music.

AS: Finally, if you were to pick one 'desert island loudspeaker', what would it be?

GC: I could live with the Chorus 826 and the Scala (I use Scalas at home), but probably for me it would be the Stella.

AS: Why the Stella Utopia EM and not the Grande EM?

GC: For me the Grande, is like a limousine, but the Stella is a sports car!

AS: Gérard Chrétien, thank you. +

"If you want to massively increase the performance of your cartridge, it's essential to understand little known fundamentals"



Many music lovers experience only a tiny fraction of the performance available from their highly prized cartridge. The popular view is that the cartridge is the place to invest attention and great sound quality will naturally follow. The truth is that the fundamentals of cartridge performance are so counter intuitive that it beggars belief. Hardly anyone we speak to is remotely aware of them, which puts their cartridge performance at a tremendous disadvantage.

It's a bit like expecting a powerful optical microscope to view an object accurately, whilst holding it with a trembling hand - crazy? Yes, but the analogy is the same, your cartridge amplifies vibration 8000 times and how well is it held? Tonearms are far from equal, in fact nothing could be further from the truth. Once these factors are tested and understood, then utterly transforming your cartridge performance becomes easy.

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Densen B-175 integrated amplifier

By Alan Sircom

I get through a lot of products for review. As a consequence, some of them quickly fade from memory. A few – usually the exceptionally good (or exceptionally bad) ones – stick in the mind. One such product was the original Densen Beat DM10. With its two large gold knobs and sharp-edged black case, it was certainly visually distinctive, but it was the sound that remained. It managed to straddle the great divide between the expansive, detailed sound of big Americana and the tight, driven rhythmic sound popular with late-model 'flat earthers' of the 1990s.

The Beat is dead. Long live the Beat!

Densen's current range of B-series integrated amplifiers (as well as pre-powers, digital products and even a tuner) are the progeny of that original Beat design, and the B-175 is the flagship one-box amp in the range. In the process it provides a perfect link between the ideas that went into the old Beat amplifier and the new; it could be considered a B-250 preamp and a pair of

B-350 mono amps in one box, albeit with some savings in the shared case and power supply.

As standard, it's a remote control line integrated (sadly, my own sample was light by precisely one remote control, as well as a manual and plug... it having done the rounds already), delivering 125W into eight ohms that doubles down perfectly to 250W into four. This spells 'stiff' power supply delivery, and in real terms mean vice-like grip over the bass cones. It's also upgradable, with optional surround processor boards, Densen's very clever moving coil and moving magnet phono boards, the possibility of driving the amplifier as part of an active system (more power amps are needed to achieve that goal, of course) and even a DNRG power supply. The phono boards can also be taken out of the box and used in Densen's excellent DP-Drive box (I also used one of these for some considerable time in the 1990s. Although the current phono boards are different to previous ones, if today's LED-fed, light-powered phono stage is as good as the last generation, it's almost worth the price of admission in its own right).

Densen's design ethos is somewhat different to most. Thomas Sillesen is officially titled 'Head Honcho' of the company, which gives you some idea of Densen's outlook... dour, dry intellectual musing is not on the menu. When not designing or running the company, Sillesen is a keen musician in his own right, and his love of music has shaped the way he evaluates his designs. Put

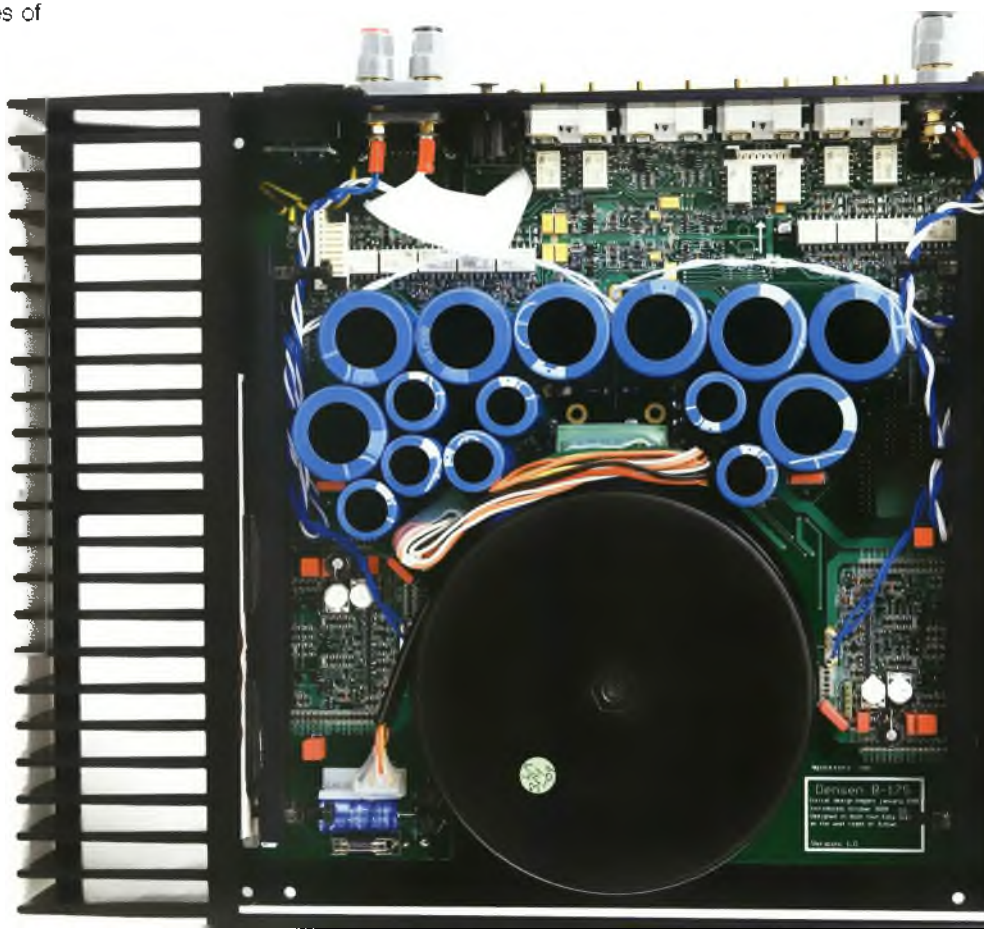
simply, he believes we should listen on music we enjoy, rather than music we think is good audio material. To that end, he recommends using both good and bad recordings of music from all genre from your collection to evaluate audio, he's no fan of excusing products through 'burn in' arguments, buying to compensate for shortcomings elsewhere, being ruled by your system (as in having to clamber over vast amps or run through a series of impossible hoops in order to simply listen to a piece of music), but most of all, you should enjoy the ride. He also discusses the 'air guitar factor' in choosing the right equipment, although this has mistakenly lumped Densen in with the 'only good for rock' crowd. Unfortunately, 'air violin' doesn't have the same impact.

There's a lot of heatsink on the sides of the B-175, and yet it only runs 'warm' at most. And almost immediately, you remember why the Beat DM10 holds such firm, fond memories. Like the older amp, this has 'groove'; lots of it, starting with the deep, tidy bass lines. I defy anyone (well, anyone who isn't a philistine) to listen to this without thinking, "Hmm... it's been a while since I played some Jaco Pastorius", because the bass is so immensely satisfying, you cannot help but reach for whichever sublime bass player you might not have played for a while. It's a hackneyed phrase in audio, but the bass isn't just deep and controlled. What makes it so enjoyable is that it is immensely tuneful as well.

I suspect the T-word gets a bad press in audio because of not-so-fond memories of 'tune dems' and being foot-tapped at by a salesperson trying to get you to upsell. However, the reality is there is a quantifiable difference between

something that presents the music with and without that 'tuneful' element, and it's something you can hear in a few seconds. It's not restricted to jazz or rock music; you hear it and hear it quickly in practically all music that isn't Messiaen or Stockhausen. It's a sense of temporal rightness that connects us with the musical themes being conveyed. It's the difference between 'sounds good' and 'sounds like good hi-fi'. Trouble is for a writer, whenever you end up discussing this important element in the musical presentation, you end up sounding like a pseud, where in fact when you hear it, you get it. Instantly. And it's why, regardless of whether it was Elvis Costello, Miles Davis or Frank Zappa who said it first, there is a lot of truth in the saying, "writing about music is like dancing about architecture".

Bass is the B-175's obvious strong point, but that shouldn't be read as its only strong point. It's good right across the board. It's an exceptionally clear and detailed performer from DC to light. The mids are a fraction on the 'earthy' side, ►





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► especially if you are used to the smoothed-over sound of a good valve power amplifier. This reads worse than it sounds, though; it's more like the sound of people singing in a natural space than the crystalline qualities of some more immediately 'uncoloured' amplifiers that often end up sounding 'colourless' and 'bland'. This extends to the treble, but this is mitigated by an excellent sense of poise and precision the top frequencies have on this amplifier.

Far from impeding the musical enjoyment factor, I think this mid and treble character enhanced it. I found myself listening to the Zappa family reissue of *Joe's Garage* with the ubiquitous wry smile (and a tapping foot), but then found myself doing the same to Strauss' *Eine Alpensinfonie* (OK, the wry smile had gone), played by Blomstedt from the Decca Box. I found myself, despite myself, listening to the whole damn thing when I should have been writing this review. Still, entertainment trumps punctuality at times.

This last showed one of the B-175's great strengths, too. There was a superb sense of space generated in the room. Space around the instruments, depth, width and even some height to the sound. So much so, it necessitated a slight change in speaker position to maximise the effect, at which point Strauss took on an even bigger scale. If I'd been playing Wagner, I'd have annexed somewhere. On a chopper.

I can't help thinking of the B-175 as something more than just an integrated amplifier. It's like an analogue Devialet; effortlessly powerful, supremely detailed, extraordinarily quiet and the kind of one box that could easily replace half a dozen preamp, power supply and mono power amp boxes. If anything, the sound of the B-175 aces that of the groundbreaking shiny French bathroom scales, focusing as it does on the way the music sounds, next to the more cerebral presentation of the D-Premier. Forgetting the price differential involved for a moment, the two presentations are ultimately fundamentally different, with the B-175 accenting the bass perfectly and the D Premier taking the lead for more open and attractive midrange and highs. In comparison, the Densen sounds more driven in the bass and the D-Premier sounds less hard in the mids and top. Meanwhile, the Edge G3 teeters between the two.

There's one last common factor from Beat to the B-Series. Densen products have always had the cleanest lines in audio, but they are so clean, you end up with super-sharp edges and corners. Seriously, I've shaved with blunter edges than these. It's worth donning cotton gloves when installing this; not only to prevent grubby fingerprints on the lovely natural aluminium or deep black finish, but to prevent the inevitable skinned knuckles that come with the design.

It's been some years since I last played with some Densen equipment. I feared my memories might have been artificially rosy, or time had paled the brand. I needn't have worried. This is a wonderful amplifier, as much powerful as it is enjoyable. If you like music, you deserve to listen to the B-175. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Connections: Four line inputs, one pair tape outputs, processor input/output bypass, preamplifier outputs (all RCA, single-ended)

Power output into 8 ohms: 2x125W

Power output into 4 ohms: 2x250W

THD + Noise @ rated output: Less than 0.05%

Frequency response (+0 -3db): 2Hz-500kHz

Dimensions (WxDxH): 44x31x6.4cm

Weight: 16Kg

Available in silver or black

Price: £5,500

Manufactured by: Densen

URL: www.densen.dk

Distributed by: KOG Audio

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Alan Sircom, Hifi+ issue 78

IDEA

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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

Rega RP6 Turntable and Exact 2 Moving-Magnet Cartridge

By Wayne Garcia

In *The Absolute Sound* last year, I more or less gushed over Rega's RP3 turntable. With its freshly minted RB303 'arm, new-ish 24-volt low-noise motor, and, most dramatically, 'double-brace' plinth technology, the RP3 presented the most significant overall improvements yet experienced by this long-time Rega fan. But as any smart reviewer should know, sometimes it's best to hold back a bit, because you can surely count on today's latest and greatest being bested day after tomorrow. I do, however, find consolation in the fact that the RP6 being reviewed here is not a replacement for the RP3 but Rega's next model up, a somewhat hot-rodded, if you will, expression of Rega's latest evolutionary thinking on LP playback.

In that regard it takes nothing away from the excellent RP3. On the other hand, it's still a step up. Pricier, too, to be sure, the RP6 goes for £798 without cartridge versus the RP3's £475 base sticker. But here's an interesting rub: the RP6 price includes the outboard TT PSU Mk2 power supply, which I consider to be an essential option to get the most out of the RP3 and which adds £198 to its starting price. At that point you're within shouting distance of excellence—and whatever comes after excellence.

I described unpacking the RP3 as a *déjà vu* experience for anyone familiar with Rega turntables. But the RP6 brings a few "whoa!" moments to the "let's get acquainted" phase of new ownership. First, what's up with that platter? I'm used to Rega's signature glass-platter/felt-mat combo, but this one goes beyond the usual simple circular glass slab that rides atop a plastic hub of a

subplatter. Though it still sports a felt mat (now available in wools dyed bright blue, yellow, red, and violet) the RP6's design sports a new, two-piece, 16mm-thick flywheel platter made of float glass, a technique wherein molten glass is floated over molten tin in order to create the flattest possible surface as well as the highest uniformity of thickness. Two separate pieces of float glass are then joined, says Rega, "using a complex and labour-intensive invisible UV curing-bond technique, [by which] the secondary ring platter is permanently bonded to the underside of the main platter. The extra ring adds mass to the outer circumference which increases the natural flywheel effect of the platter, improving speed stability, accuracy, and consistency."

Moreover, rather than simply sitting atop the subplatter's hub a new aluminium "top hub adaptor" with six raised plateaus rests between the hub and platter, further ensuring the flattest possible surface for LPs to spin on. The feet, too, are a step up from Rega's standard rubber-cup-like units. Derived from the top-of-the line P9, these feet, still in tripod configuration, are created from a much more stable sandwich of aluminium and rubber. And though this may sound superficial, in addition to the sonic improvement, these feet are simply more attractive, more serious looking, and altogether increase a customer's pride of ownership. The plinth they support is a little higher in mass than that of the RP3, and the "double-brace" ▶



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► technology found in that model is likewise employed here. To recap, the “double brace”—seen in photographs as the strip with the O-shaped cut-outs that bridges the main bearing hub and the arm mount—is made of a phenolic-resin. The idea is to create what Rega refers to as a “stressed beam” assembly to increase rigidity between these two points. One brace is fixed to the top of the plinth, the other to the bottom side.

The RP3 and RP6 share the same, newly refined RB303 arm, which, with the aid of 3D CAD and CAM technology, has redistributed mass to reduce the number of resonant points. In addition, a newly designed armtube increases rigidity. Rega’s TT PSU outboard power supply recently received a new housing, which is both more handsome than the original and also includes a new anti-vibration circuit as well as improved power-supply regulation. The TT PSU is a natural upgrade path that’s compatible with most recent Rega models that use a 24-volt motor. I highly recommend it for its lower noise, greater stability, and, given the plethora of 45rpm vinyl reissues, the convenience of electronic speed-switching. The £255 Exact 2 cartridge—you save £55 and a lot of time if you purchase the complete package for £998—is Rega’s best moving-magnet. Though it’s not widely known, Rega developed its own coil-winding

“As it was with the RP3, the RP6 delivers qualities – and not surprisingly, with even greater success – that have not always been associated with Rega designs. Here I specifically mean a depth and forcefulness to the low frequencies, along with a macro-dynamic swing and heft.”

machinery, and having greater control over the process allows Rega to use 33 percent less wire in the Exact, increasing efficiency. Unlike other Rega cartridges, which use elliptical styli, the Exact 2 uses a “Vital” stylus tip, and, like the Elys 2, the Exact mounts using the three-point system. If you wish to tweak, be my guest, but if you’re more music lover than audiophile, my advice would be to purchase the package as described. It was, after all, designed as such—setup is a snap—and that’s how I evaluated the sound.

As I reported in my piece on the RP3 in *TAS* Issue 224, Rega’s direction has been toward lowering noise and vibration by increasing rigidity, lowering mass, and improving its manufacturing techniques and tooling. The results are consistent, if not necessarily predictable, with increasingly audible improvements as you step through the line. To this end, the company’s flagship P9 was recently dropped in favour of the RP8, and its innovative ‘deck within a deck’ skeletal design... and there are strong rumours of more to come, developing a new top-end turntable to truly partner the Isis and Valve Isis CD players.

As it was with the RP3, the RP6 delivers qualities—and not surprisingly, with even greater success—that have not always been associated with Rega designs. Here I specifically mean a depth and forcefulness to the low frequencies, along with a macro-dynamic swing and heft we





TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Belt drive, unsuspended turntable

Speeds: 33.3, 45 (operated from TT PSU Mk II box)

Dimensions (WxHxD): 44.5x14x 37cm (with dustcover)

Weight: 7.5kg.

Price: RP6, £798; with Exact 2, £998

Manufactured by: Rega Research

URL: www.rega.co.uk

► typically associate with more massive designs. You won't need some orchestral blockbuster or powerhouse rock LP to hear this. Even with a recording such as the *Mozart Sonatas for Piano and Violin* [London], the first notes tell you that the RP6 delivers an increased sense of power, depth of harmonic richness, and percussive force, all with notable ease and gracefulness.

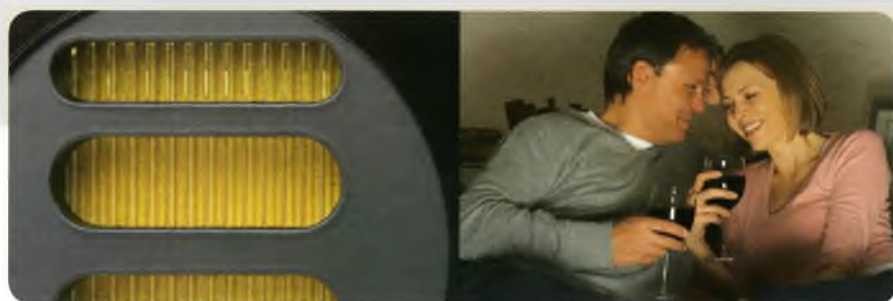
Of course, when the time comes to play something with more demanding bass and dynamic extremes, say, the famed Mercury recording of Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*, the RP6 reproduces the explosive orchestral climaxes in a way that, I suspect, will surprise listeners who appreciate Rega designs for their nimble musicality, but sometimes wish for a bit more muscle to balance things out. Rock fans take note. If you're in the mood for the sheer visceral power of Hendrix's *Band of Gypsies* [Classic/ Capitol], the RP6 allows "Machine Gun" to dip and soar and explode with the force of crashing waves, along with a fantastic palette of mind-twisting and speaker-shredding shrieks from Hendrix's Strat, stacked Marshall amps, and effects pedals, plus the rat-a-tat snare and pulsing bass that make this song such an emotional workout. With the decidedly more mellow strains of Cat Stevens, as heard on Analogue Productions' stellar reissue of *Tea for the Tillerman*, Stevens' voice is as rich as a newly tapped vein of gold, while instruments practically ooze layers of harmonic overtones, with warm surrounding halos of air. The RP6 also delivers in areas we audiophiles love to obsess over: During the *Firebird* it created an impressively large stage with terrific depth layering, instrumental focus, bloom, and air; *Tea for the Tillerman* revealed the Analogue Productions pressing as simply more

detailed, dynamically nimble, and forceful than any other edition. The list goes on; the music spins...and spins. Because all these improvements aside—and yes, they are most certainly that, and easily heard above those of the very fine RP3—what the RP6 ultimately delivers is what Rega fans have always treasured above all else, a gateway to a highly involving, long-term musical relationship with our vinyl collections. +

First Published in The Absolute Sound 226



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UK CONTACT

Justin Bird - DIRECTOR
justin@chestergroup.org
Office: +44 (0) 1244 559033
Mobile: +44 (0) 7880 884123

US CONTACT

Christina Yui - (US Only)
christina@chestergroup.org
Office: 845-361-3001
Mobile: 917-238-0764
Justin Bird (Outside US)

AUSTRALIAN CONTACT

Jim Preece (AUS Only)
justin@chestergroup.org
+61 (0) 400 808 900
Justin Bird (Outside AUS)

NEW-TECH CONTACT

Quinton Bird (NON-NORDIC)
quinton@chestergroup.org
+44 (0) 1244 559033

NEW-TECH CONTACT

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Crystal Cable Absolute Dream (Part One)

By Alan Sircom



There are already quite a few reviews of Crystal Cables' Absolute Dream floating round. It's an astonishing cable, at an astonishing price, in part because it raises the metallurgy stakes. Absolute Dream uses an all new monocrystal silver solid-core conductor wrapped in twin sheaths of Kapton and PEEK and then wrapped in a braid of both silver-plated monocrystal copper and gold-plated monocrystal silver to make up each conductor in the cable, and then housed in a translucent jacket, all wrapped up with the highest grade connectors and an elegant lozenge ID tag. Put this in the sort of presentation case you might get on a bottle of Louis XIII and the result is an expensive process, and a very expensive cable. Most of the reviews thus far have concentrated on the signal, loudspeaker and power cords (for good reason... they are incredible in their own right). But I thought I'd paint a target on myself and discuss the undiscussable first – the sound of the Absolute Dream USB cable.

The reason for this is simple and two-fold. As said earlier, no-one's covered the USB end. But also, USB is one of the few cables that is almost universally considered to step outside of the whole 'cable family' affair; it doesn't seem so tied to the sound of the complete system and even those who follow the family ethos often end up with a USB cable from a different brand (and all too often, a no-brand USB). This gives us an opportunity to study the performance of the complete Absolute Dream concept qua concept, and the chance to evaluate the performance in the context of how it performs on its own. The one difficulty here is matching products; there are many USB-supporting DACs on the market, but precious few that cost more than the cable itself. The wry humour of such a situation aside, in fact this only poses an intellectual problem rather than a physical one, and the Wadia 121 did sterling (silver) service as converter du jour, despite costing about a fifth of the cost of the USB cable it worked with. For this paring, the rest of the system comprised the Edge G3 integrated amplifier, a pair of Raidho C-1.1 loudspeakers and Cardas Clear cables as comparison USB, as well as for interconnect, loudspeaker and power duties. A top of the line AudioQuest Diamond USB – complete with 72v battery-powered Dielectric-Bias System – and Nordost's Blue Heaven USB were drafted in for comparison duties.

Intellectually at least, there shouldn't be much need for an expensive USB cable in most cases, and given the isolation of the USB input of the 121, this is one of those 'most cases'. While not completely smitten by the whole 'bits is bits' argument, the demands of USB even in tricked out asynchronous mode are not exactly huge. Nevertheless, under a variety of conditions, differences between cables have been heard, and not only through systems designed to maximise differences. The point, for the moment, is not 'why' or even 'how', but 'how much'; because if a £99 cable gets most of the way to a £6,480 cable, something's very wrong.

Nothing's very wrong at all. The Absolute Dream lives up to its name. The cable synergy issue made it hard to hear significant differences between Cardas and AudioQuest, but the Absolute Dream towered above both of them. So much so in fact the test took seconds to complete; the moment the Absolute Dream came on, the sound of the system through the other cables sounded uneven and boring by comparison.

First there's the overall increase in articulation, both vocal and more surprisingly musical. It's as if the musicians suddenly shook off the worries of being in a studio and got their act together. Voice was outstandingly precise, especially when coping with plainsong or early music polyphony; here, you need to establish the singers both as individual sonic entities in the mix, but as their voices blend together, and how that vocal blend resonates within the space it was recorded in.

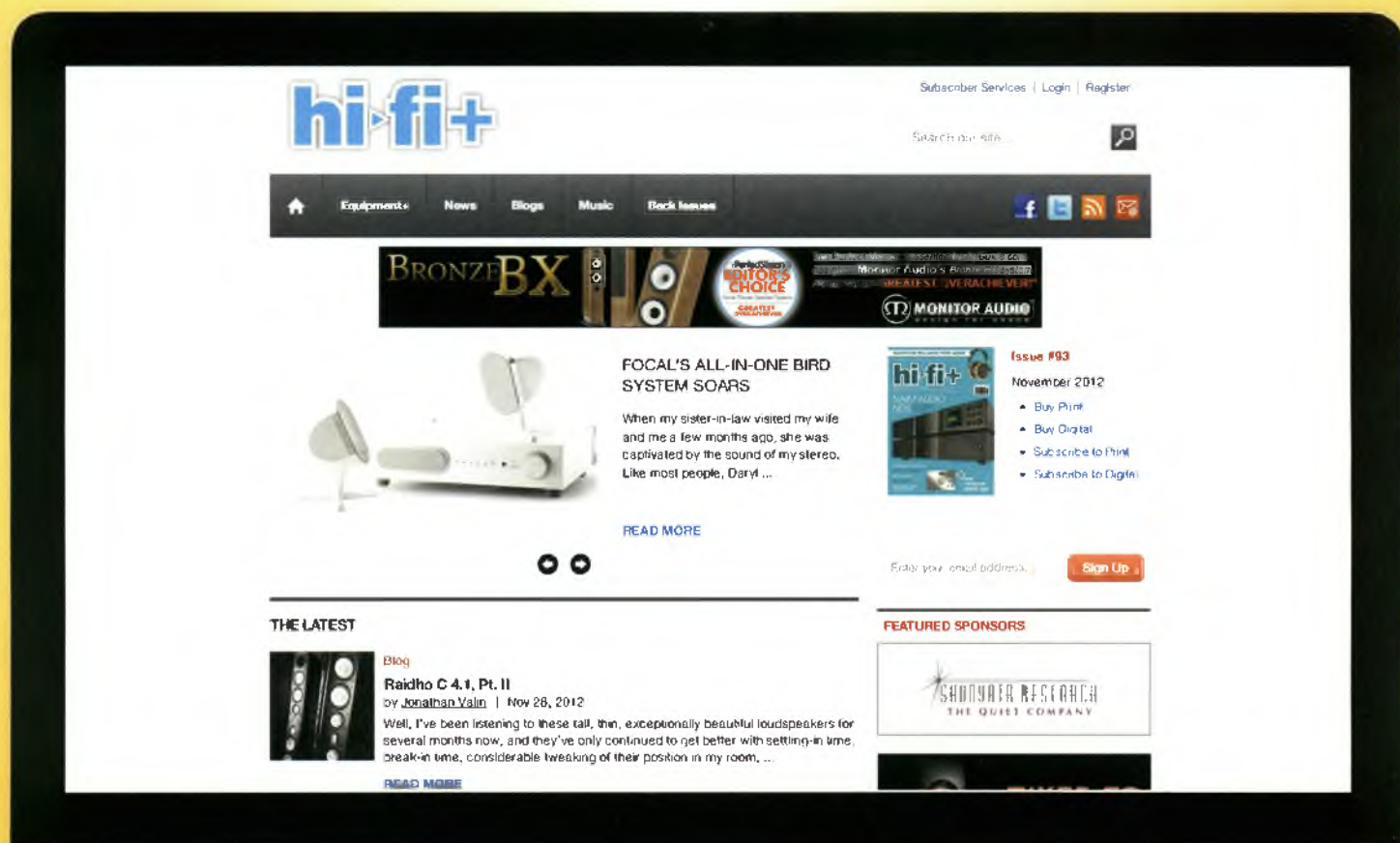
There is also considerable impact to the sound. Here, the comparison between the Nordost and the Crystal became very useful. The Nordost is every inch the leading-edge performer, with the attack of each note taking precedence. The Crystal is also every inch the leading-edge performer, but it adds the sustain, decay and release of each note to what it portrays accurately. The Blue Heaven is pretty far from a one-dimensional USB cable, but in a straight fight it sounded one-dimensional by comparison. OK, so comparing a cable with a price tag maybe 20x larger than the other is somewhat unfair to both, but the fascinating part was just how complete the Nordost sounded... right up until the Absolute Dream kicked in. ▶

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► The bass too kicked in with an intensity and drive not normally associated with computer audio. There was instrument tonality and energy right down to the bottom of the C-1.1's limits, but this was more natural than forced.

But perhaps what really wins you over with this cable is its musical nature. You just listen to more music through this cable. Yes, at first, you go through the tedious "I wonder what this sounds like?" and on goes the worn classics like *Take Five*, *Kind of Blue*, *DSOTM*, maybe even *Sea Change*. Pretty soon though that begins to get dull, and you are usually faced with the beginnings of the tell-tale itch that is the start of Gear Acquisition Syndrome. You don't get GAS from these cables, after that first flush, you begin to settle down with your music and just listen to an album at a time. I found myself devoting a regular late afternoon session to picking an old album, ripping it and playing it from beginning to end. Something that seldom happens in our sound-byte digital audio world today.

I found my computer audio happy place in the Absolute Dream USB, even if I'll never be able to justify the expense of owning it for real. And strangely, I found it in the almost forgotten charms of that late Latin jazz vibe player Cal Tjader and his *Monterey Concerts* album. The whole thing, one end

to the other. Not one track then off to some other attraction. Just music. Riveting, absolutely riveting; in precisely the way music always used to sound when you played it on LP.

However, I suspect the outstanding sonic performance of Absolute Dream USB is only half way there. There's the whole pride of ownership issue that comes with an expensive purchase. The full package, the presentation case, the finish and the case candy (a bag within the box, a credit-card owner's certificate, the full works) is something out of the Cartier textbook, rather than a Ziploc bag with some bits of wire in it. Does all that materially add to the actual sound of the Absolute Dream? Of course not, but those who spend this kind of money on cable can expect this level of all-round product sophistication from all their other purchases – why not audio?

Of course, this is hard to imagine if you cannot get your mind past the concept of the sheer expense involved. There are two ways for a journalist to look at expensive cable, or an expensive anything for that matter. The first is to set it against the context of your own life. To me, this one USB cable is equivalent to several square metres of the house extension that I've been putting off until funds permit. And they never permit.

The other way is to remember it costs roughly as much as a night in a good suite at Claridge's Hotel in London.

To someone able to afford to enjoy the finer things in life, without thinking about how better you should allocate those funds, a night at Claridge's seems a sensible way to unload thousands of pounds. For me, if I were in the same position, I'd take the longer term satisfaction knowing I owned the best cables I'd ever heard over the weekend in a hotel, no matter how good. And that means if it came down to it, the Absolute Dream would win out over Absolute Luxury in the middle of London. Would my wife agree? Sadly, we'll probably never know either way. +

Next time, the rest of the system gets the Absolute Dream treatment.

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WHAT HI-FI?
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Edge G3 integrated amplifier

By Alan Sircom

Is there such a thing as a 'blameless' amplifier? In audio electronics circles, this is a non-question; any amplifier capable of a fairly rudimentary set of performance parameters by modern standards can achieve 'blameless' status. However, among audiophiles, finding a truly 'blameless' amplifier is not so easy. The Edge G3 integrated amplifier, however, nails that status.

It's a solid-state, line-level integrated amplifier, conservatively rated at 135W per channel into eight ohms in its latest guise, with just four line inputs, a tape and a preamp output. It does come with a remote control, but all this controls is the volume. There's no balance control, phono stage, headphone socket, tone stack, fancy gold plated logo, or anything remotely resembling flummery. Instead, there's a solid aluminium chassis,

solid feet, solid heatsink fins running down the side, a solid transformer inside, a not quite as solid trio of plastic front controls (which nevertheless feature solid knurled metal knobs) and the whole thing gives off an air of (perhaps unsurprisingly) solidity.

The rear panel is laid out by engineers. It's worth remembering this, because it runs counter to general audio logic. From left to right on the back panel, the first set of phono sockets are for the preamp output, then come the four inputs, then finally the tape monitor. Because the legends for these are laser cut into the back panel, you might struggle to see them and do the instinctual thing of plugging your CD player into the left-most input and then wonder why not sound comes out. Read the manual. Why all other brands don't do this as a matter of course continues to amaze me, but the protection circuit fuses are easily replaced from the back panel, without the need to open the case itself. Not that it blows fuses, it's virtually unburstable in fact, but the fuses are easy to get at all the same.



▶ The G3 may well take a little while to run in, but it arrived with a lot of miles on the clock so all I had to contend with was the half hour or so standing start it needed to come on song after being powered down. It didn't matter if it had been in a box for a month or turned off at the end of an evening; half an hour later, it was singing its song.

I'm not sure if 'singing its song' is the correct term, though. It's more 'letting the other devices do their thing'. This amplifier does two roles and does them well; it opens the window very wide to the source component, and provides a powerful, unimpeded amplified signal for the loudspeakers to get to grips with. This unfortunately plain statement of blamelessness speaks volumes, not only about the G3, but about the pack it runs with.

It means the amplifier isn't 'rosy' or 'dark' or 'bright'. It isn't 'moody' or 'pacy', 'upbeat' or for that matter 'downbeat'. It isn't the recreator of smoky jazz clubs or vast concert halls. It doesn't lay music bare, nor does it pretty up the sound. It simply 'is' what ever the source and speaker demand of it. Consider this Zen and the Art of Amplifier Design.

Musically, this means insight into the recording process, tempered by the source and transducer of choice. With first-rate components like the Raidho C-1.1 loudspeakers (or even my trusty old pair of now sadly discontinued Avalon NP Evolution 2.0 floorstanders, armed with Track Audio spikes as a massive improvement over the giveaway set), the loudspeakers give up a lot of information about what went on in the studio. Good, and bad; if the compression is heavy-handed or even the engineer tracking wasn't at his or her best and some channels are clipped, you'll know. OK, so the Edge G3 won't change a hi-fi loudspeaker into a studio monitor (the first is designed for hours of comfortable listening at a stretch, the second for telling the engineer precisely what's happening in the recording), but the amp does tell it like it is, exactly like it is.

It's more comfortable with bad loudspeakers than poor sources, however. This 'blameless' approach meant if something didn't sound right, it was usually the fault of something up or downstream, but usually upstream. To this end, the Edge could be considered not the most merciful amplifier to use

with less than stellar source components, cheap and nasty wires or mediocre support systems. It is a demanding design and it expects a similar level of uncompromising design throughout. That said, it doesn't just demand expensive tribute; it made the ever-ready HRT Streamer II come to life, but also showed up perfectly just how important that AQVOX USB power supply is for this USB driven DAC. Perhaps bizarrely, the G3 showed just how good a six thousand pound USB cable can be when hooked to a DAC roughly 1/20th the cost of the cable.

The other side of this is if you are seeking a lot of character from your amplifier, this isn't the amplifier for you. If you want valve-like sweetness and richness, the dark tones of a Levinson, the bright lights of Ayre or the bouncy, boppiness of Naim, buy yourself one of these things instead. No, what the G3 does is the blameless thing. It presents the signal to the speakers without grace of favour. It's that 'straight wire with gain' approach, but it shows just how rare such an approach really is.

It seems that typically amplifiers deviate from that blamelessness in stage width. Next to the G3, most amps sound foreshortened. ▶



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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs: 4x line-level single-ended RCA phono

Outputs: 1x tape monitor, 1x preamp output, both single-ended RCA phono

Power rating (into eight ohms): 135W per channel

Constant current capacity: 14A

Input impedance: 33kohms

Output impedance: 0.07ohms

Transformer rating: 600VA

Total Capacitance: 40,000µF

Dimensions (WxDxH): 42.5x38x11cm

Weight: 22.7kg

Price: £6,000

Manufactured by: Edge Electronics

URL: www.edgeamps.com

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► even small next to the G3. Normally, stage width is more a function of phase on the recording, the dispersion characteristics of the loudspeaker and diffusion in the room; the amp can play its part, but it's a minor role. This time though, the G3 plays a significant part in the production. I suspect in fact it's because other amps play a significant part in holding back the imagery rather than the G3 artificially boosting the stage width.

Bass is another interesting property of the G3. It doesn't hang back and doesn't overhang. It just has bass. Enough bass. Put 'River Man' by Nick Drake through the G3 and there's almost no bass to speak of. Put on Eric Creech and the LSO's Brass section playing Gabrielli's *Music for Brass* (Naxos) and there's all the drive and energy needed to portray these instruments at full force (without making it sound like the opening of another evening's Open University

programming from the 1970s in the process). Move over to electronic bass and James Blake and the room shakes. It's easy to have big bass when it's needed, but it's more important to get it right when it's not required.

I know I've said this is not the amp to use with less than brilliant sources, but this could also be used as the cheat product for loudspeaker manufacturers wanting to sell a so-so speaker. Simply use this amp with a first-rate source on the front, and your little two-ways sound like big three-ways. If the speaker is good and small, people will think it's doing something special.

Toward the end of the test, the Densen B-175 arrived and it acts as an excellent foil to compare and contrast approaches. They are both very fast sounding amplifiers, but the parallels end soon after this. Although similar on paper, the Densen is all about the music, where the G3 is all about reproducing sound as accurately as possible. The Densen's approach sounds slightly lighter – but as a consequence, more ordered – in the bass and a touch more earthy, where the G3 goes for the overall and super-honest presentation. Both could be considered expressions of what their respective continents look for in good audio (we focus on melody, the Americans on harmony in our audio products), but I think that's a bit too much of a reduction.

Edge isn't one of those brands that leaps out at you. The company shuns marketing, glossy adverts and if you Google 'Edge Amps', you have to go through a lot of other pages before you reach the company's website. It believes – rightly – that the products should speak for themselves. And in products like the G3, they plainly do just that. Unfortunately, despite its laudable, engineering-led stance, it also means the brand gets overlooked for others that shout louder. Shame really... this is one of the very best integrated amplifiers money can buy. +

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

CAD 1543 digital to analogue converter

By Jason Kennedy

It might be because I spent a little bit too long with a DNM preamp in the nineties, but whenever I come across acrylic casework, alarm bells start to ring. DNM preamps sport separate left and right volume controls, DIN connections and frankly perverse switching logic; the base model called Start had a green button with START inscribed on it, when this button was illuminated the preamp was off. You get the picture. But it's important to note that all this hairshirt inconvenience did result in an extremely revealing piece of kit, few preamps could compete with it at the time, the DNM 3 Six was one of the very best money could buy, and worth all the effort. I'm glad to see that this design still exists as the 3D, should you feel that your current fully remote control, precision sculpted piece of majestic metalwork is cramping the system's musical style.

The matt black acrylic casework of the CAD 1543 suggested that its maker, Scott Berry, might be another purist in the Morecroft mould. The absence of all but a logo on the front panel was a sign but the back panel made things abundantly clear, this is a hardcore converter. The beautifully built, and – unlike the DNM – substantial, case has one input and one pair of outputs

on the back, to top it off the mains lead is captive, so no IEC inlet for easy installation and tweaking. The input is USB, the output RCA phonos, as I said, hardcore. Scott is not a man for compromise, he is an electronics expert who formally had a proper job in the real world but decided to jack it in to follow his dream. That dream was to make the world's best computer audio DAC. I haven't heard that all the high-end examples, but I'm familiar enough with some of the better ones to think that he may have achieved that goal. Not bad for a first product. But, will anyone buy a converter with one input, no balanced outputs and a captive mains lead for nearly seven big ones?

I am not alone in having tried to persuade him to make it a more commercial product, by adding at least a coaxial input and balanced outputs, and maybe even a conventional mains socket, but he is not to be swayed, and you have to admire a guy that is so committed to the quest for the absolute sound.

When you open up the casework it also looks like remarkably good value. In fact, I wonder if there is sufficient margin in the current price for him to be able to give international distributors the sort of cut they want. The case itself is laser cut from 10mm thick black acrylic and opens up like a clamshell to reveal mitred edges, it's the first time I've seen construction like this, but then again this material is pretty rare in our world. Inside there are an awful lot of transformers, because the CAD has five completely independent power supplies, and each of these has its own custom made transformer. This is all done with the aim of reducing noise to the absolute minimum, there is chip filtering in the circuit but transformers are considerably more effective. The output stage is passive and consists of huge Duelund capacitors and an





“Scott’s preferred way of operating this DAC is to use the volume control in Audirvana Plus (his chosen player for the Mac) and connect it directly to a power amp. Were it not already taken, Purist Audio Design would be a better name for the company!”

► “extremely low noise” resistor both of which Scott had made specially. The power that drives this output comes from the 16 TDA1543 converter chips that give this DAC its name. These are the 16-bit, non-oversampling (NOS) multibit chips that Philips made in the nineties. It’s a DAC that, alongside the similar TDA1545, crops up in some very well regarded converters but does have an Achilles heel of sorts. This is that it can’t be relied upon to operate at 192kHz. Scott tells me that most samples will do this, but that he can’t put that in the specs because a few don’t; my sample was one of them. It will however decode bitstreams up to 24-bits/178.4kHz without difficulty.

Its many advantages include high output voltage and this is why the CAD can avoid active components in its output stage, components that will always add some kind of signature to the sound. Scott’s preferred way of operating this DAC is to use the volume control in Audirvana Plus (his chosen player for the Mac) and connect it directly to a power amp. Were it not already taken, Purist Audio Design would be a better name for the company!

The absence of multiple inputs is not merely to make life difficult, it’s to avoid switches, which according to Scott’s research make themselves known whatever approach you take. I have had a Naim UnitiServe at home for a few months now and would dearly love to hear it with the CAD, however it only has a coax output, so I made the strongest case I could for adding this facility but he wouldn’t budge. Switches must be worse than we think.

The vast majority of components in the CAD 1543 are from the UK and the rest come from Europe and Australia (RCA output sockets). The only far eastern elements are the feet. These are visco elastic pucks made by Agora Acoustics of Korea. Four are supplied with the DAC but you won’t be surprised to hear that Scott recommends you use three for best results.

I used the 1543 with a number of computers all of them Apple Macs with either Decibel or Audirvana Plus software. Scott is a strong advocate of these computers, but has discovered that he can get slightly better results with J Play on a PC running Windows. On his first visit however, he bought a top spec Mac Mini and the result with the DAC was pretty astonishing, in fact it totally re-calibrated my expectations of computer audio. Fundamentally this is because the 1543 is such a quiet DAC. I’m not talking about noise that is usually perceptible as such but rather the noise floor, something that when it goes away the sound is so much more natural and relaxed it’s uncanny. It embodies the vision behind digital recording in the first place, Philips called it perfect sound forever but in essence it’s the separation of the process from the sound that makes up the music. It makes clear that digital recording is not the problem, ►



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► CD is the problem, it's just too crude a technology to take advantage of the potential of a good digital recording. A great CD player can be musical, engaging, entertaining and revealing but the reading of pits with a laser is a barrier to fidelity. When that barrier is taken away as effectively as this you start to hear the real potential of the medium, to be frank if it weren't so even handed in a tonal sense it could pass for analogue, unusually low noise analogue at that.

This is most obvious in the treble; this part of the spectrum seems to be the hardest for digital systems to do well. It's partly because they extend further than most analogue systems and partly because of filtering issues with low sample rate formats. Or perhaps it's just filtering issues with low sample rate players because when even a 16-bit chip like the TDA1543 is given full rein it sounds as natural, open and real as almost any analogue system there is.

This does remarkable things for acoustic instruments because you can hear their resonances and reverberations so clearly, the nature of the latter is very easy to discern and to be frank this is just as obvious with artificial reverb. The difference however is not small, the character of natural reverb gives a greater sense of space and for want of a better word, light. This is openness is

"This is most obvious in the treble; this part of the spectrum seems to be the hardest for digital systems to do well. It's partly because they extend further than most analogue systems and partly because of filtering issues with low sample rate formats."

of an entirely natural unexaggerated variety, the relative absence of noise is of course a key factor; the lower the noise floor the finer the details that can be appreciated because you can hear more of the decay.

Put on something more substantial like Keith Jarrett's recent solo work and the visceral quality of his piano is immediately apparent. You can really appreciate the weight and body of the grand piano on the *London/Paris Testament* recording and with this converter a veil is removed that brings the live nature of the performance into sharp focus. This intensifies the listening experience to a point where it's not hard to imagine a bigger system in a bigger room recreating the original event with a genuine sense of realism. I read that a film of Jimi Hendrix *Live At Woodstock* was being screened at cinemas around the country which is an interesting turn of events but not as interesting as getting a truly great sound system into a large auditorium and dimming the lights to play some great live footage with a converter like this.

Back in the listening room however you can keep things intimate for a hires version of Yes' *Fragile*. 'Heart of the Sunrise' off this sounded as natural as the vinyl but with lower noise, a combination that was truly transporting and had me weighing up the eternal question of which was the best Yes track (in the world ever) once more. We need *Close to the Edge* at hires to establish this of course.

Scott has a blog (linked from the CAD site) where he puts down a lot of his knowledge about getting the best out of computer audio, one point he makes is that it's best to keep the music data on a separate drive to the computer and further to this it's preferable that this drive is connected by a different input type to the USB you are using to output the signal. The reason being that USB inputs tend to share the same internal bus, I tried this by comparing USB to Thunderbolt, albeit having to convert the Firewire output of the drive to Apple's latest connection. He's not wrong; this latter approach bettered a USB connection and also markedly ►



► improved on using the internal storage, even though that storage was solid state in a MacBook Air. What surprised me was that there was more tonal colour with the external drive. This was accompanied by a relaxation across the board that made for a totally effortless presentation.

This means you can hear further into your favourite records, another layer was peeled off Nils Lofgren's *Keith Don't Go* revealing the grit and grain of his playing, the zing of new strings and the burn notes to boot. This superb live piece gives up so much atmosphere and the playing is so inspired that in the hands of a DAC of this calibre it takes no effort to close your eyes and travel through time and space to the actual event.

This is an extremely refined and revealing converter, one that puts computer audio firmly in high end territory and on a level pegging with just about anything out there. Some will still prefer a more robust sound, one that leans harder on the leading edges and has a more obviously powerful bottom end but anyone looking for maximum transparency to the signal will be shocked at how good it is. If I had to pick another company that is on the same track it would be dCS, and I mean top of the range dCS, which is considerably more expensive. Whether it's more expensive because of overheads and fancy casework, or because it's better, is the key question.

The inability to process 192kHz sample rate material is a shortcoming in any DAC these days let alone a seriously priced one. But how much of the music you love is available at this resolution? I have a little but the great majority is at 96kHz and below and it all sounds stonkingly good.

Addendum: Just as I was ready to sit down and write this Scott sent me a prototype of the CAD Revelation (pat. pending) USB cable. This further revealed just how spectacular this DAC is, and to an extent that made all the other USB cables I've got sound obviously limited. It was quite a shocker but at the end of the day it's the DAC that's making the magic and this one does so with astonishing fidelity. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

DAC: 16 x TDA1543/N2

Input: single USB, Asynchronous with full galvanic isolation

Output: tellurium copper RCA phono

Sampling Frequencies: 44.1KHz, 48KHz, 88.2KHz, 96KHz & 176.4KHz operation

Bit depth: 16 bit, (will play any bit depth)

Maximum Output Voltage: 1.65Vrms

Output Impedance: 135 Ohms at 1KHz

Case: 10mm laser cut acrylic

13A mains plug: Atlas Cables

Size H x W x D: 85 x 430 x 280mm

Finish: matte black

Price: £6,900

Manufacturer: Computer Audio Design

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

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Stello U3 24/192 USB link

By Alan Sircom

Following fast on the heels of the excellent Eximus DP-1 DAC in the last issue, the Stello U3 is basically the Swiss Army Knife of computer audio. With one minor caveat – more on that later – it allows outstanding bit-perfect, asynchronous and decoupled connection between a computer and practically any DAC, new or old.

The little box couldn't be simpler. A LED on the front panel, a galvanically isolated USB input and both a gold-plated S/PDIF coaxial phono socket and AES/EBU balanced Neutrik XLR digital outputs on the back, a grippy base so it can perch on top of any passing DAC without risk of falling and a nice brushed matt black anodised finish. All in a 10cm square case about that looks all the world like a small selection box of expensive chocolates.

The Stello U3 supports up to 24-bit, 192kHz digital audio signals (USB Audio Class 2.0); Mac users don't even need to download a driver, although Windows XP, Vista and 7 users need to use the supplied driver disc to support anything past 24/96. This is not an issue with Stello (Microsoft seems to have something of a blind spot when it comes to USB Audio Class 2.0, with even the new Windows 8 not supporting the UAC2 standard), but it also means the driver can be exactly specified for the purpose.

It connects asynchronously to the USB host, and inside the U3 is a pair of low-jitter clocks, one running at 22.5792MHz, the other running at 24.576MHz (there's also a 13MHz clock for management of the XMOS processor). These are designed to sync to sampling rates that are multiples of 44.1kHz and 48kHz respectively. As such, if the computer is outputting a bit-perfect signal, this will respect that bit perfection, er, perfectly.



It should be entirely logical that if you play a 16-bit/44.1kHz signal, the computer will output 16/44.1 and if you then play a 24/96 file, it will output that file at 24/96 automatically, but sadly the computer audio world isn't always that straightforward. In some cases (Apple's Core Audio for example) the computer defaults to the last Audio MIDI setting, upsampling or downsampling accordingly. Unless you can remember to get into the habit of quitting iTunes, adjusting the Audio MIDI settings and restarting iTunes whenever you change resolution, you need a program that can do this for you. This in part explains the popularity of Pure Music, Audirvana, Amarra and BitPerfect, because these programs automatically adjust Core Audio for the resolution of the track playing. Not that this has diddly squat to do with the U3 directly, but sometimes this needs restating again.

Rant over. How does it sound? Excellent, simply excellent. It's an honest, exciting translator of computer audio, the kind of thing that could challenge the preconceptions of those who feel they don't like computer audio. My first reaction toward any USB-S/PDIF converter is it's designed to help breathe new life into old DACs. Not this time; this is designed to make new DACs sound like better DACs. Unless the USB connection is of the absolute best (we're talking Ayre QB-9 level and above), this will make your USB input sound ▶

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

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► that bit more immediate and tidy. OK, so we aren't talking night-and-day improvements here, more a general feeling of audio correctness that may be one of the reasons why some feel CD still sounds better than PC.

Now for that caveat. The U3 is powered by the USB host controller. This is no big deal – it doesn't seem to consume too much power – but is best served by something a bit more powerful acting as intermediary, especially if you are running a MacBook Air with a USB powered hard disk drive off the battery at the same time. It's here that the AQVOX USB power supply becomes an almost mandatory recommendation. Without it, this particular combo sounded grey and insipid. With the MacBook running under mains power, it got a lot better and with the AQVOX it became a little giant killer. At this point, it fed into the AES/EBU input of the Devialet D-Premier like it was made for the task. Although the D-Premier makes a good case for wi-fi connection right into the heart of the DAC, for those unwilling or unable to make a wireless connection, this is the perfect alternative. On balance, I prefer the sound of the wireless connection, but the U3's AES/EBU output is on a par with the same on the back of my Lyngdorf CD-1, which is impressive stuff indeed.

Finally, loop back an issue to the DP-1. Inside that processor is an XMOS processor (something I missed out on the printed review) and inside the U3 is an XMOS X-Core 32bit 500mips processor, engaged in the digital-to-digital conversion. There should be no special synergy between these two devices; there's no secret handshake or 'Broadsword calling Danny Boy' style secret signal between them to make one know the other is an XMOS kid. In fact, in essence the DP-1 has a stripped-to-the-bone U3 as its USB input, so there really should be no improvement to be had here. But, something happens all the same. The whole is better than the sum of the parts and if you are using the DP-1 as a USB-based converter, then the next step in the chain is to invest in a U3... and probably an AQVOX. That being said, the U3 made a better fist of USB than an Arcam rDAC and even made as good a job of the task as the Wadia 121 DAC intended for an upcoming review.

While the Weiss INT202/203 represented the high-end of digital-to-digital conversion, I was never wholly convinced by something that was limited to FireWire and was more expensive than most CD players. While there are also basic USB-S/PDIF converters on eBay for under £20, they lack AES/

EBU, Asynchronous USB, 24/192 capability and everything else. What's needed is a high-end solution without high-end money changing hands, allowing the end user to concentrate their spending power on the all-important digital-to-analogue converter instead. The Stello U3 is one of the select few products that fits that bill, and fits the bill snugly. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Connections: USB 2.0 (Type B), S/PDIF coaxial phono, AES/EBU balanced XLR
Input: Asynchronous USB (galvanically isolated, USB Audio Class 2.0)

Resolution: Standard sample rates 44.1, 88.2, 176.4, 48, 96, 192kHz, at 16 and 24bit precision

Platforms supported: Mac OSX, Linux – Class 2.0 native

Microsoft Windows (XP, Vista, 7):

Theceus driver supplied

Dimensions (WxDxH): 10x10x3.6cm

Price: £365

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Aletheia PSU-2 balanced power supply

By Alan Sircom

A few issues ago, the Aletheia DAC proved to be an irresistible way of not only turning digits into analogue signals, but transforming the sound of your system in the process. The almost identical looking PSU-2 balanced power supply does the same thing, but with the afterburners engaged.

It's worth spending a little time on the back-story to Aletheia once again. First there was Vertex AQ, making everything from platforms to cables to power products with a mind to taking a systematic approach to designing a hi-fi. Gradually, the Vertex AQ ideas were taken up by other brands and there was a touch of brand morphing going on. Rather than blur the lines, it seems a better way is to develop different brands for different strengths. Vertex AQ continues along the cable-based systematic approach, with its vertical range of shunt filter and acoustic absorption platform-wielding cables and power blocks named after mountains around the world, but it was decided to move the platforms and room treatment devices over to the LeadingEdge Audio brand (we'll be covering LE's products in greater detail soon) while the active electronics moved across to the Aletheia brand, as much as a technology

showcase as products in their own right. This last, far from being yet another me-too electronics brand, is a small range of core products designed to bring out the best in any existing system, rather than necessarily replace components in that system. The first out of the gates was the excellent non-oversampling DAC (which did have major effects on the sound of the rest of the system simply by virtue of being there), but a power supply raises the game still further, because the further you got from actively using the DAC (say, you were playing a turntable), the weaker its effect. The PSU is intended to be used by every component in the chain (even power amps, although the PSU-2 only provides by-pass for high-current devices). ▶



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



SME

"The best pick-up arm in the world"



► However, there's more to this than meets the eye. "Not taking the amp feed through the transformer is a benefit in our view," said Steve Elford of Aletheia when discussing the power amp bypass, "because your not 'current pulsing' the transformer with the high current energy being drawn by the amps. This would make the transformer vibrate more, change the shape of the voltage waveform more – and so on." So, perhaps 'bypass' is the wrong way of thinking about the PSU-2. And you do spend time thinking about what it does and how it does it.

The simple way of thinking of this is to raid the Vertex AQ library. The PSU-2 is a Silver Jaya and two Hi-Rez Roraima power cords, one leading to a pair of by-pass sockets, the other leading to a custom wound balanced power transformer feeding four outputs, each with its own in-line Silver Jaya and Hi-Rez Roraima. Only difference is all the modules inside the PSU-2 have a complex 3D labyrinth instead of the standard 2D one found on the Hi-Rez cables and filters out in the wild. And, given the effects of Vertex are consistent and cumulative, feeding this with a Hi-Res Roraima and a few top-grade Jaya's, plus using Roraimas between PSU-2 and each device will help too.

But the simple way is not necessarily the right way of thinking about the PSU-2, because the whole is far greater than the sum

of the parts. There is also a cheaper PSU-1, which removes a lot of the 'Hi-Rez' EMI treatment, employs silver-plated copper wire rather than solid-core silver, and does away with the more complex 3D labyrinths within the modules.

The heart of the PSU-2 is the balanced transformer, in its own poly box resting on soft rubber feet and with its own acoustic absorption module. This is wound 1:1, with a centre-tapped to ground and each end of the transformer producing the 115V live and neutral antiphase outputs. In other words, instead of 230V in, 230V out, the PSU-2 delivers 115V-0V-115V. The transformer electrically isolates the power to the components from the mains to the PSU-2 through magnetic coupling, but the big improvement comes with the common mode rejection of EMI generated by one component interacting with the others in the system, as well as preventing EMI-generating computers, fridges and 'green' lighting from bleeding into the system too. That there's a second line of defence in the shunt filters and acoustic absorption used outside of the balancing transformer is a lot more than simply icing on the cake.

It's worth noting that use of any form of balanced transformer in a single-phase wiring setting is best used in a home that is absolutely up to code from an electrical standard, because the output of a balanced mains transformer means neutral and earth are no longer tied together as they are in a standard electrical system. If you are intending to star-earth the system though, the use of a balancing transformer is possibly not the ideal way to go, because the each power block is effectively its own ground plane. You could create a separate star earth point, but this is not a function of the PSU-2 as it stands. But, in a very real way, it makes you question whether star earthing is all it's cracked up to be, especially in the audio world of 2013 where computers are increasingly encroaching on our systems.

The DAC had a slow burn effect. You heard what it did at the outset, but the real joys of what it did to the system revealed themselves to the fullest extent over time. The PSU2 is the same... but different. Plug it in and BAM! You immediately ramp up your system's performance. It reacts to the music faster, ►

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STELLO U3: 24/192 USB LINK

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“And that’s what happens with the Aletheia PSU-2. Music is more ‘right’ because you are doing less work translating the sound of audio into the sound of music (only this time without the nuns or the von Trapp family).”

- sounds more dynamic, more like the music should sound. It also does some of the hi-fi-related things like opening up the soundstage and improving the overall transparency and all the things we can get OCD about.

The performance is always good, but there’s a distinct bonus for us moderns. If you have a computer in the system (and let’s face it, that’s not an uncommon happenstance today), the improvement is significantly more marked than in a system with a dedicated CD source. The improvement is substantial with conventional turntable or CD and amplifier systems, with marked decreases in noise (not so much ‘limpid pools of inky black pellucidity’, more a neutral starting place to make good music), improved separation of sounds, but also a more accurate rendition of how the music is shaped by the musicians, the engineer and the producer.

So far, so good. But then it also comes with the slow burn effect of the DAC, but even more so. Somewhere over the course of about 24-48 hours, your take on the system’s sound seems to change. It’s akin to learning a language. For the purposes of simplicity, imagine you are learning to read music; at one point in your staring at a stave, you will stop looking at a note and running through that ‘Every Good Boy Deserves...’ mnemonic and just know it’s a G. At one point you stop saying to yourself “that’s a crotchet” and simply register the note as a crotchet. Suddenly, the task (in this case, the task of reading music) becomes a whole lot simpler, because you don’t have to run through an in-head look-up table. And that’s what happens with the Aletheia PSU-2. Music is more ‘right’ because you are doing less work translating the sound of audio into the sound of music (only this time without the nuns or the von Trapp family).

This isn’t something that’s easy to explain in direct terms. It’s not as if it’s a tangible ‘it got more bass’ kind of change. And I’m not sure whether the change over time is as much you attuning yourself to it, as it attuning your system to you. As a consequence, pulling up specific musical examples not only seems irrelevant, but also actively against what the PSU-2 is trying to achieve. What it does, it does to everything. It doesn’t matter what genre, it doesn’t even matter if the music was well recorded or not, there is a sense of musical wholeness surrounding the music that pervades the system with the PSU-2 in place.

The real basis of the design is buried within Aletheia’s own documentation. It claims that there are two aims here with the PSU, “Fundamentally, providing greatly improved power, and preventing systematic interactions between the components within a system”. It’s these systematic interactions that help

define a system’s way of treating a piece of music, but if left untreated, break down the musical structure of a performance.

There is normally a sonic caveat, but not this time. This points the system in the right direction, whatever the system. I’d like to see a huge version that didn’t just pass through the power amps, but that would make the PSU-2 seem like small potatoes, in size, weight and price. But even just with the pass-thru, there seems to be some residual benefit to that end of the system. Elsewhere in this issue, I talk about the ‘blameless’ amplifier; the Aletheia PSU-2 strives to make every amplifier blameless. Not by making everything bland and uniform, but by making it work properly, and work in harmony with itself and its surroundings.

And when it’s gone... you’re quickly back with normal music replay. You get to live the rest of your life as a schnook. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Balanced mains transformer power supply
Single IEC mains inlet.
Four balanced outputs for source components and two bypassed (single-ended) outputs for power amps. Balanced outputs deliver nominal +/- 115V in antiphase. The output is not regulated, the antiphase values will always be half the supply voltage.
Max combined power output of the balanced supply is 300W.
Dimensions (WxHxD): 46x14x38cm
Weight: 12kg
Price: £10,499 (PSU-1, £7,499)

Manufactured by: Aletheia Audio
URL: aletheia-audio.com
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Triangle Magellan Duetto loudspeakers

By Alan Sircom

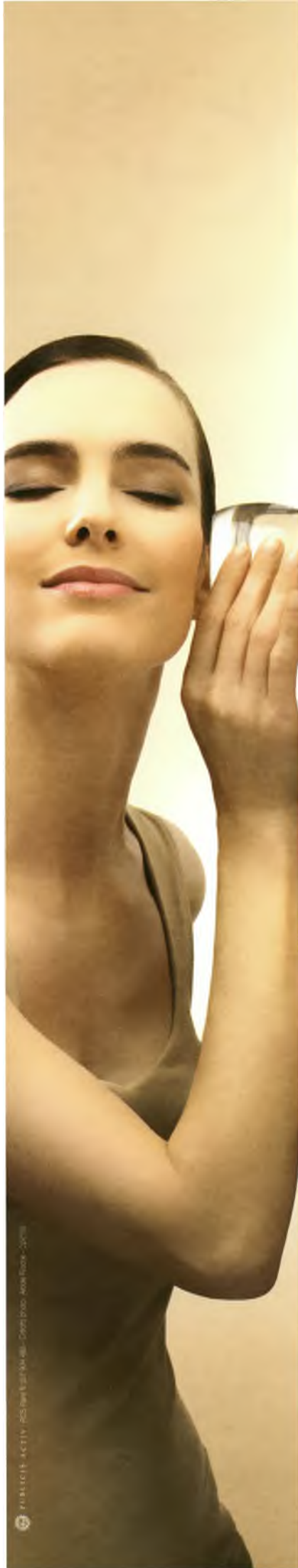
The baby of Triangle's flagship Magellan range, it would be easy to dismiss the Duetto as being just another ported two-way standmount design. It's not. It's the distillation of years of the French brand's distinctive approach to loudspeaker design, in a form factor that doesn't dominate the room. And the sound reflects all of this perfectly. It could also be easy to dismiss this speaker as a blinged-up version of the brand's Comete Ex, from its significantly cheaper Esprit range. That one's wrong too, but for different reasons.

In fact, the Duetto is every bit the Magellan loudspeaker, cut from exactly the same cloth as the enormous Magellan Grande Concert (which is big and powerful enough to fill the 200,000m³ cathedral at Amiens with sound), just scaled down to an appropriate level to do the same for 12m² – 30m² rooms; the sort of places real-world people end up playing music. This isn't just some PR spin suggesting 'trickle down' is happening; the Duetto shares components with the 2.15m tall, cathedral-filling superhero speakers.

Specifically, the Magellans all share the 29mm TZ2900 GC tweeter found in every loudspeaker in the range (except the Voce centre channel, which has a variation on the same theme). This deep, horn-loaded design features a bullet-shaped phase plug set across the dome of the tweeter itself and has been optimised to work in harmony with the horn, while behind the tweeter dome itself is a small piece of damping material designed to lower distortion in the tweeter itself. The tweeter housing itself has a rear cover, which is fine-tuned to the cabinet, allowing precisely the same tweeter to be used in all



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Classic Album Living Room at Vintage



There's nothing more relaxing than sitting in your living room, listening to a classic album. But what if you could have the classic album living room at your disposal? That's the idea behind the new Classic Album Living Room at Vintage, a new concept store in the heart of London. The store is a haven for music lovers, offering a wide range of classic albums, vinyl records, and vintage equipment. The store is located in the heart of London, in the area known as Soho. It's a perfect spot for anyone who loves music and wants to have a classic album living room at their disposal. The store is open from 10am to 6pm, seven days a week. It's a great place to spend an afternoon browsing through the shelves of classic albums and vinyl records. The store also has a selection of vintage equipment, including amplifiers, turntables, and speakers. The Classic Album Living Room at Vintage is a must-visit for anyone who loves music and wants to have a classic album living room at their disposal.



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

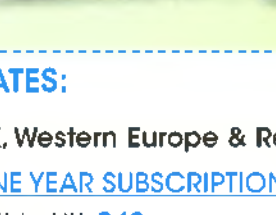
Kaiser Kawaoki Vivace loudspeaker



The Kaiser Kawaoki Vivace loudspeaker is a high-quality, high-fidelity speaker that is designed to provide a wide range of sound. It is a perfect choice for anyone who wants to have a high-quality sound system in their living room. The speaker is made of high-quality materials and is designed to provide a wide range of sound. It is a perfect choice for anyone who wants to have a high-quality sound system in their living room. The speaker is made of high-quality materials and is designed to provide a wide range of sound. It is a perfect choice for anyone who wants to have a high-quality sound system in their living room.



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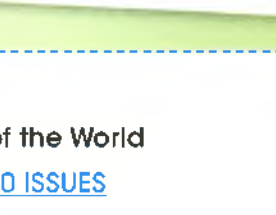
ASR Emitter II Exclusive integrated amplifier



The ASR Emitter II Exclusive integrated amplifier is a high-quality, high-fidelity amplifier that is designed to provide a wide range of sound. It is a perfect choice for anyone who wants to have a high-quality sound system in their living room. The amplifier is made of high-quality materials and is designed to provide a wide range of sound. It is a perfect choice for anyone who wants to have a high-quality sound system in their living room. The amplifier is made of high-quality materials and is designed to provide a wide range of sound. It is a perfect choice for anyone who wants to have a high-quality sound system in their living room.



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► models in the range. It's a heavy beast, too; that horn weighs almost a kilo and a half in its own right.

It's partnered by a T16GM-MT10-GC1 latex-impregnated paper cone mid/woofer design, which is very similar to 160mm midranges found in the other speakers in the Magellan series. It retains the very high crossover point (2.8kHz, with a 24dB per octave slope) and linearity from 70Hz-4kHz of the bigger speakers midrange drivers, but with a roll-off that doesn't get handed over to a bass speaker. The driver shares the same basic properties common to all the Magellan midranges though; ultra-light cone, die-cast alloy basket and strong emphasis on heat dissipation. It's this cone that is, in fact, the secret to the Magellan Duetto sound.

Triangle speakers have always pushed the concept of brilliant custom drive units in good cabinets, rather than the audiophile standard issue method of off-the-shelf drivers in an outstanding cabinet. The Magellan series goes some way to overturn this notion, but the fact remains that mid-woofer is an outstanding transducer from the upper-bass right up into the treble where the tweeter takes over. That gives the speaker excellent almost point source properties across most of the range and it makes the Duetto fast. Very fast indeed. And that's why the cabinet is more than just coming along for the ride; the speaker would either be not as lively or not as evenly balanced without a damn good cabinet helping those drivers to sing. The braced box itself is made from thick MDF, in several options of deep veneers or piano finishes. It's gently curved to the back, comes with a small pair of front-firing ports (making it easy to integrate into small rooms) and a good set of biwire speaker terminals. This last is provided with jumpers made from heavy-gauge cable used as internal wire rather than the usual bent piece of metal, showing in microcosm how much attention to detail is paid, because inside the cabinet, treble and bass use different grades



of copper wire to achieve the best effect. There is also an elegant matching stand, but this wasn't supplied.

As suggested earlier, this is a fast loudspeaker. Fun and fast. It propels music along at a fair lick, whatever the music. While that does occasionally lead to pieces of music on the ambient and Eric Satie side of things sounding like they are trying to keep up with the frantic pace, there are few loudspeakers more energetic and exciting sounding. Put another way, the overture to Bizet's *Carmen* has the kind of explosive propulsion it requires to come to life.

It's possibly not the most neutral loudspeaker in history, as Triangle's signature treble lift is still there. Interestingly, while this has been a constant in the Triangle sound, the French company's treble has been toned down over the years, while other brands have made a bit of zing their signature HF response. We have become more attuned to this high-frequency energy over time, with modern listeners often finding BBC-style loudspeakers too 'dull' in comparison. I'm not sure either argument is entirely correct, but the slight treble lift here does make for an impassioned sound.

Of course, that clean treble only works if the midrange is good, and this has also always been a Triangle strength, but here the midrange is truly wonderful. And it's wonderful whether you are playing 'My Funny Valentine' sung by Chet Baker or 'Hey! Luciani' by The Fall. Of course, it's a different ►

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► type of wonderful, one pained and broken on one track, harsh and abrasive on the other. Exactly how it should sound. It is particularly good on instrumental sounds, both acoustic and electronic. In a way, the combination of that speed and the open midrange is what good dance music needs; 'Drop The Pressure' from Mylo's *Destroy Rock & Roll* album from 2004 is a perfect example of this. Any sloppiness in delivery and it loses that drum-machine perfect beat and the mid-band preserves the voice hidden behind a lot of synthesis.

A good arbiter of fine audio performance is it changes with each piece of music. The soundstage, presentation, tonal balance should all shift with each recording because not all recordings are made under the same circumstances. And this is the kind of loudspeaker that does just that. Play a Decca recording from the golden age like *the Three Cornered Hat* and the sound is full and steps back from the loudspeakers, shift over to something like *Life in Leipzig* and the music is almost claustrophobically close to the listener. Elbow is mixed with a deep image, Lambchop is mixed wide. All of which can either be swamped by the loudspeaker's own character (everything sounds wide) or makes half your music unlistenable. I like to think of this as the Mercury Rev test – if it makes 'Holes' from *Deserter's Songs* sound like some fine, if pretentious, rock introspection, it passes the test. If you can't get past the whole 'whiny bell-end with a musical saw' thing, the speaker is getting in the way. Of course, the reality is both viewpoints are fundamentally correct, but the Duetto manages to help explain why some think album is a classic.

OK, so a stand-mount has an obvious limitation: bass. But this one covers its tracks well. In an appropriate room (small to medium sized) the bass is full and rich and surprisingly tight given those two ports firing at you. No, it doesn't have gut-churning bass. But in rooms where it works well, you probably don't need gut-churning bass anyway. If anything, you need to control bass. The Duetto's balance is just about right under the circumstances.

But most of all, what's really, really good about the Duetto is it's fun. It's enjoyable to play music through these loudspeakers. That sounds self-evident – who buys loudspeakers they don't like? – but there are many loudspeakers that manage to reduce music to just a cerebral, intellectual experience. This doesn't. You like what you hear and want to hear more. Don't confuse that cerebral quality with some perceived limitation at playing string quartets; it's good at that stuff too, but it's the kind of loudspeaker that makes you want to throw a few chairs around when you play the *Rite of Spring* as much as a Beethoven string quartet might make you want to ponder on the epistemology of the categorical imperative. But it also makes you want to reach for the Little Willies (careful now) and rock out to Jim Campilongo's awesome guitar playing on 'Diesel Smoke, Dangerous Curves' (on *For The Good Times*).

The Triangle Magellan Duetto is not your average box loudspeaker. It packs a lot of fun into a reasonably small box that can bring truly reference grade sound in even the smallest room. The most common phrases uttered by those who heard these in the course of the review (whatever the system and whatever the type of music that took their fancy) was "I really like them" and "I could live with these". Usually followed by a smile and a nod. High praise indeed! +

"But most of all, what's really, really good about the Duetto is it's fun. It's enjoyable to play music through these loudspeakers. That sounds self-evident – who buys loudspeakers they don't like – but there are many loudspeakers that manage to reduce music to just a cerebral, intellectual experience."

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Two-way ported standmount

Drivers: 29mm T2290 GC tweeter,

160mm T16GM-MT10-GC1 mid/woofer

Frequency response: 38Hz-20kHz (±3dB)

Sensitivity: 88dB/W/m

Nominal impedance: eight ohms

Minimum impedance: four ohms

Power Handling: 80W (160W peak)

Maximum SPL: 107dB

Dimensions (HxWxD): 46x25.3x35cm

Weight: 16kg

Finishes: High gloss black, white,

mahogany and bubinga

Price: £4,200 per pair

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

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

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Jonathan Carr, Lyra Designer



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- Product of the Year & Editors Choice 2002

Lyra Titan MC Cartridge
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- Product of the Year 2007 & Legacy Award.

Lyra Erodion MC Step-Up
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Fostex TH-900 headphones

By Alan Sircom

We have completely the wrong view of Fostex. When called on to discuss the brand, most of us think of those funky cassette PortaStudios of the 1980s and 1990s that saw many a muso make a mint. As a consequence, we are lodged in this mindset that Fostex equals high value, low cost pro gear. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with that mindset (Fostex does make high value, low cost pro gear), except that it's wrong. The TH-900s scream exactly how wrong it is.

These are the high-end headphones that people in the headphone industry dream of owning. When I told a few people in the business I had a pair of Fostex TH-900 on loan, the response was split between 'wow!' and 'you lucky, lucky bastard!'. Remember that the headphone enthusiast market is fast, furious and not afraid of spending substantial amounts of money on quality headphones and headphone accessories. These were people who owned – or at least knew their way around – top Stax, Audeze, HiFiMAN or Sennheiser headphones. They knew the map, knew the market and know what's good... and even they were a little bit in awe.

Not really surprising, given the headphones. Forget the rich Urushi finish for a moment and concentrate on what lies beneath; a set of 50mm dynamic drivers with neodymium magnets with a monstrous 1.5 tesla of magnetic flux.

That's just about the biggest set of magnets you can put next to your ears this side of an MRI scanner. Although this – coupled with a 100dB/mW sensitivity and a

25 ohm impedance – means notionally at least the TH-900 are an easy load, they demand both quality and quantity amplification.

Fostex has a perfect partner in its 32bit DAC/headphone amplifier (which we will be covering in an upcoming issue of the magazine), but it's not really iPod-chummy material. Not that many

people would be comfy wearing rich 'steal me!' red £1,500 headphones out in public.

The headphones are surprisingly comfortable, given thick wood earcups mean a 400g weight. The rich leather ear-pads are uniform in size (unlike thicker at the back pads, as used by Audeze) and the cups are adjustable, but I found they fitted perfectly.

However, whether it's the ear pad forming a loose seal around the listener's ears or the interface between cup and wood, but for a closed back headphone, it isn't very 'closed'. You can hear the outside world at play (attenuated yes, but not to the level normally associated with closed cans) and the world at play can hear what you are playing (again with some quite serious attenuation). As if the Urushi lacquer wasn't enough, this is Fostex telling us these are Not For Studio Use. ▶



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- I think that unless you were recording a singer close-mic'd, the amount of leakage wouldn't be too profound to cause problems, and in the home it's fine... unless your headphone is for drowning out prime time TV.

It's not hard to see why so headphone mavers got all excited about the TH-900s. It manages to be at once a very forgiving and incredibly impressive headphone. The 'forgiving'

part is surprisingly important. Headphones often win over hi-fi loudspeakers because of the directness of the sound (and the removal of the listening room as acoustical nightmare), but frequently this comes at the expense of long-term listening. The TH-900 redresses the balance. Once again, whether it's down to the wood of the ear cup is unclear, but the headphones are warmer toned than most, and that gives one the ability to sit with the TH-900 on your head for hours on end and never once feel fatigued in the process. And, as for some strange reason I felt compelled to play the whole of Jeff Wayne's *War of the Worlds* in a single sitting through these headphones, that extra softening and warmth is a positive thing. It also makes for a more sophisticated sound, and perhaps why so few new headphone users are classical enthusiasts. The TH-900 makes classical music sound inviting enough to spend more than five minutes in front of Mahler. More immediately impressive (read: bright) headphones will make you become your own shuffle button after a couple of minutes.

The Jeff Wayne extravaganza also highlighted one of the big things about these headphones: the soundstage. It's a big, wide hologram around and to the front of your ears and even has some height. Eerie and exciting and huge.

I'm sort of saving the best 'til last, as the TH-900 comes with some of the biggest, most powerful bass you'll hear this side of a dub soundsystem. It's not bass heavy, just shows up how so many headphones have overcompensated for the Big Bad Beats Bass, by making a lighter sound than they should, where they should be building proper deep bass headphones that do the job properly. This depth of bass has an odd biological effect: you hear the bass, but feel it in your gut. How that gets there is unclear, but it makes the sort of bass you'd normally attribute to trouser-flappy bass bins, then a pair of headphones. Outstanding!

It comes in a presentation case and in that is supplied a useful headphone stand, but for this much money, I'd want something a little more plush than simple foam and a headphone stand that looks less like a retasked wire coat-hanger. This isn't a major consideration if you are the buyer and the user, but I thought the point of a presentation case is it's something you present to someone else. Still, it shows the money has been spent on the right bit – the headphone itself.

And I guess, that's why the TH-900 commands such respect in the headphone community. It may have the trappings of luxury, but it's all about the go, not the show. Strongly recommended. +

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Spin-Clean Mk II record washer

By Alan Sircom

One of the biggest lies in modern life is the phrase, 'very good condition'. When buying LPs through eBay this usually means 'not quite unplayable', and a good record cleaning system has become a necessity as a result.

The Spin-Clean Mk II washer is a completely manual affair that has been around in some form since the mid 1970s; a yellow plastic bath, with a pair of felt pads, rollers, a bottle of liquid you add to tap water and some magic rags for cleaning. First wash the cloths as you would any towel (no fabric softener). Then you drop the rollers in the yellow bath (there are three sets of roller positions, allowing 12", 10" and 7" discs to be submerged from outer to inner groove), fill the bath up to the line, add a capful of liquid, slide a disc in place, turn the disc through a three rotations clockwise, the same in reverse and then take it out and dry it with the white rags in a similarly clockwise action. The liquid is said to be good for 20-50 discs (I'd say 20 at a push) and it acts as a clarifying agent (the microscopic bits of crud on the record are in suspension in the liquid in the form of flakes that sink to the bottom of the Spin-Clean Mk II). When not in use, there's an equally bright yellow lid to stop dust settling or pets drinking the liquid.

The supplied four-page A5 booklet suggests ordinary tap water can be used if distilled water is not available, but common consensus suggests if distilled water isn't available, don't start cleaning. Similarly, the instructions suggest inserting the brushes and pouring the washer fluid over the brushes, but cleaning them first works better.

Regardless, the Spin-Clean is an effective remover of bacon-frying noises. The pops

and crackles that plague 'VG' eBay albums are generally reduced; not perhaps to the significant level you can get from a good RCM, but the records are far cleaner and are much easier to listen to. A sure sign of its effectiveness is the sheer amount of dark grey gunk that lines the bottom of the yellow bath after working on just a few 'clean-ish' albums; if all that smoky residue was on the disc, no wonder it sounded like the musicians were standing round a bonfire. +

PRODUCT DETAILS

Price: £80

Washer Fluid: £20 (16 oz), £30 (32 oz)

Replacement Parts: Rollers: £22.50,

Brushes: £25, Drying Cloths: £17.50

Manufactured by: Spin-Clean International

URL: www.spin-clean-record-washer.com

Distributed by: Henley Designs

URL: www.henleydesigns.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1235 511166



AUDIO ART REVIEW

The Visual Hi-Fi History of Turntables

By Alan Sircom



1970s | Acoustic Audio RE 115



1960s | Thorens TD124



1950s | Elenco Tone Phone



1980s | Norel LP10



2000s | Acoustic Design



1940s | Elenco 1000



2000s | JBL



1970s | Acoustic Research XA

A VISUAL HI-FI HISTORY OF TURNTABLES CLASSICS, RARITIES & CURIOSITIES



1950s | Elenco Tone Phone



2000s | Continuum Caliburn



2000s | JBL Model 30/2



2000s | JBL Model 30/2



1950s | Elenco Tone Phone



1920s | Edison



Hi-fi loving graphic artist Del Gentleman has combined his two labours of love to produce a fantastic limited edition A1 poster of some of the best looking turntables in history. Forget those black and white images of jazz musicians in smoky clubs and psychedelic festival posters from the late 1960s... this is what should adorn the walls of every audio enthusiast and music lover.

The poster features everything from Edison's first phonograph in the 1870s, through classic staples of

turntablism (the Technics SL-1200) to hi-fi buff evergreens (like the Linn Sondek LP12, the Acoustic Research XA and the Thorens TD124) right through to today's super decks, like the Continuum Caliburn. And more besides.

A matching poster of the visual history of loudspeakers is also available to those who recognise that the finest audio can also be works of art worthy of hanging on the wall. +

Price: £14.99 (£5.55 p&p)

URL: hi-fi-posters.com



1960s | Acoustic Research XA



1960s | Thorens TD124



1970s | Linn Sondek LP12

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Are tablets changing audio's life expectancy?

music matters

By Alan Sircom

As I write this, we are in the run-up to the big Christmas push, and the seemingly relentless drive toward constant replacement of one gadget with another is becoming as untenable as it is inexhaustible.

Just prior to the main selling season, Apple announced its new iPad Mini, effectively triggering a small war of the small tablets, with Amazon's Kindle Fire HD, Asus and Google's Nexus 7 and Samsung's Galaxy Tab 2 app bidding for the same Christmas shoppers. The iPad offering – Apple's first in a smaller form factor – has essentially the same processing power and resolution of the company's iPad 2 and has been criticised by many for utilising this outmoded technology.

The iPad 2 was released in March 2011. The iPad Mini was released in November 2012.

We've been used to fast turnarounds in computing technology, but going from 'the best there is' to 'outmoded' in less than two years is extreme. Church of Apple followers will proclaim that this is just Fear, Uncertainty, Doubt being spread by Android lovers, but it doesn't detract from the original statement; that something can go from 'state of the art' to 'out of the ark' very quickly in today's consumer electronics world.

Of course, this rate of change is only possible if a company has enough engineers working away behind the scenes, the product is met by a receptive market and enough products get sold in the window of opportunity that product has before it's considered old hat. Spectacular mistakes have taken place in this field as a result; witness the 49-day life cycle of Hewlett Packard's TouchPad (if you are reading this in Australia, make that three-day life cycle – the product was launched there on August 15, 2011, and discontinued on August 18).

None of this really mattered for the sleepy ol' audio industry, because we could rely on product life cycles measured in years or even decades. While it's unlikely there will be many products that match the longevity of the 55 year old, Ortofon SPU or the 51 year old Denon DL103 (or even the Linn LP12, now in its 41st year), most products in the audio realm are expected to have a lifespan longer than a mayfly's.

However, with computer audio comes computer-style product life cycles. Already with the move toward the smaller Lightning connector, Apple has all but obsoleted a whole market sector of docks. And the lifespan of the latest wonder-DAC is now very short indeed; launch a USB converter today and by late Summer, you will already be in the "Yes, but what have you done for me lately" camp of No More Sales.

This is notionally a good thing. It stops brands from resting in their laurels and drives them to make an ever more perfect product next time round, and it means keeping abreast of any changes in the front end. But

it's not without its downsides, too. With the small design teams usually found in audio, it's difficult for many to bring out products at the kind of pace demanded by the computer audio enthusiast, and the worry there is if your clients change their products once a year and you make a product once every three years, your clients will 'churn' over to a rival, leaving the hapless manufacturer playing catch up. And often finding themselves unable to win back those lost customers.

I wish there was a neat solution to this, but if there is, I can't see it. Manufacturers shouldn't struggle to release products on trend, if it comes at the expense of the performance of that product. End users probably shouldn't consider audio to be yet another extension of the computer world, but trying to put that particular genie back in the bottle is always going to be next to impossible, and each successive generation of prospective audio buyer will be more attuned to shorter product cycles.

I fear the result may not be a win for either end user or manufacturer. Products that have less than two years from 'astounding' to 'arthritic' and built by small teams are invariably going to be compromised next to products with months of beta testing prior to launch. Meanwhile manufacturers have to weigh up whether it's worth spending time and money developing a DAC that may have less than a season before its sales begin to wane. This could spell products more 'abandoned' than 'finished'. Or products with ever higher prices to cover costs, even at the expense of an army of potential buyers. +

Written on a 2010-era Apple iPad.

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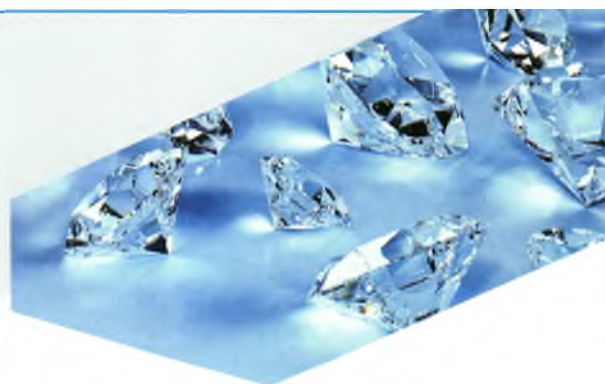
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record reviews

How To Read Them

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

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

This issue's featured reviewers are:

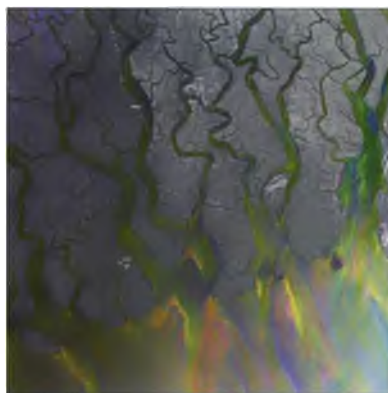
DD – Dennis D Davis

JK – Jason Kennedy

AS – Alan Sircom

PT – Pete Trewin

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	Multi-Channel		



Alt-J

An Awesome Wave

Infectious



Alt-J (or as their friends know them, 'Δ') are a quartet of Leeds University alumni, who spent five years noodling around with a blend of electro-folk indie-dub unclassifiableness, then won the 2012 Mercury Music prize, beating dead-certs like Field Music and rapper Plan B in the process. I hope it doesn't go to their heads.

Perhaps the best thing about Alt-J is it marks the return for truly wig-out geek rock. It's unlikely to signal the end fey girly singer-songwriters writing happy songs about pastel colours and slingbacks, but songs like 'Breezeblocks' or 'Fitzpleasure' are the perfect intellectual nerdy truly bloke kind of thing, in a sort of Jethro Tull manner. And just when you think you got Alt-J pinned down, they throw a curveball that makes you think again. It's like dubstep played on period instruments, Laurie Anderson unplugged, or an album of the Mighty Boosh's finest crimps, set to the score of a 1980s French film no-one ever heard of.

And for a Mercury winner, it's sanely recorded, given the mixture of vocals, acoustic and electric instruments and random found things. OK, hi-fi demonstration quality eludes *An Awesome Wave*, but it's perhaps the best odd thing you'll hear all year. **AS**

RECORDING

MUSIC



Bill Fay

Life is People

Dead Oceans



Some might remember Bill Fay from the 1970s. But not many. He cut just two albums before the London-based singer-songwriter vanished. After essentially a 41 year hiatus, *Life is People* marks a return of sorts, and it's truly brilliant.

Fay has been likened to Dylan (the voice has some similarities), Nick Drake and Leonard Cohen, but this is an attempt to pigeonhole an artist who defies such simple description. It's a moving, extremely religious album from an obviously considered and gentle soul of rare sagacity. Sometimes stripped to just him and his piano, other times accompanied by a small troupe (including drummer Alan Rushton, who was also there 41 years ago) and other times a full gospel choir, this is the sound of a man coming to terms with his later years, but isn't prepared to go gentle into that good night, at least not without making us cry first, and yet retaining his optimism.

Sonically, it's a real sweetie, too. It is a little bit stuck in the early-mid 1970s, with a slight roll off to the treble, but that just adds to character.

If you have ever uttered the phrase 'they don't make albums like they used to', meet the exception. This is a big small album you must own. **AS**

RECORDING

MUSIC





**Chris White
and Julie Matthews**

Infinite Sky
Fat Cat

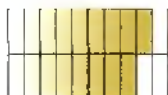
CD

Here's one for the hi-fi enthusiasts. The eighth studio album from former Albion Band members and award-winning folksters Chris White and Julie Matthews is extremely well recorded, with a great soundstage, excellent instrument separation and none of that Loudness Wars nonsense. This is also a diverse and entertaining 11 track album featuring a very talented backing band.

Best tracks on the album; the funky 'Shaky Town' (written for the people of Christchurch after the earthquake), the melancholic 'Nie Wieder' (about Gretel Bergmann, the German Jewish athlete persecuted by the Nazis in the run up to WWII) and the surprisingly up-beat sounding (given the subject matter) 'Broken Crash Barrier' and its 'more cowbell' ending. Despite these subjects sounding unrelentingly depressing, the whole album is far more enjoyable than they sound.

This is very much post folk, rather than finger-in-ear real-ale folk, or Americana style ballads about guys in John Deere baseball caps. As a consequence, it's a mature, easy listen, and incredibly polished to boot. Well worth owning, both from a musical and audio perspective. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Tame Impala

Lonerism
Modular

CD 180g

Tame Impala is one Australian, Kevin Parker (there is a regular band, but they only feature in live gigs... the album is all Parker). We liked his previous album *Innerspeaker*, but *Lonerism* sees Parker shifting into high gear. His recording method involves locking himself up in a studio for weeks on end, building layer upon layer of psychedelic melodies until he's happy. Or taken away somewhere to get all better.

There's elements of classic Beatles and Pink Floyd psychedelia in here, mixed with some true glam elements. And yet, for all that, this isn't a twee look backwards into the late 1960s, even if it's played on the instrument sounds of the period.

Best tracks for me include 'Feels Like We Only Go Backwards', which completes the psychedelic project started by Bobby Gillespie and Primal Scream, and the über-glam 'Elephant', which sounds like what would have happened if T-Rex had recorded *Ummagumma*. The recording quality isn't uppermost, as it's thick set, flat and cut a little hot. But, ultimately, so were those trippy masterpieces of the past, and unlike many of those albums of 45 years ago, this one benefits from many replays. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC



The Bad Plus

Made Possible
Decca

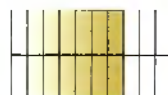
CD

The Bad Plus is a piano trio from Minnesota that combines muscle with sensitivity, and that makes for dynamic and often enthralling music. However, they are at their best on the quieter pieces, the one's where pianist Ethan Iverson gets to express himself more openly. There's no leader though, and while Iverson has the greatest lyrical potential his is by no means the dominant voice, the drums of David King are very prominent on many numbers while Reid Anderson's double bass provides an anchor that's not averse to the limelight.

It's a lot of fun when all three musicians work together on a groove like 'I Want To Feel Good Pt. 2' which fits its title to a tee despite the manic bridge. The approach is more adventurous than we saw with 2007's *Prog* and more successful too. At its best it transcends genre and communicates straight from the heart, which is quite an achievement in the context of contemporary jazz.

The sound is good if not exceptional, when things get intense you can hear the limiting quite clearly but this doesn't detract from its power too badly. It's clean and open, and on the quieter numbers gets pretty close to ECM's influential style if not its transparency. **JK**

RECORDING
MUSIC





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**Ben Webster****Stormy Weather**

Black Lion/ORG Music ORGM-1064

45- 33- 180-

In January 1965, two months after arriving in Europe, Ben Webster recorded several albums worth of material at the Montmartre Jazzhus in Copenhagen. Backed by American expat Kenny Drew, Danish drummer Alex Riel and a teenage Nils Henning Ørsted Peterson, Webster's live performances recorded here are among his best from Webster's European years. His sessions in January produced three live albums, after which he drifted for some time. But for those few days in Copenhagen, he was on fire with his set of mostly standards. Add to that the fact that Black Lion captured a particularly well-recorded set. The stereo spread is excellent, with a particularly well-defined drum kit, excellent piano sound and wonderfully resonant Webster horn sound. Even the audience sounds are well recorded.

ORG Music has released this set in two versions, a standalone 33 RPM set and a three record set including both the 33 RPM LP along with a two record 45 RPM release. Mastered by Bernie Grundman and pressed by Pallas, the result is top drawer, especially in the limited edition 45-RPM version, which presents a particularly large and well-defined soundstage. A must have addition to any Ben Webster collection. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC

**Big Maybelle****The Okeh Sessions**

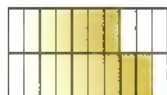
Epic/Pure Pleasure EG 38456

33- 180-

Big Maybelle is not exactly a household name in the 21st Century, but in the 1950s she was one of the great soul/blues singers and her massive physical size supported an equally large vocal gift, belting out great R & B hits. She was signed to Columbia's race label Okeh in 1952, and a few years later moved over to Savoy. Collectors today know her mainly through her two great Savoy albums, and through later LP reissues of the Okeh material. The closest comparable contemporary blues singer was Koko Taylor, who shared Maybelle's powerful vocal chords. Much of Maybelle's content is about sexual swagger, and she could make the macho bluesmen seem tame by comparison. When she sings *Whole Lot-ta Shakin' Goin' On* (years before Jerry Lee Lewis) you know exactly what she is talking about—you know exactly what is shaking, what is rattling and what is rolling. In *One Monkey Don't Stop No Show*, she tells a male companion threatening to leave that his place in bed will be filled within the hour.

The most commonly available issue of these titles has always been the one disc *Gabbin' Blues* on Epic EE 22011. This later two disc version turns up far less often. The sleeve and record labels say stereo, but fear not, this is from a mono tape remastered by Ray Staff at Air Mastering. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC

**Billie Holiday****All or Nothing At All**

Verve/Analogue Productions MG V-8329

45- 180-

Billie Holiday released four Verve LPs in addition to the earlier Clefs later reissued on Verve. These albums were compilations of songs from various recording sessions mostly in 1957. This was the last released, and is the third to receive the two-disc 45-RPM treatment by Analogue Productions. By the time of these sessions Billie's voice has thickened considerably and she sounds tired, but still makes some of the greatest music committed to disc by a singer. With backing from Ben Webster, Jimmy Rowles, Harry Edison and others, we are treated to some of Holiday's best group recordings of her late career. The Verve sessions are probably closer to what most people associate with the Billie Holiday sound, and the world-weary pathos of these recordings is without peer. The iconic David Stone Martin artwork of Billie on the front cover sums up this mood.

Billie sounds like she's at a microphone in your living room. The instruments are spread out between the speakers and there is plenty of depth. A pristine original has a bit more pronounced vocal sibilance and air, and this reissue smooths that out a bit. That aside, this is a fabulous reissue of essential music. Highest recommendation. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



**Horace Silver****'Finger Poppin'**

180g

Blue Note/Music Matter ST-84008

Perhaps the pinnacle of cultivated bop is found on this great Silver quintet date from 1959. The front line is composed of Blue Mitchell on trumpet and Junior Cook on tenor sax, supported rhythmically by Gene Taylor and Louis Hayes. This quintet formed a highly polished ensemble and *Finger Poppin'* is one of the high points of hard bop development. Even though innovators like Miles Davis were turning in a new direction, Silver's group still reached for the stars with the established bop form on this explosive set. Just listen to Hayes' outstanding drum solo in *Swingin' the Samba* for a rarely heard treat. In the bluesy Silver composition *Come On Home*, Mitchell and Cook trade some of the most amazing solos on the Blue Note label. And *Cookin' At The Continental* is a certified barn burner.

This is early Blue Note stereo, on an album most commonly available in mono. Nonetheless, this is surprisingly good stereo sound. Mastering engineer Kevin Gray, assisted by Ron Rambach, makes the most of what is often hard left/right stereo with Blue Notes — here each channel presents a fairly large spread of sound with no hole in the middle. The two channels overlap nicely. It comes very highly recommended. **DD**

RECORDING

MUSIC

**Miles Davis****'Round About Midnight**

SA 180g

Columbia/Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2083

This 1956 recording is Miles at his early best, with Coltrane, Red Garland, Paul Chambers and Philly Joe Jones. It was his first Columbia release, recorded while he was still finishing off his Prestige contract, but with the benefit of more rehearsal time and the superior recording team and facilities of Columbia. The Marvin Koner photograph on the front cover is an iconic album cover and speaks volumes about Miles. This is one of the great Miles Davis albums, and in some ways the beginning of a string of jazz masterpieces never equaled by any other group. The ballads *'Round About Midnight* and *Bye Bye Blackbird* are achingly beautiful. The album is filled with exceptional solos — some of my favorite Coltrane riffs are contained in the album. This is the first unequivocal statement of Miles' move from the bop era into his new directions, and you can hear pre-echoes of his second great quintet throughout the album.

Mobile Fidelity includes a booklet with the original album notes by George Avakian. This is by far the best digital rendition of this music, and has a wonderful analogue sound found in the best of the Mobile Fidelity reissues. It's scheduled to also be released on vinyl. Essential in both formats. **DD**

RECORDING

MUSIC

**Tommy Flanagan****Overseas**

33+ 200g

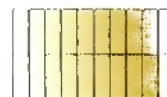
Prestige/Analogue Productions 7134

Detroit pianist Tommy Flanagan released only a couple of dozen albums as a leader, but he also appeared in a supporting role on a host of extraordinary albums by the greatest names in jazz. He was a sophisticated player whose long career saw him finally receive the recognition he deserved. *Overseas* was his first release as a leader, and this 1957 Prestige title teams him with Wilbur Little on bass and Elvin Jones on drums. While Bill Evans most famously recorded the piano trio format, Flanagan's early efforts deserved equal attention. Recorded in Stockholm, where the trio was playing with J. J. Johnson, Flanagan steps out of the shadows as a sideman for Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins and Kenny Burrell to show off an album of mostly self-penned compositions. *Overseas* also has one of Prestige's most clever covers. Flanagan plays with a youthful energy and Elvin Jones showing off greatness that would be on full display with the Coltrane band.

Overseas is very well recorded and the trio is well defined in a space with stereo like width and depth. Kevin Gray's remastering of the mono LP is exceptional, and for those unwilling to part with four figures to acquire an original, this limited edition of 1000 should fit the bill. **DD**

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Eichberg Beethoven

Kolja Blacher and the
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Anna Steppeler Organ



The Mahler Chamber Orchestra is an ensemble of about 45 members who are based all across the globe. They have been described as 'the best orchestra in the world' (Le Monde).

The soloist, Kolja Blacher, is a superbly talented musician with a wealth of experience under his bow, he has studied throughout the world and played in many countries. He is lucky enough to have the loan of a Stradivarius 'Tritton', which was made in 1730. This beautiful instrument makes the music sing.

Whilst many of these pieces were originally written for full orchestra, here the Mahler Chamber Orchestra are playing a 'chamber' arrangement. Whilst some may be sceptical as to how well this would work given the reduced number of instruments, it is immediately clear that this concept as adapted by the MCO works extremely well. It is almost as though with the reduction in numbers more passion flows from the bows of the MCO as they have to add more theatre to their own performance without being reliant upon a colleague to do this for them!

The album introduces the listener to some of Beethoven's less well known works with great authority and conviction. **PT**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Bruckner Motets

Choir of St Mary's Cathedral,
Edinburgh
RSAMD Brass
Delphian Records (DCD34071)
Duncan Ferguson



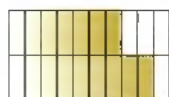
Anton Bruckner is one of the greatest composers of the nineteenth century. The Austrian is seen as a man who improvisational ability gave him ideas for some of his symphonies, while his faith was clearly an inspiration for many of his liturgical works.

Ferguson and his choir have recorded seventeen of Bruckner's motets often accompanied by the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama. The RSAMD have a reputation for creating some of the future top musicians in the world.

The disc includes some of Bruckner's well known motets such as 'Locus Iste' and 'Ave Maria' as well as some more obscure tracks. Ferguson's ability to secure emotion from manuscript to the choir through their voices is excellent. Many of these motets also require poignant moments of silence between passages, this enhances the atmosphere, creates ambience and gives the singers a chance to breathe! The choirs follow these breaks with ease and complete understanding of their importance within the context of the pieces.

This is a beautiful disc, one cannot help but be moved by the performance and these pieces. **PT**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Friar Alessandro: Voice from Assisi

Decca Records (00028947650140)



Friar Alessandro was discovered in 2011, *Voice from Assisi* is his first album and certainly will not be his last. He is the first friar to land a major record deal; having taken a vow of Poverty, all proceeds from the deal will go to his Order. His monastic life will continue to see him as a carpenter repairing furniture!

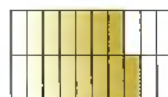
His voice is rich and rounded; you can sense the passion in his singing. He sings a variety of music on this album including pieces from Schubert, Mozart, Faure and Royal wedding composer Paul Mealeor.

Voice from Assisi was recorded at Abbey Road studios and released in October 2012. Friar Alessandro is accompanied by choir and instruments in many of the pieces.

It is clear that the tracks have been carefully chosen to reflect his clear vocal abilities but also to incorporate his deep-rooted religious beliefs. There is a combination of plainchant and sacred works. The highlight of the album for me is Faure's beautiful 'Cantique de Jean Racine', which is recorded with full orchestral accompaniment.

Overall, this album is well recorded and thoughtfully composed. Alessandro performs exceptionally well, and I expect to hear from him much more in future years. **PT**

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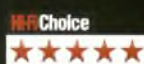
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Nicola Benedetti – The Silver Violin

The Bournemouth Symphony
Orchestra – Kirill Karabits

Decca Classics (0289 478 3529 5)



The Silver Violin is the latest album from Decca Classics featuring the very talented Nicola Benedetti, accompanied by the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Kirill Karabits.

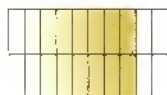
The disc contains a variety of music from films, from the opening number – Williams' main theme from the highly acclaimed 'Schindler's List' to Shostakovich The Counterplan Op. 33.

Benedetti's musical ability is clearly audible in track 8, the main theme from 'Ladies in Lavender' by Hess. The long melodic phrases coupled with her excellent fingering and sympathetic use of vibrato give the listener a very real sense of anguish.

It is clear from her vast repertoire that Benedetti is happy to embrace all genres of music and not shy away from appealing to the masses through music which many people can relate to. I thoroughly applaud this. All too often professional musicians will not participate in music to the masses through fear of criticism from 'music boffs'.

If you are looking for an album which is relaxing and melancholic, yet invigorating and poignant, at the same time, then this is certainly a must have. **PT**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Janine Jansen – Prokofiev

Janine Jansen, Boris Brovtsyn,
Itamar Golan, London Philharmonic
Orchestra and Vladimir Jurowski

Decca Classics (0289 478 3546 2)

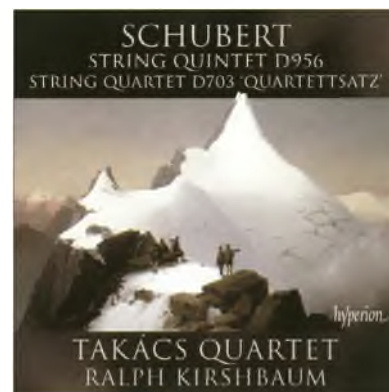
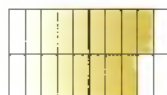


Jansen opens this album with the Violin Concerto No.2 in G Minor, Op. 63, Allegro Moderato. The haunting tones of the opening bars give the listener an immediate taste of this young Dutch musician's ability. She has a reputation for her use of musical interpretation of the scores and less so on accuracy of notes, rather she would convey the emotion she feels through accents and clever use of bow and or fingering. She currently plays on a Stradivarius 'Barrere' crafted in 1727.

Jurowski received wide acclaim for his leadership of Nabucco at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden in 1996. He has many guest and principal leadership titles under his belt, including that of Musical Director for Glyndebourne Festival Opera.

The disc is a great example of the wonderful ability that Prokofiev possessed: you hear a number of different melodies being played on different instruments and variations and imitations in other places. The London Philharmonic Orchestra accompany Jansen in a sympathetic way too. Clearly this is a very well-produced CD, and one of the better Prokofiev compilations I have heard for some time. **PT**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Schubert: String Quintet D956; Quartettsatz D703

Takács Quartet; Ralph Kirshbaum

Hyperion records (CDA67864)



Cellist Ralph Kirshbaum leads the Takacs Quartet, arguably, one of the finest string quartets performing today. Their latest recording sees them returning to Schubert, 6 years after their first Schubert album was released. The quartet's own interpretation of the music occasional leads to some surprising, yet upon reflection, understandable decisions. For example during the trio section of the Scherzo they dramatically decrease the tempo, thus creating a feeling that this is the central focal point of the piece. I was taken aback by this, having never heard it played this way before. However it makes sense when you look at the scherzo's relation to the other movements.

The disc ends with Schubert's String Quartet in C Minor 'Quartettsatz', a rather strange end with the transgression from the previous C Major Quintet. The piece is full of dramatic flair, and elegant melodic phrases.

The Takacs Quartet have an great ability to draw emotion out of their instruments and play with a full and broad sound. one could be forgiven for thinking that at times that the instruments are doubled up. **PT**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Every Home Should Have One

The Decca Sound Box Set

By Alan Sircom

The Decca Sound box set is a 50 disc compilation of some of the label's stellar moments, from the birth of stereo until the present, but many of the recordings in the set come from the label's golden age from the late 1950s to the early 1980s. During this period, Decca was pivotal in the development of full-frequency recording and later stereophonic sound (both in terms of recording techniques and LP mastering), and later still digital recording. Decca's first forays into stereo began in 1954, and to help produce the big orchestral sound the label became famous for, Decca engineers like Arthur Haddy and Kenneth Wilkinson developed the famous Decca Tree microphone technique, which producers like the legendary John Culshaw used to outstanding effect. Along the way Decca created a masterful portfolio of recordings, many of which went on to be considered some of the best audio recordings of all time and many of which are included here.

The set divides neatly into complete recordings (occasionally with bonus material) and edited highlights. Many of the classics of Decca's output are included (Ansermet's rendition of Falla's *Three Pointed Hat*, Britten's *War Requiem* – albeit without the rehearsal supplied with the CD edition – the Wilcocks/Kings *Nelson Mass*, Solti's *Mahler 8*) and some that were popular 50 years ago have dropped out of the collection (perhaps for good reason – *The Pirates of Penzance* seems awfully twee today). Sound quality is consistent, and consistently good, showing just how innovative Decca was in the analogue and digital domains (29 of the 50 albums were recorded in analogue). While the discs are presented in mini album cover versions of their original forms, the rear of each sleeve is simply presented. The age of the sleeve note is behind us, but the age of the 200 page booklet lives on.

Listening to the collection is a joy worth sampling slowly. I bought mine in April 2012 and am about a third of the way through it. I'm not convinced the bonus tracks materially add much to the early albums (although it is perhaps understandable given some of these early albums work out at less than 40 minutes long). And the sound quality is a given, even in the transition from rich, expansive and slightly distant early recordings to the up-close and detailed sound of recent years.

But perhaps what marks this out as perhaps the best of the boxes at this time is the diversity of the material on offer. A collection that covers everything from Bach to Messiaen deserves praise and demands some careful, considered listening. Finally, the booklet makes fascinating reading in its own



right, as it gives an insight into the recording techniques and the pioneering spirit of those early days of quality stereo.

Although the Decca label continues to this day, as a subsidiary of the Universal Music Group, the days of the company being run by pipe-smoking pioneering British engineers creating exciting new developments in the field of sound recording are sadly long gone. As this set ably shows... more's the pity! +

THE DECCA SOUND

Released: 10th October 2011

50 disc set

Includes 200 page booklet

A six-disc CD sampler is also available

A six-LP 'best of' set is now discontinued

WORLD PREMIERE AT CES 2013

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