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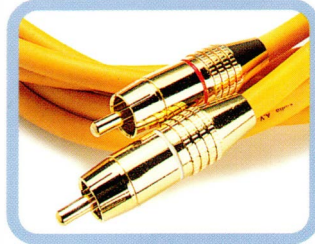
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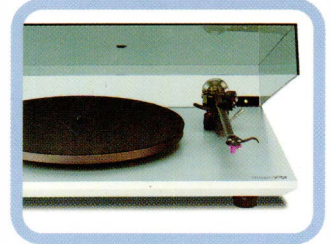
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Alvin Gold prefers serious classical music and has a predilection toward expensive amps and JMLab speakers.

HOW WE TEST THE PRODUCTS

Our reviewing process is the most rigorous in the business. We focus on transparency and resolution, mixing traditional hi-fi values with the latest technological developments via a blend of subjective views and scientific analysis.

BENCH TESTS Our main group test each month concentrates on a key area, with products from across the separates market. The testing consists of three stages: 'blind' listening, hands-on subjective testing and scientific measuring. The latter phase is conducted by our Technical Editor using the QC Suite Functional Testing Station.

GROUP TESTS Each issue features a number of additional tests aimed at narrowing the field in a specific product area. Here the testing involves just the reviewer concerned with no lab or panel testing, but plenty of comparisons.

SOLO REVIEWS As well as group tests we also review single components. In our First Impressions section, you'll find brand-new products that warrant early exposure, while High Performance concentrates on the latest aspirational, high-tech components.

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BEST BUYS are considered to offer an excellent standard of performance at an attractive price.



RECOMMENDED products are first-class components, losing out to Best Buys only because of a higher price or less competitive sound quality.



A third award, **EDITOR'S CHOICE**, is reserved for those products reviewed solo and is awarded where the Editor is convinced that a product offers exceptional quality for the price.

"THE ONLY THING YOU NEED TO REMEMBER WHEN SORTING OUT A GREAT SET-UP IS THAT HI-FI IS MEANT TO BE FUN!"



Phew! I never knew there was so much in it. This year's *Best Buy Guide* seems to be the most jam-packed yet. I haven't dared count all the reviews, but the chances of the number coming in below two hundred are slim. What this means for you is a definitive guide to the best hi-fi components of 2001 – from amps to turntables and everything in between. I appreciate that this won't make the decision-making process any easier so we have given you a few tips on how to pare down the options to an auditionable shortlist in our Best Buys intro spread (page 14). The bottom line is that all the kit in here is good and building an entertaining system couldn't be easier, especially if you enlist the assistance of a good dealer.

It's been a great year for hi-fi, both DVD-A and multichannel SACD have come on-stream with the promise of studio-quality surround sound in the home. Now we have the hardware needed to take advantage of these media, it's up to the record industry to get behind the formats and make them too good to miss.

Two classic formats have also made comebacks this year, the rate of vinyl sales actually outgrew CD for the first time and radio listening likewise increased dramatically at the expense of TV. For a keen user of both this is heartening news, maybe more resources will now be ploughed into radio and more music released on vinyl. DAB (digital radio) also grew to impressive proportions in '01, now 80 per cent of us can pick up the broad selection of stations on the medium. A percentage that doesn't include yours truly, maybe that'll teach me to leave London and live in a Sussex valley!

The highlights of my hi-fi year range from the spectacular multichannel demos presented by Pioneer (DVD-A) and Sony (SACD) to the intensity of playing my favourite recordings on ATC's SCM50 SL active speakers at break-neck volume, well, almost. There's also been lots of good new music hitting the record stores. I've written up my top three in our best of the year round-up (page ten) but there are a few others you should listen out for, including Turin Brakes – *The Optimist LP*, David Thomas and Two Pale Boys – *Surf's Up*, Nils Petter Molvaer – *Recoloured*, Flanger – *Outer Space: Inner Space*.

If you are thinking about getting your first decent music system you've come to the right place, the only thing you need to remember when sorting out a great set-up is that hi-fi is meant to be fun!

Jason Kennedy, Editor

HI-FI CHOICE

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HI-FI CHOICE

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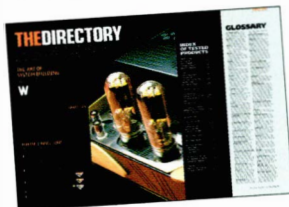
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2001 IN BRIEF

A HI-FI ODYSSEY BROUGHT TO YOU BY TIM BOWERN AND DAN GEORGE.



NEXT GENERATION MUSIC: THE BATTLE INTENSIFIES

NO SIGNS YET OF AN EARLY WINNER IN THE GREAT DVD-A VS SACD CONTEST

The most fascinating hi-fi story of 2001 has been the burgeoning battle between DVD-Audio and SACD – two new high-resolution music formats vying with each other to become the future of recorded music. At the beginning of the year DVD-Audio looked favourite, with its DVD family connections, high definition

surround sound capability and apparent support from major music labels. But it's been a year of twists and turns...

DVD-Audio had a troubled birth in 2000, the first players eventually edging into the shops towards the end of the year. Concerns over copy protection and the potentially damaging effect of Verance anti-piracy technology on sound quality have continued to cause ripples compounded by the less than revelatory quality of some first-generation hardware and software (see *HFC 210* for a technical report).

Spring saw Warner Music giving the first DVD-Audio titles from a major label their official UK launch. It was a motley collection of surround sound remixes stretching from The Doors to The Corrs, and though none of them were particularly spectacular either musically or sonically, a handful were good enough to show the promise of DVD-Audio's Advanced Resolution surround. But since that brief flurry of activity things seem to have gone quiet: BMG (Bertelsmann) is the only other

major to express its support though no titles have yet been announced.

Meanwhile, the SACD camp – or more specifically Sony – has made aggressive moves to increase market penetration and filter the format down to mass-market price points. SACD playback is now available in a combination DVD-Video/SACD player costing just £380 (Sony DVP-NS700) and a complete DVD/amp/speaker system at a mere £600 (Sony DAV-S500).

Importantly, SACD went multichannel this year – all new and forthcoming hardware will be capable of playing both two-channel and surround sound SACD discs, bringing it in line with DVD-Audio's multichannel capability. Most of the 400-plus discs currently available are two-channel only, but the proportion of multichannel titles is set to grow through 2002. Also vital for SACD was the recent announcement that two major labels – EMI and the world's largest, Universal – are set to support the format. It's the first time labels of this size have publicly announced their intention to release SACDs.

The emergence of multichannel SACD players allowed *Hi-Fi Choice* to assemble the world's first group comparison of next-generation, high-resolution music players (*HFC 220*). On the evidence of this, SACD would seem to have a significant sonic advantage. But there's still time for DVD-Audio to bite back in 2002.

One significant development is the imminent arrival of fully 'universal' disc players, able to play both DVD-Audio and SACD music discs along with DVD-Videos and CDs. The first example, Pioneer's £1,000 DV-747A, should be in the shops shortly after Christmas, with a number of imminent Chinese-produced machines allegedly priced as low as £300. The existence of such mutually inclusive hardware could mean that both DVD-Audio and SACD survive, given adequate software support and interest from consumers. But the new formats' survival is by no means a foregone conclusion – some feel that the sonically inferior DVD-Video format has the best chance of co-existing with CD as a mainstream surround sound music format, because of its universality and video-oriented specification. Time will tell...



COPY PROTECTION HITS CD

BUT JURY'S OUT ON THE FORM PROTECTION WILL TAKE

In a bid to eradicate 'ripping' CDs to MP3 files, a number of software companies have produced anti-copy systems which are now employed in millions of CDs being sold in Europe. The systems limit the way in which you can play the CDs, allowing playback in a normal CD player but not in a CD-ROM drive, or in one case, a DVD player. The systems being used vary in flexibility with some offering music companies several options to control the degree of playback on domestic equipment. The anti-copy systems have provoked a number of concerns within the industry over sound quality and the ethics of restricting freedom of use with paid-for music.

ONLINE MUSIC ENTERS NEW PHASE

ONLINE DISTRIBUTION COULD SEE END OF FILE-SWAPPING

In the wake of the infamous Napster saga, the world's biggest music labels are gearing up to launch their own comprehensive online music delivery services. MusicNet, a joint venture between three of the largest – AOL Time Warner, Bertelsmann and EMI, plus online media company RealNetworks – has completed its software development and the launch of subscription services are imminent. Meanwhile, two other music giants – Vivendi Universal and Sony – have set up a rival venture called Pressplay. Subscription services using its software will launch shortly through internet portals Yahoo! and MSN.

These developments come as the music industry attempts to harness the net's potential for direct digital distribution to counteract falling sales of its product – world sales of recorded music were reportedly down 6.7 per cent in units in the first half of this year. Beaming music direct to the home via the net is potentially a highly cost-effective route for music labels, reducing shipping costs with custom software doing the distribution. This method also provides the opportunity for the labels to obtain more information about their customers and therefore target individuals more directly. So, with the big boys finally getting to grips with the net's commercial potential and inherent security issues, it would seem that the days of free file-swapping via services like Napster are well and truly numbered.



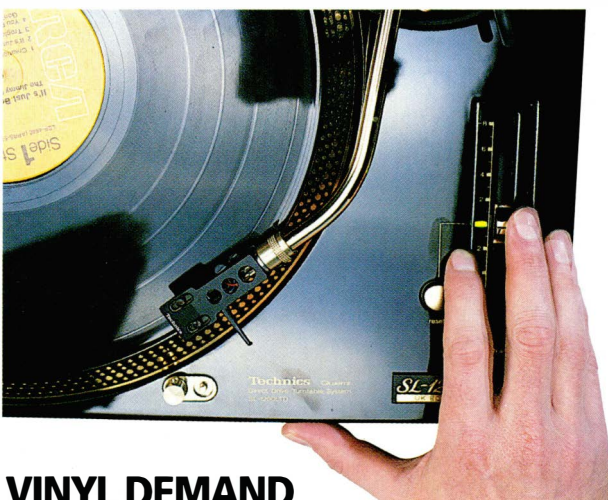
FOR THE RECORD

MORE CHOICE OF DIGITAL RECORDING METHODS

VCR-style DVD recorders became a reality for UK buyers in 2001, with three rival formats pitched head-to-head. Philips launched its DVD+RW format in late summer in the shape of the £1,300 DVDR 1000, swiftly followed by Panasonic's DMR-E20 which instead supports DVD-RAM discs. Pioneer's first DVD-RW based recorder was launched in Japan two years ago, but its new DVR-7000 machine for worldwide consumption is unlikely to hit UK shops before next year.

All of these products are designed to be video recorders – they record in data compressed stereo formats like Dolby Digital 2.0, and can't be used to clone CDs. But audio-only CD recorders continue to gain popularity, with CD-RW decks featured in an increasing variety of pre-packaged systems, not to mention separates – from high-quality single-disc decks to 3-to-1 autochangers.

Recordable CD remains the format of choice for high-quality music recording, but despite the expected threat from MP3-related technologies MiniDisc's future remains bright – at least in Sony's eyes. Sales of its MiniDisc Walkman range allegedly overtook the CD variety this year, and in the portable and mini system markets MD remains popular. What's more, Sony has recently added PC connectivity to its flexible little format's range of talents, making it a cheap, robust and highly portable solution for storage of computer audio files. Add the rumoured introduction of a higher (CD-rivalling) capacity MiniDisc next year and it seems there could be life in the ol' MD yet.



VINYL DEMAND

LPS ARE BACK IN BLACK

As CD sales declined, 2001 saw continued growth in the sale of vinyl records. This follows the increase evident in 2000, when UK LP sales were up 40 per cent on the previous year. Dance music and DJ culture have done much to ensure the continued existence of vinyl as a niche audio product, along with other music fanatics who simply enjoy its aesthetic and sonic qualities. Vinyl is now a premium quality product, with many new pressings in the audiophile-grade 180g variety.

HI-FI IMITATES ART

SPEAKERS THAT LOOK AS GOOD AS THEY SOUND

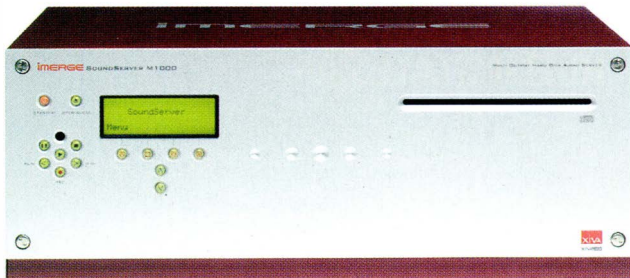
The trend for hi-fi that looks as sexy as it sounds continues apace. O'heocha Designs' latest piece of sonic art took its other-worldly speakers into hi-fi's high end, while the latest designs from Celestion display a real emphasis on aesthetic invention – the desire to create something that looks beautiful and unique. Their AVF-302 floorstander (pictured) is a case in point.

Some of the most successful speakers launched in 2001 aren't just stylish, they're also very, very small. The rise of multichannel surround systems has led demand for compact and discrete loudspeaker solutions, with 'serious' speaker manufacturers like Acoustic Energy, KEF, Mission and Dali getting in on the act, producing sub/sat packages of two or more tiny speakers plus a subwoofer to augment the bass. KEF's little egg-shaped designs have proved popular, and there are surely none more sexy than Blueroom's curvaceous MiniPods, now with a matching subwoofer.

Another way of making speakers discrete is to make them flat. NXT's merry band of licensees continues to swell, with various manufacturers making use of its flat speaker technology. Among the most interesting for home use are Elac's Imago picture panels and the not-so-discrete Cyrus Icon floorstander – touted as the first high-end application of NXT.



2001 IN BRIEF



THE FUTURE'S GETTING HARDER

PC TECHNOLOGY IS CREEPING INTO HOME ENTERTAINMENT

An explosion of digital storage formats in audio/visual entertainment hit us in 2001. Storage technologies previously confined to the 'lean forward' PC environment have made their way to the domain of the sofa, with hard disc technology now a serious proposition for 'lean back' home entertainment.

The first such product to make a splash was the TiVo TV recording and playback system, launched in 2000. A rival system from Sky called Sky + has now come on to the market, and alternative hard disc solutions for video recording have been launched by JVC and Nokia among others.

Importantly for music fans, hard disc audio recorders are now also starting to appear. For portable use, a clutch of hard disc players has emerged; each around the size of a large CD personal with a laptop-style hard drive inside for high-capacity internal storage. Using data reduction algorithms like MP3, these players can store and sort over 1,000 tracks either downloaded from the internet or 'ripped' from your own CDs and transferred to the player via a PC, ready for playback anywhere.

Home-based hard disc music recorders are also set to become big news in 2002. Imerge made a pretty big splash this year with its net-connectable, multi-room compatible SoundServer products, and Linn's high-end hard disc Kivor system looks like a fascinating glimpse of things to come. Yamaha's in on the act too – its imminent CDR-HD1000 allows users to store up to 30 CD's worth of non-data compressed music on its internal hard disc, then edit compilations ready for transfer to CD-R via its built-in drive.



DIGITAL RADIO ROLLS ON

NEW FREQUENCIES TO HANDLE DEMAND FOR DAB BANDWIDTH

Digital Audio Broadcasting has been given a boost over the last year as the continuing program of transmitter rollouts brings DAB coverage to 80 per cent of the population. What's more, we are beginning to see portable DAB devices on the market bringing digital radio to the kitchen and beyond. New machines have been launched from Arcam and Videologic, and newcomer Lektropacks has launched a model under the £200 mark. Videologic plans to release another new tuner by Christmas 2001 for around £150, and the company is working on a portable device. DAB offers a huge number of digital services, and on the commercial multiplex, ten national stations are available in addition to the local stations around the country. With all space on the original DAB bandwidth now allocated, the future of digital radio lies with L-Band, a high-frequency spectrum that broadcasters will use to launch new digital services over the coming years. So, if you're thinking about buying a DAB tuner make sure it supports L-Band – some existing tuners don't.

JUST A GAME?

NEW GAMES CONSOLES OFFER DVD/CD PLAYBACK

Video game consoles continue to converge, with Sony's PS2 finally reaching the UK in quantity this year. Though primarily marketed as a games machine, it doubles as a DVD/CD player with a remote control available separately – complete home entertainment in a box.

PS2's 'next generation' competition will soon be here, with Microsoft's Xbox and Nintendo's GameCube hitting the UK in 2002. Like PS2, Xbox will play movie and music DVDs and CDs as well as games, but GameCube's reliance on a caddy-encased derivative of Panasonic's DVD-RAM technology means no CD/DVD playback as standard. However, Panasonic has paraded an entertainment console based on the GameCube and styled like a micro system at shows and this will most certainly play both CD and DVD.



FEEL THE WIDTH

WIDE BANDWIDTH SPEAKERS GOING MAINSTREAM

With the increasing focus on high-resolution multichannel music, loudspeaker manufacturers are beginning to include wide bandwidth designs in their new ranges. Tannoy in particular is using filtered-down technology from the range-topping Kingdom models and the EISA-winning Dimension range, in its recently launched Eyriss range of speakers that use HF units that extend up to 44kHz. KEF has also got involved in wideband recently. Its new Reference series features a titanium hypertweeter that delivers a flat response to 50kHz, while SACD pioneer Sony produces both high-end and mid-price models which include a supertweeter. Expect to see more wide-bandwidth loudspeakers at realistic prices over the next 12 months.

MP3 MARCHES ON

SEARCH FOR THE NEW MP3

After stirring up a storm in 2000, the MP3 scene drew less attention in 2001. But development has continued, with new storage formats entering the portable player arena alongside solid state memory cards and high-capacity hard drives. One of the more promising is the recordable mini CD developed by Philips, which uses an 8cm diameter disc similar to old-style CD singles. Using MP3 data reduction and a PC, you can downsize ordinary CD tracks or download music from the net and stick them on Philips' cute little critters – they're cheaper and have a higher capacity than memory cards, and they're more portable than full-size discs. Several suitably diminutive mini CD personals are now emerging, including Philips' eXpanium EXP 401 and another from Freecom.

Meanwhile, the queue of potential successors to MP3's crown in the audio data reduction hierarchy is lengthening. The smart money is still on AAC, with its widespread support in both music and consumer electronics industries, and its promise of better sound from smaller files. But MP3 Pro may give it a run for its money – its creator Thomson claims sound quality equal to standard MP3 but files take up half the space, so you can fit double the music on your memory card.



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And that's just for starters.

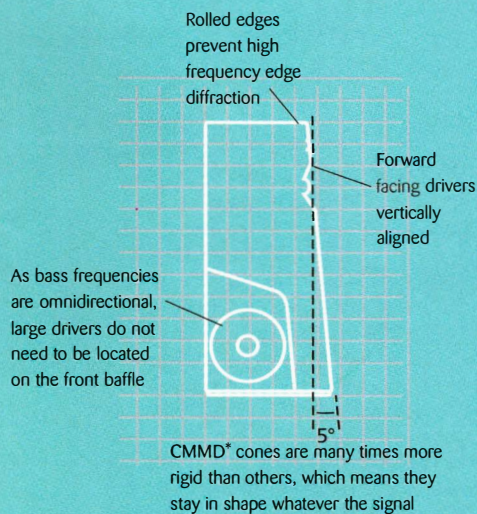
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* CMMD - Ceramic Metal Matrix Diaphragm

MUSIC OF THE YEAR

LEST WE FORGET, THE POINT OF HAVING EXCELLENT HI-FI IS TO LISTEN TO EXCELLENT MUSIC. THE MEN IN THE KNOW ARE OUR REVIEWERS AND HERE THEY PICK THE VERY BEST OF LAST YEAR'S CROP.

Fila Brazillia

Brazilification
Kudos records CD



Fila Brazillia are responsible for chilling out a nation of post-clubbers, tokers and ambient groovers. This double album is a reworking of contemporary music including Radiohead,

the Orb and Simple Minds amongst others. Many of the featured artists were Fila fans and approached the band to re-mix their songs, most notably Radiohead for *Climbing Up Walls*. Lamb's *Cottonwool* on disc two is a top chill-out tune, and listen out for the Phosphorous track *Asthma*, especially if your system does low frequencies well and you've got the deep bass disease.

Dan George

Marcus Miller

M2
3 Deuces CD



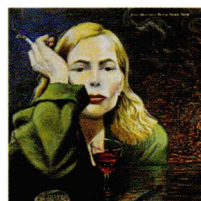
Few musicians know how to nail a *sound* quite as solidly as Marcus Miller. It isn't just the way he plays bass, the great man is a producer of equal stature and, in my experience, has never turned out a dud.

If you've an ounce of funk in your soul, M2 will connect musically. And if you ever wondered just how well you system does bass articulation, transient speed and leading-edge definition, this will tell you truthfully. All right, maybe there's a bit too much technical virtuosity and, yes, it is a bit jazz-lite. Marcus Miller, however, is a force of nature.

David Vivian

Joni Mitchell **DVD-A**

Both Sides Now
Reprise CD



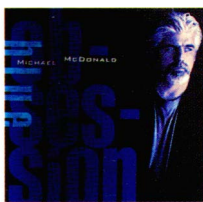
Best songwriter of the past 20 years? Joni Mitchell. Best album? *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*. There was just no way I could leave this out of the year's best. Some have complained

that Joni's voice is a little smokier of late and that her range has gone west. Fair comment, but it honestly doesn't matter. Better than ever are the natural jazz phrasing (Diane Krall eat your heart out) and the extraordinary emotional depth. *A Case Of You*, the only Mitchell composition here gets the same lush orchestral treatment as the covers of old standards that fill up the rest of the 52 minutes. Exquisite.

David Vivian

Michael McDonald

Blue Obsession
Sanctuary CD



What a voice. The ex-Doobies trooper may be known as ol' cotton mouth (with reference to his rather muffled vocal delivery) but the soul oozes like cream from an éclair.

This is all new and newish material, ranging from straight lovey-dovey (*The Meaning Of Love*) to mid-tempo funk (*No Love To Be Found*) to blue-eyed soul (*All I Need*). Sound quality overall is a tad disappointing, lacking sparkle and dynamics, though a notable exception is *Ain't That Peculiar* – but the music is so beautifully crafted and effortlessly soulful/funky, you're unlikely to be disappointed.

David Vivian

Mozart **SACD**

Sinfonia Concertante (E-flat Major)
Christopher Eschenbach, NDR-



Sinfonie-orchester
Sony
stereo/multi-channel

2001 was the year that SACD came of age, with the first multichannel recordings and the first of serious musical intent, including the incomparable *Sinfonia Concertante* in which Midori is accompanied by Nobuko Imai. Following Mozart's instructions, the viola uses *scordatura* tuning, in which the strings are tuned up a semitone, giving more brilliance and better projection. The 5.1 channel mix is spacious and open, gathering scale and involvement.

Alvin Gold

Schoenberg

Piano Concerto Opus 42, Three Pieces Opus 11



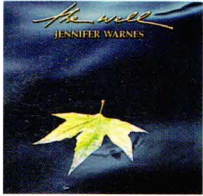
Pierre Boulez (cond), Mitsuko Uchida (pno)
Philips CD

The Piano Concerto from 1942 is the main work here and looks forward to a time when war would be over. The other works are small, highly concentrated short pieces in the serial idiom, most of them exquisitely constructed, some sounding like vignettes rather than complete compositions in their own right. First rate performances are matched to top class sound, but be warned – this disc is not for those whose definition of music begins and ends with a hummable tune or a dance rhythm.

Alvin Gold

Jennifer Warnes

The Well
Warner CD



Female vocal recordings are an essential part of the hi-fi reviewer's toolkit, and Jennifer Warnes is one of the best, with a fine, penetrating voice, and a record of using superbly

constructed, usually quite simple, open backings. Like previous Warnes albums, this one is full of variety, with colourful accompaniments, and the ability to conjure up a real, if dryish, acoustic. The musical language doesn't veer too much from the path of soft C&W, with some forays into Celtic. Not her most inspired album, but Jennifer firing on three cylinders is better than 95% of the rest.

Alvin Gold

Stravinsky

The Rite Of Spring
Valery Gergiev, Kirov Orchestra



Philips CD

With its huge dynamic range and percussional climaxes, Stravinsky's *Rite* is ideal for those wishing to test hi-fi systems to destruction. Gergiev's new account,

recorded using Jaap de Jong tube electronics, is a performance of sledgehammer brutality and power. The recording is awesome, successfully conveying the vast scale of the forces involved while at the same time allowing lots of subtle inner detail to be heard. Bass drum bangs have enormous speaker-shattering power that will tax all but the finest systems. Don't say you weren't warned...

Jimmy Hughes

Schubert

String Quintet in C, D956
Aurny Quartet, Christian Poltera, cello



Tacet 180g LP, dist Vivante

Completed not long before his early death at 31, Schubert's sublime Quintet is one of those works that makes time

stand still. Profound, yet at the same time simple and open-hearted, it's music as close to perfection as can be. Tacet have recorded in pure tube analogue, using special vintage microphones and what's possibly the only working Telefunken M5 stereo tape recorder left in existence. The sound is beautifully sweet and rich, with excellent tonal depth and a natural focussed clarity difficult to describe in a few words.

Jimmy Hughes

Vivaldi DVD

The Four Seasons
Ottavio Dantone (cond) Accademia



Bizantina ARTS

Yet another *Seasons* – plus the other concertos that make up Op8 – contained on a single DVD that plays for a little under two hours.

There's a conventional CD issue as well, but the DVD offers greater transparency and freshness. Dynamic range is wide, and the DVD offers a broader, more subtly graduated range of tone colours compared to the CD's clear but slightly closed-in sonic presentation. Of course the *Seasons* have been performed to death, but Dantone and the Accademia Bizantina play with commitment, daring, and originality.

Jimmy Hughes

Savourna Stevenson

Celtic Harp
Cooking Vinyl CD



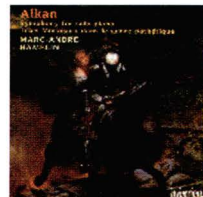
Stevenson's style is more or less folksy throughout, with the most obvious influences being Scottish and Irish, but the end result is pure Stevenson, and it's gorgeous. She has a

good line in haunting melodies and an equally captivating knack for twisting accompaniments, all propelled by the sort of foot-tapping rhythm that distinguishes the best jazz and rock drummers. Having practically reinvented the Celtic harp (with her harp-maker husband) she has truly made it her own, and this invigorating disc is a great introduction to her art.

Richard Black

Alkan

Symphony for Solo Piano and other works. Marc-André Hamelin



Hyperion CD

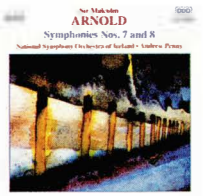
Alkan has a reputation as a composer of fiendishly difficult piano music. A contemporary of Liszt, he had a fantastically inventive mind which led him to write

such apparent oddities as this symphony. Liszt arranged Beethoven's symphonies for solo piano, but Alkan simply started from scratch and although one can easily imagine an orchestra playing some of this marvellously colourful music it was all conceived purely for piano. Hamelin transcends technical considerations and brings out the poetry and beauty of this strange, haunting music. Listen and wonder.

Richard Black

Arnold

Symphonies 7 and 8
Andrew Penny (cond) National



Symphony Orchestra of Ireland Naxos CD

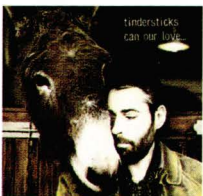
Malcolm Arnold is now one of the UK's senior composers in every sense. Regarded by

many of the avant-garde as hopelessly reactionary, he has continued to write shocking things like tunes you can hum. What's more, he's proved that you can do that and still sound contemporary and individual. These two symphonies nicely encapsulate his slightly gruff style, with plaintive melodies rudely interrupted by brass and percussion outbursts, marches, and Arnold's highly distinctive harmonies.

Richard Black

Tindersticks

Can Our Love... Beggars Banquet CD, LP



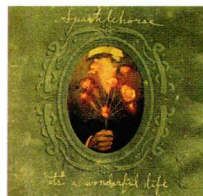
More tobacco-stained paeans to love and loss from England's twilight dreamers, but this time the lush orchestrations of recent albums have been paired back for a more delicate, skeletal

effect. This is heart-pinching music for late night listening, all the better with a bottle of red and a decent hi-fi for company. Push the volume a little and Stuart Staples' sepia croon levitates into the room, accompanied in slow-mo by guitar, violin and drums. Good hi-fi captures the quality of voice and instrumentation, increases the poignancy and ensures it's as uplifting as it is downhearted.

Tim Bower

Sparklehorse

It's a Wonderful Life
Capitol CD



So often in music, the spaces between notes and sounds are more important than the notes themselves. Sparklehorse's Mark Linkous knows this – he weaves his skewed rock

tapestries with equal deference for the power of silence and the mind-bending influence of distortion.

This is an album the caresses your ear then kicks you in the teeth, and the better your system, the more startling the effect. What links it together is Linkous' unerring sense of melody, enriched by cameos from Polly Harvey, Tom Waits and Nina Persson – tuneful, malevolent and magnificent.

Tim Bower

The Strokes

Is This It
Rough Trade CD, LP



Along with White Stripes, The Strokes have been touted as this year's saviours of rock 'n' roll and they do bring a sense of stripped-back energy and visceral bite that's been missing from

much of rock's output for, ooh, eons. They recall The Stooges, early Blondie, even Wire, fusing staccato rhythms and spiky, claustrophobic arrangements with an unmistakable late '70s NYC aesthetic. Sound quality is lo-fi, as befits its urban DIY ethos: a bright hi-fi system will exaggerate its abrasiveness, a more balanced one merely show it for what it is – raw. But utterly infectious.

Tim Bownen

Tool

Lateralus
Music For Nations CD



Guitar-band rock'n'roll might have been pretty moribund in recent years, but *Lateralus* proves it's still alive and able to kick butt. Tool can do the sort of full-on, hard-edged rock

that reminds me of Rage Against The Machine, but the band is much more versatile in its approach to composition, and shows considerable subtlety (for a rock band) in exploring dynamics. Yeah, the musicianship and lyrics can sail a little too close to the pomp/prog reefs for comfort at times, but Tool's bass/drum 'engine room' is one of the best I've heard in years.

Paul Messenger

The Grateful Dead

Ladies and Gentlemen...
(Fillmore East April 1971)



Arista 4xCD set

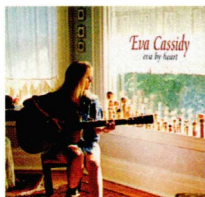
First impressions were worrying. In some ways this five-hour live set sounds more like a bootleg than classic Dead, and you get plenty of warts in

among the jewels – Weir's voice takes at least one disc to get going properly. But the sheer 'liveness' soon takes over – timing is king, and you can't tamper around with it in a raw recording like this. There is plenty to savour, from an era when the band must have been close to its peak. Garcia is magnificent, though Phil Lesh's bass might have been a little stronger in the mix.

Paul Messenger

Eva Cassidy

Eva by Heart
Blix Street Records CD



Eva Cassidy's posthumous stardom is well deserved. She was a true talent as both singer and guitarist, and a fine interpreter across a wide range of material. On one level her only studio album is an easy listening type of CD, beautifully recorded to hi-fi demo disc standards. But Eva brings considerable class and originality to a collection of modern standards that straddle the blues, gospel, folk and soul traditions. Her version of Fleetwood Mac's *Songbird* seems to be most people's favourite, but this is a CD you can just let play, start to finish, without needing to 'skip'.

Paul Messenger

Bugge Wesseltoft

(New Conception of Jazz)
<Moving>



Jazzland LP, CD

The third album from this Norwegian 'jazz' group combines sparse, almost plaintive pieces with unstoppable grooves. Wesseltoft plays Fender Rhodes, grand piano and on one track samples and is aided by a bassist, drummer, percussionist, programmer and DJ to extremely engaging effect. Influences would appear to come from places as diverse as Jan Akkerman, Keith Jarrett and The Cinematic Orchestra. If you like jazz, downbeat or even the more refined elements of dance music this exemplary disc will bring you hours of pleasure.

Jason Kennedy

Missy Elliot

Miss E ...So Addictive
Gold Mind Inc/Elektra CD, LP



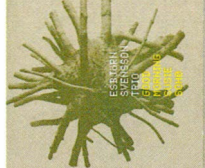
I don't like pop music as a rule but this album was pretty popular and even spawned hit single, *Get Ur Freak On*. Its full of awesome tracks, like *Lick Shots* and *Slap!Slap!Slap!* which

not only shock you with the talents of Elliot and her partner Timbaland but also sound incredible from a pure hi-fi point of view. Musically, you get dynamic, lively and totally fresh beats, samples and vocals from the most talented combo in hip-hop – or is it R'n'B? Who cares, there ain't nothing like it coming out of either camp, so ignore the labels and get addicted.

Jason Kennedy

Esbjörn Svensson Trio (EST)

Good Morning Susie Soho
ACT CD



My second piano-led Scandinavian jazz album comes from Sweden and like Wesseltoft, EST have a contemporary feel with electronic sound sources mixed with the keyboards, drums and bass. The influence once more seems to come from Keith Jarrett but this time there's some Ramsey Lewis mixed in. Insight is provided by the composing talents of Svensson, while drive and variety springing from Dan Berglund's double bass and Magnus Öström's beats. It's already inspired me to pick up their previous recording, *From Gagarin's Point Of View*, and it most likely won't be the last.

Jason Kennedy

Underworld

Everything, Everything
JBO/V2, CD



Electronic soundscapes can work brilliantly in surround – with no natural reference point adding more channels just broadens the creative palette.

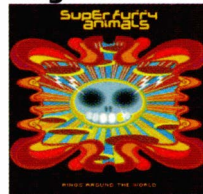
Underworld put a lot of time into this and it shows. The surround mix is unusually sympathetic, and though it's Dolby Digital 5.1 rather than high-resolution DVD-Audio it's involving in the extreme – jack up the volume and it's massive!

Extras: A choice of live footage or an abstract video track to watch with the music, plus two bonus tracks, outtakes and interactive CD-ROM stuff (PC/Mac).

Tim Bownen

Super Furry Animals

Rings Around the World



Epic CD

This DVD-Video goes some way to allaying Furry fans' criticisms that the CD version is not their strongest – being less inventive and more 'poppy' than previously. You get the standard 13-track album plus five extra tracks, all with specially commissioned videos from different directors. Sound definition is a little below CD, but the music works in surround – an absorbing audio/visual experience.

Extras: Five extra tracks with videos, 16 remixes, sci-fi animation sequence with storyboards and original artwork, facts and info, weblinks

Tim Bownen

Original Thinking.



Bose® Acoustimass®

Fender Stratocaster®



Despite many a copy, there is only one 'Strat'. Rory or Eric would surely agree.

Extraordinary products like the Fender Stratocaster® guitar or the Bose® Acoustimass® speaker system defy imitation because their success is built on truly original thinking.

Look-alike speaker systems may be everywhere, but without the unique technologies of 'The Original', they cannot match its superior sound quality. Only Bose® Acoustimass® technology produces rich, full bass from a compact, hideaway module, and Bose® Direct/Reflecting® speaker technology delivers genuine Stereo Everywhere® performance. These patented Bose®-invented technologies remain exclusive to Bose®, and they make the difference.

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Best Buys 2001

Many are called, but few are chosen for the most rigorous and prestigious round-up of quality hi-fi in the UK.

Welcome to the *Hi-Fi Choice* Best Buy Guide 2001. Across the next 70-odd pages you'll find our favourite hi-fi kit from the past year – a veritable treasure trove of great-sounding gear for the most involving musical experience imaginable.

There's something here for anyone who's serious about sound. From vinyl to DVD, two-channel stereo to multichannel surround, if it's hot, you can bet we've tested it. Unlike some other magazines, our focus is musicality and quality of reproduction – we look for kit that captures the character and energy of a musical performance. But if you want to play movies on your system too, that's fine. Our coverage of the latest hi-fi technology reflects its multi-purpose ethos, designed to cater for whichever entertainment media takes your fancy: CDs, DVD-Video music and movies, CD-R, MP3, even new high-resolution formats like DVD-Audio and SACD. In fact, you'll find more of this new music replay technology in *Hi-Fi Choice* than anywhere else, so if you're looking to the future you've come to the right place.

Hints on buying hi-fi

Split for Choice

Choosing between hi-fi components can sometimes seem baffling. You've got to decide which formats you want and try to find the kit that best suits your sonic preferences. Then you've got to make sure your chosen components all work well together! It's no wonder so many people bottle out and choose complete one-make systems instead of taking the mix 'n' match route. But with a little patience and the right advice you can build a separates system that'll keep you hooked for years – you won't regret it!

Know your needs

The first thing to do is decide exactly what you need. Every system needs an amp and speakers, but how many is up to you. A two-channel stereo system needs two speakers and a two-channel amp. However, you may decide you'd rather have a multichannel set-up for surround sound movie soundtracks and new surround music formats like DVD-Audio and SACD. In that case you'll need at least

five speakers and five channels of amplification, but remember that if you want to keep to the two-channel route for now you can always upgrade your system to full surround sound status later.

Then there are those new music formats to consider, and you may need an audio recorder – would the high quality of CD-R suit you best, or the flexibility and portability of MiniDisc?

Spend, spend spend?

Once you've nailed your priorities, set yourself a budget – but don't be surprised if you're tempted to spend more once you've experienced the delights of the high-end. If you really want to be entertained, it's worth spending as much as you can afford. It's difficult to judge whether an accomplished £1,000 player sounds twice as good as a good £500 one, but you're also likely to get better

How to use this guide

This issue of *Hi-Fi Choice* is intended to be a handy one-stop reference guide for anyone interested in discovering the best products on the market today. It's the culmination of a year's worth of the most thorough hi-fi testing in the business – your ultimate guide to sound quality. If you're thinking of buying some hi-fi now or in the future, your short list starts here.

All the products featured have been reviewed in *Hi-Fi Choice* and received one of our Award tags for their exceptional level of performance (see the next page for a description of what these tags mean). Thanks to our rigorous testing methods, you can be confident that these products are among the very best of their ilk.

aesthetics and build – attention to detail that enhances pride of ownership as well as outright performance. It's like asking, "why buy a BMW instead of a Fiesta?" They both get you from A to B, but only one does it in style.

Testing time

Make a shortlist of products that take your fancy, using *Hi-Fi Choice* as a guide. Always pick a few alternatives and make sure you take the time to audition and compare them before taking the plunge, either in a dealer's listening room or, if possible, in your own house. Make sure you try listening at realistic volume levels – hi-fi tends to sound more immediately impressive when it's loud, but is that the way you'll be listening at home? And take a variety of favourite discs with you rather than using the dealer's own selection, which you may not be familiar with.

Ask the experts


Shop around to get a good price, but remember that an apparent bargain is a waste of money if it's not the kit that's right

for you. Independent hi-fi specialists may not always be the most least expensive route, but you'll get more knowledgeable sales staff, better auditioning facilities and strong after-sales service. It's also worth looking out for the BADA logo (British Audio Dealers Association). If a dealer is a member of the BADA network, customers should be assured of a certain level of service and peace of mind in the event of, say, a shop going bankrupt before your equipment has been delivered.

Mix'n'match

There's no black art to system matching – most modern kit will work together fine from an electrical point of view. But be aware of tonal qualities. For example, don't put two bright components together if you want a warm, smooth sort of sound.

Take some care over the amp/speaker interface. Make sure your chosen amp has enough power for the speakers you are planning to use. As a rule the higher the sensitivity (listed in the Directory at the



back of the mag) the easier a speaker is to drive, but for the full story read the original review and lab test. As a general rule you can't have too much power, but speakers aren't indestructible!

Don't forget...

Remember to budget for interconnects and speaker cables when you buy your components. Keep cable runs as short as possible and remember – wires really do make a difference!

Equipment supports are important too. If you're buying small, bookshelf speakers, they'll sound better on purpose-built speaker stands. And properly designed, resonance-defying equipment racks can make a big difference too.

Separate lives

Mini and micro systems can be discrete and cost-effective alternatives to

separates. But well-chosen separates make music sound so much more real – and these days they don't have to be boring black boxes either!

Running in

Like a car engine, new equipment always sounds better when it's had a chance to run in. And it's worth keeping electronic components (CD players, amps and so on) warmed up and ready for action.

Speaking volumes

Speaker position is critical to the sound of your system. If you need to put speakers against a wall, make sure you buy ones that are designed to work that way – re-ported designs will tend to lose control in the bass. Avoid room corners and experi-

ment with angling your speakers inwards to focus the stereo image – some work well this way, others are best when pointing straight at the listener.

Your speakers' tweeter should be roughly at seated ear height. Try to make sure they're at least six to eight feet apart and the distance between your listening position and the speakers is no less than that between the speakers themselves.

Fun

Above all, have fun choosing your hi-fi. When you know you've found the right system it's incredibly rewarding. And remember... it's all about the music!

BEST BUY

HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



RECOMMENDED

HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



EDITOR'S CHOICE

HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



Our award tags

BEST BUY A product that receives a Best Buy Award has achieved an exceptionally strong performance in a *Hi-Fi Choice* group test, and offers particularly good value for money. A Best Buy product can be bought with confidence.

RECOMMENDED Products given a Recommended tag have also performed impressively in a group test of like products, displaying a level of performance that warrants serious consideration. They may not represent the greatest value-for-money, and perhaps their performance isn't for everyone, but their ability deserves commendation none-the-less.

EDITOR'S CHOICE This is a special Award available to products that have not yet taken part in a group test but have been reviewed on their own. It is presented only where the Editor is convinced that a product offers something special in terms of its performance and/or value-for-money.

How we review

When we say our testing methods are the most rigorous in the business, we

mean it. Each month we conduct a large scale Bench Test focussing on a particular product group and featuring all the latest kit. The reviewing process is in three stages: blind listening with a panel of experts, hands-on testing by the main reviewer plus scrupulous measurement in the lab. That way we get a reliable blend of subjective views and scientific analysis.

Our Technical Editor, Paul Miller – the undisputed king of objective testing and technical comment – conducts the measurement phase. He employs the Award-winning QC Suite Functional Testing Station, an apparatus he developed for the purpose and which has become an industry standard for audio measurement. Over the years, he has built up a bank of technical data that is second to none – and *Hi-Fi Choice* is the only hi-fi magazine to benefit from his expertise, so you benefit too. Add to that the years of experience collated by our team of subjective reviewers and you can be sure you're getting the most reliable opinion and advice around.



Amplifiers

Very much the heart of the hi-fi system, the amplifier controls source selection, specifies the volume and delivers the power that drives the speakers. But the variety is huge, so how should you choose?

Most low to mid-priced amps are integrated designs – a preamp and power amp combined in one box. As price increases, separate pre and power amps come into the frame.

The two (or more) box route helps keep the delicate preamp signals clear of possible interference from the heavy electrical currents passing through the power stage and its power supplies. However, pre/power combos aren't necessarily better than integrations – it really is what's under the hood that counts.

It may sound obvious, but make sure the amp you choose has all the facilities you need. Decide whether you want the convenience of remote control and make sure there are sufficient inputs to take all your source components now and in the future. If you use recorders, make sure there are enough in- and outputs to suit your needs and if you think you may want to upgrade with, say, additional power amps or a multi-channel processor then check the necessary sockets are provided.

Turntables need a phono stage. This may be included at

manufacture (usually least expensive), a build-in option, or purchased separately (usually most expensive, but best quality).

Make sure the amplifier and speaker suit each other. If your speakers offer a tricky load or aren't particularly efficient, make sure the amp has enough muscle to handle them properly. Unfortunately power ratings are no indication of quality, though they do give some idea of how loud you can play.

Don't ignore the valve option. Valve amps might not have the power or convenience of solid state equipment, but many enthusiasts won't use anything else. The midband delicacy and transparency of valve equipment is highly seductive, so give yourself at least the chance to get hooked. And above all, buy with your ears and not on the specs, bells or whistles.

Amps may need a week or so to run in, and can take time to warm up properly when you start listening. Keep ventilation holes clear and avoid stacking equipment on top of the amp. And it's best to site (power) amps clear of source components, on a separate shelf of a dedicated hi-fi support if possible.

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ARCAM DiVA A85 £749.90

◆ Stereo integrated amplifier

Arcam's DiVA A85 is new from the ground up. A software-driven model, the remote control switches the seven line inputs and normalises volume levels. Two pairs of speakers and headphones can be connected, and expansion modules will provide future-proofing. The circuit makes extensive use of surface-mount devices, DC coupling throughout and a new topology designed to reduce distortion and noise, and enhance protection.

The A85 doesn't sound like any Arcam amplifier we've tested in the past. The old easy-on-the-ear and sometimes slightly lazy quality has been displaced by a brighter, bolder, leaner sound. This is indeed a class act. I found the Arcam consistently vivid and lively, and in isolation you might never notice its limitations. It remained musical and transparent with all the material thrown at it, irrespective of the speakers chosen.

A clear break with tradition, the DiVA A85 is a leaner, fitter and more modern amplifier than previous Arcams, and although it doesn't always have the easy manners of its predecessors, it is arguably more in tune with the times. A clear, unequivocal Best Buy, not just because it sounds good but also for the features designed to accommodate changes to come, notably multichannel audio.

Arcam ☎ 01223 203200 Reviewed in issue 214



Audio Research LS25 Mk II VT100 Mk III

£5,799.00/£6,400

◆ Stereo pre/power amplifier

Audio Research is, quite simply, the gold standard in American valve amplification. The LS25 Mk II is the latest version of its senior mainstream (non-Reference) preamplifier, and the VT100 Mk III power amp is also in its latest iteration.

The two units can be connected together using single-ended or balanced connections, and the six inputs are duplicated in both forms. The preamplifier has the usual features, and a simple stick-type remote handset.

I'm pleased to report that this is the kind of valve amplifier that I like: the kind that doesn't sound as though it's driven by valves. There's no false romanticism here, no supposedly benign low order harmonic distortion to smooth the sound around the ear.

What you get is a clean, vibrant delivery that is palpable and highly detailed – especially by valve standards. The sense of harmonic and expressive integrity is a definite strength, and associated with many fine valve amps, but the sense of being in command through the whole frequency range is a step or three up. This is not so much a fine valve amp, as a fine amplifier, full stop.

Absolute Sounds ☎ 0208 971 3909

Reviewed in issue 216



Audio Note M2 Phono/P2SE £3,198.00

◆ Stereo pre/power amplifier

Audio Note's £1,499 P2SE power amp comes with its own volume control, so if you only want to use a single source, you only need to buy the power amp. The £1,699 M2 Phono preamp includes a vinyl stage for higher output (MM) cartridges (a straight M2 costs less than £1,000). There's no remote control, and the 'hands on' ergonomics take a bit of practice. Besides the phono stage the preamp has four line inputs and one tape output. The power amp is a single-ended design specified at 18 watts per channel.

Initial listening with the power amp alone was very impressive, with great coherence through the broad midband, and a beautifully judged, warm and rich tonality that sounds superbly natural. It doesn't over-project the presence and top end, but that helps keep the broad midband harmonic relationships natural and in good order. A drawback is that this encourages one to turn up the volume, and then turn it up still further – only to encounter the rather limited loudness/power capability.

Glorious dynamic and temporal coherence with a thoroughly natural and comfortable balance make for an exceptionally enjoyable and involving amplifier, except maybe for those who like their music loud.

Audio Note UK

☎ 01273 220511

Reviewed in issue 216



AVI S2000M

£949.00/£1,399.00

◆ Stereo pre/power (monoblock) amplifiers

AVI's blank fascias and compact dimensions (31x25x9cm) hide some highly refined electronics, but the lack of a proper volume knob is something of an ergonomic inconvenience. The preamplifier has five stereo inputs plus the option of a proper MM/MC, phono stage for an extra £250. The base asking price is £949 for which you get reed relay switching and a motorised volume control. The

monoblock power amps go for £1,399/pair and are rated at 150 watts a channel into eight ohms.

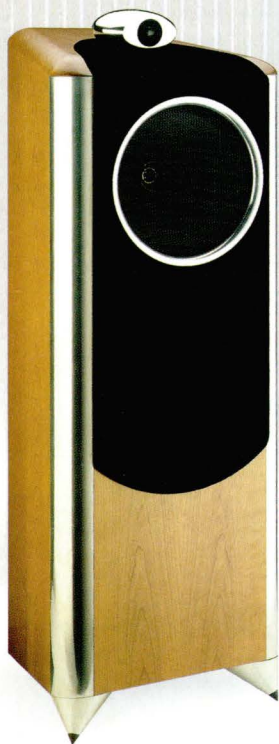
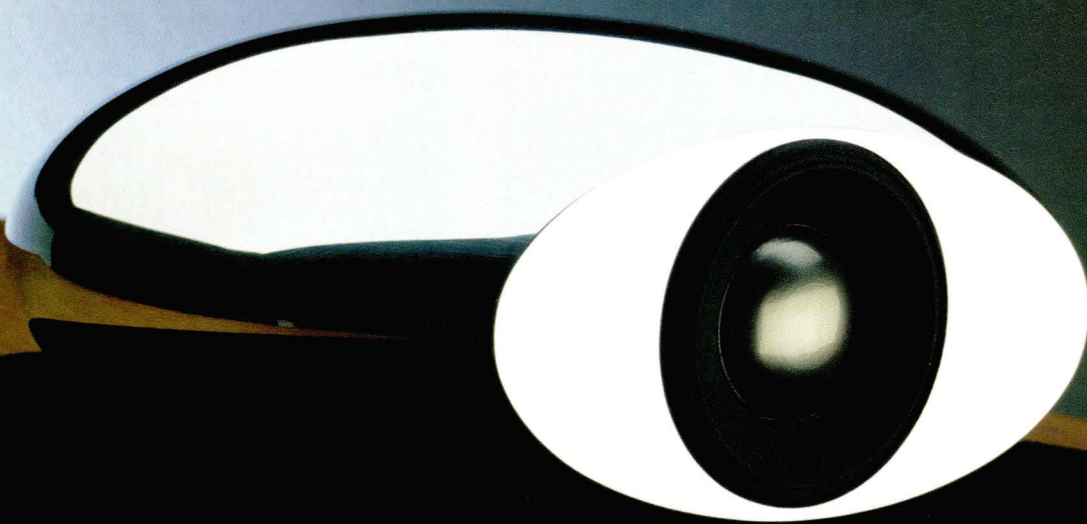
This amplifier was well able to reproduce tonal colour and shade, and could perform with equal ease at low and higher levels, the inherent character not changing with extra demands.

What struck me time and again was their ability to portray three-dimensional space, some recordings allowing the soundstage to expand beyond the boundaries of the room, begging the question, who needs surround sound? They also have a good grip on rhythm, not placing undue emphasis on it but making sure it doesn't get lost. This latest incarnation of the AVI S2000Ms may not look any different to the last, but it's got what it takes to expose the heart of the music – that's what counts.

AVI ☎ 01453 765682 Reviewed in issue 221

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STEREO AMPS



Bryston BP20/3B-ST £2,850.00

◆ Stereo pre/power amplifier

Bryston is one of those manufacturers that straddles the pro/domestic divide with ease. Like any rack-mount kit, the power amp looks a bit industrial, but its modest depth makes it quite lounge-friendly. The preamp is very smart and the controls very businesslike. The 3B-ST is rated at 120 watts per channel, and has unbalanced and balanced inputs. The preamp has eight line inputs (two of them balanced) and three outputs (one balanced) plus tape out. Everything is very solidly constructed, and Bryston offers a 20-year guarantee!

The Bryston siblings combine a very even tonal balance with plenty of detail, from the quietest passages to the loudest. This delivery of detail is so unassuming, however, it's not perceived consciously; instead one suddenly starts humming along with an instrumental line that wasn't even audible with most amplifiers. Also group-leading is the bass, which has effortless depth and copes equally with the quiet heartbeats at the start of *Dark Side Of The Moon* and some of

the more extrovert moments later in the same famous album.

It's hard to identify limitations in these amps. They aren't cheap, but for the performance they offer they aren't expensive either, and can be warmly Recommended for pretty much any demanding application.

PMC Ltd ☎ 08704 441044

Reviewed in issue 212



Creek 5350SE Special Edition £799.00

◆ Stereo integrated amplifier

Creek Audio's 5350SE sports a thick, brushed fascia extrusion, and the turned controls add an impression of luxury previously missing from the range. The controls are limited to listen and record selectors, switching for two pairs of speakers and a headphone socket. Preamp operation is essentially passive, though a remote control handset is provided, and phono and active stages are available. Power output is 85 watts/channel/eight ohms.

The panel clearly had mixed feelings about this amplifier. It was deemed to have a "poorly controlled bass" but was praised for its "clean, clear upper registers". My vote finally came down in favour of an amplifier that clearly does have a rather slow and heavy bass. This gave a balance with well-recorded acoustic material that was akin to listening with a slight loudness contour, and which with rock music could simply sound heavy handed. But the Creek also has a midband and treble of considerable depth and range, with rich and well varied tonal colours, a sense of space around the notes and almost liquid delivery that gave the host system an unusually musical quality. Although the bass can sound muddy and opaque, it has an impressively smooth and airy sound

Creek Audio ☎ 020 8361 4133

Reviewed in issue 214

Creek P43R/2xA43

£1,050.00

◆ Stereo pre/power amplifier

Don't be fooled. The little A43s seen here are wolves in sheep's clothing. They've been set up as monoblock units, capable of putting out a steady 140 watts. The P43 comes in various upgradeable stages of sophistication; ours is a passive unit with additional remote control. Six inputs and separate record and listen selectors are standard across the range.

Perhaps wolves wasn't quite right – the sound certainly won't howl at you or bite you in the ankle, though it can sure pack a punch. The most impressive area of the Creek combo's sound is dynamics, which it positively relishes: intimate moments stay that way, but big climaxes really get fired up without ever becoming frantic or hoarse.

The result is a high degree of listener involvement, which can transcend any minor weaknesses. Yes, there's a touch of 'sheen' on orchestral violins, and occasional deviations from absolute tonal purity. But it's not the sort of character that ever gets in the way. Bass is strong, and treble is clean, clear and remarkably pure, and there's plenty of detail and all that usually implies. This combo is one of the cheapest in a strong group, and still puts in a performance in the top three.

Creek Audio ☎ 0208 361 4133

Reviewed in issue 212



Croft Vitali SC/ Series 5C £2,000.00

◆ Stereo pre/power amplifier

The Vitali SC/Series 5C combo costs £750 for the preamp and £1,250 for the power amp. The Vitali SC includes a vinyl disc input, of the moving magnet variety, but just three line level inputs, which is a bit limited for the modern world. There's no remote either, and volume has to be adjusted separately for each channel. The power amp is rated at 30 watts/channel, and uses classy components like C-core output transformers and paper-in-oil capacitors.

Sonically, the Croft duo seems to strip away veils and deliver an astonishingly tangible presence, with superb voice reproduction, and exceptional stereo focus, transparency and dynamic drama. And if the Croft combo does have some innate 'forwardness', most loudspeakers tend to do the reverse, so the combination should be quite complementary.

The vinyl input also gave splendid results, again with uncanny tangibility and quite superb stereo imaging. Indeed, by adding a little extra warmth and a little less presence, this medium seemed an altogether more comfortable match for the Crofts than CD.

The sheer vividness of the Croft combo's voice rendition brings a real slice of high-end performance to the party, and at a price that seems very reasonable indeed.

Eminent Audio ☎ 01746 769156

Reviewed in issue 216

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**CYRUS aCA7.5/
SMART POWER £700.00**

◆ Stereo pre/power amplifier

This £1,250 combo has the usual tasteful Cyrus metal-work, silver-grey here, and despite the modest dimensions of each unit, the preamp has no fewer than twelve pairs of phono sockets, a pair of XLRs (balanced output), a quarter-inch headphone jack and a socket for the PSX-R power supply upgrade. The 60 watts/channel power amp is likewise well featured. Both units are very well built, with fairly conventional circuits that make use of both discrete transistors and a few integrated circuits.

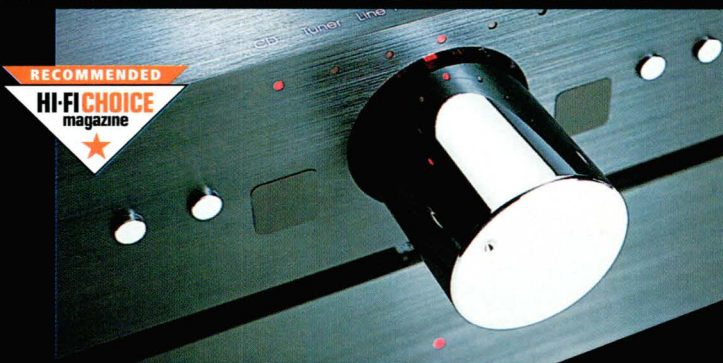
Sonically these are very civilised amplifiers. If the thought of 'civilised' hi-fi is about as appealing as cold lamb stew you might not go a bundle on them. Although the tone is consistently even and honest, and dynamics do not seem unduly constrained, the sound cannot truthfully be said to 'kick ass' in any way. Nor does it major on raw excitement.

On the other hand there is much to praise, particularly the treble timbre, which is completely free from glare and screech, and as such is exceptionally friendly to 'difficult' sounds such as orchestral violins.

This is probably not the all-time great combination for rock'n'roll or dance music, but it has many qualities which suit most types of classical music, and much jazz too.

Cyrus ☎ 01480 435577

Reviewed in issue 212



Densen Beat B-200/B-300 £1,985.00

◆ Stereo pre/power amplifier

Classy matt black alloy casework immediately distinguishes Densen's Beat pre/power amp combo. The preamp has a basic price of £1,000, the power amp costs £985, but that doesn't include the very classy looking £300 Gizmo remote handset. There's also an MM vinyl option. The preamp has six line level inputs and four sets of line outputs (to facilitate multi-amping and active drive). The B-300 specifies generous power ratings of 100 watts/eight ohms and 200 watts/four ohms.

This is a very decent-sounding amplifier, especially through a bass and midrange which shows fine coherence and dynamic integrity, though the top end is a little soft and lacking in 'air' and 'sparkle'. Speech, from Radio 4, sounds just a little shut in, with a hint of nasality, though voices sound impressively solid. Music has good warmth and weight, neutral midband perspectives and good bass-through-mid coherence, with appropriate voice-band projection, though there is a touch of transistor congestion or 'dirtiness'.

This Beat combo demonstrates fine musical integrity and coherence at a realistic price. And if it lacks some of the delicacy and transparency of valve-powered competition, it supplies plenty of power with good future flexibility.

Densen ☎ 00 45 75 18 12 14 Reviewed in issue 216

**Electrocompaniet
EC 4.7/AW-120DMB £3,448.00**

◆ Stereo pre/power amplifier

The curiously named EC4.7 preamp and 120DMB power amp are both decidedly wide and deep units, with thick Perspex fascias. The handful of buttons (there are no knobs) are backed up by blue illuminated legends hidden behind the fascia, and a very neat and straightforward remote handset. The preamp handles just line level signals, with a choice of six input pairs. Like the CD input, the pre/power link is also via balanced XLRs. The power amp is rated at 120 watts/eight ohms.

This is a quite delightful-sounding amplifier. There's just a hint of texture thickening through the midband, but it's hardly distracting, and the first and lasting impression is of a beautifully neutral and delicate-sounding amplifier which doesn't emphasise any particular part of the audio band, and which shows fine consistency and time-coherence across a wide bandwidth and dynamic range.

Dynamics themselves might have more vigour and expression, and the bass could perhaps be a little more assertive, but in truth these are mere nits rather than real criticisms. My only quibbles are over the bulk of the units and the labelling icons on the preamp. Sound quality is outstanding by any standards.

Castle Acoustics ☎ 01756 795333 Reviewed in issue 216



Kenwood KAF-3030R £249.95
◆ Stereo integrated amplifier

Originally reviewed as a Best Buy in issue 205, the KAF-3030R is a UK design with a rather restrained and retro appearance. Two speaker circuits, individually switchable, are available and there are six inputs, including two tape circuits and a moving magnet phono input. Interesting touches include a 'direct input' switch which bypasses the input selector, making a readily discernible improvement for one 'most favoured' source.

"A tight, well-focussed sound," wrote one tester, "though it could use more depth", while another felt that the balance was "open and detailed, but on the thin side". That the bass is definitely lightweight was borne out in hands-on work, but it's not lacking in tunefulness or subtlety. Within rather obvious limits it has considerable charm, even finesse, and is likely to pay its way with a speaker whose bass is a tad boomy or over-exuberant.

With more analytical loudspeakers, the bass could seem disjointed at times, and its timing poor, and there were also hints of midband coloration, but the treble maintained poise better than you'd expect of any £250 amplifier. This is a subtle and engaging amplifier, with plenty of detail and adequate power, and a particularly effective 'direct' input.

Kenwood ☎ 01923 816444 Reviewed in issue 217



Myryad MP100/MA240 £1,599.90
◆ Stereo pre/power amplifier

The illuminated knob on the preamp is a neat idea but awkward to handle, but that's about as much criticism as one can reasonably level at the looks and ergonomics of this no-nonsense duo. Assembly is very neat and tidy, with clear evidence of thoughtful, cost-effective component selection. The preamp offers four inputs plus a tape loop, and has two unbalanced outputs and balanced pair. The 150 watts /channel power amp has balanced and single-ended inputs, plus 'loop-through' line outputs.

Within seconds of starting the first track, I wrote "very engaging and immediate". It stands up very well to long-term use too. A most gratifying absence of grain or hardness positively encourages protracted listening sessions. There's just the slightest hint of fruitiness in the bass, which makes for a sound in which one can really wallow, especially when the volume is turned up. At the same time, there's terrific detail, very decent imaging, and very clean, neutral midband and treble.

Such smooth, clean performance won't be to everyone's taste, but if you value real accuracy to the musical event, plus smart finish and impeccable manners, this duo should be high on your auditioning list.

Sennheiser UK ☎ 01494 551551

Reviewed in issue 212

NAD C370 £449.95
◆ Stereo integrated amplifier

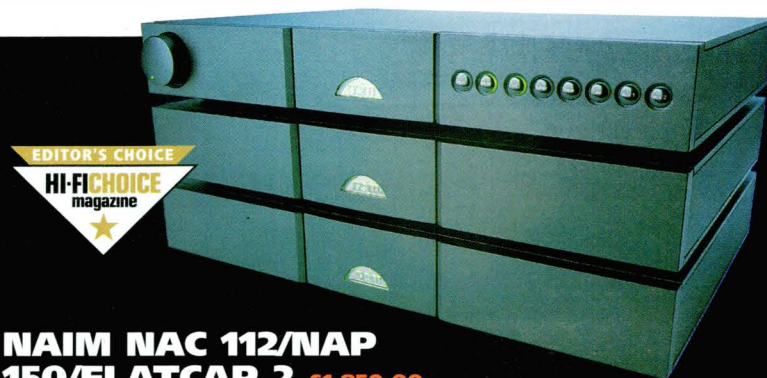
The top of the NAD Classic line, the C370 is a tremendously powerful stereo integrated amplifier, rated at 120 watts per channel from its impedance-sensing output circuit, but with plenty of dynamic (short term) power which in practice makes it seem more powerful still. It's well-endowed with the usual tone controls and bypass switching, and a full seven inputs, including two tape circuits and a phono (moving magnet) input. There are two speaker circuits, and unusually, they can be switched from the supplied system remote control.

The strong power yield of this amp comes across at every turn, even at the strictly controlled and modest listening test levels. According to the panel, the NAD had "great attack, good soundstaging, and an out-of-the-box feel". This is not perhaps the most sophisticated amplifier at its price, but its sheer effortlessness provided very real rewards.

In short, the NAD was a pleasure to listen to, as well as being musically involving. Imagery was very well handled, and this is an amplifier that will never sound breathless or out of control. This powerhouse just about has it all, including a flexible set of operating features.

Lenbrook UK ☎ 01908 319360

Reviewed in issue 217



NAIM NAC 112/NAP 150/FLATCAP 2 £1,850.00
◆ Stereo pre/power/PSU amplifier combo

The NAC 112, NAP 150 and FLATCAP 2 components all belong to Naim's new 5-series. The NAC 112 preamplifier and NAP 150 power amp will amplify without any help from the FLATCAP 2 power supply, but adding the latter to power the preamp is claimed to produce a worthwhile improvement. A microprocessor gives plenty of preamp functionality, and there are six line inputs, all on DIN sockets. The NAP 150 is rated at 50 watts /channel/eight ohms.

The listening began by substituting this combo for my regular top-of-the-line Naim gear. The change inevitably brought a reduction in musical resolution, although these components do have much of the character of their big brother – which is actually very little character at all, except for a sweet and delicate top end.

Compared to the pre/power amps alone (no FLATCAP), or the integrated NAIT 5, the midband remains very consistent throughout, while moving up the ladder enhances the perceived bandwidth at both ends of the spectrum, adding openness and sparkle, tightening up the bottom end, and expanding the dynamic range. This package slots very persuasively into the Naim hierarchy, and the FLATCAP 2 upgrade is particularly convincing.

Naim Audio ☎ 01722 332266

Reviewed in issue 213

STEREO AMPS

NAIM Nait 5 £799.99 ◆ Stereo integrated amplifier

The Nait 5 is the latest version of Naim's only integrated amplifier. Remote control is included, but all six line inputs use DIN sockets, which can be inconvenient. Volume is adjusted using a resistive ladder network, and includes the ability to normalise volume levels between inputs. The 40 watts/channel power amp circuitry offers faster signal transition times and better power supply noise rejection. Although the amp is microprocessor-controlled, all digital circuitry is switched off when not in use.

"A tad shouty", one put it, while another went on to say that the amplifier "made sense", had "good rhythmic ability" and "a slightly rich bass". On the whole, however, the Nait is a well-disciplined, clean-sounding amplifier with few identifiable colorations.

Compared to previous Nait's it provides a less exciting ride but a more even-tempered quality, and will be easier to live with in the long term. Classic Nait virtues are tamed in this new, more sophisticated entry-level Naim. This is far from the most powerful amplifier in its class, and the sound does tend to sag a little under stress with large scale music, but this is treatable using one of the outboard power supplies.

Naim Audio ☎ 01722 332266

Reviewed in issue 214



Primare A30.1 £1,500.00 ◆ Stereo integrated amplifier

Primare's respected 30.1 has been updated with a variety of component changes. Preamplifier outputs have been added, and a power amp version has been added for bi-amping. There is also an optional phono stage, and the amp comes with a basic remote control. It has clean elegant styling, uses quality materials, and features two balanced inputs and a fully balanced circuit topology. There are six inputs, but no tone controls or other facilities such as gain matching.

The 30.1 was always one of the most convincing and well rounded models in an excellent range, and the recent changes only enhance its status. "A lovely amplifier," wrote one, and it won virtually universal praise for its "absolute naturalness... realistic and extremely accurate tonality".

It has the rare ability to dig down deep into the recesses of the music, extracting previously unnoticed detail, without pulling the music apart, or rendering it unmusical. It has a warmth that is surprising for such an open sounding design, and a poise that is altogether more characteristic of some of the better and more costly pre and power amps. At £1,500 it's by no means inexpensive for an integrated amplifier, but the A30.1 is worth every penny.

CSE ☎ 01423 359054

Reviewed in issue 214



Rothwell Rubicon/Indus £1,488.00 ◆ Stereo valve pre/power amplifier

Rothwell products are named after rivers, so here we have an Indus preamp teamed up with a Rubicon power amp, to create an attractively understated combo. The Indus is entirely passive, so it's simply a collection of switches to route up to six line sources to the power amp (or recorder), plus a means of adjusting the volume. Discrete resistors are used instead of potentiometers, using two 'ladders' connected in series, one with coarse and the other fine steps.

My first reaction was that this amplifier was maybe a little too laid back, but gradually came to realise that it's actually exceedingly accurate, with an impressive neutrality throughout a wide dynamic range.

Where so many amps seem to over-emphasise some part of the audio spectrum in a way that ultimately becomes rather wearing, the Rothwell combo just tells it like it is, with fine transparency, accurate tonality and stereo perspectives, and impressive fine detailing. While the modest power output won't suit all tastes or low sensitivity loudspeakers, this amplifier's ability to perform at very low levels without sonic degradation is particularly welcome. This understated combo is well ahead of the pack.

Rothwell ☎ 01204 654614 Reviewed in issue 216



YBA Intégré Alpha 'DT' £1,550.00 ◆ Stereo integrated amplifier

The Intégré is a relatively heavy, compact design, with a volume control, a source selector for the six inputs and a record out selector which includes an 'off' setting. The remote control adjusts the motorised volume pot or invokes mute. Rear panel socketry includes bi-wire speaker terminals (two pairs, unswitched). It's possible to fit an internal MM vinyl module, and an external MC step-up is also listed (the MM stage will still be required here). Power output is a relatively modest 50 watts/channel.

This model got the panel sitting up and taking notice. Typical comments included the following: "good dynamically, and conveys the sense of the music"; "That works! Balanced and natural, low coloration"; and "Very good sense of being there: accurate scale with good detail". The sense of strong rhythmic involvement and of good timing was consistent throughout the listening presentations, and also in the hands-on tests.

Lean, occasionally dry and moderately powerful, it gives a very lively, close up feel, which can make an Intégré-driven system sound very immediate and tactile. But there was also a noticeable loss of very high frequency air and space, much of the detail apparently being related to the upper midband.

Choice Hi-Fi ☎ 020 8255 6868

Reviewed in issue 214

Bryston SP1/9B £7,100.00

◆ **Multichannel pre/processor/ power amplifier**

Bryston's multichannel amp combo is not cheap – £7,100 for the pair – but you do get what you pay for. It's not just a top home cinema rig, it's also as musical as they come. The SP1's feature count is sparse, in part because it's a processor with genuine hi-fi preamp credentials. Based on the BP-25, a stereo preamp of some repute, Bryston has added the digital surround processing essentials (Dolby Digital, Pro-Logic, dts and THX), with a bypass switch to take these out completely for stereo operation. Upgrade solutions are promised for any new formats that establish themselves.

The 9B THX power amp provides five channels configured as separate monoblocks within a single box, each delivering a conservatively-rated 120 watts of power.

From the off, the Bryston pair showed a beautifully crisp and neutral character. They seem to promote little of themselves, yet deliver a sound so inherently clear and dynamic it cuts to the quick and keeps the music flowing. In two-channel mode this is simply the most musically addictive surround combo ever to grace my equipment rack. Switching to Dolby Digital/dts surround material also produced much to admire: the space and precision, the exceptional bass, and the dramatic power of sudden peaks – an explosive effect or a musical sting.

In short, this is where purist hi-fi meets surround amplification and decoding with the minimum of musical compromise. Only the current lack of a discrete 5.1-channel input (for DVD-Audio/multichannel SACD) undermines its audiophile credentials.

PMC ☎ 08704 441044 Reviewed in issue 219



Arcam AVR100 £799.90

◆ **Integrated multichannel AV receiver**

Simplicity of design has always been an important Arcam strategy, so the AVR100's feature list is distinctly frugal and the connectivity basic. However, what you do get is £800 worth of solid engineering. There's Dolby Digital and dts processing, together with five channels of a claimed 70 watts each (rising to 90 watts in stereo). Even the handset is simple.

However, this frill-free approach does not benefit the set-up. There are simply too few adjustable parameters to balance the AVR100 in anything but a nicely symmetrical room, and speaker size selection is particularly limited.

The Eagles' DVD comes across with a good degree of poise and passion, and well-detailed dts surround. Bass is lightweight but articulate, and the upper frequencies have similarly good clarity and extension, although Henley's voice has a tad too much sibilance.

At sensible volumes, the balance across all channels makes for seamless integration of the soundstage and an enjoyable musical experience. However, get a little reckless with the volume control and things start to fall apart. A multichannel, powerhouse, party animal, the Arcam is not. Film soundtracks also reveal the its unfortunate power shortage when all channels are driven, leaving it gasping like an asthmatic sprinter when the going gets tough.

Considering its relatively affordable price tag, Arcam's AVR100 gives a good account of itself. It is at its best with stereo, while its multichannel sound is ideally suited to lower volumes or smaller rooms – circumstances for which it can be confidently recommended.

Arcam ☎ 01223 203200 Reviewed in issue 215

Arcam FMJ A22/DAVE/P25

£2,849.80

◆ **Multichannel amplifier combo**

Attractively turned out in silver livery, the FMJ A22 is a stereo amplifier, while the matching P25 is nominally a stereo power amp, but with a third power amp module fitted to provide five matching channels in total. DAVE is an optional home cinema processor module which can be fitted into the A22.

For flexibility, the FMJ A22 was designed around an upgradeable 'bus' architecture, which also delivers a degree of intelligence; multi-function controls, programmable control responses and smart output protection monitoring being top of the list. The final component is a rather complex programmable remote control with an extensive internal code bank.

We have tested the A22 in the past (in stereo trim) with very positive results, and have no reason to amend those views here. As a home cinema amplifier the obvious danger was that the soundfield processing would not be to the same standard, but this is not the case. Although it lacks some of the refinements available elsewhere, the Arcam is a serious performer, more than capable of strong, well-focused soundstaging, and sharp, quick and essentially seamless image steering.

Perhaps the principal limitation of this amplifier is the absence of a 5.1 channel input, which rules out using it with DVD-Audio and SACD. It's a gripping performer with music, however, and comes close to matching the best for multichannel imagery, which makes it a superb all round proposition, and a deserved Best Buy.

Arcam ☎ 01223 203200 Reviewed in issue 210



Denon AVC-A1SE £2,499.99

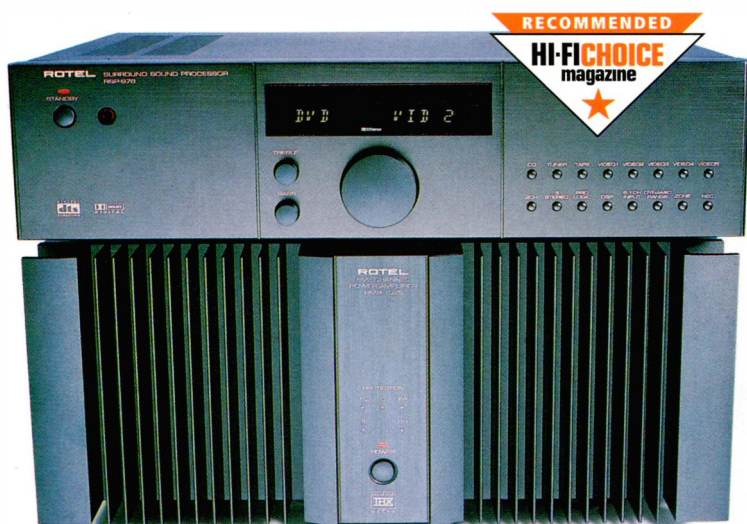
◆ Integrated multichannel AV amplifier

Crammed inside this behemoth are seven channels claiming 170 watts apiece (that's nearly 1.2kw of power!) and decoding for all of the digital formats in domestic use. This includes THX surround EX 7.1, dts-ES 6.1 discrete and full 24-bit/192kHz conversion. The rear panel has probably the most comprehensive and logically laid out array of socketry ever to grace an AV amplifier. A feature unique to Denon is the extra terminals for additional speakers mounted in the rear corners of the room. This complex beast is operated by a whopping great LCD touch-screen remote control and comprehensive on-screen display.

The AVC-A1SE has a lucid, open soundstage and an entire gym full of well-polished muscle. The title track of Steve Stevens' *Flamenco A Go Go* multichannel DVD-Audio disc bristles with clarity and passion. The supremely well recorded dts version of the Eagles' *Wasted Time* sounds distinctly compressed after the revelation of DVD-Audio. In fact, the presentation is superb but it underlines the highly revealing nature of the Denon.

Stereo music on CD and SACD has a similarly insightful presence. The upper frequencies demand special praise for sheer clarity and transient attack without stepping into forwardness. Bass is potent and tightly controlled. The minor Achilles heel is that its ruthlessly revealing nature is less than sympathetic to poorly recorded movie soundtracks. The price is far from bargain basement, but Denon's AVC-A1SE comfortably justifies the cost.

Hayden Labs ☎ 01753 888447 Reviewed in issue 215



Rotel RSP976/RMB1075 £1,700.00

◆ Multichannel AV amplifier combo

The Vinnie Jones of amplifiers, this Rotel combo is big, powerful, aggressively styled and holds no truck with frilliness or niceties. The beastly RMB1075 power amplifier is a very solid THX Ultra design offering 5x 120 watts. Watch out – the menacing rib-rack of cooling fins will bite the skin off your knuckles every time you pass too close.

The RSP976 processor's specification is standard Dolby Digital and dts decoding, with an analogue direct function for stereo. Thankfully, this minimalism does not extend to the back panel where a comprehensive array of connections will cater for most eventualities – often in triplicate. The remote control is well laid out but incredibly sluggish in operation.

Chopin's Piano Concerto in Dolby Digital is tightly focused and expressive, and 'going large' with the volume affords huge multichannel dynamic swells. On the more delicate piano sections, a mild electronic softening tends to mask the very edges of the notes, but the piece loses none of its ability to get you air conducting.

This is eminently true of the Rotel's stereo performance as well, but it just fails to extract the last 'nth' of detail. Change to DVD-A, and Steve Stevens' *Flamenco A Go Go* cracks off with pace and passion, although the soundstage is relatively bijou.

The RSP976/RMB1075 pairing forms a potent package, capable of cutting to the chase and simply making music. Despite a few minor sonic foibles, if you listen with your heart, this Rotel hits all the right notes.

Gamepath ☎ 01908 317707

Reviewed in issue 215

Cyrus AV5/ Smartpower £2,650.00

◆ Multichannel AV amplifier combo

This package consists of the Cyrus AV5 processor/preamp, and three SmartPower stereo power amplifiers rated at 60Watts per channel. The AV5 is designed for ease of set-up and use. Although it can be set up manually, you can also use the supplied microphone, which measures speaker distances and levels, and automatically makes the necessary adjustments, leaving only speaker size selection to the user. Dolby Digital and dts 5.1 processing are available, and useful secondary features include an input naming option, and an adjustable subwoofer crossover filter.

Using regular CDs as the source, stereo sound quality was very good, with the emphasis on speed, agility and clarity – very much in keeping with Cyrus' regular stereo amplifiers, which have the same expressiveness and subtlety, and the same simple lack of bombast. However, this emphasis on the detail, and some shortfall of hard-hitting dynamics, limited its ability to portray the excitement and sheer physicality of good feature film soundtracks. The relatively pedestrian nature of the soundfield processing set the limits on an amplifier that on the whole works best at moderate volume levels, and with low-key films that major on dialogue and subtle acoustics rather than large scale special effects.

This Cyrus package sounds refined and subtle, but not always very muscular. Great stuff, especially if music reproduction is top of your wish list.

Cyrus ☎ 01480 435577 Reviewed in issue 210



Myriad
MDP500/MA240/MA360 £3,798.89

◆ **Multichannel AV amplifier combo**

An expensive three-box amplifier combo, the fundamental engineering quality is obvious even as you remove the weighty components from the packaging. The MDP500 processor is a marvellously understated design with minimal front panel clutter. Internal processing is limited to standard Dolby Digital and dts formats, although there is a full 7.1 channel throughput. The MA240 is a two-channel power amp, and the MA360 a near identical three-channel affair, giving five channels rated at 120 watts. The programmable remote control and set-up interface work very well together.

From the off, the Myriad establishes itself as something quite special. By creating the most sublime three-dimensional reality from just two speakers, it reminds you just how good stereo can be.

The Steve Stevens DVD-A fared equally well, and with all channels driven the Myriad's sheer transparency led its group by a sizeable margin. Upper frequencies are supremely articulate, with oodles of detail and extension, while the midband is open and airy. Bass initially sounds lean, but it is simply better balanced with far greater extension.

This honesty could easily be the downfall of a compressed movie soundtrack but the Myriad seems to simply step up a level of brawn and kick cinematic butt. This is a star performer all round.

Sennheiser UK ☎ 01494 551551 Reviewed in issue 215



Denon AVC-A10SE £1,299.99

◆ **Integrated multichannel AV amplifier**

With its champagne finish, slab alloy fascia, sturdy frame, and straightforward (even artless) control system, this is a serious amplifier aimed at the hands-on enthusiast. Impressive specifications include THX Ultra certification, THX Dolby EX and dts-ES (though the extra rear channels will require outboard power amplification). Uniquely, the surround mode can be set to diffuse for movies and directional for music, and a six-channel analogue audio input is available for DVD-Audio or SACD. The five power amplifier channels are rated at 125 watts each.

Sonically, this is a most impressive one-box amplifier. Stereo performance was excellent: rich, full, articulate, and thoroughly convincing with a wide range of music types. Bass has extra authority, and the clarifying effect of 'tone defeat' was particularly obvious, and beneficial.

Home cinema material was also handled well, with clear benefits from THX Ultra processing. Add this to the Denon's superb image steering capability, and the result is a compelling and often dramatic experience.

The Denon AVC-A10SE is a top class integrated AV amplifier that, in the rush to provide the ultimate adrenaline fix for the latest Hollywood special effects epic, has not forgotten the art of fine purist music making. Best Buy.

Hayden Labs ☎ 01753 888447
 Reviewed in issue 210



Pioneer
VSX-859RDS £650.00

◆ **Integrated multichannel receiver**

This flexible and feature-rich package supports all manner of AV surround variations on the Dolby Digital and dts themes, and even includes an RDS FM/MW radio tuner. Multichannel analogue inputs support DVD-A and SACD – up to eight channels. The power amp section is rated at 5x100W.

Among a clutch of competitive multichannel amplifiers, the Pioneer was received best of all when playing stereo music. One recording was described as having "a big sound without sounding overpowering, and good front-to-back depth". What criticisms remained were subtle but significant. In one case a piano tended to get lost in the mix, and a clarinet recording sounded oddly convoluted, with some muddle, though the music flowed well enough.

Something of the same was noticed when playing digital stereo sources processed by the Pioneer for multichannel use, which gave a rather obviously 'processed' quality. Digital multichannel recordings, however, which require no A-to-D conversion stage, sounded sharp and well disciplined, with good spatial effects, an atmospheric quality and strong speech intelligibility.

There are some curiosities with this model. The listening results suggest less than transparent A-to-D conversion, with clear if subtle signs of unwanted digital artefacts. But in other modes of use, the Pioneer was bold and well controlled, with good surround processing.

Pioneer UK ☎ 01753 789789 Reviewed in issue 217

Disc Players

Not so long ago, CD was the only game in town. Now the same size (120mm) optical disc has spawned a host of other formats: CD-R, CD-RW, DVD-V, DVD-A, SACD, and so on. It's all starting to get very complicated, but we can help you pick your way through the options.

CD is the most prolific music storage format in history by a huge margin, and that won't change for a good while yet (if ever). All the various types of optical disc player out there will play CDs, but it has so far proved impossible, for example, to make a DVD player that plays CD to the sound quality standards achieved by a serious dedicated CD player. Until someone breaks the mould, a proper CD player will still make the most of your CD music. Mind you, to really make the most of your system, you'll need to site your player on a dedicated equipment support. An additional isolation platform or rubbery 'feet' can also be beneficial. Also, CD players don't tend to give their best results 'from cold'. It may be best to leave it on, or use the standby feature if it has one.

DVD Essentially a movie rather than music format (in the first instance at least), DVD technology is new and improving all the time. Most of the players currently available are primarily intended for DVD-Video discs, with CD as an added feature rather than a priority. Players emerging from specialist manufacturers aim to make a better fist of CD.

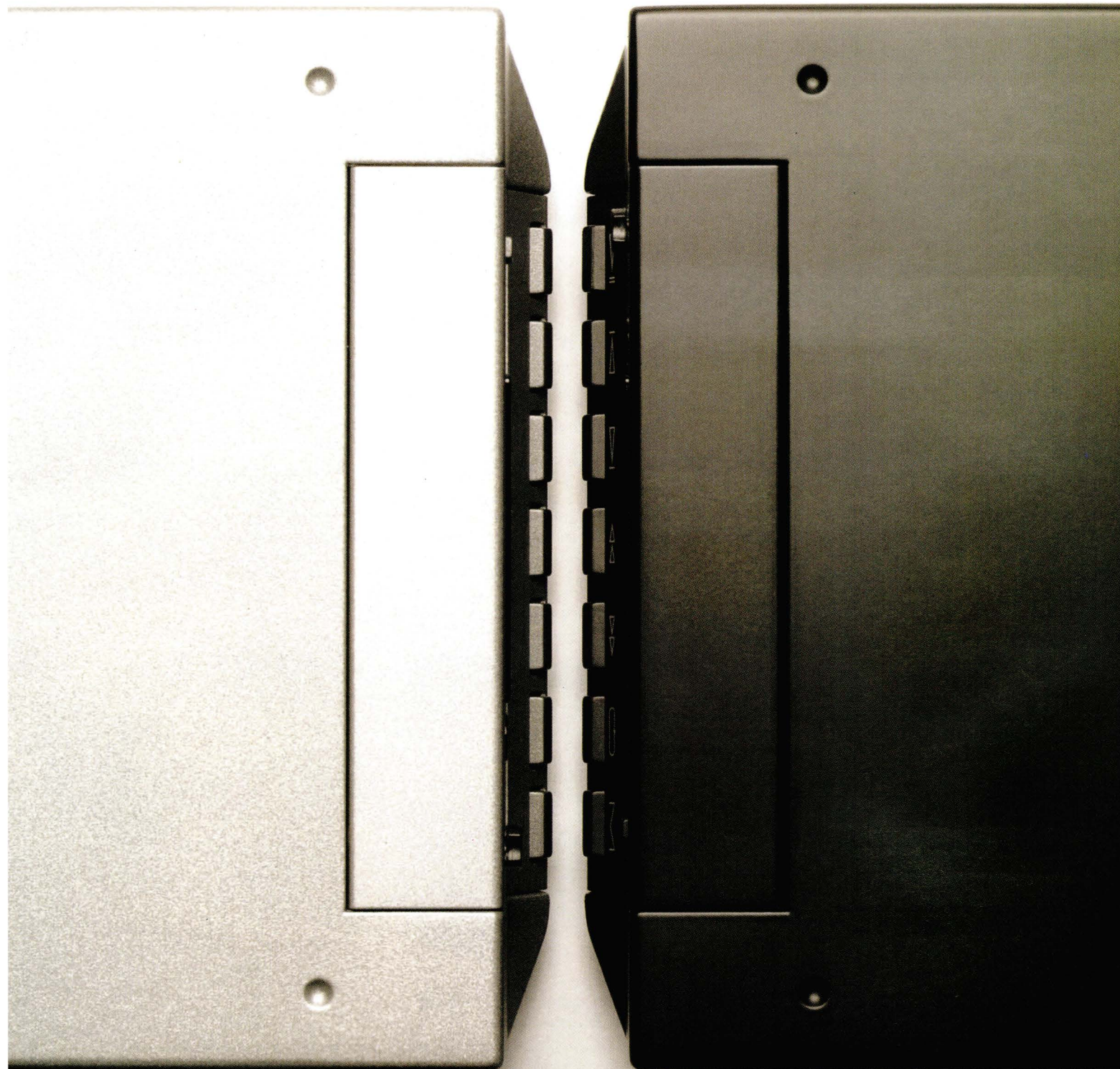
DVD-AV These 'universal' players are compatible with stereo and multichannel DVD-Audio music discs in addition to DVD-Videos and CDs. Early examples have proved disappointing with CD, but DVD-Audio itself promises much as a music format for the future.

SACD The first SACD-compatible players have essentially been CD players with the added benefit of SACD (Super Audio CD) playback, in keeping with the format's philosophy of extension from the traditional CD family. Multichannel SACD is now a reality, as are players which also handle DVD-V.

Inter-format compatibility boundaries are becoming more and more blurred, as increasingly versatile 'combi' players, able to cope with any or all 12cm disc formats, start to appear. These represent a 'no fuss' solution that is bound to be popular, but it's a racing certainty that all the extra complexity involved will leave them floundering in the wake of the best CD players when it comes to sound quality.



the Cyrus r'evolution



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Arcam CD92 £849.90

◆ CD player

The more expensive of two models in Arcam's DiVA (Digitally Integrated Audio & Video) range, the CD92 is distinguished from the much less expensive CD72 by incorporating a version of the RingDAC digital engine, co-developed with dCS. A mildly confusing system remote control is supplied, optical and electrical digital outputs are available, and the player will cope with CD-R, but not CD-RW discs.

The difference between this more sophisticated CD92 and the baseline '72 is all too clear. As one panellist noted, the CD92 "doesn't swallow its vowels", and this was how it was perceived in the hands-on testing too. The player was notable for its open-mouthed articulation, which had the effect of taking the guesswork from vocals, and which delivered fine tonal discrimination and control – if not quite in the FMJ CD23's class in overall weight and perceived bandwidth.

Individual panel members noted some harshness and forwardness with orchestral strings, though it remains controlled through the higher octave passages. This senior DiVA CD player is visually almost identical to the CD72, but its superior RingDAC digital converter delivers a sharper and more lively sound than the junior model.

Arcam ☎ 01223 203200 Reviewed in issue 212



Audio Note CDT Zero/DAC One 1x

£549.00/749.00

◆ CD player

Decidedly unconventional, in that its digital-to-analogue converter (DAC) deliberately avoids using a digital anti-aliasing filter which is almost universal elsewhere, this two-box combo consists of two chunky midi-width units, finished in silver or black. The disc mechanism provides smooth, rapid disc handling, the remote control is functional but not very pretty, and there is a surfeit of information on display – but no controls at all on the fascia.

The combination has an open, civilised sound, and it's quite detailed, though not extraordinarily so. It's somewhat easier on the ear than most CD players – but not soft or overtly valve-like – and enjoyable without being in any way obvious. Vocal quality, notably in the Diana Krall recording, was attractive and refined.

There were isolated complaints that the sound became mushy and confused when it got busier, and had a somewhat "pedestrian" quality, but on the whole this player emerged well from the panel tests.

Not half as oddball as it comes across on paper, this combination proved an easy, vivid and open performer, and was almost equally happy with all three amplifiers used in the tests.

Audio Note UK ☎ 01273 220511 Reviewed in issue 212



Denon DCD-835 £229.99

◆ CD player

Now nearing the end of its commercial life, this longstanding player has recently benefited from a substantial price cut, justifying its re-evaluation. Does it still hold up against more recent comers? There's no reason why not, even though it uses a slightly antiquated (but genuine multi-bit) DAC. The OP275 analogue output op-amp is favoured by several high-end manufacturers. There's no real shortage of features, unless you consider the absence of CD Text and CD-RW compatibility serious.

A strong and well-defined bass is the crowning glory of this player, with the sort of effortless quality that imparts real authority to the lower lines of classical and jazz ensembles.

Higher up the spectrum, however, there's a hint of midband coloration, and the treble has a slight dryness, most noticeable on solo voices and delicate percussion, and perhaps also responsible for a degree of synthetic sheen on orchestral violins. Stereo imaging is a little ping-pong and lacking some depth, at both low and high levels. Dynamics are handled with aplomb, though, and excitement levels are high when they need to be.

Hayden Labs ☎ 01753 888447 Reviewed in issue 217



Denon DCD-485 £139.99

◆ CD player

Although the rapid success of DVD has distracted the attention of most mass market brands away from plain vanilla CD players, Denon is still persevering. The budget price DCD-485 comes complete with digital output and CD-R/RW compatibility, shares the looks and some functions with the bigger DCD-665, and represents the company's most affordable current model.

Metallica got a good airing through the Denon; the punch and crunch was preserved brilliantly, with a generally smooth presentation and balanced tonality. Things got a bit coloured at higher volume on complex tracks, as the treble struggled to keep its composure, but it was far from offensive considering the price tag. In general, the treble was fairly sweet and laid back and, at the other end of the scale, the weighty, dynamic bass managed to keep the pace with ease.

Denon's low-cost option held its ground against more expensive CD players on test, losing out only slightly to its more refined 665 brother. Plenty of musical detail kept things interesting, and plenty of functions were accessible through the stubby remote. Denon is a winner yet again, this time in the budget arena.

Hayden Labs ☎ 01753 888447 Reviewed in issue 217

Cambridge Audio D500 SE

£199.99

◆ CD player

The 'basic' D500 was featured in HFC a little over a year ago (issue 202): but a £30 premium for the SE buys you a different DAC chip (nominally 24-bit rather than 20, though interestingly some specifications are distinctly inferior to the 20-bit part) and a mechanism selected for low jitter. Silver finish is also available.

Appearance and features are basic enough, but inside the case there's evidence that the money has gone into tangible performance-related areas. The DAC/output board is replaceable to allow upgrading, but as it stands it already boasts a decent DAC chip from Crystal Semiconductor and exclusive use of single op-amps (as opposed to the cheaper dual variety).

Sophistication is not the name of the game here. This player is a fun-loving type, with plenty of bass and a lively midrange. However, there's a fair degree of subtlety too, and stereo imaging is creditable.

Some music works better than others. Opera and big symphonic pieces seemed slightly less happy than smaller classical works and well-produced rock and pop. There's a pleasing sweetness to the sound which helps preserve ambience and the natural decay of percussion instruments. All things considered this is a very capable player which is both enjoyable and informative to listen to.

The Audio Partnership ☎ 0207 940 2200 Reviewed in issue 217



RECOMMENDED

HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



Cyrus CD7 £800.00

◆ CD player

The CD7 is built on a new Cyrus platform which can be upgraded using the PSX-R bolt-on power supply, or updated via a port for new DAC modules. CD-RW-compatible, what has not changed is the trademark Cyrus diecast chassis in its familiar, compact 'shoebox' shape. Socketry includes two sets of analogue outputs, an electrical digital output and proprietary MC 'bus' connections for single handset system operation.

The CD7 had a positive reception, on the whole: "As soon as the slightly distant, reverberant opening to the Handel starts, you are transported there," one panellist commented, and another remarked on what he heard as "good instrumental positioning" and on the strong timing that gave a fine impression of the quality of the playing.

Hands-on testing confirmed that this is a strong performer, with a clean overall tonality, adequate if not overwhelming dynamics, and an ability to maintain its focus in complex musical passages. The Cyrus moulds itself well to the character of the music, and largely avoids any mechanical 'edge'.

The CD7 is a smooth, articulate and transparent player, with quite bold dynamics. The upgrade potential is another plus, and build quality has long been an acknowledged Cyrus strength.

Cyrus ☎ 01480 435577 Reviewed in issue 212

Linn Genki £995.00

◆ CD player

The Linn Genki is both more and less than it seems. Less because the player is lightweight, and the CD-R/RW-friendly mechanism has a clunky loader. But there's no reason to doubt what lies under the skin: the internal engineering includes a switch mode power supply, a 24-bit Burr Brown Delta Sigma D/A converter and an HDCD digital filter.

There are two fixed and two variable analogue outputs, fed by a better-than-average ladder network, so the player could be used without a preamplifier. The extra outputs can also be used for multi-room applications.

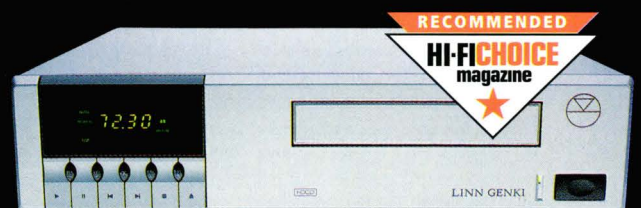
The Genki was generally well liked for its explicitness, its sharp instrumental focus and separation, and its liveliness. But it could also be rather hard and relentless at times, and forward in its balance.

One panellist commented on the very powerful cymbal sounds. Others too were drawn to the Linn's strong percussion, and described being "forced to listen" thanks to the up-front nature of its sound.

This is not a super-sophisticated CD player but it is a good one. It pulls an awful lot of detail from a disc and presents it intelligibly, though the strong character means that system matching will be more critical than usual.

Linn Products ☎ 0500 888909

Reviewed in issue 212





Marantz CD6000 OSE LE £299.99

◆ CD player

In the CD6000 saga, this is the Limited Edition of the Original Special Edition. Modifications include a couple of upgraded capacitors and a change to the response of the low-pass filter, plus some extra screening internally. It's a smartly assembled unit, given an extra touch of class by its unusual weight. It's also comprehensively equipped, supporting CD Text, including a whole bunch of editing features, and featuring compatibility with finalised CD-RW discs. One surprise came when I found it doesn't like CD-Rs which have been recorded on a PC in disc-at-once mode. Build quality is good, with neatly laid out circuit boards.

The best one-word description of the Marantz sound is 'civilised'. Excitement is not forbidden, but don't expect to find any added to essentially lacklustre CDs. Indeed, the basic tonal quality of this player is very much that of some of the best high-end players and DACs, though the 6000 OSE inevitably lacks the last degree of insight.

Whether your tastes run to classical, rock, jazz or whatever, you'll find plenty to enjoy here. Considering the very fine performance, the multiplicity of features, the smart build and appearance, a Best Buy seems in order.

Marantz UK ☎ 01753 680868 Reviewed in issue 217



Marantz 6000 KI Signature £499.99

◆ CD player

This is the top spec CD6000, the KI or Ken Ishiwata Signature version. In common with the others it's attractive, well-finished, with a smooth and quiet mechanism and excellent controls and display. The mechanism is CD-R/RW-compatible, and the player will show CD-Text displays.

KI enhancements include a new toroidal transformer and mains capacitors, better quality coupling caps, a copper-plated chassis, a reinforced bottom plate and damped cover, plus a number of other component changes.

Full, smooth and open, with a perceptible though not excessive warmth, the CD6000 KI has a sound that invites protracted listening. It is inherently musical, a fact that was as apparent to the panel as it was in the hands-on testing.

Orchestral separation received considerable praise, and the intelligibility of vocal lines was clearly a strength, although there's no obvious or unpleasant emphasis. More general comments singled out solid imagery, explicit positioning within the soundstage and a full-bodied overall balance. This is a player so obviously right in its balance that it raises few questions about fidelity at this price.

The KI version of the CD6000 might be considerably more expensive than the base version, but this higher price is fully justified.

Marantz UK ☎ 01753 680868 Reviewed in issue 212



Naim Audio CD5 £1,125.00

◆ CD player

Naim Audio's entry level CD5 is a one-box design, based loosely on the CDS and using largely Phillips core components. There are some very individual touches too. The disc drive mechanism is mounted in a manually operated swing-out drawer, and a small magnetic puck must be put in place prior to play. Other idiosyncracies include a DIN-type output socket, a stripped-down display, and no digital output. An upgrade path is available, via the addition of various external power supply units.

Sonically, the CD5 is slightly coloured and lacking transparency, and there are players with greater resolution at half the price. But where this player scores is in its ability to deliver a musical result with untrammelled vitality, and with the kind of three dimensional attributes that are normally associated with the analogue high end.

Panel members accused the CD5 of some congestion and a lack of subtlety, though one dissenter described it as "very communicative". There is clearly more than one view on this player, and we would argue that there is merit on both sides. Against the sonic and ergonomic idiosyncracies must be balanced the sheer authenticity of its dynamic certainties and train-like inevitability.

Naim Audio ☎ 01722 332266 Reviewed in issue 212



Rotel RCD-991 £825.00

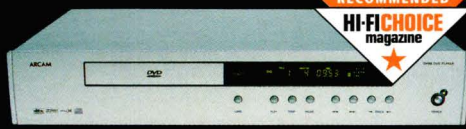
◆ CD player

This is an imposing, heavyweight unit, with a sober, businesslike appearance. The digital clockwork includes a 20-bit Burr Brown PCM-63P D/A converter and an HDCD-compatible Pacific Microsonics PMD-100 8x digital filter. It also includes switchable dither levels offering extra sound-tailoring options, as well as both unbalanced and balanced analogue outputs. Although not officially compatible with CD-RWs, the test sample had no problems with them, or with standard CD-Rs. Tested originally in issue 195 and included again as a reference player, this is the slightly altered AE version, re-voiced for continental Europe.

A Best Buy last time around, the panel's enthusiasm was somewhat toned down on an occasion when the competition had clearly had a chance to catch up. Used with the Densen Beat pre/power amplifier, it was written off by one as "powerful, but with little bass discrimination".

There was an 'edge' with some dither settings that was less apparent with the Lavardin amplifier, and virtually absent with the Marantz PM7000 amplifier used for much of the hands-on testing, underlining the importance of choosing the matching amplifier with care. The standard default setting is audibly the best balanced. Advancing standards undermine the case for a Best Buy, but under favourable conditions this is still a Recommended player.

Gamepath ☎ 01908 317707 Reviewed in issue 212



ARCAM DiVA DV88

◆ DVD-V player **£999.90**

Arcam's least expensive DVD player is not specifically capable of playing DVD-Audio discs, but an upgrade path has been prepared in advance, and the appropriate modification should become available early in 2002. The objective of the DV88 is to achieve standards of CD replay comparable to the company's entry-level CD players. The DV88 supports component, RGB and S-Video and uses professional quality parts in the video output circuitry. Modular construction, flash programmable firmware, compatibility with CD-R, RW and 'most' MP3 discs indicates a powerful, flexible design.

The single most impressive feature of this player is its extraordinarily solid and vivid picture quality. Dts recordings were equally well handled (using an external processor). But the DV88 didn't quite have it all its own way as a CD player. The consensus was that it sounded rather forward and dry, with a suggestion of stridency.

Although it failed to shine as a CD player, it's probably in keeping with Arcam's entry level player. The modular construction makes it a particularly good long-term prospect, and even as it stands, it is a much more than routinely good DVD-Video player.

Arcam ☎ 01223 203200 Reviewed in issue 213



MERIDIAN 596 **£2,350.00**

◆ DVD-V player

Meridian's 596 will handle DVD-V, CD-R and some CD-RW, but neither DVD-A or SACD high resolution audio formats. The plan is to offer a DVD-A upgrade, perhaps by the end of the year, made possible by the modular architecture.

Minimising digital jitter, on both video and audio data, is a key facet of the design brief. Meridian also specifies its own video processing circuitry, and certainly delivers a very bright and robust picture.

The 596 is both a real eye and ear opener. It's arguably the most impressive DVD player I've heard of date, with a bold, authoritative sound that's the perfect complement to its equally bold and brightly detailed picture quality.

Not that the 596 is heavy-handed, instead it seems to judge the weight, the range and impact of all types of music with great sensitivity. It provides depth and momentum without excess, developing an expansive sound that's still very easy on the ear. It sounds, quite simply, very natural without that feeling of restraint or caution that sometimes accompanies an expensive but 'over-developed' product.

The 596 is no whimsical purchase, but it does offer a sound and picture quality that's commensurate with the price, and the promise of an upgrade to full DVD-A.

Meridian ☎ 01480 434334 Reviewed in issue 218



DENON DVD-1000

◆ DVD-V player **£299.99**

Denon's E300 DVD-1000 is a simple but attractive affair based on a Panasonic kit of bits. It uses a mechanism that zips along at double speed when playing DVDs, and 4x speed with CDs. The data is then read through a 4Mb memory, and metered out, the buffer plugging any gaps. The player also boasts component video as well as composite and S-Video, but despite the Scart socket, RGB is conspicuous by its absence. Other useful features include CD-R compatibility, but there is no on-board surround processor. It coped with some test CD-RWs, but not all.

User problems with the machine's set-up meant that the panel test had to be aborted—a shame, as I'm sure the panel would have gone for this one. It doesn't quite break the mould, but it is open and attractive sounding with DVD-Video 24/96 material and CDs alike.

It was one of the few players in the test to make a decent fist of complex material like the Bartok, which can sound frantic when not handled properly, and the David Gray recording, which was punchy and light on its feet. A thinking person's budget player, the Denon does just what you need, while omitting gimmicks.

Hayden Labs ☎ 01753 888447 Reviewed in issue 216



Denon DVD-2800 **£749.99**

◆ DVD-V player

The DVD-2800 is physically massive and impressively turned out. Here is a player for the purist. The video section includes a whizzy 12-bit 54MHz video DAC, RGB via Scart and NTSC component video with progressive scan. Audio is served by an Analogue Devices differential mode DAC with HDCD. 96kHz data is available from the digital outputs for discs that conform to the DAD (24/96 stereo) standard, and CD-R and CD-RW discs are allowed. It lacks internal surround sound decoders, which should be irrelevant to committed videophiles, but there is a strong though not extravagant array of picture tweaking options and picture condition memories. Compilation MP3 CDs can be played.

The Denon failed to excite the listening panel. 'There's a slight loss of bite' was one typical comment, and it subsequently became clear that this equivocal stance stemmed from a perceptibly warm tonality, and an audible loss of extreme treble from CD. That said, it's a most accomplished performance by DVD-V player standards. Picture quality, meanwhile, was nothing short of exceptional, and matched by vivid three-dimensional soundtracks, especially with dts.

A triumph of quality engineering over the gimmick approach, picture and sound quality both stand out, though CD replay is slightly hampered by a loss of extreme HF.

Hayden Labs ☎ 01753 888447 Reviewed in issue 221

DVD-V PLAYERS



Sony DVP-NS400D £300.00 ◆ DVD player

Available in black or silver, this attractive slimline player is equipped with twin Scarts, RGB, CD-R/RW playback. A Dolby Digital (but not dts) decoder is built in, along with a limited speaker setup routine. The feature count includes interactive play using on-screen menus, and the ability to divide the screen into nine sub-screens for rapid scene access or to display multiple viewing angles simultaneously. A powerful block noise reduction feature is available, along with a digital picture enhancer that sharpens edge definition.

The panel liked this player, because it did a limited job well. 'It's fast, and a lot more fun than the last player', was one take; 'enjoyable, undemanding' was another. There were occasional complaints about loss of resolution, but considerable praise for a style of presentation that was warm, though not heavy handed, and which built organically as the music progressed in the orchestral piece.

This is also a good video player. Black levels are truly black, but there is adequate differentiation of tones in shadow areas, while brightly lit areas are clean and vivid.

Sony UK ☎ 08705 111999 Reviewed in issue 221

Philips DVD-712 £200.00 ◆ DVD player

The DVD-712 is compatible with CD-R, RW and MP3 media, delivers Dolby Digital and dts from the digital outputs, and has a memory feature called '5 Disc resume'. There's a single Scart (with RGB) and separate composite and S-Video connections, plus a powerful suite of trick play features.

The listening panel reactions drew a clear separation between the sound of the player and its musical merit. 'Got my attention' wrote one, 'it's coloured, but lively'. It's indeed lively, perhaps excessively so, and the balance can sound lightweight, but the sense of analysis, the ability to hear through the mix was unrivalled elsewhere at the price. Picture quality was even more outstanding.

The DVD-712 has a noisy loader and mechanism, slow control logic, and neither the presentation nor the control ergonomics are anything to write home about. And yet it's uncommonly well equipped, its performance on screen is little less than thrilling, while it's a gripping, if not always an entirely neutral musical performer.

Philips UK ☎ 0208 689 4444 Reviewed in issue 221



Pioneer DV-545 £330.00 ◆ DVD player

This is an astonishingly slim design, standing just 55mm tall. 96kHz audio is available from the digital outputs, and there are four digital filter settings. It's one of the few players compatible with DVD-RW discs recorded using the Video Recorder (VR) format, MP3 recordings and unfinalised CD-R/RW discs can also be played – a feature believed to be unique to Pioneer. There's no on-board surround processor, but there are two Scarts, with RGB.

The panel heard the player with Legato Link switched off: 'It sounds communicative and direct with lots of space around the vocals', wrote one, while another thought the player 'lacked resolution'.

In other areas, the Pioneer rated somewhat better than the average player. Despite some low level video noise and mild compression in dark picture areas, it gave generally impressive results on screen, with subtle skin tones and detailing. It also works well with multi-channel sound. This is an undeniably attractive and well-equipped newcomer in a busy area of the market.

Pioneer GB ☎ 01753 789789 Reviewed in issue 221



SONUS FABER

look to the past to hear the future



AMATI HOMAGE

Sonus faber.

Franco Serblin is too much the artist to settle into a routine, too passionate a designer to sit still. After 20 years, he remains driven to discover better methods for reproducing sound. And just as his views change the way we look at loudspeakers, so has his medium - Sonus Faber - evolved alongside his need to further the loudspeaker art.

His loudspeakers have developed into three distinct ranges - all the better to address the needs of an increasingly sophisticated marketplace. After all, with maturity comes a clarity of vision and intent. At the time of Sonus Faber's birth, there was no home theatre to address, and digital audio was in its infancy. In 2001, the world of home entertainment encompasses discrete 5.1 channel surround sound, purist 2-channel analogue audio, emerging digital technologies such as SACD and DVD-A, and more.

Sonus Faber welcomes the future, yet it shows respect for the past, the most vivid example being the Homage series. This luxurious range consists of the stand-mounted two-way Guarneri and the three-way floor-standing Amati, both embodying artisan skills of centuries past: the beauty and warmth of hand-fashioned cabinetry, wrapped around components which deliver sound worthy of the names of the greatest stringed instruments of all time. For more modest installations, the Signum and the Electa Amator II forge a direct link with the speakers which established the Sonus Faber name. And to serve a multitude of channels, the dazzling, ultra-modern Concerto Home series contains everything from satellite speakers and slim floor-standing models, to a centre channel, to the new Gravis subwoofer.

Whatever Sonus Faber speaker you acquire, whether you are reacting to the looks and finish or the sound it produces, there is only one response: "Che bello!"



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Denon DVD-3300 **£999.99**
◆ DVD-A/V player

In a choice of champagne or black, the DVD-3300 looks more engineered than styled, and comes with a usefully colourful remote handset. The player features on-board dts and Dolby Digital decoders, with twin RGB-compatible Scarts, and a full set of discrete audio analogue and digital, and video outputs. It's an above average DVD-Video player with some useful features, such as the ability to pull the dialogue up in the overall mix.

The leanest sounding player of the sessions, the Denon clearly had strong, propulsive timing. "It could use a little more warmth," as one tester put it, while another described it as "strong (sounding), but a little too aggressive and strident". Dts DVD-Video discs and CDs reproduced with a broadly similar dry, explicit feel and hint of aggressiveness.

With DVD-Audio software, the Denon appeared to gain disproportionately, suggesting it is well optimised for this role. Curiously, there was still a hint of stridency, though generally the bass was praised for its quality, and the player for its large scale, positive imagery.

A quite difficult machine to sum up, with an almost wilful character, but it was also a little clearer, more transparent and detailed than some rivals.

Hayden Labs ☎ 01753 888447 Reviewed in issue 213



Philips SACD-1000 **£1,300.00**
◆ SACD/DVD-V player

The first multi-channel SACD player to reach the market, the SACD-1000 is a solid, elaborately engineered unit that combines SACD with DVD-Video, CD, CD-R and CD-RW replay. An internal surround sound processor can unwrap Dolby Digital, though dts recordings need to be fed through digitally for external processing.

Sophisticated internal topology, heavy-duty power supplies, the rigid demarcation of the video, digital and audio circuitry, and the discrete output buffers all bode well for the performance.

Although it can sound a little clinical, the panel warmed to this player through the session, concluding that it would probably be the most satisfactory of the SACD players in the long term. It was also a real success with CD, which was reproduced to a high standard. Without sounding mechanical, solid and articulate music was projected with a strong sense of authority and good resolution. If CD was treated well, so were DVD-Video discs. Picture quality matches all but the very best, with crisp definition and good colour registration, with little video noise and modest MPEG artefacts. But why no RGB?

This is a first-rate SACD player, an excellent CD player and a more than routinely good DVD player, which must be counted a remarkable achievement.

Philips ☎ 020 8689 4444 Reviewed in issue 220



JVC XV-SA72SL **£350.00**
◆ DVD-A/V player

At the time of writing, this £350 JVC this must be the least expensive DVD-Audio player on the market – and perhaps the slimmest too. The appearance also benefits from its wide, semi-silvered panel through which the dot matrix display shows when activated. Sexy. This tasty-looking player also has a dual wavelength laser, to read CD-R and CD-RW discs. MP3 format discs can also be played, while Dolby Digital and dts can be decoded on board.

The panel's view of its sound was generally positive, despite occasional complaints of a "cardboardy" quality when auditioning in stereo. Detail resolution is a strong point here, while despite a suggestion of midband emphasis, there is little harshness or aggression.

CD replay sounds articulate and there is plenty of detail without excessive brightness. Imagery is well focused, and the frequency extremes are subjectively well extended yet controlled. As a video player, however, the JVC suffers to an extent from video noise and some moiré.

The XV-SA72SL may not set new standards, but it successfully skirts most of the usual traps, and turns in a mean standard of music making from DVD-Audio and CD.

JVC UK ☎ 020 8450 3282 Reviewed in issue 220



Pioneer DV-939A **£1,200.00**
◆ DVD-A/V player

Something of a ringer for previous upmarket DVD players, the 939A is equipped with on-board Dolby Digital and dts decoders, powerful random and block video noise reduction, a 10-bit 54MHz video DAC, a sophisticated on-screen menu system and CD-R and CD-RW compatibility. Construction features include a damped chassis, sophisticated power supplies and separately screened audio circuits. Socketry includes twin Scarts and twin S-Video outputs.

This is a smooth and easy-going player, uncomplicated and always enjoyable, though it never sounded quite like an authentic high-end player. It doesn't quite have the grip or the gravitas, and the range of darker tonal colours and sonorities seems slightly limited. Where it does score is in its lightning speed and attack. There is plenty of texture and pace, but without brittleness or brightness.

With DVD-A material, the Pioneer retained its natural clarity and poise. Brass sounds were strong without being strident, and the Miles Davis recording was clear and refined, but again there was something missing: dynamically, the player seemed slightly but significantly soft-centred. Nevertheless, the newer recordings (Beethoven, etc) acquired towards the end of the test programme sounded very promising – and clearly more physical and realistic than anything available from DVD-V.

Pioneer UK ☎ 01753 789789 Reviewed in issue 213



BEST BUY
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine

SONY
SCD-555ES £1,200.00
◆ SACD player

This SACD player doubles as a CD player, but there are no video capabilities here. Operationally it's like any CD player, except for a switchable coefficient digital filter for CD use, and hybrid discs provide the option of being played in SACD or CD mode. The new front-loading mechanism is the smoothest and quietest of any on the market.

Concentrating on the hybrid discs, which allow SACD to be compared directly to standard CD transfers of the same music, the 555ES delivered a standard of music making that was sumptuous and smooth almost to a fault. There were even times when the player sounded so utterly lacking in grain and edge that it practically disappeared into the woodwork, but still with no noticeable loss of detail or subtlety. There were occasions when the difference between CD from SACD was somewhat less than that between chalk and cheese, but on the whole the SACD transfers had an almost palpable texture.

On every count the SCD-555ES is an exceptionally musical CD player too, using the standard setting of the switchable digital filter. The only real limiting factor is that there's no multi-channel mode, as this player came out before multi-channel SACD software became available.

Sony UK ☎ 08705 111999 Reviewed in issue 213



BEST BUY
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine

Sony
SCD-XB770UK £400.00
◆ SACD player

The SCD-XB770 is the first pure multi-channel SACD player, with no DVD pretensions and no video circuits, significantly simplifying the player in consequence. It will play SACDs and CDs in all their main varieties, which includes CD-R/RW discs, and of course hybrid SACDs with a CD layer. The player includes six-channel analogue outputs and an independent stereo analogue out which can drive different amplifier/speaker chains if required.

This Sony made some of the best music of the day. The majority voted it the one that provided the most musical pleasure and fun. "It bounces along nicely. It sounds effortless, where some of the other players seem to be working hard," said one happy reviewer.

This is very much in accord with what I heard, too. It can be a little warm and woolly on occasion, but there is no mistaking that this player has a far wider expressive and dynamic compass than plain CD. As a CD player, however, it disappointed, even when compared to half decent entry level CD players from Sony itself. The player sounded rather metronomic and mechanical, and failed to resolve much detail, though both stereo and multichannel SACD is so well presented it still ranks as a fine buy.

Sony UK ☎ 08705 111999 Reviewed in issue 220



RECOMMENDED
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine

Sony
DVP-NS700V £400.00
◆ SACD/DVD-V player

This inexpensive player is low, sleek, and not very heavy, but there is little missing from the spec sheet. Video connection includes two Scarts, S-Video and RGB, and the audio outputs deliver multi-channel audio from the SACD circuits, and Dolby Digital and dts from the video circuits. A TVS feature delivers surround-like effects via two speakers, and the player is one of the first to read DVD-RW discs in the Video Recording (VR) format.

In and out of the panel test sessions, SACD from this Sony was large scale, smooth and clean – almost too clean according to one panellist. It was routinely able to conjure up a realistic soundstage, with no apparent ceiling on the sound as the music soared, and yet still continued to breathe.

The rest of the story is one of competence but not excitement. CD replay is smooth and civilised, but clearly lacks resolution, range and image depth. As a DVD-Video player, it is highly proficient, but MPEG artefacts were occasionally noticeable.

Sony's DVP-NS700V is not as good as the SCD-XB770ES dedicated SACD player, but it's not that far behind, which is remarkable for this sort of money.

Sony UK ☎ 08705 111999 Reviewed in issue 220



BEST BUY
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine

Toshiba
SD900E £1,299.00
◆ DVD-A/V player

Cleanly styled and extremely solidly built, the SD900E's disc drawer is hidden behind the central display window. Principal features include on-board dts and Dolby Digital decoding, an HDCD digital filter, and a distinctly superior picture noise reduction circuit and anti-aliasing filter. The player will cope with both CD-R and CD-RW recordings. One good point is that the video circuitry can be turned off when playing DVD-Audio, to the benefit of sound quality.

The SD900E offers a superb all-round performance, and the longer it was used, the stronger the impression it made. As a video player, there are few to match it. Picture quality is exceptionally sharp and subtle. Similarly, Dolby Digital and dts recordings were handled well by the internal decoders.

The Toshiba is also a fine CD player, and an even better DVD-Audio player. The Pink Floyd recording was powerful and propulsive, and the Bartok finely disciplined, allowing detail to come through without intrusiveness. And the multi-channel recordings to hand really did sound special, with a very firm, solid foundation, a coherent impression of detail and first rate soundstaging. This was arguably the finest all round DVD-V/A player on the market earlier in the year.

Toshiba UK ☎ 01932 828828 Reviewed in issue 213



CD recorders

The digital revolution has ushered in a new age of music recording. Bit-perfect copies, instant edits and hard-wearing blank media are threatening to make clunky old cassette decks a thing of the past. Perhaps you want to make compilations of your favourite tracks, or digitise a treasured vinyl collection? The new generation of CD-Recorders could be the answer. So which one do you choose?

Recordable CD recorders initially cost well over £1,000; but now they're available for less than two hundred quid. There are even twin decks available for one-box disc-to-disc dubbing, and they're being incorporated into mini and micro systems.

The current generation of CD recorders all support CD-RW, a re-writable CD originally launched by Philips. You have a choice of two disc types on which to record – CD-R discs are the cheapest, but the trouble is that you can only record on them once and can't reverse any mistakes made in the process. But discs are now very inexpensive if bought in boxes of ten or more, so botch ups are hardly disastrous. CD-RW discs are more expensive, but you can re-record on them hundreds of times.

Although the latest machines do incorporate some useful editing facilities, recordable CD is not as flexible as that other digital recording phenomenon, MiniDisc (a breed that hasn't produced any stunners in the last year). However, recording quality is definitely higher – the best models will give you a copy that is effectively identical to an original CD. Most CD players will play back a CD-R disc, but some have trouble with CD-RW. Older DVD players tend to do the opposite, play CD-RW but not necessarily CD-R!

CD recorders are extremely easy to install and operate. Like all hi-fi components they benefit from stable support and good interconnect cables. Direct digital-to-digital recording (eg from CD) needs only a single interconnect, but it should be a 75 ohm cable.



Denon CDR-1000

◆ CD recorder **£399.99**

The CDR-1000 is a single deck recorder, designed to burn from an external source like a CD player or turntable. With the help of internal sample rate conversion, it copes transparently with virtually any digital source connected to its optical input or one of its two digital electrical inputs.

It looks more like a conventional CD player than many recorders, and it's particularly easy to get to grips with as a result. Simplicity is aided by a clear

display and an excellent twist and press jog control. All normal record modes are supported – single track, program selections, whole discs and manual recording, with manual and automatic finalisation – and a variable level headphone socket is also fitted. CD Text artist and track information can also be recorded, a feature that has taken off strongly this past year.

Though rather a mixed bag from the listening panel's viewpoint, the CDR-1000 clearly has a lot going for it. As well making recordings showing

good instrumental timbre, it was described as having a "delicate, decorous" sound. There was, however, some criticism of soundstaging seeming somehow "smaller than the original" when recordings the Denon had made were played back on the same machine. But this is more a comment on its playback quality than its recording ability, so if you already own a good CD player and you're not bothered about high-speed dubbing, the CDR-1000 is Recommended.

Hayden Labs ☎ 01753 888447 Reviewed in issue 218



Marantz DR6000

◆ CD recorder **£399.99**

Quality rather than quantity is the name of the game here. A single-transport model and aesthetically very similar to Marantz's CD6000 CD player, it features a champagne gold aluminium front and generally solid construction, quality controls, and an excellent CD Text compliant display.

Being a single deck machine recording is in real time only, but CD Text can be recorded along with

the music, either from the original disc, or manually programmed. The control system is particularly easy to get to grips with, thanks in part to a limited set of well engineered controls, including a twist-and-press jog control, and a well designed remote.

The Marantz is an excellent recorder, and is quite clearly a match for anything in its class. It makes robust and well ordered copies, and CD-to-CD recordings are very difficult to distinguish from the originals. But where it really scores over the

competition is playback. It doubles as a high class CD player – fast and fluid, able to cope with both subtle and complex material, and not fazed by densely scored and complex recordings. Some slight losses of fine high frequency detail were apparent, but the muscular quality and excellent timing in play mode was more than adequate recompense. So, if you want your CD recorder to double as a player, this one's top dog.

Marantz UK ☎ 01753 680868 Reviewed in issue 218



Philips CDR785 **£350.00**

◆ CD recorder

Though simply constructed, even rather flimsy, there's little missing from this well-equipped recorder with an unusually well thought-out control system. It's a twin deck multiplay model, the CD playback side being a three-disc carousel that allows compilations of tracks from up to three discs to be programmed for dubbing in one operation, at either normal or 2x speed. A sample rate converter is fitted to suit all major digital sources, you can CD Text edit and it even has a microphone input.

The reception to recordings made on the CDR785 and replayed on a different player was generally positive, though it came in for some stick as a CD player. It's a little rough and ready with a range of material – bass is weak, and the player also sounds rather compressed dynamically.

But it's still one of the better twin decks, modestly priced and capable, with good ergonomics and offers good value for money.

Philips UK ☎ 020 8689 4444 Reviewed in issue 218

CD RECORDERS



Pioneer PDR-609

◆ CD recorder **£280**

The PDR-609 is a modestly well-equipped single-transport recorder. Double speed finalise is part of the mix, as is a new 24-bit/96kHz compatible A-to-D converter. The usual sample rate converter is built in, bypassed with 44.1kHz signals to preserve sound quality (conversion is not a loss-free process), and retaining dts and HDCD data on copies of relevant material. Digital fades can be performed, and a digital level control allows sound levels to be normalised. But this should be used with caution – altering levels is likely to result in peak distortion or less low-level resolution.

Although described by one member of our blind listening panel as “not engaging” during playback, and despite complaints of a loss of acoustic behind voices, the PDR-609 makes excellent recordings – virtually indistinguishable from the originals when compared on the same machine. The Pioneer’s integral Legato Link digital filter has a mixed effect on playback – it can make things sound rather soft and lazy, though imagery seems more three

dimensional and appears to have greater depth.

Overall, it’s a classy and well put together single deck machine that makes an acceptable CD player and an excellent recorder from external sources. It offers a fine array of useful features and it’s attractively priced too. A definite Best Buy.

Pioneer GB ☎ 01753 789789 Reviewed in issue 218



Pioneer PDR-W839

◆ CD recorder **£350**

Pioneer’s latest CD-R/RW recorder is an update on the popular PDR-W739. The basics are familiar. On the right-hand side is the CD-R/RW recording transport. On the left is a three-drawer autochanger mechanism for playback – that means you can programme a compilation for playback and/or recording from up to three discs in one go.

New features include CD Text, along with a front-mounted keyboard socket – plug in a computer keyboard for easy text entry. You also get double-speed recording and finalising, and one particularly cute feature is “instant record”. Play a CD on the left-hand side, and if you hear a track that you’d like to clone, simply press the ‘REC THIS’ button. The track immediately starts again from the beginning, and

the recording drive on the right-hand side burns the track automatically. How cool is that?

Good as it is (and this was one of the best CD burners in the test group), our listening panel still criticised recordings when both made and played back on the Pioneer. One pointed to a “distinct loss of acoustic and presence”, while another highlighted a “thin tonal quality”, though comments like “relaxed” and “competent” also figured. Still, though it’s not particularly inspiring as a CD player, it generally acquits itself well when recording from its own internal playback mechanism, and performs better still when using a good external CD player as a source. If the idea of a twin-deck CD recorder with multi-disc playback floats your boat, you won’t find a better one than this.

Pioneer GB ☎ 01753 789789 Reviewed in issue 218

BLANK AUDIO CDS

Fuji CD-R
◆ CD-R – Around **£2.28 each**

A great value write-once CD for audio recording – gives clear and well-defined results.

Maxell CD-RW
◆ CD-RW

Around **£4.99 each**

It alters the sound somewhat, but recordings are nonetheless detailed and engaging. Certainly one of the best re-writable CD-RW discs around.

TDK CD-RXG
◆ CD-R – Around **£2.49 each**

Sound that’s coherent, relaxed and free-flowing makes this a top choice for CD recording.

All discs reviewed in issue 218



Digital Excitement...yepp



YVP-P300

- Multiple Digital Audio Format Support-MP3, WMA, SMIL, JPEG, Text Viewer Included
- 1.8" TFT Color LCD
- 64MB Embedded Flash Memory & SmartMedia Card Slot
- Li-Ion Battery (Long Playback Time & Rechargeable)
- Voice Recording



YP-30S

- MP3 Playback
- 64MB Embedded Flash Memory
- Voice Recording
- High-Speed USB Interface (7.5Mbps)
- 4-Mode Equalizer/Bass booster
- European Song Title Display
- Accessories: Belt-Clip, Arm-Band, Neck Strap



YP-NDU64

- MP3 Playback
- 64MB Embedded Flash Memory
- Graphic LCD Display
- Expandable Playback Time with SmartMedia Card
- EL backlight LCD on FM Tuner Remote Controller
- Voice Recording



YP-MF64

- Multiple Digital Audio Format Support-MP3, WMA
- 64MB Embedded Flash Memory
- Graphic Animation LCD Display
- Expandable Playback Time with SmartMedia Card
- EL backlight LCD on FM Tuner Remote Controller
- Voice Recording



YP-20S

- MP3 Playback
- Graphic LCD Display
- 64MB Embedded Flash Memory
- Time & Date Display
- 4-Mode Equalizer Bass booster



YP-NEU64

- MP3 Playback
- 64MB Embedded Flash Memory
- Expandable Playback Time with SmartMedia Card
- EL Backlight LCD on Remote Controller
- 4-Mode Preset Equalizer (Rock/Classic/Jazz/Basic)

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Loudspeakers

No other component in a music system offers variety that you get with speakers, and then there is the choice of stereo or surround systems. Here we give the fundamentals for this most characterful of hi-fi components.

The stereotypical hi-fi speaker consists of a 7–20litre MDF box housing two drive units – a main (bass/midrange) unit with 170mm (6.5 inch) frame, plus a much smaller (25mm) tweeter for the treble. The box is reflex-ported, to boost the bass, and contains a simple crossover network of electrical components that divides the incoming signal so that each driver receives the right part of the audio spectrum. And that's about it.

While the stereotype might set the scene, it's only the beginning of the story. As we've moved from mono to stereo, and are now contemplating multichannel sound systems, there's been constant pressure to make speakers smaller and less visible. Among the more successful attempts to do this are the 'three-box' or 'sub/sat' stereo systems. The new NXT panel-type speakers have similar potential perhaps, though it's still early days, and in truth, the conventional stereo pair (or multichannel quintet) of box loudspeakers looks destined to carry on regardless.

A good 'biggun' will always beat a good 'littlun', but it's not that simple. It's much more difficult, and therefore much more costly, to engineer a large loudspeaker than a small one. Low-cost floorstanders might look attractive and good value, but they're unlikely to match the performance of an equivalent standmount.

Once you've chosen your speakers, do take care over their installation. For stereo you should try to sit the same distance from each, and they should be placed a similar (or slightly smaller) distance apart. Bass reproduction has as much to do with the characteristics of the room as the speaker, so careful experimentation is needed to get the best results. Moving a speaker close to a wall, for example, will increase the mid-bass output, but at some cost in midband coloration and image precision.

SAMSUNG

ELECTRONICS



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Acoustic Energy Aego2 **£300.00**

◆ **Three-box active speaker**

Acoustic Energy's super-smart and super-compact Aego2 3-box speaker costs just £300 for our stereo version, and comes complete with the power amps necessary to drive satellites as well as subwoofer. Not primarily conceived as a main stereo speaker system, a major role is expected to be as a multi-purpose package that can be fitted into small spaces and driven from, say, a PC, a TV set, a games console or personal CD player.

The satellites are genuinely minuscule affairs, with a truly solid zinc die-cast box, and a single driver with a 'pear-shaped' diaphragm. The subwoofer is small too, slim and very elegantly styled. It doesn't delve deep, which is maybe why it packs a little too much 50Hz 'thump', by way of compensation.

Yes, it does thump a bit, doesn't go particularly loud, and hasn't got very convincing dynamics. But against those limitations must be set the superb balance, coherence and focus of those little satellites, and the way that translates into musical communication.

The bottom line is that the Aego2 is a whole lot of fun, and although I wouldn't personally choose it as the main speakers of a serious hi-fi system, I can think of all sorts of other useful roles around the house.

Acoustic Energy ☎ 01285 654432

Reviewed in issue 218



Arcaydis Concept 2 **£1,199.00**

◆ **Floorstanding speaker**

The Arcaydis Concept models have solid 20mm American White Oak cabinet work, which accounts for the substantial price tag on this very compact Concept 2 two-way floorstander. It's a good-looking speaker, with nicely figured wood grain, elegantly radiused edges, and flush-mounted drive units. The main driver is a Morel 6.5-incher with a 115mm plastic diaphragm, while the Kevlar dome Focal tweeter is mounted on Arcaydis' own faceplate. The 25 litre internal volume is loaded by a large downward-firing port, and in our test we found we got the best response when it was sited away from any walls.

The Concept 2 was well liked by some of the panellists, rather less so by others. It sounds very even-handed, smooth and easy to listen to, and there was general praise for its overall neutrality and commendably low levels of coloration.

But there was also some disagreement about the quality of the bottom end, which sort of hangs on in without getting in the way, but which also seems a little lacking in drive and authority. Dynamically speaking it's just a little lazy, and one can fairly accuse it of lacking something in drive and excitement, which probably explains the panel's ambivalence. This is an attractive-looking speaker whose unforced neutrality is as easy on the ears as it is on the eyes.

Arcaydis ☎ 01562 865788 Reviewed in issue 211

ATC SCM20 SL **£2,051.00**

◆ **Standmount speaker**

This long-established loudspeaker has been subject to numerous refinements over the years, most notably ATC's 'Super Linear' magnet technology, which inhibits the generation of eddy currents within the motor.

A simple two-way standmount with a nominal 20 litre sealed-box loading, the SCM20 SL has a 7-inch main driver with a massive motor assembly, noteworthy in adopting a 'long-gap/short-coil' approach. A large 75mm voice coil has massive thermal power handling, and drives the 130mm diaphragm. A four ohm load with a low 83dB sensitivity makes a powerful amplifier essential. In-room traces show an essentially dry bass alignment, so some wall reinforcement is well worth trying.

Drawing very varied reactions from different listeners, it's neither particularly neutral, nor transparent. But it has bass to die for. It was clearly on a different plane from the rest, in the explicit way it gripped the bottom end and drove through the musical message. It would be very easy to fall in love with this main driver. It's extraordinarily clean, with a tight dynamic grip that seems to enhance voice articulation substantially.

ATC's very individual approach has its own distinct priorities which won't suit everyone, but its own validity undoubtedly demands due recognition.

ATC ☎ 01285 760561 Reviewed in issue 219



ATC SCM50A SL **£7,020.00**

◆ **Standmount active speaker**

ATC's SCM50A SL is a long-established, actively-powered three-way design that looks decidedly old-fashioned, yet sounds anything but. The difference from its predecessors lies in the Super Linear magnetic circuitry, which uses permeable insulating material to inhibit eddy currents. The top-class drivers include ATC's famous 75mm soft dome midrange, alongside a 180mm bass unit and 30mm tweeter. The electronic crossover feeds separate power amplifiers for each driver (50W+100W+200W). Signal connection is via balanced XLR interconnect.

Sonically the SCM 50As are pretty straightforward. They tell you precisely how it is – how big, how fast and how much bass extension. These are brutally honest to a greater extent than most. On the one hand, charm is not on the agenda unless it's there on the recording; on the other, you hear every transition, be it studio effect or chord change.

There is a degree of dryness that occasionally limits the fun factor – the sound could be a bit more 'juicy', for want of a better word. But in terms of resolving power for your pound, this amp and speaker combo is superb value, all the more so if you like to play music loud and long.

ATC ☎ 01285 760561

Reviewed in issue 218



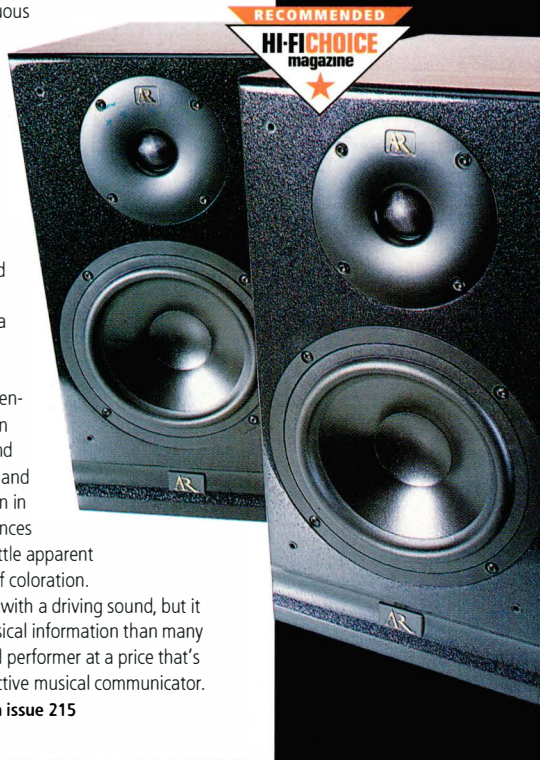
AR Status S20 £150.00

◆ **Standmount speaker**

The vinyl woodprint finish is innocuous enough, if not exactly convincing, but perhaps this speaker's most distinguishing feature is its very glossy and nicely sculpted, textured black front panel. To achieve the contouring and finish, the front is made from MDF, but the rest of the box is actually built from high-density chipboard. The main driver has a 6.5-inch moulded ABS frame, and a 120mm doped paper cone, while the tweeter has a 25mm fabric dome, and both are flush-mounted into the front.

The S20 did rather well in the listening tests, despite its modest price. In truth, it's a bit 'soft' dynamically, and might have a little more projection and texture through the presence region in particular. But the whole thing bounces along nicely and coherently, with little apparent boxiness and quite modest levels of coloration.

This is not a punchy loudspeaker with a driving sound, but it does extract and present more musical information than many of its competitors. A good all-round performer at a price that's nice, the S20 is an honest and effective musical communicator. **CSE** ☎ 01423 359054 **Reviewed in issue 215**



Audio Note AN-J/SPe £1,675.00

◆ **Standmount speaker**

The origins of this model go back to a design created by the late Peter Snell in the 1970s, which explains the decidedly retro styling. This SPe version is wired internally with silver speaker cable, comes in real wood veneer all round, and uses a high quality/density Russian birch ply for the front and back panels.

It features a 'large bookshelf'-size box, quite wide, shallow and ported at the rear – high mass stands are recommended. High sensitivity is also provided to partner Audio Note's low-power valve amps. The main driver uses a 150mm paper cone with foam surround and cast chassis.

Lively and very involving, this isn't the least coloured loudspeaker, which clearly upset some of our panellists, while others were very impressed by its generous bass extension and fine dynamic tension. In truth, the sound is a little 'shut in', and this is quite audible especially on speech, but the voice-band is highly expressive, and the complete audio spectrum sounds very all-of-a-piece and coherent, with tight timing. This fine loudspeaker is proof positive that old formulae still have considerable relevance today, especially when evolved through careful development and refinement.

Audio Note UK ☎ 01273 220511 **Reviewed in issue 219**



Audio Note AZ-One £449.00

◆ **Floorstanding speaker**

Audio Note's AZ-One is a compact two-way floorstander which looks conventional enough, but in fact uses a 'quasi parabolic horn' to load the main driver. Which makes good sense for a speaker that's primarily intended to partner Audio Note's low-power 'budget' valve amps. It's a rather plain, hair-shirt sort of design, with no attempt to soften the lines or edges, and no grille, though the chipboard carcass feels very solidly built.

The main driver has a generous 130mm paper cone, while the tweeter uses a small 19mm fabric dome. It proved rather sensitive to changes in position within the room, and should be kept close to a wall or corner, with some angling, as the maker suggests.

A very mixed bag sonically, the AZ-One suffers from quite obvious colorations, which upset some panellists more than others, but also delivers an exciting and involving dynamic experience, which is arguably more than fair compensation. Speech sounds rather 'shut in' and nasal, but music came through with impressive solidity and authority, especially through the bass region. It's an undoubted success as an 'affordable', high-sensitivity partner for low-power valve amps, delivering music with sufficient gusto and enthusiasm to deserve Recommendation.

Audio Note UK ☎ 01273 220511 **Reviewed in issue 215**



AVI Biggatron Red Spot £599.00

◆ **Standmount speaker**

The Biggatron Red Spot is a plain and unadorned two-way standmount. You do at least get real wood veneer, in black ash or cherry, but it isn't the most luxurious variety. It follows the stereotype of a 6.5-inch frame main driver in a 15-litre enclosure, one important difference being that it doesn't have a port. The main driver is loaded by a simple sealed box, so close-to-wall mounting seems advisable.

Despite its lack of bass power and 'thump', the panel praised the Biggatron's overall coherence and the way it helped listeners become involved in the music. The bass might lack weight, but it's agile and lively with good timing, giving the music real impetus and direction. The lack of said 'thump' was considered something of a plus.

Smooth and articulate with a sweet top end, the dry and forward balance adds distinct colorations to speech, with cuppy, almost shouty effects, and some boxy nasality. This verged on the unpleasant when trying to listen to highly compressed Radio 1.

Difficult to sum up, the Biggatron's undoubtedly good communication skills must be set against its lack of natural warmth. It won't be to everyone's taste, but deserves cautious

Recommendation nonetheless.

AVI ☎ 01453 765682 **Reviewed in issue 211**



Bandor Trident II £775.50

◆ 3-box speaker

Bandor is a small but long-established company that has always pioneered the use of small, metal-cone full-range drivers. Simplicity is the keynote with this all-passive (unpowered) three-box combo. The satellites are small cuboid affairs, each fitted with one of Bandor's two-inch metal-cone drivers. The subwoofer is quite small, and cleverly styled

as an occasional table: its hidden drive unit incorporates separate voice coils for each channel, and therefore creates a summed monophonic bass.

Although there's limited flexibility here, in hi-fi terms its simplicity speaks volumes.

This is not the speaker system for those who like their music loud and heavy. But there are some very real strengths, with clearly superior sub/sat homogeneity. Take care to sit directly on the satellite axes, or you'll lose out on the treble. The reward is considerable musical delicacy, precise focus and well developed stereo images with impressive depth perspectives.

Although dynamic expression is a little muted, it has fine timing and convincing coherence, especially through the crossover-less voice band. There's a touch of pinched nasality here, and the bass end also sounds a little imprecise, but the homogeneous coherence of this speaker system is its own reward.

Bandor ☎ 01494 714058
Reviewed in issue 218



Cabasse Jupiter/lo

£1,230.00

◆ 3-box speaker

France's Cabasse is one of the oldest speaker brands on the planet, and is well known for very classy drivers with large magnets and high sensitivities. Selling for a substantial £1,227.50, this Jupiter/lo manages to look and feel more like a real hi-fi product than most sub/sat systems – as long as you can stop thinking 'elephant's eyeball' every time you look at the spherical los.

The business bit here is a two-way co-axial driver, while the Jupiter powered subwoofer looks a large and brutish affair, an all-black real-wood veneered cube 40cm per side, with sharp edges and corners.

Unlike most sub/sat combos, the Cabasse 3-boxer is a real stereo hi-fi speaker system which can comfortably hold its own with more conventional competition, and its dynamic grip and authority brings plenty of drama and excitement to the proceedings. There's some mid forwardness, sufficient to make the sound a little aggressive and harsh on some material, but by the same token, low level voice articulation is very explicit.

You can make your own decision about the 'eyeball' styling of the lo satellites, but there's no denying that this speaker system delivers the goods, and therefore goes a long way to justifying its price tag.

Audio Reference ☎ 01483 575344 Reviewed in issue 218



B&W DM303 £189.95

◆ Standmount speaker

B&W has launched a new entry-level stereo pair, its first for ages to weigh in several notes below £200. Outwardly it looks a fairly average two-way standmount. Look closer and you'll notice the Nautilus traits: its pock-marked grey baffle, flared, dimpled port, and tube-loaded tweeter.

Whatever the technological claims, it all boils down to one question: does it actually sound any good? Yes, actually, it does. B&W's popular DM601 S2 (now £230) makes an interesting comparison; the DM303 is substantially different and in many respects better. It lacks a little of the DM601's expansive qualities on voices but has a tighter sort of sound, particularly in the bass. There's less weight but more clarity and speed, with an impressive absence of obvious box colorations. Treble can be over-strident on occasions but its performance is far from lean, with punchy expressiveness in the upper bass/lower midband.

All-in-all, what you get is an ably balanced and communicative all-rounder. It proves well suited to a spot of progressive house or the ruffed-up blurtings of some 'nu-metal', yet equally at home with a little Prokofiev. In short, B&W's return to budget territory goes straight to the top of the class.

B&W UK ☎ 01903 750750
Reviewed in issue 216



Boston Micro 90 £649.99

◆ 3-box speaker

This 3-box sub-sat combo consists of two small but very chunky and solid two-way satellites (Micro90x), plus a relatively compact powered subwoofer (Micro90pv). Built with the solidity of a paperweight, the slate grey powder-coated satellites incorporate several clever touches. The powered subwoofer, in contrast, is a boring 37cm cuboid black box, covered in vinyl woodprint.

The satellites alone deliver a well balanced output from 150Hz upwards – much smoother if they're sited well clear of walls. The subwoofer is reasonably competent if rather mid-bass rich, leaving a bit of a 'hole' between sub and sats.

This is not a particularly exciting speaker, but it is broadly neutral, especially through the midband. Voices have a natural and very clean openness that provides fine articulation. Low coloration makes the system easy to listen to and live with.

However, there's a rather 'thin' overall character, due to a basic lack of warmth in the upper bass. Upping the sub's volume can help, but this brings too much bass 'thump', and an increased impression of 'detachment'.

Boston's Micro 90 combo is a well sorted and executed 3-boxer. It doesn't set any new performance standards, but the midband in particular is smooth and impressively evenhanded.

Boston UK
☎ 01423 359069
Reviewed in issue 218





AV32R: maybe the most versatile av processor ever?

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Dynaudio Audience 42 **£400.00**

◆ Standmount speaker

This is Dynaudio's smallest and least expensive model, and the immediate successor of the Best Buy Audience 40. It looks exactly the same, though apparently there are significant crossover changes, a strengthened enclosure and minor driver improvements. Discreet and understated, this is a classic two-way 7-litre 'miniature' standmount. The main driver has a combination cone/dome 100mm plastic diaphragm, driven from an oversize (75mm) voice coil, and built on a cast chassis. The tweeter too is Dynaudio's own, with a 28mm plastic dome.

Like its predecessor, the 42 was a firm favourite in the listening tests. It might not have had as much quantity of bass as many competitors, but it left them for dead in quality. And because the bottom end is so well controlled, the speaker has an impressively wide dynamic range, and considerable midband clarity, even though it doesn't pack a great deal of genuine dynamic punch.

It might be expensive for a vinyl-covered miniature, but the 42 is an aristocrat of the breed, and I'd be surprised if there's a better small speaker around for the price. The small size does put limits on the bass grunt and loudness capabilities of course, but that's true for any small speaker.

Dynaudio UK ☎ 01732 451938

Reviewed in issue 215



Castle Harlech S2 **£1,000.00**

◆ Floorstanding speaker

This S2 version of the Harlech reflects Castle's transition to carbon-fibre matrix main driver cones and a change in tweeter, but in other respects it's remarkably similar to its predecessor. The real wood-finished enclosure is attractively slim with radiused edges all round, a separate veneered plinth ensuring a very stable footprint.

Acoustically very different from the competition, there are two main drivers, both with 5.25-inch cast frames and 100mm diameter cones. One is placed conventionally on the front, the other is fitted into the top surface, pointing upwards, and both are 'quarter-wave' loaded. Regrettably, Castle had managed to wire our pair mutually out of phase.

Not surprisingly in view of its 'differentness', the S2 drew a mixed response from the panel, the upward-facing main driver adding spaciousness at some expense in stereo focus. The sound is a little forward and can become hard when pushed, or on the wrong material – but it's also exceptionally agile and informative, developing genuine dynamic tension and grip rarely found elsewhere.

A worthwhile overall improvement on the original Harlech, the S2 is also a little less forgiving. It remains a very interesting loudspeaker, and solid value for money.

Castle Acoustics ☎ 01756 795333

Reviewed in issue 219



Dynaudio Contour 1.3 mkII **£1,198.00**

◆ Standmount speaker

Hi-Fi Choice reviewed the original Contour 1.3 way back in 1993, finding the speaker pretty good, if rather expensive at £1,200. Eight years on the Contour 1.3 has matured into a MkII, yet it still costs the same £1,200, the changes including extra enclosure stiffening and improved ventilation and cooling for a new double-magnet main driver motor. It's a very pretty little speaker too, finished in a quality real wood veneer – our samples came in beech, which is just one of eight options.

A stand-out success in the blind listening tests, the 1.3 attracted much more praise than criticism. A major strength is that it gets much closer than most to true neutrality, and this is combined with a fine dynamic range and a good measure of transparency.

There did seem to be a slight extra thickening to male voices, a touch of nasality, and a slight loss of agility too. But these criticisms are minor indeed, one panelist summing it up as: "An enjoyable speaker which makes the best of all types of music, staying tidy even when the going gets busy". Undoubtedly, one of the very best compact speakers around, though a reasonably powerful amplifier is advised.

Dynaudio UK ☎ 01732 451938

Reviewed in issue 219



Epos M12 **£499.00**

◆ Standmount speaker

A highly respected British audiophile brand, Epos' M12 looks very little different from the highly successful ES12 from 1996, though the price has actually been reduced by some 15 per cent. It's a classic – some might say *the* classic – compact two-way standmount, about ten litres in volume, with a very classy real wood veneer. It's also very solidly built.

Probably uniquely, the front panel is a plastic moulding which also incorporates the main driver chassis. The crossover network here is deliberately minimalist, and room measurements show well balanced in-room bass down to around 45Hz with the speakers mounted well clear of the walls.

The M12 was well liked by the listening panel, which appreciated its agility, the lack of cabinet coloration and its fine coherence. Imaging is particularly clear and precise, though the laid-back presence robs the sound of some immediacy, excitement and attack. It might be just a little too polite for some tastes, and the bass could do with a tad more weight and authority. But this is such a thoroughbred, with such fine communication skills, it simply grabs the attention and sucks you in.

Epos ☎ 020 8361 8864

Reviewed in issue 215



Excel 202A £1,795.00

◆ **Active standmount speaker**

Excel makes professional monitor speakers. This pair is the middle of three compact standmount models, all actively driven two-ways with similarly uncompromising pro-look styling. Stylewise we're talking functional/ industrial here, with an all-over textured matt black finish on MDF, though the fine detail is all neatly executed, and the sheer unfussy simplicity has its own appeal.

Weighing a considerable 15kg, it all feels very solidly built, and uses a classy 6.5-inch main driver with phase plug and 125mm flared plastic cone. Some flexibility is available: first off, the room measurement looked a little too laid back in the upper midband, but moving the appropriate jumpers a notch gave a smooth and near-ideal mid-to-treble balance.

Musical, smooth and evenhanded, this is a beautifully judged loudspeaker acoustically speaking, with impressively low coloration and very natural perspectives and tonality. But it's also just a bit too soft and gentle when it comes to handling dynamics and transients. The sound is transparent and delicate, with good basic timing and coherence, and while it could do with a little more zip and drive, the sound is smooth with low coloration, and the midband voicing is beautifully judged.

Excel Audio ☎ 020 8354 0820

Reviewed in issue 214



Infinity Alpha 30 £299.99

◆ **Floorstanding speaker**

Although Infinity is a US brand, the Alpha range is very much a European creation. This £300 Alpha 30 is the smallest floorstander, a simple two-way front-ported design in a chunkily compact enclosure, vinyl finished in 'beech', 'cherry' or 'black ash' woodprint. It's a strikingly good-looking speaker, partly due to the very hi-tech drivers and trim, and partly to the heavily post-formed edges around the front panel, and very solidly built. The drivers use deep-anodised diaphragms to create a stiffening ceramic oxide surface layer.

The Alpha 30 drew a mixed reaction from the panel, reflecting some reservations about the rather bright and shiny presentation, and a touch of hardness and 'edge'. But unusually among budget floorstanders, it provides the sort of agility and coherence normally associated with standmounts.

It also has a better idea about dynamics than most, and this plays an important part in getting the expression and intentions of the musicians across to the listeners. A degree of nasality can be initially off-putting, and the slight 'sharpness' might not sit well with some budget systems, but the fine dynamic range, good timing and seductive coherence all come together to make a satisfyingly musical experience.

Harman Consumer UK ☎ 020 8731 4670

Reviewed in issue 215

JMLab Cobalt 826 £1229.00

◆ **Floorstanding speaker**

JMLab is very much a drive unit specialist, with unique proprietary technologies like its inverted dome tweeters and 'W-Sandwich' cones, three of which are used in this three-way Cobalt 826.

The styling is smart and contemporary, if perhaps a little austere. Veneer is restricted to the side panels here, and has little figuring or grain, while the front, back, top and base are finished in a textured silver-grey laminate.

In the listening tests, the Cobalt 826 was close to the top of everyone's list, praised for its weight, control, agility and dynamic integrity. For such a large and complex speaker it shows surprising delicacy and transparency, has relatively low coloration levels, adding just a modest amount of nasality to speech, and has a good measure of dynamic grip and expression to boot.

The most obvious criticism is that the top end is just a little too bright here. It's very clean, to be sure, but could perhaps be less welcome in the wrong system.

All told this is a most impressive package. A tad too bright maybe? That seems to be the French way, but maybe you should decide that for yourself.

Focal-JMLab UK ☎ 0121 616 5126

Reviewed in issue 219



JMLab Micro Utopia £2,749.00

◆ **Standmount speaker**

Smallest and least expensive of a quintet of Utopiae, the Micro is neither small nor inexpensive. Rather, it's the classic two-way standmount, but quite bulky and pricey because

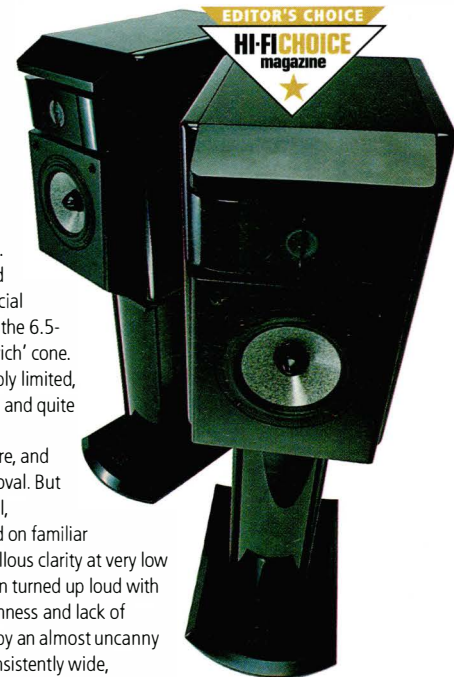
of its top class drivers, and massively engineered enclosure.

The tweeter has an oxide-coated titanium inverted dome, and special Telar 57 motor metalwork, while the 6.5-inch bass/mid driver has a 'sandwich' cone. Ultimate bass extension is inevitably limited, but the in-room balance is smooth and quite flat, albeit with a strong treble.

The MU is a bright speaker, for sure, and might not meet with universal approval. But the treble quality is quite exceptional, resolving details I never knew existed on familiar recordings. The speaker shows marvellous clarity at very low volume levels, but can get 'edgy' when turned up loud with some material, and there's a slight thinness and lack of body. That superb top end is matched by an almost uncanny lack of 'boxiness'. Dynamic range is consistently wide, dynamics themselves are lively and expressive, and stereo imaging is magnificently precise.

Beautifully clean, natural and neutral, delivering bags of detail and musical insight, this is an excellent, classy-looking, if expensive, loudspeaker.

Focal-JMLab UK ☎ 0121 616 5126 Reviewed in issue 220



KEF Reference One-Two **£1,200.00**

◆ Floorstanding speaker

KEF has plans to change its Reference Series early in 2002, but the new range doesn't include a direct replacement for this chunkily compact floorstander. Weighing a hefty 22kg, it's nicely finished in rosenut wood veneer, and sits on a moulded plastic plinth. A full three-way design, the bass driver is hidden within the box, and the mid/treble is handled by a co-axial Uni-Q driver. Free space siting seems most appropriate here.

The panel was impressed, qualifying its praise with the observation that the presentation had maybe been just a little too 'loud'. It could be that the obviously 'middly' balance gave some advantage, but it still sounds good, with impressive overall evenness, smoothness, and fine coherence. Some lack of deep bass is audible, and does rob the music of a little scale and gravitas, but dynamics are lively, expressive and communicative, and coloration is limited to a modest touch of nasality. There's also a slight lack of air and transparency, perhaps because the drivers are set a little below seated ear level. Not the most weighty sound around, this classy compact floorstander is beautifully balanced, and attractive looking too.

KEF Audio ☎ 01622 672261
Reviewed in issue 219



Living Voice Avatar **£2,500.00**

◆ Floorstanding speaker

The Avatar is the middle model of a threesome which all share the same outline configuration, but differ significantly in detail ingredients and execution, as well as price. It's an essentially lounge-friendly design which looks good and doesn't take up too much space. Finished in a fashionably pale high-class veneer, the wrap carcass is coarse-grained, high density chipboard, deliberately chosen on sound quality grounds.

The twin 6.5-inch main drivers are mounted above and below the tweeter. Bi-wire/-amp terminals feed a vibration-decoupled, star-earthed crossover network which uses top quality components, and separate plinths, 14cm high, are supplied.

The Avatar is a lovely-sounding loudspeaker. Perhaps a bit too laid-back for some tastes, it will probably suit those who like to play things loud, or indeed any system with slightly aggressive tendencies. It might sound a little restrained, but it's also exceptionally communicative, with great dynamic range and expression. This innate liveliness simply makes music unusually interesting – not just your regular CDs and vinyl, but also more unexpected sources.

A fine all-round loudspeaker, provided you like your presentation a little laid-back. High sensitivity should work pretty well with low power valve amps.

Living Voice ☎ 0115 973 3222
Reviewed in issue 218

Linn Katan Aktiv/LK140 **£2,325.00**

◆ Active standmount speaker

The Katan is a pretty little two-way speaker, tapered in shape, finished in real wood veneer, and priced per pair at £600 in black or £635 in cherry, while the LK140 power amps cost £750 each (two are required) and the Aktiv modules £125 each (again two are needed), totalling £2,325. The main driver is equipped with a 90mm plastic cone, the tweeter a 19mm dome. Linn suggests siting 4-12 inches from a wall, which gave a well balanced, but not particularly smooth in-room response.

The small bass driver means it's better suited to smaller rooms but the overall balance is brighter than average, which emphasises the impressive cleanliness and clarity of the amplification. But it also reveals a lack of warmth, weight and sheer authority, and the bass could sometimes be overloaded by the heavy transients found in rock music.

That aside, the sound is winningly coherent, coloration is modest and speech intelligibility impressively high. The open and sweet top end is very beguiling, and there's oodles of detail and delicacy here, which all goes to make up a very attractive proposition.

Linn Products ☎ 0141 307 7777
Reviewed in issue 214



Meridian M33 **£1,495.00**

◆ Active standmount speaker

Meridian has pioneered and persevered with active speakers for many years, to support its multi-room and surround sound systems. 'Functional minimalism' is the best phrase to describe the M33. The front panel is just large enough to accommodate a pair of 5-inch main drivers, either side of a central fabric dome tweeter. The textured matt black metal enclosure is an alloy casting, lined with damping compound. There are no 'user-adjustables', but the speaker accepts balanced XLR, or standard phono inputs, and is aligned for close-to-wall siting.

Perhaps the M33's unassuming appearance created limited expectations, but there's genuine hi-fi pedigree here, with a surprising amount of bass squeezing out of such small enclosures. Fine dynamic literacy and range is a hallmark of this speaker. It's very good at creating and conveying music tension, yet doesn't overstep the mark by becoming unruly or edgy. Tonally it's fundamentally neutral, if a tad 'shiny' with it, though speech can get a bit nasal.

This delightfully discreet little speaker does everything bar the low bass exceedingly well. It may not look all that special, but the sound it generates belies its modest dimensions, and is delightfully coherent and informative.

Meridian Audio ☎ 01480 445678
Reviewed in issue 214



Mission m73 £199.90

◆ **Floorstanding loudspeaker**

This m73 is part of Mission's beer-budget, vinyl-finish range. Manufactured in Malaysia, the perceived value is clearly exceptional, because this is a floorstander, and seemingly gives nothing away in size or weight to others costing at least 50 per cent more. It's a classic two-way, based on a 6.5-inch frame main driver, placing the main driver above the tweeter, and using attractive mouldings to make everything look neat and tidy. Only the top two thirds of the enclosure is acoustically active, leaving a blanked-off compartment in the lower third. Listening room measurement favours free space siting.

The M73 did well in the listening tests, albeit with some disagreement amongst the panellists. Considering its modest price, this is a refined design, especially in its control of cabinet colorations. The midband could be smoother, but it's well balanced and essentially neutral, though both the top and bottom ends of the spectrum sound a tad exposed, adding a touch of 'thump' and 'shine'.

Its weak spot is some lack of dynamic verve and expression, which reduces the excitement and tension to a degree. But over the longer haul it proved a relaxing experience that was commendably free from unwanted 'nasties'.

Mission ☎ 01480 451777

Reviewed in issue 215



Monitor Audio Bronze 3 £270.00

◆ **Floorstanding speaker**

Closely related to the Best Buy Bronze 2 standmount, this Bronze 3 shares the same drive units and overall two-way configuration, but on the floor. The front panel styling cues are typical Monitor Audio, with the familiar bronze metal dome tweeter.

The woodprint vinyl wrap is prettier than most, but both back and front panels are textured black all the way, so the speaker will always look a little severe. Although the B3 is a floorstander, it's really a standmount with integral stand, as only two-thirds of its height is used acoustically, and the lower section is blanked off, allowing damping material to be added. It has a 'dry' bass alignment well suited to close-to-wall siting.

As is so often the case with budget speakers, there's something of a dichotomy here. There's some boxiness in the midband, and speech sounds a little 'hooded' and 'shut in', but the other side of that coin is that there's no tendency to sound 'edgy' or 'shouty'. And the real bonus with the Bronze 3 is simply that it does a rather good job of getting the musical message across, which is a good deal more important than just the character of the sound.

Monitor Audio ☎ 01268 740580

Reviewed in issue 215

Neat Petite III £845.00

◆ **Standmount speaker**

We first recommended Neat's original Petite nine years ago, and this one is very similar. It's a two-way port-loaded design, using a 6.5-inch main driver in a significantly smaller enclosure than most of the type. It also has a rather unusual 'area drive' tweeter, where the voice coil is 'printed' onto the thin plastic disc that forms the actual diaphragm. The enclosure is very solid, nicely finished in classy real wood veneer, with slightly softened edges.

There was plenty of praise for the Petite III's openness, clarity and agility, but some felt that the speaker was less comfortable with more complex material. Carefully positioned, it shows a fine freedom from boxiness combined with surprising bass power.

The balance is remarkably neutral and open, if a tad thin and bright, giving fine low level articulation. It was extraordinarily easy to understand the lyrics on 'difficult' rap material, but there was also a tendency to over-emphasise consonants. The Petite III should only be used with high quality ancillaries, and might be a little too bright for some, but it still sets a standard among true tinies.

Neat Acoustics ☎ 01833 631021 Reviewed in issue 211



PMC AML1 £3,700.00

◆ **Active standmount speaker**

Founded in 1990 by ex-BBC engineers, PMC still has its roots in the pro audio scene, and has long supplied active drive packages. The AML1 is a substantial two-way standmount with transmission line bass loading. It has balanced XLR signal input only, and striking styling, with a moulded blue (or grey) front panel.

The two power amps plus associated active electronics are all based on Bryston circuitry, with a bit of equalisation flexibility. The main driver is interesting, with a 120mm honeycomb flat diaphragm made from a carbon fibre/Nomex composite. The balance is clearly suited to free space operation.

For some listeners the sound will be a little too forward and up-front, but that makes this speaker exceptionally clear and articulate at low levels. And it's the way this speaker delivers true scale and weight plus considerable dynamic range and drama that really sets it apart.

It also goes impressively loud, though it can get aggressive if you push it too hard. Stereo imaging is exceptional, as is the AML1's freedom from 'boxiness' and ability to deliver convincing low frequency ambience on live recordings. This is an expensive speaker, no question, but also an extraordinarily capable one.

PMC ☎ 08704 441044 Reviewed in issue 214



PMC TB2 £700.00

◆ **Standmount speaker**

PMC's TB1 has long been a *Choice* favourite, so the news that it was being phased out in favour of a new (more expensive) TB2 brought a tinge of apprehension. Would the new model match up to the TB1 – and justify the price increase?

TB2 has classy real wood veneer all round, and nicely rounded vertical edges to the front panel. It's a medium size standmount with 6.5-inch frame main driver, loaded by a compact transmission line. Free space siting should give the best results, but some wall reinforcement may be tolerable.

For its price, the TB2 did remarkably well in the listening tests, attracting almost universal praise for its natural and delicate midband, which brings easy intelligibility and separation to voices, with fine depth layering, good ambience recovery, and

a welcome lack of 'boxiness'. There's some lack of bass power and drive, but this is a minor weakness in a mostly very impressive and communicative loudspeaker. Outpointing many of more expensive rivals in the test group, this is basically a very well-balanced design that's also a lot prettier than its predecessor.

PMC ☎ 08704 441044
Reviewed in issue 211



Royd RR2 £1,199.00

◆ **Floorstanding speaker**

This RR2 is the largest and most expensive of three Revelation models. Largest, but not strictly speaking large, this is a delightfully compact package, finished in real wood veneer, with nicely radiused vertical edges all round. The basic configuration consists of two Royd 5.25-inch bass/mid drivers mounted above and below a single Morel-sourced tweeter. A heavy steel tray enhances stability and acts as a plinth, providing a good foundation for the spikes.

Although the deep bass is impressively strong, the next octave up is decidedly short of energy, which is bound to affect the sound quality. Yes, it does sound a little lean, a little lacking in warmth and richness, and driving bass lines could definitely be a bit more emphatic. But more importantly the RR2 avoids the mid-bass thump that's all too common. This speaker has all the midband openness and clarity of a high class miniature, with the extra sense of weight and scale that only the very largest speakers usually supply. It sounds big, but never overweight.

This isn't really a speaker for frightening the neighbours with your block rockin' beats. Rather it's a wonderfully delicate and subtle communicator, especially at low and normal listening levels, that cleverly manages to make all sorts of music just that little bit more interesting and involving.

Royd Loudspeaker Co ☎ 01952 290700
Reviewed in issue 220



Ruark Classic CL20 £1,650.00

◆ **Floorstanding speaker**

More contemporary than Classic in appearance, the CL20 is a two-way floorstander with a 6.5-inch cast frame main driver and very individual styling. Although both the front and back panels and the top and base remain parallel, the whole thing tilts back, forming a parallelogram rather than a rectangle.

The top section of the enclosure has extra thickness, clamped firmly by metal rods that pass right through the enclosure, and a proper plinth is veneered to match. In-room traces indicate free-space siting, and also confirmed the distinctly brighter-than-average presentation identified in the listening tests.

One man's brightness is another's openness, and there was plenty of praise for the CL20's delivery, and the way detail was confidently projected. However, the balance is short of warmth, so voices can be slightly thin and pinched, with more than a hint of nasality.

The bass end of things is handled very well, with firmness, authority and plenty of propulsive drive and gusto. Idiosyncratic in both visual and sonic presentation, Ruark's CL20 is nevertheless a thoroughly engaging and entertaining speaker, with fine communication skills.

Ruark Acoustics ☎ 01702 601410
Reviewed in issue 219



Ruark Vita 100 £900.00

◆ **3-box speaker**

Ruark's Vita 100 packages eschew tradition in favour of a strikingly contemporary look, with brushed aluminium (and painted MDF equivalent) providing the main theme for both satellites and subwoofer. The sats are a little larger than average – and chunkily built too.

Roughly a cubic foot plus plinth, the compact subwoofer is fetchingly painted silver and grey. It uses a 10-inch downward-firing driver in sealed-box mode, powered by a 100 Watt amplifier with plenty of flexibility.

The satellites start to develop useful output 20Hz above the upper limit of the sub, leaving a small but audible gap. The satellites are smoother if kept clear of walls, and sensitivity is low.

The Vita 100's beguiling openness made speech very explicit, and worked just as well with music too, bringing considerable expression to Eva Cassidy's beautifully recorded voice.

The bass end doesn't break any records for sheer weight and scale, but it's agile and commendably discreet. The sound might be just a little lacking in warmth and richness for some tastes, but that seems a fair price to pay for fine detail projection. No-one's saying this is the cheapest 3-boxer around, but it's certainly one of the most accomplished, both sonically and visually.

Ruark Acoustics
☎ 01702 601410
Reviewed in issue 218



Snell E.5 Mk2 £1,520.00
◆ Floorstanding speaker

Snell's E.5 Mk2 is a large and heavy two-and-a-half-way floorstander, with two port-loaded 6.5-inch main drivers. It's probably a bit too big to be considered pretty, but it's smartly turned out with beech or black real wood veneer on the sides, top and part of the front, and sits on a proper plinth. It also has just about the best set of floor spikes I've encountered on a mainstream model.

Towards the top of the back panel there's a second tweeter, while three small toggle switches turn on/off the rear tweeter, adjust the level of the front tweeter; and adjust the bass alignment for wall or free space siting.

The E.5 did pretty well in the listening tests, its exceptional bass performance recognised and praised: "Bass very taut and not overblown". Longer term hands-on listening really gave it an opportunity to shine, emphasising its impressive neutrality, a midband delicacy and transparency which is unusual among large loudspeakers, alongside that fine bass delivery and impressive sense of headroom when driven hard.

This is, in truth, an excellent all-rounder, with a surprising ability to generate serious deep bass without boom, while also retaining fine neutrality with good midband transparency.

See Hear ☎ 01795 597590
 Reviewed in issue 211



Spendor SP2/3e £1,295.00
◆ Standmount speaker

A famous name in the history of British speaker design, the SP2/3e is a large and long-established standmount with a design that harks back to the seventies.

The shape and bulk might not follow current fashions, but this speaker is one of very few these days using an 8-inch (frame) main driver – one of Spendor's own, with cast frame and transparent 145mm polypropylene cone. The finish finds top quality real wood veneer on all six faces, the 'thinwall' MDF substrate heavily damped by carefully placed bituminous pads. Free space siting requirements were confirmed by the in-room responses.

A firm favourite with two panellists, it delivers a beautiful neutrality through the broad midband, alongside a slight tendency to 'soften' transients through the presence zone. Voices sound even, smooth and transparent, with good dynamic expression and a freedom from chestiness and boxiness. But the leading edges of picked guitar strings, for example, seemed less well defined.

Continuing the Spendor tradition, the even and natural balance with fine transparency and good dynamic expression is very rewarding long term, although some might find the sound a little too polite and restrained.

Spendor Audio Systems ☎ 01323 843474
 Reviewed in issue 219



Tannoy Dimension TD10 £5,000.00
◆ Floorstanding speaker

Tannoy's TD10 sits in the middle of three Dimension floorstanders. Massively built, they're made from veneered birch ply and internally braced. The cabinet roof slopes downward in front of the super-tweeter, while the sides taper heavily backwards, helping combat internal standing waves. It scores well for style – the supertweeter is mounted in solid aluminium, the front edges are sections of aluminium tube, and baffle is two-thirds covered with black velvet. A 254mm dual-concentric driver, using a paper composite cone and horn-loaded alloy dome handles midband and treble.

The TD10s have an up-front character and tremendous impact. The main thing is the immediacy of the music: both the treble and midband are incredibly informative and transparent. Detail and resolution are abundant, with each layer of the music separated yet with a harmonious coherence.

Bass is punchy, with good depth and plenty of rhythmic drive. Tannoy has produced a remarkable loudspeaker that entertains with its passion for resolving detail and information.

Tannoy ☎ 01236 420199
 Reviewed in issue 215



Wilson Benesch Discovery £5,500.00
◆ Integral stand speaker

Is the Discovery a standmount or a floorstander? The speaker proper is a compact standmount, but the stand is a fixed and totally integral part of the whole package, forming the backbone to the enclosure as well as providing support. Despite very compact dimensions, there are four drive units (two bass-only, one bass/mid and a tweeter).

Sonically the Discovery was very easy to like, most obviously for its wonderful freedom from boxiness and a beautifully delicate and sweet top end.

Few speakers are so effective at 'disappearing' themselves, and just leaving a beautifully precise and well ordered soundstage across the space in front of the listener.

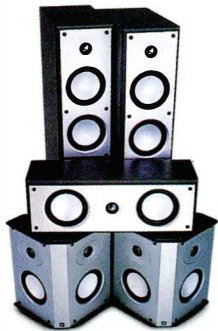
The bass is just a tad 'fruity', but not in the manner of floorstanders, and getting drivers and enclosure well off the floor brings deftness, agility and a lovely lightness of touch.

This is a thoroughly impressive loudspeaker – strikingly good-looking with its high-tech cabinetwork and stand, it may lack the dynamic drama and tension of larger designs, but the subtlety and refinement of the well-bred standmount is its own reward, and the speaker has weight and headroom that belies its modest dimensions. It's also tough enough to withstand serious abuse.

Wilson Benesch ☎ 0114 285 2656
 Reviewed in issue 212



MULTICHANNEL LOUDSPEAKERS



Mordaunt-Short Declaration 500 **£1,599.95**

◆ **Multichannel speaker system**
Individual speakers not available separately

A rather effective combination of shiny metal and black vinyl woodprint, Mordaunt-Short's Declaration 500 package is way ahead of the pack in terms of features and engineering content. At the core are the exceedingly hefty yet very slim MS 502 'power towers' used for the main front channels. Two main drivers and a tweeter are mounted on the front, while there's a big ten-inch bass driver driven by an internal amplifier on the side.

The 504 centre speaker is a horizontal version of the 502, leaving out the powered subwoofer. The 506 surround speakers are delta-shaped dipoles, with twin main drivers and tweeters in each. The built-in powered subwoofers might add an extra dimension, but they're also an extra complication. The upshot is that the 502s should be connected in 5.1 rather than stereo two-channel mode, to avoid phase cancellation problems.

Despite the initial bass difficulties, this speaker still impressed from the outset, for its very clean sound, good coherence and wide dynamic range. Essentially laid back, it could have livelier dynamics, and voices do sound a bit shut in, with a touch of nasality, but it brings a fine sense of scale to the party and likes being worked hard.

The centre speaker is a tad more 'forward' than the main stereo pair, while the surround speakers sounded great. This system is not without its idiosyncracies, but impresses with its sound quantity and quality.

Audio Partnership ☎ 020 7940 2200 Reviewed in issue 210



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BEST BUY

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JBL Xti **£1,189.97**

◆ **Multichannel speaker system**

JBL Xti40 £529.99/pr, Xti20 £429.99/pr, Xti10C £229.99

A total package price of £1,189.97 put this JBL combo comfortably below its group average, yet all five units involved are very good looking, and nicely finished in a polished wood veneer. The hexagonal box shape is strikingly attractive, and also makes good sense from an acoustic point of view. The main front left/right 'stereo' channels are

handled by the compact floorstanding two-way Xti40. For surround duties, the standmount Xti20 has the same drivers, and indeed pretty much the same cabinet too. The centre-front Xti10C is a somewhat slimmer version of the same shape, with twin 95mm cone main drivers.

After some initial reservations, I grew increasingly fond of the Xti40. It doesn't do much to reproduce the weight and scale of the bottom octave, but it does more than punch its weight through the rest of the bass region, bringing a good combination of propulsive drive and authority to whatever's going on. The balance is cautious, and voices might be a little too restrained for some tastes, but the sound stays consistently tidy and well controlled.

What was clearly a class speaker system in stereo worked, if anything, even better in full surround sound mode. While it's true that the Xti10C

centre is a little brighter and more obvious than the '40s either side, the '20s worked really well (sonically rather than visually) when it came to adding the surround tension and drama. This is a fine-sounding and good-looking package at a pretty sharp price.

Gamepath ☎ 01908 317707 Reviewed in issue 210



Rega Jura/Ara/Senta **£938.00**

◆ **Multichannel speaker system**

Jura £498.00/pr/Ara £255.00/pr/Senta £185.00

Rega's 5-channel speaker solution totals £938, a relatively modest price since all are attractively clothed in real wood veneer. The system combines a pair of floorstanders for main left/right and bass duties, plus three much smaller speakers for centre and surround.

The main stereo speaker here is the Jura, a chunky little floorstander with nicely radiused front edges, and a main driver with 8-inch cast frame and 135mm diameter paper cone. A pair of miniature two-way Aras handle the surround channels, while the centre is down to the very similar, magnetically shielded Senta.

Rega speakers both measure and sound 'brighter' than average, which can be a little disconcerting at first listen. But the top end is also unusually 'clean', so provided they're used with good quality sources and amplification, the result is pleasantly open and transparent. The Jura's strength is its bottom end, which has great agility and drive, imparting a proper sense of purposefulness to music, though speech sounds a bit shut in and hollow. The Senta doesn't sound as shut in as the Jura, which is nice with speech, but there's no obvious discontinuity across the front soundstage. The surround Aras also integrate quite unobtrusively, creating an appealingly coherent and convincing surround sound experience with a decent measure of acoustic tension.

It's hard to argue with this fine combination of sound and presentation quality at a relatively affordable price, though do check first whether the bright top end suits your particular taste.

Rega Research Ltd ☎ 01702 333071 **Reviewed in issue 210**



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PMC FB1/TB2 **£2,485.00**

◆ **Multichannel speaker system**

PMC FB1 £1,410.00 (inc plinths)/pr, TB2 £700.00/pr, TB2M/C £375.00

PMC has built a strong reputation for both professional monitors and more domestically oriented models, all of which favour transmission line bass loading. This package is far from cheap, but these are generously built speakers, handsomely finished in real wood veneers. At its heart is a pair of FB1s featuring an attractively slim and rather tall floorstanding design. Delivering the centre and surround channels here is the TB2 standmount, which shares the same two-way drivers. The FB1s are aesthetically and sonically extremely well suited to British lounges, but the TB2 is a rather bulky speaker, visually speaking, for both dialogue and surround duties.

The FB1 remains a lovely stereo speaker, delivering a truly big scale sound alongside a deftly balanced voice band. It has a wide dynamic range and good expression, and the bass just goes on down, without getting boomy or uncontrolled, yet still delivering plenty of weight and unusually clear analysis of what's going on down in the nether regions.

Although the TB2s are slightly more laid back in tonal balance than the FB1s, this didn't seem in any way distracting. Indeed, their basic good quality seemed to complement the tall floorstanders very well. The whole surround package filled the room, with plenty of scale, and a fully coherent wrap-around which conveyed the recorded acoustic very convincingly.

One might fairly criticise this PMC system for being both a little pricey, and also a little bulky, but the bottom line is that it delivers the goods.

PMC Ltd ☎ 08704 441044 **Reviewed in issue 210**



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Tannoy mXAV4 **£499.90**

◆ **Multichannel speaker system**

Tannoy mX4 £349.90/pr, mX1 £119.90/pr, mXC £99.99

Take a pair of mX4 floorstanders, a pair of mX1 standmounts and one mXC centre and you have the complete mXAV4 budget package – yours for just £499.90.

Cosmetically, all come in light vinyl woodprint with silver-grey grille cloth. (Black-on-black is an option.) The mX4 is a two-and-a-half-way floorstander with an unusually well extended bottom end from such an inexpensive speaker. The mXC's two little main drivers allow it to be significantly slimmer than average, while a slab of metal adds useful mass loading and extra magnetic shielding. The surround mX1s are the simplest, smallest of the mXs, helping to keep the overall cost down.

The mX4s are very capable in most respects, though a

little limp and feeble dynamically. The bottom end is smooth and well extended, providing plenty of weight, but not a lot of authority or grip. The sound balance is close to neutral, if just a little thin. Moving to full surround sound maintains the same overall character. The mXC closely matches the mX4s, so that transitions across the front stage are beautifully seamless. The surround speakers did their job capably enough too, though the occasional 'spit' suggests they're better when not pointing directly at the listening zone.

A supremely competent package at an exceptionally attractive price, though as a budget system it lacks the dynamic vigour and excitement that you'll find in the higher price range.

Tannoy Ltd ☎ 01236 420199

Reviewed in issue 210



BEST BUY

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Paradigm PDR-10 **£149.95**

◆ **Active Subwoofer**

A budget model from a well-known transatlantic subwoofer specialist imported by the Richer Sounds chain, Paradigm's PDR-10 was the least expensive in our test group by a considerable margin, though there are obvious repercussions in build quality and features. It's a decent size port-loaded box, though rather light-weight at just 13kg, and finished in regulation black vinyl. Input connection is either via a single line-level phono input, or a set of high (speaker) level spring-clip sockets.

It might not have much in the way of grip, drive or authority, but take a little care in getting the set-up right and it's possible to get some useful bass-fill which is, above all, commendably unobtrusive and discreet. It won't add a huge amount of musical

information, and doesn't really do much to sort out more complex bass figures, but it doesn't get in the way and muddle things up much either. Hardly the last word in sub-woofery, the PDR-10 does at least try hard, and achieves notable success given its price.

Richer Sounds ☎ 020 7940 2240
Reviewed in issue 210



Ruark Log-Rhythm **£800.00**

◆ **Active Subwoofer**

The Log-Rhythm is a large but rather good looking subwoofer, finished in charcoal grey as standard, but with the option of veneered 'side-cheek' panels. It's also exceptionally solidly built, turning the scales at around 35kg. Each vertical edge is a metal tube, adding a distinctive touch and providing firm foundation for floor spikes.

A 12-inch driver operates in sealed-box mode, and there's a generous complement of flexible facilities. A switch chooses between hi-fi and home cinema equalisation, though it does this by doubling the rolloff frequency, which seems a tad simplistic. Happily, the filtering in hi-fi mode is flexible enough to provide useful underpinning right down to 20Hz, without excess midbass boom and thump.

Sonically the Log-Rhythm does exactly what a sub-woofer is supposed to do. Above all, it's beautifully discreet, plumbing genuine bass depth with a fine combination of 'speed' and agility, alongside massive weight and scale. It proves easy to achieve fine integration with most speakers, and simply gets on with the business of delivering real bass as and when required, cleanly and with plenty of headroom.

Ruark Acoustics Ltd ☎ 01702 601410
Reviewed in issue 210



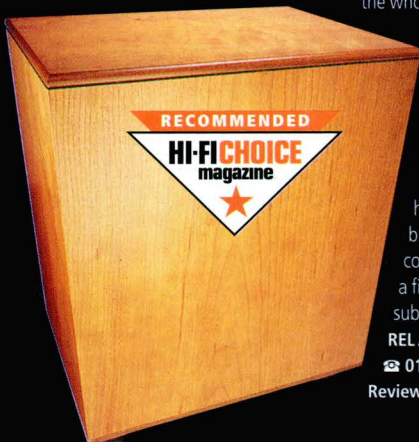
REL Strata III **£800.00**

◆ **Active Subwoofer**

Priced at £700 in black or £800 in real wood veneer, the Strata III is a large but very handsome box, with nicely softened edges all round. It weighs a solid 23kg, uses a ten-inch, cast frame driver with 190mm paper cone firing downwards, and is also unusually flexible, with two line inputs plus two Neutrik sockets, and variable gain on both high and low inputs. The roll-off filtering uses REL's calibrated system based on two rotary switches, measurement indicating that this is one of only two subs in the group test that delivered genuinely deep bass.

Sonically this is what sub-woofery ought to be about. The Strata III simply augments what the main speakers are doing, adding a foundation which enhances the scale and weight of the whole experience, especially in imaging terms. So well does this sub-woofer integrate, you only become aware of its contribution if you turn it off. A little more bottom octave might have been preferable, but in terms of agility and coherence the Strata III is a fine example of a hi-fi subwoofer.

REL Acoustics Ltd
☎ 01656 768777
Reviewed in issue 210



REL Stadium III/REL Q400E **£1,500/£1,100**

◆ **Active Subwoofers**

In a special one-off test, we compared two very different upmarket subwoofer designs from sub-woofer specialist REL. In one corner was the Stadium III, a large reflex-ported enclosure handsomely finished in classy real wood veneer. In the other was the Q400E, a much more compact sealed-box design. Whereas the longstanding 'St-series' is primarily designed for stereo music, the more compact and cost-effective 'Q-series' is oriented more towards home cinema buffs.

The Stadium III is a bulky piece of furniture, built from 30mm MDF, heavily braced, and weighing 43kg. The Q400E, meanwhile, is the largest and heaviest of the Q-series, with a 12-inch drive unit and 400 watt amplifier – you'll probably want to hide its cuboid form behind the sofa. Usefully, REL's input arrangements allow you to augment the bass of regular two-channel stereo sources, and also replay the LFE (low frequency effects) channel when using 5.1-channel surround sources.

Sonically, discretion is perhaps the most important of all sub-woofer virtues, at least as significant as the ability to deliver serious extension down into the nether regions. On both these grounds, the Stadium III proved impressive. The Q400E was more inclined to thicken textures and add 'thump'. Both these 'sub-bass systems' have plenty going for them, but the Q400E is likely to work best with movies, while the Strata III's superior filtering is the class act for integrating with your hi-fi system.

REL Acoustics Ltd ☎ 01656 768777
Reviewed in issue 210





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Personals

The world of personal stereos has become a fascinating part of the audio universe, a hotbed of competing technology from the past, present and future. From good old tape to MP3, this is an area where the 'new format' debate is continuously in full swing.

The early years were all about playing cassettes, but as the analogue world began to give way to digital, so new personal formats arrived on the scene. The first attempts with CD were cumbersome, power-hungry and averse to jogs and knocks, but nowadays CD is a truly portable medium, compact and unflappable according to the best examples of the breed.

MiniDisc (MD) was designed specifically with portable use in mind – compact and hard-wearing media, lower jog susceptibility and low-cost digital recordability. OK, so it doesn't sound as good as CD, but in a personal stereo context it has proved an absolute boon: incredibly versatile, and using funky little gadgets that slip easily into the pocket.

Next was the 'portable digital audio player' to which MP3 or similar data-reduced sound files may be downloaded. It all began with a new breed of personals using solid-state memory chip technology to store MP3 files downloaded from a computer, sourced

from the internet or encoded from CDs via a CD-ROM drive.

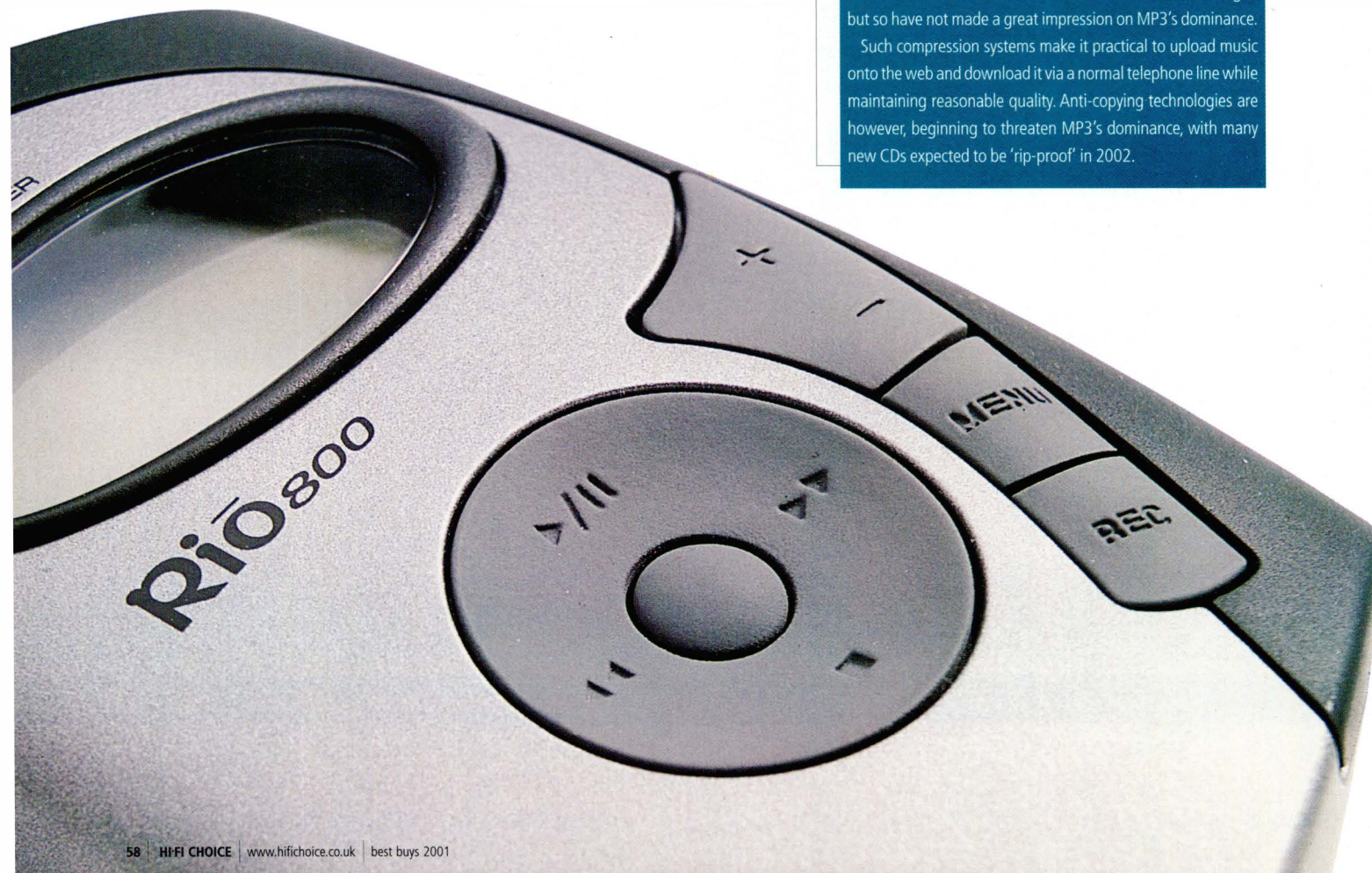
The absence of moving parts is obviously a major bonus, but storage capacity is currently limited and extra memory expensive – something which will doubtless improve over time. The same can be said of playback quality, which is generally sub-MD standard, but will get better as new codecs emerge.

Other emerging possibilities include using the massive storage capacity of a compact computer hard drive. And with a CD-R drive on your computer you can burn over a dozen hours of MP3 music onto a single disc, and replay it on one of an emerging clutch of MP3-compatible CD and DVD players, either portable or home-based. Now you only need one disc when you head for your hols!

What is MP3?

MP3 is a 'codec', a 'lossy' compression algorithm used to reduce digital audio files to a more manageable size – about a twelfth of the size of a CD file. It does this by discarding data deemed non-essential to the end result. Alternative codecs have emerged but so have not made a great impression on MP3's dominance.

Such compression systems make it practical to upload music onto the web and download it via a normal telephone line while maintaining reasonable quality. Anti-copying technologies are however, beginning to threaten MP3's dominance, with many new CDs expected to be 'rip-proof' in 2002.



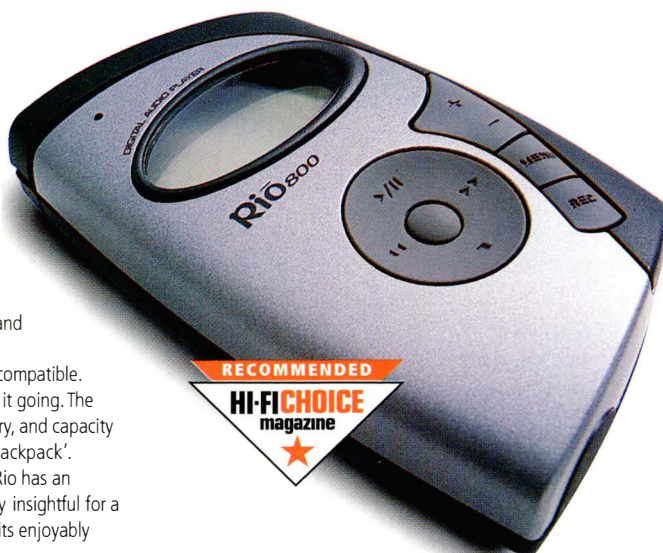
Rio 800 £299.99
◆ Solid state MP3 player

The next step up from the entry-level 600 (issue 208), Rio's 800 MP3 player offers rechargability, greater storage and a voice record function. It's larger than average but it's lightweight and stylish, and has an in-line remote control. The display is detailed and it's also 'codec agnostic', so it can be upgraded to support future file formats alongside the MP3 and WMA included in the package.

It uses USB PC connection and is Macintosh compatible. What's more, it only takes a few minutes to get it going. The basic unit comes supplied with 64Mb of memory, and capacity can be expanded by replacing the removable 'backpack'.

At the highest level of recording quality, the Rio has an impressive level of detail and proves surprisingly insightful for a compressed digital format – a consequence of its enjoyably up-front sound and crisp, snappy bass.

Sonic Blue ☎ 0118 963 7420
 Reviewed in issue 216



Sharp MD-MT877H £230.00
◆ MiniDisc player/recorder

This tiny, shiny Sharp just oozes hi-tech appeal. It's also got more features than any other MD player we know, including a number of trick play modes such as 'intro play'. Its sound is lively and upfront – though treble can get a bit wearing with the cheap in-ear headphones provided.

Recordings are impressively full of detail, with lashings of impact, though the two long play modes sound much less interesting – LP4 simply sucks all the life out of the bass and treble. Small, cool looks and fresh, exciting sound mark it as a winner. If you like your music with verve and vigour – look no further.

Sharp UK ☎ 0800 262 958
 Reviewed in issue 216



Sony MDC-PC3 £350.00
◆ PC MiniDisc deck

When Sony first entered the solid state personals market, it employed a version of its own ATRAC coding (also used by MiniDisc), along with its proprietary Memory Stick card for storage. MP3 files (or CD tracks) could be saved after ATRAC conversion, but the constraints of price and capacity that currently hamper solid state audio storage remain.

One solution could be good old MiniDisc: enter the MDC-PC3 – an external MD drive that hooks up to your PC via a USB link and allows you to save MP3 and WMA audio files onto MD. It comes bundled with Sony's excellent M-Crew music management software, and also supports extended-play MDLP.

MD currently only records in real time, so saving files takes a while, and £350 is a lot for an additional, non-portable drive employing low-capacity media. But MD has portability and editing advantages over CD-R, and the discs are much cheaper than memory cards. The MD concept may have some serious mileage in it yet.

Sony UK ☎ 0990 111999 Reviewed in issue 213



Sony MZ-G750 £200.00
◆ MiniDisc player/recorder

Finally! An MD player with an AM/FM tuner – Sony has squished a tiny radio into the MZ-G750's bulky in-line remote. Another Sony innovation is a separately available PC connection kit, enabling you to wire your MD to your computer for storage of computer audio files.

Once you lose the tinny in-ear headphones provided, the Sony presents you with a quietly persuasive sound which will woo you with midband performance much more subtle than most of its ilk. Its own recordings are clear and full of life, and even the long-play modes are acceptable. Build quality is great, light, but sturdy – and it suits most music types. Best Buy, no question.

Sony UK ☎ 0990 111999
 Reviewed in issue 216

Sony D-EJ925 £150.00
◆ CD Personal

If you don't instantly find this Sony CD Walkman sexy in the extreme, you have no taste (steady on – Ed). Its cool, brushed-metal and super-slim case screams "Buy me!" It has an in-line remote control and claims to be 'Jog Proof' – and it is. Battery-wise it should cover a week's worth of hard commuting time.

The sound lives up to its classy casing. Its charm is its musical balance, not as upfront as some of the competition but generally more listenable as a result, particularly when used with better headphones than those provided. Basically, it lets the music do the work – it handles Dusty Springfield's delicately phrased vocals with aplomb, while lending Garbage enough thump to keep you awake on even the sleepest journeys into work.

Sony UK ☎ 0990 111999 Reviewed in issue 216



Peripherals

Cables and stands might seem like accessories but the quality of these elements plays a crucial role in getting the best out of any hi-fi system. Headphones offer a listening experience that few alternatives can compete with.

Headphones

Not everyone needs or likes headphones, but for some they're a joy and a boon. You can enjoy your music at any time, without disturbing family or neighbours. What's more, a really good pair can prove something of a sonic revelation, and a wonderfully intense experience. A separate headphone amp is a good idea for serious headphone listeners.

Supports

All hi-fi derives substantial sonic benefit from being used on specialist support furniture. Vibration isolation is one obvious element (especially with turntables), but there's still fierce debate about the various mechanisms at work here, and even more about the best way to deal with them. The result is a bewildering variety of choice, in materials, techniques and aesthetics across a broad span of prices. But even the least pretentious will sound much better than your average shelving unit.

Even more important, at least for those using standmount speakers, is to place them on a pair of dedicated stands. There are various types available, some of which favour a light-and-stiff approach while others go for high mass loading. Make sure equipment supports and speaker stands are level, and any spikes are well tightened.

Cables

No hi-fi system will work without cables: interconnects to link the source components to the amplifier; speaker cables to run between amplifier and speakers; and, not to be overlooked, the mains cables to the wall sockets. All can affect the sound of your system, and specialist examples will often bring surprisingly obvious improvements over the sort of connectors you might find supplied by the component manufacturer. Cable choice can be very system-dependent however, so do listen to your dealer's advice, and ask him to demonstrate alternatives.

Regular household electrics don't need fancy cables, but the fact is

that the wide-bandwidth/dynamic range music signal is a delicate flower that needs careful nurturing if it's to be preserved all the way to your ears.

Everything about a cable has some influence: the quality of the conductors, the connectors, and the way they're joined together; the characteristics of the insulation (dielectric); the symmetry and geometry of the conductors. People who get hooked on cable sound can end up spending thousands of pounds. There's no need to go that far, but please don't settle for bell wire and the freebies.



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Cable Talk Advanced 3 £34.95

◆ Interconnect cable

Cable Talk Advanced 3 is finished in a fetching shocking pink outer sheath and arrow-marked for direction in white.

Constructed from three twisted 99.999999% high-purity oxygen free copper (HP-OFC) conductors, one of which is reversed, screening is a Mylar/aluminium foil wrap, with a drain wire connected at the source end. The plugs are gold-plated brass, with a split centre pin and Teflon insulation.

The sound is bright and clear in presentation but paradoxically also powerful and rich. Immediately impressive on first audition, the piano's left hand was weakened slightly and treble was marginally hardened in the Poulenc, adding a hint of shininess and edge to the clarinet. Bass guitar was, solid, harmonics were nicely captured and vocals quite convincing.

Cable Talk ☎ 01276 686717 Reviewed in issue 211



Ixos Gamma Audition II

£29.95 (0.8m)

◆ Interconnect cable

Gamma Audition II cable uses a pair of unscreened conductors of 80-strand pure

crystal, oxygen-free copper (PC-OFC).

The chunky white enamel-finished phono plugs have hard gold-plated

contacts and Teflon dielectric. Cable insulation is polyethylene, and the cable

uses an asymmetric weave in which live and return conductors are held in parallel without

twisting by a third 'dummy' core of dielectric.

The tone of the grand piano was rich, clear, firm and resonant, and the overall sound lacked any harshness.

The Gamma stood out among the mellower cables: it recreates real musical events, yet provides a smooth sound balance without dullness.

Path Premier ☎ 01844 219000 Reviewed in issue 211

Chord Company Calypso £30.00

◆ Interconnect cable

This surprisingly thin and light screened cable utilises 17-strand, plated, oxygen-free copper conductors in the centre wire, surrounded by low-loss gas-foamed polyethylene dielectric, and a lapped OFC screen shield. Low-mass phono plugs have Teflon insulation and gold-plated signal contacts. The cable's PVC outer covering and the aluminium plug barrels are finished in a rather smart metallic silver. Neither cable nor plugs are marked for directionality.

The Chord Calypso sounded well balanced overall, running the middle course between bright and mellow, with fine acoustics and mildly distant perspectives. There was only a hint of hardening, but no harshness or extra brightness. Also, there seemed to be none of the dulling that one or two cables introduced. Though it isn't very impressive to the eye, the ear is the final arbiter and overall this neutral and musically informative cable comes out well.

Chord Company ☎ 01722 331674 Reviewed in issue 211



Ecosse The Composer £51.00 (1m)

◆ Interconnect cable

The Composer provides a monocrystal cable at a budget price and features conventional unbalanced coaxial screened

geometry with an extra screen. The copper used for the central conductor is formed by drawing a single pure crystal (which has by definition no grain boundaries) into a long thin wire.

The outer screen 'return' is made from annealed Oxygen Free Copper (UHP-OFC), and the inner dielectric is foamed low-density polyethylene.

The Composer stood out for its realism and clarity. Piano sounded delicate, with the background acoustics revealed very clearly. The music flowed, and rapid playing was reproduced in a fluid fashion, tripping lightly but surely.

The sound was uncannily clear, the only negative being that the presentation was slightly cold, which made the background acoustics seem more brightly reflective. Of the brighter sounding interconnects, the Composer is clearly exceptional.

Ecosse ☎ 0141 353 0509 Reviewed in issue 211



Prowire VHQ £9.99

◆ Interconnect cable

This entry-level cable from Vivanco is a conventional screened cable utilising

oxygen-free copper conductors, fitted to moulded gold-plated phono plugs. No mention is made of dielectric or geometry, though we can safely assume it

comprises a pair of conventional coaxially-screened, unbalanced

cables. At only £9.99 for a 1.5 metre pair, it's very cheap.

Though lacking the refinement and musicality of pricier

cables, it nevertheless sounded better than a tenner's

worth of cable ought to. Only a slightly fuzzy crisping of leading edges and a marginal lack

of warmth give the game away that this is a budget cable.

Vivanco UK ☎ 01442 403020 Reviewed in issue 211



QED Quonex 1 £20.00

◆ Interconnect cable

This is QED's entry-level stereo audio cable. It uses low-loss foamed low-density polyethylene (LDPE) dielectric, and both left and right channel cables each combine a twisted pair of stranded signal conductors with external Mylar screening, to form a figure-of-eight cross section to help screen interference. All conductors are 99.999% purity oxygen-free copper (OFC). Termination is by phono plugs with gold-plated contacts, and the outer insulation is a rather lurid purple.

Though transients were fractionally dulled and the music lacked that last ounce of joie de vivre, this cable seemed very well balanced in its abilities, doing nothing badly and many things better than average. Neutrally balanced, it fell midway between the more mellow and the brighter cables in the test group, and rivalled some of the more expensive cables. It doesn't quite set the world alight, but certainly deserves a Recommendation.

QED ☎ 01483 747474 Reviewed in issue 211

Townshend Audio Isolda Deep Cryogenic Cables £300.00/m pair, £50.00/m

◆ Interconnect & speaker cables

Townshend Audio has been subjecting its cables to 'deep cryogenic' treatment by slowly freezing and baking them to alter the crystal structure. The Isolda speaker cable uses flat ribbon conductors, stuck together to give the lowest possible inductance. A drawback is that increased capacitance can affect the stability of some amplifiers, so Townshend fits a simple network at the amplifier end. Isolda interconnects use a much smaller ribbon shape, housed in a PTFE tube so only the cable edges are touching the insulator.

This paired ribbon type speaker cable is the best we have heard when it comes to creating a three dimensional soundstage. The Cryogenic process has increased the stereo solidity, making voices and instruments sound more real and in the room – and also increasing the richness of tone and detail.

The Isolda interconnects matched our reference in all important respects, showing impressive richness and focus. Like the speaker cable it has an even balance, superb transparency and little character.

Townshend Audio

☎ 020 8979 2155

Reviewed in issue 220



QED Profile Silver 12 £15/m

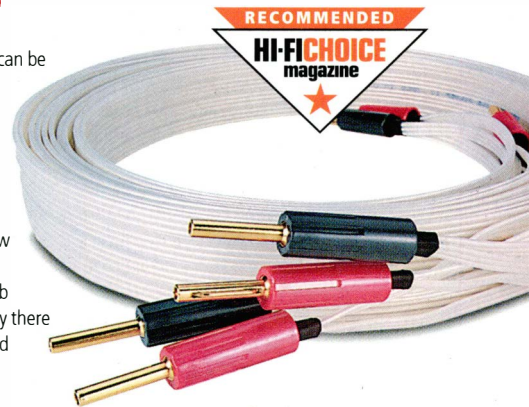
◆ Speaker cable

This cable has 12 separately insulated cores which can be connected in many different ways. Bi-wiring is one option, but our sample combined the two outer pairs of three, and the two inner pairs likewise. A couple of millimetres thick, it can just about go under a carpet, but still has quite low resistance, and low capacitance too in this configuration. The conductors are silver plated and the insulation is low loss, low density polythene.

This cable doesn't immediately reach out and grab you. It's just the tiniest bit laid back and occasionally there is a slight softness on 'bass transients', but extended listening shows that it is both very neutral and very revealing too.

Image depth is good rather than excellent, and ambience is just a little dry also, but the performance is really very good for the price.

QED ☎ 01483 747474 Reviewed in issue 215



SonicLink Rebel £7.50/m

◆ Speaker cable

Although the review sample came terminated for bi-wiring, this cable could just as easily be used for tri-wiring or conventional single wiring, since it consists of six identical colour-coded wires twisted together, each containing stranded conductors of tinned copper, insulated with silicone rubber. That makes for a very flexible cable with a fair amount of copper, and medium capacitance with a very low dielectric loss.

This is a great cable for fat bass, and there's more definition than one might expect here too, but the low treble seems to be a touch recessed. Detail is good, especially given the price, and stereo imaging is generally very believable. Finally, dynamics are unconstrained and there's a pretty good 'dance factor'. All things considered, Rebel just about makes the grade for a Best Buy.

SonicLink ☎ 01332 361390 Reviewed in issue 215



Tara Labs Prism Nexa £9.95/m

◆ Speaker cable

This cable has conductors made up of three strands of very high purity copper, with the conductors in turn twisted together under the sheath – a perfectly normal twisted-figure-eight geometry, in effect. Resistance is slightly on the high side, while capacitance is quite low and lossy.

There's a soft balance to this cable which is likely to polarise opinion strongly. At its worst, it makes the bass a little weak and takes some of the bite out of treble-rich instruments. At best, though, it can be really quite beguiling. Tonal qualities are generally well preserved, and both treble and bass are well extended. Detail and clarity are good and there's very decent stereo imaging. Although there's no one area in which this cable is outstanding, it offers an attractive overall performance.

Choice Hi-Fi ☎ 020 8255 6868 Reviewed in issue 215



**Van den Hul
The Snowline £5.49/m**

◆ **Speaker cable**

Think of this cable as a tweaky version of 79-strand – it has similar conductor cross-section and geometry, but 98 strands, of silver-plated copper, with ‘Hulliflex’ rather than PVC insulation, giving slightly lower capacitance and dielectric loss, while resistance is fractionally higher. It’s flexible and easy to terminate.

The first impression was of a slightly prominent upper bass and low midrange, and the warmth is certainly not unpleasant in most circumstances. There’s good midrange detail and a commendably natural treble. Stereo imaging is quite good, and dynamics sometimes seem a little squashed, making for some hardness at climaxes. Good bass extension makes low-lying melody lines easy to follow, and maintains clear pitching on low plucked notes and tuned percussion. And like all vdH products, it’s essentially civilised.

Tannoy ☎ 01236 420199 Reviewed in issue 215



Audusa Eupen CSA £48.00

◆ **Mains cable**

Audusa Eupen uses a polymer material mixed with a considerable quantity of fine ferrite powder. Ferrite itself is non-conductive, but has interesting magnetic properties. This is said to absorb any high-frequency noise that might be present. It’s thick, but quite flexible.

It sounded crisp and detailed, with good rhythmic cohesion and excellent pitch definition. Female vocal sounded slightly breathy, but it was a natural (rather than electronic) breathiness that avoided unpleasant smearing effects. Bass was firm and tuneful, and overall the music emerged clean and well-balanced. Given the low cost and outstanding performance, it deserves top marks.

Audusa & Co ☎ 020 8241 9826 Reviewed in issue 218



LAT AC-2 £99.00

◆ **Mains cable**

This fairly high-tech cable features a weaving and shielding/filtering system that is said to protect against the mains garbage that can assault sound quality. The conductors are ten gauge, and insulation is made from genuine PTFE. It has a heavy-duty outer jacket, and a Heil IEC socket with a hospital-grade mains plug at the other end.

It delivered a bright crisp sound with good firm bass and unlike other bright-sounding cables, seemed very focused, allowing deep access to the mix without smearing or edginess. Overall the music sounded clean with good rhythmic portrayal and crisp attack. Effectiveness should increase with length however, so the 0.9m version might not sound quite as good as our 1.8m.

Audusa & Co ☎ 020 8241 9826 Reviewed in issue 218



**Audiolinx
Blue Max £99.99**

◆ **Mains cable**

Developed by Audiolinx in conjunction with a Canadian Aerospace company, Blue Max is a fully screened noise-cancelling cable, with the conductors tightly wound in a spiral pattern for maximum shielding and noise rejection. Six Teflon insulated conductors are made from very high purity 20 gauge oxygen-free silver-plated copper, with a PVC outer jacket and protective nylon sheath.

Sonically, Blue Max proved to be one of the most impressive cables of the group, enhancing clarity and separation without adding harshness or glare. Rhythmic portrayal was very good indeed, and left to right separation improved too. Although one of the more expensive mains cables in the group, the price is still fairly reasonable given the level of improvement offered.

Audiioduk ☎ 02897 561348 Reviewed in issue 218



**Russ Andrews
Kimber Power Kord £50.00**

◆ **Mains cable**

This is the simplest version of Power Kord. The cable uses Kimber’s special weave to reduce RF noise, and thus becomes more effective as length increases.

Power Kord proved detailed and crisp, improving imaging and reducing high-frequency hash. Rhythmic portrayal was excellent, as was clarity. Despite already having quite a bit of Kimber in my system, adding just one Power Kord improved things further. To get costs down, a new thinner outer sheath has been used, making the cable more flexible. For an extra £25 it’s possible to buy a standard Power Kord fitted with a 320 wattage IEC plug, which makes an audible improvement. Extra length costs £10 per foot (30cm).

Russ Andrews Accessories ☎ 01539 825500 Reviewed in issue 218



**Synergistic Research
Master AC Line Coupler**

£238.00

◆ **Mains cable**

Thick, heavy, inflexible and decidedly expensive at £238, this cable is said to eliminate RF interference through balanced cable geometry that shunts noise on the AC line to ground. On a purely practical level, it may be difficult to use with components placed fairly close to walls.

The sound was very sharp and open, with clean overtones and crisp transients. At the same time the presentation is clean and free from smearing. Musical incidents – like when the drummer plays off the beat on Suzanne Vega’s *Luka* – stand out clearly, making the music more interesting and eventful. Imaging was very precise; everything sharply delineated without seeming over-bright or etched. But oh, the price! What does one do? Spend £238 on four or five cheaper cables, or just buy this one? The choice is yours.

Ultimate Sonics ☎ 020 8534 0134 Reviewed in issue 218



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P U R E D E S I G N . P U R E P E R F O R M A N C E .



RECOMMENDED
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine

Atacama Equinox £279.97

◆ Equipment support

Well liked on aesthetic grounds, the Equinox is a step in the modular direction: you buy a £140 two-shelf base unit, and then add £70 shelves to a maximum of five levels. Great idea, especially as each additional shelf is spike de-coupled. We liked the curvaceous frontage, and its tripod design makes set-up a doddle. The TIG welded steel frame is stiff and rigid and the large glass shelves offer plenty of space.

A good blast of the bass-heavy *Post* album from Björk demonstrated the Atacama's capability to manage low frequency bass. Bass transients retained their pace and timing, and extension was well controlled throughout some quite demanding music. Despite the presence of some noticeably harsh glass characteristics, the rack was hugely dynamic and musical. This fine modular rack is a bass star, a good musical performer, and a bit of a looker too.

Atacama ☎ 01455 283251 Reviewed in issue 217



BEST BUY
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine

Clearlight Audio RDC Aspekt Rack £549.95

◆ Equipment support

Clearlight is a German brand that makes great play of something called RDC, a resin-based compound containing grains of lead, rubber and other materials, claimed to be non-resonant and able to transmit energy in a linear fashion. The shelves are MDF with a routed-out helix filled with RDC, while the frame is again MDF, with hardwood corner struts. Three RDC cones level the structure.

Without doubt the most laid back in the test group, the notably high price is matched by a sonic performance which gives, well, very little. And that is its greatest strength – it's incredibly relaxed and natural-sounding. On Massive Attack's *Protection*, all the sibilance in Tracy Thorn's voice is smoothed away. High resolution was achieved as the rack simplified complex musical layers. A top performer with matching price tag, backed up by stunning and laid back neutrality.

hifforsale ☎ 0870 241 2469
Reviewed in issue 217

Quadraspire Q4 Reference £480.00

◆ Equipment support

It may wobble, but it won't fall down. This latest Quadraspire is based on the successful Q4 (issue 206) but now the shelves are attached to decoupling spacers which are an integral part of the stand's leg. Six column length options give a good choice of shelf heights and a variety of finishes are available for both shelf and column.

Tonally neutral with an ever-so-slightly laid-back appeal, this rack delivered detail, resolution, and a composed presentation. Led Zeppelin's *The Song Remains The Same* suffered no major coloration, allowing the electric layers to remain separated and detailed. Bass was notably impressive, punchy, quick, and well extended.

An informative midband and fast bass transients make for a fine musical performer. The fact that it's good to look at only adds to its appeal.

Quadraspire ☎ 01225 333360 Reviewed in issue 217



RECOMMENDED
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



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magazine

Sound Organisation Z560 £195.00

◆ Equipment support

The Z560 has been modified to house today's bulky AV equipment. It's a very simple design, with 6mm smoked glass sitting on light-weight steel shelves. Three finishes are available for this 'classic' five-shelf rack. The clap test revealed a very quick sound decay, and a good tap gave a 'dead' hollow sound. Once the music started the Sound

Organisation rack fooled me into thinking it was a wood-based item. The wonderfully slick *Constant Craving* by kd lang demonstrated the rack's ability to smooth out high frequencies and relax snare drum attack. Bass was a bit lean, but it timed well. For less than £200 this stand is a winner.

Veda Products ☎ 01279 501111 Reviewed in issue 217

Townshend Audio Seismic Sink Stand

£900.00

◆ Equipment support

The latest version of the SSS has two air pillow load cells, top and bottom, which makes the rack more stable than the original. By decoupling the rack

using air alone the Townshend goes further toward total isolation than most.

After some experimentation with air pressure (lower is better), the Seismic Sink proved that it is a class performer. It has a lively, open sound with exceptional resolution. The low end has terrific extension and control, bass and midband detail comes through effortlessly, and transparency is admirable.

Townshend Audio ☎ 020 8979 2155 Reviewed in issue 217



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Cyrus CLS50 £200.00

◆ Speaker stand

Stands Unique is the reputable stand-maker behind this unusual and attractive Cyrus stand. The top and base are thick glass, the support pillar is two slim steel tubes flanking hardwood fillet. Carbon fibre washers sit between the spikes and the glass base, and between the rods and top-plate, while three CF studs support the speaker itself.

First impression is that the sound is a little understated, but it's actually very clean and subtle, with a fine ability to reproduce information across a wide dynamic range and bandwidth, while adding very little coloration of its own. Most impressive is its clarity through the bass region. The sound is dry, but largely because it's exceptionally clean and free from congestion here, yet its powers of analysis are formidable. This Cyrus is a definite contender, with an unusual combination of style and performance at a realistic price.

Cyrus ☎ 01480 435577
Reviewed in issue 220



RECOMMENDED
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine

hne Cableway £399.00

◆ Speaker stand

hne's £399 Cableway is specifically aimed at the enthusiast for whom performance is the prime criterion, yet it's also one of the best-looking stands around, in a nicely understated way. The key ingredient is granite, forming the base and top plates and combining with MDF (for damping) in the central pillar. The whole stand is non-metallic, and so won't affect the signals in cables ducted up through the central pillar.

Immediately and obviously a class act, the Cableway helps a quality loudspeaker deliver an awesome dynamic range. Tonally it's dry, lean and a little forward, which will suit some speakers better than others. Dynamics do sound just a shade muted, and there does seem to be a slight thickening in midbass textures, but the Cableway's clean, sweet and neutral transparency is exceptional in sorting out large scale orchestral material. Highly Recommended.

hne ☎ 01777 708673
Reviewed in issue 220



RECOMMENDED
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine

Kudos S50 £114.95

◆ Speaker stand

The Kudos S50 has a large diameter central steel tube pillar, and a wide, stable and substantial steel tripod base. It's very easily assembled, the only option being to add some mass/damping ballast to the pillar. Good 'n' thick floor spikes are decorated by large domed lock-nuts.

It's some years since I heard an S50, and I was really surprised at how good such a modestly priced stand could sound. Tonally it's quite distinctive – warm and rich, without the over-projected voice band so often found elsewhere.

Alongside that full and slightly laid-back balance, the S50 has formidable bass delivery with real power and authority, and an impressively wide dynamic range across a broad bandwidth. Presence projection and sweetness are a little less than the best, but in truth the S50 gives very little away, and clearly continues to deserve Best Buy status.

Neat Acoustics ☎ 01833 631021
Reviewed in issue 220



BEST BUY
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine

Partington Dreadnought £100.00

◆ Speaker stand

Nicely presented in a metallic slate-grey, styling is perhaps a little prosaic here, but in engineering terms Partington's £100 Dreadnought is very impressive indeed, fully welded and showing considerable attention to fine detail. The top and base are filled with a silicon/iron-loaded resin, for optimum damping, for example. The five-section pillar gives the rather small top plate no opportunity for flexing. Ours came with some sand ballast in the uprights, but you'd normally have to do this for yourself.

Notably clean and sweet for such an inexpensive design, the Dreadnought has a dry, tight bass. It's notably free from thickening or overhang, yet provides genuine authority and drive when required, underpinning a compellingly coherent projection of detail and expression up in the voice band. A fine-sounding stand that's exceptionally well built and very realistically priced, the Dreadnought deserves confident Recommendation.

Partington ☎ 01474 709299
Reviewed in issue 220



RECOMMENDED
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine

Sound Organisation Z522 £95.00

◆ Speaker stand

The Z522 did very well last year (issue 202), but subtle changes bring it back for fresh assessment. There's a handsome new slate grey finish, the baseplate now uses 3mm steel, and the floor spikes fit into large welded sockets. Top and base are bolted to four substantial square-section pillars, which take the weight up to a hefty 10kg, even without any extra fill.

Sound quality is well up with the better models too. It's dynamically just a little 'soft' compared with the best, but still musters plenty of pace and authority. It delivers the bass end with good drive and solidity, albeit a mild thickening of textures. The top end is open, clean and explicit, though it can get slightly unruly at times.

The Z522 delivers a solid performance at a very realistic £95, and deserves confident Recommendation.

Veda Products ☎ 01279 501111
Reviewed in issue 220



RECOMMENDED
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine

AKG K-44 £19.95

◆ Stereo headphones

For £20 AKG offers its 'professional know-how' in this smart, if unglamorous, pair of cans. They're all plastic, but feature a self-adjusting headband and cushioned circumaural earpads – admittedly a little sweaty in hot weather. Don't buy them untested, though, because comfort will depend greatly on the shape of your ears. The K-44s are a closed-back design, but in practice there is little exclusion of outside sounds.

If the worst one can say about such an affordable product is that it's a bit bright, things can't be bad. Granted, detail and tonal neutrality are not the best, but in no area is the sound truly disappointing. In fact the AKG's portrayal of acoustic space and ambience was among the best, and they scored particularly well with a tricky voice and piano recording. They have a pleasing quality with vocals and a general freedom from 'spit', though close-miked trumpet and sax becomes a little aggressive at high volumes. Bass is decent rather than awe-inspiring.

The overall impression here is of a well integrated audio bandwidth, a lively get-up-and-go character and, frankly, better detail than one has any right to expect for 20 quid.

Arbiter Group ☎ 020 8202 1199 Reviewed in issue 219



Philips HP890 £65.61

◆ Stereo headphones

Physically, these Philips 'phones make an excellent first impression, pairing an impressive appearance with truly luxurious build. The cushions are soft, ear-pampering velvet, and unless you're sensitive to their considerable weight, you should find them extremely comfortable. Philips quotes a very ambitious specification, including a 5Hz to 30kHz frequency response, and a maximum SPL (sound pressure level) of 138dB, which I'm certainly prepared to take on trust!

Although there was a trace of excessive sibilance in evidence, the HP890s qualified as the most capable all-rounders in their group test. There's a nice balance between the frequency extremes and the midband, and detail is excellent. There's a little coloration, but thankfully it's subtle enough not to intrude noticeably, and the overall result is convincing and involving.

These fine Philips cans succeed in combining an excellent comfort factor with a very pleasing listening experience for the price, so we have no hesitation in Recommending them with confidence.

Philips UK ☎ 020 8665 6350 Reviewed in issue 219



Sony MDR-CD480 £40.00

◆ Stereo headphones

Sony covers possibly the widest range of headphone aspirations, and these are from the serious-but-sensible part of the range, with self-adjusting headband, the obligatory mini-jack plus quarter-inch adapter, open-backed earpieces and comfortable foam cushions.

Several headphones in our test were well on the bright side of neutral, and these are barely, if at all, treble-shy. But they are delightfully untroubled by background hiss, which you'll welcome if, like me, you have a lot of elderly recordings on noisy tape. Also, they don't make vocal consonants sound like a bacon slicer. There's enough treble to make trumpets and hi-hats lifelike, and that's plenty.

There is occasional coloration in the midrange, most obvious on guitar and solo piano sounded a little hard. Bass is not quite perfect either, being full enough in the upper reaches, but a little more elusive at the low-end depths.

Despite a few caveats, they're consistently listenable. Good comfort and lack of obvious brightness made for very pleasant long-term listening.

Sony UK ☎ 08705 111999 Reviewed in issue 219



Vivanco SR222S £29.99

◆ Stereo headphones

Vivanco's 'Airspace' SR222S has supra-aural earpieces, meaning that they sit on the ears rather than around them. Together with the rather strong headband spring, that means they're a little less comfortable than some, but perfectly bearable if positioned with care. There's the added convenience of an in-chord volume control.

We're not dealing with ultimate hi-fi subtlety here, but there's a lively quality to the Vivancos' sound that makes them involving and enjoyable. Their flaws include a variety of midband colorations, and they can sound rather hard at high levels, but they remain bouncy and fun.

Bass is quite well done, with decent extension and clarity, but instruments like guitar and sax can develop a touch of honk, while orchestral violins sound a little synthetic too.

Even when the music proves a little too challenging for these cans, it's still clear what's going on, and there's nothing in the sound to bring on headaches or fatigue. Do check for comfort, but the SR222S represent good basic value.

Vivanco UK ☎ 01442 403020 Reviewed in issue 219



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As with all ProAc models, the cabinets are finished in fine real wood veneer and set on plinths with spikes for optimum stability and coupling. These exceptional speakers will look as good as they sound for years to come.

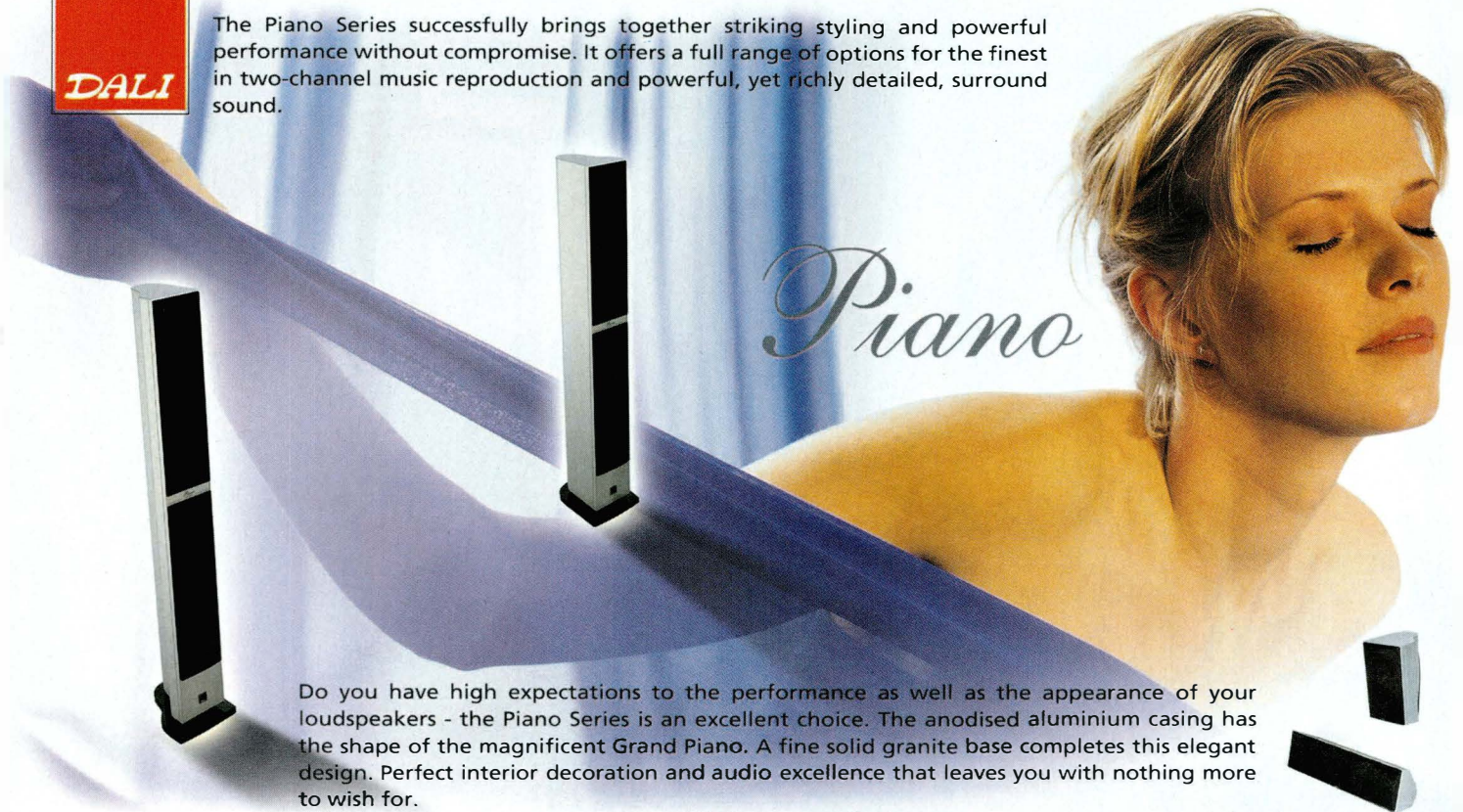


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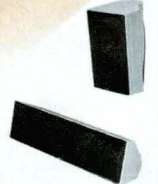


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Systems

Complete hi-fi systems are never likely to scale the heights that can be achieved by a carefully chosen collection of separates, but there are real advantages in taking the pre-packaged approach nonetheless.

Hi-fi components don't operate in a vacuum; they need to be connected together to form a system. If this is done wisely, the whole can undoubtedly be greater than the sum of the parts.

That is most likely to be the case with 'one-make' systems, like the complete 'lifestyle' packages which make up the bulk of our system reviews. A 'one make system' of a rather different kind is partly answered by ATC, combining compact 'active' (powered) loudspeakers and a high class preamp to very good effect.

Elsewhere, with new formats making multichannel increasingly important for music, we 'mixed'n'matched' a number of AV receivers with surround sound speaker systems and used the same DVD-A and SACD players with each. Achieving a good match here is partly a matter of good fortune, some combina-

tions clearly working better together than others.

This business of system matching is one of the trickier areas of hi-fi. The 'pre-packaged' approach at least ensures that all the bits will work properly together, although in truth it's quite rare to encounter significant 'sounds awful' incompatibility problems amongst mainstream hi-fi separate components today.

Outside of the exotic world of 'high end' componentry, the business of system matching today has much more to do with subtle considerations, such as avoiding partnering a bright sounding amplifier or source with similarly bright sounding speakers — or for that matter, combining dull with dull. It sounds simple enough, but it's actually rather important to make the system sound well balanced, and stay that way at all listening levels.

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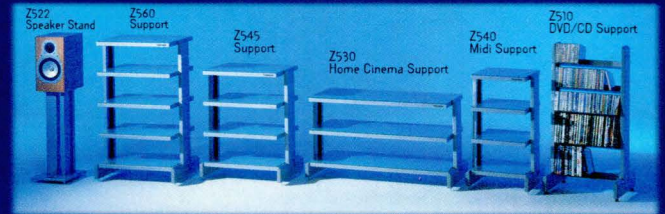
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JVC FS-SD1000R £400.00

◆ Lifestyle system

And now for something defiantly different. The main idea seems to be to replace conventional speakers with a pair of sexy silver candlesticks. Don't, whatever you do, try jamming candles in them, but within reason you can plonk them pretty much where you please.

Inside the foot high columns are rectangular polymer track diaphragms, 10mm x 90mm. A case of fashion subsuming function? JVC says the speakers were developed to mimic a single point source for "higher definition" and that the cylindrical shape reduces enclosure diffraction for unusually wide directivity and a smooth spread of sound.

Sound devoid of bass, that is, which is where the 60 watt active subwoofer comes in. A small but impressively weighty unit, it's easy enough to tuck away behind a sofa or in a corner. The electronics are all housed in a tiny, low-rise unit that's big on flashing lights. This Perspex-lidded, chrome-buttoned control centre packs in top-loading CD, three-band tuner and a 15-watts-per-channel amp.

Sonically the JVC has some admirable qualities – a certain warmth, good bass weight and, perhaps most remarkably, the ability to conjure up a reasonably convincing stereo image wherever you're sitting. What it doesn't have is quite enough treble energy and presence to sparkle. This gives its sound a refined but slightly grey and shut-in quality. Treble detail isn't bad, and the candle stick speakers are by no means inarticulate. They communicate well, but will never send a tingle down your spine.

Although the shortfall of bass is masked by the punchy little sub, integration isn't great, and the midrange inevitably suffers, sounding a little phasy and recessed, the more so when you whack the volume up.

That said, this is a clever take on the 'style' system theme, which will work well in a variety of situations. Its smooth treble and stable imaging gives it practical advantages over many rivals – a stylish music solution for the bedroom, dining room or home office.

JVC UK ☎ 0870 3305000
Reviewed in issue 220



RECOMMENDED
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



Cyrus Quattro CD/preamp/tuner & SmartPower

£1,200.00 (without speakers)
◆ Lifestyle system

When it comes to giving your product range a lifestyle spin, Cyrus is left twiddling its thumbs. It doesn't have to do a thing but consider colour. Its hi-fi building bricks have been half width from day one – for so long now that even the latest products have a classic, almost iconic air. Aesthetically, the two-box Quattro combo is the very embodiment of style-fi: clean, cool, instantly desirable. Ergonomics are a model of clarity; the remote brilliantly simple.

As if that wasn't enough, Cyrus comes from the heartland of 'real hi-fi', with audiophile credibility. The main Quattro unit is configured as a CD/preamp costing £650. The CD bit is essentially a dAD3 with its 24-bit Burr-Brown DAC. There's one line-level input, two tape loops and a coaxial digital output. Just add any Cyrus power amp, such as the £550 60 watt SmartPower. An extra £200 secures the plug in,

nine-preset RDS FM tuner module, and a further £350 gets you multi-room zoning. Upgradability is one obvious advantage of the Cyrus approach.

Sonically it's a clean and detailed combination. The tuner's presentation has plenty of verve and sparkle, but might be a little lean for some tastes. That's easily fixed, though. Quattro comes sans speakers, so choose something with a bit of bottom end welly.

Bass quality is a highlight – smooth, extended and nicely tuneful with good leading edge definition and agility. The topmost octaves are clear and bright but not fizzy, while midrange is crisp and very explicit, if not terribly forgiving of rough and ready recordings.

Quattro is expensive for a compact 'lifestyle' system, and largely bereft of the bells and whistles found on many of its cheaper rivals. It's almost too good to be tucked away in a bedroom or a study, but that's hardly Cyrus's fault. It looks great and sounds even better – real hi-fi without the hassle.

Cyrus ☎ 01480 435577 Reviewed in issue 220



Denon UD-M30 & CDR-M30 £600.00

◆ Lifestyle system

What Denon doesn't know about crafting classy, well-engineered mini and micro systems could probably be scratched on the back of a pin head. Its image is of 'proper' separates hi-fi that have somehow been squeezed into stylish, half-width boxes – a full measure of understated quality (reasonably priced to boot), pitched at the informed design-conscious home maker and hi-fi *cognoscenti* alike.

The M30 series surpasses just about everything the company has done. Hair has been let down with the remote – oval section, purple flashes, a few triangular buttons – but usability is superb. Just two units do the business: a 20 watts per channel CD receiver with 40 preset FM/AM tuner and matching CD-R deck, and a pair of compact SC-M10 speakers – made for Denon by Mission.

It's a class act – with both radio and CD it sounds fresh, incisive, musically adept and convincing. Rhythmically lucid and surefooted, you never feel it's

dragging its feet. It keys in to up-tempo material enthusiastically, and its bass is solid and nimble, if a little lacking in weight and extension.

Presentation is helped by a clear, informative midrange with bags of ambience and good attack on strings and brass. The M30 renders complex productions easy to analyse yet retains its musically deft touch. For a micro, there's considerable discrimination and finesse and the system's imaging capabilities are well above average. It makes excellent CD copies, too, even at double speed.

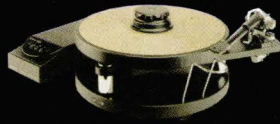
Really tug on the volume and just occasionally you become aware of slightly thickened tonal textures. Yet it's hard not to like the way the Denon does things. Crucially it puts the music first and hi-fi second. There's no mush or unnatural warmth; it just gets on with the job in an honest, revealing and enjoyable fashion. If you value clarity, subtlety and coherence above scale and flesh-pummelling volume, this will do very nicely, thanks.

Hayden Labs ☎ 01753 888447 Reviewed in issue 220

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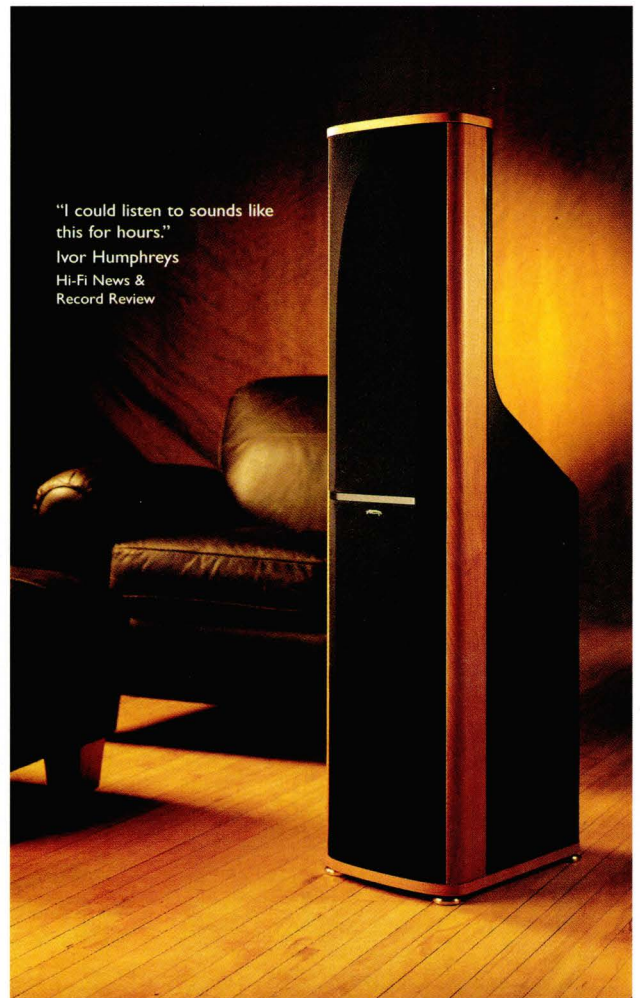
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Kenwood HM-982RW £599.95

◆ Lifestyle system

Simple idea, slightly crazy perspective. Instead of having two separate boxes placed one on top of the other, Kenwood has siamesed them at right angles to form a single unit that's defiantly lopsided. What this amounts to is full-on design funkiness, no untidy connectivity issues and, for some punters if not all, instant must-have status. It certainly took Japan by storm, where it immediately became the best-selling micro on the block.

There must be more to it than just a zany shape. Well, yes, just about everything bar the kitchen sink. All surfaces have been utilised. The vertical stack houses the comprehensive display, cassette slot, about half the fascia buttons and the headphone socket. The horizontal base has a CD recorder drawer to the front, and the main CD transport on top, plus the remainder of the buttons.

The tuner is strong, clear and, given a half-decent signal, hiss and crackle free. Much less impressive is the cassette, which is mediocre in all respects. Rated at a fairly modest 20 watts a side, the Kenwood nevertheless produces a big, warm and surprisingly muscular sound. The pseudo-techy speakers have a stab at delivering believable bass weight and extension; despite getting a bit boomy with the richest, deepest notes, they don't buckle.

Thankfully, the treble is kept in proportion. It isn't forced but sounds quite natural, even laid back, and could maybe do with a little more energy and air. Stereo is somewhat squashed in breadth and a bit two dimensional, but the Kenwood has an enjoyably fleshed-out sound and plenty of drive, and is decently even-handed with most musical styles.

You have to ask yourself how much a finely detailed musical soundscape matters, because it isn't the Kenwood's bag at all. This isn't the sort of hi-fi with which to plumb the depths of musical insight. But it is fun to listen to, goes loud enough for parties and, cassette deck excepted, seldom grates.

Kenwood UK ☎ 01923 816444
Reviewed in issue 220



Myriad Cameo £1,499.99

◆ Lifestyle system

If the very notion of a micro system puts a crease in your brow, try this for size. Anything but bijou, the Myriad Cameo combo comprises three full-width units – amp, CD player and tuner – and they're heavy, too. The 'slimline' bit is mostly an illusion, created by the arching bottom edge of the aluminium front panel, but this is a handsome and imposing stack – more audiophile statement than style-fi. Even at £1,500, you feel you're getting VFM.

It may look like a one-make separates system, but it boasts mini/micro style connectivity. Something called a 'My-Link bus' allows you to connect all three components. Which means one remote rather than three and a degree of control intelligence. No problems on the spec: the CD has a 24-bit/96kHz compatible DAC, the amp has 50 watts per channel, there are four line-level inputs, phono and two tape loops. The tuner is RDS FM only, with 29 presets.

Bigger boxes, bigger sound? No question. Tested amid a group of pre-packaged lifestyle systems,

overall tonal balance proved the most even of the group and superbly integrated top to bottom. The deep, smooth and notably agile bass doesn't have even a hint of boom or bloom. Treble's spot on, too: open, detailed, neither too forward nor reticent.

The overall system sound is a tad cool, but that's no bad thing. If it's a little short on romance, it more than compensates with clarity and dynamics. It also disproves the idea that you need a warm-sounding presentation for long-term listening without fatigue and while it doesn't quite match a comparable separates system, but it's not far short.

By making the minimum number of concessions to half-pint convenience and gimmickry, the Cameo wears its purist colours on its sleeve. Of all the pre-packaged lifestyle systems, this is the one if sound quality matters above all else.

Sennheiser UK ☎ 01494 551551 Reviewed issue 220



Marantz Eclipse 25 £899.90

◆ Lifestyle system

If its new range of Eclipse components is anything to go by, Marantz's niche instincts are alive and well. The company seems to have spotted a glint of daylight between the well engineered but samey half-width systems by the likes of Denon, Onkyo, Technics, Teac and Sony, and the more seriously hi-fi orientated all-in-one boxes from Cyrus and Linn.

Eclipse offers two design options. There's a full-width range, not tested here, plus these half-width components, which are about the size and shape of the Cyrus Quattro units and, Marantz being Marantz, priced a lot more aggressively.

It all kicks off with the £500 Eclipse 19, which combines separate CD player and RDS receiver with the two-way, twin-ported LS110 speakers, while the £900 Eclipse 25 tested here adds a DR110 CD-RW recorder to the 19's line up. Jog control and 'WOW'

bass enhancement let Eclipse mix it with the best on the gizmo front, but 25 watts a side and 30 presets for the RDS tuner is more standard fare. The units are beautifully screwed together and dripping with intriguing, tactile detail. And they sound as good as they look, particularly when used with the matching speakers. The soundstage is deep and stable, the image convincing, instruments and performers sound tangible. Listenability is sky high, even though full fat rock'n'roll is better off the agenda. Bass is agile and tuneful, but a bit of a powder puff – better, of course, an attenuated bass than a flabby, overpowering one, but more poke wouldn't go amiss.

Overall, the Eclipse 25 very successfully blends beauty, facilities, performance and value for money. If you're looking for a compact and stylish little system it's a definite Best Buy.

Marantz UK ☎ 01753 680868 Reviewed in issue 220



DVD

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This feature packed unit not only plays DVDs and CDs, but also MP3 CD's, Video CDs, Super Video CDs and CD-/CD-RW media. It also incorporates an AC3 decoder and digital audio output. The player has 4x zoom, and Pan functions controlled from the remote handset. Ready to use straight from the box.



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- Quick set-up function
- Simplified Magic Pad on-screen menu

SONY

Stock Code: 11189507

£229 INC. VAT .00

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Panasonic

Stock Code: 11183209

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AUDIO

Traditional design and understated elegance – these are the new Technics HD - series micro systems. Using Technology derived from Technic's heritage as a leading manufacturer of Hi-Fi separates, they have created the ultimate compact Hi-Fi's. The amplifiers achieve the highest possible quality from VGCA circuitry and the speakers feature "PP Mica" woofers for improved mid-range clarity and low distortion. Choose from pure Hi-Fi stereo or select the latest DVD surround set up, complete with tuner and cassette – all you need in one compact package.

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- Single cassette deck
- Digital Tuner
- Timer
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- Headphone socket



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TECHNICS 4 COMPONENT MICRO SYSTEM SC-HD550

- Variable Gain Control Amplifier – delivering the full high fidelity of both DVD Audio and CD
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- 2 x 25 watts (RMS) power output
- Dolby Noise Reduction System
- 2-Way Bass Reflex Speakers
- AL Edit – easy CD to tape editing
- CD-R playback
- Digital output
- Front loading CD player
- Single cassette deck
- Digital Tuner
- Timer
- Remote control



Stock Code: 11208101

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TECHNICS 4 COMPONENT MICRO SYSTEM SC-DHV600AV

- DVD Video & CD player
- Variable Gain Control Amplifier – delivering the full high fidelity of both DVD Audio and CD
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- 2-Way Bass Reflex Speakers
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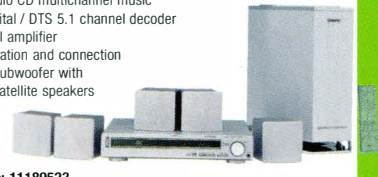
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Panasonic

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Stock Code: 11189523

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JVC DVD DIGITAL CINEMA SYSTEM TH-A10R

- All in-one centre unit combining a DVD Video / VCD / CD player and RDS FM/AM tuner
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- DVD functions: Resume, Angle List, Digest, Strobe and Zoom
- THEATER Position for picture adjustment
- Graphical User Interface



Stock Code: 11165544

JVC

£898 INC. VAT .99



ATC CA2 & SCM10A £2019.00

◆ Preamp/active speaker combo

ATC's tiny SCM10A speaker adopts the same radical styling as its SCM70ASL floorstander. A sealed-box design, fins on the rear of the ten litre cabinet provide cooling for 250 watts of amplification. The laminated MDF cabinet has aluminium extrusions on the front corners and rear cooling, so each weighs 15.5 kilos. Their CA2 partner is ATC's less expensive pre-amp. It has full remote control, five line level inputs, tape loop with monitoring, headphone socket and an optional phono stage. Balanced XLR connections link pre-amp and speakers, so just add source(s)!

It has a distinctly tight and immediate sound, but extended listening revealed a surprisingly subtle side. Timing was notably on the ball, the leading edges of notes precisely defining the beat and provoking involuntary tapping of the feet. There were occasions when the bass over-stretched these speakers and lost some definition, but given the price and size their bass depth was remarkable. The underpinning it provided whenever the music required it was highly entertaining as well as adding genuine space to live recordings.

The speakers' ability to disappear sonically was particularly effective when producing wide and deep soundstages, and the system did a fine job of revealing the advantages of the two high-resolution formats I was using. ATC's entry-level combo offers remarkable value for money. Given decent stands and some good cable, it's a high fidelity bargain.

ATC ☎ 01285 760561 Reviewed in issue



Denon AVC-A1SE/B&W CM4, CM2, CMC £4,294.99

◆ Multichannel amp/speaker system

Arguably the heaviest and most comprehensive AV receiver on the market, Denon's AVC-A1SE was the first 7.1 channel amplifier to include dts ES Discrete, Matrix, Neo:6 and THX Surround EX modes. Retro-fit upgrades for dts 24/96 and Dolby Pro-Logic II are becoming available. Nine digital inputs are joined by two banks of 7.1 channel analogue inputs plus eight composite and S-Type video sockets. Combining a pair of floorstanders, a pair of standmounts and a centre speaker, the various elements in B&W's CM collection are sold separately, but match beautifully, creating a clever blend of high technology and stunning furniture.

The combination results in a very big and relaxed-sounding system that approaches the grandest of dynamics in an almost casual manner. And yet, detailed though the sound is, there's more than a

suggestion of an easy-going laziness. Even with an up-beat DVD-A like The Corrs' *In Blue*, the music never really lets rip. Vocals sound warm but not particularly expressive while strings seem neither as vivid or thrilling as possible. This is down to system matching – the amp exhibits a comfortable muscularity while the speakers are not necessarily the best choice to "jazz the sound up", as one listener said.

But the fact that this system will happily operate at very high sound levels with absolutely no sense of stress and strain is impressive in its own right. This system relishes being played loud where its tremendous power and cavernous acoustic just seems to build and build without 'shouting' at the listener. All-in-all, it's a stylish and effective solution for music and movies.

Denon ☎ 01753 888447, B&W ☎ 01903 750750
Reviewed in issue 221

Onkyo TX-DS494/ Mordaunt-Short Premier 300 £898.95

◆ Multichannel amp/speaker system

Supplying the processing and current for this surround amp and speaker combo is Onkyo's entry-level receiver, complete with dts, Dolby Digital and Dolby Pro-Logic II decoding. Two coaxial and one optical digital input are joined by six-channel analogue inputs plus two tape and line input options. Four composite and four S-Type video inputs are available. There are five internal power amplifiers servicing front, centre and surround channels. Mordaunt Short's Premier 300 speaker system comprises four MS302 speakers for front and surround, an MS304 with its additional bass/mid unit for the centre and an MS308 active sub, complete with integral 80 watt amplifier. These are all shielded, sealed box designs with common crossover networks, so integration between all the speakers is very good indeed.

It's great to hear a surround set-up system that not only offers a surprising level of detail, clarity and sophistication but also conveys much of the emotion and drama of the music. The best SACD recordings have a smoothness and surefootedness that were not lost to this budget combination... "This system



is a real surprise" remarked one listener. "Shut your eyes and these tiny speakers disappear, leaving an expanse of detailed, unforced music."

Sure enough, kettle drums sound rather more like Pot Noodle drums, but for all the loss in weight, the music still possesses a presence that just would not be achievable from a two-channel system of equivalent size. In this instance, the 'surround experience' provides all the ambience you'll need. This really is a very capable little system for music and movies alike and one that will evidently grow to accommodate upgrades from budget to top-flight DVD-A or SACD front-ends.

Onkyo ☎ 01788 556777, Mordaunt-Short ☎ 020 7940 2200 Reviewed in issue 221



Tuners

Radio is unique – a free diet of new music, entertainment and information, all at the spin of a dial. We're particularly lucky here in Britain, because the BBC maintains broadcast quality standards probably unmatched elsewhere in the world (and the commercial sector). And a good quality hi-fi tuner will help you make the most of it.

Tuners have hit the spotlight recently with more and more people switching off their TVs and touching that dial. And given the variety offered by the medium, especially in its digital guise and the fact that it's free that's not surprising.

Greedy to switch off analogue radio and sell its transmission spectrum to the mobile communications sector, the Government sees DAB as a replacement for FM. We think that any government that tries to switch off either analogue radio or TV is likely to get its fingers very badly burned by the ballot box. (Long Wave radio, incidentally, has been broadcasting continuously since the 1920s!)

Go for DAB or stick to FM? That question faces anyone contemplating a new radio tuner today. DAB has both advantages and disadvantages against its much older brother.

The digital camp points to increased choice compared to the overcrowded FM waveband. DAB already features more stations than FM, with room for more including a wider variety of specialist stations. DAB is noise-free and immune from certain forms of the type of interference that can plague FM, and should work better in poor reception areas – without the need for elaborate aerials. DAB digital tuners are unaffected by aerial quality: either it works, or it doesn't; there's no sliding scale.

But many audiophiles still prefer FM. Even with its inherent background noise, under good reception conditions (for which you need a good roof aerial – see a 'twig' specialist to find out what's best for your area) it sounds more transparent, coherent and delicate than DAB, probably because the latter uses data reduction techniques (to squeeze the most stations into a given transmission slot). 'More means less' is the traditionalists' claim.

So should you go digital? First it will depend on whether your area has coverage yet – although 80 per cent of the population can now access DAB. Even so, tuners are still costly, and a good budget FM tuner (with proper aerial) can be fully competitive on sound quality, for less dosh. But if you want those extra stations, a digital tuner has really got to be the answer.



Arcam DiVA DT-81 £649.90

◆ DAB tuner

This is Arcam's third and cheapest DAB tuner, though it's based on the same 'Gold Card' technology as its predecessors. Construction, internally and externally, is very neat, and there's a full complement of socketry, including an analogue input to loop through an FM tuner. Operation is simple. The 'tuning' dial simply scans through stations by name, and there are quick-access presets too. Additional features include coverage of 'L-band', (not yet in the UK), and switchable audio compression.

It's difficult to compare DAB tuners, because the sound of the format dominates, but this Arcam seems particularly clean and extended. It has a neutral tonal balance and a nicely stable stereo image – when the broadcast is good enough to take advantage of it.

Plenty of DAB stations still manage to sound as rough as fairly indifferent FM, but with a good transmission the lack of interference and breakup is welcome. The intrinsically open sound of this tuner makes the most of DAB's advantages. The DT-81's bass may sound lean at first, but its assurance when something really profound comes along is very satisfying. As for detail, most of the time it arguably betters the majority of FM tuners and of course noise is noticeably lower in level.

Despite continuing reservations over DAB itself you can't help but admire both Arcam's initiative in embracing the technology and the firm's highly professional implementation.

Arcam ☎ 01223 203200 Reviewed in issue 221

Cyrus FM7.5 £400

◆ FM tuner

Another product in Cyrus' gorgeous 'one size fits all' case, the FM7.5's fascia achieves just the right balance between simplicity and ease of use, with just seven presets, a rotary tuning knob and four further buttons.

Built from a fairly standard digital synthesis chip set, but with superior power supply arrangements, it's an FM-only tuner with no RDS display data or inter-station muting, but it is possible to tune in fine steps to optimise reception of slightly 'off-tune' transmitters.

Given that it shares building blocks with many other current designs, it's no surprise to find that the FM7.5 doesn't blaze any dramatic new trails in sound quality. But it is better than average for its class.

As with all tuners it gives its best when fed a really clean and strong radio signal, and under those conditions its sound is admirably clear and free of congestion, with pretty good bass extension and no suggestion of drooping treble, though it can become a bit 'splashy' in big climaxes.

With more modest RF inputs, typical of an indoor aerial, the sound loses a little detail and clarity, but it retains its basically full-bodied and inviting character, and there's no tendency for it to become tiring. On the whole, Cyrus seems to have managed to balance the sonic requirements of different music styles very well, so this is an attractive product, both to look at and to use.

Cyrus ☎ 01480 435577 Reviewed in issue 211



Harman Kardon TU940 £179.00

◆ FM/AM tuner

A big and bulky affair on purely styling grounds, the heart of this tuner is pretty much the same selection of integrated circuits that can be found in the majority of contemporary tuners. The roll-call of features is entirely par for the course: FM and MW reception, 30 presets, RDS, and switchable IF bandwidth. There's a usefully scaled signal-strength meter and altogether it's well built and easy to use.

It also sounds good. Not only does it work well when the RF signal is less than perfect – it gave distinctly better-than-average rejection of pirate stations, which many big-city-dwellers will welcome. And with good reception it produces a clear, hearty and involving sound. With large-scale classical works on Radio 3 it rides the dynamics like an expert surfer, maintaining a better grip on the detail in loud passages than most of its competitors and keeping noise low when the music pauses. It has a natural tone on speech programmes, while lively pop, rock and jazz benefit from the strong but not excessive bass and taut midrange.

There is still a little roughness in the treble, and a slight loss of precision and polish, but there's always good involvement and life here, and even stereo image depth was a passable imitation of the original. With the added bonus of better-than-average AM reception, and a respectable bill of health from the lab bench, this tuner looks like a no-brainer Best Buy.

Harman Consumer UK ☎ 020 8731 4670 Reviewed in issue 221



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Part exchanged and ex-dem clearance.

Digital

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Sugden Masterclass CD - new - boxed	£1990	£2500
Helios Model CD2i - new	£890	£1200
Helios Model CD3i - ex-dem	£690	£900
Linn Genki - 1yr - boxed	£650	£1000

Analogue

Nottingham Analogue Mentor - with reference platter	£1900	£2900
- Reference power supply for above	£490	£800
Nottingham Analogue 'Foot' - 12" carbon fibre tonearm - new	£700	£1100
Nottingham Analogue Space Deck - with SME arm mount	£650	£850
Helius Cyalene - tonearm	£590	£1350
Hadcock GH228 Super - 9" tonearm - nearly new	£440	£640

Loudspeakers

Living Voice Auditorium - Hi-Fi Choice 'Best Buy'		
4 pairs - Walnut - ex-dem	£1150	£1500
Cadence DS	£750	£1750
Dali 104 (MS)	£390	£650
Lowther Bi-Core 2000	£500	
Klipsh LaScala Black	£1750	£3500
Quad ELS63 - fully reconditioned by Quad	£1500	£3000
Quad ELS63 - fully reconditioned by Quad	£1300	£3000

Amplifiers

Border Patrol 300B SE - with new Western Electric valves.		
Light Oak - the best SE available - ex-dem	£3750	£4500
Canary Audio 301 - 24 watts stereo power amp with		
2 matched pair Western Electric 300B - fabulous	£3900	£5200
Art Audio Concerto - integrated 40 Watts Class A. V.good	£1500	£2650
Audio Innovations S1000 - 50 watt class A monos	£790	£1550
Joule Electra 2 box phono pre-amp	£800	£2000
Art Audio VPS - valve line pre-amp	£600	£1400
Sugden A21 - integrated (line only) ex-dem - mint condition	£750	£900
Musical Fidelity A1000 - 'super pre main' class A	£850	£1800
Cary '2A3' 7 watt power amp. 1992	£850	
Cary 5500 Line pre-amp. 1992	£550	
Unison Mystery One PR+	£950	£1750
Tube Technology MAC phono pre-amp. Fully refurbished by		
manufacturer. Including Hovland film and foil capacitors.	£900	£1400
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Tom Evans Groove - phono stage - new	£490	£750

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Marantz ST6000 £179.90

◆ FM/AM Tuner

Though the price tag puts the ST6000 firmly in the budget category, you wouldn't guess so from its appearance or the full complement of features. That front panel is real brushed aluminium, and inside there's no obvious sign of scrimping either. There are two aerial sockets, switchable IF bandwidth (a useful dodge for making the most of poor or crowded reception conditions), full RDS, plus a timer (with a clock which automatically sets the right time, courtesy of RDS), and a digital signal strength display.

Best of all, the sound quality doesn't let it down either. The bass is the weak link here. There is bass, but it's on the distinctly restrained and polite side. However, if you prefer Radios 2, 3 and 4 to 1, and value clean midrange and treble above awesome bass, you'll probably find this tuner extremely attractive. Under good reception conditions it is capable of extracting very pure sounds from the airwaves, with low levels of fizz and spit.

There's plenty of detail, and it's easy to pick out particular instruments and to hear all the background comings and goings in well-recorded radio drama. Imaging is good too, and all in all it's a relaxed and enjoyable listening experience. And the weak signal performance is competent too. This tuner is easy to use, smart, well-made, and competitive on sound quality with others costing well over twice as much. In short, it's a tearaway Best Buy.

Marantz UK ☎ 01753 680868 Reviewed in issue 211



Videologic DRX-601E £299.99

◆ DAB tuner

Videologic has applied its expertise in high-technology PC sound to the development of this, the first 'affordable' DAB tuner. The £300 DRX-601 handles DAB only, but has a loop-through input for connecting an additional FM tuner. It has both optical and electrical digital outputs plus an RDI output. It also supports Dynamic Range Control, which is one of the most obvious advantages of DAB over FM.

Videologic's cost cutting is mostly in minor areas, such as the relatively small display, and the general look and feel. There are one-touch presets, but only via the remote control.

All the usual riders and caveats about DAB as a system apply here. Treble is best when it's at low levels, when the characteristic DAB sheen is least obvious. Classical chamber music, which tends to have quite restrained amounts of high frequencies, does well, likewise a good deal of easy listening music, while high-energy pop and dance music is much less favoured.

Some humorous soul coined the term 'space monkeys' to describe the characteristics of data-reduced digital systems. These sound a bit like a very high-frequency version of chattering monkeys riding on the music signal, at the limit of hearing but becoming more audible the longer one listens.

Given the way that DAB operates, it's to be expected that differences between tuners will in fact be less than those between CD players and so it's not really surprising that this 'budget' model can meet much more expensive alternatives head-on. In the circumstances it seems to be the current DAB Best Buy.

Videologic ☎ 01923 277488 Reviewed in issue 211



Sony ST-SE570 £129.99

◆ FM/AM tuner

There's no one particularly remarkable aspect to this tuner, but it's a typically well-equipped and smartly presented Sony. The features count is very good for what is very much a budget unit: you get full RDS (including EON), AM reception on both MW and LW bands, 30 presets, signal strength metering, and even a dimmable display. Internally it shows some signs of cost-cutting, but all the essential bits are there, as usual including some familiar integrated circuits. What more could one want for £130?

One might want good sound, I suppose. And on the whole this tuner won't disappoint. It has a reasonably neutral character and seems unperturbed by most kinds of music. In RF performance it manages well, and with good reception it extracts the essence of a piece of music from the ether with confidence, offering pretty good resolution through the mid-band and cleanly extended treble – just a tiny bit rough at loud climaxes. Although the bass is extended and powerful when needed, it sounds a touch congested and a little slack at times. Big and heavy classical or rock loses something in bass precision, and there's also a certain laziness which makes it just a little less than completely involving.

Although it's obviously good value for money in material terms, this little Sony just misses out on the highest accolade, but nevertheless achieves a very respectable overall performance for an extremely modest sum.

Sony UK ☎ 08705 119999 Reviewed in issue 221



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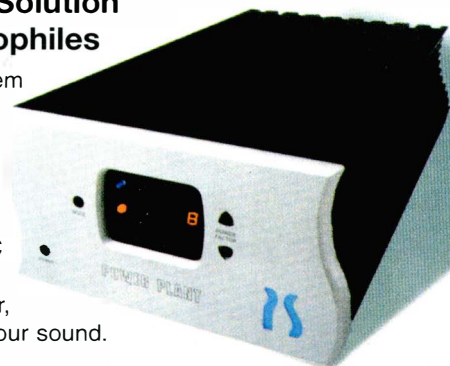
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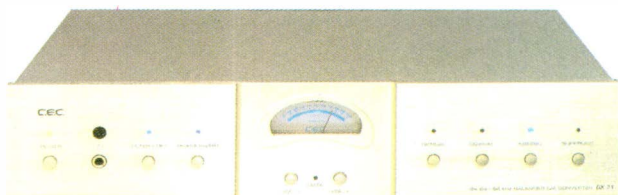
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Turntables

Despite the best efforts of the music business, vinyl discs refuse to die. It's partly thanks to the DJ scene of course, but also due to the considerable number of hi-fi enthusiasts who regard this ancient analogue medium as comfortably superior to digital formats like CD.

The demise of vinyl has been predicted many times since the convenient, noise-free compact disc took over pole position in the late 1980s. While it's true that turntable sales collapsed in the early 1990s, they'd bottomed out by the middle of the decade, and have been on the rise ever since. Even sales of new vinyl LPs have been increasing since 1998.

Turntables represent a special case among hi-fi components, as they involve three quite distinct elements: the motor unit that spins the disc; the tonearm that enables the cartridge to track the groove; and the pick-up cartridge which actually traces the groove and generates the music signal. Furthermore, an amplifier requires special circuitry to handle a cartridge's signal – a phono input. This might be fitted, but is sometimes an optional extra (and also depends on the type of cartridge).

In practice the majority of turntables are sold as complete motor/arm packages, often with a cartridge fitted too. Changing the latter is usually straightforward (styli wear out and need changing anyway), though the motor and arm exert a greater influence over the sound.

By its very nature a turntable is a very effective seismograph, or vibration detector. Proper support furniture is vital, and quite dramatic differences may be heard between different types of support. Those with suspended wooden floors would do well to consider a wall shelf, especially if the feet are inclined to tap enthusiastically.

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There are rumours going round...

...that vinyl LPs are obsolete technology, that valve amps are quaint artefacts from a better age, and even, heaven forbid, hi-fi as a pursuit is finished, overtaken by home cinema and the computer.

We have only one thing to say to the scurrilous mischief makers behind these vicious rumours. Sour Grapes! If you can make a better sound from your digital sources, your tranny amps, and specially from your umpteen channel surround sound monsters, then we take our metaphorical hat off to you.

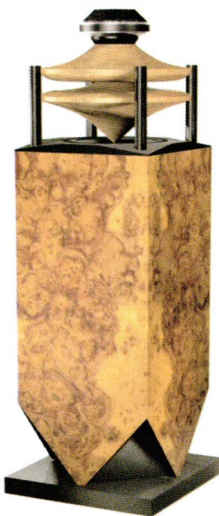
And, we'll close our shop tomorrow.

Thankfully (phew! mops brow with handkerchief) we're not going anywhere. Not even for a lunch break, it seems. If any of these rumours are true, nobody's told our customers! As each month passes we get busier and busier. Not too busy, though, to give you our unrivalled turntable set-up ability, advice on system matching and cable selection, and generally on buying a vinyl playing system which will blow away the digital opposition and leave the home cinema crowd gnashing their teeth with frustration!

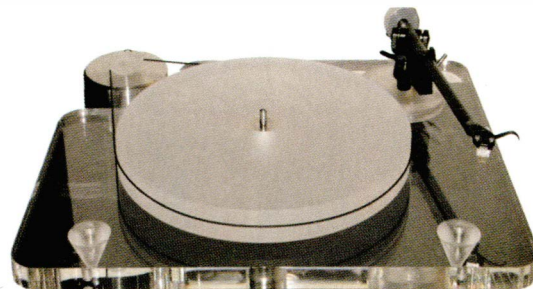
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Nottingham Analogue Hyperspace - £1700 (arm and cart extra) - next up in the range from the acclaimed Spacedeck, the Hyperspace successfully takes on decks double its price! Superb British engineering.



Duevel Bella Luna - from £2995 - these German speakers redefine reproduction at this price level; they are simply exceptional!

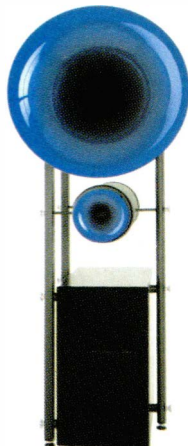


Clearaudio Champion - £725 (arm and cart extra) - new model from this German company. Just add a Rega arm for a sonic and visual feast.



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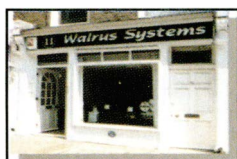
Croft Vitale - £425 - possibly the best value phono pre-amp in the world. All valve design with no PCB.

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Dual CS415-2 £159.99

◆ **Integrated turntable**

It would be unreasonable to expect any great sonic insights from such a basic product: the most one can really demand is an absence of obvious sonic intrusion. In that, the CS415-2 delivers. The arm tube is metal, but most of the rest is plastic, and its mounting is far from rigid. Also, the arm's tracking force is not adjustable, so substituting the supplied cartridge is impractical. However, the felt mat will improve the platter's character and the arm seems quite free and is not unduly resonant. The automatic mechanism works perfectly well, and the motor is better than the synchronous types beloved of specialist manufacturers.

However, this deck will never satisfy lovers of big fat bass, and seems to have an aversion to low frequencies. Otherwise the sound is perfectly listenable. Midrange is not unduly coloured, treble extends tolerably well and is quite clean. Dynamics are not marvellous and neither is stereo imaging but there's a valiant stab at both. The overall tonal balance is quite laid back, and ultimately there's a sense that the sound is optimised for background listening. But it's never offensive either, and that's a major plus in this case.

BBG Ltd ☎ 020 8863 9117 Reviewed in issue 214



Rega P3 £298.00

◆ **Integrated turntable**

Rega's P3 is a mildly updated version of the Planar 3. Similarities to the P2 are legion, although there are important differences, such as the thicker chassis, bevelled at its edges. Bearing, sub-platter and the motor are much the same, but the platter is thick glass and the arm the more sophisticated RB300, with calibrated spring-applied downforce.

Summarising this deck as 'a more civilised version of the P2' would on the whole be entirely fair. There's still plenty of excitement around, but it isn't quite as raw and it's easier to hear what's going on in the mix. The P3 has a sturdier bass line with more authority. The midrange is a touch clearer, though by no means completely free of coloration, while the treble is a little more open, if not entirely free of 'splashiness'.

In general, this is a very capable deck for a very modest price. Most dealers who stock the P3 will also keep a P2 so it's easy to compare the two and decide how much you think the difference is worth. What you won't find is very much competition from other makes, which makes a Recommendation for this deck even more obvious. It's a great product and a very safe buy.

Rega Research ☎ 01702 333071 Reviewed in issue 214



Rega P2 £198.00

◆ **Integrated turntable**

After some millennia of budget turntable predominance, Rega's Planar 2 has been replaced by the P2. Differences? The platter, once glass, is now painted particle board. Otherwise, construction is familiar. The basis is a painted chipboard chassis, on which are mounted the arm, motor and main bearing. The arm resembles the classic RB250, considered by many to be one of hi-fi's greatest bargains with tube and headshell a single forging. It's also extremely simple and unfussy to set up and use.

With no Planar 2 for comparison, what matters is that this deck puts up just as much of a fight as its predecessor. Looking back, what really characterised the Rega approach was its sheer liveliness. Other decks could equal, sometimes better the Planars on tonal subtlety or insight, but none had the same 'danceability' factor.

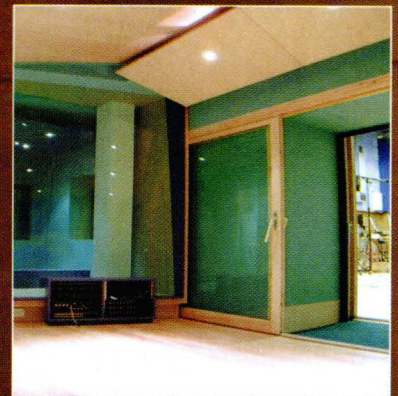
That's still there in abundance. But the detail? If your tastes run to symphonies or operas, you might find it difficult to disentangle everything, and in recordings with a natural acoustic the P2 definitely seems to move the walls inwards. Stereo imaging is not 100 per cent, and characterisation of solo voices is somewhat lacking, but neither of these is such a grave drawback. Tonal accuracy of course depends quite a lot on the cartridge.

All things considered, this deck has lost little or nothing of its appeal over the years. This appeal is most obvious with pop and dance music, but even with classical and smooth jazz there is much to admire. Add functional elegance and noted reliability and we have a deservedly continuing Best Buy.

Rega Research ☎ 01702 333071 Reviewed in issue 214

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Lyra Helikon £1,095.00
 ◆ Moving coil cartridge

Lyra has, after ten or so years, finally replaced its Clavis and Clavis DC models with the Helikon, a medium-compliance moving-coil design that sits in an aluminium body with the bare minimum of protection from the elements. That bare minimum consists of 'wash' paper, which the instructions reassuringly describe as "a lot more sturdy and lasting than it looks".

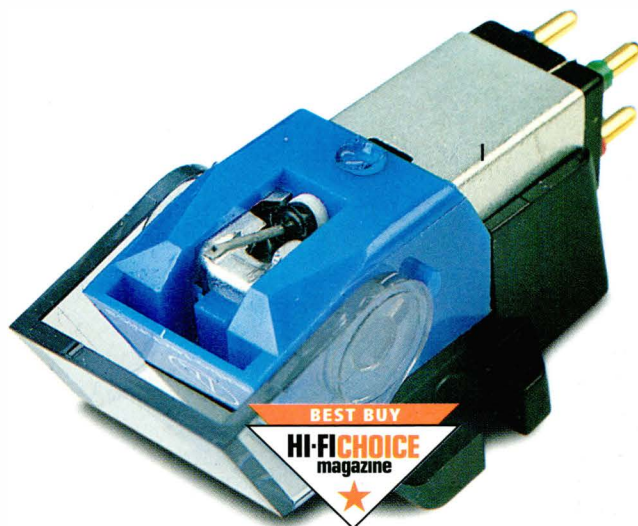
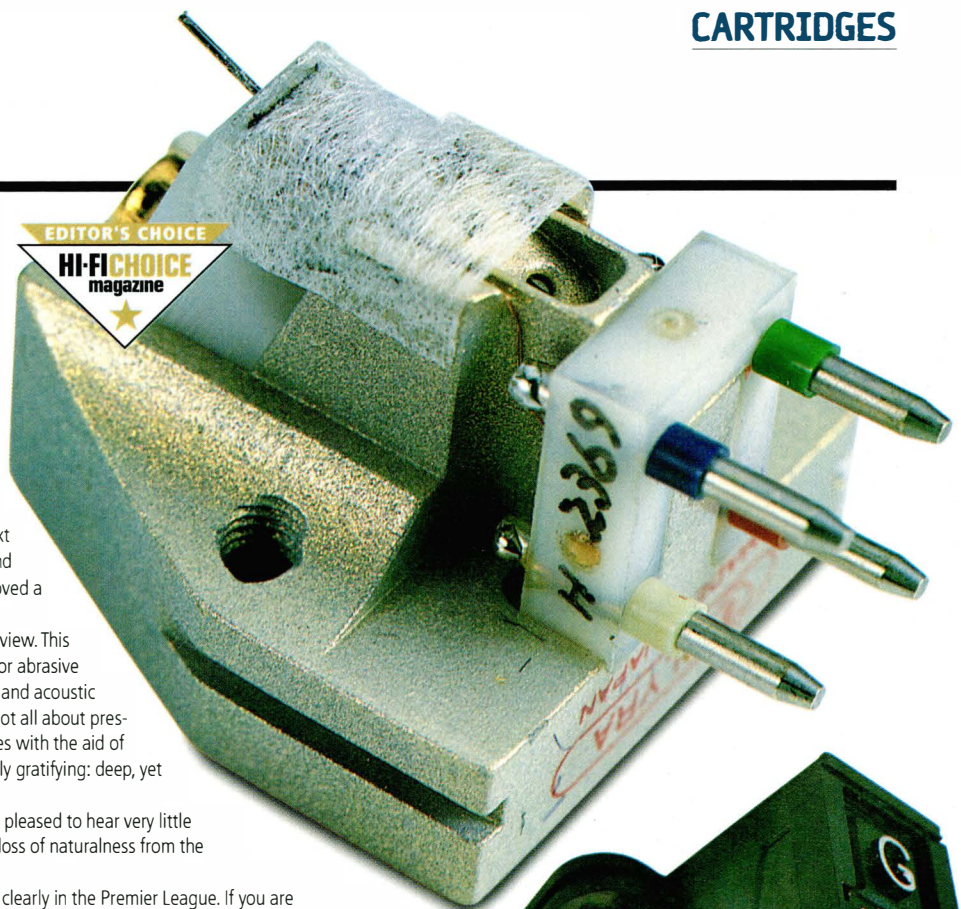
The sound of a cartridge can be highly dependent on the other components it works with. In the context of an SME Model 20A turntable with Series V arm and Tom Evans' The Groove phono stage, the Helikon proved a marvellous transducer for my black disc collection.

A lively balance persisted for the duration of the review. This cartridge has a sparkling treble, though not a bright or abrasive one. On a live recording there's no lack of ambience, and acoustic guitar was equally well resolved. But the Helikon is not all about presence. I spent one session delving into its bass qualities with the aid of The Prodigy and Leftfield, and the results were equally gratifying: deep, yet nimble with it.

I compared its balance with my CD player and was pleased to hear very little discrepancy, save for some extra veiling and a slight loss of naturalness from the digital source.

It's a lot to spend on a cartridge, but the Helikon is clearly in the Premier League. If you are after a romantic sound, look elsewhere, but if you want to extract nuance from the smallest groove variations, the Helikon deserves your attention.

Path Premier ☎ 01844 219000 Reviewed in issue 215



Audio Technica AT110E £28.95
 ◆ Moving magnet cartridge

Originally Recommended way back in issue 39 (1984), Audio Technica deserves full marks for keeping cartridges like this budget AT110E going. It's an unpretentious little beast with a typical specification, including an elliptical stylus and the sort of moderate mass and compliance which suits most arms. Audio Technica quotes 1-2g downforce, though it seemed happiest at or above 1.5g.

The humble player delivered a rather impressive performance. Yes, there is some coloration – the bass is probably a little on the fruity side of neutral and the midrange is not entirely natural – but the sound is remarkably clean even at noisy climaxes, and in quiet music there's plenty of detail to be found. There is much to admire all round: plenty of bounce and sparkle, solid and assured bass, excellent insight into the music and only a very little hardness when the going gets tough. What's more, performance seems relatively unfussy about set-up, always a bonus.

Don't be put off by the low price. This is a very capable cartridge indeed, and one that's likely to enhance many a budget turntable set-up.

Audio Technica UK ☎ 0113 277 1441 Reviewed in issue 214



Grado Prestige Black £49.00
 ◆ Moving magnet cartridge

US-based Grado has some novel ideas on cartridge design. Its 'Flux Bridger' system is a low-inductance variant on the moving magnet principle, and Grado boasts of treble extension to about 50kHz. That's clearly a good thing, as are the low distortion characteristics of the system.

Drawbacks? Really only that this lightly damped device is a fussy so-and-so to set up. Offset, overhang, arm height and tracking force all need careful tweaking to give best results.

These comments assume that set-up has been very careful – if not, expect a considerably cruder performance. But under ideal conditions this is a very capable cartridge indeed. Treble is very open and clear, with a welcome lack of haze and blurring. Bass is quite well extended, although perhaps not the best of the bunch, while midrange is neutral. There is some very good imaging in evidence and detail is really quite admirable, suffering just a little at high volumes. There's also a particularly good sense of recorded space, with very believable ambience. More of an enthusiast's product than an all-rounder, but it is worth persisting, because the ultimate performance is genuinely above its price class.

Veda Custom Install ☎ 01284 701101

Reviewed in issue 214

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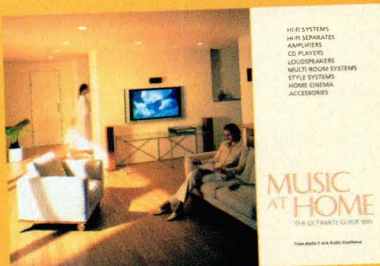


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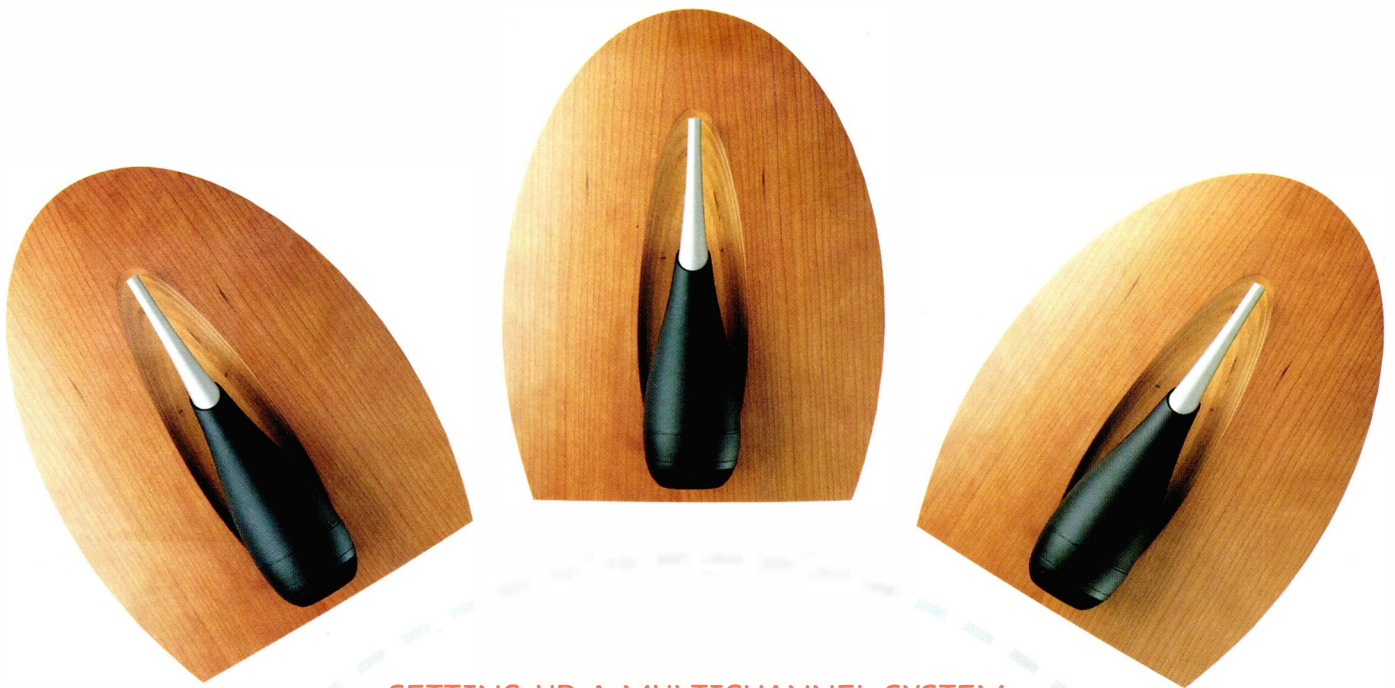
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While *Hi-Fi Choice* continues to offer hints, tips and features devoted to getting the best from CD-based audio systems, the advent of high resolution, multichannel formats in the form of SACD and DVD-Audio now multiplies those two channels by three. Fortunately, setting up such a system need not be three times as complicated nor, if you play your cards right, three times as untidy.

Certain facts affecting domestic harmony cannot be escaped, however. You

will require at least five loudspeakers and one possible a subwoofer and, though all five amps may be housed in one integrated AV chassis, there's still no avoiding the extra pairs of speaker cable. Of course, the route you take in building such a system will depend on your current gear.

With uncompressed, multichannel surround sound still in its infancy, few enthusiasts will be tempted to start with an entirely cleansheet. On the other hand, those already living with a 5.1-channel AV system for playing Dolby Digital and dts-encoded DVD movies might well consider integrating an SACD or DVD-A package into the playlist.

THE INTERFACE

However, no current AV amplifier or receiver package includes a decoder for

SACD or DVD-A data in its raw form. It's not that the technology is unavailable – it's included in the players themselves – but simply that no standard for a digital interface of appropriately increased data capacity has been agreed upon.

With the choice whittled down to DVI (digital visual interface) and Firewire, the smart money, in the high-end manufacturing fraternity at least, is on DVI. This streaming interface offers far lower jitter than the packets of data transmitted by Firewire. Sure enough, the jitter increase is not sufficient to corrupt consecutive bits of data, which is why it's perfectly suited for PC purposes, but it may well have an impact on audio quality. Only



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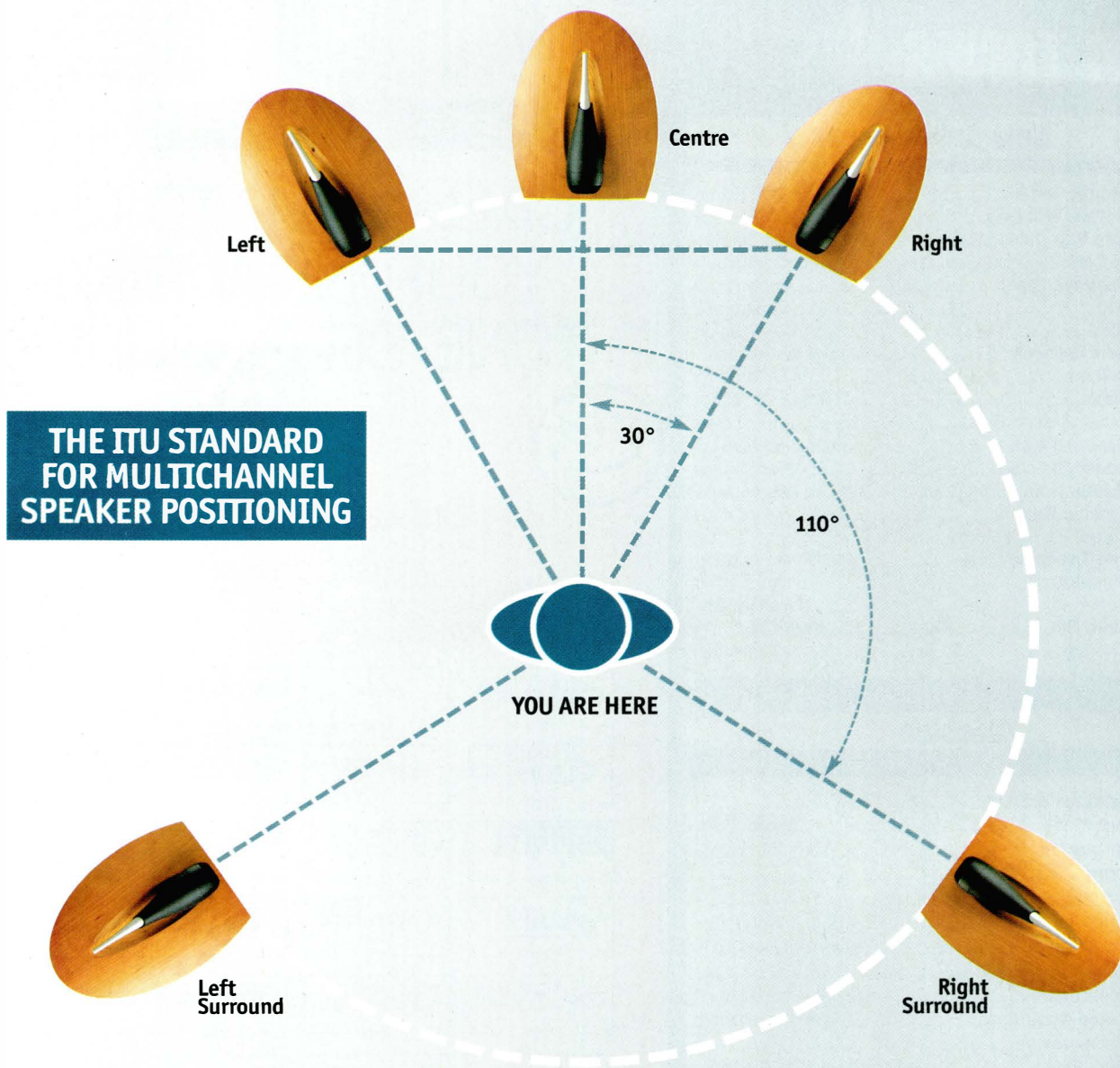
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“SYMPATHETIC AMPLIFIER MATCHING NEEDS MORE ATTENTION IN AN SACD SYSTEM THAN ONE BASED ON A DVD-A PLAYER.”

time will reveal the compromises of the chosen digital interface between future DVD-A and SACD players and their partnering multichannel decoders.

For now, DVD-A and SACD players can only be ‘interfaced’ with an audio system via their own 5.1 channel analogue outputs which are connected to the multichannel analogue inputs of an AV receiver, amplifier or preamp. If your choice of AV amplifier has a ‘multichannel direct’ facility then be sure to use it. Many DSP-ridden AV receivers will route at least the two front channels (via an ADC) back into the digital domain just in case you should

wish to avail yourself of some additional processing. The golden rules for two-channel audio, and particularly those that deal with keeping the audio path as straight and simple as possible, are just as true for 5.1-channel audio.

I’ve discussed the impact of ultrasonic noise and distortion on the behaviour of amplifiers numerous times in our CD player lab reports. Some just end up sounding hard, grainy and fatiguing through distortions lying above the range of our hearing folding back directly into the audioband. This is why most SACD players include a two or three-position

For best results you’ll want to get five identical speakers for the full surround effect. An extra subwoofer can be added to handle the low end.

filterswitch that curtails their ultrasonic response. However, these analogue filters are only found on SACD players because, despite offering a lower effective bandwidth than 192kHz-sampled DVD-A, SACD recordings typically encompass far higher levels of ultrasonic noise. As a result, sympathetic amplifier matching needs more attention in an SACD system than one based on a DVD-A player.

Other areas of optimisation will be more

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SETTING UP A MULTICHANNEL SYSTEM



“ALL FIVE SPEAKERS IN A MULTICHANNEL AUDIO SYSTEM SHOULD BE SITUATED AT THE SAME HEIGHT, RATHER THAN ABOVE THE LISTENER.”

familiar. The use of rigid stands for the extra speakers and care over their placement with respect to walls and corners is just as relevant as it is for the front pair. You can afford to be a little more relaxed about the installation of an active subwoofer provided, it remains in front of the listening position. The orientation and type of speakers, however, may well differ between a multichannel system destined purely for music and one that's also used for a home cinema.

HOME CINEMA OR MUSIC?

The optimal replay of uncompressed, wide bandwidth audio from all channels offered by SACD and DVD-A is best accomplished by using five *identical* speakers for front, centre and surrounds. This may not be possible in a combined audio/home cinema system where the centre speaker is typically forced onto its side by a TV or projection screen. Naturally, the sheer physical presence of a large TV between the front speakers is hardly ideal for 'high resolution' audio, but where unavoidable do ensure that the timbre and dispersion characteristics of the centre speaker dovetails seamlessly with that of the front pair.

Frankly, using four or five small but

matched speakers like the Premier package from Mordaunt Short (above), with a beefy subwoofer to bring up the bass, is often preferable to trying to knit together two huge 'stereo speakers' with an ill-matched centrebox lying on its side. Also, as most new SACD discs are being recorded according to ITU specifications, these speakers should also be placed equidistant from the listening position. The ITU (International Telecommunication Union) recommends they be arranged in a circle around the listener, with the front L/R speakers set at 30 degrees to the sides of the centre channel and the surrounds set a further 80 degrees from these.

This puts the surround speakers in a position more typically occupied by the 'sides' of a full 7.1 channel THX EX cinema set-up, where the rear speakers are placed, behind the listener. Furthermore, all five speakers in a multichannel audio system should be situated at the same height, rather than above the listener as they often are at the rear of a home cinema set-up. The theme of equidistance is important if multichannel audio is to snap into 'focus' around the listener's head. Once again, listeners are often closer to the surrounds in a home cinema than the front speakers, which is why the flexibility of programmable delays is so vital.

NO DELAY

To the best of my knowledge, no SACD players include control over channel delays, for example, though the latest Sony models do offer separate front, centre and surround volume together with the sort of bass management facilities more commonly found on conventional DVD-V players. Ideally, bass management should not be employed. Just set all speakers to 'large' and the subwoofer 'on' to bypass this invasive chunk of processing. Independent volume is useful, however, because it allows the AV receiver to be used in its most straightforward bypass mode where all channels are raised or lowered equally via a common volume control.

Separate AV preamp/power amp combinations offer more power and, with a following wind, better audio quality than their fully integrated counterparts. Many manufacturers offer two *and* three-channel designs, the latter provided by way of an upgrade for existing 'stereo' customers, bringing them up to five-channel status with minimum disruption. Separate power amps also encourage the use of long interconnect and short speaker cable combinations – preferable to running five plus metres of heavy cable.

For a truly high-end, multichannel system, the natural extension of these ideas culminates in the use of five separate monoblock power amplifiers situated at the feet of five identical loudspeakers arranged in a circle about the listener. But whether you choose this no-compromise route or one of the less financially challenging examples represented in last month's system test, the future of high quality audio has never looked, or sounded, more exciting.

The Philips SACD 1000 was the first multichannel SACD player on the market.



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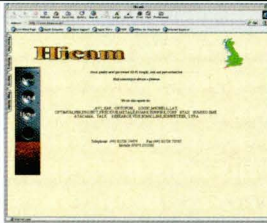
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Graaf WFB 2 Hybrid Preamplifier (Ex-demo)	950
Naim Audio NAC 92/N Preamplifier (S/h)	325
Naim Audio Flatcap power supply (S/h)	249
Naim Audio NAC 82 Preamplifier 97 (S/h)	1495
Naim Audio Hi-Cap Power supply 98 (S/h)	495
Monrio Asty LS Valve Preamp (New & Boxed)	375
Unison Research Mystery 1 Valve Preamp	1199

Amplifiers

Audio Note P Zero Mono Valve Amplifiers (Ex-demo)	529
Conrad Johnson MV55 Power Amplifier (Ex-demo)	1399
Conrad Johnson Premier 11 Power Amp	2799
DPA Enlightenment 100w Stereo Power Amplifier (S/h)	599
Electrocompaniet ECI-1 Integrated 80 Amps (S/h)	1599
Golden Tube Audio SI-50 MKII Valve int.	699
Graaf Venticinque 25 Watt Integrated (S/h)	995
Naim Audio NAP 90.3 Power Amplifier (S/h)	295
Naim Audio NAP500 Power Amplifier (S/h)	7500
Jadis JAB0 Valve Mono Power Amplifiers (S/h)	3750
Michell Engineering Alecto Stereo (Ex-demo)	899
Roksan Rok 1.5 Power Amplifier (S/h)	949
Unison Simply 2 Valve Integrated (New & boxed)	599
Unison Simply 4 Valve Integrated (Ex-demo)	999

Loudspeakers

Acoustic Energy AE1 MKII with Stands (S/h)	899
Boston Acoustics VR 10 Centre Ch. (New & boxed)	175
Infinity Outrigger jr Outdoor Speakers (New & boxed)	129
Magneplanar SMG C SE (S/h)	599
Opera Duetto Mahogany Speakers (Ex-demo)	289
Robertson Audio DX7 Floorstanders (Ex-demo)	599
Totem Tabu Mahogany (Ex-demo)	1599
Totem Arro MKII Cherry (New & boxed)	849
Totem Model One Signatures Cherry (Ex-demo)	1199
Velodyne TX810MK2 Subwoofer (S/h)	349

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Thorens TD125 Turntable (S/h)	99

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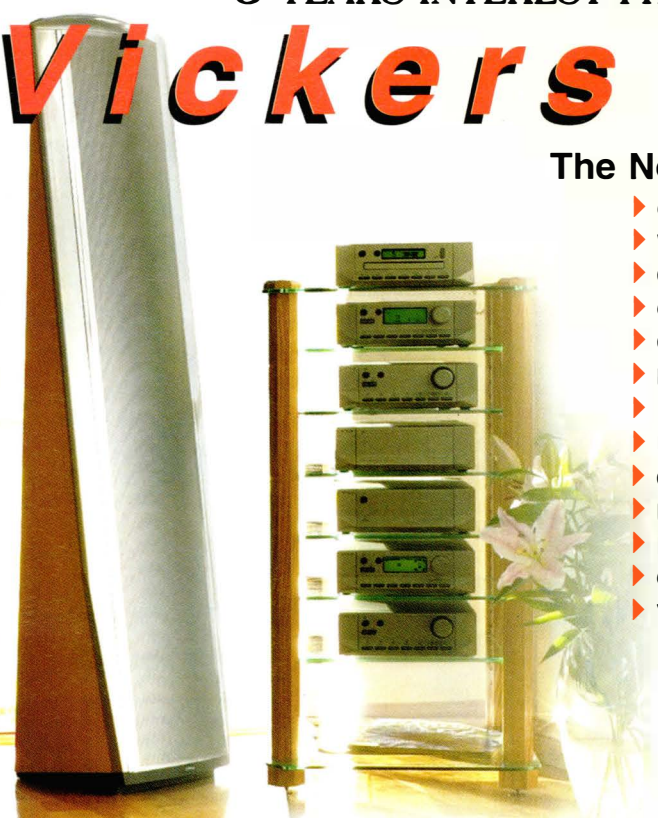
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BUYING TIPS

Buying second-hand can be a great way to pick up a bargain. A formerly expensive second-hand component might well prove a better long-term bet than a brand-new product engineered down to a price. Do some research on which brands and products have a good service back-up, so if something does go wrong, you can get it fixed. Unless you purchase from a second-hand hi-fi dealer, you're unlikely to get any warranty. So it's up to you to ensure the fitness of any gear that you buy. Products such as speakers should be less prone to breakdown than amplifiers, and amps should be more reliable than CD players. But any abused component could be troublesome – have a proper dem, and judge the seller as well as the goods!



THE DIRECTORY

THE *HI-FI CHOICE* DIRECTORY ROUNDS UP OVER 1,000 PRODUCTS REVIEWED IN PAST ISSUES. HERE YOU'LL FIND OUR OPINIONS ON THE BEST HI-FI COMPONENTS, ALONG WITH GUIDANCE ON HOW TO ASSEMBLE THEM INTO FIRST-CLASS HI-FI SYSTEMS.

THE ART OF SYSTEM BUILDING

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT BRINGING TOGETHER AN IMPRESSIVE HI-FI SYSTEM? IT GOES A LITTLE LIKE THIS...

When it comes to getting together a great separates system, identifying decent individual components is fundamental, but it isn't the whole story. There is the business of system synergy to consider, which put simply means how well your components gel as a whole. The degree to which this can affect the end result tends to increase with price, thus budget components are relatively immune (a competitively priced Best Buy disc player, amp and loudspeaker pairing of almost any hue will combine to make a good system). When considering a purchase it's always good practice to listen to alternatives. It's the only way you can learn what different components sound like and find out which ones appeal to you.

So once you have shortlisted some components, the next step is to track down a knowledgeable dealer to take you through the options available. As well as getting the basic hardware right there is the question of which cables to use; should you stick with what comes in the box or pay extra for interconnects and speakers leads? We firmly believe that cables make a worthwhile difference, but if you are sceptical any dealer should be able to demonstrate this for you.

And don't skimp on supports. The temptation is to use any old shelf or sideboard for system and speakers, but it's worth the outlay for speaker stands and proper system support.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

WIRING UP A SYSTEM IS REALLY QUITE STRAIGHT-FORWARD IF YOU FOLLOW A FEW BASIC GUIDELINES.

- When bi-wiring (see glossary) with speaker cable you will sometimes need to connect two plugs to one socket on the amp. If the amp has a binding post connection you can usually put one plug through the hole that goes across the post and one in the end. If this is not possible you may need to use spade connectors or have both pairs of cables soldered into single plugs at the amp end.
- If a cable has an indication of directionality, i.e. if there are arrows on the casing, use these with regard to the way the signal travels. If there are no arrows you can try it both ways and see if you hear a difference or just route the signal in the direction of the writing on the cable jacket.
- In multichannel AV systems you may have the option of routing video signals via the amp, or bypassing it. The former option gives easiest functionality if you use several sources, but by bypassing you are removing a switch and connection which should improve quality.
- Try to avoid laying mains cables across or beside signal cables as the field they produce can have a negative effect.
- Try to keep all cable runs as short as possible (unless you use Naim, in which case refer to manufacturer's recommendations).

AWARD TAGS

Whenever *HFC* reviews a group of like components we have the opportunity to give the best products a Best Buy or Recommended award. Best Buys are considered to offer an excellent standard of performance at an attractive price. Recommended products are first-class components losing out to Best Buy status only because of a higher price or less competitive overall sound quality.

A third award, the Editor's Choice, is reserved for those products reviewed solo, such as you see in the First Impressions or High Performance sections. An EC is awarded where the Editor is convinced that a product offers exceptional quality for the price.



GLOSSARY

5.1-CHANNEL AUDIO: Six discrete channels, typically front left and right, centre, surround left and right, and LFE (Low Frequency Effects) for a subwoofer.

BALANCE: Most loudspeakers have a characteristic frequency balance resulting from emphasising parts of the audio range and/or de-emphasising others.

BASS: The lowest three octaves of the audio band – hence 'low bass' refers to the bottom octave (20-40Hz); 'mid-bass' the middle octave (40-80Hz); and 'upper bass' the 80-160Hz octave.

BI-AMP: (sometimes tri-amp): Loudspeakers equipped with separate access terminals to each drive unit can be driven by separate (matching) power amplifiers for each driver.

BI-WIRE: (sometimes tri-wire): Loudspeakers with separate access terminals to each driver can be driven by separate cable runs between the amp and each driver.

CD-R: Recordable CD that cannot be erased, though discs that have not been completely filled can have tracks added until the disc is finalised.

CD-RW: Re-writable or re-recordable CD, incompatible with older CD players.

CLASS A: Operation of an amplifying stage or device in which current always flows, as opposed to Class B, where some of the devices are effectively turned off some of the time. Class A tends to give lower distortion.

CLASS AB: Most practical amps operate in Class A for the first fraction of a watt and Class B thereafter.

CLIPPING: An amplifier's output waveform is 'clipped' if the volume is advanced too far and no more 'volts' are available to sustain ever-increasing power levels. Distortion increases dramatically at this point.

CLOCK: Any electronic oscillator that is used to generate a timing reference signal.

CROSSOVER: A simple electrical network which divides the full bandwidth signal received from the power amplifier, apportioning appropriate parts of the spectrum to the various drive units.

DAC OR DIGITAL-TO-ANALOGUE CONVERTER: The stage in any digital component at which incoming digital data is used to reconstruct a recognisable analogue (music) waveform.

DOLBY DIGITAL DD (AC3): A compressed (10:1) digital audio format that typically contains five or more entirely discrete channels, eg 7.1 EX where discrete side channels are used.

DOLBY PRO-LOGIC, DPL: Forerunner to DD that 'steers' information to the front L/R, centre and mono surround channels via an analogue matrix.

DRIVE UNIT/DRIVER: A transducer which converts electrical energy into acoustic energy, eg bass driver, tweeter.

DSP OR DIGITAL SIGNAL PROCESSOR: Integrated circuit that handles the decoding of digital audio streams. In 5.1 processors it separates the left from right and front from rear while managing the various bass options.

DTS OR DIGITAL THEATRE SOUND: Competitor to Dolby Digital with a reduced 4:1 compression ratio that, ostensibly, promises higher quality.

DVD-A: High-resolution variant on DVD offering up to 192kHz bandwidth and 24-bit dynamic range, discs are compatible with standard DVD players.

ELECTRICAL DIGITAL: Any digital connection that uses an electrical cable rather than optical. Includes the balanced ('AES/EBU') interface.

FILTERS: Filters are intrinsic to digital audio, both analogue and digital. These are often very sophisticated in design, and in total they probably have rather more to do with the 'personality' of CD player sound than most other factors.

FINALISE (CD-R): The process of copying the Table of Contents from its temporary area on CD-R and CD-RW to the final position where it will be recognised by ordinary CD players.

FREQUENCY RESPONSE: The range of frequencies, from low to high, which a loudspeaker will reproduce.

IMPEDANCE: With speakers, the complex electrical load that a loudspeaker presents to the amplifier which is driving it.

JITTER: An insidious distortion specific to digital audio caused by the clock, used to regulate the conversion of data into analogue audio, being imprecise.

LINE-LEVEL: Practically every modern source component (except phono cartridges) gives an output in the region of 1-2V, referred to as 'line level'. It follows that all inputs labelled 'CD', 'tuner', 'aux' or 'tape' are designed for this input level and thus interchangeable.

LOSSLESS COMPRESSION: A method of reducing the number of data bits (density) without corrupting the original description of the musical signal.

LOSSY COMPRESSION: Reduction in data density by recourse to a psycho-acoustical model that predicts what is, and what is not, 'audible' within a sequence of music.

MIDRANGE: The middle three or so octaves of the audio band, where the ear is most sensitive, covering the approximate frequency span from 160Hz up to 3kHz.

NETWORK: see Crossover.

OUTPUT IMPEDANCE: A measure of resistance to alternating current, a source with low output impedance (say, below 100 ohms or so) helps ensure compatibility with most amplifiers, even when using long or unusual interconnect cables. A high impedance, especially in conjunction with an amplifier with a low input impedance (some are as low as eight kOhms, although the standard is 47 kOhms) can result in audible treble losses.

PLL OR PHASE-LOCKED LOOP: A technique by which a clock of defined characteristics is used to generate a new clock at a different frequency from the original.

PRESENCE: Critical section of the audio band at the point where midrange and treble meet.

QUANTISATION NOISE: A form of distortion or noise resulting from errors in the description of the musical signal by the digital code.

SACD: high-resolution music-only format developed by Sony/Philips – offers 100kHz bandwidth without digital filtering and its associated ills.

SAMPLE RATE: The rate at which the musical waveform is sliced up into discrete chunks. For CD this is 44.1kHz or once every 0.023msec. DVD will also support 48kHz and 96kHz.

SENSITIVITY: The relative loudness that a speaker generates for a specific voltage input. Expressed in decibels per watt (dB/W).

THX: Standards system for home cinema set-ups which includes amplifier power and speaker dispersion characteristics. THX Ultra being more stringent than Select.

TOSLINK: The proprietary name given by Toshiba to the optical fibre signal transmission system it invented for consumer applications.

TRANSISTOR/MOSFET: the two main types of power semiconductor used in solid state amplifier output stages.

TREBLE: High frequencies, the top end of the audio band, eg above 3kHz.

TWEETER: Treble driver.

TWO/THREE-WAY: Loudspeaker crossovers split the signal into two or three frequency bands, a 2-way speaker can have more than two drive units.

WATTS (PER CHANNEL): the Watt is the unit of electrical power and the WPC rating is the maximum average undistorted power that an amp can deliver to a typical speaker. However, speaker sensitivity variations can make more difference than amplifier output.

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AMPLIFIERS



STEREO AMPLIFIERS – INTEGRATED

SPECIFICATIONS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	LINE INPUTS	MM PHONO INPUTS	MC PHONO INPUTS	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
	Affordable Valve Co. EL34	650	A real bargain on the face of it, but the sound is oh so soft, warm and old-valve. Too much of a good thing	4					40	202
	Arcam Alpha 7R	300	Decent, if slightly system fussy amplifier that no longer pulls all the right strings	5	●		●	●	45	196
	Arcam Alpha 8R	350	Workmanlike amplifier is well thought through, but is now beginning to show its age.	5	●		●	●	50	208
	Arcam Diva A65	380	Easy on the ear remote control amp, but not especially powerful.	5			●	●	40	217
BB	Arcam Diva A85	700	Much enhanced design topology give a more hard hitting, engaging sound than previous Arcams	7			●	●	85	214
R	Arcam Alpha 10	800	Although not the best sounding in its class, the Alpha 10's modular nature demands it be taken seriously	5			●	●	100	181
BB	Arcam FMJ A22	1,000	Powerful, articulate, and expandable into a home cinema or multiroom amp/controller	7			●	●	100	201
EC	ATC SIA2-150	1,984	An impressive sounding integrated amp with a dynamic, open and detailed sound	4			●		150	192
	Aria S2	1,000	Glamorously packaged valve amp produces a real eyes closed, feet up kind of sound	4					12	190
BB	Audio Analogue Puccini	450	Superbly finished, the entry-level Audio Analogue performs way out of its class	5	●	●			40	175
	Audio Analogue Puccini SE	595	Upgraded, more powerful Puccini is disappointingly sluggish and curiously lacking in musical vitality	5	●	●			40	181
R	AVI S2000MI	999	Fine, detailed amplifier with excellent timing and strong control of a wide range of loudspeaker loads	5			●		100	175
	Bryston B60R	1,249	Great build, but the lazy bass and opaque treble bracket an articulate midband. Comes with 20 year guarantee	5			●	●	60	175
R	Cambridge Audio A500RC	200	Solid value, decent build and a surfeit of watts make this an attractive proposition, but it can sound slightly loose	6			●		50	196
R	Canary Audio CA-608	1,495	If you value the grand scheme of things and appreciate a bit of dynamic vigour this could be the amp for you	4					24	202
	Chord CPM 3300	5,495	Very powerful yet compact amp with rather complex ergonomics and transparent sound. Oh, and a lovely blue glow	5			●		220	214
R	Copland CSA 28	1,249	Elegant Scandinavian cool, abundantly detailed if somewhat system dependent	5	●		●		60	189
	Copland CTA 402	1,698	A unusually flexible valve amp with an attractive and textured sound	5	●		●		35	193
	CR Developments CR324	569	Solid and capable on paper, this is a bit of a blunt instrument when let loose on the music	5					150	181
	Symbol CA1	499	Lacklustre amplifier tends to underperform with complex material. Best with straightforward compact loudspeakers	6					40	178
R	Creek 4330	279	Diminutive but classy amp will drive anything, and can be specified in various configurations	4	●				40	192
	Creek 4330SE	499	Somewhat perplexing, though always interesting, miniature audiophile amplifier, needs careful system matching	5					50	208
	Creek 5350SE	799	Smooth, open and articulate sound and quality build, but bass is a tad heavy handed	6			●	●	85	214
R	Cyrus 5	500	A enjoyable amp that is assured and unflappable, although detail is unremarkable	7			●	●	45	205
	Cyrus 7	700	Welcome return to form for the Cyrus stable: this is the best sounding audio brick around	6			●	●	60	196
BB	Denon PMA-255UK	140	Great beer-budget buy, with everything necessary for basic but decent high fidelity operation	5			●	●	30	208
	Denon PMA-355UK	230	Detailed, but rather inexpressive sound which doesn't quite live up to the claims.	5	●		●	●	50	217
R	Denon PMA-1500R	500	Recommended for its outrageous power, especially with problem speakers	5	●	●	●	●	70	181
R	Densen Beat B-100 MkII	650	High 'air guitar' factor, and can punch above its weight, but check it will complement your system	5					60	175
	Exposure 2010	599	Neatly turned out amplifier, with mainstream appeal but bland with it	6			●		50	214
	Electrocompaniet EC1-3	1,000	Basically good, but too many rough edges to warrant recommendation	6			●		75	201
	Ezo Aria HE	449	Quick, detailed but aggressive and sometimes coarse sounding amp. Beautifully turned out, though	5				●	40	208
	Graaf Venticinque	1,790	Smart and practical, but it just never seems to shine sonically	6					25	202
	Holff Audis Signature	750	A 'no-feedback' circuit giving outstanding resolution, but significant load dependency	4	●				65	181
	Kenwood KAF-3010R	180	Plenty of twiddly bits yet weak on inputs, and basically good, but somewhat uneven sound quality	4	●		●	●	70	186
R	Kenwood KAF-3030R	250	Kenwood's best amplifier for some years has a lean bass but excellent mid and treble.	5	●		●	●	50	217
	Krell KAV-500i	5,000	More at home in background listening/home cinema applications than out-and-out audio maniac set-ups	5			●		250	192
	Linn Majik	845	Slightly rough and ready power amp modules, but capable preamp that can be expanded into a multiroom system	5	●		●	●	33	214
	Lundahl Mag Amp	1,735	Unusual valve/magnetic amp hybrid with relaxed balance and good timbre	5					23	196
	Marantz PM-6010 OSE	229	Good starter amplifier, with characteristic smooth, low key delivery	5	●		●	●	50	196
	Marantz PM7000	300	Lots of power for the price, but detail and subtlety seem to have been sacrificed	6	●		●	●	115	205
	Marantz PM6010 OSE Ki Sig	400	Well-made, but somewhat ill-balanced amplifier that doesn't slot into most systems comfortably	6	●		●	●	50	208
	Marantz PM-17 Mk II	999	Big, bold, but over-fruity balance – the 'fat controller' as one put it	6	●	●	●	●	60	214
	Marantz PM-17 Ki-Signature	1,300	Full feature audiophile amp where the end results don't quite justify the fantastic ingredients	6	●	●	●	●	60	189
	Mark Levinson No383	5,500	Extremely versatile design that thinks and acts like a serious pre/power. Sounds superb	5					100	212
	Monrio Asty	400	Engaging, but ill-disciplined, even OTT amplifier with unpredictable system compatibility	5					55	178
R	Musical Fidelity X-A2	500	A chip off the old block; sounds very similar to the X-A1 and XA-100R	6					75	208
	Musical Fidelity A3	849	Similar to the XA-100R internally, and a little too relaxed for some	5	●	●	●		85	196
	MVL A2	970	Curiously designed, and curious sounding amplifier with Sound Sentinel circuits to address perceived weaknesses	9	●			●	100	201
	Myryad T-40	400	The T-40 is a well built and sensible, but needs more dynamics and finesse	6			●	●	50	192
R	Myryad MI120	600	Well styled, well built: a good, even tempered amplifier, although it can sound rather brittle	6			●	●	60	175
	Myryad MI 240	1,500	Big and powerful integrated amp sounds clean and neutral if a bit short on musical tautness and dynamic tension	8	OPT	OPT	●	●	120	216
BB	NAD C320	200	Excellent budget amp from the maker of the seminal 3020 offers better clarity and neutrality and good build	6			●	●	40	186
R	NAD C340	270	A classic NAD amplifier copes with any speaker, delivers plenty of power, and does so with calm decorum	6	●		●	●	50	192
BB	NAD C350	300	A typical NAD: refined, warm tonality, adequate detail, and a strong power yield	7			●	●	60	208
BB	NAD C370	450	Flexible, ultra-high power integrated amplifier delivers a real punch, but is not without finesse.	6	●		●	●	120	217
	NAD S300	1,900	Substantial integrated with loads of power and no shortage of finesse, slightly bass-strong	5			●	●	100	189
	Naim Nait 5	799	As always with the Nait, less is more, and the Nait 5's 30 watts seem to go a lot further with some sources	5			●		30	214
	Opera Aida	795	Low power (in practice) minimalist integrated amp, but the mahogany wings don't help it to fly	5	●	●			60	201
	Pathos Classic One	995	Unusual looks and even more unusual electronic design, but compromised musical potential	5			●		55	202
R	Pioneer A-407R	230	Clean, consistent, finely detailed sound, good finish and (mainly) good build	5	●		●	●	45	186
R	Pioneer A-607R	300	Lively, articulate amp with plenty of drive and a hint of brightness	5	●		●	●	60	192
	Plinius 8100	1,450	Slightly rough and ready, but plenty of balls from this stripped down antipodean.	6			●		100	214
R	Pracisa Acustica Sonoro	1,800	It is not often that transistor amplifiers are made to sound so palpably valve-like	6			●		100	189
R	Primare A10	500	Beautifully made, smooth and easy sounding, and though not overtly detailed or dynamic, is well organised musically	6			●		50	208
R	Primare A20 MkII	799	Everything except packaging has changed in Mk II version: but balsier model has lost none of its refinement	5			●		70	181
BB	Primare A30.1	1,500	Smooth, detailed singing quality, elegant appearance, and healthy power yield	6			●		100	214
	Red Rose Music M5	8,000	Sophisticated integrated valve amp with powerful, refined sound and beautiful build	4					45	219
	Restek Fantasy II	1,499	Muscular, but ultimately rather strident amplifier which needs careful system matching	6			●		100	189
R	Roksan Kandy KA-1	475	Power with control, barely compromised by a small degree of dryness	6	●		●	●	120	205
R	Roksan Caspian	795	Mainstream Roksan line level amp works well under most circumstances	6			●		70	201
BB	Rotel RA-931 MkII	189	Simple, non-remote amp majors on clarity and transparency, without sounding over-analytical	4	●		●		35	208
BB	Rotel RA-971 MkII	275	Improved RA971 is a chip off the old block: bags of power, but with added precision and clarity	6			●		60	196
	Rotel RA-972	400	Better in the treble than the bass, which is a little too rounded and woolly	6			●		90	205
	Sharp SM-SX1	3,300	Jewel like 1-bit digital amplifier with limited power reserves but offering glimpses of sonic magic	5					50	211
	Sharp SM-SX100	10,000	The world's first stable, 1-bit digital amplifier is a technological milestone that should go from strength to strength	n/a					110	200
R	Sony TA-FB740R	200	Very open and clear sound, comfortable with a wide range of musical styles	5			●	●	60	205
	Sony TA-FB940R	300	Technically innovative amplifier fails to cut the mustard with complex material	5	●	●	●	●	70	208

STEREO AMPLIFIERS – INTEGRATED (CONTINUED)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	LINE INPUTS	MM PHONO INPUTS	MC PHONO INPUTS	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
	T+A PA-1220R	1,445	Unique presentation and feature set, but sometimes rather relentless sound quality	7			●	●	100	189
	Tact Millennium MkII	7,000	This digital class D amplifier represents a bold declaration on the future expansion of digital audio in the home	n/a			●		150	194
	TAG McLaren 60i	500	Clean, slightly antiseptic sound from this beautifully turned out entry level Audiolab 8000LX replacement	6				●	60	189
	TAG McLaren 60iRv	1,000	Looks, feels and sounds better than the Audiolab it supersedes. Smooth, open, refined but lacks body and drive	6			●	●	60	184
	Talk Electronics Cyclone 1	550	Much improved build quality and silver finish, but the sound lacks physicality and can sound strained	6			●		65	196
R	Talk Electronics Storm 2	650	Crisp, clean, well defined sound, arguably lacking warmth, but a good midrange purchase overall	6			●		50	175
	Teac A-EZ000	180	Has the potential to cause significant damage in the budget amp sector once the wrinkles are ironed out	6					50	195
	Technics SU-A660 Mk 3	200	Plenty of welleie for the price, but the sound can be a tad coarse and lacking in fine detail	5	●			●	37	186
	Technics SU-A808	300	Intriguing amplifier, with abundant detail but dynamically rather flat	6	●		●	●	55	196
	Thule IA60B	700	Dry, edgy and glassy sounding amplifier, though the balanced input may appeal to some.	6			●		60	214
R	Token Audio K50	350	Stainless steel finish, others available. Sound is warm and attractive, though a little undynamic	5					50	186
	Tube Technology Unisis Sig	2,400	A very attractive product which combines many classic valve attributes to good effect	5	●				30	202
	Yamaha AX-496	240	Lacklustre, if well equipped and powerful, amplifier shows some improvements over previous amps, but not enough	6			●	●	85	208
	Yamaha AX-596	300	Clean, agile and lean this amplifier isn't. Bold and powerful, however, it certainly is.	5	●		●	●	100	217
R	YBA Intégré	1,550	Careful system matching is essential, but this is definitely one of the good guys	6			●		50	214

STEREO AMPLIFIERS – PRE/POWER AMPLIFIERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	LINE INPUTS	MM PHONO INPUTS	MC PHONO INPUTS	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
	Amp Flux System 2	3,000	Three-box affair with a clean, spacious sound and plenty of slam. A touch steely, but undeniably potent	5			●	●	50	187
	Alchemist Kraken APD7A/8A II	1,098	Unusual looks and unusual sound too, rather rough and lacking detail	6					55	187
	Arcam Alpha 9C/10P	1,000	Well specified and flexible preamp with sound only just lacking in greatness	6			●	●	100	187
BB	Arcam Alpha 9P	400	Clear, colourful and well-disciplined, the Arcam is a strong all-rounder that can compete with conviction	1					60	165
EC	ATC CA2	750	Stripped down version of ATC's range topper delivers considerable transparency and bandwidth, excellent value	5			●			221
	Audio Note M Zero/P Zero	998	Neat shoe box-size components. Able to impart music with real life and soul when partnered with P Zero power amps	5					8	191
R	AudioNote M2Phono/P2SE	3,198	Wonderfully natural and inviting sound with great warmth and drama, but limited loudness capability	4	●				18	216
EC	Audio Research LS25 /VT100	11,489	This is not so much a fine valve amp, as a fine amplifier, full stop (LS25 MkII/VT100 MkII)	6	●		●		100	216
EC	AVI S2000M	2,348	This preamp/monoblock pairing does most things very well and images better than most	5			●		150	221
EC	Border Patrol 300B SE	3,995	Single ended valve power amp with passion, grace and fire, and plenty of grunt to boot	1					8.5	186
	Bow Technologies Warlock/Walrus	6,490	Heavyweight dual mono pairing with superb build and rich, refined sound	5			●	●	150	216
R	Bryston BP20/3B-ST	2,850	Recommended for pretty much any demanding application	8			●	●	120	212
	Cary CAD 2A3SE	1,575	Monoblock valve power amp. Low power but gives delightful speed, coherence and transparency	1					5	196
	Chord SPM-4000	8,500	Sound is as stylish as its appearance is bold. Probably one of the best amps you are likely to hear	1					410	202
BB	Creek P43R/A52SE	949	Excellent sound, remote control operation and upgrade options from fine value preamp.	6			●	●	100	187
BB	Creek P43R/A43	1,148	Great value and a podium performance earning a best buy	6			●		140	212
	Crimson 620C	875	Not entirely satisfactory power amp which has dynamic strengths, but underachieves when the volume is raised	1					50	181
R	Crimson CS610/CS630	1,250	Good, clear sound, including a decent phono stage, but flexibility is limited. Slimline monoblocks with grunt and finesse	3	●	●			100	187
BB	Croft Vitali/Series 5C	1625	Oddball retro style and ergonomics, but truly magical voice coherence and projection, great transparency	3	●				30	216
	Cyrus Power	498	Detail and midband clarity and stand-out qualities. Smooth and refined with most types of music but bass-soft	1					50	183
R	Cyrus aCA7.5/Smart Power	1,250	Great for classical, jazz, and existing Cyrus owners, recommended	7				●	60	212
	Cyrus aCA7/aPA7	2,694	Low feedback power amp design that's a positive departure from the transistor norm, preamp is functional but not as impressive	5			●	●	150	190
	Cyrus aCA7.5/PSX-R/aPA7	2950	Very stylish 4-box modular system, slight forwardness delivers oodles of clarity and detail	7			●	●	150	216
	Densen Beat B-200	1,000	A versatile preamp with a high 'air-guitar' factor and Densen's characteristic styling	6	●	●				191
R	Densen B-300	800	Expensive but highly musical. Colourful and warm sound with strong timing and listener involvement	1					100	183
R	Densen Beat 200/300	1,850	Classy jet black cast boxes pack plenty of punch with good total musical coherence (remote L300 extra)	6	OPT		OPT		100	216
BB	Electrocompaniet EC4.7/120DMB	3250	Bulky Norwegian combo has wonderful broad-band transparency, wide dynamic range and fine musical tension	6			●		120	216
EC	Gamut D200	2,995	Single MOSFET pair per side gives tremendous resolution and timing (balanced only). Formerly Sirius	1					200	183
EC	Levinson No380/No334	9,490	Preamplifier combines precision and warmth with unusual configurability, power has refinement, authority and transparency to spare	6			●		125	195
	LFD Mistral Linestage/Power	898	Strong ergonomics, generally decent sound, but a little lacking in detail	6					60	165
	Linn Kolektor/LK85	990	Beautifully tuned out machine, yet slightly bland, aimed at an all Linn system	9	●	●			62	212
	Michell Orca/Alecto mono	3,600	Line-level design with a gorgeous remote and focused, spacious sound	6			●		100	187
R	Moth 30 Series Monoblocks	879	Tested with Active Preamp. Demonstrated solid balance and proved adept at delivering vital musical qualities	1					100	155
	Moth 30 Active LS/60 Stereo	948	Excellent-sounding ultra-simple miniature preamp, power amp lacks finesse and control, however	4					60	165
	Muse Model Three	1,990	Natural sounding tranny preamp with useful audiophile features. Works beautifully with 160 power amp	5			●			166
R	Musical Fidelity X-P100	800	Good long-term listening prospects, detailed and a little fruitiness (tested with X-A200 power amp)	6	●		●			200
	Musical Fidelity NuVista 300	3,300	Powerful smooth sound with tremendous bass extension. Capacity to fulfil the demands of the most dynamic material	1					350	199
	Myryad MA120	450	Based on MI120 integrated – see latter for comments, but sounds significantly better when bi-amped with MI120	1					60	165
R	Myryad MP100/MA240	1,600	Smart finish and impeccable manners, smooth, clean performance	6			●	●	120	212
R	NAD 114	270	Beer-budget preamp which sounds focused, detailed and consistent	6	●	●		●		165
R	NAD Silverline S100/S200	2,000	Beautifully built kit that sounds as good as it looks with heaps of power	7			●		200	200
EC	Naim NAC112/NAP150	1,375	Clean, clever simplicity, plus a very well balanced sound that's much sweeter than earlier Naims	6			●		50	213
	Naim NAC112/NAP150/FLATCAP 2	1,800	Adding a FLATCAP 2 brings a very worthwhile sonic upgrade to the basic NAC112/NAP150 combo	6			●		50	213
	Naim NAC102/NAP180	2,122	More of a 'character act' than a neutral reproduction system, majors on excitement at the expense of subtlety	6			●		60	200
EC	Naim NAP500	10,000	Wonderful neutrality, bandwidth and dynamic range, plus Naim's traditional leading edge definition	1					140	208
	Quad QC-twenty four/II-forty	4,000	A classic valve amplifier in circuitry and sound, but with modern ingredients and gorgeous retro styling	7					40	213
R	Rega Hal/Exon	2,194	Passive line stage dedicated to Exon monoblock power amps, bold outgoing, in-command sound	6	●	●		●	125	165
BB	Roksan Caspian Power	595	Excels musically and in conventional hi-fi terms. A power amp for people with long-term satisfaction in mind	1					70	183
	Rotel RC-971	150	Low price is offset by rather coarse sound quality with certain types of music. (Tested with RB-971 power amp)	5				●		178
BB	Rothwell Indus/Rubicon	1448	Quietly smooth combo with passive pre-amp has a lovely neutrality and consistency across a wide dynamic range	6					10	216
	Samuel Johnson pca100	1,800	Stylish wood and metal fascia - precise, clean sound with an emphasis on leading edges	6			●	●		201
	TAG McLaren PA20R/125M	1,500	Clean, detailed sound but limited thrill power	6			●	●	145	184
R	Talk Hurricane 2L/Tornado 2	1,249	Design of integrity which gets to the heart, if not the soul, of the music	6					65	165
	Technics SU-C3000	2,997	Price includes SE-A3000. Supremely clean and even sounding combo, though it could be more musically involving	5	●					188
	Technics SU-C1010	300	Although the sound's basically all there, it's arguable that a good integrated offers more, for less	6	●		●			200
	Thule Spirit PA100	600	More successful than matching preamp: sound is gutsy and lively, and generally clean	1					100	187
	Thule Spirit PR150B/PA150B	1,600	The limitations in the sonic performance mean that the competition has more to offer	6					150	212
	Unison Research S8	2,950	Outrageous Italian styling and an equally melodramatic sound, with splendid voice projection and tension	5				VOL	24	216

PHONO STAGES

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	LINE INPUTS	MM PHONO INPUTS	MC PHONO INPUTS	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
	Clearaudio Symphono	740	Slightly inconsistent balance mars the performance of this lively performer	0		●				201
R	Creek OBH-9	160	A neat little unit with an essentially neutral and listenable character	0		●				189
	Cyren aEQ7/PSX-R	826	Very hi-tech product which tends too much towards smoothness except at climaxes, which can be rough	0	●					189
	Densen DP-Drive/DP-02	350	Quite unusual design in many ways: sound is mostly good but never quite shakes off a 'synthetic' quality	0		●				189
R	Electrocompaniet ECP-1	495	An excellent phono amp that combines well-rounded balance with detail and low noise	0	●	●				189
BB	Moth 30 Series Phono	249	Fine sound all round, in any kind of music, from this bargain phono stage	0	●	●				189
	NAD PP-1	40	A basic phono stage that does its job rather coarsely: a bit bass-shy too	0	●	●				189
R	Pass Labs XOno	2,995	Not absolutely neutral, but the overall result is so beguiling it's hard to resist	0	●	●				201
R	Primare R-20	500	Fights a little shy of densely scored music, but generally an enjoyable and neutral performer	0	●	●				201
R	Pro-Ject Phono Box	40	Moving-coil compatibility is a dubious extra in a way, but MM performance is acceptable at this giveaway price	0	●	●				201
R	QED Discsaver DS-1	35	It's cheap, it's cheerful, it's OK - perfectly adequate for use with a phono-less integrated, though not very refined	0	●	●				189
	Roksan Artaxerxes X/DS1.5	1,150	Delicate and well balanced, slightly congested at climaxes. Power supply expensive, but runs two Roksan components	0	●	●				189
R	Tom Evans The Groove	1,800	Plenty of detail, excellent imaging and almost flawlessly neutral: a good choice for information retrieval off any LP	0		●				201

AMPLIFIERS



SPECIFICATIONS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	LINE INPUTS	MM PHONO INPUTS	MC PHONO INPUTS	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Arcam AVR100	800	A solid sounding and well-engineered A/V amp with an affordable price tag. Good with music and well suited to smaller rooms	6			●	●	70	215
R	Arcam Alpha 10 DAVE/10P	2,500	Packed with a diversity of electronics that against engineering odds sounds extremely good	5			●	●	110	198
HC	Arcam FMJ A22 DAVE/P25	2,850	Powerful, authoritative, great stereo, excellent home cinema - what more can you want?	7			●	●	100	210
LC	Bryston SP1/9B THX	7,100	Stripped back 5.1 channel processor/amp combo reaches genuine audiophile heights. Currently lacks 5.1 input for DVD-A/SACD	6			●	●	120	219
	Cyrus AV5	1,000	Few processors are as adept with music. An effective multi-channel solution for music fans	4			●		N/A	201
	Cyrus AV5/SmartPower	2,650	Refined, detailed and attractive, but ultimately lacking in balls	3			●	●	60	210
R	Denon AVR-3300	800	Not as powerful as Denon claims, but nonetheless capable of impressive high-fidelity multi-channel sound	4			●	●	75	198
R	Denon AVR-3801	800	Well-endowed, sharply priced receiver is also a musical high roller.	8	●		●	●	105	217
BB	Denon AVC-A10SE	1,200	State of the art sound quality, a strong feature set and reasonable pricing. What more could you want?	11	●		●	●	125	210
BB	Denon AVC-A1SE	2,500	A powerful, articulate 7.1-channel integrated amp, loaded with features and equally at home with music and film soundtracks	12	●		●	●	170	215
	Kenwood KRF-V7773D	800	Bold, detailed presentation, but there are some technical limitations and a slightly mannered quality, especially with music.	10	●		●	●	120	210
	Kenwood KRF-V9993D	1,300	Complex amp that rocks with home cinema but loses out with music	7	●		●	●	110	215
BB	Marantz SR-5000	500	Something of a rough diamond, but a powerful and entertaining package	5			●	●	105	198
BB	Marantz SR-7000	700	Excellent at the price, and almost equally effective with 2-channel music and multichannel AV.	9			●	●	100	210
	Marantz SR-14EX Mk2	3,250	A weighty beast, with 7.1 processing but only five channels of amplification as standard. Highly capable with both music and movies, but rather costly all-in-all	8			●	●	140	215
	Musical Fidelity HTP/HT600	3,998	A very well matched pairing with considerable musical talents	8			●	●	100	207
R	Myryd MDP500/MA240/MA360	3,800	Superb three-box, five-channel A/V amplifier. Great with movies and beats most multichannel amps hands down with music	9			●	●	120	215
BB	NAD T760	650	More than adequate home cinema receiver that unusually doesn't muck up the music	7			●	●	60	210
	Nakamichi AV-10	1,000	A very powerful AV receiver that's easy to install and set-up with a civilised and subtle performance	4			●	●	140	198
	Onkyo TX-DS787	900	Obstructive ergonomics and messy sound undermine basically well-equipped receiver.	7	●		●	●	100	217
R	Onkyo TX-DS989	2,500	Authority personified, excellent AV signal processing, but sound quality a tad subtle.	9	●		●	●	160	210
	Pioneer VSA-E08	1,300	THX circuitry gives home cinema material a boost, but this is not an obvious first choice for music.	10	●		●	●	100	210
	Primare P30/A30.5	3,700	No 5.1 channel input for DVD-A/SACD but capable of almost uncomfortable realism with real solidity and drive	8			●	●	120	210
R	Roksan DSP/5 ch amp/VSU	2,440	Clean, powerful stereo expanded seamlessly, if without distinction, to 5.1 channels.	4			●	●	80	210
	Rotel RSX-972	1,000	Not the brightest tool in the Rotel toolbox, and pricing is surely rather optimistic too.	8			●	●	75	217
R	Rotel RSP-976/RMB-1075	1,700	A potent and enjoyable two-box beast that gets to the heart of both music and movie sound	8			●	●	120	215
R	Rotel RSP-985/RPB-985 MKII	2,400	The hugely versatile processor is the weaker subjective link in this otherwise impressive combo	3			●	●	130	198
	Sony TA-E9000ES/N9000ES	2,300	Big, gold, powerful and remarkably versatile but fails to cut the sonic mustard	5			●	●	110	198
S	Sony VA777ES	1,500	Smart circuitry gives this model unusual precision and transparency, and it is a fine all rounder 9	9			●	●	100	210
EC	TAG McLaren AV32R EX	2,749	A flexible AV processor, unusually good with music. Would form the heart of a top-class multichannel system in standard or 7-channel 'EX' form	6			●	●		215
	Technics SA-DA10	500	Lower mid-market AV amp has all the right ingredients, but fails to stir the soul	5	●		●	●	80	210
	Technics SE-A1010/SU-C1010 x3	1,350	A preamp plus three stereo amps provide a six-channel A/V solution without complex processing. Visually stunning but low on grunt and detail	6			●	●	70	215
	Yamaha RX-V1000RDS	800	Solid mainstream performer is more convincing as home cinema amplifier than for multichannel music.	8	●		●	●	100	217
	Yamaha DSP-AX1	2,000	An anorak's delight, and one of the most flexible and effective soundfield creators ever conceived	11	●		●	●	110	210

CABLES



SPECIFICATIONS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SYMMETRICAL	COAXIAL	STRANDED	SOLID CORE	COPPER	SILVER	DIG CABLE TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
	Acoustic Precision Eikos	89	Not entirely neutral: probably best suited to upbeat music. Very stiff construction		●	●		●			188
	Audioquest Sidewinder	40	Suppresses the sound. At this price it's a disappointment		●			●			211
R	Audioquest Coral	99	Slightly forward imaging hardly detracts from its excellent tonal qualities and detail	●				●			200
	Cable Talk Advanced 3	35	Good sound and great detail, but a slight brashness in the treble	●				●			211
	Cambridge Pacific	30	Lacks subtlety and bass impact but is otherwise quite serviceable for the price		●	●		●			176

SYMMETRICAL
COAXIAL
STRANDED
SOLID CORE
COPPER
SILVER
DIG CABLE TYPE
ISSUE NUMBER

ANALOGUE INTERCONNECTS (CONTINUED)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SYMMETRICAL	COAXIAL	STRANDED	SOLID CORE	COPPER	SILVER	DIG CABLE TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
	Cambridge Silver Spirit 60	100	Good bass but a lack of detail and differentiation of instruments	●		●		●			188
R	Chord Calypso	30	Informative, clear sound at a decent price	●		●		●			211
	Chord Cobra 2	50	Good, strong sound with full-bodied music, less happy with smaller forces	●		●		●			176
	Chord Chameleon 2	90	Deep bass is fine but despite that the sound can be a bit hard and lacking body and resonance	●		●		●			188
R	Connections Midas HD	39	Canary yellow cable with excellent plugs and an open sound. Slight treble glare	●		●		●			160
R	DNM Reson	40	Seemed a little harsh in the test system, but can work well and should be tried	●			●	●			200
BB	Ecosse The Composer	29	A high degree of realism and delicacy, and a fantastic price		●	●		●			211
	Goertz M1 Interconnect	145	Soft sound lacking in bite, with excessive and plummy bass (NB sample used in review was only 0.5m)	●			●	●			176
	Insert Audio IC100 MkII	47	Mostly good sound is let down by pervasive dryness			●		●			176
R	Insert Audio Image 5.1	85	Very good detail and imaging: perhaps a touch bass-light		●			●			200
BB	Ixos Gamma Audition II	30	Detailed and neutral, with just a hint of pleasant mellowness	●		●		●			211
	Ixos Gamma 1002	39	Lumpy bass, grainy treble, and poor integration. Nice colour, though	●		●		●			176
	Ixos 1000	90	Nothing badly wrong, just a little bit bland and outshone by others at the price	●		●		●			200
BB	Kimber PBJ	68	Assured sound, solid and natural bass and clear treble — excellent performance all round	●		●		●			188
R	Kimber Hero	110	Slight roughness detracts from some music; seems well suited to rock and jazz. Lively and detailed	●		●		●			176
	Nordost Black Knight	60	Flat black cable that is distinctive but slightly coloured — but not in a wholly negative manner	●		●		●			160
R	Nordost Solar Wind	85	Good tone and dynamics, with just occasionally a touch of bass-lightness in busy music	●			●	●			188
R	Nordost Blue Heaven	145	Very good bass and only slightly grainy treble add up to a well integrated, natural-sounding cable	●			●	●			176
	Precious Metals SS35	50	Extended bass, but dry character suits electronic music better than acoustic		●	●		●			188
	Profigold PGA301 MkII	40	Mellow and well rounded, but can seem a little heavy		●	●		●			211
	Prowire VHQ	10	This crisp cable lacks a little refinement, but it's great for the price		●	●		●			211
R	Prowire Silver	60	A good cable in every way, with just the occasional hint of coloration and coarseness			●		●	●		176
R	QED Qunex 1	20	Well balanced, and easily rivals more expensive cables		●	●		●			211
BB	QED Qnect 2	30	Very well balanced, refined and detailed, this is everything a good cable should be, and excellent value			●		●			176
R	QED Qnect 4S	70	Some coloration and roughness in the midrange and treble, but bass is gratifyingly solid	●		●		●			188
R	QED Qnex Silver Spiral	90	A great cable for lovers of big sounds	●		●		●			200
	Reference CS1	75	A moderate performer, with a little coloration and a tendency to lose bass at climaxes	●		●		●			188
	Silvertone Ex-Static	35	Pleasantly unfatiguing and competitively priced cable that lacks detail and insight		●	●		●			160
BB	SonicLink Whisper (Silver Pink)	45	Dynamically sensitive and muddle-free. We're unsure about the flesh-coloured finish, though...	●		●		●	●		160
R	SonicLink Black	49	Nickel-plated copper with a slight dryness in the bass and a hint of treble roll-off don't compromise integration	●		●		●			176
	SonicLink Message (Lilac)	60	Some dryness can affect transient sounds, though tone is generally good, especially in the bass	●		●		●			188
	SonicLink Violet	95	Better bass than treble — a little dry in the upper octaves	●		●		●			200
R	Straight Wire Chorus	40	A very confident cable with good bass, though perhaps a shade of treble loss		●	●		●			176
R	Straight Wire Sonata	80	Tonal balance favours lower frequencies but despite this it's a very listenable cable		●	●		●			188
	Straight Wire Encore II	100	Slightly variable bass performance is a weakness in this otherwise capable cable	●		●		●			200
BB	Supra EFF-ISL	80	Excellent sound in all areas — nothing to criticise	●		●		●			188
R	Tara Labs Prism 22	64	Mild tendency to plumminess offsets some hardness in complex music with mixed results		●		●	●			188
	Tara Labs Prism 55-i	195	Good with laid-back music, but seems lazy with more exciting material	●			●	●			200
BB	TCI Viper	55	Fine performance in all areas: just the smallest hint of sibilance. Very good value	●		●		●			200
BB	van den Hul PB5	50	A highly neutral cable with fine dynamic and rhythmic performance too — excellent			●		●			188
R	van den Hul Source HB	65	Price for 0.8m. Hybrid carbon-fibre/copper cable that is a paragon of naturalness			●		●			160
R	van den Hul D102 MkIII HB	80	A fine cable, but the competition has crept up and it no longer leads the pack	●		●		●			200

DIGITAL INTERCONNECTS (PRICES PER TERMINATED METRE PAIR)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SYMMETRICAL	COAXIAL	STRANDED	SOLID CORE	COPPER	SILVER	DIG CABLE TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Audioquest Digital One	35	A neutral and capable cable that adds little or no character to the sound			●		●		E	207
	Chord Optilink	40	Beautifully made, but performance is practically indistinguishable from other, cheaper, Toslink leads					●		O	207
	Ixos 1051-100	39.95	Plenty of bass, and detail seems good, but there's a loss of involvement			●		●		E	207
BB	QED Qunex P75	25	A superbly capable interconnect that's highly detailed and well balanced			●		●		E	207
R	Ross OP004	19.99	Sounds much like most other Toslink leads: slightly lacking detail, but good value					●		O	207
	SonicLink Digital Optical	30	Possibly slightly more detailed than other opticals, but still no match for a decent electrical digital link					●		O	207



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DIGITAL INTERCONNECTS (PRICES PER TERMINATED METRE PAIR)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SYMMETRICAL	COAXIAL	STRANDED	SOLID CORE	COPPER	SILVER	DIG CABLE TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
	Straight Wire Info-Link	300	A good cable, but bass seems a little light and detail suffers a little at dimaxes		●		●		●	F	207
R	van den Hul Optocoupler	49.95	Noticeably has the edge over other optical leads, but still second best to electrical types							O	207

LOUDSPEAKER CABLES (PRICES PER METRE LENGTH)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SYMMETRICAL	COAXIAL	STRANDED	SOLID CORE	COPPER	SILVER	DIG CABLE TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
	ALR Jordan QMM	5	Generally neutral, if sometimes bass-shy, but not very communicative	●					●		183
R	Audio Note AN-B	16.50	Well suited to valve systems, elastic bass, methodical but unintrusive and musical			●		●			133
R	Audio Note AN-L	29.50	Fruity bass and expressive vocal rendition was appreciated by the panel, which was happy to accept its foibles	●			●		●		133
R	Audioquest Slate	15	Capable across the board, with just the smallest degree of dryness, but very listenable	●			●	●			203
R	Bandridge LC7409	4	Detailed and up-beat cable. A bit too steely for classical strings			●					157
R	Cable Talk Talk 3.1	2.25	Quite well-balanced but tends to lose bass lines in complex music	●				●			168
R	Cable Talk Talk 4.1	4.25	Smooth and cultured sound that lacks fine detail and is a bit too restrained			●					157
	Cable Talk Flat 2	5	Rather unexciting sound, with variable bass and dry voices	●				●			203
	Cable Talk Concert 2.1	8	Can make stereo images recede, and favours the upper bass	●				●			192
	DNM LSC350	6.95	Majors on midband and lower treble lucidity at the expense of bass and extreme treble extension	●			●				168
R	Chord Company Odyssey	17	Relatively vice-free cable with good detail throughout the range and generally neutral bass	●			●				192
	Chord Company Rumour 2	10	Performance is listenable enough but fails to excel in any area	●				●			203
BB	DNM LSC8500	12	High impedance can influence the treble response, but this was a winner on sound per pound. Bi-wire	●			●				133
	Ecosse Reference CS-2.15	12	Stereo and rhythm are good, but persistent dryness detracts significantly	●			●	●			215
R	Electrofluidics Monolith 2020	45	Excellent bass extension and very fine performance elsewhere - one of the best cables available all round	●			●	●			203
	Gale XL189	1	Slightly bright and not too subtle, but a perfectly acceptable cable for any starter system	●				●			168
	Gale XL315	2	A little lacking in detail but plenty of life and excellent value	●				●			157
R	Gale XL160-2	2.50	Rhythmic and bouncy-sounding bi-wire cable. Can be slightly manipulative			●					157
R	Goertz M2	32	Remarkably detailed, smooth, neutral and with excellent bass; check amplifier compatibility	●			●				168
BB	Ixos Gamma 6003	2.99	A little midrange dryness, but bass is among the best at this price, strong and consistent	●				●			203
R	Ixos Gamma 6006	5	Bass is better than treble, which can become spitty and sibilant - though only slightly	●				●			192
BB	Kimber 4PR	4.90	Considering the price, this cable's very slight dryness is forgivable when everything else is so right	●	●		●				192
R	Kimber 4VS	8.50	A good mix of virtues including particularly fine bass	●				●			183
R	Kimber 4TC	18.80	A well-balanced cable with good performance in all areas	●				●			168
BB	Kimber 8TC	348	Very capable in all areas, particularly good at imaging and with firm bass. Price for 5m terminated pair	●				●			203
	Linn K20	4	Seems to work best with lively, unsubtle music - can be dry and edgy	●				●			183
	Monster Cable Z1	12.50	Slightly bass-rich balance, and could do with a bit more detail	●				●			215
	Nordost Flatline Gold II	9.50	Exciting sound but a bit too 'in-yr-face', and bass is not always even	●				●			192
	Ortofon SPK100	3	Grey-sounding - strips instruments of their natural richness and resonance. A bit bass-shy, too	●				●			133
R	Ortofon SPK200	4.99	Good strong bass and fair detail, only slightly marred by a little dryness	●				●			183
R	Ortofon SPK300	8	Tremendously open and atmospheric, with robust, full-blooded bass - if slightly bright at times	●				●			133
	Precious Metals SL102	10	Unusual construction gives rather strained sound, only really cheering up with simple musical textures	●				●			183
	Profigold Silverflex LC8258	4	A pretty-looking cable that does little to offend but is let down by some congestion	●				●			203
	Prowire Out of Sight	1.99	Special-purpose cable for laying under carpets etc. Fair sound across the board	●				●			203
	Puresonic 7845	1.95	Big, weighty sound - but too messy and bloated for its own good	●				●			183
	Puresonic 7891	2.85	Chunky cable design; shame about the sound quality	●				●			157
	QED Qudos	2.25	Despite high-tech design and excellent Air-Loc plugs, its music-making failed to gel	●				●			157
BB	QED Qudos Silver	5	A few minor flaws but overall performance is very assured for this price	●				●			192
	QED Profile 4x4	9	Good midrange and treble balance, but bass is rather slack and detail not outstanding	●				●			168
R	QED Profile Silver 12	15	Very slightly laid-back, but good tone and detail - wears its achievements lightly	●				●			215
	QED Genesis Silver Spiral	30	Commendable bass, with a little dryness and mildly compromised imaging; good, but not the best at its price	●				●			203
	SonicLink S300	18	Happiest with simple music; tends to smudge detail in complex pieces	●				●			168
R	SonicLink AST50	1.95	It may look like bell-wire, but AST50 sounds detailed, ordered and balanced	●				●			157
R	SonicLink AST75	2.95	Unusual materials and rather unusual performance too, strong on excitement and with plenty of bass	●				●			203
R	SonicLink AST150	3.95	Slightly plummy bass and a useful way of holding musical strands together	●				●			157
	SonicLink AST200x2	5.95	At its best with exciting music, this cable seems shy of subtler details	●				●			192
BB	SonicLink Rebel	7.50	Plenty of bass, but without sacrificing upper frequency clarity or dynamics	●				●			215
	Straight Wire Duo	3	Not so subtle and lacking some detail, but sound is consistent with level and musical style	●				●			203
	Straight Wire Rhythm	6	Its major flaw seems to be woolly and indistinct bass, which pervades most types of music	●				●			192
BB	Straight Wire Quartet	8	A good all-rounder with full tone, clear detail and natural ambience	●				●			183
	Supra Classic 6.0	4.95	It's all there, but a persistent lack of detail seriously mars the view	●				●			215
R	Supra Ply 3.4	6.95	Clean sound which stays together well at high levels, with full bass - perhaps a touch of treble restriction	●				●			183
R	Supra Ply 3.4/5	7.95	Good in all areas with rich bass and just a touch of treble roughness	●				●			203
R	Tara Labs Klara	2.95	A good budget cable with an even spread of virtues - and very minor vices - across the board	●				●			183
R	Tara Labs Prism Nexa	9.95	Slight tonal softness affects both bass and treble, but the overall sound is very listenable	●				●			215
	Tara Labs RSC Prime 500	36	More suited to melodious music than anything with bite and drive, with only moderate detail	●				●			203
	TCI Python	7.99	No single major sin, but detail is not outstanding and rhythm isn't always completely solid	●				●			203
R	Townshend Isolda	50	Superb sound all round, and amplifier compatibility enhanced by included stabilising inductor	●				●			203
R	van den Hul The Snowline	5.49	A hint of high-end civilisation with a few rough edges and a slightly warm balance	●				●			215
	van den Hul Royal Jade	10.99	Lots of technology, but sound suffers from dryness and woolly bass	●				●			203
	XLO Pro 600	16.50	Decent bass and good treble, but sounds confused with densely-scored music	●				●			215

MAINS CABLES AND CONDITIONERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SYMMETRICAL	COAXIAL	STRANDED	SOLID CORE	COPPER	SILVER	DIG CABLE TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Audiolinx Blue Max	100	Expensive, but good value considering the improvement offered				●	●		PLT	218
	Audio Note AN-MP	99	A noticeable improvement on standard mains cable, but not as great as others				●	●			218
	Audiosource bbc	48	Very good value, extremely sharp detailing - maybe too sharp			●		●		PLT	218
BB	Audusa Eupen CSA	48	Reasonable cost, outstanding performance and a strong recommendation			●		●			218

MAINS CABLES AND CONDITIONERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SYMMETRICAL	COAXIAL	STRANDED	SOLID CORE	COPPER	SILVER	DIG CABLE TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
	Clearaudio Accurate Power Gen	1,090	Compact and beautifully finished unit that offers positive sonic benefits that justify the price								206
	GTA PHY-HP board	299	Oozing style and quality, the board generates an extremely natural and truthful sound								206
R	LAT AC-2	99	Excellent clarity, music sounds clean and easy to follow - enthusiastic recommendation		●	●		●			218
R	Lynwood Electronics Mega Power	295	Reasonable price model that improves focus while producing a sweet, tight and clean bass								206
	Maplin Bowthorpe ASC 431	50	Excellent mains purifying abilities - including other equipment used elsewhere in the house (Maplin code BJ84F)			●		●			218
	Olson Sound Fantastic	80	Reasonable price, superior build quality - all in all, a bit of a bargain			●		●			218
R	PS Audio Power Plant	1,200	Power Plant improves the cleanness and separation of individual voices and instruments, giving an impressive 3-D quality					●	●		206
R	Russ Andrews Kimber Power Kord	70	Impressively detailed and crisp, choice of connectors can make even more difference					●	●		218
BB	Russ Andrews Kimber/Power Block	350	Improved version that elevates music to a cleaner and more three-dimensional experience with greater stereo imagery					●	●		206
	Russ Andrews The Purifier	250	More ambitious version of the Silencer that gives a cleaner, quieter background, allowing more low level detail								206
BB	Russ Andrews Silencer	40	A cost effect solution to noise-free mains supply that reduces 'hash' without losing brilliance and immediacy								206
	SonicLink SG Power	80	Bright, open and detailed with sweet and natural treble frequencies			●		●	PLT		218
	SonicLink S-Gold mains	225	Delivers a clean incisive sound with excellent detail, clarity and with no increase in noise								206
R	Synergistic Res. Master Coupler	238	Absolutely outstanding performance, but extremely expensive					●	●		218
R	Trichord Research Powerblock500	300	Isolation transformer that bolsters clarity, openness and gives an increased refinement making for a purer and natural sound								206

CASSETTE DECKS



SPECIFICATIONS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	DOLBY C	DOLBY S	DOLBY B	DOLBY HX PRO	3-HEAD	TWIN DECK	AUTO REVERSE	AUTO CALIBRATION	ADJUSTABLE BIAS	ISSUE NUMBER
BB	JVC TD-R472	200	Excellent auto-reverse deck which doesn't suffer the usual disadvantages and is very sharply priced	●			●			●		●	158
R	Kenwood KX-W6080	200	Modestly decent-sounding twin deck, with some transport instability and ragged bass				●			●		●	171
	Marantz SD455	170	Works well as a single deck, especially on replay, but dubbing at high/low speed compromises sound				●			●		●	184
	NAD 613	230	Rough and ready, but enjoyable sound, though marred by mechanical motor noise				●			●		●	158
	NAD 616	300	Twin deck with basic features. No Dolby setting memory, transport is too unstable for audiophile use				●			●		●	171
	Nakamichi DR-10	800	An ergonomic oddity, but one of the last of the great cassette decks. Worth considering against MD	●			●			●		●	195
R	Onkyo K-611	460	Cute drawer-loading mini-size component with 3 heads and dual capstan transport	●			●			●		●	146
R	Pioneer CT-S550S	250	Great features, good with cheap low bias tapes, but slightly synthetic sound quality	●			●			●		●	164
	Pioneer CT-W806DR	300	Had it not been for the iffy transport quality, this sophisticated twin would have been Recommended				●			●		●	171
	Teac V-1050	180	One of the cheapest 3-head machines around, but it shows in very 'thick' sound	●			●			●		●	184
BB	Technics RS-AZ6	200	For those who can't afford the RS-AZ7; clarity over the widest bandwidth thanks to AZ thin-film head	●			●			●		●	164
BB	Technics RS-AZ7	270	Thin-film head gives a solid, almost CD-like bass and midrange. A clear advance in state-of-the-art	●			●			●		●	158
R	Yamaha KX-580SE	250	Subtle, engaging and transparent deck, with a lightweight tonality, but stability and strong detail	●			●			●		●	171

CD PLAYERS



SPECIFICATIONS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	ELEC DIG OUTPUT	ASSEMBU ELEC DIG OUT	OPT DIG OUTPUT	ST OPT DIG OUT	BAL ANALOGUE OUT	HEADPHONE SOCKET	VARIABLE OUTPUT	SACD COMPATIBILITY	MULTI-DISC	ISSUE NUMBER
	Advantage CD15	3,995	A CD player of some stature - what it lacks in dynamics it makes up for in subtlety and flow	●	●	●		●					193
	Alchemist Kraken	1,249	Distinctive looking player likely to suit a Alchemist system, but will result in variable results elsewhere		●								190
R	Alchemist Nexus APD32A	597	Refined treble, constrained yet capable bass and attractive all-round presentation	●									169
	AMC CD8A	150	Has balanced output, but is otherwise rather grey and unremarkable			●		●	●				172
BB	AMC CD9/DAC8	200	Beer-budget two-box system (player plus DAC) is smooth, attractive and easy on the ear	●									179
	Anthem CD1	1,595	Unusual combination of high-end player, complete with HDCD, and changer. Good, but noisy	●	●							●	178
BB	Arcam Alpha 7SE	300	Sharper, clearer Alpha 7 SE, and more affordable than before			●							207
	Arcam CD72	400	Easy going, slightly soft-centred reworking of Alpha 7 in new, svelte DIVA clothing	●		●							212
R	Arcam Alpha MCD	450	Excellent bass and natural midband, but just a touch of treble dryness, from this very listenable changer									●	178
BB	Arcam Alpha 8SE	600	Excellent (and very reasonably priced) HDCD-compatible player is a strong all-rounder	●		●							176
R	Arcam Alpha 9	800	Refined, articulate player which employs new DAC technology to great effect	●		●							188
R	Arcam CD92	850	High resolution player needs a touch of spit and polish to be completely convincing	●		●							212
R	Arcam FMJ CD23	1,100	World class presentation allied with innovative technology to deliver an engaging standard of music making	●		●	●	●					206
	Audio Analogue Paganini	750	Basically good, but sometimes heavy-handed player	●									191
	Audio Note AN-CD1	600	Easy on the ear, and for a valve player, easy on the pocket, but a bit Radio 2-flavoured	●									188
	Audio Note AN-CD2	999	High output impedance makes performance unduly system fussy	●									195
	AVI S2000MC2	899	A chip off the old block. This model's in-er-face balance obstructs an otherwise finely detailed sound	●									176
R	AVI S2000MC Reference	1,399	Lean, dry, high resolution player, built to outlast most of us. A fine performer in a sympathetic system	●									169
	Balanced Audio Tech VK-D5	3,995	A valve-infused player with a big and engaging sound. Lacks a little subtlety	●				●				●	194
	Cambridge Audio D100	120	Hard, clanging and coloured sounding, and with suspect control logic			●							200
BB	Cambridge Audio D500	200	Clean and highly articulate player wears well in extended use			●							202
R	Cambridge Audio D500 SE	230	A really lively sounding player with good detail but just a hint of dryness			●							217
R	Copland CDA 266	1,199	Simple yet elegant design is unexpectedly sophisticated under the skin, and effective in execution	●									176
	Copland CDA 289	1,898	Beautifully built and musically enjoyable. Lacks some precision, but still among the best below £2,000	●									194
R	Cymbal CDP12	1,299	Clean, detailed and airy HDCD-equipped player with minimalist trappings	●								●	176
R	Cyrus dAD1.5	395	Improved dAD1 variant has improved digital filter for a more natural, easy on the ear quality	●									191
R	Cyrus CD7	800	New Cyrus player has strong all-round attributes to match its good looks	●									212
R	Cyrus dAD3 Q24	900	Bold, lean and lively player demands sympathetic system matching			●							200

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ONE-BOX CD PLAYERS (CONTINUED)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	ELEC DIG OUTPUT	ASSEMBLY ELEC DIG OUT	OPT DIG OUTPUT	ST OPT DIG OUT	BAL ANALOGUE OUT	HEADPHONE SOCKET	VARIABLE OUTPUT	MULTI-DISC	SACD COMPATIBILITY	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Denon DCD-435	130	Good low cost player, and a step up from the DCD-425, its predecessor			●			●				191
R	Denon DCD-655	180	Fine, slightly soft-edged budget player, and a good ameliorative for aggressive, edgy systems			●			●	●			200
R	Denon DCD-835	230	Refined sound with terrific bass extension. Some slight coloration	●					●	●			217
	Denon DCD-1550AR	350	Disappointing bland and ploddy sound from an immaculately constructed, high-tech player	●		●			●	●			179
	Densen B-400	1,280	Bold, purposeful sound, but lacks subtlety, and has some ergonomic flaws	●									212
	EZO Fog Stage 3	1,170	Curious player is difficult to drive, and has sound quality that both enchants and sometimes confounds					●					212
R	Kenwood DVF-3030	180	Solid CD player with straightforward features			●			●	●			207
BB	Kenwood DP-4090	250	Focuses a clear, wide aperture lens on the music — and has CD Text too	●		●			●	●			172
	Kenwood DVF-R9030	800	Kenwood's first DVD-A player suffers from a mild compression of dynamics resulting in a polite yet matter of fact sound	●		●	●	●	●	●	●		206
R	Linn Genki	995	Explicit, rather bright sounding player with strong multi-room appeal								●		212
	Marantz CD5000	150	Well equipped budget player sounds thin and rough at times			●			●	●			202
	Marantz CC3000	150	Ragged sounding multidisc player, but it is cheap and well equipped	●							●	●	204
	Marantz CD6000	250	Great package with all mod cons, and eminently listenable too	●		●			●	●			207
BB	Marantz CD6000 OSE LE	300	Detailed, well rounded, at home in any musical context — a real bargain	●		●			●	●			217
BB	Marantz CD6000 KI Signature	500	Excellent all rounder, a well appointed good value package	●		●			●	●			212
R	Marantz CD-17 MkII	800	Sophisticated player with a short but attractive feature set, and a new found bounce in its step	●		●	●	●	●	●			206
R	Marantz CD-17KI Sig	1,100	Minor QC problems aside, this is a superbly turned-out machine, but ultimately a little bland	●		●					●		176
R	Marantz CD-7	3,500	A superbly designed CD player, both inside and out. Precise and dramatic in equal measure	●		●			●	●			194
EC	Marantz SA-1	5,000	The brand's first SACD player is a stunning machine that's equally as strong with conventional CD	●		●			●			●	208
R	Meracus Tanto	1,395	Believable tonal colours and textures, refinement takes preference over dynamics — but it's not cheap	●		●							169
BB	Meridian 506	1,100	Revised 506 includes MSR remote and a new D/A chip, which makes it livelier and more detailed	●		●							176
	Monrio Asty	695	Well built player has solid, propulsive sound quality that deteriorates towards HF	●		●							200
	Musical Fidelity X-RAY	799	Brilliantly packaged and clean but slightly antiseptic sounding player	●		●							184
BB	Musical Fidelity A3 CD	800	Excellent player has few faults apart from a slight loss of HF detail	●		●							200
	Myryad T-10	400	Rather ordinary player fails to shine with good music recordings	●		●							184
	Myryad T-20	600	Matter of fact styling and sound quality, a tad bright for some systems	●		●							195
	Myryad MCD 600	1,299	Abundance of detail and resolution from this 'Super DAC' CD player	●		●							220
R	NAD C520	170	Significantly improved entry level NAD is smooth and dynamic, if slightly dull	●		●							202
	NAD C521	200	Good timing and excitement, but not good at holding the listener's attention	●		●							217
	NAD 523	250	Lacklustre musical presentation was disappointing on test; so was the absence of a digital output	●		●						●	204
	NAD C540	330	Not cheap, and disc handling is pedestrian at best, but the C540 is smooth & elegant with just a hint of aggression	●		●							200
R	NAD Silverline S500	1,100	It sounds as good as it looks, which is notably refined and easy on the ear	●	●	●		●					195
R	Naim Audio CD5	1,120	Recommended subject to audition, a dynamic machine, yet some physical minuses										212
	Nakamichi MB-10	400	Jewel of a multi-disc player, with crisp sound and superb fuss-free compact packaging	●		●			●	●	●		204
EC	Naim NACDSII/XPS	5,625	Brings you the Naim sound, but for once doesn't have to rely on Naim ancillaries to get the results	●		●							188
R	Onkyo DX-7222	150	Competitive following recent price cut, and on the whole a strong performer musically	●		●			●	●			200
	Onkyo DX-7511	300	Earthbound mid-price CD player fails to excite	●		●			●	●			207
	Parasound CDP-1000	499	Comes on like a high end player, but ultimately sounds a bit weak and soft-centred	●		●							184
	Philips CD751	150	Inconsistent and occasionally opaque and scrawny sounding cheapie	●		●			●	●			172
BB	Philips SACD-1000	1,299	Not quite a universal disc player, but it does SACD multi-channel, DVD-Video and CD to a universally high standard	●		●						●	220
	Pioneer PD-5507	200	Low cost Legato Link implementation sounds gentle but slightly muddled	●		●			●	●			191
	Primare D20	799	Well presented player doesn't quite cut the mustard, though it performs promisingly	●		●							188
	Revox Exception E426	2,250	Very stylish with a light, agile sound that extends superbly and has fine timing	●		●			●	●			182
	Roksan Kandy	475	Slightly old-fashioned sound quality player available in various colour schemes	●		●							200
	Roksan Caspian	895	Improved Caspian (retested for 2001) is still bold, dynamic player, but rather more subtle and expressive	●		●							212
	Rotel RCD-951	300	Disappointing chopped-down RCD-971 — buy the original	●		●							191
BB	Rotel RCD-971	450	Odd disc handling logic, but bold, detailed and refined sound make this a must	●		●							184
R	Rotel RCD-991	825	Strong midrange player with switchable dither levels to provide some system tweaking ability	●		●							212
	Sherwood CD1	1,100	A very neutral, even handed sounding player with a rather flat, lifeless sound. Beautiful construction	●		●							163
	Sharp DX-SX1	2,700	Stylish player with a slightly forward but extremely nimble sound. Connects to matching digital amp via dedicated umbilical	●		●			●	●	●		211
R	Sony CDP-XE330	100	Unrefined, but lively, detailed and highly affordable	●		●							202
	Sony CDP-XE530	140	Well equipped, but raw, scrappy sounding player lacks depth and weight	●		●			●	●			200
BB	Sony CDP-XB930E	300	Yet another first rate UK optimised player with all the bells and whistles	●		●							195
R	Sony DVP-NS700V	380	Outrageously good value for money DVD-VISA player, though SACD replay quality trails the audio only Sony SCD-XB770ES	●		●						●	220
BB	Sony SCD-XB770ES	400	Expressive and expansive player in the best SACD tradition, but CD replay is disappointingly lacklustre	●		●						●	220
BB	Sony SCD-555ES	1,200	Fabulously built with superb sound using both CD and Super Audio software, you'll be hard pressed to find a better CD player at the price	●		●						●	213
EC	Sony SCD-1	3,500	The first SACD player sounds fabulous but there's not much competition and limited software as yet	●		●			●	●		●	194
	T+A CD1210R	1,185	Intriguing player with rather pushy basic sound, but has switchable digital filters	●		●							188
	Talk Electronics Thunder 1	550	Entry level upgradeable Talk Electronics player sounds slightly muted	●		●							200
	Talk Electronics Thunder 2	699	Fine player, slightly lacking in dynamics, but readily, if expensively upgradeable in various ways	●		●							191
R	Talk Electronics Thunder 3	1,000	Clean, fast, and availability of a complete upgrade path make this a good long term proposition	●		●							195
R	TAG McLaren CD20R	1,249	Dry and unatmospheric, but plenty of presence — recommended with caution	●		●							188
	Teac VRDS-9	700	Well-presented. This Teac is crisp, yet shallow, and inconsistent in sound quality and partnering skills	●		●					●		176
	Teac VRDS-25x	1,000	Excellent, individualistic player with bold, colourful sound, but test sample had iffy CD-R compatibility	●		●			●	●			195
	Technics SL-PG390	90	It's very cheap. Very, very cheap	●		●							202
	Technics SL-P57	200	Strong, but ultimately rather opaque and hard-sounding, high tech CD player	●		●							207
R	Technics SL-MC7	300	Maximum storage capacity for a minimum price, and presentable sound too (multidisc)	●		●					●	●	204
	Thule Spirit CD100	600	Definitely a try before you buy machine, but the bass and mid are excellent	●		●							188
	Trichord Genesis	549	Breathed-on Pioneer is warm and mellious, but ultimately lacks drive and authority	●		●			●	●			169
	Trichord Revelation	799	Well-ordered and clean sound that may be a little too refined for some, images well	●		●							166
	Tube Technology Fusion MkII	1,350	Improvements over the original model but still remains too inconsistent for its own good	●		●		●	●	●			206
	Tube Technology Fulcrum	2,800	An imaginative two-box player with a smooth sound that lacks some lustre	●	●	●							194
	Yamaha CDX-596	230	Well-priced and attractive-sounding, this player can read CD-RW	●		●							207
	Yamaha CDX-496	180	A rather splashy and approximate sound, further hampered by mechanical noise	●		●			●	●			217
	Yamaha CD-X993	400	A bit of a lush, though the sound is singularly free of grain, and equipment levels are strong	●		●			●	●			184
	YBA Spécial	695	There is nothing here to justify the pricing or the high-end parentage. Avoid	●		●							195

DIGITAL RECORDERS

MINIDISCS



SPECIFICATIONS

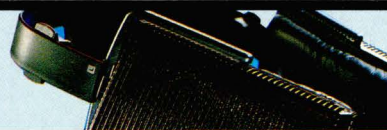
STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	FORMAT	PORTABLE	OPTICAL IN/OUTPUTS	ELEC IN/OUTPUTS	ISSUE NUMBER
	JVC XM-448	220	An hidden keyboard is a great idea, but musically it sounds rather cool and strident	MD		●	●	205
	Kenwood DMF-5020	250	it may be high-tech but nothing conceals the caricatured sound	MD		●	●	205
R	Kenwood DMF-9020	500	One of the best MD decks yet for sound quality, and the first to make titling a practical proposition	MD		●	●	191
	Onkyo MD-121	450	Mid-sized deck that sounds slightly coloured at times, though immediate and lively	MD		●		177
R	Pioneer MJ-D508	200	Well equipped but musically sleep inducing player that deserves its recommendation due to price	MD		●	●	205
	Sharp MDR3H	300	Nifty machine combining a 3-disc CD changer with a MD recorder. Sound on both is rather below par, though	MD		●	●	184
R	Sony MDS-JA555ES	650	Powerful demonstration of Sony's proficiency, it delivers the best MD can offer	MD		●	●	205

CD RECORDERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	FORMAT	PORTABLE	OPTICAL IN/OUTPUTS	ELEC IN/OUTPUTS	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Denon CDR-1000	339	Straightforward but attractive single CD-R/RW deck is a respectable player and recorder, though some midband congestion was noted when recording	CD		●	●	218
	Denon CDR-1500	449	Ultra high jitter takes the sparkle out of an otherwise attractive dual disc CD-R/RW burner	CD		●	●	218
	Harman/Kardon CDR-20	499	High jitter player makes quite good recordings that sound less good when played back internally, especially when using the internal record capable transport	CD		●	●	218
	Hitachi DV-W1E	520	Combination CD-R/RW and DVD player has excellent ergonomics, but tends to sound rather opaque	CD		●	●	218
	JVC XL-R5000	450	Flexible, ratty build, and attractive sound, but it's a little expensive compared to other rivals	CD-R(W)		●	●	205
	LG ADR-620	350	A powerfully equipped machine with useful multi-room capabilities, but sound quality is rough and ready	CD-R(W)		●	●	205
BB	Marantz DR6000	400	Classy CD-R/RW recorder is also a classy CD player, in contrast to most CD recorders	CD		●	●	218
R	Marantz DR-17	1,500	Highly recommended, but with a jitter problem that, resolved, would improve sound quality	CD-R(W)		●	●	205
BB	Philips CDR951	380	An improvement on previous models, it delivers the musical goods in some style	CD-R(W)		●	●	205
R	Philips CDR785	350	Ragged play quality, but a good record performance from this well equipped, well priced CD-R/RW deck	CD		●	●	218
BB	Pioneer PDR-609	250	Classy single deck CD-R/RW burner is also a good if characterful player	CD		●	●	218
R	Pioneer PDR-W839	350	Good quality twin CD burner makes recordings that can be hard to distinguish from the original. Good value too	CD		●	●	218
R	Pioneer PDR-W739	400	Flexible multi-disc that has everything including respectable sound and pricing	CD-R(W)		●	●	205
	TEAC RW-800	350	Capable recording tool, but a little rough and ready as a player	CD-R(W)		●	●	205
	Yamaha CDR-D561	449	Twin CD-R/RW burner makes solid, believable discs, but is priced higher than equivalent models from elsewhere	CD		●	●	218

HEADPHONES

HEADPHONES



SPECIFICATIONS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	ELECTROSTATIC	SUPRA-AURAL	CIRCUM-AURAL	OPEN BACK	CLOSED BACK	MASS (g)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	3.5mm JACK ADAPTOR	ISSUE NUMBER
BB	AKG K44	20	Lively, enjoyable and remarkably detailed: a bargain			●		●	190	32	●	219
R	AKG K100	36	Leather clad groover with bags of power and clarity, for a respectable asking price		●		●		190	100	●	205
	AKG 301	70	Big 'phones with even and detailed sound but lacks sufficient bass weight			●	●		230	100	●	194
	AKG K 240 DF	100	Inoffensive 'phones that are very laid back, if lacking in grunt			●	●		240	600	●	186
R	Audio Technica ATH-D40fs	100	Detailed and involving sound with a professional 'studio' quality appeal			●		●	250	66		194
R	Audio Technica ATH-M40	120	Incredible detail and honesty from these classically designed studio 'phone			●		●	250	60		186
	Beyer DT331	65	Clear and extremely detailed sound with rather thin bass			●			210	40	●	194
	Beyer DT431	81	Nice looking 'phones that may not be the best players on the field, but will always give 100 per cent			●	●		210	40	●	186
	Beyer DT531	105	Average performer from an established player. Lacks punch and bite			●	●		245	250	●	205
R	Beyer DT511	106	Superb midband clarity and speed slightly at odds with soft bass. Even so, high tingle factor			●	●		200	250		172
BB	Beyer DT831	140	These provide silky, smooth textures in abundance and we're not just talking about the velvet ear pads			●	1/2		295	250	●	186
	Grado SR-40	45	Cheap and nasty appearance largely redeemed by cheerful, up-beat sound. Very comfortable		●				120	32	●	172
BB	Grado SR-60	79	For sheer musical enjoyment these are hard to beat. Retro styling may not be to everyone's taste		●				200	32	●	194
R	Grado SR-125	150	What these 'phones lack in style they make up for ten-fold in musical quality		●				200	32		186
R	Grado SR-225	200	Warm, darkly-coloured tonally and ultimately lacking in clarity, but true to the spirit of the music		●				200	32		163
	Grado SR-325	300	Elegant sound across the frequency spectrum; let down by old fashioned ear-piece design		●				200	32	●	205
	JVC HA-G77	40	Too coloured for general recommendation, and lacking detail			●	●		260	32	●	219
	JVC HA-W60	49	Remarkable lack of interference and hiss ameliorates adequate sound of this cordless design		●			●	165	1/8	●	172
R	JVC HA-W200RF	75	Distinct lack of hiss from these FM cordless 'phones ensures that detail and depth are easily heard			●			280	20,000	●	186
R	JVC HA-DX3	200	Great headphone with a rich bass, careful mid-range and high comfort factor			●			340	90	●	205
	Koss TD/80	50	Oodles of bass but with a recessed midband; tiresome on the head with prolonged wearing			●		●	250	60	●	194
	Koss R/200	80	Basic sound is OK, but sensitivity is too low to be useful. Features stereo width control			●	●		210	60	●	219
	Koss R/100	100	Rather cheap looking 'phones that supply good detail but are severely lacking in midrange excitement			●		●	215	60	●	186
	Precide Ergo Model 2	140	Still has much of the spaciousness of the Float from which it is derived, but coarse mid/top				●		380	100		163
R	Philips HP890	70	A remarkably sophisticated and very comfortable headphone			●			330	32	●	219
	Philips HP910	80	Ergonomically good but suffers from a muffled mid-range and over excited bass			●	●		247	32	●	205
	Sennheiser IS 380	55	As close as you'll get to real hi-fi with infra-red phones at this price. Inevitable hiss spoils the illusion		●			●	192	1/8	●	172
	Sennheiser HD570 Symphony	90	A little lightweight in sound, and prone to sibilance - but detailed, and comfortable to wear			●			210	64	●	219
R	Sennheiser HD 545	125	Fine all-rounder that takes all styles of music in its stride. Ear-clamping headband			●			255	150	●	172
BB	Sennheiser HD 565 Ovation	150	Wide bandwidth design which is refined, expressive and extremely comfortable			●	●		255	150	●	157
	Sennheiser HD590	160	Assured and confident player with very low colouration and great comfort			●	●		270	120	●	205
	Sennheiser HE 60/HEV70/UK	998	Very nearly a superb electrostatic, with a pure midband, but top end is sibilant and edgy	●					260	N/A		163

HEADPHONES (CONTINUED)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	ELECTROSTATIC	SUPRA-AURAL	CIRCUMAURAL	OPEN BACK	CLOSED BACK	MASS (g)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	3.5mm JACK ADAPTOR	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Sony MDR-CD480	40	Generally neutral and nicely detailed; comfortable too						250	40		219
	Sony MDR-V700DJ	100	Great looking fold-away 'phones with exceptional build quality. Kickin' bass						300	24		194
	Sony MDR-CD 2000	200	Large pads make for sweaty listening. Pure mid-tones, but weightless bass						300	32		205
	Technics RP-F500	40	Just too bright for general recommendation, though they play along with gusto						225	40		219
BB	Technics RP-F800	50	Comfortable budget model that sounds sublime with great dynamics						160	40		205
	Technics RP-DJ1200	130	Functional design with head-pulping bass and muggy tonal balance. Good job they're sweat-proof						230	32		172
R	Stax System II	400	Luxury option at its price, but the sound delivery is five star quality all the way						295	50		205
BB	Stax Lambda Nova Basic	395	Refined, articulate, yet with real presence – and a notable bargain by electrostatic standards						347	N/A		163
	Vivanco SR322	30	Weak design and uncomfortable, but redeems itself with substantial sound quality						248	32		205
R	Vivanco SR2225	30	Not that subtle, but high fun factor compensates						250	32		219
	Vivanco Cyberwave FMH3000	40	The only cordless 'phone to offer genuine walkabout freedom, but sounds like a cheap FM tuner						210	FM		172
	Vivanco IR5800	50	Consistently musical infra-red design. Doesn't reach for sonic heights so hiss can be forgiven				1/2		226	1/8		172
R	Vivanco SR950	80	Cuddly feel and sound make these an enjoyable pair of 'phones						252	32		194
	Vivanco FM7980	80	A fair amount of whine and crackle detracts from 'phones which are otherwise very listenable						280	9,000		186
	Vivanco FM8180	99	Well thought-out features and a better than average sound are, at times, marred by intrusive hiss						240	9,000		186

LOUDSPEAKERS

SPECIFICATIONS

STEREO SPEAKERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE (WxHxD) (cm)	FLOORSTANDER	SENSITIVITY (dB/W)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	BASS FREQ. (Hz)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Acoustic Energy Aegis One	150	At a new low price, this has a very natural and transparent midband, erring a little on the dull side	19,36,5,24		87	6	40			187
R	Acoustic Energy Aegis Two	250	Floorstanding variation on the Aegis One theme, with a neutral, even and detailed if slightly shiny sound	19,87,24		89	8	40			201
	Acoustic Energy Aegis Three	350	Clean and capable 2.5-way budget floorstander with fine dynamic range but some mid-bass excess. Mass-loaded	19,5,93,25		90	5	25			215
	Acoustic Energy AE120SE	500	Attractive styling and good sonic headroom, but a heavy, uneven overall balance, and a difficult amp load	18,97,28		89.5	10	25			199
R	Acoustic Energy AE520	1,000	Could be more neutral, but high-class build is reflected in a high-class sound. Very elegant too	21,98,30		91	3	25			190
	ALR Entry 2	250	Metal cone stand-mount has a generous performance envelope, but sound quality was controversial	20,33,29		90	4	22			201
	ALR Jordan Note 3	1,000	Very substantial, with tuneable ABR for better room matching. Sounds good but could be more neutral	24,5,37,32		89	5	30			211
	ALR Jordan Note 7	2,500	A beguiling Anglo-German collaboration delivers metal-cone precision with fine dynamic range	25,107,32		92	4	25			196
R	AR S20	180	Classic stand-mount might not have the most dynamic sound around, but it's an honest and effective musical communicator	20,37,28		90	4	28			215
	AR 15	275	Neat and chunky wall/stand-mount certainly knows how to rock and roll, less convincing on the delicate stuff	22,37,22		90	4	45			201
R	Arcaydis Concept 2	1,200	Solid oak floorstander is a little lazy sounding, but is well balanced and smooth with modest coloration	19,90,26		86	7	25			211
	ATC SCM10	1,000	A compact speaker with good transparency but lightweight bass	18,38,25,5		80	8	65			192
	ATC T16	1,750	Compact active 'home studio monitor' in colourful cast box, with considerable loudness potential	27,45,33		A	A	45			214
R	ATC SCM20	2,051	Not too transparent but has great dynamic grip and bass to die for. Needs a power amp	24,44,33		84	5	65			219
EC	ATC SCM10A	1,299	Stylish, active power houses with plenty of subtlety when required (balanced connection only)	23,39,31		A	A	45			221
EC	ATC SCM50A SL	7,000	350 Watts of power combine with superb drive units and a 48kg cabinet to provide alarming resolution	35,71,6,48		A	A	38			218
	ATC SCM70A SL	10,500	Stylish aluminium casework disguises dynamic grip, tracking and precision that equals the very best	127,40,46		A	A	20			205
R	Audio Gem Emerald	540	Pretty, compact floorstander with lively if lightweight sound	18,94,21		87	6	40			164
	Audio Note AZ1	449	A fine partner for low power valve amps, it delivers music with great gusto and enthusiasm, but also more than its fair share of coloration	23,83,29		92	6	30			215
R	Audio Note AN-E/D	1,520	This classic large stand-mount might have throwback aesthetics, but it delivers an exceptional allround sound	36,79,28		92	4	20			204
R	Audio Note AN-J/SPe	1,675	Retro styling but a vigorous and dynamic performer that creates fine musical tension	33,58,5,24,5		90	5	38			219
R	Audiovector C2	799	Elegant two-and-a-half-way has a big, full bandwidth sound, but midband seemed a little underdeveloped	19,106,27		90	4	20			190
R	Audiovector M2	1,399	High-class, smooth and slightly laid-back performer has driving bass. It's upgradable, too	20,102,30		89	4	22			180
R	AVI NuNeutron	500	A smooth and subtle though pricey sub-miniature, albeit with the inevitable limitations of the breed	14,27,23		86	4	50			190
R	AVI Biggatron Red Spot	600	Good bass coherence and timing, but the lean and decidedly forward balance won't be to every taste	19,5,37,30		88	7	30			211
	AVI Posttron	899	This 'mini-floorstander' is capable of great precision and delicacy, but in a rather small-scale way	17,5,74,24,5		85	6	40			174
R	B&W 601 S2	200	A smooth and sophisticated stand-mount combines good drive with fine neutrality	20,5,36,23		89	4	30			207
BB	B&W 602 S2	300	Large stand-mount has fine dynamic literacy and good communication skills at a very competitive price	23,5,49,29		90	5	28			201
R	B&W 603 S2	550	Capable of being driven seriously loud, but the cautious balance seems less happy playing at low levels	23,5,87,29		91	4	22			193
	B&W CDM-1NT	750	An uncommonly stylish and sonically self-effacing stand-mount that should be very easy to live with	22,40,29		89	7	30			208
	B&W CM4	900	Beautifully styled trend-setting floorstander has a big but rather dull sound	20,91,29		91	3	35			219
	B&W CDM-7NT	1,250	A very classy floorstander, in sound as well as looks, with fine bass drive, authority and overall neutrality	22,95,29		90	6	20			208
R	B&W Nautilus 805	1,400	A small-sounding loudspeaker dynamically, but very stylish, clean and 'unboxy', delivering loads of detail	24,42,31		89	12	28			199
	B&W Nautilus 803	3,500	Classy looking three-way with impressively deep bass, wide dynamic range and a laid-back balance	29,108,42		89	3	20			210
	B&W Nautilus 804	2,500	The prettiest Nautilus has tremendous clarity and imaging but lacks the welly of bigger models	24,101,5,24,5		89	8	38			200
EC	B&W Nautilus 802	6,000	Outstanding example of the high-tech speaker builder's art, needs real power but gives real sound	39,111,55		91	8	34			183
R	B&W Nautilus 801	8,500	The 801 is a magnificent loudspeaker in nearly every respect, but it is one that likes to play loud	52,711,69		91	8	34			186
R	Blueroom Minipod	249	The Minipod can show its competitors a thing or two about freedom from boxiness and looks fab	18,34,17		91	4	50			193
R	BC Acoustique Araxe	1,300	Neat compact floorstander is a very lively communicator, if a little short of deep bass grunt	21,92,30		94	3	40			204
R	Cabasse Farella 400	950	Exciting but very upfront-and-in-her-face sound. High sensitivity, fine build and good dynamic drive	26,92,32		92	5	28			180
	Carls on OA52.2	1,500	Ultra-discreet design integrates cleverly with the listening room. Impressively unboxy, but sounds a bit thin	41,54,37		90	8	20			195
R	Castle Richmond	250	Tiny real-wood miniature has a lightweight but very coherent sound, a bit in-her-face but plenty of fun	17,33,20		90	5	50			201
	Castle Inversion 15	425	This striking looking standmount is a good all-rounder, commendably free from boxiness	22,42,25		91	4	30			193
R	Castle Severn ZSE	700	Pretty little floorstander is lively and communicative, if a little coloured in the voice band	21,84,24		88	6	28			204
BB	Castle Harlech S2	1,000	Improved Harlech is slightly aggressive, but lots of fun, and very good looking too	20,96,33		89	6	50			219
	Castle Inversion 100	1,975	Large semi-omni design with gorgeous Art Deco styling, sounds open but bass alignment is ill-tuned	26,5,111,45		91	8	20			195
R	Celestion A Compact	600	Provided the room isn't too large and your tastes not too heavy, this is a charming little number	17,24,21		90	3	45			193
BB	Celestion A1	899	Rich, warm and laid-back, but a true quality sound; lovely build	24,41,35		88	6	25			164
R	Celestion A2	1,500	Full-scale, big sound from ultra-elegant floorstander. Smooth and slightly laid back presentation	24,93,39		89	6	22			180
	Charfo Syntar 100	249	Pretty with a pleasantly easygoing balance, but not the most communicative or exciting sound around	18,32,27		87	6	45			170
R	Charfo Hiper 1000	300	Classy looking standmount has a sweet, easygoing sound with fine midband voicing	18,35,28		87	4	45			187

STEREO SPEAKERS (CONTINUED)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE (WxHxD) (cm)	FLOORSTANDER	SENSITIVITY (dB/W)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	BASS FROM (Hz)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
	Chario Constellation Lynx	550	Beautiful near-miniature is let down by a midband too laid back for its own good	20,36,26		87	3	40	●		190
	Chario Academie Millennium 1	1,399	Pretty but pricey, with a smooth even balance but limited dynamic expression	21,37,31		87	4	42	●		219
EC	Chario Academie Millennium 2	2,100	Price includes stands. A showy speaker that lives up to its own hype	22,53,35		90	4	55	●		190
	Cyrus CL570	800	Wonderfully striking styling, but presence is very laid back; likes playing loud	22,33,32		87	8	40	●		211
	Cyrus Icon	2,500	First high end NXT speaker with huge omni-directional soundstage. But they have limited dynamics and unusual imaging	34,125,29		84	8	18	●		216
BB	Dali 606	400	A big bruiser at a tempting price. Sounds refined and polite, but also packs some punch	22,97,32	●	91	4	25	●		174
	Dali Royal Menuet MkII	429	Classy sub-miniature with a beautiful box and fine ingredients, but a little lacking in subtlety and excitement	16,26,18		87	3	50		●	190
R	Dali Evidence 870	1,249	A real heavyweight, sonically and physically, and good for movies as well as music	245,106,36	●	93	2.5	20	●		204
	Dali Grand Coupe	1,333	Big sounding stand-mount with laid back but clean and informative sound	23,41,29		85	5	45	●		219
BB	Dynaudio Audience 42	400	Expensive for a vinyl-covered miniature, but an aristocrat amongst the breed. Is there a better small speaker around for the price?	17,28,5,24		87	4	40	●		215
	Dynaudio Audience 72	1,100	Very competent in most respects, but doesn't quite grab the attention; could be more communicative	20,97,26	●	89	3	20	●		211
R	Dynaudio Contour 1.3 MkII	1,200	Stand-out performer amongst compact stand-mounts; neutral, with fine punch and dynamic range	20,38,29		88	3.5	45	●		219
R	Dynaudio Contour 1.8 MkII	1,842	Wonderful voice-band delicacy and loads of deep bass from a very elegant and compact box	21,95,29	●	85	4	20	●		167
	Elac CL102 II	599	Chunky floorstander with classy drivers has a neutral, slightly 'shiny' character, and could have more punch	20,95,28	●	88	9	23	●		199
	Elac CL 310i Jet	800	It's pricey, and you can buy better performance for the money. Small speaker, good sound	123,20,8,28,2		86	4	42	●		191
	Eftax Liberty 3+	150	Bright, bassy, laid back and attractively evenhanded, but dynamically challenged. Big box for your dosh	20,5,38,34		86	4	25	●		187
	Eftax Linear Response	249	A curiously dumpy shape, but smooth, laid-back performer is easy on the ears, with fine tonal accuracy	25,35,32		85	4	40	●		177
	Eftax Chroma Front	300	Gorgeous shiny styling package at an ultra-competitive price, suffers from an excess of rather flabby bass	19,98,28	●	87	4	25	●		201
R	Energy e:XL 25	400	Neat slimline design delivers a fine all round performance for the price, but could sound smoother	15,87,31	●	90	4	25	●		201
R	Excel 202A	1,795	Very Pro-styling, a compact active monitor in BBC tradition - neutral, unboxy and laid-back	15,21,5,36		A	A	25	●		214
BB	Epos M12	429	Retains the beguiling midband coherence that made the ES12 such a favourite. A genuine class act, sonically and aesthetically	20,38,26		86	7	40	●		215
	Gale 2i	140	Unspectacular sound and appearance fail to help this solid little miniature stand out from the crowd	22,40,27		88	7	40		●	170
	Genelec HT206	1,400	Baby active monitor goes very loud for its size. Very neutral but a tad boxy	20,31,24		A	A	40	●		214
R	Heybrook Prima 2	159	Great openness, speed and timing. Sounds fresh and vital, though sometimes lacks scale and weight	20,29,18		87	6	50	●		179
	Heybrook HB1	180	Good value but an uneven performer, the HB1 provides plenty of fun with the volume turned well up	21,38,25		88	3	50	●		207
BB	Heybrook Heylette	200	Attractive traditional-style near-miniature with classy main driver now has fine overall balance to match	19,5,30,22		88	4	45	●		187
BB	Heybrook Optima	259	A dumpy ugly duckling with a heart of gold. Deserves a better tweeter, but communicates well	22,88,29	●	94	4	30	●		193
BB	Heybrook Heylios	269	Classically styled stand-mount has a fine balance of smoothness and dynamics, plus real wood veneer	23,5,36,27		89	6	25	●		201
	Heybrook Ultima	649	Has the bass wallop to justify its dual hi-fi/home cinema roles, but doesn't excite	22,97,29	●	89	6	45	●		174
R	Heybrook Duet	750	Looks slightly old-fashioned, sounds a bit coloured but its fine timing and liveliness serve music well	23,43,30		88	11	27	●		199
	Heybrook Octet	1,800	Good-looking but pricey floorstander with novel drivers and a fine ceramic-enclosure midband	24,97,31	●	90	6	25		●	180
R	Indigo Three	500	Cute 'n' chunky standmount is an entertaining communicator. Great fun, despite some sonic weirdness	23,30,5,32		86	17	24		●	199
BB	Infinity Alpha 30	299	Some sharpness and nasality, but fine musical literacy plus a good measure of dynamic expression adds up to a great value floorstander	22,86,29	●	89	4	30	●		215
	Jamo E800	200	Nicely voiced, open midband but bottom end is a bit strong and amorphous	17,5,33,29		87	3	30	●		207
	Jamo D830	1,400	Dynamically exciting and communicative, but lacks both smoothness and neutrality. Pricey too	24,5,38,32		88	5	30	●		211
BB	JBL LX2	250	Invigorating, if a touch crude, this good-hearted speaker reproduces music with enthusiasm	22,40,27		87	8	40	●		170
	JBL T1200	400	Very substantial standmount knows how to rock and roll, but can sound uncouth on more delicate material	21,41,30		92	5	40	●		193
	JBL SVA1500	700	A distinctive Pro-style bi-radial horn tweeter, with a fun sound, enlivened by a juicy bass thump	17,5,51,31		86	8	40	●		174
R	JBL SVA 2100	1,250	Monstrously large and brutish styling, goes very loud as well as deep. Fine focus but some boxiness	37,114,52	●	91	8	<20	●		180
	JBL LX70	550	Bassmeister supreme, shame the rest doesn't match up. Fine sensitivity but an itchy, scratchy treble	26,5,94,30	●	91	4	33	●		183
BB	JBL Xt140	500	Real wood and a cute shape, with a punchy driving bass, and a restrained overall balance	23,82,31	●	88	6	40	●		210
R	JMLab Electra 905	1,200	Compact but massively engineered, delivers a very classy sound with exceptional dynamic range	23,5,47,28		90	4	40	●		204
HF	JBL JM Lab Cobalt 826	1,229	Big 3-way French floorstander is lively, informative and mostly neutral, if a tad bright	22,103,34	●	91	3	35	●		219
EC	JMLab Micro Utopia	2,749	Superb top-of-the-line stand-mount with magnificent powers of analysis and communication; no deep bass	26,43,41		89	3	50	●		220
	JMLab Mezzo Utopia	7,250	Looks good and sounds even better. A genuinely big speaker with fantastic coherence	35,115,47	●	92	4	30	●		186
HF	JPW ML510	130	Lots of good quality speaker for the price, but not an ideal match for cheap budget components	20,34,22		88	5	50	●		169
	JPW ML910	330	Loads of speaker for the money, plenty of headroom and loudness capability, but sounds dull	23,104,30	●	91	4	43	●		183
R	JPW ML1010	400	A seriously substantial speaker for the price, and an obvious choice for those who like their music loud	22,5,115,40	●	91	6	25	●		170
	KEF Cresta 2	149	A good looking/value package but sonically disappointing, and no match for the Q15	20,5,37,24		91	4	40		●	195
R	KEF Q15.2	200	A vigorous and entertaining compact speaker that remains particularly well aligned for close-to-wall siting	20,5,31,27		89	3	30	●		207
	KEF Q35.2	350	A very decent and good looking compact floorstander, but a pair of stand-mounted Q15.2s is likely to have the performance edge	21,78,5,27	●	90	2.5	25	●		215
	KEF Q55.2	500	Beefy vinyl-finished UniQ delivers loads of bass, but might have more control	21,87,29	●	90	4	25	●		210
R	KEF Reference One-Two	1,350	Limited low bass but bags of headroom. Coherent and lively sound, but could be more transparent	22,5,87,35	●	89	3	40	●		211
	KEF RDM Three	1,500	Definitely a speaker aimed at long-term satisfaction rather than immediate impressiveness. Nice	24,100,27	●	90	4	40	●		189
	KEF Reference Model 2	1,599	Classy, large floorstander that has massive headroom and clean mid-to-treble, but limited deep bass	23,103,34	●	89	4	30	●		167
R	Keswick Audio Torino	999	Good value, lively contender with distinctive styling. Goes loud and deep but could be smoother	26,93,28	●	90	4	20	●		167
R	Linn Kan	295	Great bass discrimination from size, ensuring a very informative, if slightly shut-in experience	19,31,19		86	4	45		●	187
R	Linn Katan Aktiv/LK140	2,325	Too small to have much grunt or loudness, but bright top is very sweet, clean and detailed	17,34,23		A	A	40		●	214
BB	Living Voice Auditorium	1,500	Pretty, compact floorstander has wonderful coherence, high sensitivity and fine dynamic integrity	21,5,98,29	●	91	4	25	●		180
EC	Living Voice Avatar	2,500	Dynamic and highly resolved yet physically discreet design with a relaxed balance	21,5,104,27	●	91	8	40	●		218
EC	Living Voice Avatar OBX-R	4,000	Discreet but extremely fine design with external crossover and an affinity with great amps and sources	21,5,104,27	●	89	8	45	●		196
	Magnat Vintage 320	350	Loads of speaker for your money, but the sound is thick, heavy and lacking in presence and authority	25,102,30	●	90	4	20	●		201
	Magnat Vector 77	450	Tall, dark and a lot of speaker for the money. Beautiful balance, but lacking in subtlety and transparency	22,115,29	●	89	5	30	●		183
	Magnat Vintage 710	800	Very competent but didn't particularly stand out; distinctive styling and slightly shiny sound	20,27,42,32		90	5	25	●		211
R	Magnat Vintage 720	1,200	Slightly crude in some respects but lots of heart, fine scale, decent dynamic coherence and integrity	29,113,32	●	88	4	20	●		180
	Martin-Logan Prodigy	8,967	Combines the finesse of an electrostatic with the grunt of cleverly engineered cone bass to good effect	42,179,71	●	91	4	28	●		204
BB	Meridian M33	1,495	Compact active wall-mount packs remarkable dynamic vigour into a very discreet package	15,38,22		A	A	45	●		214
	Mirage FRX7	550	Neat slim floorstander has a heavy, laid back balance, probably better suited to movie than music reproduction	17,5,95,32	●	90	4	25	●		204
	Mirage OM-5	3,000	A meaty model that goes loud without distortion, digs deep with aplomb and creates plenty of depth of image	133,30,42	●	90	6	22	●		206
	Mirage OM-10-1	2,000	Tall black omni-bi-pole has plenty of bounce and dynamic vigour, but is more room sensitive than most	23,118,30	●	88	4	20	●		210
H	Mission 700	130	A lot of speaker for the money. Good bass weight and extension and goes loud with ease	18,34,26		87	8	40		●	179
R	Mission 771e	200	Beautifully styled miniature has a delightfully voiced midband, and real wood finish too	17,31,22		86	6	45	●		207
BB	Mission m73	200	Sharply priced and good looking floorstander. Dynamics are a little limp, but it has a good overall balance. Excellent value for money	20,87,5,31	●	88	3	25	●		215
	Mission 780	299	Gorgeous miniature has a fine midband and clean, bright treble, slightly odd bottom end	16,5,28,27		86	6	40	●		201
R	Mission 773e	400	Beautifully designed slim floorstander could be more neutral but still delivers an all-round entertaining sound	17,5,88,26	●	92	4	30	●		193
R	Mission 774	500	Gorgeous floorstander is an entertaining communicator, despite some balance oddities (bright treble)	18,95,31	●	90	4	40	●		183

STEREO SPEAKERS (CONTINUED)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE WxHxD (cm)	FLOORSTANDER	SENSITIVITY (dB/W/m)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	BASS FROM (HZ)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Mission 782	699	Ultra-compact floorstander has a glorious midband and slightly odd bass. Good communication skills	16.5,82,28	●	86	9.5	25	●	●	199
R	Mission 775e	800	Lots of speaker for the money, and musically involving too, if a little short of serious weight and authority	23,115,30	●	93	3	25	●	●	204
R	Mission 783	1,000	Plenty of bass weight, and a clean, articulate midrange, but the two don't quite seem to gel	20.5,97,33	●	87	5	20	●	●	211
BB	Monitor Audio Bronze 2	180	A real corker, which combines solid material value for money with a fine all round sonic performance	18.5,35,27	●	89	3	30	●	●	207
R	Monitor Audio Bronze 3	270	Very similar to the Bronze 2, though not necessarily better. Good value with better dynamic expression than most of its ilk	18.5,87,24	●	90	3	30	●	●	215
R	Monitor Audio Silver 5i	450	Great looking, sharply priced real wood floorstander, but bottom end lacks drive and tension	20,81,21	●	87	5	30	●	●	210
R	Monitor Audio GR20	1,500	Solid and confident design with all metal drivers and neutral if slightly uninspiring sound	20,92.5, 30	●	89	6	30	●	●	212
R	Mordant-Short MS902	200	Gorgeous metal-finished budget stand-mount has a shiny sound to match its looks	18,31,25	●	87	4	45	●	●	207
BB	Naim Intro	660	Great dynamic range and info retrieval, but thin, lacks warmth	24,89,27	●	89	6	30	●	●	164
R	Naim Credo	1,060	Involving sound, but rather forward and cold. Good clarity, but some coloration and a lack of richness	24,89,30	●	88	8	28	●	●	180
EC	Naim NBL	6,648	Elegant, large floorstander is exceptionally informative with an awesome dynamic range and dry, forward balance	29,116,47	●	89	4	20	●	●	200
R	Neat Critique 2	445	Contemporary standmount has a clean, crisp sound with lovely natural midband voicing	22,32,24	●	86	6	50	●	●	183
BB	Neat Mystique Mk2	575	This elegant package delivers a fine overall sound quality, some might find the top end too insistent	20,86,18	●	85	6	23	●	●	177
R	Neat Neat Petite III	795	The treble is peaky, but this is still one of the most coherent and communicative miniatures around	20,30,5,20	●	86	5	30	●	●	211
R	Neat Elite	1,195	A highly entertaining all-rounder, has a planar tweeter that sounds sweet, if not particularly smooth	20,88,18	●	88.5	6	25	●	●	195
R	NHT Super Zero	200	If tiny size is top priority, the Super Zero is worth considering. It looks nice and sounds articulate, but it definitely needs a subwoofer	14,23,14	●	84	8	100	●	●	215
BB	NHT Super One	250	A fine compromise between size and performance, sensitivity and hence loudness capability is modest	18,5,29,5,23	●	85	8	30	●	●	170
BB	NHT 1.5	400	This compact standmount sounds much bigger than it has any right to. Good timing and communication skills	18,42,26	●	85	6	40	●	●	177
R	NHT Super Two	550	Black and shiny compact three-way floorstander has marvellously even balance and good coherence	18,5,100,26	●	87	8.5	25	●	●	199
R	Oheocha D2-Iso-5	2,500	Radical aluminium pawn shaped cabinets combine with multiple drivers make a subtle and refined sound	37,94,37	●	89	8	30	●	●	217
R	Opera Prima	495	Good-looking hardwood enclosure, plus fine mid and treble, but less satisfactory bass	19,34,31	●	90	4	40	●	●	190
R	Origin Live Conqueror	1,650	Chunky floorstanding three-way has lovely cabinetwork and lively sound, but limited deep bass	24,94,27	●	88	8	30	●	●	167
R	Orelle Swing	1,200	A superb example of what an essentially small loudspeaker can do, with bags of brio and enthusiasm	18,101,28	●	87	8	45	●	●	195
BB	PMC TB2	600	A worthy and prettier successor to the TB1, which sets a high standard in its size/type class for neutrality and transparency	20,40,5,31	●	88	8	30	●	●	211
R	PMC LB1	999	Still fully competitive eight years after our original review, this genuine compact monitor is now a modern classic	17,5,53,26	●	87	6.5	40	●	●	199
BB	PMC FB1	1,275	Handsome floorstander has the lively coherence of a simple two-way alongside impressive bass weight and extension	20,105,31	●	88	6	20	●	●	204
R	PMC AML1	3,525	Sparkling active Pro monitor with serious attitude: 'in yer face' balance, with great dynamics	20,40,32	A	A	A	25	●	●	214
R	Polk RT16	799	Bass rich, lively and powerful, but suspect top end; big and not very pretty	22,105,39	●	91	4	22	●	●	160
R	ProAc Tablette 2000 Sig.	899	Beautifully veneered compact stand-mount is classically balanced, if a little on the bright side of neutral	19,36,26	●	87	6	30	●	●	204
R	ProAc Studio 125	1,000	Pretty if pricey compact floorstander with a beautifully natural and neutral midband, and some bass thump	20,94,28	●	87	8	28	●	●	192
R	ProAc Response 1.5	1,790	Gorgeous but pricey floorstander has lovely midband voicing but limited bandwidth resolution	19,98,25	●	86	7	35	●	●	219
R	QLN Signature	1,000	Attractive pyramidal standmount with heavy, laid-back balance but remarkably unboxy sound	27,37,36	●	83	4	25	●	●	199
R	Quad ESL-989	4,600	A very 'different' speaker experience, with magnificent midband transparency and imaging, but limited loudness capability	67,134,32	●	83	3	38	●	●	213
R	Red Rose Music R3	3,500	Compact two-way with lovely veneer and ribbon tweeter: probably the most sophisticated small speaker out there	20,40,5,26	●	87	4	46	●	●	219
R	Rega Jura	450	Beefy sounding, chunky floorstander sounds very 'direct coupled' to the music, if a touch 'boom'n'tizz'	22,5,92,5,26	●	90	5	25	●	●	193
R	Rega ELA Mk II	498	Pretty smooth, the latest incarnation has a superb midband and excellent communicative skills	30,80,20	●	87	8	40	●	●	139
R	RMS Revelation Series 1	1,299	Innovative metal-box compact with integral port/stand - clean with good timing but very laid-back balance	20,99,24	●	81	8	22	●	●	167
EC	Royd Revelation RR2	1,200	Pretty little floorstander delivers genuinely deep bass without 'thump'; lively clean, open midband too	19,89,18	●	85	4	20	●	●	221
R	Roksan Ojan 3X	995	Innovative low-line, two-way floorstander with decoupled tweeter; great bass and fine dynamic range	28,79,46	●	84	8	20	●	●	167
R	Ruark Epilogue	269	Beautifully finished miniature with a lively balance and plenty of charm; best suited to smaller rooms	17,29,23	●	87	8	47	●	●	183
R	Ruark Sceptre	599	'Traditional' cabinetwork with classy veneer and shiny gilt fixings, hampered by rather wayward sound balance	21,38,31	●	87	8	40	●	●	174
R	Ruark Prologue One R	949	Strikingly contemporary compact floorstander is well voiced but a little lean in overall balance	17,5,93,28	●	88	5	25	●	●	204
R	Ruark CL20	1,500	This punchy rock'n'roller has plenty of drive and enthusiasm, but can sound aggressive	23,93,34	●	90	5	38	●	●	219
R	Ruark Excalibur	7,000	A big, handsome speaker with a big, laid-back but open sound, rocking bass and loads of headroom	30,125,53	●	90	4	30	●	●	186
R	Sequence 400	329	Clever hang-on-wall panel is well voiced, though bass isn't too great	25,100,7	●	86	8	45	●	●	164
R	Snell K.5	795	Classy AV-ready stand mount is very solidly engineered. Sound is neutral but lacks excitement	22,46,30	●	87	6	25	●	●	190
BB	Snell E.5 Mk2	1,520	Large floorstander has serious deep bass extension, and also a delicate midband with low coloration	22,109,30	●	89	4	20	●	●	211
R	Snell XA75ps	4,500	Active bass floorstander with marvellous mid coherence, slightly suspect bass integration	28,117,50	●	91	6	25	●	●	194
R	Soliloquy SM 2A3	1,095	Fine match in balance, coherence, transparency and speed. Intended for use with Cary CAD 2A3SE	35,5,19,30	●	91	8	45	●	●	196
R	Sonus Faber Concertino	599	A beautifully neutral loudspeaker in a beautiful Italian suit of clothes. Classy, if quite pricey	21,32,29	●	87	5	30	●	●	193
R	Sonus Faber Grand Piano Home	1,589	Classy walnut'n'leather floorstander with fine engineering and lovely midband voicing	23,5,29,108	●	90	3	25	●	●	214
R	South Coast Speakers Lancelot	895	Pretty compact standmount has nice ribbon tweeter but sounds a bit soft and lacks dynamic vigour	19,36,26	●	84	8	45	●	●	199
R	Spendor 2030	599	Discreet slimline floorstander with delicately coherent, laid-back sound	18,89,27	●	87	8	30	●	●	160
R	Spendor SP2/3e	1,295	Large stand-mount is polite to a fault, but has beautiful 'hear-through' transparency - a genuine classic	28,55,33	●	88	8	50	●	●	219
EC	TAG McLaren F1	15,000	Oddball aesthetics with accurate, unflappable, controlled and consistent sonic neutrality	40,127,48	●	87	8	25	●	●	202
BB	Tannoy mX2	150	Surprisingly refined considering its very modest price: very communicative with outstanding midband delicacy	18,5,33,25	●	89	4	45	●	●	207
R	Tannoy Revolution 1	200	Pretty little mini-monitor is smooth, well mannered and polite to a fault, lacks dynamic expression	17,30,22	●	86	4	30	●	●	187
BB	Tannoy mX3	300	A great all-round compromise at a very modest price, combining good looks with fine midband voicing	18,5,87,26	●	90	5	40	●	●	201
R	Tannoy mX4	350	Pretty 2.5-way has a clean and unboxy sound with respectable transparency, but lacks the dynamic grip and drive to make music really involving	18,5,96,26	●	89	3	20	●	●	215
BB	Tannoy Revolution R2	350	Bargain price real wood floorstander is beautifully voiced and very even-handed, if a tad laid back	17,94,24	●	90	4	20	●	●	193
R	Tannoy Revolution R3	550	Handsome real-wood floorstander does a decent job, but lacks the evenness of its smaller R2 brother	18,5,103,28	●	89	8.5	28	●	●	199
R	Tannoy D300	999	Gorgeous-looking compact floorstander. And a fine all-round performer, too	24,85,23	●	87	6	26	●	●	167
R	Tannoy ST-100	1,200	This supertweeter adds a subtle and delicate effect while also broadening the soundstage at a price	15,10,5.6	●	95	8	N/A	●	●	206
EC	Tannoy TD10	5,000	Extremely competent and rhythmic speaker, a futureproof supertweeter and detail to die for	35,101,37	●	91	6	38	●	●	215
R	Tannoy Kingdom 12	6,000	Something of a throwback, but great fun, with fine dynamics and authority, but a tricky amp load	54,106,46	●	92	3	28	●	●	213
R	Triangle Cometes	359	Communicative standmount has great midband dynamics, but the very bright top end might be intrusive	22,40,29	●	91	4	42	●	●	193
BB	Triangle Zephyr II	599	Loads of fun. Dramatic dynamics and righteous timing will give any hi-fi system a wake-up call	22,94,29	●	91	4	25	●	●	190
BB	Triangle Antal XS	875	Ugly duckling has a rather tasty sound, with plenty of vigour and excitement	22,108,30	●	92	3	40	●	●	219
EC	Veritas H3	6,000	Loads of fun with wonderful dynamic and temporal integrity from horn-loaded Lowther drivers	30,110,47	●	104	4	50	●	●	191
R	Vienna Acoustics Mozart	1,500	Gorgeous slimline floorstander sounds very laid-back but very charming, and musically literate	17,97,30	●	88	7.5	25	●	●	199
EC	Wilson benesch Discovery	5,500	Innovative three way with built-in stand, combines great subtlety with weight and headroom	23,47,38	●	6	45	●	●	●	212
EC	Wilson benesch Bishop	20,000	Deep and even bass sets new standards for cleanliness and clarity; lovely open midband too	23,161,561	●	89	4	S20	●	●	189
R	Wharfedale Diamond 7.2	140	A good-hearted, lively and up-front performer that's a little lacking in subtlety and smoothness	19,29,5,23	●	88	4	45	●	●	169
R	Wdale Diamond 7.2 Anniversary	200	Lively and exuberant, but a tad untidy with it; can sound a bit cold and hard	19,29,5,24	●	88	4	40	●	●	187
R	Wharfedale Pacific Pi40	500	A lot of speaker for the money, but bass is unruly, even in a large-sized room. The smaller Pi30 might give a better bottom-end balance	22,113,36	●	89	3	25	●	●	215
R	Zingali Overture 25	1,975	Gorgeous, pricey, imposing standmount has a horn tweeter of great delicacy. Impressively weighty	30,57,38	●	90	8	25	●	●	195

SUBWOOFERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE WxHxD (cm)	FLOORSTANDER	SENSITIVITY (dB/M)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	BASS FROM (HZ)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
	Acoustic Energy AE1085	299	Lots of loud subwoofer for your money, though ultimately more film than music oriented	50,42,43				20			179
R	B&W ASW1000	499	Bulky heavyweight is a high quality item, able to generate more bass output than music is likely to need	54,47,50	●	A		A20	●		198
	Jamo D8SUB	950	Pretty but pricey, the D8SUB packs plenty of punch (for movie fans), but doesn't delve deep enough for music replay	45,51,45,5		A		30			210
R	JPW SW60	349	A real heavyweight, sounds clean and transparent, if perhaps a little understated. Usefully flexible	55,47,39				20		●	179
	M&K MX70	795	Cutely compact and entertaining too, but lacks the ultimate extension to justify its high price	37,32,30	●	A		25			210
	Mission 7AS2	399	Ugly if very effective at supplying very low bass, but filter could do with more flexibility higher up	56,30,31	●			<20	●		198
R	Paradigm PDR-10	150	Not much grip, drive or authority, but it doesn't get in the way and it is very cheap	34,5,36,42	●	A		25			210
	Polk PSW430	400	A lot of subwoofer for your money, but lacks deep grunt and is more movie than music oriented	38,5,45,46	●	A		25			210
R	REL Q50	375	This good looking if bulky sub does the business with impressive flexibility and sonic self-effacement	42,53,31				20			210
R	Ruark Log-Rhythm	775	Adds weight and scale with commendable discretion, making a positive contribution to the whole musical exposition	43,43,43	●	A		<20			210
	Soliloquy S10	1,050	(Active) Pretty subwoofer, cosmetically matching SM 2A3 speakers, pricey and mid-bass a bit strong	51,30,5,46	●	A		25	●		196

SATELLITE & SUBWOOFER SYSTEMS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE WxHxD (cm)	FLOORSTANDER	SENSITIVITY (dB/M)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	BASS FROM (HZ)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
R	AE Aego2	300	Not quite a serious hi-fi speaker system, but a seriously fun type product for all that (19x35x27cm sub)	7,10,9		A	n/a	45	●		218
R	Bandor Trident II	776	Loudness is limited, but overall sound is impressively homogeneous and coherent. (31x46x31cm sub)	12,13,10-12		83	6	25	●		218
R	Boston Micro 90	650	Lacks warmth but the midband is smooth and impressively evenhanded (37x36x39cm sub)	10,17,14		88	4	28	●		218
R	Cabasse Jupiter/lo	1,228	A sub/sat combo that really competes with proper stereo speakers. Striking styling and stereo imaging (40x43x41cm sub)	15 diam		94	2	30	●		218
	KEF KMS2002	499	Looks the business, but lacks deep bass and the presence/treble is also too restrained (32x36x32cm sub)	13,23,14		85	3	45	●		218
	Mission FS2	450	Intriguing NXT speaker technology has minimal visual impact, but lacks dynamic precision (32x47x25cm sub)	13,5,28,4,5		86	6	40	●		218
	NHT Super Zero/Sub One	1,000	Decent enough, but not the prettiest nor the best value around for music replay - one for movie fans (40x41x42cm sub)	14,23,14		84	8	30	●		218
R	Ruark Vita 100	900	Not the cheapest sub/sat, but certainly one of the most accomplished, sonically and visually (30x42x30cm sub)	11,20,17		86	6	40	●		218

LOUDSPEAKERS

MULTICHANNEL SPEAKERS & PACKAGES

SPECIFICATIONS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE WxHxD (cm)	FLOORSTANDER	SENSITIVITY (dB/M)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	BASS FROM (HZ)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
BB	Acoustic Energy Aegis Three	350	High value floorstander has deep and even bass and a smooth neutrality thereafter	19,90,25	●	90	5	22	●		198
R	B&W LCR6	349	Large, gutsy standmount intended for all-round AV use delivers fine performance as a stereo pair too	20,5,55,32		90	5	20	●		198
	B&W Nautilus package	6,500	This classy, laid-back package is arguably too good for current programming. Very bulky centre speaker	var	var	n/a	3	20		●	210
	Definitive Technology BP2X	595	Pricey but effective bi-polar surround speaker, with unusually high sensitivity	23,37,15		94	4	120		●	198
	Definitive Technology BP2004	1,700	Pricey bi-polar floorstander has a fine midband, let down by its built-in powered subwoofer	19,104,31	●	91	5	28	●		198
	Dynaudio LR/C 120	439	Slim centre and front standmount, has an evenhanded but rather laid back balance but lacks drive	16,5,57,31		89	5	25	●		198
	Jamo Concert package	2,500	Lovely main speakers sonically overshadow the centre, while surrounds are a bit obvious too	var	var	n/a	5	30		●	210
BB	JBL Xti-series package	1,100	Hexagonal boxes all round, this package has decent authority and all round tension	var	var	n/a	5	40		●	210
	KEF Q-series package	880	Cleverly designed, vinyl-finished UniQ package packs a goodly thump but centre and surrounds stand out	var	var	n/a	3	25		●	210
	Mirage OM-series package	2,000	Big black and bouncy package with omni fronts has plenty of vigour but some coloration var	var	var	n/a	4	20		●	210
R	Mission 77DS	199	Neat flush-mount surround speaker has no bass but a smooth midband and nicely restrained treble	34,26,12		92	4	120		●	198
	Mission Cinema 8 package	1,400	Beautifully styled and cleverly designed package, but could have more grunt and drive for the price	var	var	n/a	4	30		●	210
	Polk RTE 1000p	1,300	Tall elegant tower with built-in powered bass 'subwoofer' that needs using with discretion. Bright but engaging	20,110,35	●	91	4	25	●		198
	Monitor Audio Silver series	1,000	Great looking conventionally styled package lacks something in dynamic drive and tension	var	var	n/a	4	30		●	210
R	Mordaunt-Short Declaration 500	1,600	Good value vinyl THX Select package with Power Towers. Good authority but must be 5.1-connected var	var	var	n/a	3	25		●	210
R	PMC FB1/TB2 package	2,200	Classy if bulky and pricey package has good transparency, coherence and weight	var	var	n/a	6	20		●	210
R	Rega Jura/Ara/Senta	920	Classy real wood package does a good all round job, but sounds bright and might have more surround weight	var	var	n/a	4	25		●	210
BB	Tannoy mXAV4 package	500	Lacks grunt, grip and authority, but smooth and refined with seamless surround coherence	var	var	n/a	4	20		●	210
BB	Tannoy Saturn S6LCR	400	A punchy compact standmount based on a serious cast-frame, pro-style dual-concentric driver	21,38,29		89	6	25		●	198
BB	Tannoy Saturn S6	500	Fine value vinyl floorstander offers plenty of genuine grunt and real dynamic tension	21,89,29	●	91	4	20	●		198

CENTRE CHANNEL SPEAKERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE WxHxD (cm)	FLOORSTANDER	SENSITIVITY (dB/M)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	BASS FROM (HZ)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Acoustic Energy Aegis Centre	140	Good value centre-front speaker but a tad shut in and with a slightly obvious top end (price per speaker)	46,17,20		89	5	50	●		198
	B&W Nautilus HTM1	1,500	Very bulky for a centre speaker, though very capable too - a little less laid back than its siblings	76,37,30		89	4	30		●	210
	Castle Keep	250	Substantial centre-front speaker based on Harlech drivers but with rather brighter voicing	48,17,29		88	8	45	●		198
R	Definitive Technology CLR2002	595	Pricey, but undoubtedly one of the better centre-front speakers around, with fine timing and open voicing	55,5,17,5,31		90	4	40	●		198
	Jamo Conce Centre	550	A decent balance match but lacks the class and grip of the Concert 8s, and is bulky and pricey too	55,22,30		87	5	100		●	210
BB	JBL Xti10C	200	An elegant, cleverly designed centre and a good match for the 40s. Better value than most too	51,19,5,27		88	5	50		●	210
	KEF Q95C	200	This artfully designed UniQ centre looks much better than most on top of the TV set	40,17,17		89	3	120		●	210
	Mirage OM-C2	600	Large but discreet omni-bi-pole matches OM-10-1 well but lacks tight focus, and seems expensive	64,18,5,31		88	4	50		●	210
R	Mission 77C	199	A good centre-front match for 77-series, the triple tweeter might be a curiosity, but voicing is very good	42,17,21		91	4	100		●	198
	Mission 78C	350	Makes a good visual and sonic match for the 782, but quite pricey by comparison, given the ingredients	45,17,19		86	3	100		●	210
	Monitor Audio Silver Centre 10i	300	Neat and good looking partner to the Silver Sis, but a little more forward, and quite expensive too	50,17,21		87	4	100		●	210
R	Mordaunt-Short MS 504	200	Smart yet discreet and a good match for the 502. Sounds clean and expressive, and is well priced	50,19,20		88	3	120		●	210
R	PMC TB2M/C	325	This bulky centre speaker is quite pricey, but it combines good transparency with some authority	40,20,31		87	6	50		●	210
	Polk CS 1000p	999	Monstrously large and heavy centre-front speaker, presumably for those with monstrous intentions	87,22,35		92	4	25	●		198
R	Rega Senta	185	The very compact Senta is sensibly priced, a bit bright maybe, but articulate and expressive	32,16,21		89	4	120		●	210
BB	Tannoy mXC	100	Could be more exciting, but a very impressive centre speaker at an unusually reasonable price	42,16,21		88	4	120		●	210
BB	Tannoy Saturn S6C	200	A punchy compact standmount based on a serious cast-frame, pro-style dual-concentric driver	38,21,29		89	6	25	●		198

PERSONAL / INTERNET

SPECIFICATIONS

PERSONAL STEREO

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	STORAGE FORMAT	RECORDING	IN-LINE REMOTE	CODEC	PC CONNECTION	STANDARD CAPACITY	ISSUE NUMBER
	Aiwa HS-PX307	30	So-so sound but an impressive features roster. Decent value overall	Cassette		●				204
R	Aiwa AM-HX50	180	Neat play-back only personal with an impressively full-bodied sound, though short on detail	MiniDisc		●				204
	JVC XL-PG31	60	'Challenging' looks and frankly unpleasant sound add up to a player that's best avoided.	CD						216
	JVC XM-R700SL	250	The most expensive player here, but its in-ear face sound and slab-like, heavy design make its value questionable	MiniDisc	●	●				216
R	Kenwood DPC-X517	100	Clean, funky bass makes for an exciting sound; an attractive proposition, if you can stomach the looks	CD						216
R	Panasonic RQ-5X71	70	A sleek aluminium body, decent sound and superb features	Cassette		●				204
	Panasonic RQ-5X91	80	A super-slick personal for well-heeled cassette users. Sound is rather bright	Cassette		●				204
	Panasonic SJ-MR100	250	Well built and nicely appointed, though performance is unremarkable at the price	MiniDisc	●	●				204
R	Philips ACT7582	115	A splash-proof body and an entertaining sound – the perfect CD personal for holiday japes	CD						204
R	Sharp MD-MT877H	230	Pleasantly up-front sounding player in a sexy little package, well worth your attention if you like that kind of thing	MiniDisc	●	●				216
	Sony WM-EX404	35	Super-stylish but sonically flawed, with particularly uncomfortable earphones	Cassette						204
BB	Sony D-EJ925	149.99	Beautiful design matched with a beguiling sound – a clear Best Buy	CD		●				216
BB	Sony MZ-G750	199.99	Light, simple to use, and with a relaxed and enjoyable sound, and with a tuner too!	MiniDisc	●	●				216
BB	Sony MZ-R91	250	A petite and sexy beast with good sound and excellent facilities	MiniDisc	●	●				204

INTERNET AUDIO

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	STORAGE FORMAT	RECORDING	IN-LINE REMOTE	CODEC	PC CONNECTION	STANDARD CAPACITY	ISSUE NUMBER
	Aiwa MM-VX100	130	Aiwa's expertise in the personal stereo field is visible, but performance is only average	Solid State	●	●	MP3	PRL	32MB	204
	Audio ReQuest ARQ1	568	Full size separate containing CD player, hard drive and PC connection. Sign of things to come?	CD/H/D	●		MP3/WMA	APR/USB	17GB	208
BB	Creative Labs Digital Jukebox	349	Smartly designed high-capacity portable with storage for over 1,000 tracks	Hard Drive	●		Agnostic	USB	5.7GB	208
R	DigMedia Music Store	350	Innovative CD/hard drive combo with optional solid state portable. MP3 with or without a computer	CD/H/D	●		MP3	USB	5.4GB	208
	JazPiper MV32P	125	First wave player that looks good but sounds bright. Includes voice recording and phone book features	Solid State	●		MP3	PRL	32MB	195
	LG MF-PD360	130	Good looking and temptingly affordable, but features and performance are nothing special	Solid State	●		MP3	USB	32MB	208
	LG AHA-FD770	200	Cassette and solid state personal in one – novel idea, poor execution	SS/Cass	●	●	MP3	PRL	32MB	204
	Logix Evzone	219	Novell MP3 player that uses iomega Click! discs for storage. Chunky but quite effective, and discs are much cheaper than memory cards	Click! Discs	●		MP3/WMA	USB	40MB	213
R	Neo-25	420	Sparsely equipped but efficient hard drive portable with an exceptionally high potential capacity. Average in the sound department	Hard Drive	●		MP3	USB	10GB	213
R	Philips eXpansion EXP103	190	The best MP3-CD personal, at least at the time of writing... An effective solution for MP3 on the move	CD			MP3			213
	Philips Rush SA126	250	Sound is a little thin and wishy-washy, and the fiddly controls and lack of remote make it difficult to use	Solid State	●		MP3	USB/PRL	64MB	216
R	Pine D'Music	120	Good build, solid sound and a voice recording mode make this a good first-time buy	Solid State	●		MP3	PRL	32MB	195
	Pontis SP504	158	Not the best aesthetically, but exceptionally good MP3 sound	Solid State	●		MP3	USB	32MB	204
R	Rio 500	190	Well featured and a strong performer, though new generation Rios have now arrived	Solid State	●		MP3	USB	64MB	195
R	Rio 600	169	Neat design, strong future-proofing, good features and sound. Only its memory lets it down	Solid State	●		Agnostic	USB	32MB	208
R	Rio 800	300	If you're interested in solid state, this player's great sound and ease of use make it worth a look	Solid State	●	●	Agnostic	USB	64MB	216
	Sony SSP-PD7	250	Cute but pricey with limited supplied memory, but sound is good and it's one of the first to employ AAC coding	Solid State	●		MP3/AAC	USB	32MB	213
	Schneider MPMan F20	99	The world's first MP3 personal. Basic but still good value	Solid State	●		MP3	PRL	32MB	195
	Smart Portable MP3 Disc Player	119	CD personal that also plays MP3 tracks burnt onto CD-R discs	CD			MP3			208
	Sony NW-MS7	249	A gorgeous little personal using Sony's Memory Stick storage. Good but pricey	Solid State	●		MP3/ATRAC-3	USB	64MB	208
	Sony NW-MS9	300	It's got size and simplicity on its side, but it's up-front, boomy sound is significantly below par	Solid State	●		MP3/ATRAC-3	USB	64MB	216
R	Sony MDC-PC3	350	A MiniDisc deck which hooks to a PC. Introduces cheap and flexible MD media to the world of MP3	MiniDisc	●		MP3/ATRAC	USB		213

RECORD PLAYERS

SPECIFICATIONS

TURNTABLES

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	MANUAL	AUTO	SEMI-AUTO	SPEEDS	SUSP SUBCHASSIS	EXTERNAL PSU	SUPPLIED WITH ARM	SUPPLIED WITH CART	ISSUE NUMBER
BB	Audio Note TT1/ARM1	594	Simple and unpretentious, it delivers a real taste of true high end performance at an affordable price	●			33/45	●	●	●		203
	Avid Acutus	4,995	Extremely capable design with no apparent shortcomings, don't sell your vinyl 'til you've heard it on this!	●			33/45	●	●	●		194
	Clearaudio Reference	3,990	Opulent beast tested with Souther TQ-1 arm. Tends to gloss over detail, but can sound bold	●			33/45					144
R	DNM Rota 2	5,600	Tonally slightly bleached, but extracts detail like few others. Works well on its own table				33/45			●	●	144
	Dual CS 455.1	220	Neat record player with automatic convenience (and 78rpm), but doesn't match simpler manual rivals sonically		●		33/45/78				●	203
R	Dual 505-4 UK	250	Consistent sounding and well isolated turntable. It is slightly lacking in oomph			●	33/45	●		●	●	103
R	Kuzma Stabi/PS	1,950	(Tested with Stogi Reference) Solid oak plinth; sound is very clear, detailed and extended	●			33/45	●	●	●		91
R	Linn LP12 Basik	1,100	Trails the full LP12 significantly, but pace, rhythm, timing etc still top rank	●			33			●		103
R	Linn LP12 Lingo	1,750	The classic reference is improved by the Lingo, but charming character remains	●			33/45	●	●	●		91
R	Michell Gyrodec	875	Sweet and natural-sounding player, well matched to Rega RB300 arm	●			33/45	●	●			55
EC	Michell Gyro SE	775	A stunningly desirable combination of looks, solidity and sound make this a tempting turntable	●			33/45	●				190
BB	Michell Orbe SE	1,725	A Superb turntable, able to mix it with the best at virtually any price	●			33/45	●				192
BB	NAD 533	220	Sonically a little crude, but musically satisfying results at a very modest price	●			33/45			●	●	203
BB	Notts Analogue Spacedeck/Arm	750	No frills, just a first-rate, outstandingly natural-sounding deck that will last forever	●			33/45		●	●		159
BB	Pro-ject 2	300	Remarkably effective at the price, with decent timing and a generally well defined sound	●			33/45			●	●	164
	Pro-ject Classic Cherry	450	A great looking turntable with a generous and dynamic sound, but lacks something in overall coherence	●			33/45			●	●	203
	Pro-ject Perspective	750	Flexible facilities and competitive package, but performance of turntable alone is behind the best	●			33/45	●		●		192
R	Pro-ject 6/Sumiko	850	Don't think of this as a deck with a good arm, but as a scaled-down Oracle Delphi – it's that good	●			33/45	●	●	●		138

SPEAKER STANDS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	HEIGHT	TOP PLATE SIZE (cm)	FILLABLE	WELDED	NUMBER OF SHELVES	SHELF TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
	Target HM60	106	A solid and well-built stand laid-back to the point of coma	40-70	16.5,19	●				202
R	Townshend Seismic Sink	499	Unique inflatable plinth that works well with decent floorstanders as well as standmounted speakers	4	38,48					202

TUNERS

ANALOGUE TUNERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	WAVEBANDS	PRESETS	RDS	REMOTE CONTROL	SIG STRENGTH METER	ROT TUNING KNOB	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Cambridge T500	180	Very capable tuner suited to good and less good reception conditions	FM,M,L	64			●	●	193
R	Creek T43	399	Quality UK-made tuner offering classy sound in all areas at a very fair price	FM,M,L	64		●		●	193
R	Cyrus FM7.5	400	Beautifully made and presented, with sound that's a small but worthwhile advance over budget models	FM	7				●	211
BB	Denon TU-260L II	130	The return of the all-time favourite, now enhanced with RDS and sounding as fine as ever	FM,M,L	40	●			●	193
R	Denon TU-1500RD	250	A well balanced and clean sound with good bass and treble extension	FM,M	40	●			●	184
	Magnum Dynalab FT11	499	All-analogue tuner: receives weak or tightly packed stations but loses out on noise and sonic neutrality	FM	3				●	184
BB	Harman Kardou TU940	179	Good sound and particularly good signal recovery under tricky reception conditions	FM, M	30	●			●	221
	Leak Trough Line - GTA	300	A renovated classic with a style all of its own coupled with an emotive and gutsy performance	FM	0				●	206
	Linn Pekin	545	Smart and high-tech tuner which integrates well with Linn systems but offers less appealing performance out of that context	FM, M	80		●		●	211
R	Linn Kremlin	2,600	Controversially good sound at a very high price	FM	80		●		●	142
	Marantz ST-17	600	Great looks, but sound let down by opaqueness due to pilot-tone breakthrough	FM, M, L	60	●			●	221
BB	Marantz ST-48	120	A classic budget model which manages a performance only just behind much more expensive models	FM,M	60	●				184
BB	Marantz ST6000	150	Another budget killer from Marantz, with sound well above its class and useful features	FM, M, L	90	●			●	211
R	Myryad T-30	400	Attractive product that produces attractive sounds too: capable of very musical performance with a good aerial	FM	29		●			193
	Myryad T-10	530	A very smart unit which works well and offers good rhythmic drive and vitality, albeit at a price	FM	20				●	184
	NAD C440	200	Rather polite sound, a little vague at times, that seldom offends but never excites	FM,M	30	●				193
	Pioneer F-504RDS	250	Cable-friendly with advanced RDS and excellent RF performance; slightly disappointing sound	FM,M	40	●			●	166
	Roksan Caspian	595	Neat fascia with great ergonomics, but sound is not really any better than models at half the price	FM	50		●		●	184
	Sony ST-SE500	140	A lot of features for the money, but sound lacks detail and has some coloration	FM,M,L	30	●			●	193
	Roksan Kandy KT-1	375	Well made but sound is a bit lacklustre and lags behind some budget models	FM, M, L		●				211
	Rotel RT-935AX	160	Good ergonomics and sound quality at a realistic price, but limited features and RF selectivity	FM,M	20					166
R	Sony ST-SE570	130	Good honest budget tuner: loads of features, just a trifle bland	FM, M, L	30	●			●	221
	Sony ST-SA3ES	250	Clean, lean presentation but needs a quality aerial to perform at its best	FM,M,L	30	●			●	157
R	Sony STS-B920S	180	A little hiss and image compression don't detract from the clean performance of this feature-packed tuner	FM,M,L	30	●			●	184
	Thorens TRT2000	499	Not exactly neutral sounding, but nonetheless makes listening fun	FM,M	59	●	●		●	157

DIGITAL TUNERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	WAVEBANDS	PRESETS	RDS	REMOTE CONTROL	SIG STRENGTH METER	ROT TUNING KNOB	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Arcam Alpha 10 DRT	800	The first DAB tuner and arguably still the best, but the system's still not perfect	DAB	7	●	●	●	●	199
R	Arcam DT-81	650	A very smart and polished DAB performer	DAB	16	●	●	●	●	221
	Arcam FMJ DT26	1,000	Metal-cased version of the Alpha 10 DAB, not so competitive now DAB prices are dropping	DAB	7	●	●	●	●	211
	Symbol C-DAB 1	1,000	The first 'high-end' DAB tuner, although format is the ultimate limitation. Gorgeous finish	DAB	8	●	●	●	●	199
	Pision Wavefinder	299	Bizarre-looking DAB tuner that requires a powerful PC to operate - great gadget, sound variable	DAB		●			●	211
	Radi DAB-606	199	Nice price, odd product. Awful to use and sounds rather gutless	DAB	30	●	●	●		221
	Sony ST-D777ES	550	Smart and useful with DAB and FM in one box, but neither band really shines	DAB, FM, M, L	99	●	●	●	●	211
R	Technics ST-GT1000	500	Handy tuner that combines DAB, FM and AM in one unit and substantially lowers the price bar for DAB entry	DAB,FM,M	97	●	●	●	●	199
BB	VideoLogic DRX-601E	299	Cheapest DAB tuner to date, and concedes little if anything to dearer models	DAB	10	●			●	211
	VideoLogic DRX-601ES	349	Tweaked version of 601E with modified frequency response: a matter of taste	DAB	10	●	●	●	●	221

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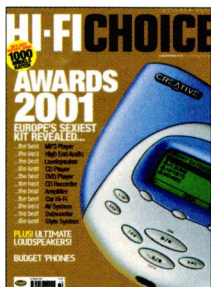
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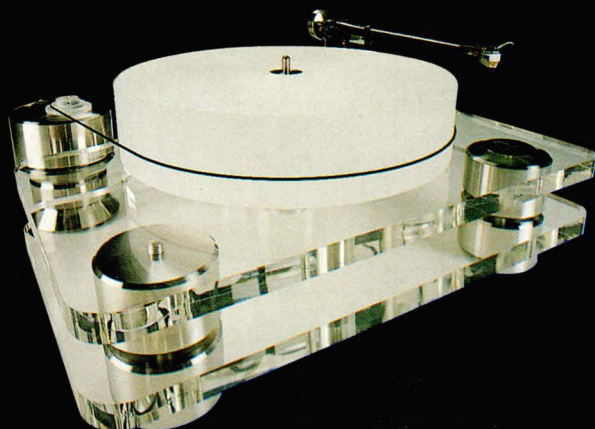
TWEAKER'S CORNER

If you're feeling the pinch of impending Christmas relative-type purchases, fear not, you can still splurge on your hi-fi, with our accessories round-up. Stocking fillers and more serious tweaker's toys are given the once over, and we'll show you how to improve your system from as little as a tenner. We check out isolation platforms, mains conditioners, and clever CDs, to name but a few.

PLUS

Exclusive reviews of the latest high-end SACD players. We test top-of-the-range multichannel sources from Marantz and Sony and put them through their paces. Who will be king of the SACD? Trust *Hi-Fi Choice* to tell it like it is.

HFC 223 ON SALE 29TH NOVEMBER



PLEASE PHOTOCOPY

CHOICE CUTS

THE OPINIONS OF OUR COLUMNISTS HAVE BEEN MANY AND VARIED OVER THE PAST YEAR, SOME SCARY, SOME SUBLIME BUT ALWAYS WORTH READING. HERE ARE SOME OF THE HIGHLIGHTS.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

For me, the thing that ruins most hi-fi systems is the way voices and instruments often seem to be in competition. It's natural to give the bulk of your attention to the dominant musical line, but listening grows ever more rewarding when you can follow subtle inner background detail, not just the lead vocal.

Jimmy Hughes, February 2001

COME TOGETHER

Stereo CD players will continue to be made for hi-fi enthusiasts, no question. But because they're able to replay CDs as well as DVDs, DVD players are fast replacing them in the mainstream sector, and they are the key component in bringing the hi-fi and AV worlds together. *Paul Messenger, August 2001*

BROADBAND

Then Johnston played a track and asked what we thought of the sound. We looked around, startled, but couldn't sense a trick in the works. We were listening to a Dvorak symphony and it sounded solid and dimensional – we were immersed in a large hall acoustic. *Wes Phillips discovers compressed surround sound, September 2001*

STUDIO STYLE

DVD-A and SACD have the potential to bring into the home the sound that engineers hear in the studio. When we start getting recordings through that

have been made for these formats from the ground up, we'll get to hear everything – the window will be wide open. It's a fantastic opportunity for those of us who appreciate great sound quality, and it's up to us, the so-called early adopters, to ensure that these media survive. *Jason Kennedy, August 2001*

FOR THE RECORD

So vinyl's on the up again! It's official, I suppose, 'cos it was on the BBC TV news. But for some of us vinyl's never been away. As a hi-fi source the 'official' upturn really began three years ago. *Paul Messenger, May 2001*

HOT TOPIC

The findings of this month's valves versus transistor group test make it quite clear that the valve designs have a definite advantage on overall sound quality grounds. Sure, there are qualitative differences, and the transistorised stuff goes louder and holds the bass together better, but it's the valves that sound more natural. *Paul Messenger, July 2001*

A SPIRITED PERFORMANCE

If you've ever heard a recording of a live concert you attended, chances are the experience of actually being there was not replicated. Listening at home is never going to have the same immediacy. Yet if your hi-fi system does its job well, it can get you close to the live experience. Not by faithfully

replicating the sound made at the time, but by recreating the spirit of the performance.

Jimmy Hughes, November 2001

SHATTER THE MYTH

A myth has developed that digital recordings on to CD-R/RW are indistinguishable from the original CD. If this were the case then there would be no difference in competing media save for its price and branding. And that's an illusion we intend to shatter. *Paul Miller, April 2001*

THE 'SUBJECTIVISTS'

It wasn't until the mid-'70s that there was any real recognition in Britain that the turntable, the tonearm, or for that matter, the amplifier had any real impact on sound quality. By the end of the '70s, the 'subjectivists' were starting to represent the majority view, and HFC was pioneering some interesting measurements to back up those claims. *Paul Messenger, May 2001*

THE BEST SPEAKER EVER

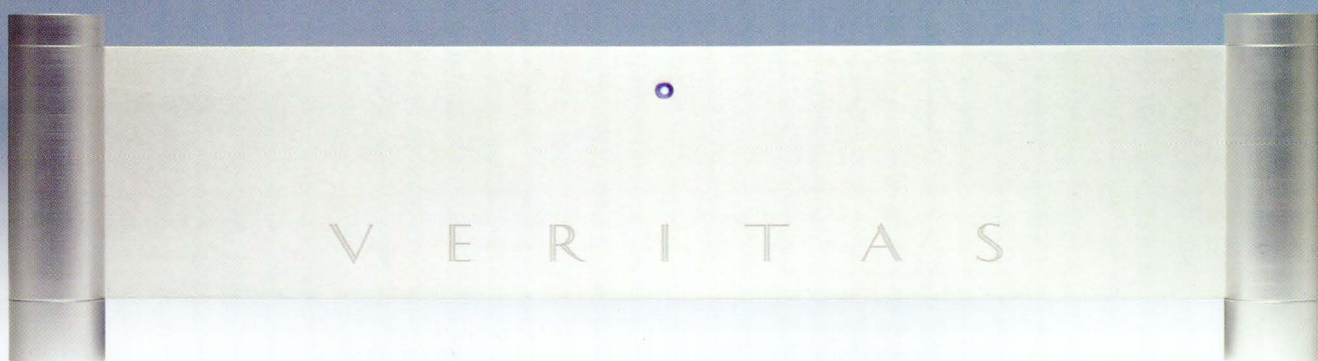
The Sendor BC1. Listen to a BC1 now and compare it to today's speakers; it's still better than 99.9 per cent of them. Of course it has limitations (bass, loudness). But just listen to the accuracy, the lack of coloration, the timing. Every designer has one great product in them and, for Spencer Hughes, the BC1 was it. Robin Marshall talking to *David Vivian, June 2001*

“JOHN FRANKS (CHORD) HAD A THAI CUSTOMER WHO WANTED A BIG AMP, SOMETHING THAT LOOKED LIKE A DISTENDED BORG CUBE CLAD IN ALLOY ARMOUR AND CARRYING THE UNSPOKEN WARNING THAT RESISTANCE WAS INDEED FUTILE.” *David Vivian, February 2001*

Question: Is this the best amplifier ever built?

Answer: oui, si, ya, nai,
ja, igen, yes,
haan, ken, evet,
chai khan, ano,
da, hai, ia.....

In any language the answer is the same



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Ivor Humphreys, HiFi News



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