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ALL THE NEWS FROM CES 2013!



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ROCK STEADY...



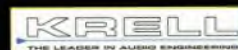
Krell, creator of so many firsts, can be credited with the concept of the true high-end integrated amp. Its KAV-300i revolutionised the way audiophiles treated a single-chassis solution to their amplification needs. The secret? Incorporating all of Krell's expertise in a no-compromise, yet compact enclosure.

The S-550i respects this long-standing tradition, building on the acclaimed S-300i and upping the power to a massive 275W per channel. With balanced and single-ended operation, an iPod dock and circuit details derived from the flagship Phantom, the S-550i is pure Krell. And that means power, musical authority and the ability to, well, rock. Hard.



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editorial

For a 'nation of shopkeepers', the British seem remarkably bad at keeping those shops in business. Recently, we've seen some bad economic hurting going on in the UK high street, with well-known consumer electronic and home entertainment stores either going to the wall or going into administration. In some respects this comes down to the wider economy, the increase in business rents and rates, and the shift online. But, it also represents – in the case of home entertainment stores like HMV and Blockbuster – an expression of the radical change in the way people get their entertainment today. Remarkably, this change is only now filtering to the audiophile world, but it's why there are more and more new DACs and streamers and fewer new CD players these days.

Manufacturers seem in some respects more aware of the changes that have hit our industry than the audiophiles who buy their products, and some of this is down to complacency; if there's an HMV store on the high street stocking CDs, then there must still be CDs being sold everywhere. Sadly, this doesn't seem to be the case, and HMV's fate carries with it more than a third of all physical sales of music in the UK.

If it hasn't already done so by the time you read this, HMV should have bounced back in reduced form, but I suspect there will be far fewer racks selling CDs up and down the country this year. For those outside the UK, this is possibly old news; you had your Tower Records moments some years ago. But, this is the wake-up call. If you still haven't started to think what to do when the CD well begins to run dry, now's the time.

Congratulations to Professor Saurabh Dube, of Mexico City, Mexico, who has won the excellent Antelope Audio Zodiac DAC in our first truly worldwide competition.

Hi-Fi+ was saddened to learn of the passing of David Manley, founder of Manley Labs, VTL and the ViTaL record label. He was 73. Originally of South African origin, the hard-living Manley moved to the UK, then California before settling in France. Our industry is made smaller by the death of one of its true individualists, and our thoughts go out to his family, friends and drinking partners.

Alan Sircom
editor@hifipius.com

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SHOW REPORT

Postcards from Las Vegas

By Chris Martens and Alan Sircom



The annual CES takes place in Las Vegas, Nevada. It's a melting pot of everything consumer electronics, photography and audio. It all began with audio, though and the high end (specialty) audio world has its own dedicated section, in the hotel rooms of the Venetian hotel. There is also an independent event, The Home Entertainment Show, based in the Flamingo hotel further along the Las Vegas strip. And there are 'off piste' rooms in other huge resort casinos, such as the Mirage.

Audio frequently gets lost amid nano-shield waterproofing, flexible tablet computers and the latest gigantic flat TV screen, so it's down to the specialist titles to bring you the latest in hi-fi. Even then, no one person can cover every room. In fact, if a team were to cover every room, the next three issues of the magazine would be one big show report. So, instead we bring you a flavour of what was new and great sounding across all four days of what is still the biggest audio event of the year. For the full story behind the photos, click on www.hifiplus.com. +



“Born in the USA...”

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

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

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

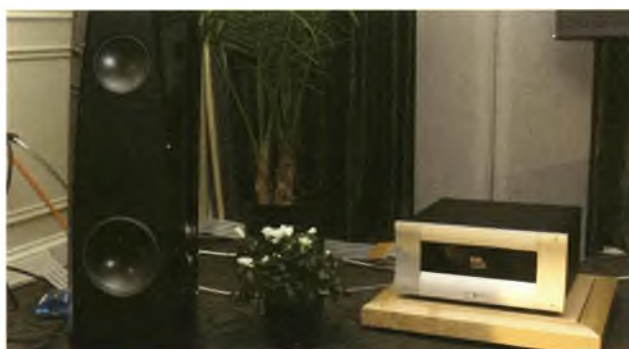
that easily exceeds the HDMI standard and has gained the demanding DPL Seal Of Approval.

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

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

NORDOST
MAKING THE CONNECTION





Rockport Technologies and VTL. The former showed its new \$21,500 Atria speakers, driven by the latter's new \$10,000 S-200 stereo amp and \$13,600 TL6.5 Mk II line preamp



Alongside two new streamers, High Resolution Technologies launched the \$900 Stage; a small three-piece 'high-end-audio-in-a-box' system with truly outstanding performance



Touraj Moghaddam of Vertere has long held a desire to push the envelope of tonearm technology. But it needs to be a very fat envelope full of large denomination bills, because the titanium titan costs a cool \$35,000

Applying the same design principles that made their Aon 3 monitors such a success, GoldenEar now serves up the Triton 7 (\$1,398); a compact, full-range, high performance floorstander whose value-for-money quotient is off the charts!



EAR Yoshino was to show its new multi-format player, but the delivery company had other ideas. Fortunately, the new \$9,000 Marten Django L floorstander made up for the loss



Magico's new \$12,600 S1 floorstander is the least expensive model ever to appear from the brand and yet from first listening retains a lot of the precision and detail of bigger models in the range. It even comes in colour!



A bold departure for Wadia, the elegant Intuition D1 is a digital integrated amplifier, designed to process DSD over USB as well as delivering up to 350 watts per channel. Expected price... around \$7,000



The iconoclastic \$32,000 Kronos 'table features a full suspension system and dual counter-rotating platters. The result is a quiet, dead-stable 'table with an exquisite sound



YG's new flagship Sonja 1.3 loudspeaker looks almost dinky in this image, but in reality the \$106,000/pr loudspeakers stand about man-height and were one of the show's stars



The British contingent is always strong at CES, and the boundless enthusiasm and energy of Keith Martin of IsoTek goes down well with an American audience. Here, he's busy demonstrating the a power cord from the exciting new Discovery EVO 3 range



Reports of CD's demise are greatly exaggerated, according to Audio Research. Its new \$13,000 Reference CD9 replaces the CD8 and brings the filtering, upsampling and some of the inputs of the company's Reference DAC to the party



The \$8,495 Universe II is said to be the most sophisticated ZYX moving coil to date. Asked what sets the cartridge apart, US importer Mehran Farahmand simply said: "Emotion"

Kingsound has made a light, comfortable, and sonically sophisticated electrostatic headphone rig called the Emperor, which – at \$1,600 – is ideal for those of us not (yet) wealthy enough to pay a King's Ransom



CEntrance has crafted a high-output HiFi-M8 portable headphone amp that can go toe-to-toe with today's better desktop amps and includes a superb iDevice/USB DAC, to boot. Price: \$699



Meridian's \$38,000 DSP7200 loudspeakers now feature a new group delay compensation algorithm, that makes the bass performance of this digital active speaker stand out



BLADE

the future has landed

As the world's first single apparent source speaker, KEF's original Concept Blade was hailed as a masterpiece of innovative engineering and design excellence. Now, after years of painstaking development, it's been refined into a loudspeaker that achieves the ideal in sound reproduction: the perfect clarity and emotional depth of a live performance. Prepare to be astonished...



The bottom line is that this loudspeaker is a truly impressive technological achievement, stuffed with clever ideas that come together to deliver exceptional performance.

Hi-Fi Choice, Nov 2011

The Blades are totally transparent to the musical performance. They don't just show you where the musicians were sat, they reserve the precise impact of that layout on the arrival time!

Hi-Fi Choice, Sept 2012

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The LeadingEdge Racks and Room Treatment – Adopting a systematic approach to system infrastructure

By Steve Dickinson

We live in complex times. Back in the good old days, you put the hifi into a cabinet, which kept it off the floor and stopped the cat from sleeping on it. If you didn't want a cabinet, you put it on a convenient table. All was well, provided nothing got broken during dusting. Then somebody noticed that, actually, what you stand this stuff on seems to make a difference. This observation has led to a wide variety of solutions, from the Bauhaus, via Heath Robinson, to the Cammell-Laird schools of design.

All have one stated purpose: to allow the equipment to work at its optimum with minimal disruption from unwanted interference. The fun starts when you try to get agreement on what form that interference takes, and how you deal with it. Me? I find it best to subscribe to the 'by their fruits, ye shall know them' school. If it works, be happy. It is, of course, always nice to have an inkling as to what might be going on.

LeadingEdge is a collaborative venture between Vertex AQ, whose isolation platforms and cabling have been reviewed in *Hi-Fi+* on several occasions, and Kaiser Acoustics, whose Kawero loudspeakers have been winning friends and influencing people across Europe for a while now.

Kaiser's expertise is in acoustic technology, and they also have some very



high-class cabinet making facilities, as is clear from the superb fit and finish of the Kawero loudspeakers. Kaiser has been supplying acoustic treatment products to the architectural acoustics market for decades, with impressive installations that embrace everything from concert and conference halls down to lecture theatres and commercial premises. This is serious science and engineering we're talking here, so expertise in the field is well established. What's new is that, in combining its skill sets with Vertex AQ, the two are bringing them to the wider domestic audio market, reaching beyond the loudspeakers into all aspects of the system environment; Kaiser delivers the room treatment and cosmetics, Vertex provides the support and signal isolation technology. Together they should add up to an interesting approach.

The table itself incorporates several different technologies, intended to control vibration and reduce electromagnetic interference. An electromagnetic absorption layer is built into each platform level, together with various anti vibration and acoustic control technologies. Much of the cleverness is, though, contained within the platform shelves themselves, working through the Vertex AQ HiRez equipment support cones which form part of the system. Two cones are top and tailed with a rubber pad and O-ring (Vertex AQ describes these as 'decouplers'), while the third is a mechanical coupler, providing a single exit path for mechanical energy within the unit itself.

Each platform also conceals a complex labyrinth, consisting of numerous different-length paths, intended to dissipate vibrational energy of different frequencies. The platform's top-plate has two metal insert panels which couple, mechanically, to this labyrinth. The equipment is stood with the two decouplers resting on the wooden part of the top plate, and the coupler placed on one or other of the metal inserts, as convenient, so that vibration can pass down into the labyrinth below the surface. This suggests not all unwanted vibration is external, and too much isolation will prevent that vibration being removed effectively in the first place.

The platform also minimises the amount of external vibration that can influence the equipment, this reduction primarily managed by the feet fitted to each shelf. Known as Stop-Chocs, and originally developed in the automotive industry, the mesh blocks are used to reduce noise, vibration and harshness by securely, yet flexibly, attaching heavy components to the vehicle structure without transmitting vibration.

Finally, airborne vibration is dealt with acoustically. The underside of each platform incorporates the micro perforation technology used in the acoustic panels and similar, free-standing, side mini-panels can be placed alongside the equipment. These acoustic panels also contain EMI absorbing materials, to reduce electromagnetic interference. The aim is to sit the equipment in an environment that is as free as possible from external influences.

The Vertex AQ philosophy is that the principal offenders are vibration and electromagnetic noise. Vibration may be external - mostly created by the system in action; and internal - vibration of transformers and other stuff excited by the AC current, or mechanical movement of transport mechanisms, sub assemblies or components. External, acoustic, vibration ►





can be structure-borne, commonly transmitted through vibrational energy in the floor or walls, or air-borne: vibration set off by the movement of air in the room. Electromagnetic noise is mostly external, entering either via the cabling, or through the casework.

In all these various types of interference, the problem boils down to two issues: how to minimise the degree of interference entering the system, but more importantly, how to get rid of it once it's in there. This is where some other approaches fall down. If you focus on isolating the equipment, you may also prevent any interference that is already in those units finding an exit path; if you focus on grounding, you can make it easier for external, malign, mechanical forces to find a way in. The LeadingEdge racks attempt to cover both sides of this equation, and seemingly do so with considerable success, aided in no small part by the Acoustic Panels that make up the other significant part of the system solution.

The vast majority of acoustic solutions consider the problem in terms of pressure; sound is pressure waves, to be dealt with by varying degrees of absorption or reflection, strategically located about the room. But that ignores the fact that sound also has a velocity component; the particles in the air mass are actually physically in motion. LeadingEdge employ micro-perforation technology, a well-established technique in the architectural and aeronautical worlds, to handle energy peaks in the velocity domain – with astonishing results. But I'm getting ahead of myself...

You may not want to concern yourself with equipment support, in which case coffee-table or cabinet makers will be happy to take your call, but if you're persuaded, as we at Plus Towers are, that this stuff is important, then come with me, dear reader.

Essentially, there are two products in the LeadingEdge portfolio: a modular equipment support table, and a range of acoustic panels in various shapes and sizes. Each works perfectly well by itself, but for full effect they should really be used together, the whole being (considerably) more than the sum of the parts, as I discovered during a very interesting day spent in RG's listening room, working our way up to a full-blown LeadingEdge table and acoustic panel system, while LeadingEdge's Steve Elford explained the technology and the thinking behind each element.

Most people will start with the table, so that's what we did. Beginning with the equipment set up on a rather nice Quadraspire table using the excellent new bamboo shelves, the system sounded tidy and enjoyable. No reason not to like it, certainly no criticisms of the table, at the price. The system was an uncompromisingly high-end one, as befits the Gregory household, with electronics from Wadia, VTL and Jeff Rowland, playing into Kef Blades, all connected and powered by Nordost Odin. Frankly, though, given the cost of this system, at this point I'd not have been thinking it was money particularly well-spent. Moving across to the LeadingEdge table, a whole new level of organisation was immediately apparent. The contrast was quite marked, suddenly the contributions being made by the old table were clearly evident, being now largely absent. As we added the various different elements of

the LeadingEdge system, all kinds of music just started making much more sense. Whether dense orchestral such as the Dvorák 9th Symphony, or fast, modern jazz from Roberto Fonseca, the

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Xtension 10

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

With a retro-styled mass-loaded chassis, which is decoupled by high-grade magnetic feet, the Xtension 10 boasts a near-perfect base for vinyl playback. Combine this with the top-of-the-line 10CC Evolution Tonearm, high-mass vinyl sandwich platter and built-in Pro-Ject Speed Box S/E II, and you are left with a truly desirable turntable package. All for only £2,000.

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► individual musical elements became better sorted, arranged in the right time and place, making more sense of their contribution and portraying levels of musicianship that had, hitherto, been well-concealed.

An example: I took along one of my favourites, the Roberto Fonseca album *Akoka*. We spent some time using the track *Lo Que Me Hace Vivir*, which has a harmonic and rhythmic complexity reminiscent of Bill Evans. Partway into the track, it explodes with a rush of added energy and impact, the intensity of Fonseca's piano matched only by the speed and skill of the percussion. Except that it wasn't. At first, before we moved over to the LeadingEdge rack, the percussion was uncontrolled and almost random, with little or no connection to the music. It was like Animal from the Muppets being let loose, in one of his more manic moments, and the rest of the band doing their best to play the piece and keep up. Bit by bit, however, as we added the various different elements of LeadingEdge technology to the system, the magic began to happen. Suddenly, the percussion fitted into the music, and stopped being an unhelpful intrusion. Rhythmically and dynamically the various musical elements fell into place and it no longer sounded like an under-rehearsed band with an out-of-control drummer, instead becoming an ensemble of superb musicians, unquestionably on top of their game. Now, all the expensive hardware began to justify its asking price.

Dense orchestral music fared just as well. As we built up the various LeadingEdge elements, from racks to acoustic panels, the sense of an orchestra working against itself receded and we were left with a performance free of congestion, confusion, and spatial disarray, replaced with a convincing, stable and, above all, meaningful presentation of the music.

Encouraged by all this, I took away a smaller set, to get to grips with it in the familiar surroundings of my own listening room. Happily, the benefits seem to be remarkably consistent and the Leading Edge stuff seems to be effective in systems big

“It’s capable of scaling up, or down, as the situation requires. It’s also possible to use the platform shelves by themselves, so entry to the LeadingEdge system doesn’t have to start with an entire table setup. Platforms can be free-standing on top of your existing tables... or built into the sort of wall units that can hide entire systems.”

and small, in rooms palatial or poky. It's capable of scaling up, or down, as the situation requires. It's also possible to use the platform shelves by themselves, so entry to the LeadingEdge system doesn't have to start with an entire table setup. Platforms can be free-standing on top of your existing supports or tables, or perhaps most interestingly of all, built into the sort of wall units that can hide entire systems.

Once you've heard the typical sonic contributions made by various different support materials, it is often not difficult to recognise them. Steel and glass supports sound different to wooden ones, and acrylic sounds different again. The striking thing about the LeadingEdge table was the lack of this sonic signature. I'm used to the MusicWorks ReVo table, which takes a rather left-field approach using only acrylic, and one of the things I like about it is that it seems to impose very little of itself. The consequence of that is that if I'm listening to a familiar system on a different table, it's not difficult to hear the table's contribution to the proceedings. Not so the LeadingEdge. The ReVo does this disappearing act, partly, by not really being there all that much, anyway. The LeadingEdge takes a more considered, more complete and ultimately more successful approach, achieving its unobtrusiveness through clever and thoughtful engineering. Unfortunately that cleverness means there are too many considerations to cover in a single review, so I need to leave things here until next issue, where I'll be examining the LeadingEdge range in greater detail. For now, let me just say that these products delivered such a fundamental improvement in system performance, in more than one case and of a nature it would be hard to achieve by other means, that they've forced me to reassess system priorities and relative values. These products are not cheap (although their modular nature does help in that respect) but, if more music means better value, LeadingEdge is a very valuable proposition. +

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*

Kuzma Stabi M turntable

By Alan Sircom

Designing one turntable is comparatively easy. Designing a range is much, much harder. You need to avoid making them too similar, but also making sure they aren't too dissimilar. You cannot get away with 'the same, just bigger' anymore, but reinventing the wheel (or, in this case, the platter) can lead to wild differences between products. Franc Kuzma, designer of the turntable brand that bears his name, clearly understands... and has overcome these issues perfectly in the new Kuzma Stabi M.

First, let's set it in context; the M stands between the Stabi Reference and Stabi XL2 in price, but closer to the XL2 in performance. It's a very traditional looking deck (it has a large outer plinth and even a lid), just one that's larger and heavier than most. It's currently designed to only take Kuzma arms (a range of armboards is imminent) and is an ideal match for 12" arms and the company's 4Point arm (as used in the review sample). And, for the appreciable future, the deck's colour scheme comes in a choice of black, or black.

The combination of bigness and blackness does make this something of a statement piece. In fairness, it's not that much bigger than a SME Model 20/12, but the addition of a heavy bent smoked plastic lid gives it substance. It's considerably more aesthetically pleasing than early samples (which were often described as 'agricultural', as in 'looks like a box of tractor parts', or at

best like a really big record cleaning machine), but it is still big and black and heavy. The size and weight call for a substantial equipment support, too; putting a 60kg turntable on a flimsy wall-shelf isn't an option, and its half-metre depth and 610mm width mean it could overhang some smaller equipment tables, which looks odd.

The mass is a part of the Stabi M's secret weapon, 12kg of its 60kg total weight is taken up by the platter alone (two slabs of 30mm thick aluminium, separated by an acrylic damping plate to be precise), and a lot more goes into the massive chassis, which is all made from solid aluminium (the



reason why the whole plinth is finished in black rather than a polished wood, is that too is made from aluminium, and gives you an indication of just how massive the deck really is). That adds up to a lot of structural rigidity – no matter what that platter does, it isn't going to influence the chassis and you'd need grenades to cause the chassis to influence the platter.

The platter itself features an inverted bearing with a ruby ball. This is housed in the 'subchassis' (more an isolated section of the total mass of the system).

If one part of the M's arsenal is down to mass, the other is torque. Lots and lots of torque. The M uses a hefty DC motor mounted in a brass cup and aluminium plate arrangement, itself all supported in a suspended brass motor housing. While this is not a suspended deck, the main frame and motor system are hung from the top plate via four large elastic dampers. This is

for fine tuning the levelling of the platter and armboard assembly. Everything is bolted together using thick aluminium blocks. The DC motor is so powerful, it can drive that massive platter to full speed in less than two seconds. Only DJ decks spin up faster, and they have platters that weigh as much as a sheet of paper by comparison. That the M's motor can heft a 12kg platter to full speed by itself in two seconds is little short of amazing. As I said... torque.

One of the unique features of the M is its machined blue plastic



belt. This is designed to be near indestructible in daily use, so no changes in speed as the deck compensates for an ever-shifting rubber belt. In other words, less wow or flutter from play in the belt, in fact all the advantages of belt drive with much of the precision of direct drive. In the unlikely event of damaging the belt (say, you used it to drive a supercharger or maybe used it in self-defence against a rampaging polar bear) an SME or Linn standard belt or Kuzma's neoprene belt could be used instead, with appropriate modification.

The turntable itself includes an off-board speed control, but the basic controls are replicated on the front panel of the M itself, and turning the motor on or off can be operated by remote control (not supplied at the time of review). I'm not entirely convinced of the need for a remote, but basic replication of speed and power controls on the deck itself is a great thing if – like most people playing turntables – you've hidden the PSU on a low shelf and your knees make that twig-snapping sound each time you bend.

The whole deck sits on three spiked feet for easy adjustment. Although its sheer weight means nothing about set-up of the Kuzma M is 'easy' (anything 'easy' that involves at least two people puffing and panting usually means you have to at least buy her a few drinks first), but the assembly of the deck is straightforward.

This proved to be one of the easiest reviews I've ever performed. Most of it was done with just two albums. The first – *Sea Change* by Beck showed how adept the deck was with simple music and vocals. The second – *Newport 1958* by Duke Ellington and his Orchestra – highlighted what it could do with a massively dynamic piece of music. Between the two, you could hear the difference in pressings and the 'fist' (in the Morse Code operator sense) of the mastering and recording engineers, even the difference in vinyl formulations. ►



► Naturally, some of this comes down to the abilities of the Benz cartridge fitted and the performance of the system it was used in. But a good deal of this comes right down to the authority and precision of the turntable.

More than this though, the two words that punch through the whole review are 'master tape'. OK, so on many recent recordings that should be 'Hard Disk', but it just doesn't have the same impact. This presents vinyl with the kind of precision one would normally find when invited to listen to a freshly minted master tape. It was like the pressing plant and all the stages between tape and ear had been swept aside.

That first album (on MoFi) is a dry studio cut, although you can easily listen into the wet parts, such as the reverb tails on the guitar parts and the placement of the synth bass in the mix. It's a fantastic recording, although those seeking 'the absolute sound' ideals of live acoustic instruments in their own space will be slightly disappointed, it always sounds good in an increasingly (and very deliberately) claustrophobic manner. The Kuzma M made light work of this. Vocal rooted centre stage, layers of

instrumentation (it doesn't matter if it's natural spacing or pan pot and delay, the instruments were clearly sitting in their own 3-D spaces) and the precision of the instruments just made the sound more like what you'd expect to hear in a control room than a listening room. And yet, it also had the refinement, sophistication and insight of high-end devices, along with that precision and speed and detail demanded by a recording engineer.

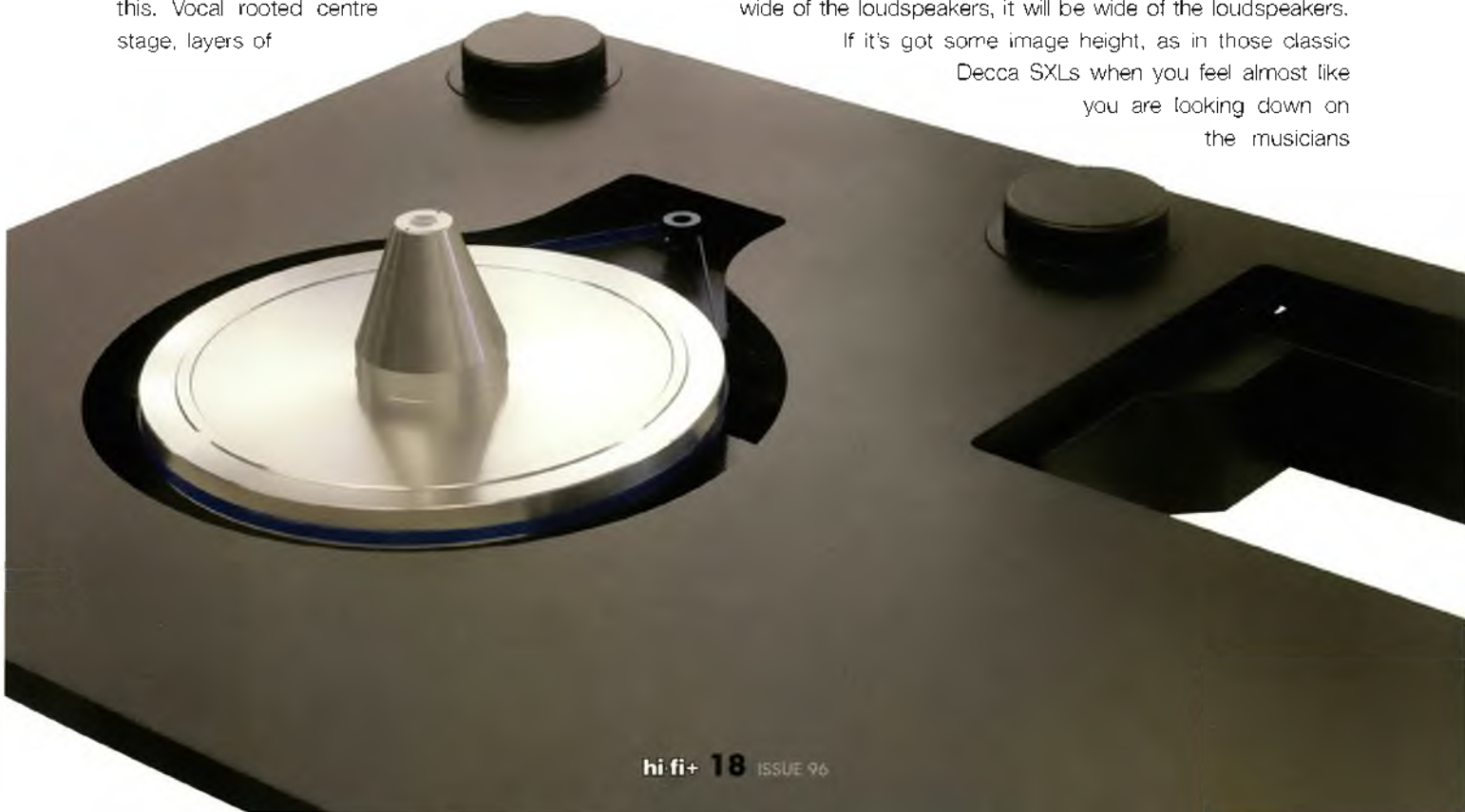
Moving over to the Ellington album, on 'El Gato', the orchestra builds slow and then thanks to a razor sharp fanfare from trumpeter Cat Anderson and the rest of the horn section, you jump out of your seat. Except in most cases you don't; the range of this is curtailed and just sounds smooth. Here, it's as dynamic and exciting as if you were in that Jazz festival 55 years ago. It's powerful, almost shockingly so, loud and exciting.

OK, so listening to two albums is not even the beginning of a review of a component this important, but practically everything that followed only served to extend slightly on those first two cuts. And I don't think that was blind luck; the Kuzma M's abilities are such that you could take almost any two albums you know well, play them one after another and then have such a profound take on the performance of the deck that you'll reach for the credit card seconds later.

Why? Because not only will you hear near enough everything that was put on the vinyl, the recording defines the parameters of sound (which is how it should be). Or rather, all other things being equal, the recording defines the parameters of the sound – if you have a strongly-flavoured cartridge or phono stage or amps or speakers, naturally that will be the sticking point, but the turntable itself is not going to introduce its own flavours into that mix.

This is most easily resolved listening to soundstaging. If what's on the vinyl is deep and narrow, the soundstage will be deep and narrow; if it's wide of the loudspeakers, it will be wide of the loudspeakers.

If it's got some image height, as in those classic Decca SXLs when you feel almost like you are looking down on the musicians





TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Speeds: 33, 45, 78

Platter material: aluminium and acrylic

Platter mass: 12 kg

Bearing type: ruby ball - inverted

Shaft diameter: 16 mm

Chassis material: aluminium

Motor: 1 DC (three phase)

Includes: Clamp, Mat, Lid, bearing oil, Allen keys. Optional armboards (design does not allow two arms)

Dimensions (WxDxH): 61x50x29cm

Weight: 60 kg

Price: £12,495

Manufactured by: Kuzma d.o.o.

URL: www.kuzma.si

Distributed by: Audiofreaks

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)20 8948 4153

from the gods, all served up as it comes. It's not simply the soundstage, but that part hits you first. Then comes the detail resolution, the delicate articulation of voice and instrument on k.d. lang's 'Save Me' from her 1992 *Ingénue* LP. And then you begin to listen further into the mix.

An interesting part of this is how it exposes dynamics and microdynamics. It suggests that the whole microdynamics thing is a red herring; when you hear what an unforced dynamic turntable can do, there is no differentiation between macro- and microdynamics, there is just the music. Of course you can hear the squeak of the drum pedal; you can hear it when there's just a bass drum and a bass line being played, and you can hear it when the whole band fires up. Why would anything be otherwise?

The thing about the Kuzma M is it does what only the best products do; you end up describing aspects of its performance not in a 'it does this' or 'it makes this piece of music sound like that', but in terms of what other things fail at doing. The best way of describing this is it's like Franc Kuzma sat down and listened to a cross-section of the best turntables (including a couple of his own designs) and mixed together all of the good bits and ironed out all of the negative parts. And, the rivals aren't exactly stocked full of negatives. Put it this way, a lot of people listen to something like a top spec Linn or an SME and love it. A few will say, "it's not for me, because..." and identify a performance characteristic that they don't like. Usually, when not coloured by something almost ideological, the thing not liked is surprisingly consistent, and is often the same performance aspect liked by those who bought the deck; the Linn's simplicity of delivery and upper bass richness can also be viewed as over-simplifying the music and glossing over deep bass information, the SME's even-handed presentation (in the hands of those who love it) can be viewed as boring (by those who don't). The Kuzma Stabi M is that rare thing, a turntable that doesn't oversimplify or overstate the music, that doesn't emphasise one aspect of performance at

the expense of others and that simply gets on with the job of resolving music beautifully. Arguably, more beautifully even than the Kuzma XL2 that stands atop it in price.

Turntables are all about the engineering. Although there are exceptions, generally the better the engineering, the better the turntable; and the better the sound as a result. And this is engineering with a capital 'E'; you could drive a tank over the Stabi M. But, although the suspicion would be this creates an over-engineered design, in fact it creates a turntable that makes many designs sound under-powered and under engineered.

So you are going to need a world-class system to fully realise the potential of the Stabi M (just finding an arm and cartridge suitably resolving to not hold the Stabi M back is likely to set you back several thousand pounds, and any speaker system less than full-range will miss much of the M's joys), but the end result is like getting the keys to every studio control room in history. Very highly recommended. +

MEET YOUR MAKER

Meet Your Maker – Kuzma

By Alan Sircom



Last year, we spoke to Franc Kuzma, at his factory in Slovenia, about the way he designs and builds turntables. Unlike most hi-tech brands with computer aided design and product development, he uses those tried and trusted methods of pencil, paper and a good set of ears.

Alan Sircom: Why do you still use a drawing board?

Franc Kuzma: I'd like to say analogue is better, but the truth is I never learned how to use a CAD/CAM program! I spoke to the guy who sells these programs and he told me it takes about three to five years to learn, and there's no way I can take the time out to master this. It would be nice to have someone trained who could use this... one day!

It does have its advantages though. The basic principle is we do the drawing and then do the prototype, because often the idea is one thing, but the end result has no point. Some rely too much on the computer to do the work.

AS: How long does the design process take?

FK: I have a feeling each time it takes longer and longer! For example, the AirLine took about two and half years to develop, the 4Point took a little longer and now the Stabi M is looking like it will take three years from start to finish.

Because we are a very small company and don't have separate R&D, any time you make a prototype, you need to steal time from production and that slows the process down.

This too has an advantage. It allows the ideas to mature, to rest a bit in the design process, and allows us to be one solution ahead. At least, that's my excuse!

AS: How long do the products take to build?

FK: It depends, but let's take the 4Point tonearm, which is one of our most complex products and has about 130 pieces in total that we need to make, plus all the screws and stuff we buy in. Assembly time, when all those parts are finished and painted is very quick – we can make 30 tonearms in about two weeks – but the complete process of manufacture takes about 12-15 months!

AS: How much of your material is locally sourced?

FK: Most of it. We buy in some specialist components, such as wires and lift-lower arms, from the Far East, but we don't generally buy off the shelf. We also buy bearings from the best manufacturer, who happens to be in the UK, but we still need to check every one. It's very expensive. And naturally, we don't make our own motors or air compressors. Everything else we make or machine in house.

AS: A turntable is arguably only as good as its bearing. How are yours made?

FK: Normally the bearing shaft is cut and hardened and ground to the precise size. After that we do what is called lapping, and then take the extra step of polishing. We choose materials that are not metal-to-metal (to minimise vibration), so we use a special textile. This is hard to shape but will run forever, even without oil – but we still use oil anyway. We've been using this material for 30 years and the bearings still run on and on... perhaps forever!

AS: What turntable are you most proud of?

FK: Well, the first turntable we are not making any more, so there's some nostalgia there. But, I'm hoping the Stabi M will be the one I'm most proud of, because it's the culmination of all the knowledge of my time in turntables, including some things I knew but never put into turntables before.

AS: What would you have done differently?

FK: I would have liked to introduce the Stabi S ten years earlier. It's such a simple design and gives good performance. So why didn't I think about making a 'non-turntable turntable' before?

However, whenever looking back, you always forget about things like family commitments, so you never play it safe in hindsight, and we must have done something right, because we've been in business for more than 30 years!

AS: What do you think about the 'vinyl revival'?

FK: In some ways, it's wrong because it's becoming a fashion statement. However, if people are buying vinyl because they are passionate about their music, it's very good because it means people are thinking about better sound. +



The Wilson Benesch Cardinal Loudspeaker

By Roy Gregory

The world of high-end loudspeakers is increasingly falling into two camps: the (traditional) one where 'specially modified' OEM drivers are combined with in-house cabinets – and where just about everything is built in-house. But, what happens if you take that recipe a stage further? That's exactly what Wilson Benesch has done in its latest flagship design, the Cardinal; but then, that should come as no surprise, it's a path it has been actively pursuing for nearly two decades.

As befits a company based in Sheffield, it is a design approach dedicated to sound engineering and materials technology. Here you have a speaker that contains a unique cone material, in-house drivers, a composite cabinet and not a bit of wood anywhere. One look at the Cardinal and you can't mistake its high-tech credentials, but what you can see is only half the story.

The massive, extruded aluminium baffle is carefully shaped to reduce diffraction, but also minimize resonance and bending modes. Variable thickness and curved "returns" that extend a full 50mm back from the baffle face make for an incredibly rigid element. Behind this, the rear half of the cabinet is formed from a curved, W-section, formed with combined carbon-fibre and fibre-glass skins, sandwiching a thick structural foam core. The result is incredibly stiff and extremely light, while the foam core material and mixed material skins make for excellent self-damping. This carbon composite channel is the result of a proprietary production process, the materials, expertise and plant required making it an incredibly costly element – a fact that Wilson Benesch off-sets by using it across its range of products.

The composite channel is linked to the baffle by extruded 'cheeks'. By varying the depth of these, the volume can be dialed in for different systems, while again, the extruded profile allows extreme shaping of the elements to increase stiffness and resist resonance. These side panels on the Cardinal are fully 180mm in depth. Finally, the back of the cabinet is finished with a beautifully sculpted and extruded aluminium post that adds another clamping element as well as significant additional stiffness. The end result is an enclosure that involves clamped, mixed materials in a self-damping

sandwich structure, virtually devoid of parallel internal walls, with all the benefits of a stiff material like aluminium, but with none of the ringing that normally goes with it. Throw in the low energy storage characteristics of the composite channel section and this could be a theoretically near perfect cabinet.

The internal volume itself is constructed from two separate elements. The large, upper enclosure houses the tweeter and lower-midrange unit. The lower cabinet contains the midrange driver in its own, separate enclosure, loaded by an electromechanically damped ABR that vents through the slot between the two sections of the cabinet. The remainder of the lower enclosure contains the bass system, comprising a pair of isobarically loaded woofers, in turn loaded by another ABR. The rear isobaric drivers are mounted as closely as possible behind the front units, on their own 35lb aluminium sub baffle, bringing the driver complement in total to nine a side.

The top of the cabinet looks like it would be more at home in the Olympic velodrome than gracing the top of a loudspeaker. Whilst it has an undeniably powerful visual impact, again the purpose is to eliminate resonance and any parallel surfaces inside the cabinet. The Cardinal stands on the most substantial base I've yet come across, machined in-house from a single slab of aluminium. If the purpose of the massive baffle and the stiffness of the cabinet as a whole are designed to offer a stable mechanical reference for the drivers, this is the part that delivers the necessary mechanical ground. It stands on three stainless steel posts, each with a massive but beautifully executed adjusting wheel and tipped with a large tungsten carbide ball. That interfaces with three identical balls captured in the large disc feet provided with the speaker, an arrangement – first seen in the Wilson Benesch tonearm – that guarantees minimal point contact. All these parts, like the driver baskets and motor assemblies, even the four sets of terminals mounted on the speaker's underside, are all produced in Wilson Benesch's own CNC shop.

Which brings us, in turn, to the drivers themselves. At first glance, you could be forgiven for assuming that the Cardinal only uses two different drivers, the in-house tweeter and a 170mm cone unit, but appearances are deceptive.

Although the 170mm baskets, specially designed to minimize rear reflections, are identical, there are four different 170mm units in play here, each with its own specifically tailored cone and motor assembly. The cone material in the Tactic-II drivers is isotactic polypropylene, a unique fibre that can be formed under temperature and pressure. Under the right conditions, the surface of each fibre melts, bonding the whole into a single monocoque element, combining the self-damping of polypropylene with the structural tuning available from a woven carbon-fibre or Kevlar cone, yet without the additional mass of added resin. This material offers both a versatile and elegant solution to the problem of precisely tailoring a driver's mechanical and acoustic properties. Like everything else, cone design is a case of balancing virtues. The isotactic-polypropylene material offers the opportunity to maximize the structure's self-damping characteristics while minimizing the relatively high mass of the material itself. Add in modular neodymium magnet assemblies and motor parts that are also machined in-house and Wilson Benesch is able to create dedicated midrange, lower-mid, bass and ABR drivers, all on the same basket and all precisely tailored to the final system, a factor that becomes particularly critical once you take a look at the crossover topology – or rather, lack of it.

A firm believer that crossovers really are the root of all evil when it comes to loudspeakers, designer Craig Milnes has opted to run both the midrange units wide-open (the upper-mid's ABR loading a more controlled iteration of an open-baffle). Either side of that very broad mid-band, all crossover slopes are simple first order, an arrangement that maintains phase integrity and minimizes subtractive and electrical losses – but does place a heavy emphasis on the mechanical behaviour of the drivers themselves. It's an unusual choice for a multi-driver, ultra high-tech system like this one, one more usually found in minimalist, high-efficiency speakers, but it makes perfect sense of the system's technological strengths – and weaknesses. If you are using a higher order filter with steep slopes and rapid driver roll-off, then, you can concentrate on a narrower pass-band, but the Cardinal's crossover uses either shallow slopes or an entirely acoustical/mechanical roll-off in the case of the mid-band drivers. The ▶





- ability to tailor the drivers' mechanical responses so precisely is what makes the approach possible, while the lack of subtractive filter elements between the amp and the drive-unit delivers enhanced control to overcome the heavier mass of the polypropylene cones compared to, for example, ceramics. The result is best described as two-way first-order electrical, but four-way acoustical, with the pseudo-d'Appolito arrangement of upper and lower-mid drivers flanking the tweeter at its heart, an arrangement that Wilson Benesch feels is so critical to the cardinal's performance that they've dubbed it the "Troika concept".

The Cardinal's Semisphere tweeter is relatively low-tech in appearance, with its simple silk dome, but that conceals the carefully engineered carbon-fibre brace behind the dome and the self-contained rear housing, with its incredibly powerful motor and carefully contoured internal chamber. Add in the optimally contoured front plate and you have a unit that delivers the proven benefits of the soft dome approach (excellent tonal and dynamic shading and contrast) with superior dispersion and extension. The Cardinal claims an upper output limit of -3dB at 35kHz, which puts its tweeter not far behind some pretty exotic alternatives – without the complex crossovers those drivers demand, or the tonal and integration issues that so often bedevil their application.

The base is over 60cm in each dimension, while the tall, narrow (20cm wide) cabinet rises 175cm from the floor and is 56cm deep. Each speaker weighs in at 180kg, testament to the sheer amount of aluminium in each cabinet, a sobering consideration given that around half the volume is delivered by the lightweight composite sandwich! Efficiency is quoted as 90dB, underlining the important contribution of that low-loss crossover topology, while nominal impedance is stated as 6 Ohms, with a 3 Ohm minimum. The upshot is a speaker that is neither particularly easy to install or drive – but it is well worth the effort. The ball-bearing interfaces on the feet (together with the substantial weight) made it surprisingly difficult to slide the speaker even on my wooden floor, and I eventually resorted to some felt-based footers for placement purposes, before installing the dedicated feet. The four sets of terminals beneath each base-plate accept both spades

and bananas, which is just as well, as most of you will need jumpers to bridge the gaps left by single/bi-wired cables – as well as a second pair of hands and a ratchet socket wrench to make the necessary connections.

Generally, it is the transducers in any system that introduce the greatest degrees of colouration or character. But the sound produced by the Cardinal is uncannily coherent and well-integrated, musically, spatially and temporally contiguous – to a degree that is frankly astonishing for a speaker system in which each cabinet consists of two enclosures and nine drivers. It speaks volumes for the precision with which Wilson Benesch have been able to tailor the mechanical behavior of their drivers and cabinet, achieving better results across the mid-band transitions than most speaker designers achieve with subtractive crossover designs. It also underlines the special benefits of parts and materials continuity across so many of the drive-units. It's something that is impossible to achieve unless you build all those drivers yourself, specifically tailored for purpose. ►

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▶ The Cardinal's lack of intrusive or identifiable character makes it one of the most self-effacing loudspeakers that I've ever used, surpassed in this regard only by various Avalons. Yet this essential honesty is a double-edged sword, throwing the performance of the driving amplifier into stark relief. In the same way that sugar in tea masks the complexities of its flavor, subtractive crossovers and cabinet colouration draw an obscuring veil across a host of sins. Eliminate them from your loudspeaker and suddenly you have to deal with problems you never realized you had. It leaves the Cardinal in the unfortunate position of a messenger delivering unwelcome news. But rather than "shooting" the speaker, consider how good it can sound with amplification that really does deliver. I was lucky enough to have electronics from Connoisseur/Berning, VTL, Avantgarde and Siltech to hand and the results were spectacular, especially with Siltech's ruinously expensive but stunningly good SAGA set up.

Working at their best the Cardinals simply disappear from the musical equation, physically and sonically. The soundfield that contains the musicians steps away from the speakers completely, with no sense of the mechanics behind the reproduction. Ringing the changes between different amps and source components, you realize that the Cardinal is capable of delivering the full range of instrumental colour

and musical expression, instrumental or vocal – as long as your system delivers the signal. The speaker is so devoid of subtractive/intrusive obstruction that performances arrive intact, with proper form and full of sense and purpose. In no small part that is down to the wide open, lucid and responsive mid-band, but as with all large speakers it's also about the top and bottom and how they integrate with the whole.

The Hemisphere tweeter is a masterpiece, retaining all the proven virtues of silk domes, but using novel bracing techniques and its optimised rear chamber to extend the performance envelope far higher than you'd expect. The result is a natural sense of air and space, positional clarity and musical articulation that, until now, has been the preserve of exotic tweeters and speakers with dedicated super tweeters built in. The seamless transition between the midrange driver and tweeter help in this regard, but like all really good high-frequency units, you also hear their impact at the other end of the spectrum, where the clarity and transparency of the bass is remarkable. Overlapping bass notes are easily distinguished, pitch and placement effortlessly clear. The result is music with a stability, clarity and uncluttered sense of natural pace and timing; the Cardinals let music and musicians breathe. The multiple small drivers don't have the generosity or weight that comes from large cones in even larger cabinets, but they don't ▶

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WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION

► have the additive elements that go with them either. The Cardinal's bottom end is all about poise, information and control. It's not trying to sound bigger than it is and that's one of the principle reasons it doesn't suffer from "big speaker" syndrome; the sense of weight without that weight being quite right...

One implication of the speakers' honesty is that the character and differences between sources becomes significantly more obvious. So, for instance, the different nature of CD and SACD layers of the same disc is more apparent, while the presentational distinctions between vinyl/analogue and digital sources becomes a gaping chasm. Of course, the flipside of that is that good orchestral recordings on CD have a presence, tonality and stability that's all too rare, while vocals from vinyl take on a new sense of natural presence and shape, instruments – especially drums – a new solidity and substance. If the Cardinal has a weakness, it is in the realm of micro-dynamics and instrumental texture, areas in which higher efficiency designs or those with super light drivers excel. But the Wilson Benesch is hardly deficient in these areas, while it's other (considerable) strengths more than tip the balance. So when Joe Jackson sings that, "It's different for girls", he really sounds like he means it, and the band sound like they feel his pain; or when Sonny Rollins exchanges licks with Clifford Brown the richer, rounded tone, the sheer length and volume of his sax is perfectly differentiated from the shorter, sharper bark of the trumpet.

The Wilson Benesch Cardinal is as impressive from a sonic perspective as it is in pure engineering terms – and that's really saying something. Here we have a product where innovation and execution are perfectly in accord with purpose. As expensive as it is, for once it's not hard to see (or hear – or rather, not hear) where the money has gone, in terms of materials, manufacturing or performance. It also represents the tip of a long and perfectly mapped development path, stretching back across multiple models. But the pace of advance isn't necessarily even and the Cardinal represents a genuine step change in both ambition and performance. It might be demanding but it can also be mightily rewarding and is, by some considerable margin and on any terms, the best speaker that Wilson Benesch has ever made.

If you want a product that manages to combine cutting-edge technology with artisanal audiophile sensibilities then this is it. If you want precision engineering fused with artistic nuance, look no further. Me? I just love the unburstable, uninhibited, uncoloured enthusiasm and honesty of the



Cardinal. Any speaker that can deliver this much music with this much conviction gets my vote. On that basis the Wilson Benesch Cardinal joins a very select short list indeed. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: 4-way dynamic loudspeaker

Driver Complement: 1x 25mm WB Semi-Sphere HF; 1x 170mm WB Tactic II Mid; 1x 170mm WB Tactic II Lower-Mid 4x 170mm WB Tactic II LF; 2x 170mm WB Tactic II ABR

Crossover: 2-way, 1st order electrical; 4-way acoustical

Bandwidth: 25Hz – 35kHz ± 3dB

Sensitivity: 90dB

Impedance: 6 Ohms nominal (3 Ohms minimum)

Dimensions (WxHxD): 620 x 1735 x 640mm

Weight: 180kg each channel

Finishes: Silk black baffle, spine and foot, carbon-fibre cabinet. Side cheeks in black carbon or black silk.

Bespoke side cheeks available in wood and high gloss finishes, at extra cost: Wood Satin: Natural Cherry,

Maple, Oak Wood Gloss: White Gloss, Birds Eye Maple,

Red Birds Eye, Burr Walnut, Ebonised Walnut, Walnut,

Red Tulip, Zebrano, Metal: White Gloss

Price: £54,950 pr.

Manufacturer: Wilson Benesch Ltd

Tel: +44 (0)114 285 2656

URL: www.wilson-benesch.com

Micromega MyDac digital to analogue converter

By Alan Sircom

One of the great perks of being an audio reviewer is discovery. Not just the day-to-day discovery of new products every month, but those occasional superstars. And, when those superstars are keenly priced, so much the better. So it is with the Micromega MyDac, a superstar performer at a very decent price.

The MyDAC is a small, lightweight ABS box in black or white with a digital converter inside. With the rounded corners and the simple layout, it's almost impossible not to think 'Apple' (in white, it looks like a scaled-down Airport Extreme), although the French converter is lighter in overall build. It has precisely two moving parts; a thumbwheel on the front to switch the DAC's inputs and put it into standby, and a mini toggle switch at the back to flip between USB Class 1.0 and 2.0 audio. As explained in the manual, Class 1.0 audio brickwalls the USB output of the host computer at 24 bit, 192kHz precision and to get beyond this means either buying a Mac or downloading software from Micromega's own site.

Alongside USB, the DAC also includes independent coaxial and optical S/PDIF inputs. A figure-eight power socket and a pair of gold phono, a power light and a trio of white lights on the front panel complete the line-up.

There isn't much of a manual to speak of, but there isn't much need for a manual either. The thumbwheel at the front selects the source, which flashes until it locks onto a signal. But don't let 'simple' deceive you; this is a full-blooded DAC in spec and sound. The USB, for example, is asynchronous using the fast-becoming ubiquitous XMOS chipset, while the S/PDIF interfaces use a Wolfson application. Both sync to one of two clocks depending on the signal, one set at 22.5792MHz for multiples of 44.1kHz sampling and one set at 24.5760MHz for multiples of 48kHz. The redocked datastream then passes to a Cirrus Logic CS4531 converter chip. This not only allows full 24-bit, 192kHz processing, but also delivers a large enough output to feed directly to the output terminals, although Micromega buffers this off-the-chip output.



The two big feathers in the MyDac's cap are that it's the only DAC at the price that has its own custom designed switch-mode power supply (no wall-wart plug-tops here) and that it is both designed and built in France. We have become so used to 'designed locally, built globally' – especially at this price – that something made in the EU and doesn't cost as much as a small car is astonishing. Here's the thing, manufacturers – if Micromega can do this, why can't you?

The easy way of looking at the MyDac is thinking of it as just another budget DAC and set it accordingly. And, under such conditions, the MyDac acquits itself extremely well. But, there's a lot more to the DAC that comes if you ignore the price and the plastic casing, and start thinking of it as a barnstormer of a converter that delivers a good taste of true high-end performance.

How this works is simple. You play something with a touch of meat to it; Mahler, for example. And it sets out a detailed, layered presentation of what an orchestra is supposed to sound like; not accented or curtailed or melded together, just the energy and flow of an orchestra. As it should sound, and in many respects as the rest of the system lets it sound.

In a way, where it makes its lack of high-end credentials is in the observance, not the breach. Many high end converters are seemingly designed to sing siren-sweet with the right music, and sound less promising with anything else. The MyDac makes no such limited claims, and sounds all the better for it. I doubt many MyDacs will end up playing "I'm So Lonely" from the Team America soundtrack just after a swift round of Beethoven piano sonatas, but if they did,

their owners wouldn't find the Micromega stressing one over the other. Ultimately, no DAC should behave this way, but sadly many surprisingly expensive ones do. The true top team players in this game don't favour one genre over another, and the MyDac shows its colours there.

This means you can end up with seemingly absurd systems where the DAC costs one tenth the price of the cables it's used with... but if it works, it works.

In many a budget system, the MyDac's expansive presentation and detail can be masked and the one potential flaw in the presentation – a lack of 'full fat' upper bass – can be highlighted. However, when you move up a notch or six, that lack of upper bass richness becomes tonal honesty (because it's not trying to add body to a budget system) and that

"Something made in the EU and doesn't cost as much as a small car is astonishing. Here's the thing manufacturers – if Micromega can do this, why can't you?"

separation of instruments and detail presents as all the things many want from a good high-end system.

I don't want to overstate this, because it's easy to accidentally kill off half the product's potential audience, and it's not fair to the product or its potential owners to do that. Those with a good, but inexpensive system will find the DAC not only an excellent introduction to the joys of high-end sound with all the resolution and spaciousness that comes with the upper echelon, but also an introduction that stays with the listener as the system improves. A good product like the MyDac has both staying power and the potential to raise the game of the listeners using it; listening to the sound of the MyDac is both satisfying and ear-opening. Those on the first rungs on the ladder will not only hear what a good DAC sounds like, but begin to see there's more to audio than those lower rungs offer. They will find the MyDac offers them a glimpse into a world of exceptional audio performance and musical enjoyment that they might never have otherwise discovered. Chances are, those who go down this route will end up keeping the MyDac until it becomes the longest standing – and likely cheapest – part of their system.

Nevertheless, uprooted from the entry level, the MyDac does offer much more than at a point where its similarly priced rivals begin to show their limitations. There is a second in-between system I use, comprising a Sugden A21se, a pair of old ProAc Studio 140, with Crystal Cable Standard Diamond signal cables and an AudioQuest Diamond USB. Normally, an Arcam rDAC does the digital conversion and does it well. But the MyDac left it for dead. The additional refinement to the sound it gave made BB King's *Live at the Royal* that bit more live sounding and gave extra articulation and clarity to his voice. It's also extended without sounding extended, as in 'edgy', 'bright', 'etched', 'hyperdetailed' or all the other potential woes that beset inexpensive digital.

That's possibly the key thing about the MyDac's performance. It doesn't sound cheap. Quite the reverse in ►

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► fact; in the right context, it sounds very, very expensive. Back to that system: swapping out the MyDAC for the Primare in that system was telling; the Primare was better in terms of bass extension and precision, but the difference between the two was not as clear cut as might be expected, given the differential in price. OK, so ultimately the Primare won out, but based on the presentation alone, you could easily be mistaken for thinking these were two rival high-end DACs with different presentations.

I've got to say, this is perhaps one of the most exciting products I've encountered in years. Of course, it's great to have the astonishing products, the dCS and Metronome players or Light Harmonic converters that show what can be wrung out of digital data files, but without products like the MyDAC showing just how good audio can sound at lower altitudes, there will be ever fewer people starting small, and working up to those true reference class products.

Let's not get carried away with this. It's a good DAC at a very fine price, but it's not the second coming. Such a product is always welcome, but while it keeps its cool in the presence of some extremely lofty company, it's not a £2,000 DAC, in either build or sound. That it comes extremely close in the latter department is why the MyDAC deserves all its plaudits. Best of all, it's only the start of a set of MyProducts; we're in for some classy French fancies. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Digital inputs: 1x Coaxial, 1x Toslink S/PDIF, 1x USB input (Class 1.0/2.0)

Analogue outputs: stereo phono pair

S/PDIF sampling frequency range: 32 kHz – 192 kHz

USB sampling frequency range: 44.1 kHz – 192 kHz

Resolution: 16 – 24 bits

Bandwidth (± 0.2 dB): 5 Hz – 100 kHz

Linearity (-100 dB): 0.1 dB

Signal to noise ratio: A weighted (20Hz – 20kHz) > 110 dB

THD + noise (1 kHz): < 0.002%

Output level: 2 V rms

Output impedance: 600 Ω

Dimensions (WxDxH): 14x14x3.6cm

Weight: 0.36kg

Price: £259

Manufactured by: Micromega

URL: www.micromega-hifi.com

Distributed by: Absolute Sounds

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

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“ Plug it in and BAM! You immediately ramp up your system's performance. It reacts to the music faster, 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. But somewhere over the course of about 24-48 hours, your take on the system's sound seems to change. 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).

There is normally a sonic caveat, but not this time. This points the system in the right direction, whatever the system. 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. ”

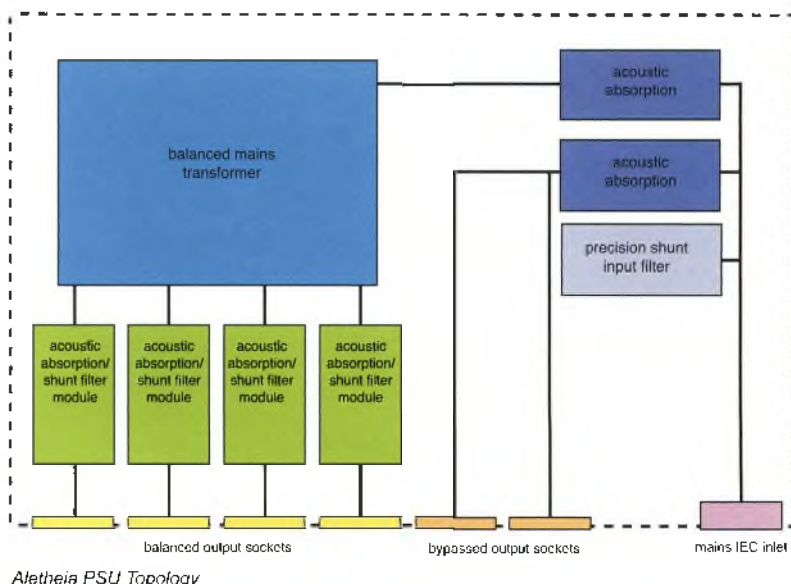
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

The Cherry On The Icing On The Cake – The VPI Classic 4 Turntable

By Roy Gregory

The original VPI Classic was a solid-plinth, fixed motor, heavy platter design reduced the essential elements that make up a turntable to the absolute bare essentials. Nothing particularly new in that of course, except that any such conceptual minimalism goes hand in hand with a clear set of priorities. Get those priorities right and your pared down product will fly on gilded wings. Get even one of those priorities out of step and you'll rapidly dilute the supposed benefits of all that mechanical and philosophical distillation. What made the Classic an instant hit, was that its priorities weren't just different to the norm, they really were spot on. In combination with VPI's particular mix of technology and engineering solutions, the results were spectacular – especially given the modest price.

What's in the mix? The thing that sets the Classic apart was its primary concern with speed stability, mandating a close mechanical coupling of motor and platter. Of course, many designers will tell you that the noise from the motor is the root of all evil, but Harry Weisfeld wasn't buying that. He believed that speed stability was the forgotten parameter in record replay, particularly at the bottom end of the market. Investigation revealed just how accurate his supposition was – and the rest is history. The Classic mounts its motor securely to a massive slab of 70mm laminated MDF, topped off with a steel plate. The deep, cast aluminum platter runs on VPI's established inverted ▶



► bearing itself a crucial part in the chain. Because it uses a Teflon thrust pad, that bearing isn't just quiet, it also helps prevent the transmission of noise from the motor into the platter itself. The end result is a motor, joined rigidly to the platter it drives but able to transmit energy only through the soft interfaces of the belt and bearing thrust pad. Listen to the Classic and you quickly realize just how right the essential proposition is. Speed stability and musical authority are unprecedented for the price, while noise floor and dynamic range are equally impressive. Not bad for a budget deck – which naturally means that things can only get better...

The Classic 2 adds the full-on, all-singing, all dancing JMW 10.5" tonearm, complete with VTA adjustment on the fly, lifting record replay by another substantial notch. But it's the Classic 3 that gets really serious. A revised plinth uses 50mm of MDF, laminated with an 1/8th of an inch of steel and a 1/2" machined aluminium top-plate. The peripheral rim-clamp (which can be placed over OR under the record – if you don't want to use it) and HRX record weight add even more flywheel effect as well as making warped records a thing of the past, while the arm is treated to a substantial mounting plate, making it adjustable on the fly but still rigid once you lock in the setting. Used with the SDS external power supply and matching HRX pulley, VPI have created a monster – one that demolishes competition at many times its price, as well as decimating VPI's own extended family of more expensive 'tables. My TNT 6 is gathering dust in storage since the Classics turned up. But the 3 is not the last word, and there's one more spectacular trick in this particular tale. Roll out the Classic 4, the final proof of this particular pudding.

The Classic 'tables are essentially relying on the massive platter and close-coupled drive system to deliver the required speed stability, while the sheer mass of their damped plinth dissipates unwanted mechanical energy from the motor and bearing. If that's the case – and it certainly explains why the Classic 3, with its more sophisticated and effective sandwich construction sounds so much better than the 1 – then more plinth should be better again. That's exactly what you get with the Classic 4: the same motor and platter/clamp/bearing set-



up, but coupled to an extended plinth that is 3.5 inches wider and 4.5 inches deeper, capable of accepting not just a 12" tonearm in the primary position, but a second arm too. But the really interesting question is just how much difference that 33% increase in the size of the plinth makes. The answer is – a lot!

Okay, so you can't eliminate the arm from the comparison – unless you mount the 3's arm on the 4 – but that's not going to impact on the two key areas that concern us here: noise floor and dynamic range. Listen to the 4 and there's no escaping the extra sense of life, energy and immediacy it brings to recordings. Whether it's the solid thwack of the drums underpinning Elvis Costello's 'Little Triggers' or the extra shape and motion, the pluck and release of the bass guitar notes, there's simply more attitude and intent in the playing. It's a better band, playing a better song and you can really hear that they've nailed it. The poise, the almost hesitations in the rhythm, are much more explicit, much more effective, elevating the track from the good to the truly great. The fragility and angst in the lyric are more apparent and as a result the whole thing makes much more sense, musically a whole that is far greater than the sum of its parts. That's what the 4 brings to the party and it's no little thing...

What you are hearing here is the product of clearer separation of the instruments and clearer definition of the relationship between them. It's all about placement, in time ►



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► and space. The Classic 4 is simply letting you hear that much more clearly what the players are doing and exactly when they are doing it. The when is down to the speed stability and that's what defines the internal chemistry within the band – but the what comes from the lower noise floor and more positive dynamic definition of the 4 and it's that that adds the expressive power to the piece, adding the emotional flesh to the musical bones. The fact that you can hear that slight delay before the bass note, the pause before the drum pattern is what gives the track shape, accent and impact. This is what hi-fi is all about – cutting right to the core of the performance. It's not about the detail as such, but the sense the player makes of that detail, and in this regard the Classic 4 is a whole step up from both the 3 and most other 'tables I've used.

Of course, the 12" JMW also has its part to play, with its natural sense of ebb and flow, its stability and expansive soundstage, all characteristics of the reduced tracking error. But these are niceties that build on the foundation provided by the 4's substantial plinth. Mounting the Triplanar on the second armboard proves the point, that arm's articulation and rhythmic agility benefitting just as obviously from the super stable environment.

The fully loaded VPI Classic 4, paired with the JMW 12.7 is a versatile and incredibly communicative and engaging performer. In terms of sheer musical bang for your buck I'm not sure it need fear any competition, and certainly not at its price. Like any 'table, it's a mechanical device and precision set-

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Belt drive, solid-plinth record player

Platter: High-mass, cast aluminium

Main Bearing: Inverted with Teflon thrust pad

Speed Adjustment: Electronic via separate SDS power supply

Tonearm: JMW 12.7

Effective Length: 308mm

Armwands: Interchangeable without adjusting azimuth or VTF

VTA/SRA: Vernier scale, adjustable while playing

Prices: £7,950 Classic 4 with JMW 12.7

£9,850 Classic 4 with JMW 12.7 & 10.4

£1,340 SDS power supply/110v motor kit

UK Distributor: Renaissance Audio

Tel: +44 131 555 3922

Website: www.renaissanceaudio.co.uk

up will reap major dividends. The beauty of the 4 is just how clearly it lets you hear those benefits – which is exactly where we're going next time. What do you use as a support, as coupling and to optimise set-up and replay? Just how far can you take the Classic 4? With a second arm, two clamp options, a motor and power supply upgrade and more, the answer is surprisingly very far. The Classic 4 is the deck that grows with your vinyl maturity and few decks that offer this kind of versatile platform for replay have anything like the Classic's ease of use... and even fewer offer such benefits on the right side of £10,000.

But perhaps the best bit of all for a real turntable enthusiast is that many of the lessons learned on the VPI Classic will apply equally to every other deck; let the tweaking (I mean fine tuning) begin... +



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW



Crystal Cable Absolute Dream (Part Two)

By Alan Sircom

In the first episode of this tale of Extreme Wire, we looked at the impact just one Absolute Dream cable can have on a system. While the cable in question (USB) can be taken out of context, *Hi-Fi+* has always espoused the importance of using the same cable family throughout, and Absolute Dream is head of the Crystal Cable family.

The basic layout of the cable is common throughout the Absolute Dream family, although there is a slight difference in construction between the USB and Firewire cables and the rest of the line; to recap, it's an all-monocrystal design, with each

conductor being made from a central solid core of silver with layers of Kapton and PEEK dielectric, with a braid formed of a mix of silver-plated copper and gold-plated silver, which is then wrapped in a translucent outer sleeve. These conductors are then further woven together before being terminated using very high quality connectors, and each cable comes with its own jewel-like ID lozenge. It's easy to mistake this identifier as some kind of damping device or even a special network (in the manner of MIT or Transparent Audio), but the reality is it's just there for show and to give each cable a serial number.

Crystal Cable knows the secret of elegant brand management. Like all Crystal products, these are sold in some of the most refined packaging you'll see in audio today. The Absolute Dream is boxed as if it were a Tiffany necklace rather than an audio cable. While there will always be those who resent such packaging on principle, if you are buying into something this luxurious, a bit of 'luxury in all aspects is to be expected.

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"Impressive to look at, glorious to listen to, the Premier belongs among the handful of the best turntables ever made, regardless of price. That it is priced not all that far above several manufacturers' entry-level models is almost too good to be true." *The Absolute Sound* (review of original Premier)



Turntables: Cello • **Premier II** • Premier III • Diamond • Laufwerk • Laufwerk II • Laufwerk Slate

Tonearms: Classic II 10 • **Classic II 12** • Cantus 9 • Cantus 12 • Tacco II 9 • Tacco II 12

Cartridges: MC Scheu S • MC Scheu Kupfer • MC Scheu Ruby 3

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► Deluxe packaging aside, what Absolute Dream represents is the ultimate expression of a team that has the resources (both financial and scientific) and the engineering skills required to design a cable as uncompromising as this. Absolute Dream is not the kind of thing you could summon up from an engineer's cable catalogue, and it's not some microwave transmitter cable retasked for hi-fi use. It's the current pinnacle of years and years of R&D from both Siltech and Crystal Cable (husband and wife team, remember), in a product design without compromise. It's punishingly expensive to make, equally punishingly expensive to own and isn't the kind of product line that will disappear overnight or change with the seasons. This is a substantial investment and one that will be at the top of the cable tree for some time.

Crystal suggests 100 hours of burn in prior to serious listening, and also suggests the direction of the cables is not initially 'fixed', but fixes over time as signal is passed. Perhaps the two are related. Either way, it's academic in this case – the cables are so expensive, just one set were available for UK reviewers and these have been passed from reviewer to reviewer, and mine came pre-conditioned. So if there is a change in performance in the early hours of listening, they came and went long before I got the Absolute Dream. I tried using them both ways, and didn't hear much in the way of directionality, however.

When appropriately partnered, the two main (and immediate) presenting characteristics of Absolute Dream are consistency and presence. Consistency in

that the basic Absolute Dream performance parameters that applied as much to the USB as it does to the interconnects, speaker cables and even power cords. Second is that presence. It's a feeling of complete control over the sound; not overblown or stilted or even creating the wrong-sized imagery. Just, that it gets things as they should be sounding. It's uncanny; it doesn't 'pretty up' the music played, but it just seems to bring the best out of even the worst albums – 'Take Five' by the Sachal Studios Orchestra is a fantastic concept (a Pakistani orchestra, complete with sitar and tabla performing jazz standards), but the sound can be a bit 'toppy'; the Absolute Dream doesn't smooth over that brightness, just makes it more acceptable. It also produces images wide and clear of the boxes should the recording call for that. It's just not about the recording taking place, but also the performance that justified the need for a recording in the first place.

Wannabe musicians wanting to learn a piece of music by ear would love the way Absolute Dream handles music for them; not only does it separate out the individual lines of the mix like your speakers had become monitors, but it also lays open the phrasing of the musicians in a way that's usually obscured ►

► by the rest of the system. This applies no matter how sparse the recording: even the old Elvis at Sun album unveiled insights into Scotty Moore's playing that I've been trying to crack for years. I now know what it is... but it doesn't mean I can play it like Scotty Moore could!

Some cables seem to have a centre of excellence; the other cables follow on from that one great wire. It's here where Absolute Dream stands out, because it's all centres of excellence. Start with an interconnect, you'll feel the urge to add more Absolute Dreams to the power and speaker ends. Start with the speaker cable, and the same happens. Ditto power lead. Even the USB – USB being the one region where cable family ties begin to go a bit dysfunctional – has that ability to make listeners think Crystal Cable Absolute Dream is the all-system choice.

Absolute Dream also has a telephoto effect on the differences in almost all other cables. If you are standing 1m from one person and 6m from another, the latter will look smaller than the former in a photograph taken with a standard lens. If you strap on a long lens and walk back 200m, the two will appear to be standing shoulder to shoulder, despite still standing 5m apart. In the cable world, this means the difference between two 'merely' superb cables become trivial, next to the difference between them and Absolute Dream. This applies universally, too; climbing down from the place where everything in the system costs as much as a Mercedes and to a place where high-end begins, the difference between Absolute Dream and the others is just as large. In fairness, all described above happens when you start experimenting with the big 'O' – Nordost's Odin – but with a different overall presentation. Odin is hyper-detailed and hyper-focused, where Absolute Dream is all about power and image separation. These are two thoroughbreds nose-to-nose at the finish line, and both deserve equal attention if you are looking for the best.



I find the Crystal Cable Absolute Dream a potentially impossible act to follow, and that's not a good place for a reviewer. Having a benchmark set so high that the differences between most (even reasonably 'spendy') cables seem insignificant probably invalidates me from making accurate value judgements about cables at a less breathless price and performance level. For me, the name is entirely apposite; it's an Absolute high-water-mark in a cable reviewer's career and at a price so lofty I can't even afford to Dream about it. As such, the net result of living with Absolute Dream for a while is I probably need to find a new cable guy. Rewiring your whole system with Absolute Dream is so far ahead of the pack, I'm not sure you can find a way back to the 'ordinary' world. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Each conductor: Monocrystal silver core, Kapton and PEEK dielectric, gold-plated silver and silver plated copper monocrystal braid.

CrystalSpeak Absolute Dream loudspeaker cable: £23,220/2m pair

CrystalConnect Absolute Dream interconnect cable: £10,690/1m phono/XLR pair

CrystalPower Absolute Dream power cord: £9,830/1.5m

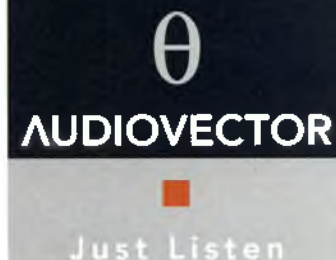
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Nightingale Concentus CTR2

By Paul Messenger

I've heard the Nightingale described as an Italian variation on the panel theme. Like classic panels, it's a dipole design, though it differs from most current models in using conventional moving-coil drive units, and housing them in a package of considerable physical elegance.

The £8,000/pair Nightingale Concentus CTR2 – the full name is important, as others around the globe have also chosen the Nightingale name – is the only loudspeaker in a generous range of audio electronics produced under the Nightingale banner since 1995. Alongside the CTR2 loudspeakers, Nightingale makes an extensive range of valve amplifiers and a number of mains conditioning units.

The elegant shape tapers in gently curving hardwood (walnut) sides to a top that's half the width of the base. The unit sits on an attractively shaped and fluted base which can accommodate spikes and ensures fine physical stability. The only real aesthetic criticism is that the front view is rather large (likewise the black grille), as these are unavoidable consequences of dipole/panel operation. You can leave the grilles off, revealing the attractive hardwood front panels (though the graining doesn't quite match between the pair), but the disposition of the mirror-imaged drivers can look a trifle odd. The floor-coupling arrangements are a trifle primitive: the three-per-speaker spikes should certainly sit properly without rocking, but these pretty chrome finished cones lack lock-nuts and are simply too short when fixed into the recessed underside of the plinth – I ended up using large Michell cones instead.

“Like classic panels, it's a dipole design, though it differs from most current models in using conventional moving coil drive units, and housing them in a package of considerable physical elegance.”



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► What really distinguishes this speaker from the overwhelming majority is that there's no enclosure as such. Instead of attempting to remove or make some use of the out-of-phase signals generated from the rear surfaces of the cones, the CTR2 simply lets them waft out into the room.

This has a number of crucial implications. On the plus side, there is by definition no enclosure here, so there's consequently a complete freedom from most of the boxy effects that plague most other loudspeakers. These will include the internal reflections and standing waves generated by the rearward radiation, and the vibrations created in the enclosure panels themselves, all of which threaten to colour up the sound. The front panel here can introduce some coloration of course, but only from vibrations generated by the drive units themselves, as there are no associated enclosure pressures.

The downside of any attempt to create a full range dipole panel speaker is that it has to be to be relatively wide in order to deliver even quite modest bass extension, because the very lowest audible frequencies (20-50Hz here) inevitably 'wrap around' the width of the enclosure so that the radiations front and back of the bass drivers cancel each other out.

The combination of conventional drive units with panel-mounted operation is not unique, but it is decidedly unusual. Such an approach might lack the super-light self-damping diaphragms found in Quad's electrostatic models, for example, but the use of conventional moving-coil drivers does offer the practical compensation of operating very like a regular loudspeaker.

All four drivers come from Italian brand Clare. Bass is supplied by twin 200mm drive units with 155mm diameter doped paper cones, giving a total cone area roughly equivalent to a single 275mm unit (albeit somewhat modified by mutual coupling). These hand over at around 450Hz to a 135mm midrange driver with a 100mm doped paper cone and a notably large magnet; thence to a 25mm soft fabric dome tweeter with a gentle horn flare. The three-way crossover network is housed within a generous box with spade terminals mounted next to the drivers, and the speaker has two pairs of input terminals.

A dipole speaker essentially radiates sound in a figure-of-eight pattern, so there's little output towards the sides and it should consequently be possible to mount these speakers quite close to side walls without compromising coloration or imaging. However, it is important to space them away from a wall behind, as the rearward radiation from the bass and midrange drivers is out of phase with, and as loud and energetic as that directed towards the front.

Finding the very best spacing between speakers and wall will require experiment in situ, as it's likely to vary from

one location to another. Sited around 1m from the end wall of a room measuring roughly 4.3x2.6x5.5m (wxhxd), the bass rolls off rapidly below 50Hz, simply as a result of the geometry. Furthermore, the overall tonal balance, measured under far-field averaged in-room conditions, is rather uneven. The broad upper bass and lower midband zone from 100- ►



“After extended listening the compensating advantages of dipole operation come through in the fine information, detail and delicacy, especially in the broad bass and midrange regions.”

- ▶ 500Hz lacks about 5dB, though the balance here may be adjusted to a degree through careful positioning, to take best advantage of room interaction. The upper midband (500Hz-1.7kHz) is a prominent plateau, though the broad presence and lower treble (1.8-12kHz) is very depressed, by more than 5dB across the 3-6kHz octave.

That said, the midband sensitivity is a generous 90dB, alongside a load that's very undemanding and easy to drive. Interestingly, it proved possible to smooth the balance significantly with the help of some Mumax room treatment panels. These flattened out a 1.5kHz peak and also improved the 50-300Hz evenness.

There's no avoiding the fundamental unevenness in tonal balance here, which is clearly audible and quite difficult to ignore, initially at least, though one does adjust quite quickly to the resultant perspective shifts. Although this does somewhat compromise the ultimate neutrality, it shouldn't be taken to mean that the Nightingale isn't a very enjoyable musical experience. Indeed, this speaker's freedom from boxiness is also clearly audible and a very worthwhile bonus – and arguably provides at least some justification for its rather hefty pricetag.

The bottom line is that the combination of a recessed presence band alongside a relatively energetic mid-bass inevitably creates a distinctly 'laid back' overall character. This in turn means that the speaker is very easy on the ears and can be played quite loud without any hint of distress or aggression. This is actually rather pleasant, though it does mean that the dynamic expression seems to lack a little vigour, subjectively speaking, and the volume has to be turned up a bit higher than normal in order to comprehend dialogue, for example when watching TV.

In fact both the dynamics and the timing are rather good here, and the imaging also has an attractive spaciousness without significantly sacrificing focus or precision, all three factors which can probably be ascribed to the dipole modus

operandum. The Nightingale trucks along, looking very good and simply delivering all the important goods without any tendency to blur the picture with unwanted boxy effects.

Sometimes one might perhaps wish that it would delve down into the bottom octave, and the fact that it doesn't robs the soundstage of some of the impression of scale one might encounter in the reality of a concert hall. But after extended listening the compensating advantages of dipole operation come through in the fine information, detail and delicacy, especially in the broad bass and midrange regions, characteristics which seem particularly well suited to thermionic amplification.

Physically speaking this loudspeaker looks very attractive, and the lovely woodwork it uses was well appreciated by the lady of the house. And if the front view looks rather large in an era where a narrow front is very much the dominant fashion, it looks very slim indeed from the side, with or without the grilles in place.

Furthermore, and disregarding balance anomalies which are real but surprisingly easy to accommodate, it's only once one gets to hear a genuinely box-less loudspeaker that it's really possible to appreciate the sonic advantages of eliminating the box from the whole equation. Any panel type speaker such as this risks comparison with a number of alternatives based on using more exotic planar drivers of various kinds. This has the benefits of the dipole-panel approach in a far prettier package, and one that is significantly more practical in terms of sensitivity and amplifier loading. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Floorstanding three-way dipole loudspeaker

Drivers: 2x200mm bass; 1x135mm mid; 25mm tweeter

Sensitivity: 90dB (confirmed)

Impedance: 8ohms (confirmed)

Frequency response: 40Hz - >20kHz ±6dB (measured in-room)

Construction: Solid walnut

Size (HxWxD): 103x52x10cm

Weight: 26kg each

Price: £8,000/pair

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Primare DAC 30 digital converter

By Alan Sircom

The up-market DAC market (broadly priced from about £1,500-£3,000, but centred around the £2,000 mark) is getting very contended, and for good reason. It's the point where the designer can work to a set of performance goals, rather than just build down to a price, the point where performance clearly stands above the entry level (in the majority of cases) and yet doesn't skate too far into the sort of high-end circles where sales are restricted as a result. It's the difference between 'expensive' and 'unaffordable'. April Music, Arcam, Ayre, Benchmark, Hegel, Naim and more have dogs in the fight. And now, so does Primare, with the DAC 30. Fortunately for Primare, it joins the fight with a good reach.

A full-sized converter, the DAC 30 uses the skills learned in decades of making high-grade amps and CD players. And that means paying close attention to power supplies, eschewing small switch mode power supplies for linear, but unlike many an audiophile DAC, uses a R-Core transformer instead of a toroidal, because there's a move that suggests R-Cores sound

better, especially when dealing in the digital domain. The transformer has separate windings for digital and analogue stages, which are completely physically separated from one another on different PCBs on opposite sides of the chassis.

The high-current digital power supply features a 48,800µF capacitor bank, the analogue supply has a 74,000µF capacitor bank, the sort of thing that wouldn't seem out of place in an integrated amplifier. Both of these banks are subdivided into combinations of smaller caps, because this lowers equivalent series resistance. Regulation also differs from side to side; digital relies on a Linear Technology LDO 5A chip, while the analogue side uses a two-stage regulation process; pre-regulation using the ubiquitous LM317/337 regulator chips, ▶





► then on to a high-speed discrete regulation circuit, close to the analogue side of the DAC board itself. In short, what a thorough and methodical implementation of feeding juice to all parts of the DAC should be like.

The DAC itself uses the XMOS chipset to control USB to 24 bit/192kHz precision and as this is a Class 2.0 Audio USB operation, so PC users need to load driver software, although current Mac users are fine. XMOS is the asynchronous USB connection of the moment, but that's in part because it's based on a fine implementation. Coaxial, Toslink and AES/EBU inputs are also featured, and whichever input is used, the DAC 30 routes the digital data into an SRC4392 sample rate converter chip to upsample the datastream to 24/192 precision. This means any data jitter is effectively eliminated in the sample conversion process, although notionally it also means any such jitter is effectively 'folded' into the new digital datastream. This is then fed to the Crystal CS4398 DSD DAC (although the DAC 30 does not support DSD), the chip-maker's flagship product and thence to either Primare's OpAmp-based balanced or MOSFET-driven single-ended output stages. This last represents one of the key bonuses of the DAC 30 – most DACs either uprate a single-ended signal to balanced operation, or drop balanced down to single-ended. That Primare includes different output pathways depending on type of operation makes this stand above the rest. Even the mute circuit is relay controlled, which is sound analogue engineering instead of digital jiggery pokery.

All of this ultimately sits in a heavy alloy chassis, of the kind common to all Primare equipment, and the kind that gives the brand its continued reputation among audiophiles. It also comes with a remote control, which can control the basic operation of the DAC. Because it can connect to a NAS drive via USB, perhaps a better option would be to provide some limited control over drive units connected to the DAC, in the manner of something like a Naim or Bryston, but the controls

“This last represents one of the key bonuses of the DAC 30 – most DACs either uprate a single-ended signal to balanced operation, or drop balanced down to single-ended. That Primare includes different output pathways depending on type of operation makes this stand above the rest.”

on the DAC are relatively basic (power, digital source) and the remote is intended for controlling a Primare system.

The company takes a reasonably pragmatic view of running in; the DAC 30 gets a lot better after one day, then better still after three or four days... and that seems to match how the DAC 30 warms up in reality. It sounds pretty good out of the box, but over the course of a weekend, it beds in nicely and sounds stable from there on in. This is greatly beneficial for those seeking weekend-long loans, as there's no 6,000 hour conditioning period.

It's similarly pragmatic when it comes to cables. If you want to spend a fortune on cables, go for it, but the DAC 30 doesn't need too much in the way of outlay to sound fine. Yes, using the likes of Crystal Absolute Dream can be easily heard, but it's not a DAC that cries out for good cabling. But ►



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"But for me the real star of the Show was the revised Raidho C1.1 bookshelf loudspeaker. There are subtle changes between this model and its C1.0 predecessor, but it took about a nanosecond to realise you were in the presence of greatness, even given the lofty company and its over-achieving predecessor. *Alan Sircom's CES 2012 Show report issue 86 Hi-fi Plus*

"the C1.1's were simply sensational" .."had these two-way stand-mount speakers fallen within my purview, I would have nominated them for Best Sound of Show" *Jonathan Valin from Absolute Sound at CES 2012. Who has since awarded the C1.1 The Absolute Sound's Golden Ear award*

“If its installation is pragmatic, the sound quality is anything but. There’s an almost immediate sense of grace and charm to the music, and that is quickly coupled to a powerful sense of deep, well-rounded bass.”

► don’t mistake that for being somehow not a high-end device; this is a DAC that benefits from being in some very exalted company. It’s just one of those rare things in high-end; an unfussy product.

If its installation is pragmatic, the sound quality is anything but. There’s an almost immediate sense of grace and charm to the music, and that is quickly coupled to a powerful sense of deep, well-rounded bass. This is perhaps best demonstrated by playing *Kashmir* by Led Zeppelin (Japanese CD box set, stored both on WAV through a Naim UnitiServe and ALAC from the USB output of a Mac). Bonzo’s drumming takes on a mighty roar in both cases, and yet this doesn’t undermine the sweep of Robert Plant’s vocals, set apart from the instruments that can so easily dominate the mix. Move to some early motets by Dufay (O, Gemma Lux, on Harmonia Mundi) and the purity of the voices have an almost atavistic influence on the listener, especially as the baritones are firmly rooted in place.

However, the DAC 30 doesn’t suffer musical fools gladly. Signal compression and data reduction are now a function of the modern musical landscape, but the Primare is no fan of either. I’m of the opinion that the bit rate of a data reduced file can be an arbiter of ultimate quality – a reasonably unresolving system cannot parse the difference between a lossless file and a 128kbps MP3 version of the same track, where more refined systems make such differences all too clear. If that is the case, the DAC 30 is a first-class converter because it lays those differences bare; iTunes seems to have a habit of rewriting the CD-derived ALAC version of the Avett Brothers *I and Love and You* album with the 256kbps AAC version I bought through the online service, and you could hear the difference easily, if you listened to the change in the reverb tails.

The DAC 30 also has a limit to how much signal compression you can get away with. It still makes a fair fist of whatever you put in front of the converter, but chart material

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Analogue outputs: 1 pair Stereo XLR and 1 pair RCA both 4.3Vrms

Digital outputs: 1 x SPDIF (RCA)

Inputs: USB-B, 3 x SPDIF (RCA) 3 x optical (TOS-link), 1 x AES/EBU (XLR)

D/A converter: Crystal DSD DAC CS4398

Output impedance: RCA 100Ohm; XLR 110Ohm

Power consumption: Standby 0.5W, Idle 50W, Operation 60W

Dimensions: 430 x 370 x 95 mm

Weight: 8.5kg

Colour options: Black or Titanium

Price: £2,000

Manufactured by: Primare

URL: www.primare.net

Distributed by: Karma-AV

URL: www.karma-av.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1423 358846

with a couple of decibels of dynamic range does end up sounding thin, flat and loud. Fortunately, it seems the musical world is finally pulling back from the loudness war, and the great battles for dynamic range are hopefully behind us. And if more people had digital converters this good, we would have never even had a loudness fist-fight.

It’s hard not to think of the DAC 30 in context of all the other converters at the price. It has a difficult task; to stand out, without being so different as to limit appeal. And it does just that, thanks to its grace and poise... and bass. I don’t think there is one winner at this point, just converters that are right for individual listeners. The Arcam is clean and detailed and has its sights firmly set on the highest possible resolution, possibly more than is needed from a two-grand DAC. The April Music Eximus is all about expanse and midrange. The Naim DAC is all about temporal precision and the Ayre’s leading edge accuracy all make their cases well. The Primare has the grace and the bass. For myself, I’m finding this to be perhaps the best balance of the lot.

Amid a lot of exceptional DACs at the price, the Primare DAC 30 is an exceptional DAC. The bass energy and depth, the refinement, the precision of the converter makes it a perfect addition to the pantheon of upmarket converters. This one’s a real keeper. +



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"Frankly ? These are the best speaker cables I've ever heard."
Tellurium Q Graphite review - HiFi World, March 2012



"Undeniably expensive it may be, but it is still cheap at the price, simply because musical performance like this was almost unattainable at any price before it arrived."
Avalon Time review - Hifi+, Issue 71



How Low Can You Go?

The Icon Audio Stereo 20PP Integrated Amplifier

By Roy Gregory

Icon Audio's Stereo 60 amplifier, a high-powered valve integrated designed in the UK and made in China reviewed recently, left me mightily impressed. I noticed on its price list that the company also offers a model dubbed the Stereo 20PP. If the first thing that caught my eye was the name, the next was definitely the price – £499.99. Dig a little deeper and I quickly discovered that Icon's entry level amp hasn't just adopted the moniker of its illustrious Leak forebear, it uses pretty much the same valve complement and even cites the original as its inspiration. Depending on your point of view that's either brave or foolish, aiming high or borderline sacrilegious...

It was also way too tempting to resist, especially given my affection for the original Leak Stereo 20, an amp I always preferred to the more highly touted Quad 11. In fact, only the much rarer and more expensive Radford STA15 comes close, but that's another story. The real question is, how much of the original model's impressive DNA has Icon managed to retain, especially given the astonishingly low price?

The large cardboard carton containing the amp duly arrived and sparked not a few misgivings; it seemed unfeasibly lightweight if this pretender was to get anywhere near the musical grunt and authority of the Leak. However, opening the box

revealed a thick cocoon of foam surrounding a compact and remarkably dense unit, buried right in its centre. Things were definitely starting to look up. Closer inspection revealed further reasons for optimism. The Stereo 20PP* retains more than just the valve line-up from the original. As well as the single output pairs of EL84s and the small but solid chassis, the internals are entirely hard wired. The GZ34 rectifier has gone, replaced by a solid-state device (a victim of cost constraint I suspect) but instead you get passive switching for three line-level inputs, volume control and a tape input. There's also an earth post in case you want to use a record player (you'll need a standalone phono-stage) and ▶



The secret to make your cartridge perform at the same level as one costing between 3 to 70 times as much



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Vinyl enthusiasts would find themselves in an unexpected journey when they try an Origin Live arm.

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Such claims seem wild, but the strange thing is that owners of Origin Live arms, are so impressed by the improvements over established references, that they go on later to upgrade to arms higher in the range and are just as delighted.

To find out why these claims are not so wild, please read www.tonearm.co.uk

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new website <<



At long last! Hi-Fi Plus has rebooted its website.

The new Hi-Fi Plus website is the go-to URL for all the best the magazine has to offer and more, including news, reviews, features, show reports, all the latest music, and even some unique made-for-the-net features too.



- ▶ a headphone socket on the front panel – all of which make the Stereo 20PP a far more practical proposition than the vintage power amp from which it's descended. Given just how many bedrooms it will find itself in, the headphone socket is an inspired addition.

The practicality goes farther than just the facilities; the tubes employed are all affordable and readily available (although experience suggests that if you want to get as far as tube rolling a £500 amp, the quality of the ECC82/12AU7 driver valve has a significant impact on the overall sound of the amp) while the price also includes a Perspex valve cage. Speakers are connected via five-way binding posts (one pair per channel, suitable for speakers in the 4 to 8 Ohm range) whilst my only real complaint was that the RCA sockets used don't seem to allow full insertion of the plugs. They still make a connection, but slightly more positive mating would be reassuring.

Similar logic suggests that the natural habitat for the Stereo 20PP would be sandwiched between a CD player (or lap-top/

iPod) and a pair of small bookshelf speakers. But, given the leak's propensity for punching way, way above its weight, I had no compunction about starting the Icon experience by connecting it between the Wadia 861SE and the focal Stellas! There's nothing like asking a lot of a product to find out what it's really made of – and in this case it was a challenge the Stereo 20PP rose to with gusto. I'm not sure quite what I was expecting but it certainly wasn't the sure-footed, confident musical substance and authority that this diminutive amp delivered. This went way beyond astonishment and well into silly grin territory.

Playing small-scale female vocal tracks – Taken By Trees – the Stereo 20PP displayed a winning, tactile intimacy, while larger scale works such as the Ivan Fischer Mahler 4 were handled with surprising aplomb. Okay, you had to watch the levels on the really big orchestral tuttis, but what really impressed was the dynamic coherence and rhythmic integrity of the presentation, the way the amp kept hold of the shape and sense of the performance.

It's ability to get a grip on the pace, scale and density of proceedings was underlined by tracks like Lloyd Cole's 'Forest Fire' with its hitch kick changes of ▶

Icon Audio also produces a Stereo 20SE but it is an entirely different animal. Running a single KT88 per side in single-ended mode, it does incorporate valve rectification (via a WE275) a swankier chassis and a price-tag that's twice the size of the 20PP's.



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► pace and undulating rhythmic foundation, its sparse opening and the intensity of its finale. The little Icon puts in a real singalong performance, full of energy and musical enthusiasm.

Let's not get too carried away. Judged by the sort of standards that pertain to these elevated partners and their performance expectations it's not hard to put your finger on the Stereo 20PP's shortcomings: stereo spread is broad and reasonably deep, but focus and transparency are lacking; drums have really good attack and leading edge location, but they do lack a little of the substance and impact that come with bigger, more capable amps, perhaps related to; the overall character of the amp which has a slightly hollow tonality across the broad mid, robbing singers of chest and orchestral instruments of some colour and identity, making tonal separation less obvious. In some ways it's a bit like Audrey Hepburn in the Ascot scene from *My Fair Lady*; astonishingly convincing until it gets carried away, when the rough edges bubble to the surface. It might not actually scream "shift yer arse" but you get the idea...

So the Stereo 20PP isn't even close to perfect. But then, at £500 it has no earthly right to be. What it is, is far more capable and musically accomplished than you have any right to expect, a quality that stands it in good stead once it starts mixing in more realistic company. Run with a pair of Focal 807V stand-mounts – the kind of two-way loudspeakers that frequently used to grace so many budget systems – and either a basic CD or iPod source, the results were remarkably engaging, even invigorating. The overall musical integrity of the little Icon amp gelled perfectly with the rhythmic coherence and enthusiastic dynamics of the 807V, delivering music with a real sense of get up and go when required, but surprising delicacy and intimacy too. Tonally, the two were a good match, the slightly rounded top and bottom and lean middle of the Icon smoothing over any aberrations in the 807's balance without impeding the sense of musical integrity or flow. Overall the bass might be described as enthusiastic (a step the right side of loose) but it was coherent enough, with enough momentum to make the speakers sing, even in a smallish room. Revisiting my student days, The Cure's *A Forest* had all the familiar hypnotic rhythmic pulse that I remember so well, while the attitude and attack of Talking Heads were all present and correct as well. Asked to do more than it can, the Stereo 20PP will simply gloss over the wider demands and give you what it's good at: It keeps the music interesting and entertaining – which is exactly what it should do.

Add to that the fact that the headphone socket runs straight off the output transformers and you've got one hell of a headphone amp in your hands. It's a modern trend that delivers results and recognizes a reality in which headphone listening is becoming more not less important. Used with a pair of upmarket Sennheisers, the results were exceptional, bringing welcome body and substance to the sound, as well as a greater than normal sense of space. Okay, so the combination isn't going to give Stax any sleepless nights, but it definitely delivers the musical goods.

The Icon Audio Stereo 20PP is an astonishingly capable and entertaining amplifier. It would make a perfect first amp – and a perfect second amp too, meaning that once you can afford something bigger and better, it will happily sit

“What it is, is far more capable and musically accomplished than you have any right to expect, a quality that stands it in good stead once it starts mixing in more realistic company.”

in the wings, playing substitute until you need that second system. A worthy inheritor of the Leak Stereo 20's mantle, it definitely lives up to the legend. Sure, the original is probably still better, but it is also more expensive, less practical and a lot less available. The new 20PP is just what we need – a lot of music when, where and how we want it, at a price people can actually afford. You could easily spend a lot more than this and end up with a lot less; budget esoterica in the real sense, the Icon Audio Stereo 20PP can be warmly recommended. It's the sort of amp that will stay in the family for years – just like its namesake in fact. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Integrated valve amp

Valve Complement: 1x 12AU7/ECC82, 2x 12AX7/ECC83, 4x EL34

Inputs: 3x line-level RCA, 1x tape RCA

Outputs: 1pr 5-way binding posts/ch 1x ¼" headphone jack

Rated Output: 15 Watts/ch into 8 Ohms

Dimensions (WxHxD): 270 x 160 x 256mm

Weight: 9.5kg

Finish: Black

Price: £499.99

Manufacturer: Icon Audio

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Atacama Elite Eco Rack

By Chris Thomas

Bamboo is one of the buzzwords in the world of audio racks at the moment. In the never-ending search for new and interesting materials bamboo is receiving much attention. But, as Dennis Greenaway of Atacama explained to me, there are several reasons why it is such an attractive proposition. First and foremost is of course its suitability for audio equipment because of its rigidity, favourable density and consistency. He explained that the hardwoods that are available these days are usually supplied from harvested trees that can vary wildly in all of these properties. Most come from

rain forests too and Atacama have a responsible attitude to the environment and feel uncomfortable using up these valuable resources. Chinese Bamboo on the other hand has the required properties as, when you harvest a bamboo tree some way up the trunk, it immediately starts to grow again at its previous formidable rate. Couple this with its high CO₂ absorption and you have a Carbon neutral material.

Classified as a grass the oak-sized bamboo trunk used industrially is in fact a huge hollow tube. These are split in half lengthways before being flattened to make planks and then resin-bonded together under great pressure, cut and formed into the four-legged shelves that form the Eco range. At the present time these are available in three different heights (125mm, 175mm and 225mm) and are stacked level by level (up to five) upon a base unit that is distinguished by very short (30mm) legs. Spikes provide the base footings so wooden floors will require protectors. Each subsequent level sits neatly within a cone and cup arrangement but Atacama have wisely decided to hard couple these through the entire height of the structure with steel rods that link each interface. In this way the spikes at the base have the continuous connection through to the top shelf that is desirable for the resonance-control that, in many ways, is about coupling.

The shelves themselves are big both width and depth-wise with wide legs and it must be said will dwarf many smaller audio components though very few will be too large to be accommodated within it, except perhaps for some really big power amplifiers or those that generate huge amounts of heat. In these cases I would say that a freestanding Eco base might well be an ideal solution. The overall width of the rack is a substantial 660mm while the gap between the front legs is 485mm. Perhaps we might see a smaller, more compact version in the future. It would be well worth it I think for those who want to take advantage of the Bamboo isolation but have smaller electronics. Weight also, should not be a problem, as each shelf will handle up to 30kg. The flat fronted shelves curve back into a semi-circular shape and have an open-sided cable management hole at the rear.





► Atacama can also supply a wider version of the Elite Eco for AV use or a hybrid version for audio use that features these Carbonised Bamboo shelves mounted on a metal frame and called the Eris Eco. The all bamboo Elite remains the best sounding though.

Listening to racks is never a straightforward proposition. As with all audio, the variability of components etc. mean that the reviewer gets a snapshot of the possibilities. There is also the type of surface they sit on to be considered. I have a hard wood floor mounted on suspended floorboards.

Once in place, the Atacama rack offers an immensely stable platform and I was able to try it with both budget and high-end equipment. The solidity of build is reflected in the sound with very firm and solidly placed soundstages. Whatever equipment I tried, source or amplification, had a warmer balance than I was used to. The sound of a system will always be dictated to some degree by the surface the components sit on. Without the tonal lift of glass or the energy sapping properties that I hear from acrylic, the bamboo seems to flesh out the balance of the music, offering bite sized chunks of colour richness while, at the same time, dragging tempos back slightly from the pushing nature of a thick, solid glass shelf. Bass is full and rounded with an impressive weight to it. Now all this can be a positive bonus to some cheaper equipment as it certainly adds more than a little strength, presence and colour to the sound. With high-end equipment it can slightly over egg the pudding. My David Berning set-up felt as though it needed leaning back a bit and I might well have been looking to roll another Telefunken tube in there to replace the single RCA that I rely upon to add tonal refinement, except I happened

to have some Stillpoints Mini Ultras, on bases to hand. What a great combination this turned out to be. The recipe of adding a dash of Stillpoints to the Elite Eco's main course really brought things to life. Now I had the leaner speed and articulation I like alongside the body and tonal shading that the Atacama has. It was a Eureka moment so to speak and still a very reasonable monetary proposition.

As a stand alone level-by-level support system, the Elite Eco is very good. Incorporate some Stillpoints Mini Ultras and you have something quite special. A rack that makes a serious contribution to the sound of your system and that is precisely what an audio support should do. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Free-standing multi tiered audio rack

Material: Carbonised bamboo, steel coupled through cone and cup.

Sizes available: 30mm base – 125mm-175mm-225mm shelf units

Weight limit: 30kg per shelf

Finishes: Natural Bamboo, Light or dark Oak (+£80 on a 4 shelf rack inc base)

Price: £639.96 – standard bamboo.

Manufacturer: Atacama Audio, Leicester, UK.

Tel: 01455 283251

URL: www.atacama-audio.co.uk



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Classic Album Living Room at Vintage



Classic Album Living Room at Vintage is a new concept in vintage record stores. The store is located in the heart of the city and is a must-visit for any music lover. The store is filled with a wide range of vintage records, from the 1950s to the 1990s. The store is also a great place to find vintage equipment, such as turntables, amplifiers, and speakers. The store is run by a team of experts who are passionate about music and vintage equipment. They are happy to help you find the perfect record or piece of equipment for your collection. The store is open from 10am to 6pm, seven days a week. So, if you're looking for a great place to find vintage records and equipment, Classic Album Living Room at Vintage is the place to go.



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Kaiser Kawaerl Vivace loudspeaker



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

ASR Emitter II Exclusive integrated amplifier



The ASR Emitter II Exclusive integrated amplifier is a high-quality, high-performance amplifier. It is designed to provide a wide range of sound, from the deepest bass to the highest treble. The amplifier is built with high-quality components, including a high-quality power supply and a high-quality output stage. The amplifier is also designed to be easy to use, with a simple front panel and a clear instruction manual. The amplifier is a great choice for anyone looking for a high-quality, high-performance amplifier. It is a great choice for anyone looking for a high-quality, high-performance amplifier.

The Kaiser Kawaerl Vivace loudspeaker is a high-quality, high-performance loudspeaker. It is designed to provide a wide range of sound, from the deepest bass to the highest treble. The loudspeaker is built with high-quality components, including a high-quality power supply and a high-quality output stage. The loudspeaker is also designed to be easy to use, with a simple front panel and a clear instruction manual. The loudspeaker is a great choice for anyone looking for a high-quality, high-performance loudspeaker. It is a great choice for anyone looking for a high-quality, high-performance loudspeaker.

The ASR Emitter II Exclusive integrated amplifier is a high-quality, high-performance amplifier. It is designed to provide a wide range of sound, from the deepest bass to the highest treble. The amplifier is built with high-quality components, including a high-quality power supply and a high-quality output stage. The amplifier is also designed to be easy to use, with a simple front panel and a clear instruction manual. The amplifier is a great choice for anyone looking for a high-quality, high-performance amplifier. It is a great choice for anyone looking for a high-quality, high-performance amplifier.

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Oppo BDP-105EU Universal/Blu-ray player & DAC

By Chris Martens

Over recent years, Oppo Digital has followed a simple recipe for success: just build universal disc players that offer greater versatility, more audiophile-friendly features, and better all around sound and picture quality than your competitors, and then sell them for sensible prices. Naturally, this laudable goal is a lot easier to describe on paper than it is to achieve out in the real world, but Oppo has made good on its promises, year after year and player after player, in the process earning a reputation as the nearly automatic “go-to” source for players that will satisfy discerning music (and movie) lovers on a budget.

Historically, many of Oppo’s most popular players have sold for around £499—a relatively modest price point where Oppo has traditionally been a value-for-money leader. But never a company to rest on its laurels, however, Oppo has recently announced the BDP-105EU (£1,199)—a player that promises to do everything its predecessor should do and then some.

The BDP-105EU can handle virtually any format of audio or video disc you’d care to throw at it, including Blu-ray Video, Blu-ray 3D, DVD-Video, DVD-Audio, SACD, CD, HDCD, and more. But with the BDP-105EU the universality theme doesn’t end with disc playback because the new player is also designed to serve both as a network-streaming player and as a multi-input high resolution DAC (complete with asynchronous USB DAC functionality). Video mavens might also want to note that the BDP-105EU is capable of serving as a powerful, inline video processing engine/scaler for use with various outboard video source components.

To really “get” what the BDP-105EU is about, think of it not so much as an powerful multi-format disc player per se (although it is that and more),

but rather as a multi-function digital media playback hub whose bag of trick includes, but is in no way limited to, disc playback. In practical terms, this means the BDP-105EU neatly resolves debates about whether it is better to listen to discs, to stream content from the Internet, or to enjoying audio files stored on computers, because it can quite happily enable you to do all of the above.

The BDP-105EU comes housed in an all-new steel chassis said to be significantly more rigid than the chassis used in previous Oppo players, and it benefits from a fan-less architecture, meaning all internal components are convection cooled (most previous Oppos required fan-cooling). Do such seemingly small detail changes like a more rigid chassis or a fan-free design make for meaningful sonic improvements? My opinion (based on extensive comparisons ►



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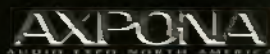
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► between the BDP-105EU and its 95EU predecessor), is that they do. Specifically, the new player offers a noticeable more solid and “grounded” sound with quieter backgrounds, improved resolution of low-level transient and textural details, and superior three-dimensionality.

Moving on, the 105EU uses a beefy toroidal power supply and provides both 7.1-channel analogue audio outputs plus two separate sets of stereo analogue outputs (one single-ended and the other fully balanced). Interestingly, the BDP-105EU (like the BDP-95EU) features not one but rather two costly 8-channel ESS Sabre32 Reference DACs, one used to feed the 7.1-channel outputs and the other used exclusively to feed the two sets of stereo outputs. What’s interesting is that ESS’s Sabre32 Reference DACs have seen use in some very expensive components, making it all the more impressive that Oppo fits two of the devices into its sub-£1200 player.

Another new touch is that the BDP-105EU provides a built-in headphone amp that runs straight off one of the player’s ESS Sabre32 Reference DACs. While the headphone amp offer relatively modest output (at least on paper), it has the undeniable benefit of being fed directly from one of the Oppo’s ESS Sabre32 Reference DACs, so that it gives listeners an unusually pure, uncluttered, intimate, and up close perspective on the music (precisely what you would want for monitoring application, for example). I found the Oppo headphone amp had more than enough output to drive moderately sensitive

headphones such as the HiFiMAN HE-400s or PSB M4U1s, though it might not have sufficient “oomph” for some of today’s more power-hungry top-tier ‘phones (for instance, the HiFiMAN HE-6).

While the original BDP-95EU offered a reasonable range of Internet content options and could play digital audio files from USB storage devices or eSATA drives, it was never set up to function as multi-input playback device or as a high-resolution audio DAC (though many 95EU owners certainly wished for these capabilities). The 105EU changes all this by offering a greatly expanded ranges of general-purpose inputs, including two HDMI inputs (one that is faceplate accessible and MHL-compatible) and three USB 2.0 ports (one that is faceplate accessible). Moreover, the 105EU also provides three dedicated DAC inputs: two S/PDIF inputs (one coaxial, one optical), plus one asynchronous USB ►

Atacama



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► input. Finally, to complete the connectivity picture the new player provides both Ethernet and Wi-Fi network connections implemented, respectively, through a rear panel-mounted RJ-45 connector and a handy USB Wi-Fi dongle.

To take full advantage of these network-connection options, the BDP-105EU offers DLNA compatibility, complete with support for DMP (Digital Media Player) and DMR (Digital Media Renderer) protocols. In practice, the means the BDP-105EU can access audio, picture, and video files stored on DLNA-compatible digital media servers (that is, personal computers or network attached storage devices) that share a common network with the Oppo within your home.

Video enthusiasts will want to know that the BDP-105EU sports a powerful Marvell Qdeo Kyoto-G2 video-processing engine that can be used either by the Oppo itself, or by outboard video sources whose signals are routed through the Oppo. The Marvell engine offers picture adjustments (brightness, contrast, hue, saturation, sharpness, noise reduction, color enhancement, and contrast enhancement), provides upscaling to “4K” (that is, 3840 x 2160) resolution, and can convert 2D material for 3D playback (the latter two being features the BDP-95EU did not support).

From this technical overview, you can see that the BDP-105EU is an extraordinarily flexible source component, but for most audiophiles the key question is, and always will be, “How does it sound?” Let’s focus on that question next.

From the outset, the BDP-105EU struck me as being a very high-resolution player—one that made child’s play of digging way down deep within recordings to retrieve small, essential pieces of musical information that helped convey a sense of realism. To hear what I mean, try the track “O Vazio” from the Jim Brock Ensemble as captured on *Jazz Kaleidoscope*—a sampler disc (in HDCD format) from Reference Recordings. Throughout this track the Oppo did a stunning job of rendering the distinctive attack and action of each of the instruments in the ensemble (accordion, bass, drum kit, guitar, trumpet, winds, and other more exotic percussion instruments), giving them a commanding sense of presence with precisely focused placement within a wide, deep,

three-dimensional soundstage. In particular, the105EU showed terrific speed and agility on the leading edges of notes (especially on the drums), rendering them with the sort of surefooted clarity and convincing impact that reminded me of the sound of far more costly players.

But another song from *Jazz Kaleidoscope*, “Jordan” from the Brock/Manakas Ensemble, contains a brief, quiet passage that reveals another important aspect of the BDP-105EU: namely, its impressive ability to maintain focus and resolution even when playing at very low-levels. After the introduction of the song, which lasts about 35 seconds, the music comes to a dramatic pause that eventually is broken by the extremely faint sound of a cymbal (or small gong?) gently introducing the rhythmic pulse that will supply a heartbeat for the rest of the song. At first, the cymbal is heard so softly that its sound barely rises above the noise floor, yet even so the Oppo gets the sound of the instrument right, preserving all the essential elements of attack, timbre, and decay. This uncanny ability to resolve very low-level musical information enables the BDP-105EU to flesh out soundstages in a delightfully coherent and believable three-dimensional way, enabling listeners to here all the little interactions between instruments and the acoustic spaces in which they are ►



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Disc Types: BD-Video, Blu-ray 3D, DVD-Video, DVD-Audio, AVCHD, SACD, CD, HDCD, Kodak Picture CD, CD-R/RW, DVD±R/RW, DVD±R DL, BD-R/RE

BD Profile: BD-ROM Version 2.5 Profile 5

Internal Storage: 1GB

Supported Internet Streaming

Content applications: Netflix, YouTube, Larianback, and Picasa. A BBC iPlayer application is also under development.

Inputs: Two S/PDIF inputs (one coaxial, one optical), three USB 2.0 inputs, two HDMI inputs, three dedicated DAC inputs (one coaxial, one optical, and one asynchronous USB), one Ethernet port (RJ-45), one Wi-Fi port (via USB dongle).

Outputs: One 7.1-channel analogue audio output, two stereo analogue audio outputs (one set balanced via XLRs, one set single-ended via RCA jacks), two digital audio outputs (one coaxial, one optical), two HDMI outputs

Frequency response: (RCA) 20Hz – 20kHz: ± 0.2dB, 20Hz – 96kHz: -1.5dB; (XLR) 20Hz – 20kHz: ±0.3dB, 20Hz – 96kHz: -1.5dB; (Headphone Amp) 20Hz – 20kHz: ± 0.3dB

THD + Noise: <0.0003% (1kHz at 48k/24b, 0dBFS, 20kHz LPF), <0.0017% (1kHz at 44.1k/16b, 0dBFS, 20kHz LPF, <0.01% into 600 Ohms (1kHz at 48k/24b, 0dBFS, 20kHz LPF, Headphone Amplifier)

Headphone Amplifier Output: 17mW @ 600 Ohms, 34mW @ 300 Ohms, 63mW @ 150 Ohms, 77mW @ 120 Ohms, 120mW @ 60 Ohms, 187mW @ 32 Ohms

DAC Resolution: [USB Audio] 2 channels @ 192k/24b PCM, [Coaxial/Optical] 2 channels @ 96k/24b

Dimensions (H x W x D): 12.3x43x31.1cm
Mass: 7.9 kg

Price: £1,199

Distributed by: Oppo BD UK, Ltd.

URL: www.oppo-bluray.co.uk

playing. While the original BDP-95EU did a fine job in this respect, I would say the BDP-105EU sounds better still.

The voicing of the BDP-105EU is generally neutral, with taut, deep, and well-controlled bass, transparent mids, and revealing, extended highs (though this is a player that tends to expose mediocre recording for what they are). Pleasing though the Oppo can be, some might find it a bit lean-sounding or austere compared to some of the more deliberately warm-sounding offerings on the market. If you prefer components that give a voluptuous musical presentation then the Oppo might not be your cup of tea, but if sonic honesty and neutrality are your things you should get on very well with this player indeed.

Let me expand on my voicing comments by pointing out that the BDP-105EU needs a lot of run-in time to sound its best (some say as much as 200 hours or more). As playing time accumulates, sonic traces of leanness and austerity gradually melt away, thus enabling the player to reveal a smoother, more full-bodied, and more forgiving sonic persona.

If you buy the notion that some source components try for a softer, smoother, and thus ostensibly “musical” presentation while others aim for maximum musical information retrieval, then I would say the Oppo falls squarely in the information retrieval camp (as do a great many other high-performance solid-state players). Thus, tonal colors are rendered vividly through the Oppo, but without any exaggeration or oversaturation, so that there is nothing artificially sweetened, enriched, or “glowing” about the 105EU’s sound (you would never mistake it for a typical tube-based player). Instead, the Oppo is one of those rare “what you hear is what you get” sorts of players whose primary mission is to tell you how your discs or digital music files actually sound, which in my book can be a beautiful thing.

As a disc player, the BDP-105EU is more than good enough to show in palpable ways how well recorded SACDs really do sound better than their equivalent CDs (there’s greater smoothness and ease with SACDs, and simply more “there” there, so to speak). But as a DAC, the Oppo really comes into own, sounding much like it does when playing discs, but with subtly heightened levels of tonal saturation and warmth that make the music seem more engaging and intense, yet without seeming overblown in any way.

Are there caveats? Apart from the extensive run-in requirements noted above, I can think of only a few. First, the BDP-105EU is an inherently complex product that—at the end of the day—is simpler to navigate and control use when it is connected to a display screen, which might be off-putting to audio puritans purists. Second, the player’s sound is so unashamedly refined and sophisticated that you may feel inspired (if not compelled) to use top-tier interconnect cables that—no joke—will wind up costing more than the player does. But trust us on this one: the Oppo’s worth it.

If ever a product deserved to be considered the Swiss Army knife of digital media playback, the BDP-105EU is the one. Whether you choose it for multi-format disc playback, for network streaming capabilities, or to use as a DAC at the heart of a computer audio system, the BDP-105EU will consistently serve up levels of sonic refinement and sophistication the belie its modest price. Enthusiastically recommended. +

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Naim Audio Discrete Regulator upgrade

By Alan Sircom

Here's a tough one. How do you describe the sound of a handful of components in power supplies that might be used to power a CD player, a streamer, a preamp or even an integrated amplifier? Fortunately, when it comes to the Naim Discrete Regulator upgrade, there was a lot of time to ponder the subject.

You see, Naim Audio launched this update to the press, the dealers and on its website relatively quietly last year... and all Hell broke loose. Expecting there to be a steady stream of loyal followers seeking shifting from a power supply regulator on a chip to a discrete-component regulator module, the company was taken aback by the torrent. "Please don't review it yet," was the plaintive cry from the company's PR man, "we can't make 'em fast enough!" In fact, such was the demand for the new DR-modded power supplies that there was quickly a waiting list of Morgan proportions, Naim's dealers were doing a brisk trade in new-for-old replacements, and they partied like it was 1985 as a result. Even so, it means there's a waiting list for new power supplies as everyone trades up.

The module is not quite a plug-and-play replacement, and some small amounts of open-case surgery are required to implement the upgrade, so it's no ten-second swap-out. The mod is designed for all HiCap, SuperCap, XPS, 552 PS and 555 PS models, made since the last major industrial design change in 2002. Anyone

buying a new power supply need not trouble themselves; the new regulator circuit is fitted into all five PSU units from mid-2012 onwards – just look for the 'DR' logo on the back panel if in doubt.

Put simply, the DR upgrade is replacing the original LM317 power supply regulator chip with an all-discrete module; a two inch by one inch or so circuit board of surface mount devices, tantalum caps and heatsinks. It looks like the kind of MacGuffin James Bond would either have to extract or plug in somewhere just before the bad guy's secret base exploded. The change is claimed to improve impulse response and lower noise across the board. According to Naim, the development of this new circuit took two years, to ensure it didn't throw the baby out with the bathwater. The small army of Naim modders have been using discrete regulation in their power supplies for some time, but some of these have create a radical change away from the core Naim sound in the process. This might well be great for those modders (what better way of putting your stamp on a hot-rodded product than to fundamentally





► change the sound?), but Naim Audio didn't want to change the sound, just enhance it.

There are in essence two parts to this review; one, how much the DR mods improve the HiCAP. The other, just how much a HiCap improves a SuperNait. This last is almost forgotten, because the rush to add better power supplies to Naim equipment has always been focused on sources and preamps. External PSU upgrades to integrated amps don't get the same coverage (because half the fun of an integrated amp is it's integrated, as in it's all in the one box), but the effect is there, all the same. It gives the already tidy bass of the integrated a touch more snap and precision, it makes vocals stand out slightly better and

it overall gives a more realistic sense of presence. It's there, but it doesn't fundamentally change the basic character of the SuperNait (which is a great thing... if it ain't broke, don't fix it). Ultimately, I'd say if you have a SuperNait, try the HiCap upgrade, but it isn't a game-changer. In some respects though, I preferred the SuperNait un-beefed.

So far, so LM317-equipped HiCap. What about the DR upgrades to that power supply? Interestingly, I found the DR upgrade to be one of those rare and blindingly obvious all-things-to-all-people kind of upgrades. This makes the Naim sound perhaps address some of the criticisms levelled at the brand by its detractors – the imaging, and especially the mid-band transparency are significantly improved, even on a fairly recent SuperNait. However, in the process, it retains all the typically Naim-like traits that Naim's loyal following have loved for years, such as that almost stripped-back temporal precision and sense of musical correctness.

I've always felt in a way Naim's stumbling block was opera – being no big opera lover, that's no big loss for me. However, even philistines can occasionally bask in a well-turned aria, and it always struck me that Naim's ordered, close-knit presentation and almost Big Mono sound was at odds with the sweeping complexity of something musically grandiose. The DR mod addresses this well, making the amplifier more open sounding, but without losing any sense of musical identity in the process. This is only the most obvious aspect of the change; in fact on closer inspection, what it does to Domingo singing Donizetti, it does to Neil Diamond singing, er, Neil Diamond. And all points in between.

Put it this way, the SuperNait +(unmodded) HiCap is more of the same, but the SuperNait +(DR) HiCap is a clear change for the better. It's not going to make the Naim presentation appeal to those of a seriously high-end bent, because in the process the balance that makes Naim appeal to Naim users would probably disappear in the process. But what it does is make that Naim sound more universally appealing without sacrificing what the company is good at doing. Which is perhaps why it's proving so massively popular. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Naim Dual Regulator modification

Price: HiCap (as tested) £425

XPS: £925

SuperCap: £1,295

555 PS: £1,450

552 PS: £1,750

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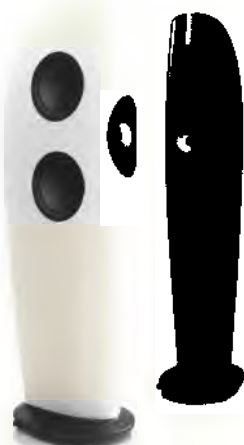
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Inconvenient Audio – the (un)comfort zone

music matters

By Alan Sircom

An odd trend in computer audio started a train of thought that ended in one of those epiphanies that audio reviewers seem to have every 10 days or so. The trend in question is to eschew any form of connected audio system (whether through Ethernet, wifi or USB) and instead run a 'sneakernet' system; you load files from a computer to a USB thumb drive and then control that from an appropriately equipped digital device (such as the Bryston BDP or the Naim DAC). That way, the computer remains entirely divorced from the audio system and "you can get all of the advantages of computer audio with none of the disadvantages."

Except perhaps the biggest advantage of computer audio... convenience. Having your entire music collection available instantaneously and accessible at the swipe of a finger on a touchscreen is, let's face it, a big selling point of computer audio to many people. Indeed, there are many who happily, consciously trade that last degree of fidelity for such immediate access. In fact, when it comes to the advantages of computer audio, convenience is the biggie.

So why then should people consider a sneakernet system to have 'all of the advantages' of computer audio? I think it comes down to the audiophile's secret love of the inconvenient. LP is a prime example of how easily it is to make something difficult. Take a record out of a sleeve, put it on the platter, press 'start' and cue up the stylus. That's oversimplifying the base-line LP playback procedure. Passed through the audiophile filter it becomes turn on the compressors for air bearing, vacuum platter and arm. Wait a few minutes for the pressure to stabilize. Remove record from anti-static sleeve. Navigate way to record player past random boxes between you and record deck, place record on platter, engage vacuum hold-down, place clamp and peripheral ring clamp over record on clamp. Zap with Zerostat gun. Cue up record. Play brief snippet of record before adjusting VTA. Play again, adjusting VTA on the fly, play a third time, navigating past random bits of turntable to return to seat. Adjust at least twice more before hearing end of side. Repeat the process all over again for the B-side. While this might make for the best sound around, it hardly engenders an atmosphere of bonhomie in the home.

Products that have made the process simpler have seldom made great successes in the audiophile domain. It's as if simply playing a piece of music is too easy; we need extra added ju-ju to make the sound better. It's almost as if the inconvenience is a badge of honour; the more time you spend performing processes indirectly involved with music replay, while not actually playing music, the more of an audiophile you are.

Under such conditions, a sneakernet computer audio system is a natural winner. It takes something as potentially easy as playing music

files and makes the process inherently more complicated than it need be.

I'm not denying there is an audio-related element in all this. Every additional step in the vinyl replay chain is there for more than dramatic effect, and there are those who dislike the idea of putting a computer in the audio chain, either on principle, or due to a series of rationales (often to do with EMI and RFI). It may even be that a sneakernet system sounds intrinsically better than any of the computer alternatives. But the point is, if we cling to this inconvenience as a path to better sound, we risk disenfranchising a generation who would never accept that level of inconvenience under any circumstance. Ultimately, if a sneakernet system does sound better, we need to find a way of raising the standards of computer audio, not extract the computer from the computer audio system.

Any navel-gazing about audio these days inevitably descends into 'yoof' discussions; why doesn't anyone under 35 come visit a hi-fi store these days? It's not the whole reason, but a generation or two raised on 'always on' convenience has a low tolerance for making things more difficult than they need to be. So, perhaps traditional audio's failure to reach a younger audience in part comes down to having too close a shave with Occam's Razor.

The crazy thing is that it doesn't need to be this way. There are perfectly fine, convenient, fuss-free products that don't need a route map and a degree in engineering to operate.

Some of them even sound pretty good. +



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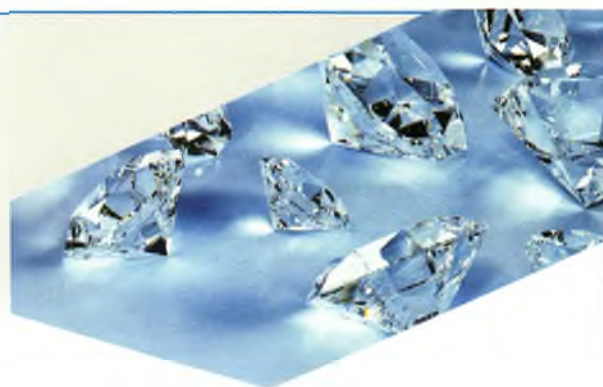
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record reviews

How To Read Them

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DD – Dennis D Davis

SP – Simon Pope

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Waiting On Daylight

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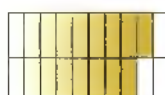
Despite being a Nashville lad, Gibson Guitarist Award winner Bart Walker has impeccable Southern Rock credentials. The second offering from Walker – following up on last year's *Who I Am* – this shows the man is that rare combination of a guitarist who can string together a good story and a fine solo, and yet has a degree of economy in both. No endless widdly-wee solos. No clunky lyrics or even clunkier rhymes.

The band can chunk out a fine rhythm, while Walker is fine guitarist, and not a bad singer, his DNA firmly from the Billy Gibbons musical genepool in both respects. The production respects this, making a swampy – but not necessarily lo-fi – mix. But Jim Gaines has, if anything, even better credentials than Walker here, having been at the faders of classic Santana, George Thorogood and Stevie Ray Vaughan cuts. The mix can get a touch structurally dense, but there's always that dirty great, dirty and great big guitar sound at the core; if it were any greasier, you could fry chips in it.

This is what Ruf records does best – good, no-nonsense rock from first-class talent that doesn't get the coverage it deserves outside of the specialist blues radio stations and magazines. More like this, please! **AS**

RECORDING

MUSIC



Devon Allman

Turquoise

Ruf Records



Atlanta based guitarist Devon Allman is the son of Gregg Allman of The Allman Brothers Band fame. He's played his part in that band's seemingly endless history, as well as a part of the Royal Southern Brotherhood supergroup.

Turquoise is Devon's first solo cut. His blend of blues-tinged rock is confident, polished and very well produced from all angles. Given his roots and current group aspirations, this is more soulful, occasionally funky and rocky. Tracks like 'Don't Set Me Free' are Springsteen than van Zandt.

OK, not all tracks work – 'There's No Time' has a clunky latin beat to it that frankly doesn't work, some of the lyrics on tracks like 'Key Lime Pie' are cringe-worthy ('So Sweet and So Fine/You're my Key Lime Pie') and who opens a number with a saxophone solo in 2013? – but the album is worth owning for 'Yadira's Lullaby' alone. At this point, you can't help but feel he's channelling late uncle Duane playing 'Little Martha' on *Eat A Peach*.

While this doesn't break the nu-AOR template significantly, this is a confident debut from a supremely talented singer and guitarist. He needs to find one style and stick with it, but this is what second albums are for. **AS**

RECORDING

MUSIC





I Am Kloot

Let It All In

Shepherd Moon

CD 180

The Manchester-based trio spent more than a decade plugging away to achieve 'overnight sensation' success with 2010's *Sky At Night*. Produced by Guy Garvey and Craig Potter (of Elbow fame) this wry, bordering on embittered, bluesy song cycle sounds deceptively lovely.

This is a far more sparse, dour sound than the previous cut, more akin to pre-fame I Am Kloot. And in many respects, it's all the better for it. From the opening, bluesy-burlesque 'Bullets' (a fine song about screwing up a relationship) to 'Forgive Me These Reminders' (which sounds like Gilbert O'Sullivan singing a suicide note) you are listening to ten songs of rare brilliance, and equally rare despair. *Let It All In* cements I Am Kloot's position as Manchester's current lead mardy-bastards.

It's a diverse album too, from creepy claustrophobic-close moments to something close to stadium filling orchestral rock moments. The Elbow influence bestows a fine sound quality and this helps make the repeated listening.

It's not surprising I Am Kloot have managed to retain cult status, despite all the Mercury Prize nomination interest of a few years ago. This is a mature album from a sophisticated band that demands attention. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC



The Lumineers

The Lumineers

Duotone/Decca

CD 180

In the wake of the unparalleled success of Mumford & Sons in the US, there's been a spate of Americana releases, perhaps best described as 'fake folk'. The Lumineers are a prime example of this. A New Jersey trio relocated to Denver, the acoustic rootsy sound is proving enormously popular, with chart success, sell-out gigs all over the world and Grammy nominations.

It is also very well recorded; simple acoustic country folk with guitar, drums, cello and vocals. The two male members of the band frequently wear nice little hats. And by mid 2013, you can practically guarantee it will be the sound of every rootsy commercial for everything from banking to tins of chicken soup.

It's like listening to a Waterboys tribute band, but one that isn't allowed to play any Waterboys tracks. Or Arcade Fire, without the fire. 'Slow It Down' being the only real exception; it shows promise missed elsewhere.

Music isn't always about passion and fire. Sometimes you need something more background-y. But this isn't it. This is what happens if you have Bob Dylan designed by a committee of elevator technicians desiring useful music for people to pass the time. But, if you like the idea of folk without actually liking folk, you'll probably love this crap. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC



The Mighty Mojos

Hook, Line and Sinker

Self Published

CD

Belfast-based four piece The Mighty Mojos are a classic blues band, with the accent on slide guitar and a contemporary sound. This, their first album, sports a combination of blues standards ('Come On in My Kitchen') with self-penned numbers ('Devil in Disguise').

The album itself isn't going to set the world alight; four middle aged musicians on the Northern Ireland circuit producing very serviceable blues-rock isn't going to bat Bat For Lashes out of the charts. But even five years ago, the dominance of the Big Labels would push talent like this out of commission simply because the faces don't fit. Now, freed from such control and dominance, a successful touring band like this can not only cut their own CD, but even gain some coverage beyond the local gig scene.

Mostly recorded at Doghouse Studios in Ballymena, the sound is crisp and dynamic. While the guitar parts are uppermost, the fact the studios are owned by guitarist David McClean is not immediately noticeable (as in, it's not a slide guitar with a distant backing band). McClean aside, singer Alan Ward has a particularly powerful growling voice in the Paul Rodgers style, which is high praise indeed. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC



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Bob Dylan

Blood On The Tracks

Columbia/Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2098

Arguably this is Bob Dylan at his peak, with a sense of songwriting that left the impenetrable poetical word play behind on this 'break-up' cathartic album. You can immediately grasp what it means to be tangled up in blue, or to need shelter from the storm than to understand Dylan's earlier word constructions. Recorded in late 1974 at New York's famed A&R Recording Studios where Phil Ramone was the recording engineer at the time, Dylan went with fairly spare acoustic arrangements.

A few months later Dylan had second thoughts about some of the cuts after listening to a test pressing, and redid half the songs at Sound 80 studio in Minneapolis. The album as released includes five tracks from each of the two studios, and the sound of the Sound 80 sessions are muddier and have less depth than those from the more accomplished New York recording sessions. Until now, the best digital version was an expensive and now out of print blu-spec CD (SICP 20041) from Sony Japan. This excellent mastering by Mobile Fidelity's Rob LoVerde and Shawn Britton resolves a little more detail and texture than the blu-spec CD. Mobile Fidelity will be releasing an LP version, so stay tuned. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Duke Ellington and Johnny Hodges

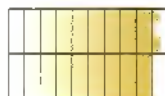
Back To Back

Verve/Analogue Productions MG VS-6055/B0017369-01

This small group (sextet) Ellington session from 1959 features alto saxophone player Hodges, and was successful enough to spawn a successor album *Side By Side*. Both albums have long been collectables with jazz lovers as well as audiophiles, as they combine top-notch music with fabulous sound. The album subtitle "Play The Blues" sums up the feeling of the album, which includes several compositions from self-proclaimed father of the blues W. C. Handy. It has been suggested that the what makes these performances so exciting was the resulting tension between the two stars arising from Hodges often striking off from the Ellington band to make it on his own, but always coming back when that didn't work.

These sessions have sometimes been judged unfairly by comparison to Ellington's entire output, but the music is unbeatable. This new mastering by the late George Marino of Sterling Sound brings out more detail and texture to the instrumental sound than the original. Sterling Sound's reissues of the 1960's material from the MGM period have been dramatically better than the reissues. The improvement here is real but not as dramatic. Still, this is a first class reissue. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



George Benson

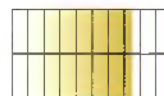
Beyond the Blue Horizon

CTI/Speakers Corner CTI 6009

Why write about a George Benson album on CTI? Much of Benson's later output was crassly commercial, and too often CTI's arrangements were overproduced and reflected the worst of what recording engineer Van Gelder was capable of. But this is one of the exceptional CTI releases, with Benson in one of his very best recorded performances. He plays three of his own compositions as well as covering Miles Davis' *So What?* and Luiz Bonfá's *The Gentle Rain*. The Bonfá cover definitely steals the show, but the album as a whole has no weak spots.

Benson recorded this 1971 session with Jack DeJohnette and Ron Carter, along with a percussion duo and organ backing. This is smooth jazz, but not background music—Benson's lyrical side is on display but he also plays with musicians who pushed his experimental side. Recorded by Rudy Van Gelder, the album had more than adequate sound in its original incarnation. Famed mastering engineer Willem Makkee, who retired from Emil-Berliner Studios, set up a mastering studio in his home rather than really retire. Makkee's fine work is on full display here. This underappreciated gem is an excellent choice for reissue and highly recommended. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC





Larry Young

Into Somethin'

Blue Note/Music Matters 84187

45^{rpm} 180^g

Larry Young represents the progressive wing of Hammond organ playing. Music Matters has now given us another great 45-RPM Young Blue Note album reissue. Young is surrounded by Sam Rivers, Grant Green and Elvin Jones. Young, Green and Jones were a tight group and recorded together often. Sam Rivers, a multi-instrumentalist whose adventurous style led him into free jazz creates a great balance here with Jones and Young, no strangers to free music, and Green, who had no difficulty taking that route. Here, they meet in the middle and create music at once complex and out there, but at the same time grounded enough in bop not to alienate the Blue Note base. The album title is reminiscent of Ornette Coleman's *Something Else* and the resemblance is more than skin deep.

Both albums now seem tame looking back on what was to follow. Young's album is based in swing and groove, which carries along Rivers' more free tone on a platform easily accessible to a broad audience. This is some of Van Gelder's better work and the soundstage, instrumental timbre and balance are all excellent, made even better by Kevin Gray's excellent mastering work. Very highly recommended.. DD

RECORDING

MUSIC



Miles Davis

In A Silent Way

Columbia/Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2088

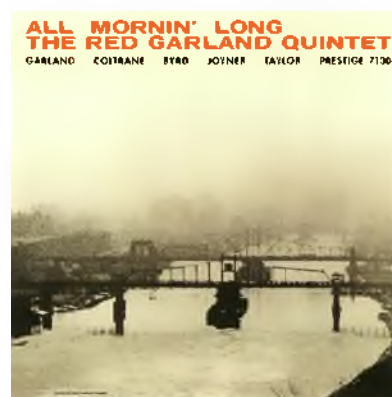
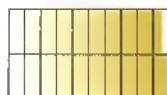
SA

Miles introduced some elements of his electric band in his 1968 band *Miles In The Sky*, but it was with *Silent Way* that he jumped in with the full fusion electric band. Taking his classic quintet minus Ron Carter, he added Dave Holland, Joe Zawinul and John McLaughlin and lit the way for 1970's jazz. Much of jazz-fusion today sounds dated, but *Silent Way* stands with a handful of classics that still sound fresh. I wore many a cassette copy out in car stereos, and have treasured my LP copy for decades. The Mosaic box of the entire session was enlightening but in the end too much of a good thing. Recorded in 1969 at Columbia's famed 30th Street Studio B, the sound is as good as it gets for jazz rock fusion. The instrumental timbres are crystalline and laid out a perfectly.

The complete sessions released by Mosaic on LP and Sony on CD fell sonically short of what I hear on my pristine 1A original pressing. This remarkable new CD version, however, now jumps to the head of the class. Jazz-fusion is the one area where digital versions frequently outclass LP in my view, but I hope to be surprised when the LP version is released by the folks at Mobile Fidelity. DD

RECORDING

MUSIC



Red Garland

All Mornin' Long

Prestige/Analogue Productions 7130

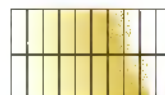
33^{rpm} 200^g

Red Garland's classic session included Coltrane, Donald Byrd, George Joyner and Arthur Taylor. Coltrane had a busy year in 1957, playing famously with the Thelonious Monk Quartet, recording a host of Prestige albums and recording Blue Train, his sole Blue Note release. Garland, like Coltrane, had been part of Miles Davis first classic group and together they recorded some of the truly great jazz albums. *All Mornin' Long* does not reach the level of these albums, but that's hardly a knock on this music. Despite Coltrane's involvement, the real star of the show is Garland, whose block chord method of playing is on full display, and his solos are what make this a stand out recording.

That's not to say that Coltrane and Donald Byrd's fine solos aren't fascinating looks at Byrd's early development and Coltrane's sheets of sound period. It's perfect for Analogue Productions program of bringing us very desirable classics that didn't quite fit into the 45-RPM blockbuster sound program. Kevin Gray's mastering of this title is masterful and compares well with the original. The new 33-RPM series from Analogue Productions has yet to produce anything less than a great version of wonderful music. DD

RECORDING

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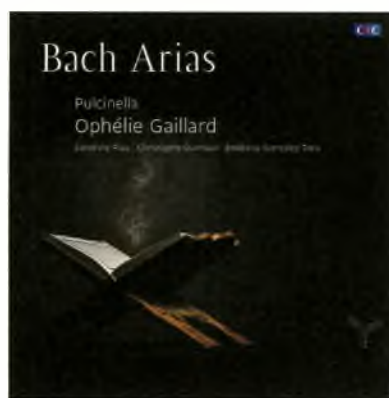
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Bach Arias

Pulcinella: Sandrine Piau (soprano), Christophe Dumaux (alto) Emiliano Gonzalez Toro (tenor), Ophélie Gaillard (cello)

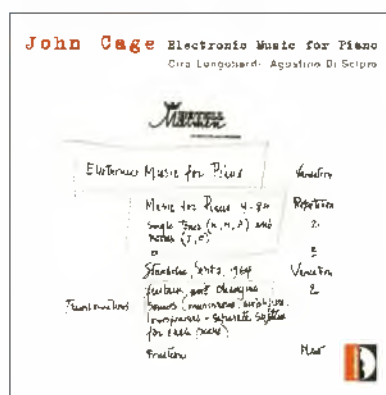
AP045

This disc of JS Bach Arias contains a beautiful melange of his works. The musicians clearly take their own interpretation on the musical directions; 'Choral Schubler' better known as Watchef Auf is a fine example, as the melody in this recording is taken by the sackbut, a most beautiful instrument.

Pulcinella is a group of musicians all who have an understanding of the baroque, from the articulation and phrasing within the tracks. The group centres around cellist Ophélie Gaillard. This Franco-Swiss musician is renowned for her brilliance and risk taking within music. She plays on a Goffriller cello (1737) and a Flemish violoncello piccolo.

Piau sings a diverse range of genres with great ease, and she has been widely recognised across the world. Dumaux has a strong countertenor voice and made his professional debut at the age of 23. Gonzalez Toro is of Chilean descent, however his first performance was in Geneva at an early age. His voice accurately dances around the melody, especially in the long passing phrases which Bach so frequently uses. **PT**

RECORDING
MUSIC



John Cage: Electronic music for piano (1964)

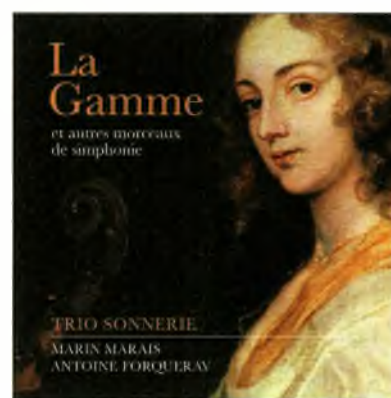
Ciro Longobardi (piano), Augustino Di Scipio (computer, live electronics)

Stradivarius STR33927

Perhaps no other composer has written for the piano with such a phenomenal degree of diversity than John Cage. This disc concentrates on a selection he wrote for piano ("or any number of pianos") and electronics. The pieces are 'free' in so much as duration can be as long as the performer requires dependent on concert length (or the capacity of a disc!) The sound-world created is meditative and tranquil, the combination of sparse piano and electronic effects results in a spacious, timeless sound that has an obvious avant-garde edge but is oddly familiar due to its 'movie soundtrack' qualities. It's less about notes and more about mood and colour.

It's incredibly hard to comment on performance quality as the art of the performance is creating the length and space of each piece to in order to communicate personal interpretation. The sound quality is very good with fine presence, detail and depth. By the nature of the music it's never going to be a chart-topper but it's definitely worth a listen to the musically curious - if only to demonstrate to friends and colleagues how open minded you are. They could well mistake this for pretention, though... **SP**

RECORDING
MUSIC



La Gamme et autres morceaux de symphonie

Trio Sonnerie – Monica Huggett (Baroque Violin), Emilia Benjamin (Viola de gamba) James Johnstone (Harpsichord)

Linn Records CKD 434

French court music is the theme of this SACD from Linn Records. The energy and *joie de vivre* is immediately experienced as Trio Sonnerie begin playing. The group has played extensively throughout the world for the last 30 years and have received awards and made many recordings.

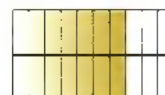
The intensity of the three instruments is emphasised particularly in the opening section of the Sonate a la Maresienne, which has long phrases containing glorious suspensions and beautiful harmonic phrases, which then become dance like in the following section.

Marais, born in Paris in 1656, studied under Jean-Baptiste Lully, and the Lully influences are clear. Marais was appointed to the Royal court of Versailles as a court musician, hence the origin of these beautiful pieces.

Forqueray, was born in 1671 and like Marais was a virtuoso of the viola de gamba, he was appointed to the court of Louis XIV in 1689 at just 18. A long line of Forqueray composers followed in his footsteps.

This album is another classic from the Linn collection and well worth purchasing. **PT**

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MUSIC



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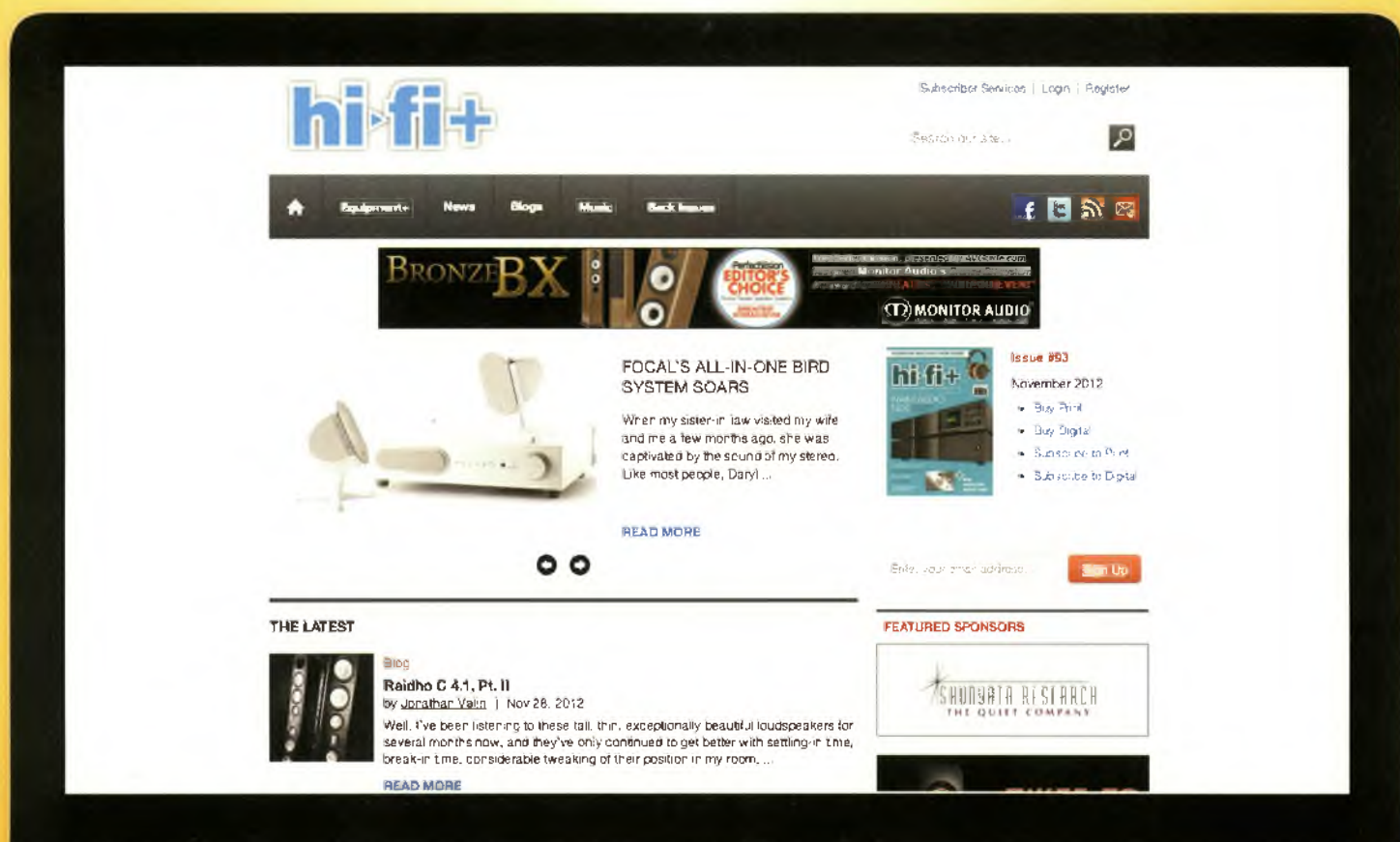
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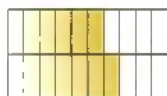
This disc is compiled of two works, K622 (Concerto pour Clarinette et Orchestre) and K581 Quintett avec Clarinette, deux violins, alto et violoncelle en la majeur).

Patrick Messina, is a leading musician, a visiting professor at the RAM and principal soloist at the Orchestre National de France. He has a passion for chamber music. His love of Mozart is clear as he plays the Adagio in the concerto, and his ability to sustain long phrases is remarkable.

The concerto is one of Mozart's last pieces, although he was suffering from many personal issues. This does not come across in the music, especially in the last movement of the concerto, where happiness abounds!

Muti is of Italian origin and in his long and celebrated career has conducted the Salzburg festival and was principal conductor of the London Philharmonia and Music Director of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

This album was recorded in the Theatre of the Champs-Elysees and is well worth purchasing. **PT**

RECORDING
MUSIC

Music for two Organs SA

The Viennese Habsburg
Court of the 17th Century
David Blunden and Johannes Strobl
Bossart Organs of the Abbey
Church of Muri, Switzerland
Audite 92.653

Music for Two Organs is recorded in the Abbey Church of Muri, which was founded as a Benedictine Monastery in the 11th Century. These organs were built in 1743. However, the title of the CD can be misleading as not all tracks are for two organs!

The ambience of the chapel has been well captured by Audite on the SACD. These are fairly small chamber organs of limited stops, but there is enough variation to capture the different sections of the pieces.

There are 18 tracks some of which have choir accompaniment. Two of the tracks are composed by King Leopold I, while the vocal tracks include beautiful Gregorian chant.

Blunden is an Australian born organist, who currently resides in Basel. He has established himself as a performer of international calibre as a soloist and accompanist.

Strobl was born in Austria and is currently the Director of Music in the parish of Muri, Switzerland a role which includes overseeing the important organs of this former Benedictine monastery.

In all, the SACD is a diverse, yet inspiring album to own. **PT**

RECORDING
MUSIC

Shostakovich
– String Quartets

Jerusalem Quartet
Harmonia Mundi – HMG 508392.93

This two CD set features the young musicians of the Jerusalem Quartet, who have won many awards across the globe since their inception in 1993.

The album features 15 quartets for string, and they are a great example of Shostakovich's chamber music.

The simplicity of the opening Quartet, no 1 in C Major lulls you into a false sense of security. However it soon becomes apparent that this is not the case as the 4th Quartet begins! This at first appears to be a very complex piece, with lines weaving and cascading in opposite directions. however upon further listening, it becomes clear that the themes are very simple, using much imitation. At times you would be forgiven for thinking this was Haydn!

The 9th Quartet ends, surprisingly, with a cheerful end yet introduces the earlier themes from the preceding movements. Shostakovich planned to write 24 quartets, one in each key, as he never repeated a key. However, he only managed 15, which in itself is no small feat!

The Jerusalem Quartet tackle this music with great ease. They easily portray the contrast expected by the composer and the listener really experiences the passion these musicians feel for this music. **PT**

RECORDING
MUSIC

Every Home Should Have One Too good to be true?

By Alan Sircom

There's an old adage, "if something's too good to be true, it probably is." In the panicked rush to obtain as many good box sets as possible, one of the prime movers in this new flourish of boxes proved elusive. Back in 2009, Deutsche Grammophon celebrated its eleventy-first birthday by releasing two box sets, labelled '111', the first – a 55 disc retrospective of some of the best of DG's stereo recordings in a bright red box – was quickly sold out and now commands frankly insane prices. When it's cheaper to buy all 55 CDs individually, the pull of the box begins to pall. However, there's always a chance one will turn up...

It's that drive that led me to a supposedly UK site that had copies of this now-rare box set at its original price, with free delivery to boot. An order was placed just before Christmas, but it didn't arrive until New Year. No problems potentially... the Christmas mail order rush can push such delivery times back.

The first oddity was that although the site had UK details and even a UK telephone number, the delivery had come from Shanghai. The second was in contacting the company, email replies came back at about 2am London time.

From the outside at least, the box looked like the original, at least in photos. In fact, the high gloss finish box has little in common with the more understated matt box the original came with (a colleague has the legitimate version). It also doesn't line up properly and the case is relatively easy to damage. The booklet is almost identical, though. So it was hoped this was just some later batch of the 111 box.

Wrong! It's a fake.

The sleeves gave the game away. Poorly printed, on thin paper, some with water stains, some with rips and looking like photocopies of the real deal, it was a pale shadow of the originals. Each one was stored in a plastic inner sleeve too, which wasn't on the original set, although this might be a force for good.

The discs themselves had labels that bore passing resemblance to the real deal, although the logo was a different colour and some of the red ink was leaking onto the plastic sleeves, which is never a good sign. The discs were also inserted in reverse order, but that is a trivial concern. Many of the discs looked scratched, as if they had been fed through a cheap copy hopper.

What's on the discs is the original recordings as suggested. They come with the same metadata as the original files (in most cases, a couple simply fail to include any metadata at all) and the transfers vary from virtually identical to the originals to very poor high-speed copies. One of the worst in my set (so far...) is the disc

of Martha Argerich's versions of Chopin's Etudes from 1977. About half way through the disc, it sounds like every keystroke is accompanied by some distant stick fighting. I'm only about a fifth of the way through the set, but I'd say six of the ones I've played thus far sound fine, three sound as if they might be victims of a bootlegger's CD copier and two are functionally unplayable.

Interesting philosophical and legal asides fall out of this. The philosophical musing is relatively simple on the surface; if you are listening to the real music played on a fake disc, what are you actually listening to? This sounds trivial, but philosophers like Russell, Strawson and Kripke pulled out lengthy academic careers on similar problems about naming and identity.

Legally, however, it puts the listener in a potentially dark place. I bought the music in good faith, but because the discs are fakes, the owners of the copyright do not license the recordings to me, therefore I don't technically have the right to play them. While it seems extremely unlikely anyone duped in this manner would end up being punished for possessing such recordings (not least because how could you ever be traced), the proper course of action is to return the discs, demanding a refund. That is, of course, assuming you recognise the discs as fakes. I hope few would look at this box set and think, "DG was having a bad day with this one!" and then keep the box.

As for me, I have decided to keep the box. Not for the music on it (I'll probably either end up buying the box second hand, buy any discs in the set I don't already have, or even download the FLAC files from the DG website), but both as a future public demonstrator of just how bad fakes can be, and as a salutary lesson in online buying.

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