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See page 28



AUTUMN SPECIAL

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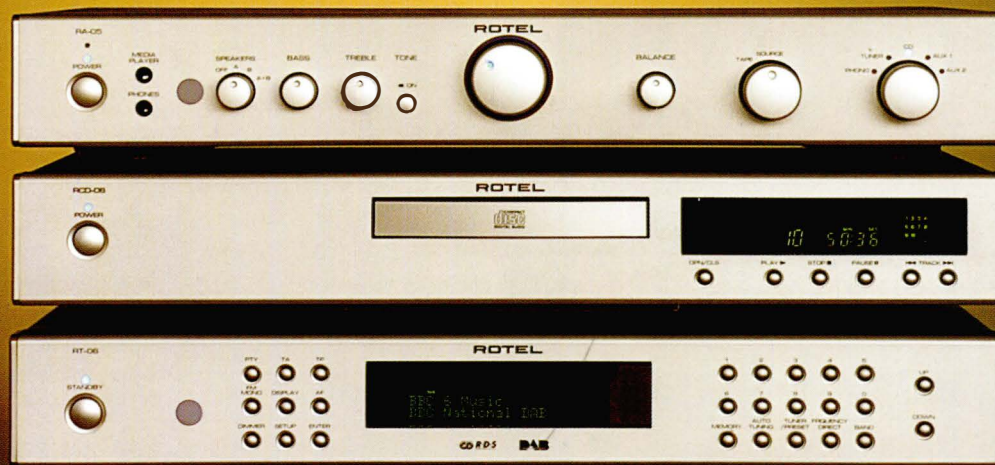


ULTIMATE GROUP TEST >>>
AMPLIFIERS

FEATURING

- > Arcam DiVA A90
- > Audiolab 8000Q/8000P
- > Cambridge Audio 840C
- > Creek Destiny
- > Denon PMA-2000AE
- > Onkyo A-9755

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The world's best hi-fi rated



Rotel RA-05 integrated amplifier. You will have noticed that a pattern has developed over the past 25 years or so. When Rotel launches a new amp, the buttons and knobs tend to stay in the same place. It's what is inside that changes. We continuously evaluate and select components that offer the best possible performance, such as UK-designed metal film resistors. We keep refining circuit board layouts and signal paths to maintain the purity of the signal. We even manufacture our own power supplies, which generate our uniquely vital sound. We may even add an additional feature or two. And every time, it's a better amp. www.rotel.com

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WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
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What Hi-Fi? Sound & Vision
August 2006

ROTEL

Welcome to the issue...

HI-FI CHOICE NOVEMBER 2006 ISSUE 286

Future Publishing Ltd, 2 Balcombe Street, London NW1 6NW ☎ +44 (0)20 7042 4000



It's early September as I write, and the summer is officially over. Yet the sun's subsidence brings its own rewards. The kids return to school; the TV schedule cranks itself up from the depths of the summer's malaise; and the darker evenings bring the perfect excuse to cosy up on the sofa, shut your eyes and engulf yourself in the balmy sounds that spread like sunshine from your hi-fi.

Autumn is an exciting time for hi-fi fans – indeed, for the whole consumer electronics industry. It's the time when a year's worth of development crystallises into fully formed product and a plethora of new kit invades the retailers' shelves. Of course, it's no coincidence that Autumn is also the time when Britain's all-consuming public stops dreaming of beaches and re-focuses its disposable income on more domestic pursuits, like hi-fi. And this season, there's no shortage of great kit to choose from.

This issue features the best of these shiny new hi-fi gems. Nestling among the many exclusive, in-depth reviews are key models from top British brands, including Ruark's new flagship speaker, the latest £500 amp from Arcam and two quite brilliant CD players from Cambridge and Rega. And there are plenty more besides, from Europe and beyond, all preparing to do battle for class leadership throughout the coming year.

Fans of 'real hi-fi' should rest assured: in terms of product quality, we've never had it so good. So enjoy this month's treasure trove, and make sure you tune in next time when we honour the best of the best in *The 2006 Hi-Fi Awards Issue* – out 19 October. Don't miss it!

Tim Bown

Tim Bown Editor

WHY WE'RE NO.1 FOR HI-FI...

- Since 1975, *Hi-Fi Choice* has delivered the world's most thorough, no-nonsense guide to buying high-performance hi-fi.
- We now publish 13 issues a year, including two special editions: *The Collection*, an issue dedicated to the finest high-end components, and *The Hi-Fi Awards* – the most important annual awards in the hi-fi calendar.
- Every issue contains a potent mix of the latest hi-fi news, views, music, interviews and in-depth tests, brought to you by a prestigious team of expert writers from the UK and around the world.
- We only review the most interesting and worthy new hi-fi components – high-performance audio products across a wide range of price points. We obtain more genuine hi-fi exclusives than any other magazine – if it's worthy of your attention, you'll read about it first in *Hi-Fi Choice*.
- Our tests are the most rigorous in the business, conducted by the UK's most experienced team of hi-fi reviewers.
- Alongside in-depth component reviews and accessory round-ups, every regular issue of *Hi-Fi Choice* features an *Ultimate Group Test* on a core hi-fi product category – from source components to amps and speakers.
- Each *Ultimate Group Test* is conducted using a uniquely thorough three-step test regime. This consists of carefully controlled 'blind' and sighted listening sessions, a full set of laboratory tests and extended 'hands on' testing by the primary reviewer. No other magazine goes to such lengths to ensure accurate comparative reviews.
- Components that best meet our exacting standards are listed in the *Buyer's Bible* section – the world's most reliable reference guide for the hi-fi buyer.
- That's why *Hi-Fi Choice* is...
The Essential Guide To Audio Excellence In The Home

Beautiful in-house photography, so you see the product in all its glory

Cherry-picked kit – only the most worthy components make it into *Hi-Fi Choice*

Comprehensive in-depth reviews – we give you the full story

Wooden it be nice?

Annotated shots show you what's really going on inside

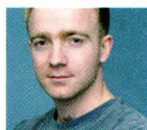
Interviews with designers give you extra background information

Carefully considered verdict scores, so you really know what we think of a product

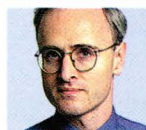
THIS ISSUE'S EXPERT WRITERS AND REVIEWERS INCLUDE...



PAUL MESSENGER
A former *HFC* editor, Paul has been writing about his beloved hi-fi hobby for nearly 30 years. In that time he has become one of the world's most respected scribes and probably the UK's foremost loudspeaker reviewer.



DAN GEORGE
Dan is a hi-fi nut whose dream came true when he became *HFC's* reviews editor. Armed with a bristling contacts book and a pair of razor-sharp ears, he ensures that only interesting products make it into *HFC*.



RICHARD BLACK
Richard is a professional musician, recording engineer and a highly knowledgeable hi-fi analyst to boot. He has a knack for writing about complicated subjects in a readable way – and he only writes for *HFC*.



MALCOLM STEWART
Former editor of *Hi-Fi Review* magazine, Malcolm was one of the best known and most outspoken reviewers of the 1980s and 1990s. He currently edits hi-fi industry bible *The British Audio Journal*.



ALVIN GOLD
Alvin has been writing about his obsession for more than 20 years. In that time he has contributed his encyclopaedic knowledge to almost every hi-fi periodical you can think of (and several more besides).



DAVID VIVIAN
An award-winning journalist, David's sharp ears and equally sharp powers of description are a valuable mix for *HFC*. He also writes about cars, but who needs the latest Lotus when you've got the finest hi-fi to test drive.

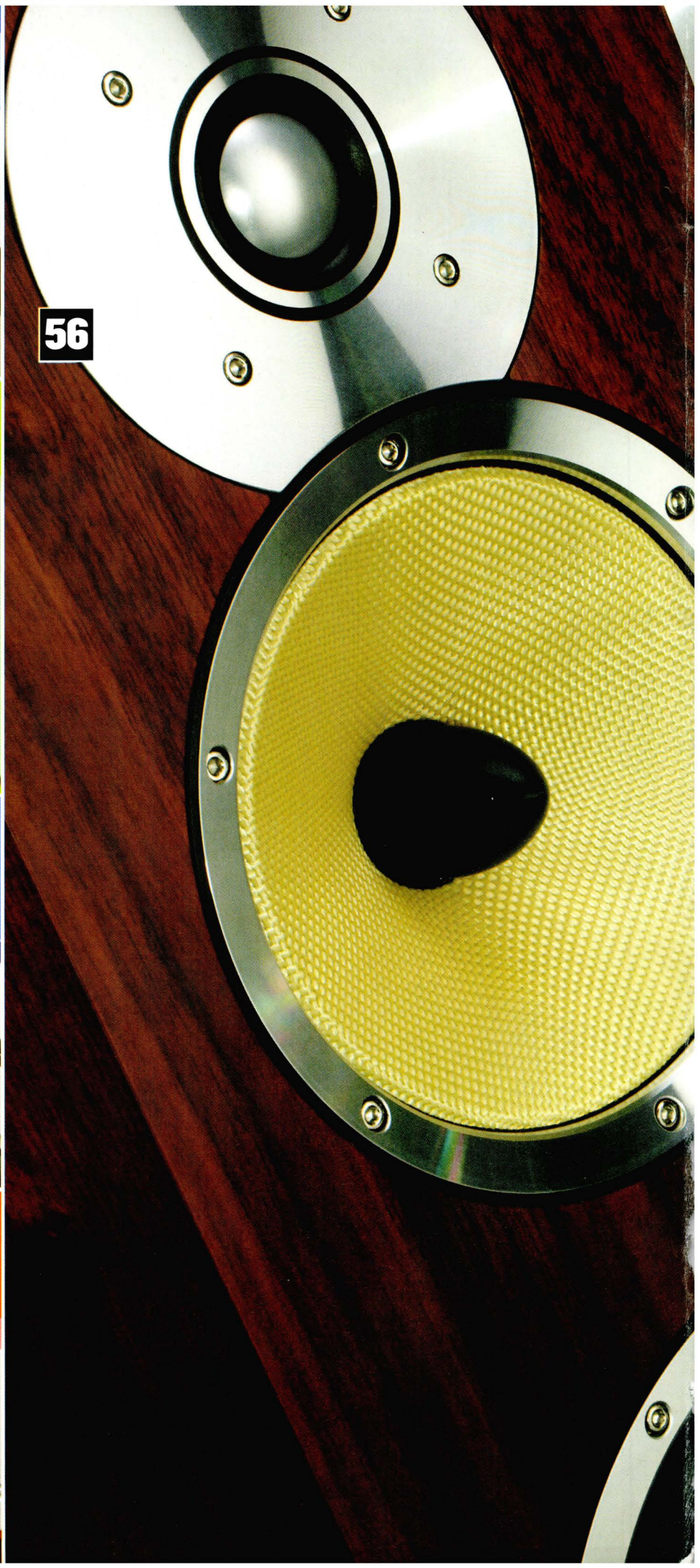
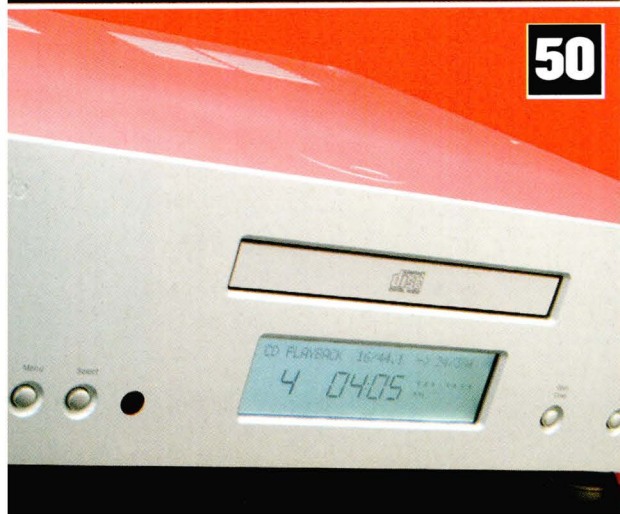


JASON KENNEDY
Jason previously edited *HFC*, but can now be found in the wilds of Sussex indulging himself with the very best hi-fi money can buy. His own system is simply sensational and his love of music knows no bounds.



ART DUDLEY
One of the most respected commentators on the American hi-fi scene, Art has written for *Hi-Fi Heretic*, *Sounds Like* and *Listener*. Among other things, he is currently US journal *Stereophile's* 'editor at large'.

To ensure you get the best information, opinion and advice, *Hi-Fi Choice* employs the most knowledgeable and experienced hi-fi writers in the business.



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BUYER'S BIBLE

The ultimate guide to high performance hi-fi and AV gathering together all our favourite products for your perusal. Your shortlist starts here...

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FREE MINI-MAG!

Inside your free 2nd-hand hi-fi mini-mag...

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- 3 Trading Pages
- 7 Reader Classified



TRUST YOUR SENSES



BLIND FAITH

"Superb value for dollar, rich and full sound at lower volume levels, engaging detail and musicality,"

Stereophile

"There is much to like about this speaker, most obviously its impressive suppression of cabinet colorations, but also in the high-class drive unit technology it employs."

Hifi Choice

"Indeed a terrific loudspeaker...somewhat more "joyful" than its little brother (MS4), yet unmistakably superior."

"In terms of measured performance an almost perfect transducer."

Stereo

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FEATURES



Wide Dispersion



3D Audio



Low Resonance Cabinets



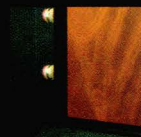
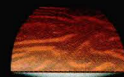
Time Coherence



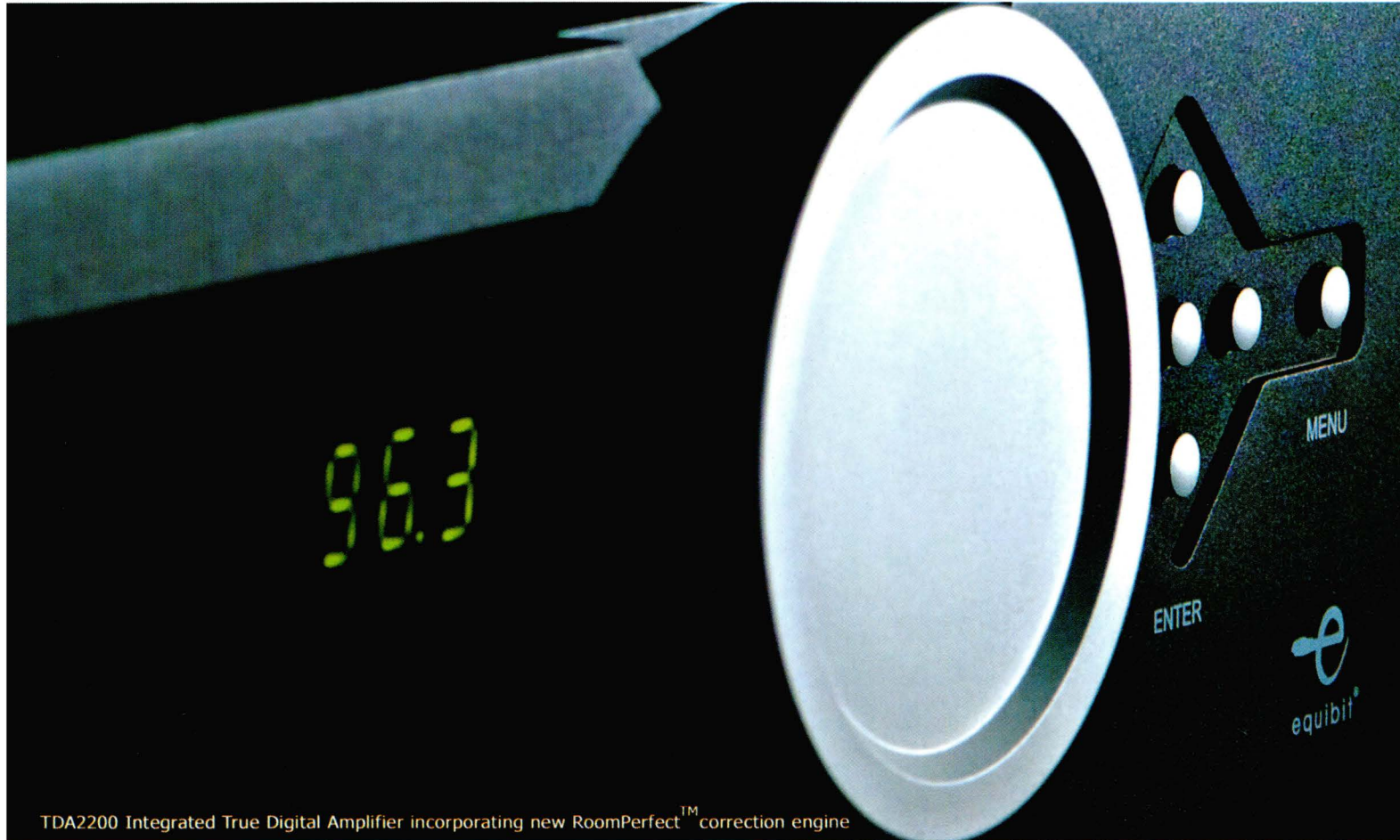
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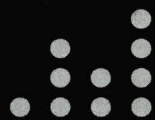
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YAMAHA AX-497 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

▶ Here's the first look at one of Yamaha's stereo integrated amps from its new wave of two-channel hi-fi. The £300, 85-watt AX-497 is a key player in Yamaha's long-awaited return to stereo and is bursting with proprietary technology, including 'Topart' symmetrical circuit topology, said to ensure the highest signal purity, plus 'CD direct amplification', meaning the amp matches the CD player's signal levels, to minimise noise.

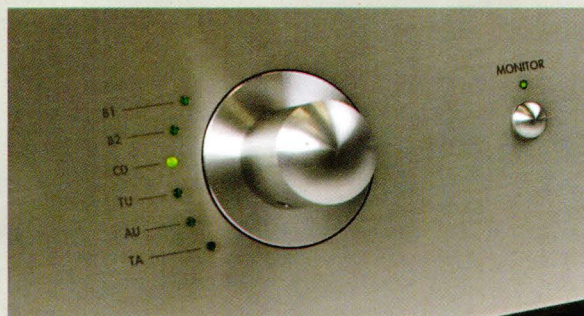
Button twiddlers will welcome the comprehensive control panel, which features tone, speaker and record out controls; but minimalists will love the fact that these are all cleverly hidden beneath a fascia panel, for stealth-like looks. There's also a tone direct mode, motorised volume control and a linear damping circuit for better frequency response. We can't wait to fire this beast up.

To find out more, see our exclusive in-depth review in the next issue of Hi-Fi Choice

PRODUCT	Yamaha AX-497
TYPE	Integrated stereo amplifier
PRICE	£300
KEY FEATURES	Topart symmetrical circuit topology ▶ Rated power: 85 watts per channel ▶ CD direct technology ▶ Hidden fascia controls ▶ Linear damping circuit ▶ Record out selector
CONTACT	☎ 01923 233166 🌐 www.yamaha-uk.com



P R I M A R E



SCANDINAVIAN DESIGN

I 130

"It has the kind of performance that products in the next price class upwards would envy, yet has sacrificed nothing in build, finish or usability in the process."

What Hi Fi? Sound & Vision Awards 2005



I CD31

"If you want an elegant, superbly built top-end player, Primare's CD31 is an excellent place to start. It sounds fabulous and is built to sky-high standards."

What Hi Fi? Sound & Vision Awards 2005



I SPA21

"If you're after the Holy Grail of home cinema amps – great sound with both music and movies – then the SPA21 is it. The queue to pay homage starts here."

What Hi Fi? Sound & Vision Awards 2005



Primare marries timeless Scandinavian design with impeccable build quality to deliver sound and vision as large as life itself from elegant, compact audio and video components that are as easy to install as they are to appreciate

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www.csesolutions.co.uk
01423 359054



For further information please visit www.primare.net

VINCENT CD-S6 CD PLAYER

Here's a sneaky peek at Vincent's new hybrid CD player, the CD-S6, unveiled for the first time in last month's *AudioFile*. *Hi-Fi Choice* has been given the player exclusively and testing is already underway on this German-designed, Class A configured hybrid disc spinner. Its stunning specifications belie its modest price point, thanks in part to Far Eastern manufacture, with European development – something we're increasingly witnessing these days.

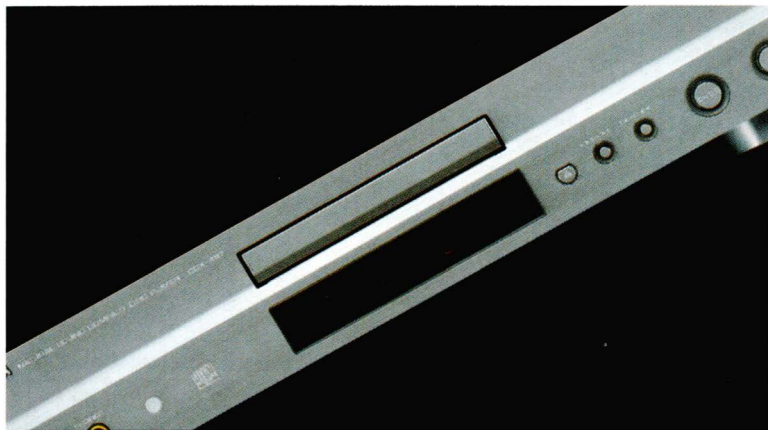
The player sports a 24-bit/192kHz DAC from Burr-Brown, a Philips VAM 1202 mechanism, HDCD decoding from a Pacific

Microsonics chipset and a Class A configured valve output stage. Vincent clearly thinks hybrid is the way to go with digital sources. Do we agree?

To find out more, see our exclusive in-depth review in the next issue of Hi-Fi Choice

PRODUCT	Vincent CD-S6
TYPE	CD player
PRICE	£999
KEY FEATURES	Hybrid design with valve output stage ● HDCD compatible ● 24-Bit/192kHz Burr-Brown DAC ● Philips VAM 1202 mechanism ● Acoustically damped chassis
CONTACT	☎ 01702 601410 🌐 www.ruark.co.uk

NEW PRODUCT HIGHLIGHTS



YAMAHA STEREO RANGE

Yamaha is back in stereo! Following several years in the home cinema wilderness, the electronics giant has recommitted to two-channel with a CD player, FM/AM tuner and a range of amplifiers. Pitched at the budget end of the market, the new line-up incorporates a host of proprietary technology, as one might expect from a company that leads the field in DSP development for home cinema.

Fronting up the return to stereo movement is Yamaha's CD player, the CDX-497. This is an oversampling, aluminium-fronted disc spinner, full of flexible playback options. It also benefits from a low-impedance power supply, optical and coaxial digital outputs, plus several features designed to aid recording from CD. The player is a perfect match for either of the two new integrated amps, the AX-397 and AX-497, while radio fans should check out the TX-497 tuner. Expect reviews soon.

Price TX-497 £140; CDX-497 £200; AX-397 £250; AX-497 £350 **Due** now
 ☎ 01923 233166 🌐 www.yamaha-uk.com



DK DESIGN VS 1 REFERENCE MkIII

Sussex-based hi-fi dealer Metropolis Music is now importing DK Design equipment from Nashville, Tennessee. The first product to hit the UK is a 'muscle amp': a Class A/B, hybrid, dual-mono integrated amplifier called the VS 1 Reference Mk III. The 150-watt, US-designed amp uses 6992 valves in the Class A input stage and bi-polar transistors in the solid-state output stage. It comes supplied with a phono stage, line-level output, subwoofer output and WBT binding posts. It is sold with a five-year warranty.

Price £2,500 **Due** now ☎ 01435 867438 🌐 www.dkdesigngroup.com

REVOLVER CYGNIS

Loudspeaker specialist

Revolver has taken a huge leap up-market with a new £6,000 floorstander called Cygnis. The three-way flagship boasts 91dB sensitivity and is based around a two-part enclosure with two chambers housing an array of drive units. The 15-litre top section contains a 26mm aluminium tweeter and a 130mm glass-fibre midrange unit, with the 50-litre bass section housing a massive 254mm doped paper cone, said to extend to 30Hz. Features include a hand-built crossover in a dedicated enclosure, composite midrange cabinet and claimed frequency response to 30kHz.

Price £5,999 **Due** now

☎ 0870 047 0047 🌐 www.revolveraudio.com



KOSS QZ77

Koss is the latest headphone manufacturer to announce a noise-reducing earphone. The QZ77 features both passive and active noise reduction technology, said to eliminate unwanted and harmful noise. The earbud design has the main headphone body positioned just outside the ear, which is connected to a tubular post that is inserted into the ear canal.

The in-ear section uses expanding 'memory' foam for an ideal fit to improve bass and treble. This foam acts as passive noise reduction, while an active circuit removes noise further.

Price £75 **Due** now

☎ 0870 607 0540

🌐 www.koss.com





DENON DVD-1730

➤ Denon's latest low-cost DVD-Video player is packed with technology, including an HDMI digital output for suitably equipped displays and 24-bit/192kHz Burr-Brown DACs for audio replay. Its picture quality is described as 'near HD' via HDMI, thanks to a video scaling feature that can deliver pictures up to 1080i quality, and it's compatible with DivX, CD-R/RW, MP3 and WMA formats. But the most amazing thing is the price: you get all this for just £150!

Price £150 **Due** now

☎ 01234 741200 🌐 www.denon.co.uk

AUDIOAERO PRIMA AMP

➤ French specialist Audioaero has launched a new hybrid integrated amplifier called the Prima. Incorporating a military-spec 6021W valve in the preamp section, the new amp offers 75 watts per channel and four line-level inputs, a pre out and a tape monitor. It uses a ladder attenuator for the volume control and Black Diamond Racing Cone feet to decouple the unit from the surface it is mounted upon.

Price £1,495 **Due** now

☎ 020 8882 2822 🌐 www.audioaero.com



JAMO CONCERT SERIES

➤ Jamo's new Concert Series loudspeakers are aimed at both stereo and multichannel applications. The range comprises three floorstanding models, plus a standmount, subwoofer and centre speaker. Heading up the range is the £1,600 three-way C809 (pictured), which employs two 180mm woofers and a midrange unit, plus a 25mm tweeter. All models benefit from fully decoupled silk-dome tweeters – to reduce interference from baffle-based vibration – and hard conical cones. These are said to avoid break up across the working frequencies. There is also an impedance correction feature aimed at further reducing distortion. Bass fans may wish to add the matching front and rear-firing sub, which boasts two 254mm drivers, plus a colossal 1.8-kilowatt amp.

Price from £400 to £1,600 per pair
Due now

☎ 01923 205605
🌐 www.jamo.com



Soundbites

MURATA has brought its high-end super-tweeters to the UK. Available through Audio Atmosphere, the hemispherical tweeters create sound through a special ceramic piezoelectric membrane, said to have a resonant frequency well above the audio bandwidth. A special claimed characteristic of this membrane is its 'breathing' vibration mode, which is said to offer a wider dispersion compared to conventional units. Prices start at £1,259.

☎ 01785 711232



BLACK RHODIUM's new Diva loudspeaker cable has been designed for use with low powered single-ended products partnered to high-efficiency speakers. The silver-plated copper wire has evolved from the company's T90 cable and is fitted with Eichmann Bayonet 4mm plugs. Expect to pay £345 for a three-metre terminated pair.

☎ 01332 342233

ROBERTS has launched what it claims is the smallest DAB radio on the market. The Gemini 49 DAB portable is both mains and battery powered, with a built-in charger for rechargeable AA batteries. The unit is 40mm deep, has ten station presets and a two-line LCD display. It also has a headphone socket, auto clock set feature and FM wavebands. Expect to pay £60.

☎ 01709 571722

DENON's new £500 micro hi-fi system, the D-F102DAB, is based upon its new Advanced Evolution full-size components. Described as 'real hi-fi', the 35-watt, DAB equipped micro benefits from a built-in phono stage, 24-bit/192kHz DACs and a fascia-based connection for music portables. Cassette deck and loudspeakers options are also available, each for an extra charge.

☎ 01234 741200



OMNIMOUNT has launched a new four-strong glass and metal furniture range. The Eclipse series has a reduced profile and is said to take up less space than conventional equipment supports. Made from high-grade aluminium, the racks can support up to 68kg. Prices start at £230.

☎ 01379 649376

NAIM NAC122x

➤ Naim's most affordable preamp, the 112x is being replaced this month with an all-new, improved version, called the 122x. Based on the upmarket NAC202, the new preamp features a hardwired, motorized ALPS volume control, which Naim says delivers better performance. It also sports relay-switched DIN inputs and low resonance casework, plus an extra set of RCA phono outputs optimised for use with subwoofers. The amp can be powered from the preamp power outputs on Naim's NAP150x and NAP200 power amps, or using either a FlatCap 2x or HI-CAP 2 power supply. There is also an RS232 option for multiroom users.

Price £725 **Due** now ☎ 01722 426600 🌐 www.naim-audio.com

➤ The Insider

THIS MONTH, HFC TALKS TO...

ROBERT BURN
Job Title: Product Development Manager
Company: Rotel UK



What is your most exciting product in development?

The most exciting development is the continued research into Class D amplifier technology and its application within quality hi-fi products.

What is the most innovative product you've encountered recently?

It has to be the iPod; if not for itself, for the way that it has introduced music to many.

Name a really great album that you've heard recently.

The Puppini Sisters, *Betcha Bottom Dollar*. A colleague recently pulled this out during a listening session and I was smitten by the fun, performance and recording quality. It appeals to music lovers of a certain age.

CD or vinyl and why?

It has to be CD. The software is more readily available and CD is also more convenient and great value with very little fuss.

Are we experiencing a resurgence of two-channel stereo?

We think so. The sonic quality of hi-fi separates these days is significantly better than ever before. As a result, we have noticed both here in the UK and across Europe an increase of new consumers in addition to those re-discovering their music collections.

➤ Hi-Fi Diary

OCTOBER

21-22 Home Entertainment Show
 Renaissance Hotel, Manchester
www.home-entertainment-show.co.uk
The North's largest hi-fi event

NOVEMBER

3-5 What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision Show
 Novotel London West Hotel
 Hammersmith, London
www.whathifishow.co.uk
Major home entertainment show

FEBRUARY 2007

23-25 Sound & Vision – The Bristol Show
 Marriott City Centre Hotel, Bristol
www.bristolshow.co.uk
The UK's biggest hi-fi show

Wake up and smell the bitstream

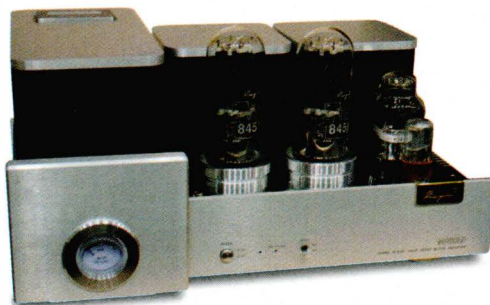
➤ In a recent interview for *Rolling Stone*, Bob Dylan has spoken frankly about the sound of modern records, including his own. "I don't know anybody who's made a record that sounds decent in the past 20 years," he complained. Neither does he have any sympathy for record companies that gripe about no longer making enough money because of illegal downloading, stating: "It was like, 'everybody's gettin' music for free'. I was like, 'well, why not? It ain't worth nothing anyway!'" He continued: "You listen to these modern records, they're atrocious, they have sound all over them... there's no definition of nothing, no vocal, no nothing, just like... static."

Pete Thomas, head honcho at PMC, was interviewed by Reuters about Dylan's comments and said: "This could be interpreted as reviving the old vinyl-CD debate or analogue vs. digital question... It certainly brings into question whether on simple acoustic works the recording professionals should avoid the vast range of tools open to them and go back to basics."



EU says: keep it cool

➤ European Parliament has drawn up potentially drastic requirements for manufacturers in the form of its EuP (energy using products) directive. This aims to reduce the effect that manufacturing, using and recycling any energy-using product has on the environment by forcing companies to use ecodesign parameters. This is likely to mean that leaving a electronic component powered up is no longer possible, as can be seen with some current DVD players. EuP only applies to components of which 200,000 are sold on the EU market each year – so as long as valve amps don't become the next iPod, there is still hope.



Free legal downloads

➤ Spiralfrog has signed a deal with Universal Music to offer music downloads from the label's catalogue for nothing, news that saw iTunes stock drop two per cent soon after. So what's the catch, or how is the site going to pay the record company? Advertising. For every tune you want to download you have to watch a 60 second video advertisement. For the 13-24 target age group, this looks like a good deal, but there is a further complication in that each tune incorporates DRM that stops it being playable after 30 days. Then, you can go back and watch some more ads to re-load your tunes. Spiralfrog is in discussions with EMI and Warner to broaden its appeal, but at present there are no plans to offer the service outside of North America.



Klipsch buys API

➤ Klipsch has acquired API, the Canadian company that owns Mirage, Energy and Athena Technologies. This move follows soon after Klipsch's acquisition of Jamo and makes the onetime horn speaker specialist a contender for biggest loudspeaker company ever. The API brands will continue to operate autonomously, but Klipsch will benefit from the R&D facilities at the Canadian National Research Centre. Fred Klipsch, chairman of the Klipsch Group, commented: "The move allows us to enhance the way we develop innovative products and solutions that bring added-value offerings to all of our customers in the audio products industry."



High-end wi-fi

⊕ Slim Devices claims that it has built "the world's first network music player for lovers of pure sound". The Transporter is built like an audiophile product, using a 24bit/192kHz DAC chip from AKM and featuring balanced outputs. The company, which makes the popular Squeezebox wi-fi receiver, says that the Transporter is designed to take advantage of lossless formats such as WAV and FLAC. It also features the attention to detail in power supply regulation and jitter minimisation that you see in serious CD players. Indeed, according to Slim's Patrick Cosson: "It sounds better than most CD players... it surpasses even the most exotic player." The Transporter is currently available online for \$1,999.



Roving multichannel

⊕ Landrover's latest Freelander 2 vehicle will be available with the first line-fit example of a Dolby Pro Logic II 7.1 system. The Alpine-built system features a centre channel, side and rear surrounds, an 80-watt twin active subwoofer and a ludicrous 440-watt multichannel power amp. For some reason, no big screen or projector system is fitted to complete the effect.



JIMMY'S TWEAKS #46

HANDY HINTS FROM JIMMY HUGHES – HI-FI'S SUPER TWEAKER



One tweak at a time

When making changes to your hi-fi system, it's essential not to make several changes all at once. If you simultaneously make three or four changes, chances are one (or more!) might not be beneficial. The overall sound may well be enhanced because two or three of the changes you made were improvements. But the sound would have

been even better had you evaluated each change separately, and realised one of the changes made things sound worse. So, discipline yourself; make one change at a time. And don't move on until you're sure the change is a definite improvement. Sometimes, what seems like a big improvement is merely a difference.

TOP 10 PRODUCTS TO ENCOURAGE NON-FI FRIENDS TO BUY

1. Cambridge Audio Azur 640A v2 amp (£300)
2. B&W DM303 loudspeaker (£180)
3. Pro-ject Debut SE turntable (£200)
4. Denon DVD-1920 universal disc player (£200)
5. Yamaha CDR-HD1500 hard disk recorder (£600)
6. Goldring GR2 turntable (£265)
7. NAD C352 amplifier (£350)
8. Primare CDI 10 one-box hi-fi system (£1,200)
9. Grado SR80 headphones (£80)
10. *Hi-Fi Choice* subscription (£11.40 quarterly Direct Debit plus free gift!)



New Music

IN THE STUDIO

ARTISTS RECENTLY ABSENT FROM THE CUT AND THRUST OF SHOWBIZ HYPE DUE TO FINISHING THEIR LATEST ALBUMS



ROD STEWART

Title: *Still the Same... Great Rock Classics of Our Time*
Release date: Oct

After his four volumes of standards under the *Great American Songbook* banner revitalised his album sales, Stewart returns to rock with an album of covers that includes John Fogerty's *Have You Ever Seen the Rain*, Elvin Bishop's *Fooled Around And Fell In Love*, Bob Dylan's *If Not for You* and Van Morrison's *Crazy Love*. Production is by Clive Davis and John Shanks.

DAMON ALBARN & BAND

Title: *The Good, The Bad & The Queen*
Release date: January 2007

Albarn insists this isn't a solo project but a new band – yet they're not called *The Good, The Bad and The Queen*, which is merely the title song of their album. Confused? Quite. What is clear is that whatever they're called, the band includes drummer Tony Allen, former Clash bassist Paul Simonon and ex-Verve guitarist Simon Tong. Production is by Danger Mouse, fresh from his Gnarl Barkley triumph.

PETER GABRIEL

Title: *Big Blue Ball*
Release date: early 2007

It's taken 15 years, but Peter Gabriel has finally completed the star-studded global fusion album he began during a series of recording weeks at his Real World studio in the early 1990s. "The idea was to bring together rock and world musicians and see what happened," he says. Gabriel himself takes several lead vocals and other singers include Sinead O'Connor, Natacha Atlas and Papa Wemba.

PETE DOHERTY

Title: *The Implant Sessions*
Release date: late 2006

In-between his various drug busts and tabloid exploits, the Babyshambles man says he's planning an all-acoustic solo



album. "It's different because it will just be me," he says. The working title refers to the opiate-suppressing implant he's had to combat his addiction. Babyshambles have also started work on the follow-up the band's 2005 debut *Down In Albion*.

YUSUF ISLAM

Title: *tbc*
Release date: late 2006

The artist formerly known as Cat Stevens has been recording his first set of new songs in 28 years, after giving up music following his conversion to Islam. An insider says that his gentle melodies and yearning voice have changed remarkably little and song titles include *One Day At A Time*, *Green Fields* and *Maybe There Is A World*.

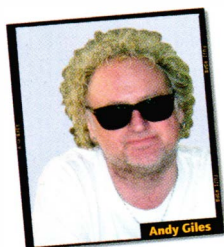
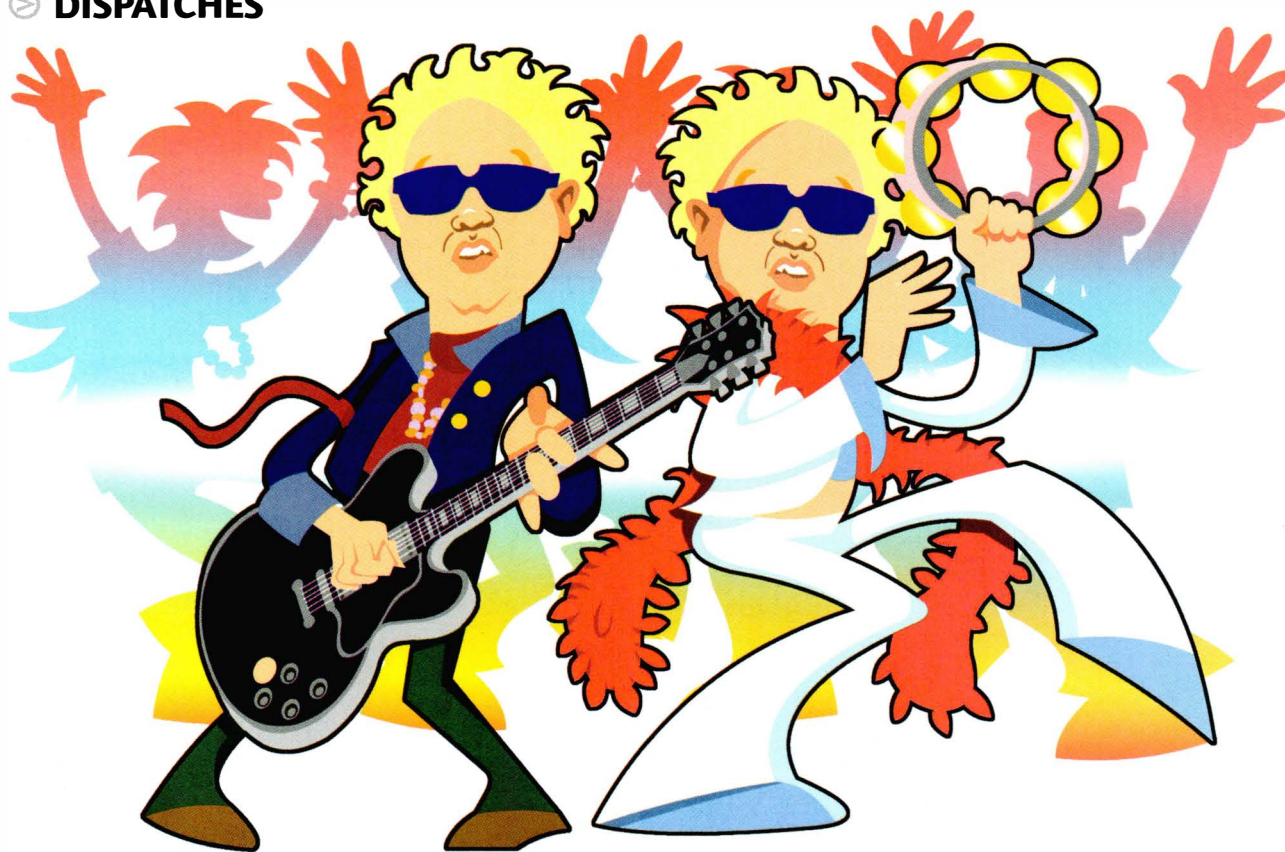
ALSO COMING SOON

JAZZ/ CLASSICAL

Branford Marsalis Quartet Braggtown (Sep); **Tim Ries** The Rolling Stones Project (Sep); **Christine Brewer** Strauss' Four Last Songs and Wagner's *Ainestod* (Sep); **Dawn Upshaw** *Golijov* Ainadamar (Sep)

SACD/ DVD-AUDIO

Coleman Hawkins Hawk Flies High (SACD, Sep); **The Gent In Love** (SACD, Sep); **LA Phil Stravinsky** Rite Of Spring (SACD, Oct); **Cincinnati Symph Britten** Young Person's Guide To Orchestra (SACD, Oct); **Various** World's Greatest Audiophile Vocal Recordings (SACD, Sep)



Andy Giles

Emperor's new download

Strut your stuff – but not on MP3 please

Go on – start me up... I went to see The Rolling Stones on the first date of the UK tour. You know what? Jagger really does strut, pout his lips and sway his hips like a snake. And posture... wow, can he posture? He is – and they are – quite extraordinary. It's pure rock and roll from the guitar headstock collaboration of Keith and Ronnie to the taciturn drum strokes of Charlie. It was the best example of rock hegemony since Led Zeppelin played Earl's Court in 1975. No really. Honest.

So I get home – all enthralled and high – and play my favourite Stones album *Exile on Main Street*. Although I haven't a clue what the lyrics of *Tumbling Dice* are about – really I don't – it's my favourite track on a quite brilliant album. The Stones did it on stage that

“I'm in heaven – I don't just hear it – I can see it all over again. I see Jagger moving, I see him playing to the audience. It's bliss.”

night, so I want to hear the studio version. Being a sad and lonely hi-fi figure, I play it on my pure audio system. That's a Linn LP12 turntable (1983 vintage) with Naim amps of a similar age. Speakers are KEFs. I'm in heaven – I don't just hear it – I can see it all over again. I see Jagger moving, I see him playing to the audience. It's bliss. I could be in the Marquee Club in 1969.

Okay. Do any of you know the story of the Emperor's new clothes? No? As briefly as I can, then, it tells of an Emperor, not the sharpest blade in the drawer, but widely feared throughout the land, who is duped into buying a suit made of buggler-all in which to parade amongst his people. In fact, there are no clothes... but he is a dim-wit and his court and people are so in awe of him that they believe his every word. If the Emperor says he is wearing a beautiful suit of clothes, then he is. At the parade, however, one brave little lad exclaims “but he's got nothing on”.

This is my point. For my girlfriend, I downloaded *Exile on Main Street* and then listened to it on a popular, well-known 'quality'

MP3 player. No names, no pack-drill. So. What's with all this download nonsense? It's the Emperor's new clothes; why doesn't somebody admit it sounds awful? Whatever happened to hi-fi... It stands for high fidelity, remember? This example – being able to compare my sonic and spiritual experience of listening to The Rolling Stones as they should be heard – and then listening to the squashed, ersatz muck that is accepted today made me realise that music is being disregarded in favour of vulgar transportable convenience. It came home to me.

Can you really listen to classic albums while you're on a plane or a train? Be the brave little lad that said “but he's got nothing on”. Just be courageous – and say it's rubbish. Listening to MP3 – or any compressed music – is soulless. When I played *Exile on Main Street* back on MP3, I never saw Jagger strut, pout, sway or posture in my mind. Not once.

It made an old man cry.

Andy Giles is one of British hi-fi's biggest personalities. A former journalist, he has strong industry ties and a long-standing PR business



Alvin Gold

Tiddly-Prom

The Proms justify the BBC's reputation

As I write, the 2006 season of the BBC Proms is drawing to a close. In my youth, I travelled up regularly from the south coast to sit in day-long queues for Arena tickets. Even after my children were born, I continued to queue, and my favourite Prom memory was when I gained admittance with two of my children – about five or six years old then – but far too late to be near the orchestra. So, the only hope of giving my children a view (and keeping the peace) during Beethoven's *Choral* symphony, conducted by the late Klaus Tennstedt, was to allow them to take turns perching on my shoulders. Then, just minutes before the music started, a small delegation approached from the front and said that they had noticed how well the children were behaving, and invited them to stand at the front so that they would have a proper view.

This year, it looked at one point like I would not make it to the Proms at all. The Arena tickets were financially within reach, but the time necessary to queue had simply become too precious. Then came an invitation from another reviewer and friend – HFC's very own Paul Messenger (with family) to an all-Mozart evening, which included the *Requiem*.

I had barely returned home after this concert when I had a call from my oldest son, Simon, with an invitation to another Prom, only two days later. This one included a London premiere of an uncompromising work by Henze, followed by the bombastic and militaristic Shostakovich seventh symphony. It ended in a stunning finale that rocked the hall to its foundations, and told the relatively small audience (the hall was half empty) who attended that they had just experienced something very special indeed.

In a world of commercial opportunism, the Proms stand as a tribute to BBC Radio 3, which organises this, the longest and arguably the most important classical music festival in the world. When various other BBC activities are open to vilification – including, some would say, partisan coverage of some of the world news agenda – the Proms is an excellent counterweight, and a beacon of excellence. ▶

B

RETRO

HI-FI REVISITED

B&W SILVER SIGNATURE LOUDSPEAKER



B&W's Silver Signature was produced between 1991 and 1999. A compact two-way speaker of extraordinary design, it was built in commemoration of John Bowers, the company's founder, who died in 1988. It also celebrated B&W's first quarter of a century. Even today, its performance remains exquisite.

The Silver Signature was intended as a statement product, to mark out the current state of the art for a compact speaker. Nothing, absolutely nothing about the Silver Signature was done on the cheap. It was called 'Silver' for good reason. Everything that would normally be made from copper – from the crossover inductor windings to the drive unit voice coils, the 4mm binding posts and including the wiring between the crossover and the two drivers – was made from silver. The use of silver was based on B&W's conviction that it was the optimum material for the job. "Precious metal for a precious sound," as the maker's brochure copywriter had it.

At first sight, the speaker was an apparently straightforward 170mm two-way, dressed to the nines to be sure, but the details are extravagant, even leaving the silver to one side. The anodised alloy dome tweeter (based on the 800-series unit) was resiliently mounted in its own bullet-shaped enclosure on top of the cabinet, physically time aligned with the bass unit. The top front edge of the cabinet was subtly reamed away, and the tweeter mounting plate was positioned slightly off axis, to reduce and to distribute diffraction residuals. The bass cone kept the faith that B&W had already built up with Kevlar, but it used a new profile. Along with the tweeter, they were new drivers.

The compact, 25.4x45x24.5cm (WxHxD) enclosure was a full Matrix design, with reflex bass loading, in which a three-dimensional internal structural grid of reinforcing members effectively damped the main panel resonances, replacing them with lower amplitude, easily damped higher frequency resonances that would be much less audible. The fourth-order crossover was removed from its normal throne inside the enclosure and housed externally in its own box. This allowed



"Nothing about the Silver Signature was done on the cheap. It was called 'silver' for good reason."

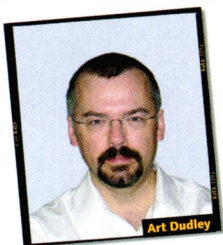
it to be placed in the ideal location: close to the main system amplifier and remote from the fluctuating magnetic field from the bass driver, also addressing the issue of microphony. The Silver Signature was even supplied with appropriately uncompromising stands made from Pre-Cumbrian Welsh slate (for "inertia mass, stiffness and acoustic damping"). The speaker was finished in a suitably extravagant Birds Eye Maple grey and rich red/brown Bubinga, which we recall looked nothing less than stunning, in a retro-modern 1950s Cadillac meets Mercedes S-Class interior sort of way.

Most of the contemporary reviews were enthusiastic or better. Although there were some mild criticisms of colorations and other minor shortcomings, the consensus was that the Signature did what it set out to do: set a standard that would stand for many years for its accuracy, resolving power and its near holographic stereo sound staging. Flaws were minor: we recall it liked being auditioned on or very close to the tweeter axis. It was so good that at least one reviewer bought his own pair for use as a reference. The initial selling price was around £4,000, but it ended up at £5,500 pair by the time the model had finally been laid to rest. Anyone who owns a pair would be mad to let them go. **HFC**

Alvin Gold

Finally, a few words in conclusion about the Royal Albert Hall, which has been completely refurbished in recent years. Along with its massive pipe organ, it now looks much less neglected, and its character remains largely as before. It still seats six thousand or so in an amazingly compact space. As a result, it retains what for a large auditorium is a uniquely intimate character. After 111 seasons of the Proms, the RAH remains as compelling a place to hear music as ever.

Alvin Gold began writing about hi-fi more than 20 years ago and has since become one of the UK's most internationally renowned reviewers



Sweeter Apheta

MC Rega's first spin proves a good 'un

So sad though it sounds, I still remember the first record I selected to play when I brought home my first-ever moving-coil phono cartridge, some 25 years ago: Leonard Cohen's *New Skin for the Old Ceremony*.

As it happens, I chose the same LP for my session with the brand new Rega Apheta cartridge, the company's first moving-coil design. The choice was appropriate: The Rega Apheta is as different from other moving-coils as moving-coils are from moving-magnets.

In technical terms, the new cartridge's greatest distinction is its stripped-down suspension. The Apheta's longer than average aluminium cantilever passes through an elastic grommet that's built into the front of the alloy cartridge body – and that's it. A cross-shaped former is attached to the very end of the cantilever and wound with fine copper wires, which are held up and out of the way with tiny blobs of what appears to be silicone adhesive. The magnet, and a comparatively large mechanism responsible for holding it in place and fine-tuning its position, sits a fraction of a millimetre away from the former. There is no tie wire, no auxiliary suspension, whatsoever.

The Apheta seems very sensitive to VTA; used on a Rega turntable, the arm should be set as low as possible. The manufacturer's recommendation calls for a resistive load of 100 ohms, output is stated as 0.5 mV, and the recommended downforce is 1.75 grams (higher

works better for me) And the cartridge body has three threaded bolt holes, for nutless installation – and parity with Rega's own alignment geometry, when used in a Rega arm.

Sonically, the Apheta is a marvel of clarity and directness. I've only had a few short days with my review sample as I write this, and the thing still sounds a bit grainy to me, in the manner of all phono cartridges that have yet to be properly run-in. Yet the sense of presence with which it portrays solo voices and instruments is unmistakable – and uncanny. Cohen and his nylon-string guitar were there, as was Steve Winwood on Traffic's *Freedom Rider*, and Julie London and Barney Kessel on *Cry Me a River*. More to the point, the sound was sufficiently clear and direct that it let the emotions behind the music shine through.

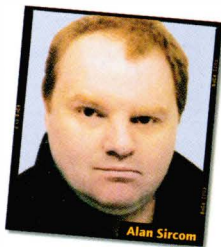
Take This Longing brought me close to tears; Julie's mix of melancholy and cool detachment brought me close to something else altogether...

I'm impressed. If you'll forgive a clunky Americanism, it's awfully nice to see someone hit a home run on their first trip to the plate!

Art Dudley has written for Hi-Fi Heretic, Sounds Like and Listener. He lives in the US and works as Stereophile's editor-at-large

“If you’ll forgive a clunky Americanism, it’s awfully nice to see someone hit a home run on their first trip to the plate!”





Alan Sircom

Three obituaries

It's been a bad couple of months for hi-fi

The industry's blue LED got a little dimmer with the passing of two significant names recently – one English and one American.

David Inman's name runs through the British hi-fi loudspeaker industry like a red thread from the early 1960s to the early 2000s, with Castle Acoustics, KEF Audio and Celestion. For many years a regular panellist in *Hi-Fi Choice's* loudspeaker blind listening tests, David brought charm, good humour and an extraordinarily wide and deep knowledge of music to even the most fraught listening test. Never garrulous or mean spirited, David Inman's mischievous nature and abject professionalism always made his demos entertaining, informative and most of all enjoyable. David died on June 29th and is survived by his companion Maureen, his son and grandchildren.

Across the Atlantic, Dean Roumanis, chief operating officer and part-owner of Krell Industries, passed away on 30 July, one day after experiencing chest pains following a long bicycle ride. He was 52. A part of the Krell 'family' since 1986, Dean has been credited with being pivotal in the growth of the company over the last 20 years. A noted recording engineer and musician in his own right, Dean was also active in Team in Training, an organization that raises money for The Leukaemia & Lymphoma Society through long-distance bike rides. In the cut-throat world of American high-end audio, Dean was that rare thing: universally liked and respected. Both David and Dean will be sorely missed.

Another passing took place recently, too. The Warner Classics label is being robustly pitchforked into a subset of Rhino, Warner's reissue division. Warner Classics has effectively ceased to be an active record label, according to the Gramophone website. This leaves just three majors in the classical field: EMI, Sony-BMG, and Universal (Naxos, the largest player in the classical game right now, is technically an independent label). Despite Warner Classics titles receiving praise recently, and the division showing a profit, it seems neither was enough to keep the label from being bean-counted into the freezer and its artists left out in the cold. ▣

MUSO

CLASSIC ALBUMS

THE ORB ADVENTURES BEYOND THE ULTRAWORLD



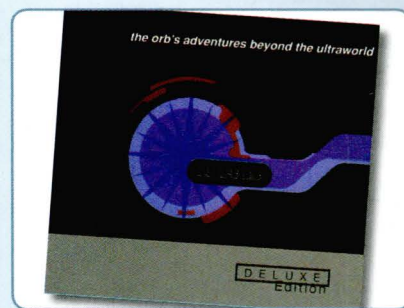
The Orb's fantastical sound, a mix of dub reggae, 1970s rock and soul samples, Chicago

house, minimalism, Eno, Kosmische Musik (German prog) and, of course, the sensibility of Pink Floyd, made an astonishing impact. It was with one clean swipe that The Orb became the most talked about house group of the late 1980s after the broadcast of their December 1989 John Peel session in London. At twenty minutes, *A Huge Ever Growing Pulsating Brain* or simply *Loving You* was chock full of incredible sounds, the most important being the familiar David Gilmour guitar chime from the opening of the classic Floyd album *Wish You Were Here*. No matter that it takes nearly ten minutes for the track to reveal its beguiling dance floor beat, it was heaven in sound topped off by the golden voice of soul diva Minnie Riperton. This most requested Peel session ever set The Orb on the way to making their incredible debut album *Adventures Beyond The Ultraworld*, of which *Loving You* would form the kernel.

Ultraworld not only put paid to the idea that only musicians made records, it also bridged the gap between prog and punk. The Orb were all originally punks, and the most hated band of the punk era was Pink Floyd. But with *Ultraworld*, Alex Paterson and crew made Floyd hip again.

Loving You emerged from Sunday sessions in Jimmy Cauty's south London squat where Alex and friends would end up after DJing in the countrywide raves of 1989. Beats were subtracted from DJ mixes and the concept of chillout music was born. After that, Paterson began DJing at The Land of Oz in London with Youth, which birthed the Rickie Lee Jones sampled *Little Fluffy Clouds* plus sonic nods to minimalist Steve Reich. In the end, *Ultraworld* featured 20 outside musicians and the use of six London studios over an intense six months.

Though using only 16 and 24-track recording, Paterson acknowledges that the album's ground-breaking high-fidelity sound was as a result of "layering different sounds on top of each other, making colours sing their sounds, having fun and going for it in terms of



"A virtual aural recreation of the Apollo 11 moonshot, with help from ex-Gong guitarist Steve Hillage."

sound bites and natural sounds, layering beats and squeaks in order to make a film music of the mind!"

Another aspect was the use of six Cyclosonic Panners to give a three-dimensional quality to the music. This all came to a head on the *Back Side Of The Moon/Spanish Castles In Space* duo – the first a virtual aural recreation of the Apollo 11 moonshot, with help from ex-Gong guitarist Steve Hillage (an epitome of ambient house production), the second a Guy Pratt double bass meditation which would later land him a job with the real Pink Floyd!

Ambient reggae, Vivaldi, Krautrock, acid house and Berlin techno were some of the elements that defined the rest of the set, but it was the Orb's uncanny ability to mix danceable tunes with great sounds that really cut the mustard. Not to mention the meticulous mixing process, which lasted much longer than the recording – from June 1989 to August 1990 in London, Berlin and Barcelona.

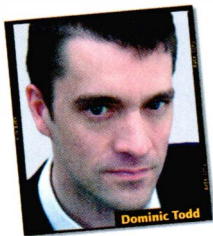
On its release in April 1991, what Paterson terms "his calling card to the planet" was a UK Top 30 chart hit. Originally conceived as a triple album, it now comes as such: Universal has repackaged the original double CD in a hugely impressive Deluxe edition with a bonus disc of mixes, including that classic Floydian Peel session that started the whole thing. **HFC**

Mark Prendergast

Classical industry columnist Norman Lebrecht (writing on the *La Scena Musicale* website), described the closure as an “execution” and bemoaned the poor state of the classical recording industry in general by noting that the number of major label classical releases has dwindled to around three dozen per year. This may be painting an exceptionally bleak view of the nature of the 21st Century music business, but Warner Classics’ emergency stop suggests otherwise.

Warner Classics will also be sorely missed. Although not as much as David and Dean, who weren’t the sort of people who would let accountants get in the way of good music.

Alan Sircom began his journalistic career in the early 1990s. He has since become one of the hi-fi and AV industry’s most respected scribes



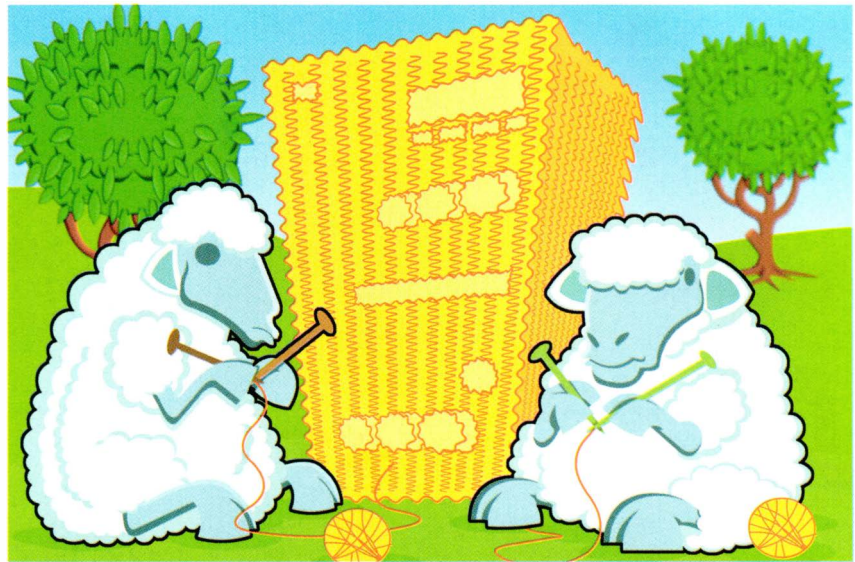
Acronymity

The HDA mark saves audio, if you can see it

The other day I received an email campaigning to raise the profile of ‘quality’ hi-fi. Of course, there’s nothing new here. For as long as I can remember, raising the profile of hi-fi separates within the public’s perception has been a priority within the hi-fi industry. In the 1970s, hi-fi consumed a considerable part of the average household spend, but these days it’s well down the list. And so, the combination of shrinking sales and, thanks to cheaper Far Eastern imports, lower margins has seen many minds within the industry sharpened.

The outcome of this has been for specialist retailers to promote actually listening to the equipment in demo rooms, and perhaps even comparing hi-fi separates directly with mini systems. The hi-fi press has always supported the importance of listening to high-quality hi-fi, while some manufacturers have done their bit in advertising strongly outside the usual audio-only avenues.

I can even remember an early 1990s campaign by BADA (the British Audio Dealers Association) that promoted hi-fi separates via an ‘approved’ logo sticker. The idea was to distinguish decent hi-fi much as the Wool Mark was used for ‘quality’ cardigans and all things sheepish. Whether any of these ideas have actually worked is a moot point. Sales still



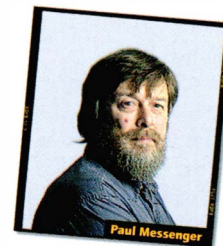
“The idea was to distinguish decent hi-fi much as the Wool Mark was used for ‘quality’ cardigans and all things sheepish.”

declined, but would the decline have been even greater without the various schemes, adverts and promotions? It’s impossible to measure, but overall I think that these ideas have had a beneficial effect upon the health of the sector.

Back to that email, and the latest initiative involves the BFA (British Federation of Audio) suggesting the promotion of high-definition audio. They have a good point. The past year has seen the public at large spending large amounts on High Definition TV. Even customers who already had a flat screen plasma or LCD TV have been quite happy to chop those in after just a couple of years of ownership. No wonder the BFA, with a membership consisting of hi-fi manufacturers and distributors, is keen to see some of that lucrative business for themselves. Especially galling for all those involved solely within hi-fi (and not the video side, too) has been the fact that HDTV also offers ‘CD quality’ audio, yet this seems to attract little attention. Even with cinematic giants like George Lucas suggesting that half a film’s impact comes from the soundtrack hasn’t been enough to persuade people to shell out on the audio – at least to nothing like the amount a decent HD plasma will set you back. I have every sympathy, yet can foresee a major problem. Hi-Fi separates already offer high-definition audio, yet selling that to the public really requires a new format or, at the very least, significant investment in advertising and branding – much as Lucas has done with the THX-approved certifications for

home cinema equipment. Without a major new format, then, we’re left with promotion. To coordinate manufacturers, retailers and the press to get behind a recognisable HDA (High Definition Audio) certification sounds like a pretty Herculean task to me. If it can be done, then it could give the industry a much-needed shot in the arm. If, in a few months time, I hear ‘the man in the pub’ talking about HDA then job done. If not, then let’s just hope it’s not through lack of effort on all our parts.

Dominic Todd began his hi-fi career in the retail business and has been a freelance hi-fi reviewer and columnist since 1993



Troublesome Tweeters

Pinshed, prodded and probed

It was a reader who spotted it. The tweeter ribbon of the Pinsh 2.1 speaker wasn’t sitting properly in its magnetic gap, as can be seen in the photo on p65 of our July edition (*HFC 281*). He alerted Pinsh, and the question was raised whether this might have contributed to our criticism of a lack of lower

treble in the review. This is possible, though on balance it seems unlikely.

It's hard to say for sure whether this damage occurred before or after the review took place. Given that Pinsh's own driver had originally delivered the pair to my house, it's much more likely that the damage occurred when a carrier took over to ship them from my place to the photographer's studio.

Certainly, re-measuring a pair of 2.1s some three months later only served to confirm the findings of the original review. But encountering a similar problem of weak treble in the ribbon tweeter equipped Ruark Crusader III reviewed elsewhere in this issue does give pause for thought. Is this mere coincidence, or something more than that?

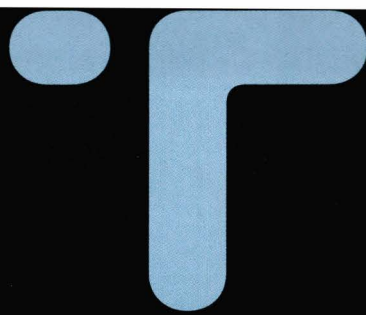
Another tweeter-related query arose from our March review of the Focal Profile 918 (*HFC* 277). A major criticism of this speaker was of: "a pronounced suckout from 2-3.5kHz, reaching around -6dB at 2.7kHz", and this led to a very laid back sound with a clear lack of presence energy. But had I assessed the speakers under the right conditions? That was the question which Focal's managing director Gerard Chretien put to me when we met later.

He had a point, and I hadn't a clue. Unlike most speakers, which tend to work best with their protective front grilles removed, the Profiles are supposed to have their grilles left in place, and only partly for aesthetic reasons. The tweeter is mounted on a shield-shaped protrusion ahead of the grilles, so their direct sound will be unaffected whether the grille is in place or not. However, the top part of the grille frame, either side of the tweeter, is both solid and concave in shape, so that a dish profile helps direct baffle reflections forward. But had I measured the 918s with grilles on or off? Frankly, several months after the event, I hadn't the remotest idea.

The review 918s had long gone back to their distributor, but I did get the chance to try a with/without grille comparison on a pair of very similar 928s. Having gone to a fair amount of trouble lugging in and unpacking the 928s, it was a trifle disappointing to find, when measured using my far-field in-room averaged technique, that the difference with and without the grille was very small indeed.

However, the traditional way of measuring speakers is to do so at one metre, and under these conditions fixing the grille in place did indeed help smooth out the response between 2kHz and 6kHz. But we don't listen one metre away from our speakers, and there's no denying that the effect of the grille was minimal when measured (or auditioned) at a normal listening distance in the far field.

Paul Messenger is a former editor of *Hi-Fi Choice* and has been writing about his favourite hobby for nearly 30 years



TECHNO

TECHNOLOGY EXPLORED

THE MORE BITS, THE BETTER?



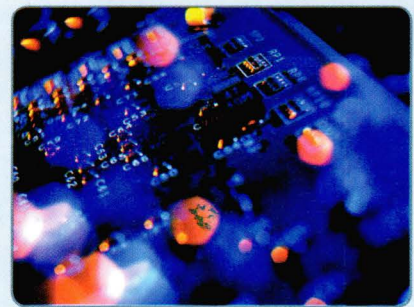
In this issue, you'll find a review of Cambridge Audio's new Azur 840C CD player, which takes upsampling to new heights with 24-bit/384kHz conversion. We've looked at upsampling before and concluded that for all the hype sometimes spouted concerning it, it's in essence just another way of performing digital filtering so as to ease the task of analogue filtering. Upsampling by another octave continues that process and is a difference in magnitude rather than in kind.

But this 24-bit business... how does that work? Is it creating more information than 'regular' 16-bit digital-to-analogue conversion? Is it essential, useful, important... or merely window-dressing?

Binary coding of audio signals is quite simple in principle. Each sample is represented by a digital 'word' made up of 'bits'. In CD-format audio, 44,100 samples every second are each represented by a 16-bit word in which the most significant bit carries a value of 0.5 times full-scale amplitude, the next most significant 0.5 times that, and so on, giving a resolution of one part in 65,536. Adding an extra eight bits to the wordlength makes the resolution one part in 16 million. Clearly, all things being equal, that's a lot better.

DVD-Audio recordings may have been made and stored at 24-bit precision. However, it is a fundamental principle of communications theory that once you have limited your amount of information, you can't increase it subsequently. As such, CD audio is 16-bit, take it or leave it.

That said, two things make the whole 24-bit business valid. First, if you have some 16-bit information and apply any kind of process to it, you decrease its accuracy even further if the processing and output are also 16-bit accurate. The same is true in analogue: making a copy of a recording with, say, 60dB S/N ratio on a cassette deck with the same SNR gives a final result noisier (by 3dB) than the original. If, however, you do your digital processing at high precision and save the output similarly, your reduction in accuracy is negligible. There's a good case for over-engineering, here.



"Adding an extra eight bits to the wordlength makes the resolution one part in 16 million."

The other factor is dither. This is the 'magic dust' of digital audio that prevents (not reduces, but actually for once prevents) the horrid-sounding quantisation distortion that would otherwise result when audio is digitised to 16-bit precision. Add some carefully specified noise to the audio and quantisation distortion is banished, to be replaced by ordinary noise. The audio is now paradoxically stored to infinite precision – except that the paradox evaporates when one realises that the noise now limits the precision. All the same, noise is a lot nicer to listen to than quantisation distortion, which at low levels is not pleasant at all. And to some extent, we can hear down into noise.

Now, one of the interesting things about upsampling is that it allows one to use fewer bits to represent the audio accurately (or rather, with a given S/N ratio). With or without noise-shaping (filtering the dither), fewer bits can suffice. But by using lots of bits, one ensures that things are kept shipshape and simply inches closer to the fundamental performance limits of 16-bit CD. The truth is that 24 bits are as many as DAC designers feel are ever worthwhile and CD player manufacturers use them because they're there. Strictly, it's overkill... but when did that ever harm audio reproduction? **HFC**

Richard Black

The world according to...

Audio Note UK

This issue, Hi-Fi Choice talks to Peter Qvortrup, the always outspoken big cheese (or should that be 'top tube?') at Audio Note UK. Interview: Malcolm Steward

The last time I interviewed Peter Qvortrup, the man behind Audio Note UK, was many years ago. When *HFC* visited him more recently to get his current opinions on the state of the audio nation he played, continually and much to our surprise, modern heavy metal while we spoke. It transpired that although he remains an ardent fan of – and very well informed about – classical music, he finds rock music more stimulating while he works.

In between discussing the musical structure of various selections that he played us – from Aphex Twin to operatic heavy metal – we garnered his opinions of today's audio scene from the perspective of one of the world's most outspoken music-loving manufacturers.

HFC What are your thoughts on the obsession with iPods and MP3 players?

Peter Qvortrup I think iPods are good in one sense but they're bad in a major way: they, like MP3 and other compressed formats, turn music into a throwaway item. But that started with CD. I mean, just look at a CD: it looks disposable, whereas an LP looks like something that you ought to look after and that you might be proud to own. That aspect of digital sound has really served our industry badly – and I don't simply mean in terms of the reproduction side, but more generally. You might be able to get music very quickly now, but that has caused the consumer to lose respect for it.

HFC How do you feel about music servers?

PQ A friend of mine had 7,000 songs on his computer and his basement flooded. He had all the security and doubled disks then discovered that none of that helps when your computer is underneath four feet of water.

But, coming back to the iPod, the advantage is that it allows youngsters to listen to a much broader range of music. Unfortunately, that's not what they tend to do. If they like heavy metal, that's what they'll listen to: they don't tend to explore other genres. And because there's so much of it coming out all the time,

and it's so disposable, very little of it lasts.

Having said that, my teenage son listens to a fairly broad range of music – from Stravinsky and Prokofiev to bands like The Locust and Melt-Banana. Come to that, I like Aphex Twin and I find the way he (Richard D. James, aka Aphex Twin) generates music fascinating. The music works very well on our systems, too!

HFC So do Audio Note UK amplifiers now have iPod inputs?

PQ No. And we don't have USBs. We've experimented with them and I really don't like the sound. People often say to me that it sounds good but in our sonic environment, USB doesn't work – you can hear that it does something, and what it's doing is not attractive.

I would be hugely surprised if digital – no matter what the sampling rate – ever comes near to challenging analogue. And, of course, the best that can be done with analogue is largely what was done in the 1950s and 1960s. And most of the finest recordings are in the mono catalogue: early Blue Notes and Columbias; one-mic jobs. You listen to those recordings of Bing Crosby, Harry Belafonte and Louis Armstrong and they're staggeringly superior to anything that's been made since. It makes you wonder why they didn't just stop there instead of confusing things further.

HFC I was once told that Japan needs a new format every ten or fifteen years to keep its product cycle churning over comfortably.

“I would be highly surprised if digital – no matter what the sampling rate – ever comes near to challenging analogue.”



PQ Yeah, and that has created a rod for this industry's back. The hardware manufacturers are now completely in the pockets of the computer industry. As an example, multi-format disc players use a CD-ROM mechanism that's churned out by the billion in factories in China. And those mechanisms aren't particularly good at reading CDs. It's something to do with the reading angle and the width of the laser: if it can read a multi-layer disc, the mechanism isn't that good at getting the information off a CD, which then puts the job back on the error correction system. And that explains why so many 'universal' players don't sound that good with traditional CDs. I've not heard anything good from a multi-reader.

HFC How does Audio Note UK view formats like SACD and DVD-A? Are they genuinely advancing the art of music reproduction?

PQ No. I think they are all, without exception, steps backwards sonically. And I think they are major contributors to the broad lack of interest in classical music, which is really in its death throes. That is something I find extraordinarily depressing. It's not unlike the situation with books. Human history creates these artefacts and we don't protect them even though they are an integral part of our humanity and the thought processes that have created what we are now. It's not the same with our architecture: we have societies and laws that protect old buildings but we don't protect our recorded heritage. That is left to commercial entities that can do with it what they like. And now they're going to make that even worse by extending the copyright from 50 to 75 years, which will make it even more difficult for individuals who are interested in releasing recordings from probably the greatest era of all time – the repertoire that is on 78s. Most of the great jazz and classical works and most of the truly great musicians that came into the 20th Century are on 78s.

We have the National Library and all sorts of art galleries and they are all protected. In some countries, it's a criminal offence to damage their cultural heritage: you can buy a painting and hide it away in your home but if you burn it, you go to jail. And you can't add a conservatory on your Grade One listed building in the UK. It makes absolutely no sense that music isn't considered as important as books, paintings and architecture.

Coming back to your original question, the problem with these new formats is that their higher sampling rates are achieved by cheating: they over-sample one-bit converters, which might work when you look at the output on a Fast Fourier analyser but that won't ☐





Peter Qvortrup: with this many LPs, who needs trousers?

show you the detrimental effect that has on the signal, which sounds bleached, vapid, and lacking in dynamic contrast and energy.

And the recordings that sound the worst are invariably those of un-amplified instruments, and that again leaves classical music in a very bad shape. When the music goes from the analogue into the digital domain, as my friend and colleague, Andy (Grove) always says, "what you have is one bit and a lot of guesses". Occasionally you'll get all the right guesses in

survey didn't say was that you can only make valve amplifiers over 'that certain price'; you can't make a £299 valve amplifier. Well, you can, but you can't make any money on it!

HFC Isn't there a problem for valve amplifier manufacturers in that there aren't really any new bandwagons onto which they can jump?

PQ There aren't any bandwagons for transistor amp manufacturers either: they've all long since passed. What it comes down to now with either design is to simplify the circuits as much as

PQ Think about it – most guitar and bass amplifiers are valve powered. There are very few decent transistor amplifiers used in that arena and one has to ask oneself why valve amplifiers shouldn't be the obvious choice for someone wanting to listen to rock.

HFC So how do you see the hi-fi market developing in the future?

PQ What's happening, essentially, is it's moving backwards towards the 1950s and 1960s, when the market consisted of people who had a real interest in music. People like that will continue to buy hi-fi but a large proportion of them will also build their own. There has been an enormous increase in the D-I-Y sector. I truly welcome this, because I'd much rather deal with informed, intelligent customers. That element is still growing – and at a reasonable rate.

If you look at the way the retail sector has behaved over the past 15 years or so, it has served its short-term advantage and squandered the long-term. In a strange way, it has got what it deserves. I look around the world and see some dealers who have very happily carried on selling two-channel, focused on maintaining their customer base, focused on selling the best products for the price and have continued to do very well. That's partly because people come into stores that are full of home cinema and they wonder if they're actually in a place that wants to sell them a stereo. In effect, those stores are chasing the music lover away.

Happily we are able to conclude our discussion by agreeing that the market, although perhaps diminishing, is still looking healthy for good, old-fashioned stereo. **HFC**

“One has to ask oneself why valve amplifiers shouldn't be the obvious choice for someone wanting to listen to rock.”

the right sequence – and they're what turns into examples of how wonderful this new technology is, while most discs have a sound that varies from not very wonderful to downright mediocre, get passed off as "poor original recordings."

HFC It intrigues me that you're still running a successful and profitable business selling equipment that is based on a technology that's nearly a century old

PQ We currently have a very full order book – there are more people prepared to buy what I make than I am actually able to produce. Look at the proliferation of companies now making single-ended products, like the Ongaku, that we started pushing in the late 1980s. An Italian magazine did a survey and found that over 40 per cent of amplifiers over a certain price sold in the country were valve designs. What that

possible and use the best components available, to optimise the price/performance ratio.

HFC How are we still able to get valves?

PQ The hi-fi industry's consumption of valves is puny compared to the professional sector. Guitar amps and all sorts of stage equipment use valves.

As far as supplies of currently manufactured valves are concerned, the Russians are still big producers. The Svetlana factory produces some 300,000 each month – and that's a serious quantity – many of which, more than 90 per cent of them in fact, end up in guitar amps. And the Chinese are still manufacturing a lot – 300Bs and their derivatives along with some really old triodes, which are highly desirable.

HFC Why do you work to extreme examples of the rock canon when most would picture you listening to classical?

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'arc angels'



**"THE SOUND WAS SO MAGICAL
MERLIN HIMSELF WOULD SURELY BUY ONE"**

HIFI NEWS / OCTOBER '06 / KEN RESSLER / REF 3

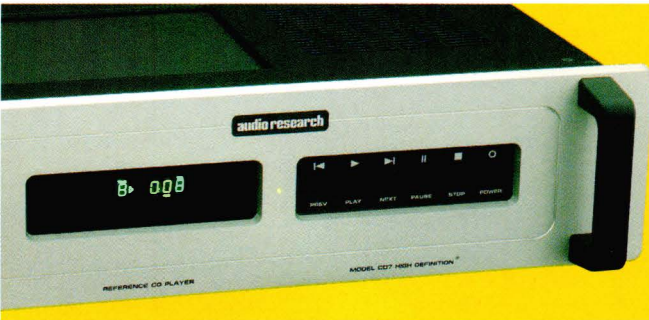
AUDIO RESEARCH REFERENCE 3 VACUUM TUBE PRE AMPLIFIER



**"THE SOUND OF THE PH7 IS WHAT COUNTS AND
IT'S A STUNNER"**

HIFI PLUS / ISSUE 48 / ROY GREGORY / PH7

AUDIO RESEARCH REFERENCE PH7 VACUUM TUBE PRE- PRE AMPLIFIER



**"IT JUST SOUNDS LIKE YOU ALWAYS HOPED
CD COULD SOUND, IF CD WAS DONE RIGHT"**

HFC THE COLLECTION / MAY '06 / ALAN SIRCOM / CD7

AUDIO RESEARCH REFERENCE CD 7 VACUUM TUBE CD PLAYER

Audio Research has always used the knowledge gained through designing their Reference series components to benefit every model in their range. Phono stages, pre-amplifiers, power amps – Audio Research believes, like Formula 1 car designers, that the benefits gained at the cutting edge should be shared.

A new entry-level pre-amp delivers a taste of Reference sonics to a wider audience: the LS17. Fully-featured and supremely functional, it is a dream match for the VS55 stereo power amplifier – an astonishingly affordable introduction to Bill Johnson's wizardry. And we remain dazzled by the LS26, which we suspect will find itself driving more than a few Reference 110s.

Reference 110 is the first ever single-chassis, stereo power amplifier in the Reference range: the 2x110W Reference 110 – a perfect match for the LS26 or the Ref 3, the finest pre-amp ever issued by Audio Research. But there's more.

So fine is the CD3 Mk II that Audio Research was inspired to develop it further. The resultant CD7 is so good – its internals include a Ref 3-derived output stage – that this player has earned the honour of becoming the first-ever Reference series digital source component. For analogue supporters, the all-tube Ref PH7 phono stage is probably the best phono section available today. Completed with either the flagship Ref 610T or 210 monoblocks, the Reference models reign supreme.

The bloodline strengthens.

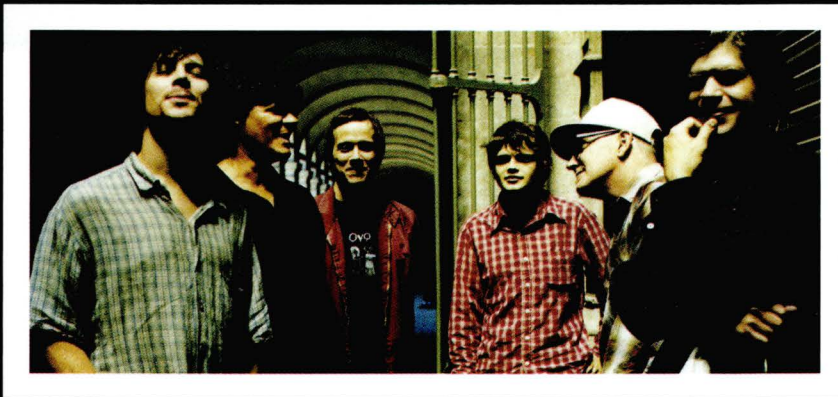
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New country

Lambchop have been alt-country darlings for 20 years. So why are they getting into sampling? Head 'chop and hi-fi fan Kurt Wagner explains... Interview: Dave Oliver



Kurt Wagner is the musical brain behind Nashville's Lambchop, one of the most innovative and rewarding bands to come out of the alt-country scene. Their quiet musicality, blending elements of country, soul, jazz and folk, plus a fluctuating line-up that regularly expands into double figures, has always given the impression of a fiercely analogue 'real instruments' sensibility.

In fact, they have dabbled with electronic effects on their subtly layered records, but never more so than on their latest album, *Damaged*. As well as the traditional slide guitars, coaxing string section, muted horns and Wagner's often mumbled vocals, the

Nashville that missed out on the German electronic revolution, but that's the kind of stuff they're fascinated by, so it's kind of odd that something retro-sounding like that would come out of Nashville.

"One of the things they do is that they sample the actual tracks that we used in the songs, so they'd take 'em, chop 'em up and reintroduce them to the song so they were sort of naturally integrated anyway. It's like mixing in real time, so the remixing is done within the song rather than later on.

"They would take a guitar part, for instance, take one little sound and then stretch it and change it and reintroduce it somewhere else.

using those sounds and textures to augment and connect the album, sort of like interludes between the songs that would tie the record together and make it a great record.

"At the end of the record, after the final song, there's the sound of a fireplace going. It's totally natural, but it also totally relates to what we were trying to do with the electronics and the sampling.

"I think it's essential to have a good hi-fi system to fully appreciate a Lambchop album. Mark Nevers has been our engineer for quite a while now and I think he's one of the most gifted people in Nashville, by far. Ever since our first record, I've tried to make each one sonically better than the last, and sometimes that will be slow, but other times we'll make a giant leap, especially working with Mark. It's worth giving our records a listen on the nicest stereo you can because the things we put into each record are sometimes so subtle that they merit that kind of attention. I'm very proud of them."

"It's worth giving our records a listen on the nicest stereo you can because the things we put into them are so subtle."

band's affable leader called on some local acquaintances in Nashville to help create a more intimate mood for what he claims is his most personal album.

"Hands Off Cuba are William Tyler and Scott Martin. They're a couple of young kids from

Sometimes they're recognisable and sometimes they're not. Sometimes they're sort of atmospheric, sometimes they're more choppy, nippy kind of sounds.

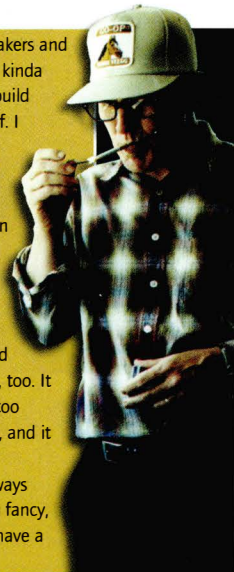
"It's just an idea I had of how to take that kind of sound and integrate it into what we do,

KURT'S KIT

"I've got a couple of Mission MS10 speakers and some JBLs from the late 1950s. They're kinda big do-it-yourself things. They used to build these kits that you put together yourself. I found them in someone's garage and they were pristine, so I took 'em home. They don't have tweeters or anything, so I sometimes use them in combination with some other stuff or sometimes on their own, and they just have the most beautiful, warm sound.

"I just settled on a Harman Kardon amp, I can't remember the model. I used to have valve amp that came from a kit, too. It was great but it was just getting to be too much trouble to fix it every time it died, and it was getting harder to find parts.

"My wife used to be a DJ, so she's always had a lot of turntables around. Nothing fancy, but I'm a great fan of vinyl, so I like to have a lot of records around."



ESSENTIAL LAMBCHOP

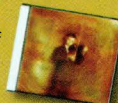
Nixon (2000)

Lambchop had already existed for over six years and had four albums behind them before this superb record catapulted them out of the alt-country backwaters and into international recognition.



Is A Woman (2002)

The band developed their sophisticated sound with this inviting slice of melancholia, which offered greater consistency of mood and musical approach – still down, but looking at the stars.



Damaged (2006)

Kurt claims this is his most personal album. It creates an intimate sonic atmosphere, due both to the understated arrangements and the subtle tonal augmentations of Hands Off Cuba.



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One of the most effective ways to realise significant sonic gains in any system is to improve the mains quality supplying it. And one of our favourite tools for the job right now has to be IsoTek's cracking Sigmas six-way mains distribution block. IsoTek is perhaps the best-known name in the mains filtration game and the Sigmas has enough outlets to make a significant difference to any system. Inside the alloy-fronted casework is a meticulous mains filtering circuit, with silver solder and high-quality cabling throughout, and nicely finished with a high-spec external mains lead.

Tested last month, we found that in a variety of systems the unit brought an extra level of detail and really opened up images. We even went on to speculate that the Sigmas could be the best way to spend £1,000 on accessory upgrades. So, now it's your turn to go power-mad. For your chance to win one, simply answer the question below. The winner will be drawn at random after the closing date.

CONGRATULATIONS...

...to our last winner, Mr. Cunningham from London, who wins a superb Marantz DV9600 universal disc player worth £1,500!

QUESTION:

What sort of solder does the Sigmas use?

- A:** Silver?
- B:** Talgonite?
- C:** Adamantium?

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TERMS AND CONDITIONS

The competition start date is 21 September 2006. The closing date for entries is 18 October 2006. Employees of Future Publishing (including freelancers) and their relatives and any agents involved are ineligible to enter. The Editor's decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into. Prizes cannot be exchanged for cash. The entries will be judged after the closing date and the winners will be notified by telephone within ten days of that date. Prizes will be sent out within 28 days of notification by the companies involved, not Hi-Fi Choice or Future Publishing. Entering costs - BY TEXT: £1.00 (including VAT) for each entry plus your usual text message cost. This service is available to T-Mobile, Orange, Vodafone and O2 customers only. BY PHONELINE: Each call costs a maximum of £1.50. Please remember to get permission from the person who pays the bill before you enter. No purchase necessary. Alternatively, please send your name, address and telephone number with the correct answer to: Hi-Fi Choice, Future Publishing, 2 Balcombe Street, London NW1 6NW. If you have any problems making your call or sending your text, please contact the service provider, Opal Telecom. Tel: 0845 330 5002. Email: futuresupport@opaltelecom.co.uk

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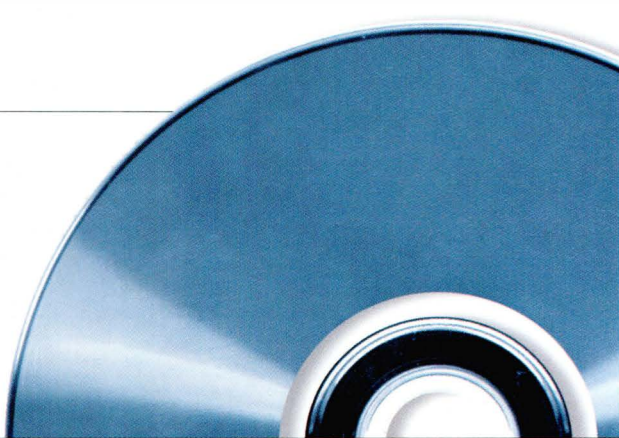


ChoiceCuts



This month's varied musical morsels

Reviews by Alvin Gold, Jason Kennedy, Dave Oliver, Mark Prendergast, Phil Strongman and Nigel Williamson



AUDIOPHILE VINYL

MAX ROACH

We Insist! Freedom Now Suite

Candid/Pure Pleasure

180g vinyl

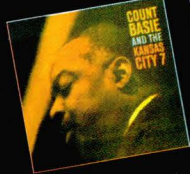


Music: This is a highly political album made in 1960, when the American civil rights movement was building into a significant force. This means that whenever Abbey Lincoln is centre stage, you can hear the anger in her voice when she sings of the experiences of slavery. The music comes into its own when the likes of drummer Roach, saxophonist Coleman Hawkins and trumpet player Booker Little among others add their own more varied voices to the mix. There's a remarkable bit of free shouting from Lincoln at one point, but this is a highly musical and powerful album with a very strong line-up. ★★★★★
Sound: The original recording is lean, but this does little to undermine the music, instead giving it the bite that the material demands – there's no pussyfooting whatsoever! The stereo doesn't really get used for much more than voice, but again this adds to the power of the sound. ★★ ★★ JK

COUNT BASIE AND THE KANSAS CITY 7

Impulse/Speaker's Corner

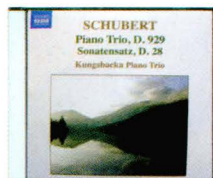
180g



Music: Count Basie made his name with big band jazz that really kicked off in the 1950s, but as the 1960s came around, he made two albums with the smaller Kansas City 7 ensemble featured here. The sound they make is strongly reminiscent of the early 1950s, with smooth but solid rhythms underpinning melodic solos and some superb playing by all involved, with Basie's own understated piano (and funkier electric organ) surprisingly low in the mix. Made in 1962, it harks back to the bop era when jazz was less challenging and sounds sweet as a result. ★★★★★
Sound: A Bob Thiele recording for Impulse is always going to sound good, and with Speakers Corner doing the pressing this is most certainly the case. Instruments have tone to die for and the luxury button has most certainly been pressed. ★★★★★ JK

LPs were supplied by Classic Records and Pure Pleasure.
www.classicrecords.com

COMPACT DISC & VINYL



SCHUBERT

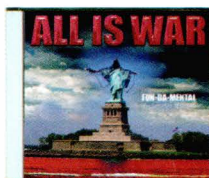
Piano Trio No. 2 in E flat major, D. 929; Sonatensatz, D. 28

Kungsbacka Piano Trio

NAXOS 8.555700

Music: Despite the popularity of some of his symphonies, Schubert was best known for his chamber compositions, of which the early Piano Trio (Op. 100) is assured and melodic. It is a work that once heard, sounds as though you have always known it. Although it isn't technically difficult, the performance of Sweden's Kungsbacka Piano Trio is more than up to the mark, sounding bold and ideomatic. The Sonatensatz is an attractive enough work, but not in the same class. ★★★★★

Sound: The recording is decently recorded, with clean open balances offset only by a trace of top end grain. It is solidly recommendable, and not just because like all Naxos recordings it is well priced. ★★★★★ AG



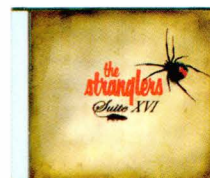
FUN-DA-MENTAL

All Is War

Five Uncivilised Tribes

Music: While the tabloids have fulminated against *All Is War*, it seems few have bothered to listen to the new album by Aki Nawaz's pioneering British-Asian fusionists. Now we finally get the much-delayed record, it becomes apparent that Fun-da-mental are not recruiting agents for Al Qaeda at all, although they ask some deliberately provocative and unsettling questions about the West's attitude towards Islam. More importantly, *All Is War* is a sonically audacious record, mixing Asian ragas, Zulu chants, punk guitars, nu-blues and breakbeats in thrilling fashion. ★★★★★

Sound: A heady soundclash, in which East and West and ancient and modern intermingle in a melange of beats and cross-stitched rhythms, given unity by Nawaz's bold production. ★★★★★ NW

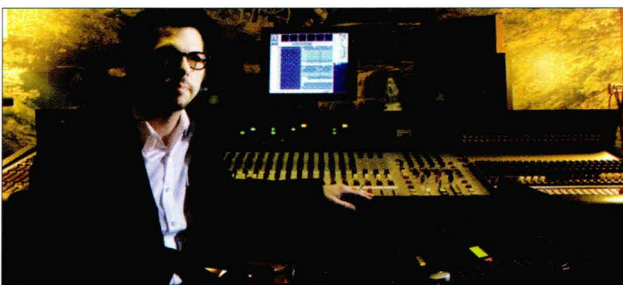


THE STRANGLERS

Suite XVI

Liberty

Music: Yes, the Stranglers are as (lyrically) sleazy as they always were. And yes, it all still works; those driving, throbbing pub punk beats – as provided by bassist Jean-Jacques Burnel and drummer Jet Black – remain the perfect foundation for Dave Greenfield's soaring keyboards and Baz Warne's melodically angular guitar. There are even some genuinely magical touches on numbers like *Spectre of Love* and *Anything Can Happen* – only *Summat Outanowt* breaks the crass barrier. It's been over 20 years since any of them were anywhere near sixteen but this is still very strong – and sweet. ★★★★★
Sound: Suite XVI is as good as their recent *Norfolk Coast* set, and somehow this disc manages to be both compressed and spacious. Well recorded, bass friendly rock'n'roll. ★★★★★ PS



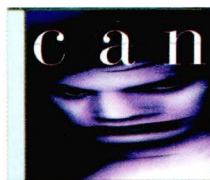
SPARKLEHORSE

Dreamt For Light Years In The Belly Of A Mountain

Astralwerks/Capitol

Music: Mark Linkous, the man behind moody alt-country rockers Sparklehorse, released his last record five years ago, then slunk into a debilitating depression which paralysed his ability to work. With a little help from his friends, including Gnarlz Barkley *wunderkind* Danger Mouse and Flaming Lip Steven Drozd, he's taken inspiration from the rural North Carolina surroundings where he's now based. His latest record is a paean to nature and gently losing it, with some gorgeously adept introspective moments tempered with the occasional Neil Young-esque rocker. It's a pity he took such a rocky road to get here, but the world should be grateful he did. ★★★★★

Sound: This gentle, brittle and delicate music is well served by the disc's sumptuously detailed production, which frames the songs beautifully without overwhelming them. ★★★★★ DO

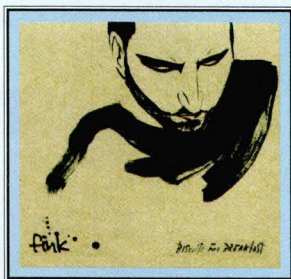


CAN

Rite Time

Mute

Music: The original Can of *Monster Movie* fame reformed in 1986 in Nice. Instantly jumping into the hypnotic locked grooves of old, this is an album that burst with creativity. On *The Beautiful Side Of Romance* pulls you in like nothing before and on *Like A New Child*, Holger Czukay seems to be mining the same textured inspiration that produced *Tago Mago*. Turned down by Virgin and eventually released by Polygram in 1989, it has thankfully been returned to complete Can's classic discography. ★★★★★
Sound: Both Karoli and Czukay as producers made sure that listeners got a widescreen image of Can. Mixed for both CD and SACD, the bass and ambient textures will put any system through its paces. ★★★★★ MP

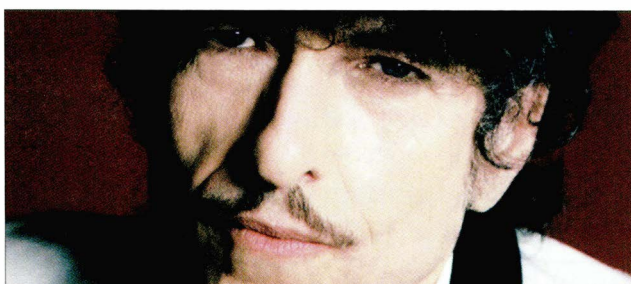


THIS MONTH'S CLASSIC HI-FI TEST DISC "Reproduces voice with considerable aplomb"

FINK Biscuits For Breakfast Ninja Tune

Music: Sampled beat master Finian Greenall (aka Fink) set aside the sampler for this album, picked up an acoustic guitar and started singing. It's more than just voice and guitar; drums and bass figure but these are never the main ingredient, even though he clearly likes his bass. On the sultry *Hush*, Tina Grace's voice takes over but for the most part this is singer/songwriter stuff in the bluesy, storytelling style but with its own distinctly up to date feel. His take on *All Cried*

Out is very fine, but it's self penned tracks like *So Long*, *You Gotta Choose* and *Kamlyn* that work best. ★★★★★
Sound: This 'made in Brighton' recording reproduces voice and guitar with considerable aplomb. The low end can occasionally get a bit much, but with all but the biggest speakers that's not an issue. This is one of the best sounding albums to come from Ninja Tune and I hope it inspires more in the same vein. ★★★★★ JK

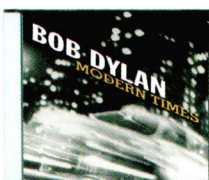


BOB DYLAN
Modern Times

Sony/BMG

Music: An acclaimed autobiography and the Scorsese biopic *No Direction Home* have created such renewed interest in Dylan that the 44th album of his career has been his most eagerly anticipated in years. Anyone who enjoyed 2001's *Love & Theft* will relish this warm, humane follow-up. *Modern Times* is essentially a sequel, offering the same panoramic vista of 20th Century American music, from gritty blues to jazztime swing via crooning ballads and rockabilly. The imagery is rich, full of both wit and moral indignation at the times in which we live. In fact, at least three tracks – *Thunder On The Mountain*, *Workingman's Blues* and *Ain't Talkin' Just Walkin'* – are fit to rank alongside his greatest. This far down the line and given his canon of greatest works is already pretty far reaching, that's some achievement. ★★★★★

Sound: Recorded with his road band, there's an assured artistry to the ensemble playing. But it's still his voice you notice most, his frail, uncertain pitch conveying extraordinary expression and emotion. ★★★★★ NW



BASEMENT JAXX
Crazy Itch Radio

XL

Music: As Basement Jaxx, Simon Ratcliffe and Felix Buxton have been making high-quality dance pop albums since the late 1990s, and on this latest evidence, they just keep getting better and better. From criss-crossing funk rhythms to Balkan beats and banjo house experiments on *Take Me Back To Your House*, this is nothing less than a dance music masterpiece. Any record sporting the imagination, wit, verve and sheer enjoyment displayed by this disc should be on everyone's list of music to investigate. ★★★★★

Sound: Sometimes raw, sometimes lush, the sheer breadth of sound and acoustics on offer demonstrate just how hard Ratcliffe and Buxton worked to get that subtly layered sound exactly as they want it. ★★★★★ DO



MOZART

Symphonies No. 40 in G minor, No. 41 in C major; Final Ballet from Idomeneo Marc Minkowski (conductor), Les Musiciens du Louvre

Archiv Productions 00289 477 5798

Music: These are the last two symphonies that Mozart composed and benefit from the full flowering of his genius as a composer. Minkowski comes across here as a superb advocate. The recording, made on period instruments, suffers none of the intonation problems encountered in original instruments performances. Tempii are predominantly fast and fluid, and musicianship is energetic and compelling. ★★★★★

Sound: The recording is almost as good as the performance. The sound is highly articulate and dynamic, and does justice to even the fastest and most difficult passages, but it occasionally sounds slightly enclosed. ★★★★★ AG

DVD-AUDIO & SACD

GORDON GRDINA, GARY PEACOCK AND PAUL MOTIAN

Think Like The Waves

SACD (stereo/multichannel SACD plus stereo CD)

Songlines

Music: This trio consists of two masters of jazz rhythm in Gary Peacock (bass) and Paul Motian (drums), who have been at the top of the game for forty years apiece, alongside the young Canadian guitar and oud player Gordon Grdina, who also composed the material. Together they make one of the most absorbing and well balanced sounds in jazz today. That sound reflects Grdina's interest in both straight ahead jazz and Arabic styles; his oud playing is beautiful and works with the double bass so well. Motian meanwhile keeps a complex but never flashy rhythm that is tight yet loose in the best possible way. ★★★★★

Sound: Originally recorded at 24-bit/88.2kHz, this SACD pressing preserves all of the fine detail that goes into creating the subtle harmonics of the instruments, managing to reproduce the complexities of the band's interplay without getting messy. A very fine result. ★★★★★ JK



BRITTEN, BARTÓK, HARTMANN

Frank Bridge Variations; Divertimento; Concerto Funèbre

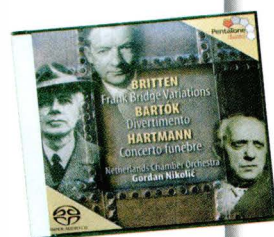
Gordan Nikolic (leader and solo violin), Netherlands Chamber Orchestra

SACD (stereo/multichannel SACD plus stereo CD)

Pentatone PTC 5186 086

Music: All three works here were written for string orchestra and all are masterpieces. They were all written between 1937 and 1939 by composers in Germany, Hungary and Britain. The Hartmann is the only overtly anti-war composition of the three, but uncertainly and a sense of impending catastrophe permeate all three pieces to some extent. In each case, the playing is superb: tight, penetrating and concentrated. ★★★★★

Sound: Another true DSD recording from the Pentatone stable, the multichannel mix is discreet, and mainly intended to add atmosphere – but in stereo or multichannel, the sound is pungent with very alive sounding strings which in a lesser recording, or using an inferior recording technology, could sound harsh and aggressive. ★★★★★ AG



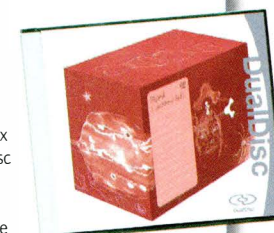
BJÖRK

Surrounded

DualDisc (one side CD stereo, the other DVD-Video) One Little Indian

Music: No, this is not a new album from the world's leading pop art maven, but a limited release of a box set of all seven of her original albums in the DualDisc format – the original album on one side and a surround mix on the other, as well as all of the accompanying videos (27 in total). Listening to these again, it's remarkable how she's progressed from the perky, quirky dance pixie of 1993's *Debut* through the left field symphonic pop of *Post*, the sophisticated electronica of *Homogenic*, the microsonic chamber music of *Vespertine* and the vocal-only experiment of *Medúlla*. It's a tremendous body of work, dominated by that unique, childlike yet otherworldly voice, but the strength of the compositions and the arrangements cannot be underestimated. It's great fun, too. ★★★★★

Sound: No hi-res mixes as such here, which is a strange omission, since both *Vespertine* and *Medúlla* have already been released on DVD-Audio. Nevertheless, this diverse, rich and expressive music benefits enormously from the surround treatment. ★★★★★ DO

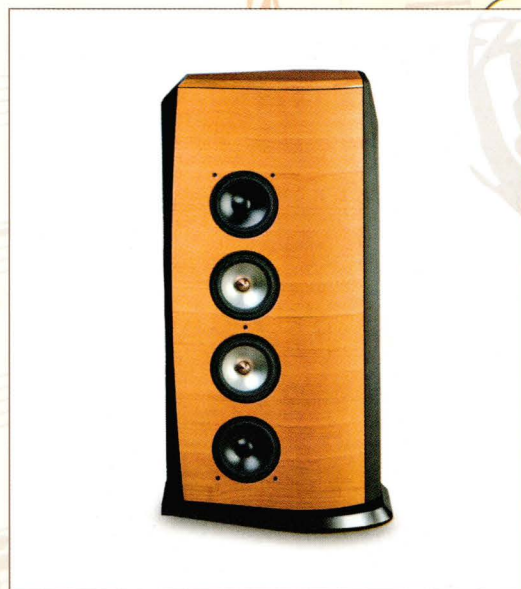


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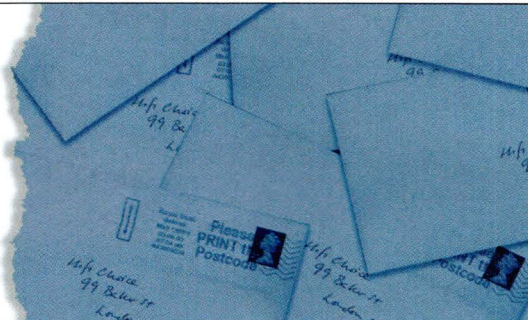
The Finest Italian Hi-Fi

ChoiceMail



The pick of this month's best letters

Write to: Hi-Fi Choice, Future Publishing Ltd, 2 Balcombe Street, London NW1 6NW. Or email your letters to dan.george@futurenet.co.uk



FORGIVE ME

I've just been listening to the new Christina Aguilera album *Back to Basics* – sorry if this isn't your sort of music but this is about the recording, not the music (sort of). While listening, I thought it sounded a bit off; a bit 'mushy'. Difficult to describe, but her last album contained lots of multi-layered instruments, with her voice soaring above. Even though the new album is essentially the same, it just didn't sound right.

On the cover it says "HI-FI – A New Orthophonic High Fidelity Recording". Isn't this an old recording method? If it is, then the album title is at least appropriate! It's probably me or my system, though. I can't imagine RCA deliberately using a recording method that



Above: Christina Aguilera's latest album

sounds crap. It's a shame, as *Stripped* was a surprisingly excellent hi-fi album and this is a real disappointment.

Searkind HFC online forum

HFC Despite your disgraceful taste and unforgivable claim that it's about the recording and not the music, we've dignified your communication with a response! We're sure it's part of the whole *Back to Basics* album 'concept', as the technology was pioneered back in the 1920s. So it's nothing new, but was in fact a way of recording using a greater frequency range than was available at the time. The perceived 'mushiness' could be down to all sorts of variables in the recording chain, right up to the transfer to CD, so there may be no link at all.

ENVIRONMENTALLY ILL?

Isn't it time hi-fi turned green? I've noticed many manufacturers recommend keeping CD players and amplifiers permanently switched on, companies producing products that are deliberately inefficient, heat-producing Class A designs and even valve amplifiers still in production. These cannot be good for the environment. Isn't it time that someone developed hi-fi that sounds good without contributing to global warming?

Richard Savini Oxford

HFC It's a tough call. In many cases, the hotter the amplifier, the better the sound. People still fondly remember the sound of Musical Fidelity's A1 integrated amp, even if you could fry bacon on its top plate. But there are plenty of new technologies that make amps more energy efficient, including Class D switch-mode designs like the Onkyo reviewed

"I can't imagine RCA deliberately using a recording method that sounds crap."

on p85, and other variants like Cambridge Audio's Class XD amp tested on p79. A new EU directive is likely to push for greater energy efficiency (see p14), but this will only effect mass market products, so valve amps will escape with a caution... for now!

74 AND NO MORE

I know that there is more or less only one type of CD-R available nowadays, but are they up to scratch? I remember reading a report a while ago about the 80 minute discs making the CD player work harder, as the spiral is more tightly wound. Also, I remember seeing a feature in

Letter of the month

DISAPPEARING DEALERS

I have noticed a few dealers closing down recently and that's a real shame. I'm finding it difficult to audition kit and the opportunity to test different brands side-by-side is almost impossible. I'm after an FM tuner and it's hard to find dealers in East Anglia. I can't be alone in thinking that dealers and manufacturers need to evolve the ways they do business. I'm ready to spend – and quite a lot too – but nobody is making it easy for me. It's a crazy situation.

Alan Cook via email

HFC We're increasingly seeing readers buying 'blind' online using reviews alone because they have a similar problem to you. On the other hand, dealers can only continue to remain in business as long as they have customers and if everyone buys online, bricks and mortar dealers will disappear. It seems that the necessary travelling to dealers is as much of an investment as the actual auditioning, so we should all persevere, but come on hi-fi dealers and manufacturers – help us out here, stock a broad range of kit.



WIN CRYSTAL CABLE PICCOLO INTERCONNECTS!

The author of our letter of the month receives a one-metre pair of Crystal Cable Connect Piccolo interconnects worth £260, featuring a silver/gold conductor with Kapton insulation, plus a transparent Teflon jacket. So get writing! (150 words max please...)

Hi-Fi Choice, reporting that the 80 min discs didn't sound as good as the 74 min ones.

I've always avoided 80 min discs as I wanted to minimise the chance of them not playing on various CD players. However, I now want to transfer a lot of stuff from MD to CD-R and each instalment will just fit on an 80 min disc.

Pioneer 31 HFC online forum

HFC About seven years ago, when domestic CD-R recorders were in their infancy, *Hi-Fi Choice* did indeed find that 80 minute CD-Rs were sonically inferior to the 74 minute variety. This was due to the fact that the pits and land (used to store digital data on the disc) were constricted, in order to squeeze more onto the recording surface. Whether you can distinguish an identical 80 min disc from a 74 min disc under blind conditions is questionable, though. We doubt you would notice it, especially if transferring from MiniDisc. However, some of us in the office avoid 80 minute discs, too. Why not experiment and let us know how you get on?

HARD TIMES

I'm starting to think about the days when we no longer have any moving parts in our hi-fi electronics. When are manufacturers going to bring out audiophile music servers and will they be any good? Could we eventually see these things surpass the quality of a CD player? Also, with bigger storage becoming available on hard drives, will the quality of recordings go up? Could we see a revival of large bandwidth DVD-A and SACD quality music streamed via the net or stored on hard drives? What are the limitations to all of this and what are the possibilities?

Surely there are other people getting excited about the future of hi-fi, or are they all still



Above: NaimNet NS REF audiophile music server

worried that MP3 is killing it? I believe that while the dawn of MP3 shook hi-fi, it has opened up doors to a new world of music that promises not only infinitely more convenience but far superior sound.

Carl via email

HFC We're excited too, Carl. Many of the industry movers and shakers we speak to confirm that servers are coming and it's the inevitable way of the future. There are already hi-fi companies getting involved such as Chord, Cyrus, Linn and most recently Naim, who is developing an audiophile server under it's new NaimNet banner (see last issue's *AudioFile: Industry Profile*). Whether the technology can surpass a dedicated CD player is a question for future editions of *Hi-Fi Choice* to answer, when more serious products become available. As music lovers foremost, even die-hard audiophiles must be able to see the advantages of servers if they are implemented correctly.

What do you think about the server issue? We'd love to know what you think the future will be. You can write to us, or simply send an email to the address on the previous page.

DO YOU WANT TO BE FAMOUS?

Now's your chance! We're looking for avid hi-fi fans to appear in a new feature called *System File*, in which we aim to explore, explain and experience the hi-fi system of one lucky reader per issue.

The idea is this: first, you send us a letter or an email, explaining why you and your hi-fi should be featured. Then, we pick one reader and arrange one of our reviewers to visit, with notebook and camera in hand. Finally, once the lucky reader and our reviewer have finished listening, describing, discussing and recommending, we publish the results – for the benefit of all!

If you'd like to be considered for this feature, simply write a 'review' of your system – good or bad – using 500 words or less and send it to: *System File, Hi-Fi Choice*, Future Publishing Ltd, 2 Balcombe Street, London NW1 6NW. Alternatively, you can email it to: tim.bowern@futurenet.co.uk. If we pick you, you'll not only receive a visit from one of our reviewers – you'll also get a special *Hi-Fi Choice* goody bag thrown in, too! So get writing... the first instalment of *System File* will appear in a few issues' time.

Onlineforum

A few choice comments plucked from our online forum. Join in the fun at www.hifichoice.co.uk

I've got a Dual CS 430 that has ground to a halt after 15 years. It needed a kickstart for the past year or so and I think it might need oiling or a new drive belt. Any clues on DIY servicing, or is there anywhere in London that can give it the once-over?

Modernlover

...You mention oiling and

new belt – why not try that yourself first? You could look on ebay for suitable belts and oil, but if not Audiogold in Crouch End is worth a try. But the Dual is a pretty basic deck and it could be worth getting something better second-hand like a Rega instead of shelling out for a service.

Piccadilly

...Ask Pete and Les at Walrus Systems. They might do it for you: www.walrus.co.uk or 020 7724 7224

Davewhit2

I've got a Densen B110 but the remote costs £134. Should I buy one or not?

dudywoxer

...At that price, why not

just walk over to the amp and turn it up?

sunny scunny

Just been to my local shop to get a Cyrus 8vs amp when I noticed that Roksan had bought out a Kandy Mk3. The shop hadn't heard it and therefore couldn't comment. Just wondering what you all think or

would recommend for this kind of money?

prs999

...Who knows, the Kandy might be good, it might not. Time will tell. But, in that price range you should also audition the Cambridge Audio 840A (£750), which has been getting some rave reviews.

meninblack

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ZINGALI OVERTURE 4 LOUDSPEAKERS | £17,145

Sigh-fi

Gryphon and Zingali get together and spawn a system... the result looks like a futureworld dystopia and sounds like God's own stereo!

Los Angeles November 2019. Under dark skies, the city is a vast industrial wasteland. Flames belch out of oil refinery towers and factory smokestacks. Thousands of city lights twinkle in the misty, polluted night air. And flying cars, with blinking blue, red and orange lights, cruise all but silently above the drizzling dystopia.

Barely visible in the distance is a huge, flat-topped pyramidal skyscraper hundreds of floors high. As we get closer, it resembles a mammoth Aztec temple or Babylonian ziggurat. Or perhaps it looks like the headquarters of the replicant manufacturing Tyrell Corporation? Try the Gryphon Diablo integrated amplifier.

The moment you muscle the Diablo out of its transit packaging it hits you: *Blade Runner*. The 1982 sci-fi cult movie has been credited with influencing the look of many subsequent films, but Danish high-end audio? It gets better. Gryphon's statement CD player, the Mikado, precisely mimics the scene in the film where Edward James Olmos' flying squad car (or 'spinner') is guided down to the police HQ's roof top circular landing pad by the flashing blue lights around the perimeter. It's uncanny. Place a CD in the Mikado's top loading transport, secure it with the magnetic puck and thumb the 'close' button. A circular metal plate descends gracefully onto the CD. While this is happening lights flash around the perimeter. Blue.

HE SAY YOU BLADE RUNNER

I don't know, it might be a coincidence but this is the first *Beautiful System* that looks more like an homage to an 1980s sci-fi flick than a stereo. Gryphon Audio Designs' founder and boss, Flemming E Rasmussen, has degrees in painting, graphic arts and, my guess is, the subversion of traditional hi-fi styling. But even if the cyberpunk school of

industrial design doesn't float your boat, trust me, you'll want to stick around for the music. There is nothing that comes even remotely close to being routine about this system. And that goes as much for the Zingali Overture 4 speakers as it does the front end.

But the front is where we'll start. A perfect exemplar of the engineering philosophy that informs all Gryphon electronics, the Mikado CD player is a dual-mono design based around four dual-differential digital-to-analogue converters with separate regulated power supplies, utilising custom-built toroidal transformers, to prevent interference between the digital and analogue audio sections. The large blue-on-black LED display is housed outside the main chassis and is isolated from the digital audio power supply.

I NEED YA, DECK

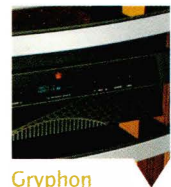
Eye-catching as it is, the kinetic theatre of the transport isn't just for casual entertainment. That motor-driven cover effectively seals the floating mechanism beneath it with the aim of eliminating the effects of external vibration. The Philips CD-Pro2 transport's all-metal chassis is, itself, built on a heavy die-cast metal frame and, along with the balanced-mass 40g clamping puck, further improves isolation. Round the back, the Mikado has both balanced (XLR) or single-ended (phono) analogue outputs and balanced 110 Ohm AES and 75 Ohm S/PDIF digital outputs.

What Gryphon calls its "third generation upsampling technology" claims to shift aliasing noise upwards in frequency so that the upper corner frequency of the digital anti-aliasing filter is more than double that of the standard 44.1kHz sample rate. In the interests of extracting the purest, most unadulterated sound possible, the



Gryphon Mikado CD player
£6,800

The Mikado could cut it as a fascinating work of kinetic art, but it's also a stunning CD spinner with breathtakingly pure sound. And not just with comic opera.



Gryphon Diablo integrated amplifier
£6,100

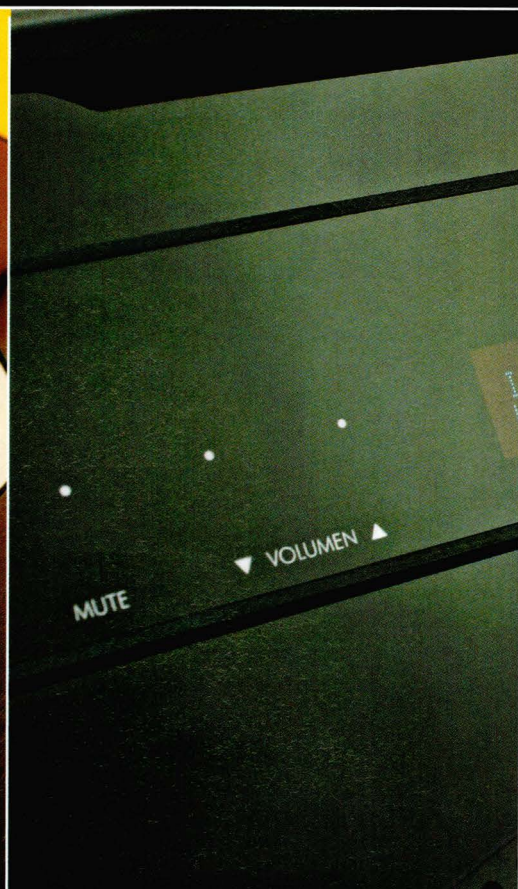
An integrated to strike fear into the hearts of even the most ambitious pre/power combos, the Diablo is a mighty amp in every sense. Be afraid, be very afraid.



Zingali Overture 4 loudspeaker
£4,245 per pair

From a distance, just another unassuming floorstander. Close up, a thing of considerable beauty that sounds wonderful too. Exquisite and sensitive in all ways.

“Gryphon Audio Design’s founder and boss has degrees in painting, graphic arts and, my guess is, the subversion of traditional hi-fi styling.”



simple first-order analogue filter uses a single, silvered Mica capacitor.

Timing issues are addressed with independent, specially designed, temperature-compensated crystal oscillators with a claimed accuracy of better than five parts per million. In comparison with conventional 44.1 kHz digital-to-analogue conversion and more rudimentary implementations of upsampling, the asynchronous sample rate conversion in the Gryphon Mikado is claimed to offer greater resolution of fine detail, sharper image focus and extended high-frequency response.

YOU'VE GOT SOME NICE TOYS HERE

By any standard, the Mikado shapes up. But as a chunk of desirable high-end hi-fi, it isn't in the same league as the Diablo. Even if you don't think it's the prettiest one-box amp on the planet, there's no denying it's one of the heaviest, most powerful and best specified around.

But then Gryphon's resolute belief that, as a species, the integrated amp is a valid high-end contender reaches back to the launch of its ambitious Tabu integrated, which rubbed uncomfortably against the grain of conventional wisdom at a time when it was felt that the minimum requirement for high-end status was a pre/power combo. Indeed, Gryphon champions the idea that

integration brings compelling advantages to the arena. For example, with separates, the distance between boxes introduces exposed interconnects to the signal path. And some care must be taken with electrical and sonic compatibility. Blindingly obvious maybe, but in a single box, the audio signal path is significantly shorter and compatibility issues are elegantly sidestepped, allowing the designer to allocate a greater portion of the budget where it counts: in the audio circuit.

As with the Mikado CD player, the Diablo is a dual-mono design, and one of truly monumental build. Highlights include massive, overkill power supplies, zero negative feedback, heavy biasing towards Class A, military-spec double-sided copper printed circuit boards, dual Holmgren toroidal transformers, PCB mounted sockets and, for all those sonofabitch speaker loads out there looking for a rumble, 250 watts per channel into eight ohms (though it's worth mentioning now that the ultra-sensitive Zingalis could be driven by a circus flea on a treadmill).

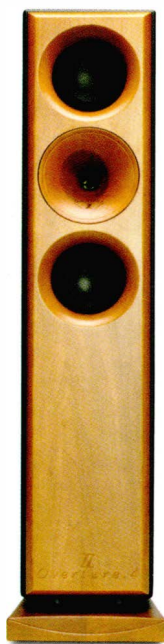
Absolutely no horses have been spared in the making of this amplex of amps. Include, in that, a volume control that has been specially developed by Gryphon for its next generation state of the art preamplifiers. The microprocessor controlled 50-step relay 'volume

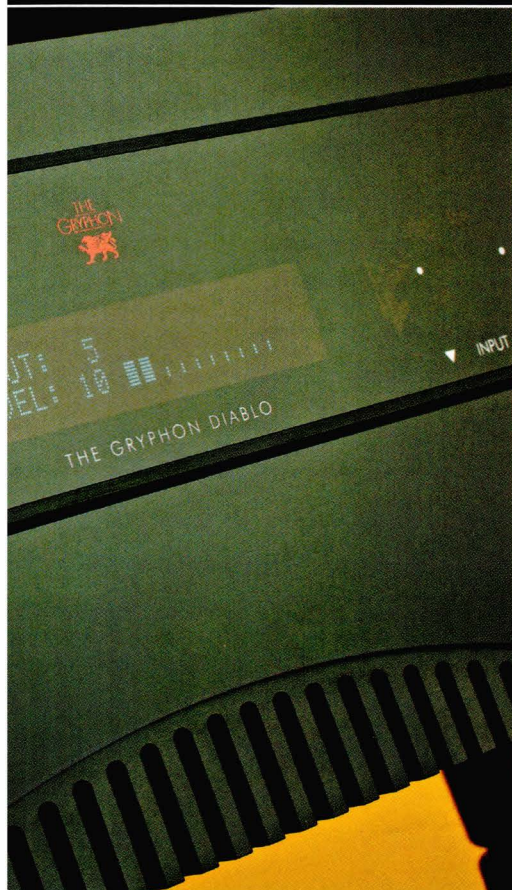
attenuator' dispenses with mechanical components, digital circuitry and op amps altogether. Instead, it employs only a select few, handpicked components. At any given setting, only a couple of Welwyn ultra precision resistors are in the signal path; according to Gryphon, it's "the most utterly transparent attenuator ever conceived".

The Diablo's simple touch-panel control panel and software-based menu display allow key functions to be customised, and updated software can be installed via flash memory as it is developed. A fixed level throughput allows the power amplifier section of the Diablo to be re-configured for use with a separate multichannel preamplifier. It means the Diablo's power amplifier can be used in surround applications while keeping its signal path uncompromised for stereo listening. XLR sockets cater for the one balanced source and there are gold-plated phono sockets for the four inputs and two outputs.

I'VE SEEN THINGS...

Now, you didn't think we were going to round off this system with an ordinary pair of speakers, did you? No, quite right. The Italian designed and made Zingali Overture 4s (for fourth generation) are about as conventional as square eggs, a visually sumptuous *mélange* of carved, real wood cabinets, oddball compression





“The very deepest bass has the solidity and impetus to bring the sense of venue alive on live recordings in a way few other systems we’ve heard can match. And the sound projects well into the room.”

drivers and rather stunning ‘Omniray’ horns. They’re also quite ridiculously sensitive and require only a handful of watts to reach convincing volume levels, which means that the Diablo barely has to flex its little finger, never mind its shirt-splitting biceps.

It invites the question, why such a powerful amp? Surely the Zingalis cry out for single-ended valve circuits where the first watt is deemed the most important. Well, you’d have thought so. But what, on paper, looks like a mismatch of car crash proportions delivers more magic than a Harry Potter convention when you fire it up.

There are two probable reasons. One, Gryphon – while deadly serious about the hi-fi holy grail of preserving signal integrity, with no additions or subtractions – makes no secret of the fact that it also pays meticulous attention to the importance of imaging and ambience and, to this end, employs ultra-wide bandwidth circuit topology. And two, this is an approach the large, weighty Zingalis seem born to exploit. Or, just perhaps it has something to do

with the extensive collection of first and second generation master tapes of studio performances in all musical genres recorded between 1956 and 1976 – the so-called golden age of stereo recording – Gryphon uses as a development reference. No CD or LP, it contends, comes close to these original recordings for dynamics and resolution.

YOU’VE DONE A MAN’S JOB, SIR!

But whatever the reasons, the results are extraordinary. Here’s a system that takes you straight to the heart of the music. The overall balance is maybe a little more relaxed and lush than we’re used to here at *Beautiful Systems*, but stunningly transparent and informative all the same. The long, tall Zingalis are smooth and tuneful at low frequencies and subtle resolvers of detail through the mid and treble. Their delivery sounds remarkably natural and unforced. The system can conjure up a richly textured and detailed soundscape of scalp-prickling realism and holographic depth. The very deepest bass has the solidity and impetus to bring the sense

of venue alive on live recordings in a way few other systems we’ve heard can match. And the sound projects well into the room, effectively making the enclosures disappear. Voices are natural and unadulterated, music is coherent and brilliantly well timed. Despite the relaxed balance, there’s a presence and sense of vitality to the presentation that grabs your attention and won’t let go.

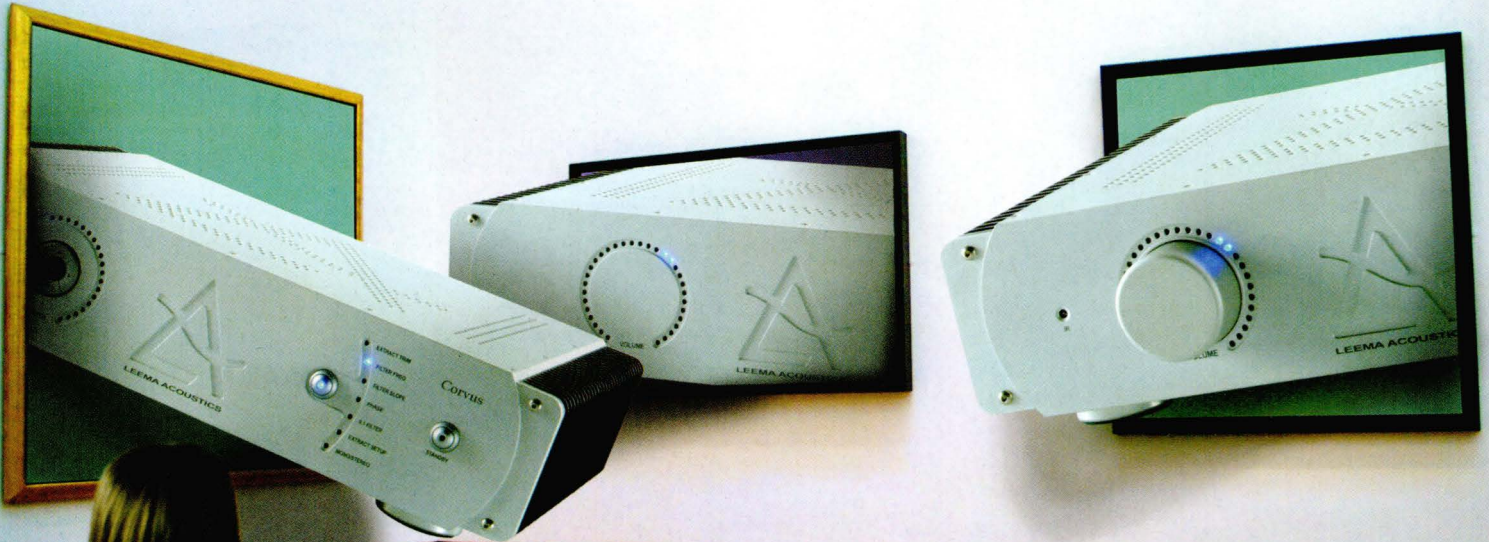
The Diablo is undoubtedly the star contributor. The vast reserves of pure, stable power it can bring to the party might not be called upon directly, but its speed, precision and authority most definitely are. Teamed with the sublime Mikado and ultra-sensitive Zingalis, it accounts for the ease with which dynamic contrasts are struck; the sense of emotional ebb and flow thus liberated is spellbinding.

So here it is, *Blade Runner* in a box and, quite possibly, the best system on which to play Vangelis’s mesmerising soundtrack. Just a few words of warning, though: enter a room to listen to this system and you might never leave. **HFC**

David Vivian



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REVIEWS

Welcome to the HFC hardware reviews section – the only place for definitive tests of the latest hi-fi components. Our unique combination of extensive listening, unsighted comparisons and scientific lab reports, conducted by the UK's most experienced set of reviewers, ensures you're holding the most comprehensive and reliable guide to high performance hi-fi in the world.



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OUR RATINGS EXPLAINED

Percentage ratings for various different criteria, like sound quality and value for money

Our overall conclusion

You can find more civilised players for the money. But few combine dynamics with fine timing skills as effectively as this. **HFC**
Jason Kennedy

VERDICT

SOUND >> 83%

FEATURES >> 85%

BUILD >> 85%

VALUE >> 85%

CONCLUSION

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 84%

The things we like most about the product

The things we think could be better

The product's final score. All criteria are taken into account but the emphasis is on performance. Components scoring more than 85% may qualify for an HFC Award Badge

OUR AWARD BADGES EXPLAINED



A component receiving the coveted Hi-Fi Choice Best Buy Badge has been judged to deliver excellent performance at its price point, thereby offering outstanding value for money.



This Badge is awarded only to those components that are judged to deliver reference-standard performance, regardless of cost. These products may be considered among the very best of their kind.

Turn the page for the most rigorous tests of serious hi-fi in the business...



Astronomical!

It's not rocket science... Rega's new Saturn CD player runs rings around the competition

PRODUCT Rega Saturn
TYPE CD player
PRICE £1,298
KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 43x8.5x27cm
◻ Weight: 6.4kg ◻ Analogue outputs: single-ended phono ◻ Digital outputs: coaxial and Toslink ◻ Top loading disc drive ◻ Supports MP3 discs
CONTACT ☎ 01702 333071 🌐 www.rega.co.uk

Earlier this year (*HFC 279*), we were wowed by Rega's new £500 Apollo CD player. Its unique feature was the use of a brand new UK-developed and sourced chip set to control the disc drive mechanism and extract the digital data from the discs. This was believed responsible for a substantial improvement over its Planet predecessor.

A few months down the road, Rega has had the time to develop its more upmarket Saturn,

based on the same disc drive and control chips used in the Apollo. The more expensive design adds considerable extra engineering in the DACs, power supplies and analogue circuitry. The starting point for the Saturn was Rega's earlier Jupiter model, which was itself the upmarket derivative of the Planet... all of which makes us suspect Patrick Moore thinks up Rega's CD names. Once the development work began, however, it quickly became clear that it was worth taking the new player rather further, because the new data retrieval technology was that much more effective than before. Accordingly, the Saturn goes several stages beyond the Jupiter, which explains why it costs £300 more than the £1,000 Jupiter it replaces.

As Britain's leading manufacturer of turntables, tonearms and cartridges, Rega was a late entrant to the CD player scene, though when the top-loading Planet finally arrived in

1995 it was very well received. The company tries to avoid changing its products unless absolutely necessary, so the essentials of the Planet and Jupiter remained unchanged for many years, apart from a substantial cosmetic revamp in 2000. But even that was instituted because the tooling for the original cast casework became worn.

The new Saturn looks exactly like its cheaper Apollo sibling, and both are also almost indistinguishable from their Planet and Jupiter predecessors. All four share the same stylish casework, with a fascia divided into three sections. The top of the widest central portion is scalloped away to make room for the cover over a central top-loading disc drive mechanism. This cover features a clever double-hinged lid, so it tilts backwards as well as up, and therefore doesn't require too much space above – total height with the lid open is 17cm.



Finished in either satin black or satin silver, the casework is aluminium alloy, and unlike the plastic front used on the Apollo, the Saturn also has an aluminium front panel. A modest central red coloured display provides basic operational information, with a defeat option, and four elegantly shaped buttons unambiguously supply basic play, stop and skip functions. A new handset is supplied in order to include the functionality needed to support the replay of discs recorded in compressed MP3 format, which may contain hundreds of tracks. This slim, light affair has fine button differentiation and is easy to operate one-handed.

Although you wouldn't necessarily notice it at first, the only visible difference between a Saturn and a Jupiter lies in the centre of the loading bay lid. The Jupiter's lid incorporated a rotating disc clamp, but no such device is needed with the Saturn, because the new disc drive mechanism has a clever 'ball-chuck' mechanism to grip the disc. The disc is clipped onto and held in place by three spring-loaded ball bearings, an arrangement which not only adds virtually no inertia to the drive mechanism, but also grips the disc tightly and pulls it flat against the platter, for more accurate laser reading.

Ironically, the new players might never have come about had Rega not lost the source of its key CD components a couple of years ago. Of necessity, specialist hi-fi brands rely on buying in core components like integrated circuits and drive mechanisms from outside suppliers. Rega,

“Rega likes working with local suppliers, and for that reason it was one of the first to employ Wolfson DACs in its players.”

like a number of British brands, used to buy in most of these components from Sony Europe. Until, that is, Sony decided to pull out of the business and Rega, along with a number of its competitors, was obliged to make alternative arrangements for CD sleds.

It's said that every cloud has a silver lining, and that cliché seems particularly apt for Rega. Certainly it has brought much greater diversity in the core components used throughout the marketplace, as each brand has come up with its own solutions.

Rega likes working with local suppliers, and for that reason it was one of the first to employ Wolfson DACs in its players. The Saturn uses two parallel WM8740 dual-differential converters for superior dynamic range and linearity. The most interesting part of the story, however, is that Rega found a British software company that had developed a brand new chip set specifically intended for CD operation.

Whereas traditional suppliers have focused primarily on DVD replay in recent years, treating CD as a mere adjunct, this all-new CD-oriented approach incorporates the latest chip design developments including much more memory than earlier designs, ensuring that both signal processing and error correction

demands are satisfied without compromise in sound or specification.

The Saturn feels significantly heavier and more substantially built than the Apollo. It also features a 60VA transformer with separate windings for audio, digital and display sections, high-speed diodes and Nichicon audio grade capacitors. Similarly high-grade components are used throughout the rest of the machine, including a low-jitter crystal oscillator clock, and a discrete Class A analogue output based around a cascode pair of solid-state output devices.

SOUND QUALITY

After clipping a disc into the Saturn and closing its lid, the first thing that happens is that the word 'Initialising' appears across the display. This stays in place for significantly longer than the normal TOC (table of contents) reading process of earlier generations of CD players, as the player takes its time in assessing the type and quality of the disc, and optimising the data acquisition process. The initialisation process takes around ten seconds, so it's best to operate the player from the very user-friendly remote handset. Initialisation did hesitate once or twice when dealing with

Q&A

We spoke to Terry Bateman, Rega's senior electronics design engineer, about the evolution of the Saturn CD player



HFC The Saturn appeared some months after the Apollo. Did it take that much extra development time?

TB It didn't really happen that way. Indeed, you could say we started with the Saturn, because our original experiments with the new disc drive mechanism and servos were based on fitting them into a Jupiter chassis. Having made up this prototype, we realised we were dealing with something rather special here. But for commercial reasons, it was more important to get the Planet replacement (the Apollo) up and running, because that's where the sales volumes are.

How come the Apollo sells for the same price as the Planet, but the Saturn costs significantly more than the Jupiter?

It took a while to get the Apollo fully into production, as demand turned out way ahead of our expectations, and it takes time to get suppliers of surface mount boards, for example, properly geared up. When we got back to working on the Saturn, I didn't want to sell it short. It was clear that the potential of the new drive system made it worth spending more money elsewhere in the player than we had in the Jupiter. We therefore improved the power supplies and DACs, and introduced special audiophile components in strategic locations, all of which improved the sound, but also pushed up the price.

When you were making the Jupiter you also produced an outboard DAC called Io as an upgrade. Do you expect a new DAC too?

I don't know that we'll do a separate DAC like the Io again, but I think there's still quite a lot of extra potential in our new disc drive system, and I'd certainly like to take it to a higher performance plane in the future.

We could use top-of-the-line, high-spec Burr Brown DACs, upgrade the power supplies and capacitors still further, use discrete component op-amps, physically separate the analogue and digital circuit boards, and so on. I've even been experimenting with a prototype valve-based DAC/filter arrangement, with rather promising results, though I don't really expect us to follow that route. Whatever decisions are taken, I'm very excited about the way our CD players are going.



CD-Rs, probably because our machine was an early pre-production example, but opening and closing the lid, or powering the player down and up, sorted this out quickly.

The Saturn was connected up to my current reference system, consisting of Naim NAC 552 preamp, NAP 500 power amp, B&W 800D loudspeakers and mostly Vertex AQ cables. First impressions were very positive indeed, especially in terms of the sparkling high frequencies, which immediately showed great delicacy and precision.

It hardly seemed worth comparing the Saturn with its Jupiter predecessor, since the latter's sound quality had already been bettered by the newer, cheaper Apollo. For the record, the Jupiter is certainly a decent enough player, but

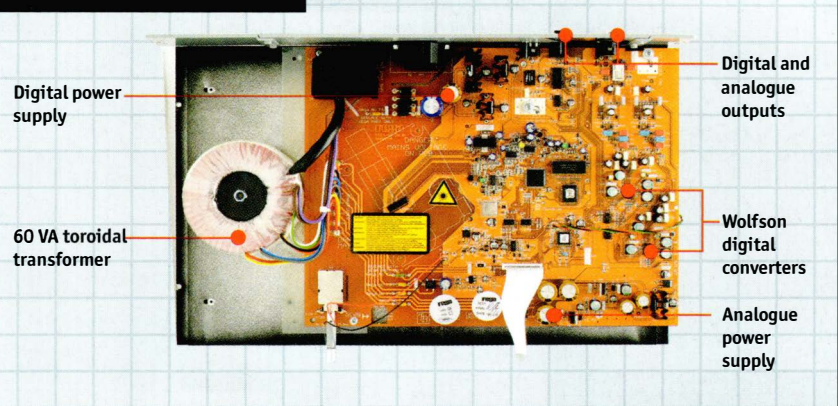
it sounds distinctly sloppy in comparison with the Saturn, with an obvious softening of definition right across the audio band. This is perhaps most noticeable towards the bass and treble ends of the spectrum, but some lack of focus runs throughout, leading to less precise imaging and ultimately tonality. One can still enjoy the Jupiter, but it's clear that the Saturn runs rings around it (pun entirely intended) sonically and musically.

The Apollo makes a much more useful point of reference, and the two machines certainly demonstrate their common parentage very convincingly. While the overall flavour and balance is very similar indeed, the Saturn's extra precision, poise and subtlety are also very obvious and worthwhile. On the new flagship player, instruments are more tightly focused and demonstrate a wider dynamic

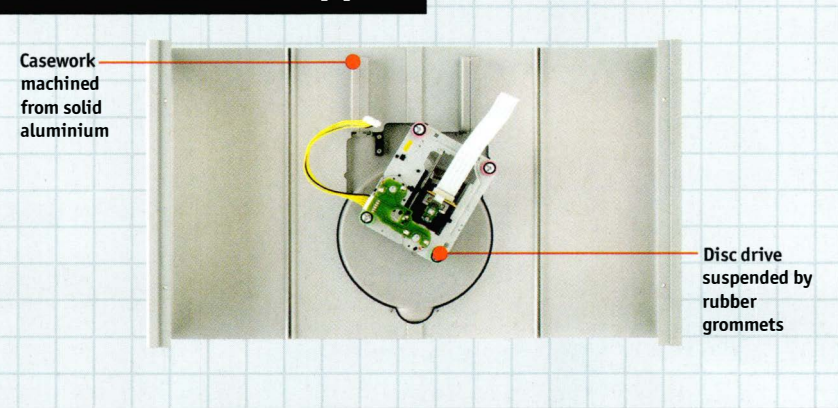




Detail – main chassis



Detail – underside of top plate



“A minor criticism of the Apollo was a slight lack of bass authority and impact, and this is clearly not the case with the Saturn.”

range, while voices sound that much more real, and imbued with a greater sense of humanity.

Precision is really the key word here. Beautifully made choral recordings, like the John Rutter/Cambridge Singers selection *There is Sweet Music* showed a splendid freedom from boxiness, with the recorded acoustic enveloping the singers in a lovely warm richness. Soloists were properly highlighted while the harmonies of the choristers supplied the appropriate context. Indeed, the definition and discrimination was so good here, it seemed almost possible to count the number of voices.

A minor criticism of the Apollo was a slight lack of bass authority and impact, and this is clearly not the case with the Saturn. The Chemical Brothers' *Push the Button* might be disappointing from a recording quality point of view, especially compared to some of the duo's earlier offerings, but it still revealed the Saturn's firmer, crisper and clearer bass end readily enough, giving individual notes more convincing shape. It also made the rather mucky mix sound that much more coherent,

with greater poise and more compelling and logical musical arguments. Indeed, in an admittedly subtle way, it managed to make the whole album appear that bit more listenable and enjoyable, by virtue of its tauter presentation and tighter timing, and the delicate persistence in the way the extended crescendos were handled.

Acoustic material is even better served. Christy Moore's *Live at the Point* never sounded better, nor the Irish audience so numerous or enthusiastic. In particular, the subtlety of Moore's guitar playing and his artful microphone techniques were easy to appreciate. He even somehow sounded more obviously Irish than usual. Once again, the wide dynamic range and accurate tracking brought a real sense of realism to the performance, the sparkling top end rendering even the finest detail sweet and coherent.

Country music is as tough a test of timing as any, and Alison Krauss' band Union Station has some of the most skilful practitioners in the art of picking around right now. *Choctaw Hayride* on the *New Favourite* CD gives a player every

opportunity to trip over itself in the rapid interplay between banjo, Dobro and guitar. The Saturn passed this test, and also proved adept at dealing with less than perfect discs.

The bottom line is that this new Rega machine is something rather special. It's also a bargain, since it delivers a performance that's more than capable of competing with much more costly machines. **HFC**

Paul Messenger



VERDICT	
SOUND >> 92% [Progress bar]	PRO Brilliant sonic and musical performance with notably precise definition and a wide dynamic range at a very realistic price, the Saturn is simple and very nice to use.
FEATURES >> 82% [Progress bar]	CON Feature count is not particularly generous, and the top-loading layout can be inconvenient to site, as it requires loading space above.
BUILD >> 89% [Progress bar]	
VALUE >> 94% [Progress bar]	
CONCLUSION An attractively styled, well built and very easy-to-use player that does all the basics superbly well, delivering a sparkling sonic and musical performance with great poise, precision and dynamic range. Feature count is rather limited.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 93%	

The third Crusade

We put Ruark the Lionheart and his band of loudspeaker drive units to the sword

PRODUCT Ruark Crusader III

TYPE Floorstanding loudspeaker

PRICE £2,800 per pair

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 23x95x32cm

• Weight: 26kg • 8.5x60mm ribbon tweeter • 75mm doped fabric midrange driver • 180mm paper bass driver • Sensitivity: 88dB • Impedance: 8 ohms (nominal) • Frequency response ($\pm 3\text{dB}$): 37Hz-22kHz

CONTACT ☎ 01702 601410 # www.ruark.co.uk

Ruark describes the original Crusader as "one of the iconic loudspeakers of the 1980s". We'd certainly concur that its original and attractive styling has the sort of timelessness that deserves this revival as part of the company's Heritage Series, and in celebration of Ruark's upcoming 20th anniversary.

We last reviewed the Crusader in its original form back in 1997, which is some testament to the model's longevity, and at the time it cost £1,600 per pair. Nine years on, the price has gone up to an altogether more substantial £2,800 per pair. This new version does incorporate a number of changes, most obviously in the use of a ribbon tweeter in place of the more conventional dome used in the original. The large midrange fabric dome driver has always been a key ingredient in the Crusader package, and this unusual type of drive unit remains a part of the new version.

The styling is perhaps the Crusader's cleverest and most attractive feature. In common with its two-way Talisman stablemate, this three-way's unusual construction method effectively consists of two deep, narrow 'trays': a smaller rearward, black-finished one fits just inside a larger front section that is real-wood veneered, with nicely radiused edges front and rear. This arrangement may well have good structural properties, but the visual consequences are particularly intriguing: the eyes pick up on the pretty woodwork, and tend to perceive the rear section as more of a shadow than a solid box, so the speaker as a whole appears much

smaller than is actually the case. Construction is impressively solid, using a mix of 18mm and 25mm MDF with asymmetric internal bracing, and the standard finishes include extremely well finished oak, cherry and walnut veneers.

The front panel leans slightly backwards, which probably assists driver time-alignment and also allows the enclosure to be fairly low yet still direct the sound upwards into the room – for ribbon tweeters it's

absolutely essential to be close to the vertical axis. The speaker is slightly deeper at the base than the top, which will help spread the internal resonances in one plane, as well as keep the centre of gravity lower. A nicely shaped, real-wood finished plinth is supplied, and this usefully extends the stability footprint a little, while also providing secure mounting for chunky 8mm spikes. There's also scope to add some useful mass loading at the bottom of the enclosure.

Large midrange domes are relatively rare among hi-fi speakers, and are actually more commonly found in the larger professional monitors, such as those made by ATC and PMC. There are both advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, they have high power handling, because the dome is driven at its edge by a relatively large diameter voice coil with high thermal capacity. And because the dome has a diameter roughly mid way between a bass driver and a tweeter, it creates a more even distribution across the audio band. The down side is that an edge-driven dome necessarily has limited excursion, so it can only be used as a midrange-only driver, and that in turn makes a three-way configuration inevitable, with considerable extra crossover network complexity in consequence.

The bonus of a ribbon driver is that it holds a pleated conductive metal ribbon within a powerful magnetic field, so that the 'voice coil' ribbon and the diaphragm are one and the same. The ribbon used here is 8x55mm (Ruark suggests it's 8.5x60mm), which will certainly ensure fine lateral dispersion to beyond the limits of human hearing. That said, the highest audible frequencies will be subject to some vertical beaming – so best results will be obtained when the tweeters are aimed





“Putting the Crusader III at the end of the chain rendered the Chemical Brothers more listenable than usual at higher levels.”

directly towards the ears, the more so because the ribbon itself is set quite deep behind the flush-mounted faceplate.

The chunky 180mm bass unit has a cast frame and a deliberately coarse-pressed 125mm paper cone, while the doped fabric dome midrange diaphragm has a diameter of 78mm (again, Ruark suggests this is closer to 75mm). Ruark has had the decency and good taste to provide three separate terminal pairs here – one for each unit and its associated arms of the dividing network – so there’s full flexibility for bi/tri-wiring or bi/tri-amping.

SOUND QUALITY

The configuration suggested – and the in-room measurements confirmed – that the Crusader III was likely to give best results when sited in free space and clear of walls. The overall tonal balance looks impressively smooth and even right through the bass and midrange, though the upper mid, 1-2kHz, is just a shade prominent. However, things are much less satisfactory above 2kHz, as the averaged trace drops steeply by some 7dB at 3.2kHz. There’s good recovery by 6kHz, but relative output is clearly lacking between 2.5 and 5kHz.

This result is very different from that obtained with the earlier Crusader nine years

ago, where the transition through the upper crossover zone was unusually smooth and even. The new model does offer obvious improvements in bass smoothness and extension, and again in midband sensitivity. Indeed, the latter is 4dB better than before, at a very healthy 89dB (1dB better than specified), with no compromise in the easy drive load. But it would seem that the new ribbon tweeter doesn’t yet integrate as well as its conventional dome predecessor.

For the listening sessions, the speakers were hooked up to a system that comprised Naim CDS 555 and Rega Saturn CD players, Rega P9/Naim ARO/Rega Apheta record player, Magnum Dynalab MD106T FM tuner and Naim NAC552/NAP 500 amplification, all hooked up with Vertex AQ and Naim cables.

The measured findings are directly reflected in the listening experience – something that was immediately noticeable, because that presence dip happens to be the segment of the audio range where human hearing is most sensitive. In fairness, the upper-mid forwardness provides some compensation, but that basic lack of presence energy in particular (and to a rather lesser degree the treble as a whole) results in a sound that is a little too laid back, lacking the sort of incisiveness and

excitement that helps facilitate musical communication. And because the hard edges of consonants are shy, speech and song lyric intelligibility are also somewhat reduced.

The positive aspect to this is that the Crusader III will never sound aggressive, even when the recording – and there are plenty to choose from – has been mixed with a very upfront balance. A CD like the Chemical Brothers’ *Push the Button* can sound almost unbearably edgy when played on truly neutral loudspeakers, especially if the volume is turned up high on the title track. Putting the Crusader III at the end of the chain, however, rendered it much more listenable than usual and at significantly higher levels, too. And, even though the treble proper still sounded a bit strong, the ribbon tweeter showed itself to be very clean with low subjective distortion and plenty of headroom.

Track three of the same CD (*Believe*) highlights another strength of this speaker, which is a fine ability to reveal the subtle distinctions between the complex bass elements found on this track. While it might not be the last word in drive and authority, the Crusader III has a very crisp and clean bottom end, with good agility and evenness, and very well controlled enclosure coloration. Indeed, ▶

[Review] Ruark Crusader III loudspeaker



POSITIONING

With its port tuned to a lowish 35Hz, the Crusader III's far-field in-room measurements worked very well in our test room. It delivered bass down to 23Hz under in-room conditions, relatively smoothly and evenly right through the bass region, provided the speakers are kept well clear of walls.

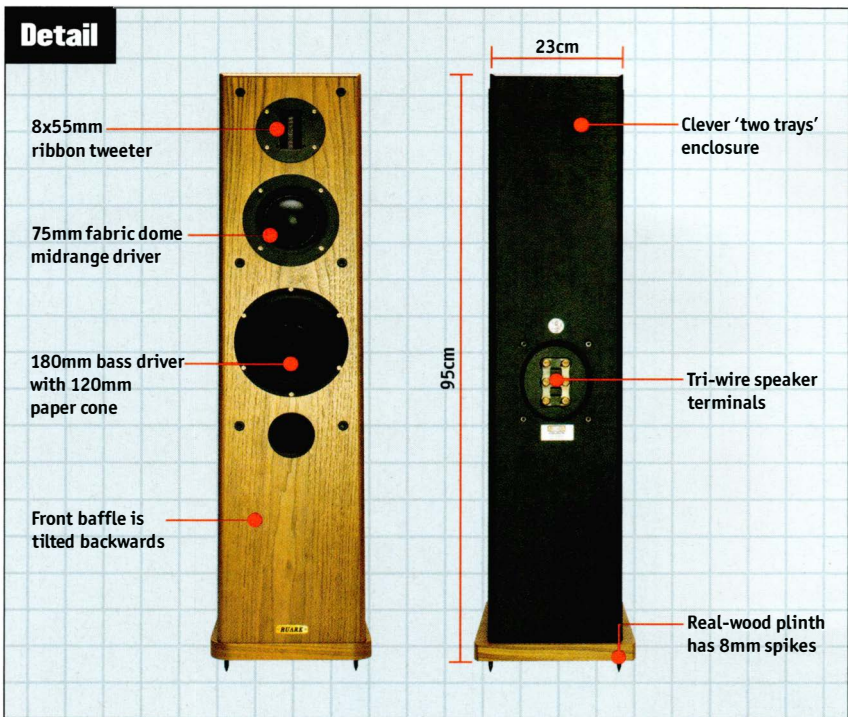
However, the overall bass level is 'dry', with the average level below 120Hz running at about 4dB below the prominent upper midband zone. Although free space positioning will give best results, especially from the point of view of best imaging and lowest midband coloration, this speaker should also be able to tolerate some wall proximity without sounding too bass heavy if circumstances dictate this. Close-to-wall siting will increase the mid-bass level, between 50Hz and 100Hz, by about 6dB, but it can also introduce unwanted cancellations, too. It's therefore always worth experimenting in situ, as every room has its own, often unpredictable characteristics, so do try moving the speakers around while playing music with plenty of bass content.

Because of the ribbon tweeter, best results will be obtained when the tweeter is directed at the listening seat. This is particularly important for the vertical axis, where the 55mm diaphragm height will introduce a degree of beaming of the highest frequencies.

SYSTEM MATCHING

Sensitivity registers 89dB under our measurement regime, which is high enough to give decent loudness capabilities with any normal amplifier, though some low-power valve types might be better avoided. It's actually slightly higher than the 88dB specified by the manufacturer, and considerably higher than the rather modest 85dB we measured for an earlier Crusader model back in 1996.

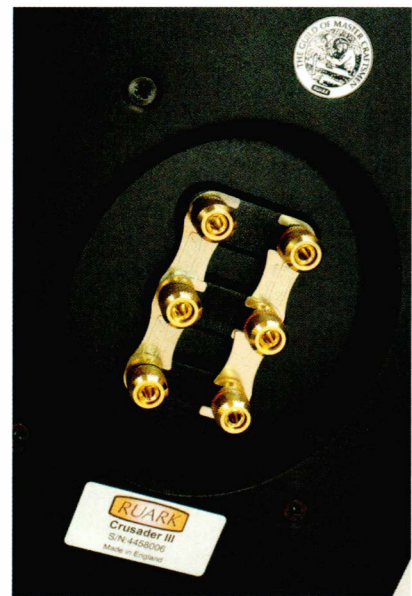
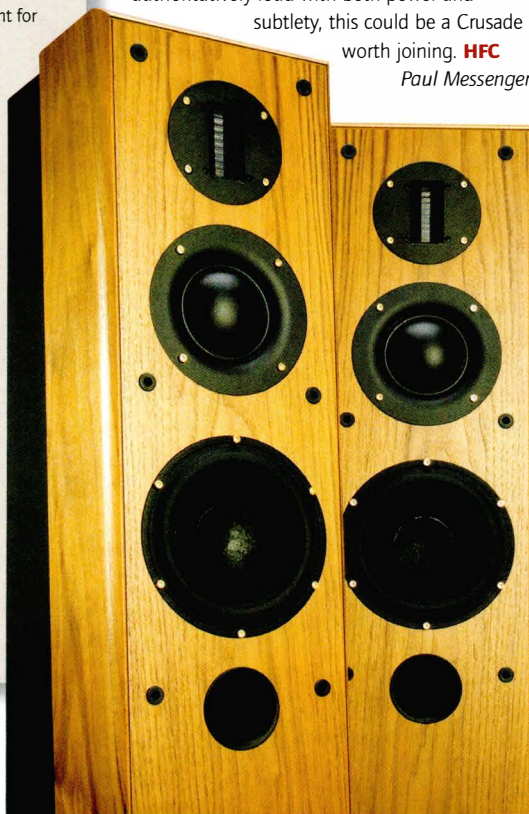
While any three-way is an increase in crossover network complexity over two-way designs, the impedance here stays high throughout, so the speaker will not demand excessive current from the amplifier. The impedance minimum is a benign six ohms, which is found between 120Hz and 300Hz; elsewhere the trace stays at or above eight ohms.



presence zone apart, the overall neutrality here is thoroughly impressive, and the fine box control ensures a wide dynamic range. Stereo imaging is also impressively free from boxiness, without any tendency for sounds to cluster around the speakers themselves.

Ultimately, the Crusader III's lack of treble energy can hold it back when it's playing very quietly, but it can also be a positive boon when rocking and rolling at relatively high levels. Indeed, exploring the Raconteurs' *Broken Boy Soldiers* was a whole lot of fun, because this character allowed it to be played at higher levels than are normally comfortable with modern rock recordings. If you like your music played authoritatively loud with both power and subtlety, this could be a Crusader worth joining.

HFC
Paul Messenger



VERDICT

SOUND >> 87%



EASE OF DRIVE >> 85%



BUILD >> 92%



VALUE >> 78%



PRO
Elegant cabinet has 'two tray' construction and backward leaning baffle that's discreet. Fine bass and mid neutrality with low box coloration and wide dynamic range.

CON
Ribbon tweeter doesn't integrate too well, resulting a significant lack of presence energy, suppressing fine detail especially at low levels.

CONCLUSION

Visually discreet and attractive speaker, with fine cabinetwork. Although bass and midband are even and neutral, the lack of presence and the top end in general favours high listening levels, but tends to suppress detail when playing quietly.

HI-FI CHOICE >> **83%**
OVERALL SCORE

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HI-FI WORLD
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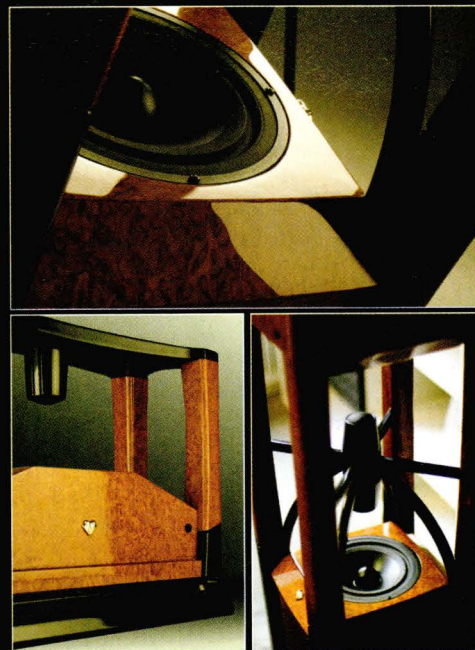
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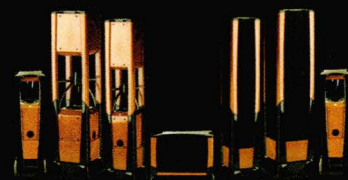
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magazine



Cambridge Audio



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<



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Pay azur go

You'll spend more than usual for Cambridge Audio's new player, but you get what you pay for

PRODUCT Cambridge Audio Azur 840C

TYPE CD player

PRICE £750

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 43x11.5x36cm

► Weight: 8.5kg ► Analogue outputs: balanced (XLR) and unbalanced (phono) ► Digital outputs: S/PDIF electrical and Toslink optical ► Digital inputs: S/PDIF electrical and Toslink optical ► 24-bit/384kHz resolution

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In HFC 281, we raised an eyebrow at Cambridge Audio's upmarket aspirations as exemplified in the very fine Azur 840A integrated amplifier. Forewarned by that experience, we were still taken aback by the present suspect. £750 is not, after all, a 'real' high-end price for a CD player, and the typical machine at that price offers considerably fewer novel features than does this one.

The most obvious technical selling point of the 840C is its use of upsampling; not just to 192kHz, but to 384kHz. This is something not

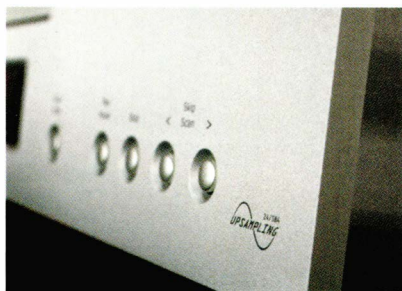
(as far as we know) previously seen outside the rarified realm of handbuilt esoterica. In fact, there's a whole story in this, for Cambridge has joined forces with Swiss digital audio specialist Anagram Technologies, buying in the latter's class-leading upsampling technologies.

Anagram employs the full processing power of a high-performance Digital Signal Processing (DSP) chip to offer features not available in off-the-shelf solutions. Admittedly, the most extraordinary ability of Anagram's upsampling, potentially enormous up- and down-sampling ratios, doesn't apply to a CD player at all, but the high performance in audio terms is still welcome and it is still one of very few ways to offer 24-bit/384kHz performance.

Having such processing power on hand is too good an opportunity to waste, and Cambridge has cleverly harnessed it for other digital devices by adding digital inputs at the rear of the 840C. This means that you can plug in, say, a DAB tuner or a PC's digital output and enjoy the benefits of the 840C's upsampling and high quality digital-to-analogue conversion.

What's more, the digital outputs on the unit can be fed with an upsampled version of the data on the CD or from the digital inputs.

Converting 384kHz data to analogue would appear to be beyond most current DAC chips, but the type used in the 840C has a special input for data from an external filter. This bypasses the DSP within the converter itself and in fact reduces the amount of 'bit twiddling' that the data undergoes, compared with conventional upsampling CD players. This in turn means that the performance really is defined by Anagram's software alone, rather than in combination with the DAC manufacturer's filter implementation. While in principle this should not matter, at a very subtle level, there are minute distortions that can arise when digital signal processes are combined, and who's to say they won't be audible under some conditions? Regrettably, Anagram has still missed a trick in making the 'brickwall' filtering performance only slightly better than average, so there is still some aliasing going on above 20kHz.



“One feels no urge to sit and analyse what’s so good about it. It’s a great music player... and that’s all one needs to know.”

In terms of construction, this player features a swift CD-Audio transport that loads discs in as little as three seconds, plus an external servo board to control the transport and provide a stable source of digits for the DSP. All the various audio bits are contained on a single board, spanning the width of the player at the rear and filled with surface-mount components. Following the DAC chips, high performance op-amps perform what little analogue filtering is needed and buffer the signal for the balanced and unbalanced outputs. The power supply uses a toroidal transformer and a bank of filter capacitors.

The player's standard of finish is good and the appearance smart and modern, although the dark-grey-on-light-grey liquid crystal display will not be everyone's idea of beautiful. Frankly, we regard it as a bit of an anachronism, but there's no denying it conveys the information perfectly well and very legibly.

SOUND QUALITY

Cut to the chase – we found this player upliftingly excellent in almost every way. Indeed, we found ourselves thinking dark thoughts about just how much more the high end of audio can offer in real terms.

A possible criticism of the 840C is that it's a bit boring. But in fact it's just very, very realistic sounding. If you like your music reproduction enhanced in some way, you simply shouldn't bother with the Cambridge Audio Azur 840C. This is life in the raw, as it comes.

Well, very nearly, at least. Just on the odd occasion, we were dimly aware that the merest hint of precision in images was lacking, with performers seeming ever so slightly vague around the edges where true 'reference' CD players had in the past shows them more clearly delineated. Yes, 'dim', 'odd', 'mere' and 'vague'... this is subtle stuff. It is important to note, though, that nothing at or near the 840C's price exceeds its performance in this regard, and we really are talking about the last 'nth' part of the performance envelope here.

Tonally, the player is highly neutral. It may have a smidgin of coloration in the upper midrange/lower treble, which probably relates to the filter limitations noted above. Then again it's at least the equal of anything in its class. Bass is truly excellent, deep, powerful, tuneful, rhythmic and controlled, and extreme treble is crystalline and pure.

But that honesty thing... it's what kept us putting disc after disc in the player. It has that

rare knack of preserving the polish of a Haydn string quartet without prettying up the Sex Pistols, belting the bejazyus out of a dramatic finale in an Italian opera without fudging the simplicity of Nina Simone. It's hard to put a finger on just what combination of technical qualities makes for this admirable characteristic, but in the end it's clear that a quite effortless approach to detail lies behind it, together with (probably related to) a lack of the subtle grunge and noise that dirties up the sound of lesser reproducers.

The real joy of this player, though, is that one feels no urge to sit and analyse what's so good about it. It's a great music player... and that's all one needs to know. Dig out some favourite discs, spin them up and don't resist the urge to grin. This is technology transcending the merely technological, and we're delighted to have encountered it. **HFC**

Richard Black



VERDICT	
SOUND >> 90% [Progress bar]	PRO Fine tonality, fabulous bass quality, great detail – but above all a degree of musical honesty that really involves the listener.
FEATURES >> 90% [Progress bar]	CON Vices are minor in the extreme: a touch of upper midrange lift, a very slight smudging of images, both only audible in painstaking A/B comparisons.
BUILD >> 88% [Progress bar]	
VALUE >> 96% [Progress bar]	
CONCLUSION One of the most involving and rewarding music replay machines we've come across at such a sensible price and an excellent partner to the fine 840A amplifier. There simply isn't a CD player at the price that offers anywhere near as much!	
HI-FI CHOICE >> 93% OVERALL SCORE	

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HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



COPLAND
INTEGRATED VALVE AMPLIFIER CTA405

INPUT SELECT

TAPE

ST. BY

AUDIO LEVEL

Swede heart

Copland's spirited new integrated valve amp delivers power and grace in equal measure

PRODUCT Copland CTA405

TYPE Integrated stereo valve amplifier

PRICE £2,288

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 43x18.5x39cm

• Weight: 25kg • Inputs: Five single-ended (phono), plus MM phono stage • Output: tape monitor (phono)
• Rated power: 50 watts per channel (8 ohms)

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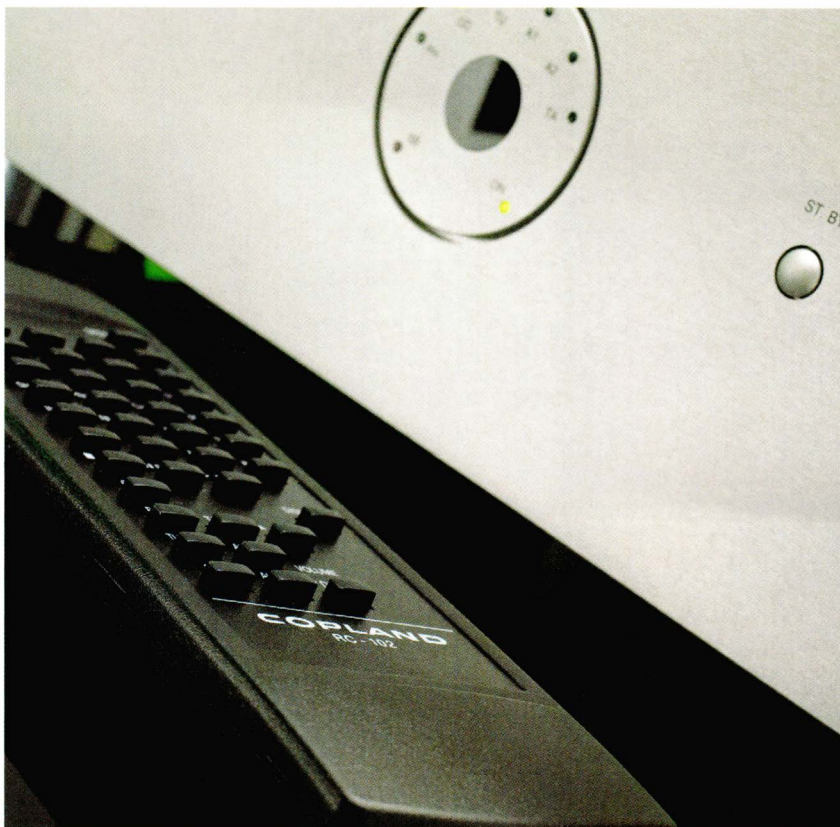
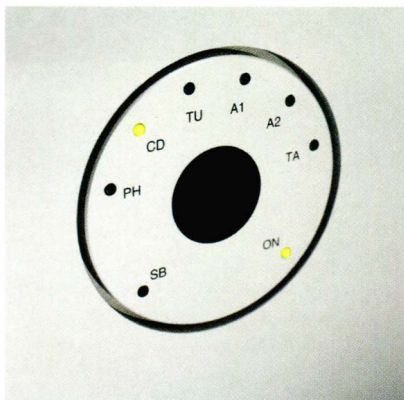
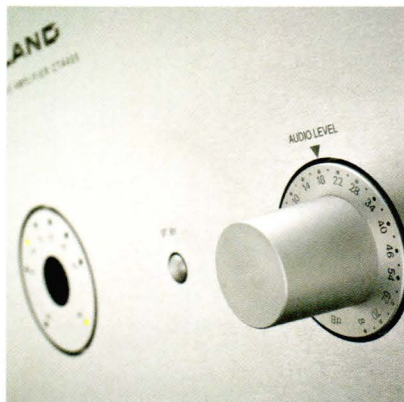
Copland has long been recognised for its beautiful build quality and typically elegant Scandinavian industrial design. The brand epitomises the very best of Swedish cool, and in this respect nothing has changed over the years. But in other ways, the brand has moved on. With its amplifiers, Copland has concentrated on somewhat more upmarket

(though still reasonably priced) valve-based designs. The CTA405, a new integrated stereo amplifier, perfectly reflects the change of gear.

The amp is a follow-up to the decade old CTA401 and the similar, but remote controlled CTA402. The obvious headline change is that the CTA405 is more powerful, up from about 35 watts to 50 watts a side, thanks to the replacement of the EL34 output tubes with KT88s. But this is only one of the changes to the power amplifier section, which also includes a redesigned power supply based on a newly specified screened 600VA toroidal transformer (designed and wound by Copland themselves, as is their usual practice) feeding a 1000µF reservoir bank. The new supply is said to be good for 100 watts per channel across a 5Hz-100kHz bandwidth, which means it is

cruising well within its operating ceiling at the full output from the output stage, especially as the quoted frequency response is a slightly more conservative 10Hz-100kHz (-3dB). Operating conditions are set manually with an adjustable bias control, and when the output tubes reach the end of their service lifetimes, they should be replaced in matched pairs.

The amplifier is equipped with a preamplifier section closely modelled on the CTA305 control amplifier, with five line-level inputs plus tape with off-tape monitoring. The Copland also has a moving magnet phono input, which at a pinch could also be used for high output moving coils. Certainly, there's enough gain available and noise levels are satisfyingly low. Power and input switching is by relay, which internally helps ensure short signal paths.



Input selection uses one of the two front panel rotaries, with a matching central area housing LEDs for power status and the selected input. There is also an LED for tape routing. The remaining rotary control is an ALPS analogue volume control, and the unit is supplied with a system remote control which can be used to operate a Copland CD player. Four- and eight-ohm taps are available for loudspeakers, but as with most valve amps, sound quality appears best with the eight-ohm taps, irrespective of the speakers used.

There are some minor practical considerations to watch, though. One is that loudspeaker polarity is inverted from nominal, a decision that arose because it apparently simplifies the construction of the case design. To maintain correct phase in a system that does not invert phase elsewhere, the connection to the speakers should be reversed at the amplifier or loudspeaker end. As Copland points out, connecting the speakers according to the instructions on the back of the amplifier ensures correct phase without additional electronics. The low-level line outputs are non-inverting. Also, the on/off power of an attached Copland CD player (the manufacturer suggests using the excellent CDA823) can be remote controlled from the 12V remote jack fitted to the back panel.

The amplifier includes an auto power off feature, which is triggered when the amp is not used for about eight hours. This is a safety requirement in some counties, though amps destined for other markets are manufactured without this function.

“The CTA405 is no refugee from the 1960s, as so many valve amps appear to be. Instead, it is a vital, lively and agile sounding amplifier.”

Build quality and finish are very high, and operational feel is up there with the best. But those who know Copland expect nothing less.

SOUND QUALITY

The company name was inspired by Olé Moller's love of the capricious music of Aaron Copland, which might seem out of character for a man who is famously quiet and self-effacing. But quiet and self-effacing are not how Copland amplifiers present themselves, and that's particularly true of the CTA405. Put another way, the CTA405 is no refugee from the 1960s, as so many valve amps appear to be. Instead, it is a vital, lively and agile sounding amplifier. If you didn't notice the illuminated bottles glowing inside (and in daylight you probably wouldn't), there's little to betray the thermionic valve heritage.

Of course, there is only one real way of evaluating the true worth of any hi-fi component. It is to answer this simple question: could we live with this product? Restating the question to take value into account, we could instead ask if someone had this much money to spend on an amplifier that does what this one does, could they live without it? The answer would be a simple affirmative in the first case, and a negative to

the second. This is one of the very best integrated amplifiers we know of at this price, and very possibly the best valve-based design of its ilk around at the moment.

It was clear that the Copland was this good virtually from the very first note, and it achieves this status as already suggested not by sounding quintessentially valve-like, but almost the exact opposite. There is no false warmth here, no soft, valve-like treble, and the midband is much bolder, more architectural and more fully formed than might be expected of a valve amp. More usefully, there is no obvious sign that the sound varies with different loads or that it responds differently as the volume level changes. The amp's performance remained consistent with a range of speakers, and across a broad volume range, even maintaining its *savoir-faire* when driven mildly into overload – the one respect in which the CTA405 conformed to valve stereotypes.

Perhaps the most impressive demonstration of the Copland's excellence was with a pair of speakers from Vienna Acoustics – a medium size floorstanding two-way called the Beethoven Baby Grand. We have learned to respect this speaker, despite a balance that's best described as 'uncommunicative', even a little cool. But with the Copland amplifier in ▶

Q&A

We interviewed Olé Moller, Copland's designer and CEO, about the genesis of the CTA405



HFC What are the technical highlights of the CTA405?

OM Starting with the basics, the Copland CTA401 main circuit has been designed on a single PCB. High quality surface relays are mounted directly onto the input area to achieve a reliable switch function with a minimum of crosstalk. A selector on the front panel remotely controls the relays and an ALPS potentiometer is used for volume control. Star earthing minimises the influence of induced voltages in the earth lines. The passive complement of all audio stages are comprised exclusively of polypropylene capacitors and high tolerance resistors

Then, the power supply is delivered from a custom-built 600VA toroidal, which feeds a substantial reservoir bank. The transformer is magnetically screened to minimise spurious leakages, and there are separate power supplies for the pre and power amplifier. The output is coupled to the load using output transformers, which are designed to minimise plate and screen current, and we found we could achieve very good performance with low level of feedback at the specified 2x50 watts output.

How do you go about designing output stages?

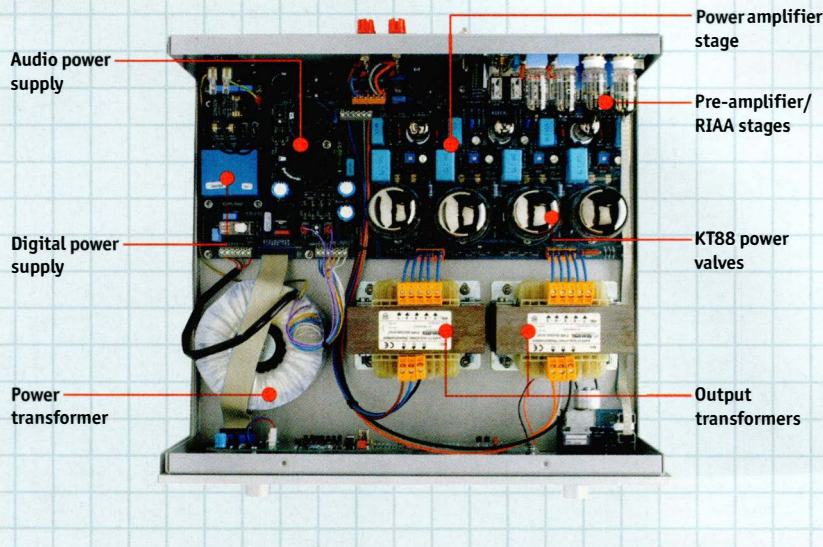
We design the output stage transformers at Copland, with segmented windings for low leakage losses. These provide low distortion and high stability through the bandwidth. The output stage is low in impedance, though of course it will not be as low as many solid-state designs, despite fairly low levels of overall negative feedback.

What about the active valve stages?

ECC83 double triodes are used in the RIAA phono section, and the line-level stage is built around 6990 active triodes. The drivers for the power amplifier also use ECC83s, and two double-triode 12BH7 are used as phase splitters to feed the two pairs of KT88s, which operate in push/pull.

The sound is similar to previous Copland integrations, but it sounds more powerful, and it has a tighter, more disciplined feel, due mainly to the new power supply and the use of KT88s.

Detail



charge, a remarkable transformation occurred. It was lively and agile where previously it was leaden. The Copland, which simply sounded in control, did not prejudice the analysis and discipline of its music making. In combination, this amp and speaker managed to say more about music than many more demonstrative counterparts.

That at any rate is one interpretation; a more simple minded analysis is that the sheer liveliness of the amp helped counteract a lack of the same qualities in the loudspeaker – but as it turns out there was no obviously reciprocal effect with differently balanced loudspeakers. The always lively and exquisitely detailed Mordaunt-Short Performance 6, for example, sounded close to neutral and completely in command with the Copland in charge of proceedings. In part, this may be because the Copland is successful in areas where other valve amps are weak. The bass, in particular, is solid and muscular, and doesn't suffer audible signs of overhang or excess. Stereo imagery is also impressively realised. Not because it always sounds especially wide or deep, but because it can do both of these

things, and does so when the source material demands, making a solid construction around the plane of the loudspeakers when the recording is good enough.

The point to bear in mind here is that the Copland is subtle and responsive. It goes a long way to making the most of the material it is fed, and it is adept at making the end result enjoyable without rounding off too many of the rough edges which are often essential to the worthwhile reproduction of great music. It doesn't do what many valve amps do, which is to make music listenable at the expense of its internal structure. It does its job honestly, and without smothering fine musical detail. In short, the CTA405 is simply an excellent amp, irrespective of its enabling technology. **HFC**

Alvin Gold



VERDICT

SOUND >> 92%



FEATURES >> 76%



BUILD >> 93%



VALUE >> 89%



PRO

A fine, expressive amplifier, but it is also highly detailed and has more real world power than the numbers suggest. It performs consistently with a range of different speaker designs.

CON

Speaker polarity should be inverted (see main text), and it runs quite hot, so plan ventilation carefully.

CONCLUSION

This amp turns the tables on other valve amplifiers by refusing to display the typical limitations, yet offering all the benefits. This is an engaging and vital sounding amplifier, grain free and subtle, with backgrounds as quiet as most solid-state amps.

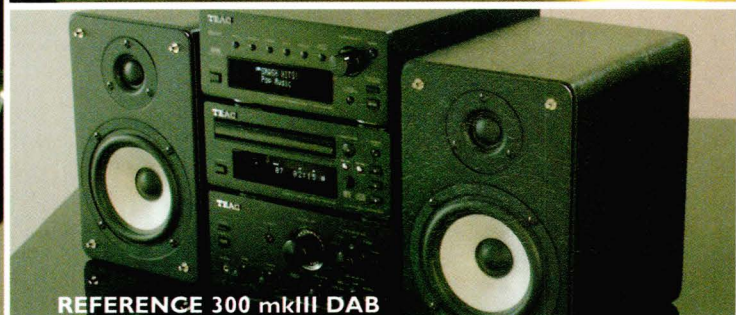
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> **91%**



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Pretty sharp

Sharply styled and classily finished, the CM7 introduces B&W's unique FST driver at a new low price

PRODUCT B&W CM7

TYPE Floorstanding loudspeaker

PRICE £999 per pair

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 20x91x30cm

• Weight: 20kg • 25mm aluminium dome tweeter

• 130mm 'surroundless' FST Kevlar cone midrange driver

• 165mm paper/Kevlar cone bass driver

• Sensitivity: 88dB • Impedance: 8 ohm (nominal)

CONTACT ☎ 01903 221500 # www.bwspeakers.com

B&W engineers originally pioneered in the much more upmarket Nautilus models. Its particular distinguishing factor is its replacement of the usual type of flexible surround attached to the edge of the cone diaphragm by a polymer ring. This ring is in contact with, but not physically attached to, the cone edge.

The logic is impeccable. In the majority of three-way designs, the midrange driver is either the same as (or a scaled down version of) a bass driver. But the difference between a midrange-only drive unit and a driver required to produce bass (with or without midrange) is that a bass unit needs to allow significant fore'n'aft excursion, and this factor is quite unnecessary in a midrange-only driver.

Whereas the multiple roles of the conventional rubber roll surround include centering the cone, absorbing edge-of-cone

vibration and permitting generous fore'n'aft excursion, by omitting the last of these, B&W engineers have designed a cone termination specifically oriented towards optimising the vibration absorption characteristics, by using a heavy rubber gasket in place of the usual roll. The alleged consequence is a significant improvement in dynamic range resolution.

The attractive sharp-edged cabinet, made in B&W's Danish factory, comes finished in wenge, rosenut or maple real-wood veneers. Our rosenut samples lacked any real grain and therefore weren't the most convincing, it must be said (but then neither is the concept of a rosenut tree). But the end result is at least marginally preferable to vinyl woodprint.

To avoid lugs, magnets hidden beneath the veneer hold the fabric grille in place, and all three drivers are flush-mounted. Matching the shiny trim around the other two units, the tweeter's highly polished faceplate is partly cut away to allow it to be located as close to the midrange unit as possible.

The tweeter is fitted conventionally into the front of the enclosure, not externally which is B&W's favoured approach, but it does use an internal Nautilus-style rear loading tube. The 25mm alloy

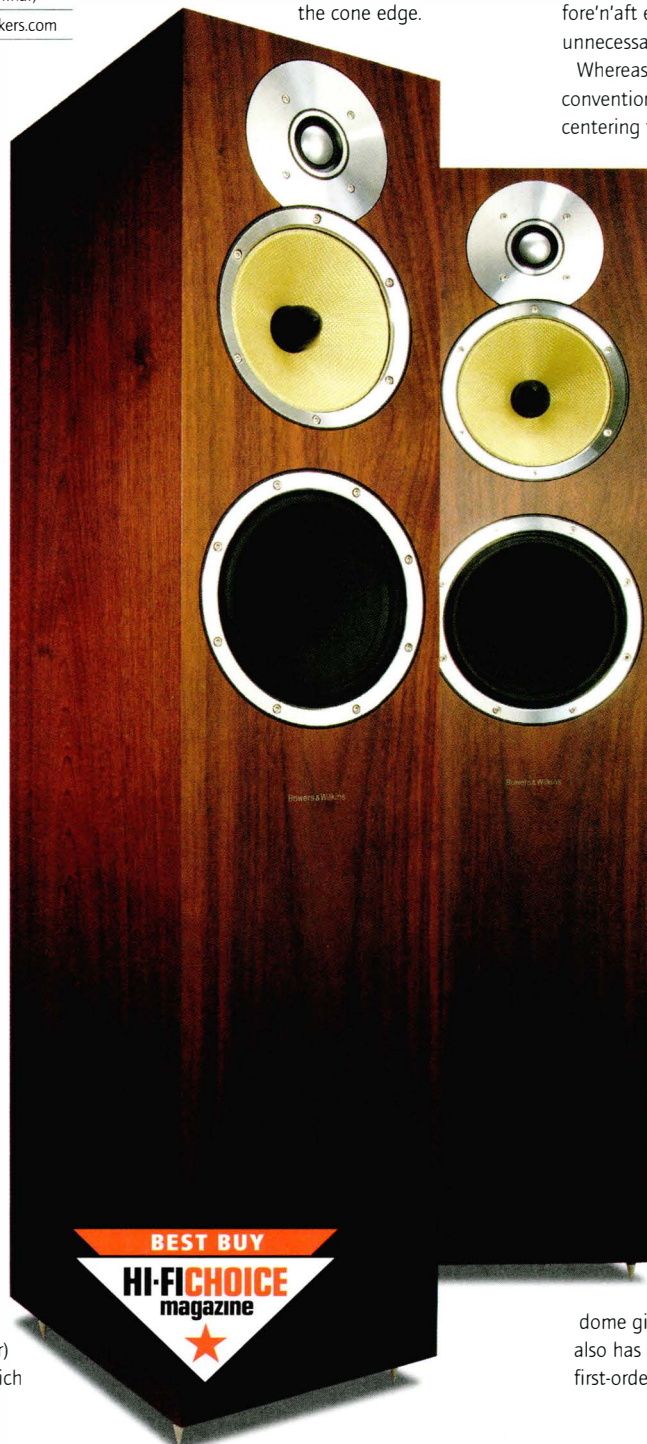
dome gives output right up to 50kHz and also has a low enough resonance to allow a first-order, single capacitor network.

As the world leader in hi-fi loudspeakers, Worthing-based B&W has been particularly adept at finding and/or creating niche-filling models at a wide variety of prices. The company has a dozen different series of models covering every conceivable price, size and style. The CM-series models are relatively recent arrivals on the scene, initially filling a gap between the vinyl-covered, budget-price 600-series and a more stylish and technically advanced CDM-NT Series, essentially by combining the engineering of the former with the real-wood veneer of the latter.

Recently though, things have become rather more complicated. The mid-price CDM-NTs are no more, replaced by the 700-series and a wholly new slimline metal-jacket XT-series launched at around the same price. The two new latest introductions from B&W are in this intermediary CM-series; both sit in the gap between the 600s and the 700/XTs, but they're rather more than just prettied up 600s. They do have the attractive real wood finish, but they also borrow some of technologies from the 700/XTs.

This was not particularly evident in the little two-way CM1 miniature, which we reviewed in *HFC* 277 and *HFC* 279, but it's far more obvious in this three-way floorstanding CM7. Although its £999 per pair price tag is substantial, this is also the first time that the company's radical FST midrange driver has been available at such a low price. This unique feature demands proper explanation.

The FST (Fixed Suspension Transducer) is a special type of midrange driver, which





“At the same time, the CM7 offers clear advantages over smaller two-way designs, through the delicacy of its mid and top end.”

Helping to keep the cabinet slim, the CM7's FST midrange driver is smaller than the versions used in B&W's more upmarket models, though its Kevlar cone still has the same 120mm diameter as the paper cone used in the nominally larger bass unit.

Twin terminal pairs offer the bi-wire/bi-amp option, and a generous flared Flowport at the rear reflex-loads the enclosure. A hollow foam port sleeve offers an interesting port tuning option. Floor coupling is achieved via 6mm spikes (with a rubber foot option), and these fit directly into the base. While the speaker feels stable enough, one can't help feeling that a separate plinth, for aesthetic as well as stability reasons, ought to be part of a £1,000 package.

SOUND QUALITY

Work started with the speakers located clear of walls, and connected up to a system using a Naim CDS 555 CD player, Rega P9/Naim ARO/Rega Apheta record player, Magnum Dynalab MD106T FM tuner and Naim NAC552/NAP 500 amplification, plus Vertex AQ and Naim cables.

Having spent the previous day listening to a pair of B&W's massive and costly 800Ds, it was hardly surprising that the first impression of the CM7 was a little disappointing. This much more modest model lacks the scale, authority and also the subtlety of its big brother – but such a comparison is distinctly unfair, given the 13:1 difference in price.

A few hours acclimatisation usually allows one to adjust to the inevitable shifts in tonal balance that occurs when changing speakers. But by the following day, the CM7s still weren't getting this reviewer excited. The top end seemed sweet and encouraging enough, but the music as a whole was sounding thick.

The in-room measurements provided the clue, as the whole bass region, especially around the 45Hz port-tuning frequency, was clearly dominant over the midband. Happily, the solution – inserting those hollow bungs – turned out to be simplicity itself. These not only damp the port output somewhat, they also shift its tuned frequency downward to around 30Hz. This has a dramatic effect on both the measured and the perceived tonal balance of the speaker, and the effect is totally positive.

The complete removal of that bass heaviness and thickening immediately brought a natural tonality to orchestral music, and made it much easier to hear the impressive qualities of that special midrange driver. Male voices no longer had a thick and chesty quality and the speaker as a whole seemed altogether more transparent, with much improved stereo image perspectives. Initial fears that B&W had got this one wrong were entirely laid at rest.

The CM7 has its limitations, for sure. But that's true of any £1,000 loudspeaker... otherwise there'd be no sense in making an 800D. The CM7 falls short of ultimate performance, but the crucial point is that it

does so evenly, and delivers a well balanced all-round performance in every respect.

One might wish for more of the dynamic drama and smoothness that larger and more costly speakers provide. But you'll be wishing for the same from any speaker at the CM7's price. At the same time, the CM7 offers clear advantages over smaller two-way designs, through the delicacy of its mid and top end, and a bass delivery that's deep and crisp and even. Indeed, with bungs in place the bass extension is a creditable 24Hz for -6dB under our in-room far-field conditions, alongside decent 88dB sensitivity, even if the load has a four-ohm minimum at 140Hz.

The bottom line is that the CM7 is a fine all-rounder in both appearance and sonic performance. But don't ignore those clever hollow bungs, as inserting them made all the difference under our conditions. **HFC**

Paul Messenger

VERDICT	
SOUND >> 85% 	PRO A fine all-round performer, with good dynamic range, a sweet top end, low enclosure coloration and an expressive midband. An easy speaker to like, physically and sonically.
EASE OF DRIVE >> 80% 	CON Sounds small and lacking in scale, weight and dynamic expression. Real-wood finish lacks conviction, and the need for a proper plinth is obvious.
BUILD >> 87% 	
VALUE >> 86% 	
CONCLUSION With the clever bungs in place, the CM7 delivers a fine overall balance with good dynamic range and a sweet top end, from an attractively compact unit. The sound could perhaps have more scale and expression, but at the price it's a good all-rounder.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 86%	

Paying DiVA ends

Arcam's return to core values pays off with a new, affordable stereo amplifier

PRODUCT Arcam DiVA A70

TYPE Integrated stereo amplifier

PRICE £500

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 43x8.5x33cm

• Weight: 9kg • Inputs: eight single-ended phono sockets inc. MM turntable and tape input • Outputs: tape, preamp and second zone single-ended outputs • Remote IR input and 12V trigger output for multiroom connectivity • Rated power: 50 watts per channel

CONTACT ☎ 01223 203200 🌐 www.arcam.co.uk

Priced at £500, the new A70 integrated sits strategically between the A65 Plus and the A80, costing about £80 more than the former, and £100 less than the latter. Its internal architecture, however, is closer to the A80 than the A65 Plus; it is basically an A80, with some changes. These include a reworked power supply, featuring a new toroidal transformer with a reduced power capacity, which is part of the cost saving necessary to meet the selling price. But there are claimed advantages to this transformer too, which is said to have better self-regulation. That should translate into better bass kick and timing. The preamp section, however, is essentially the same as in the A80.

There is one other key change to the A70 over previous models, in that it integrates Mask of Silence technologies that Arcam has been

developing. The key component here is the so-called Stealth Mat, a pseudo randomised metallic matted material that absorbs internal EMC, with the effect of reducing the electrical noise floor. What this is really about is reducing the masking of detail by radiated internal electromagnetic noise. It has been used in other Arcam models, but this is the first time it has been employed in anything near an entry-level amplifier price, though it is common practice with more costly FMJ products and the multichannel models.

The A70 looks much like every other DiVA product. In fact, the A70 uses exactly the same front panel and button layout as the A80, the only visible difference being the change in model number. It is also identical to the A80 in functional terms, which means that it has six inputs, one moving magnet phono compatible, and one a tape circuit with off tape monitoring. The volume control and input switching is by wear-free electronic controls with no moving parts, in line with Arcam's other recent components. User features include remote control, input volume normalisation, low and high resolution volume control laws, a programmable cap to the volume start-up level, and separate record and listen source selection. A full range of secondary features includes two pairs of 4mm binding post speaker terminals with switching for either or

both pairs, separate preamp out (room two) and line output sockets, and also a headphone socket. All that's missing is a set of inputs direct to the power amp. Finally, a processor mode allows the volume to be controlled externally when the amp is part of a multichannel system. This rich vein of user features is one of the payoffs for using electronic controls programmed in silicon.

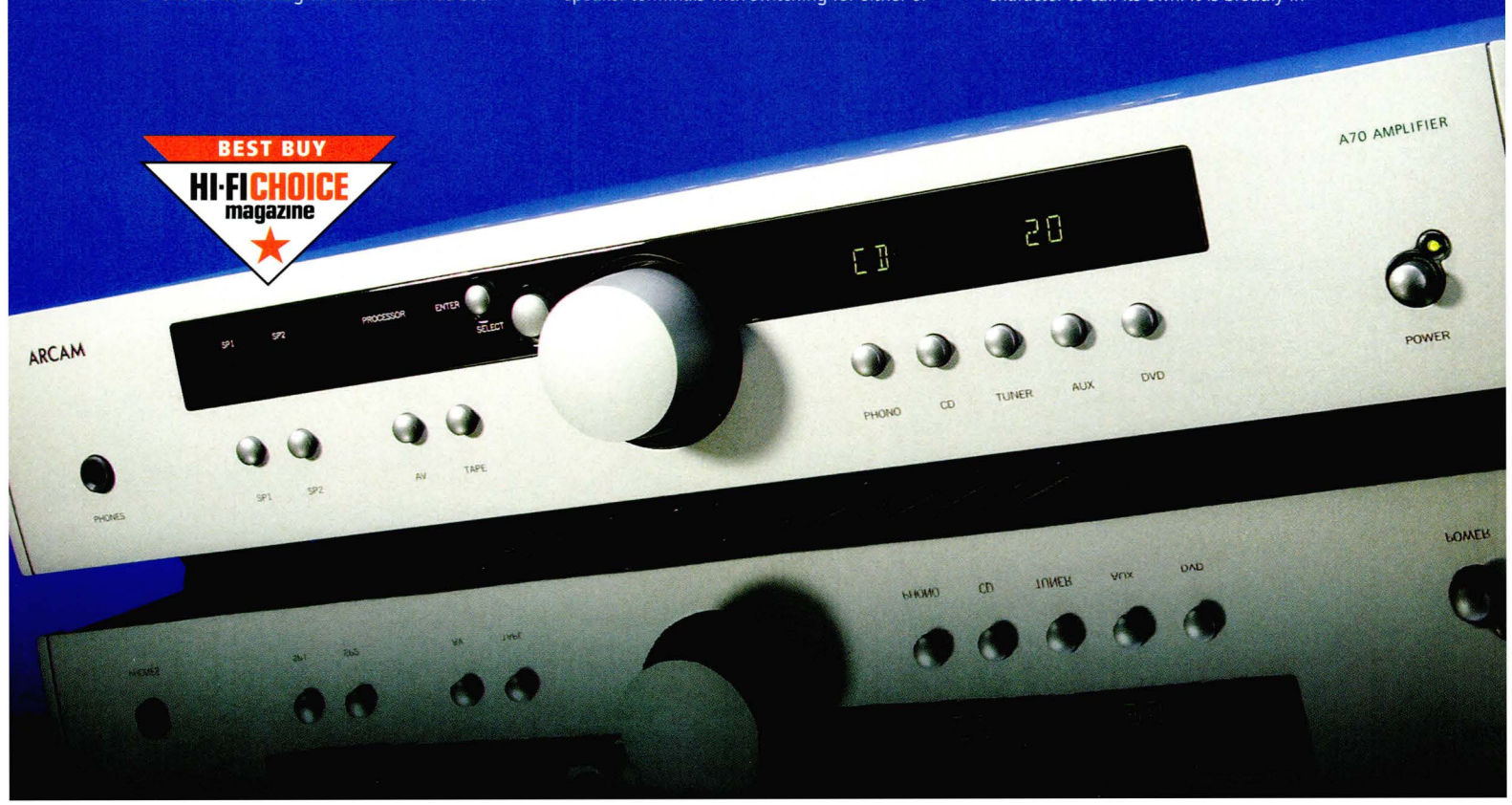
SOUND QUALITY

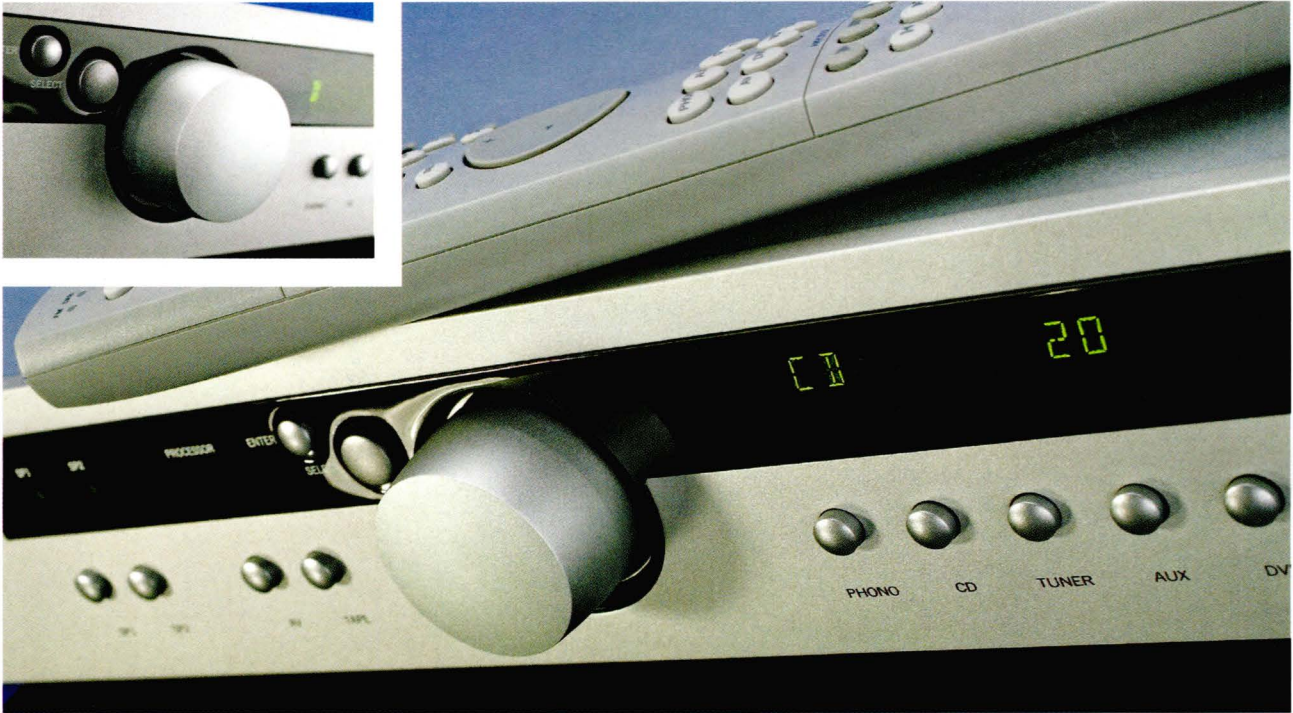
The Arcam was initially pressed into service driving a 2.1-channel system consisting of the Eclipse TD712 satellites and 725SW subwoofer (the new Eclipse subwoofer is scheduled for review next issue). Then later in straight stereo, using Mordaunt-Short Performance 6 and Vienna Acoustics Beethoven Baby Grand speakers, along with others. The main source component was an Arcam CD73 CD player, which was fortuitously to hand; it's a close aesthetic match for the A70 and for many is likely to be its preferred partner. Our review model was an early production sample, which was pressed quickly into service without as long a burn in period as usual, and this in a way made its initially strong showing all the more impressive.

It's not easy to describe the voicing of the Arcam, because it doesn't have a strong character to call its own. It is broadly in

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HI-FI CHOICE
magazine





“It has enough muscle and range – tonal and musical alike – to make complex orchestral recordings rewarding to listen to.”

keeping with previous Arcam models in the DiVA range. At worst, this could mean being flat and undemonstrative, with a full bass offset by a lack of life and vitality, but the A70 marks a subtle retreat from this stereotype.

The positive sonic attributes of previous models have been retained. It still sounds solid and meaty, but it has a propulsiveness and forward momentum that has sometimes eluded previous Arcam models at this end of the price band. There is none of the rather thin, or the sometimes brilliantly detailed quality you'll find in the opposition either, but the level of detail and the quality often described as 'vitality' is definitely a step up from its predecessors. And while it is no powerhouse, the 50 watts per channel specified by the maker translates into a surprising amount of real world grunt – in most circumstances enough to cope manfully with some quite demanding loudspeakers, the Vienna Acoustics model in particular.

But then it also rose to the occasion with the Mordaunt-Short Performance 6, which in the wonderful world of loudspeakers counts as

something of a ball breaker. Somehow the A70 was able to draw out most of its excellent qualities while minimising the potential problem areas, and the end result was a combination with real strength of character. It had enough muscle and range – tonal and dynamic alike – to make complex acoustic orchestral and choral recordings rewarding to listen to, with vivid but not excessive detail, and a more solid sense of presence and image depth than is usual for a relatively inexpensive amplifier. It was really only leaner balanced chamber and solo material that sometimes appeared to demand more power than the Arcam had on offer, especially with the Vienna Acoustics speaker, which is relatively power hungry. This kind of music tends to be associated with greater peak to mean volume levels, which perhaps is at the root of this observation.

Overall, though, this is a very natural, uncontrived amplifier. It easily overcomes the soft centred sound that Arcam is sometimes accused of, without straying too far in the opposite direction by emphasising detail excessively. It has a perceptible, but not

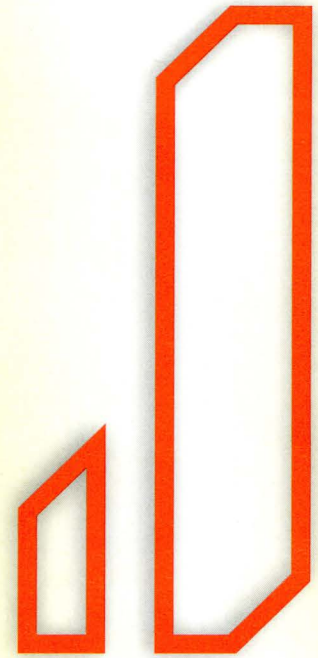
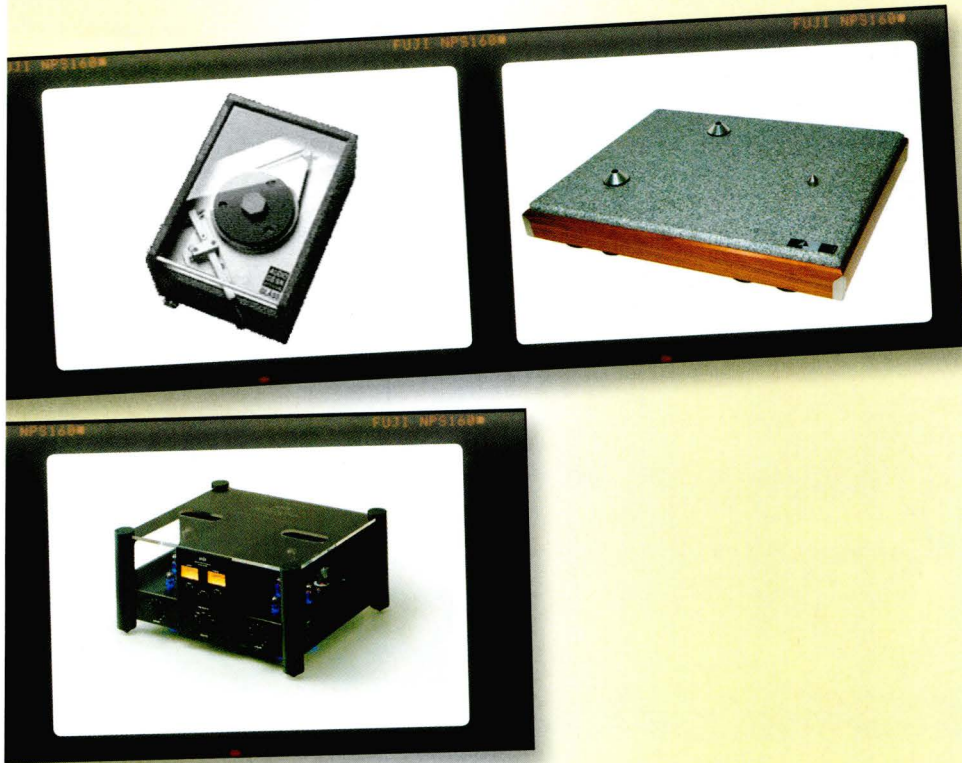
excessive warmth, a realistic sense of scale, and the kind of overall balance that works well with a wide range of loudspeakers.

The A70 is slated to hit the shops toward the end of 2006. We get the distinct impression – though Arcam is not confirming this – that in the fullness of time, it may well end up displacing the A65 Plus and A80. It certainly deserves this level of success, sounding a little leaner and more vital than its immediate predecessors, while retaining a measure of solidity and gravitas, and the ability to work with even tricky, upmarket speakers. Add good build quality and a rampant feature set (which lacks only a direct input for the power amp stage) and the case in favour of the A70 is surely very strong indeed. **HFC**

Alvin Gold



VERDICT	
SOUND >> 84% [Progress bar]	PRO Warm and solid without sounding woolly or indistinct, the A70 also scores well with its well-chosen feature set and excellent user interface. Improves on its Arcam peers.
FEATURES >> 88% [Progress bar]	CON Power output is modest on paper, though in practice it delivers better than some with similar output numbers. No power amp input.
BUILD >> 85% [Progress bar]	
VALUE >> 91% [Progress bar]	
CONCLUSION This is a very well balanced amplifier, which retains most of the positive qualities of the A80, along with improvements in some areas, thanks mainly to Mask of Silence technologies. There's slightly less power, but also a significantly lower price.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 88%	



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Time for a change

Rotel's latest entry-level recruit has its digital eye fixed firmly on the boogie with its excellent timing

PRODUCT Rotel RCD-06
TYPE CD player
PRICE £349
CONTACT ☎ 01903 221500 # www.europe.rotel.com

The current Rotel range contains just two CD players: this new RCD-06 model and the RCD-1072 at £595, a tightly focused range from what was once one of the strongest names in budget hi-fi. Rotel was also a pioneer of adding UK design input to Far East built audio. The continuity of this process has been maintained by B&W employing the services of Robert Burn (from Rotel's former distributor, Gamepath) as group services manager and Rotel voicing expert.

The RCD-06 replaces 2002's RCD-02, but does not appear to have changed externally. Functionally there are few frills, but it does feature everything most of us might require from a CD player, including a coaxial digital output, single-ended analogue outputs, an external remote socket and a 12v trigger. The latter two make the player custom-install friendly, an increasingly important factor for many products.

Under the lid, the RCD-06 ups the 02's 18-bit ante with a 24-bit/96kHz DAC from Burr-Brown; the exact choice of chipset, however, is not divulged. What we are told, though, is that the metal-film resistors are UK designed and the low-noise resistors are US

made. So, while Rotel manufactures in China, components are not limited to those made in the same country.

The player's remote handset tries a little bit too hard to be different by incorporating the main functions into a cross arrangement not unlike those found on DVD handsets. That said, it wouldn't take a great deal of familiarisation and the most important button, eject, is included – a boon to couch potatoes.

SOUND QUALITY

In the context of expensive and revealing amplification and loudspeakers, this player exhibits a good deal of precision in terms of timing, imaging and general detail. It does so in the context of a slightly thin midband, however. This gives a good sense of transparency, but sounds like a tonal weakness in a revealing system. However, it's an approach that would help a more appropriately priced system with speakers that are smooth and evenly balanced, such as B&W's own CM1.

If you avoid bright loudspeakers and/or amplifiers this should not be an issue, and given that Rotel's own integrated amps would have been used in the voicing process they probably complement the player beautifully.

This is a highly engaging machine for the price. The qualities listed above are impressive, especially the timing. This has always been a tough one for any hi-fi component let alone a CD player, of which there have been too many that can't get it right. So the RCD-06 has a real

advantage in the way that it can start and stop notes precisely without sounding too gritty in the process – very impressive at the price.

We enjoyed the solidity of imaging on offer as well; voices in particular are presented in a distinct and almost tangible fashion that suggests channel separation has not been compromised. It is also a facet of the detail resolving capabilities on offer, which are clearly very good for the asking price.

This neat Rotel needs careful partnering in order to smooth out its midband but has a highly engaging and revealing sound that puts it among the top 'budget' contenders. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy

VERDICT	
SOUND >> 80% [Progress bar]	PRO Superb timing, impressive imaging and good detail resolve from a straightforward and solid player. That it delivers all these aspects of CD sound at the price puts it in bargain territory.
FEATURES >> 74% [Progress bar]	
BUILD >> 80% [Progress bar]	
VALUE >> 91% [Progress bar]	
CON Slightly thin midband tone will not suit all systems, so partner with care; mildly confusing remote handset.	
CONCLUSION Rotel continues to maintain high standards with its entry-level player, which has the timing skills of a master and images well with it. Carefully partnered it should provide the basis of a highly entertaining system.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 86%	

King of the Castle

Castle's latest tower speaker turns in a performance that isn't going to be stormed by a usurper

PRODUCT Castle Richmond 7i

TYPE Floorstanding loudspeaker

PRICE £900 per pair

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 18x92.5x26cm

● Weight: 16.7kg (each) ● 25mm fabric dome tweeter

● Two 130mm woven carbon-fibre cone bass/mid drivers

● Sensitivity: 88dB ● Impedance: 8 ohms (nominal)

CONTACT ☎ 01756 795333 # www.castle.uk.com

Castle says that its widely lauded standmount speaker, the Richmond 3i, has set new standards not only for Castle but the industry as a whole, and that the all-new Richmond 7i – under consideration here – is set to do the same for the floorstanding market.

At first glance, there's nothing exceptional about the Castle 7i; it's a modest-looking, smartly finished floorstander that does little to attract attention to itself. This, considering the amount of time one spends listening to a loudspeaker compared to the amount of time it sits mute in the room being a piece of furniture, is no bad thing. In fact, it is a consideration whose importance escapes many people; until, that is, their aesthetically sensitive significant other quietly, or otherwise, brings it to their notice.

Similarly, its construction seems outwardly unremarkable. However, its apparent simplicity barely hints at the amount of effort that went into its voicing and fine-tuning: in particular, the attention that was paid in order to elicit from it a bass performance that is especially engaging and a top end delivery that, while detailed and assertive, doesn't threaten to scrape the enamel off the listener's teeth.

The Richmond 7i is a three-unit, two-way design that employs a pair of Castle-designed, 130mm, carbon-fibre coned bass units, developed from those used in the popular 3i, alongside a 25mm, fabric-domed Vifa tweeter. The drivers are integrated by a bi-wirable, third-order, Linkwitz-Riley crossover that uses carefully-selected components including Silicon Iron inductors,

which Castle contends are the best for bass speed and tunefulness, and polypropylene capacitors to give detailed, naturalistic treble. These all sit in a discrete chamber within the base of the cabinet to avoid compression and vibration effects.

The cabinet itself is formed from 18mm, matched veneer MDF, which

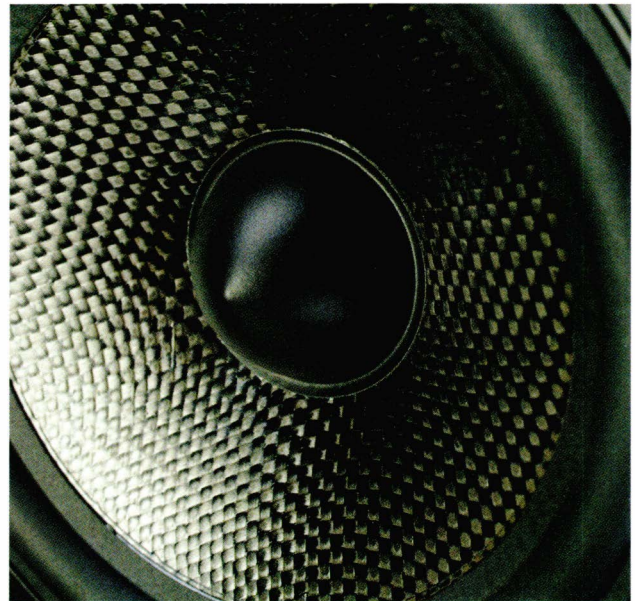
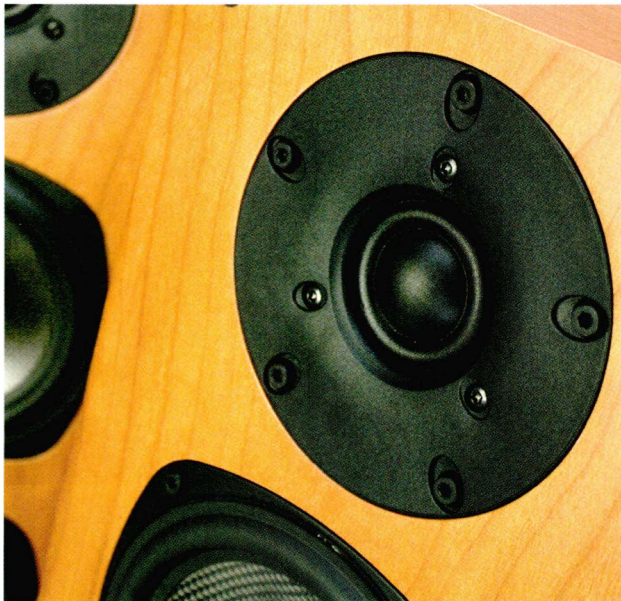
is braced and ported to offer the sort of bass performance one would perhaps expect from a more expensive loudspeaker, along with an overall sense of naturalness and rightness about the rest of the spectrum. Particular care was taken over the internal damping to maintain this balance: too much was felt to give a sound that appeared over-damped and too dry while too little allowed the cabinet to contribute too much to the sound,

which gave results that were too 'noisy'. According to Castle's PR, there is an ideal balance between a total absence of cabinet intrusion and an amount – albeit tiny – that the ear finds natural and acceptable. After all, in our everyday lives we rarely hear music emerging from absolute silence so why should sound emerging from a perfectly silent loudspeaker appear natural? Or so the argument goes.

If this appears more evolution than revolution, then that fits the company profile. Some thirty years after its foundation, the company (still British owned and managed) remains based in the same place in which it began life, Skipton in North Yorkshire, and still maintains its long-standing, initial philosophy. This involves the combination of using the latest advances in technology alongside honest, old-fashioned, hands-on craftsmanship. There is, however, no hint of xenophobia about this operation; Castle's design and management teams have forged an excellent working relationship with the loudspeaker world's leading hired gun – Germany's renowned designer, Karl-Heinz Fink – who designed the 7i as well as the acclaimed 3i, which has already been praised in the pages of *Hi-fi Choice*.

Our 7i review samples were finished in an attractively figured





“The 7i displays outstanding dexterity when replaying acoustic guitar music... an uncanny ability to dig deeply into a mix.”

book-matched Cherrywood veneer but, as is customary with Castle's designs, the speakers can be ordered in one of seven other standard veneers if preferred.

SOUND QUALITY

Initial listening showed that Castle had achieved a very respectable performance across the spectrum, with the bass being particularly noteworthy for its dexterity, punch and clarity. Although only extending down to a claimed 47Hz, the low frequencies had good weight and impact, and lacked little in the way of visceral impact. Its speed seemed comfortably able to justify Castle's claims for its performance, demonstrated with its commendable showing on the Chic classic, *Le Freak*, where it deftly exposed the groove under Bernard Edwards' agile and precise bass playing and showed how his lines interwove seductively with Nile Rogers' abruptly choked guitar chords. And all this when it was being driven by a modest AV receiver.

Switching to a Naim system, using a NAP250 power amplifier, showed that the 7i had far more to deliver. At least it did once we relocated our pair from the customary speaker positions in that room, firing down its length, to fire across the room's shorter dimension. Set up close to a solid back wall with no toe-in, the sound seemed to gel more convincingly. Don't let that discourage you, however, as the speakers sounded fine firing down the length of a second room we tried, set a half a metre or so from the rear wall, which suggests they experienced some sort of adverse interaction with the layout of the first room.

'Seductive' is the ideal term to describe the speaker's performance. Delightfully detailed yet beautifully coherent, it allows the listener to relax into the flow of the music easily, while delivering all the nuances the critical listener might demand. Furthermore, it seemed equally indifferent to the sort of music we played and neither favoured nor voiced its disapproval of anything we subjected it to (and that ran from Arvo Part, ancient, bronchial era Dylan through to Radiohead, gangsta rap and beyond).

In particular, the 7i displays outstanding dexterity when replaying acoustic guitar music; while listening intently to the techniques of one or two players, it demonstrated an uncanny ability to dig deeply into a mix. As we listened to one particular track during our test period, we became aware of a faint buzzing that occasionally intruded into the music. This proved not to be a failing drive unit, but was actually on the disc – the guitar had its action set fractionally too low and the sound was the low strings buzzing against the frets. This wasn't something that regularly manifested itself and promoted a great respect for the revelatory prowess of the Castle design.

The 7i is certainly couldn't be accused of highlighting recording deficiencies but it did, for example, show quite clearly the mess that is the stereo soundtrack of Cream's *Disraeli Gears*. The mono mix, in which Ginger Baker's drumkit stays in the same room, sounded so much more coherent. The speaker was also discriminating when it came to speaker cabling, sounding far better to my ears with the heavyweight Chord Signature cables than it did with the Epic versions.

Above all, though, the Castle 7i proved to be a persuasive communicator of music. Its hi-fi attributes and abilities were merely the icing on the cake. And, as an added bonus, there's no need to listen to the speaker cranked to high heaven – as is my usual wont – because it sounds equally dynamic, comfortable and informative at 'don't wake the children' levels, which isn't something that one can say of all loudspeaker designs. **HFC**

Malcolm Steward



VERDICT		
SOUND >> 86% [Progress bar]	PRO Provides a musical performance at all volume levels. The speaker maintains its composure and sense of pace even played quietly.	
EASE OF DRIVE >> 85% [Progress bar]	CON The 8mm floor-spikes aren't too sturdy and the plinth could usefully be a little wider to promote greater stability to exploit fully the system's dynamic abilities.	
BUILD >> 87% [Progress bar]		
VALUE >> 87% [Progress bar]		
CONCLUSION Castle's communicative floorstander goes for the subtle musical approach. Detail hounds after analysis above enjoyment need not apply, but the deft touch it has with many musical genre is always going to appeal. Looks lovely, too.		
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 87%		

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" With the Hyperion I couldn't find any compromise. "
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the best of any music it is asked to play, whilst
astounding transparency tells you the result of every
modification made to your system and its set-up. "

- David Alcock, Hi-Fi News

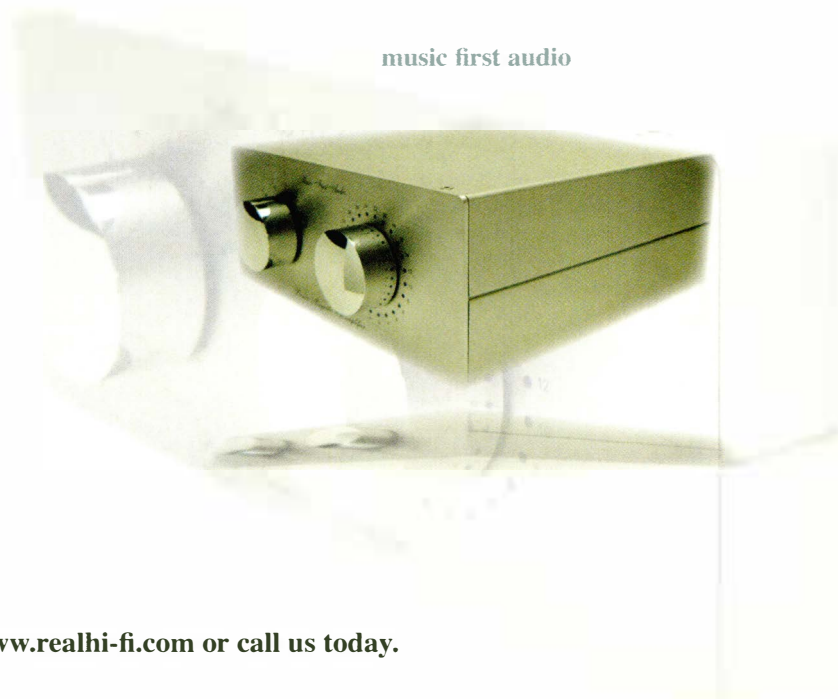
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Big noise, little box

Velodyne adds DSP-based room EQ to its new entry-level range. But beware – this tiny box goes LOUD!

PRODUCT Velodyne SPL-800R

TYPE Active subwoofer

PRICE £699

CONTACT ☎ 0131 555 3922 🌐 www.velodyne.com

In the US, the spiritual home of the subwoofer, Velodyne is the market leader among 'serious' manufacturers. The 800R is the solid, yet diminutive entry-level model in the new SPL range, with a sealed enclosure well under three quarters of a cubic foot in volume. Internal hardware includes a 200mm Kevlar reinforced resin cone and a 1kW Class D amplifier, both of which have been carried over from the previous SPL Series II range.

Velodyne has long made a feature of room equalisation, and the SPL-R series boasts a six-band digital equaliser. Unlike Velodyne's more expensive ranges, this is a simple graphic (not parametric) equaliser, and there is no video display allowing you to see what's going on. What you do get, though, is a test microphone and added simplicity in the form

of a single press button on the remote, which performs set-up with no further intervention. There are also four equalisation curves labelled movies, rock, jazz/classical and games, each with a pre-programmed volume offset. In addition, a night (compressed) mode, mute and four phase settings are available.

Most UK subs (after REL) allow concurrent parallel connections at speaker and LFE/line level. Velodyne does not. The REL method allows the system to be set up for 2.1 channel music and 5.1 channel applications simultaneously. REL also suggests that the high-level input provides optimum sound quality since it exactly mirrors what the main speakers see, but Velodyne points out with some justification that this involves changes in electrical loading on main system amplifier, with potentially deleterious amplifier interactions and performance effects.

SOUND QUALITY

The Velodyne has a higher LF cutoff frequency than its rivals from REL (the R-205 and R-305, which cost £100 less and £100 more

respectively), and its LF filter is designed for somewhat higher frequency use. With larger floorstanding speakers, the Velodyne cannot be adjusted to simply underpin the main speaker without overlap (though you can get close). But with smaller speakers, and larger ones that can be filtered back to around 40Hz or so, the Velodyne is an excellent match.

There is more than enough power to drive bass lines along with real power and urgency; the sense of authority is palpable. At the same time, the enclosure is inert enough not to sing along with the music. Also, because it is not a vented design, there is no wind noise or port related distortion.

The SPL-800R pushes all the right buttons. In common with the REL R range, it is small and well finished, and Velodyne has learned the art of making truly inert subwoofer enclosures that sustain use in sealed (or infinite baffle) form. It has a good (but not exceptional) transient response, and bass depth is not in the same class as its obvious rivals discussed above. But the DSP feature gives a very stable, even bass that integrates well with the host system, and its output is prodigious.

In the SPL-800R, Velodyne has a subwoofer of moderate bass depth but real power, with well designed filters that help with system integration. This offers a lot of adjustability from the remote control without the need to access the subwoofer directly. Sonically it can really kick ass, while features like the remote control and a remote IR input, plus the lack of dust traps on its sleek flanks, makes it a good bet for custom installation systems. **HFC**

Alvin Gold



VERDICT

SOUND >> 83%



FEATURES >> 85%



BUILD >> 92%



VALUE >> 87%



PRO
Can play very loud, and is very tidy, thanks to solid build. The well designed low pass filters and effective room EQ to reduce boundary effects from bright walls all help, too.

CON
Lacks the ultimate bass extension of the best rivals, and is not always as seamless as it could be with mixed 2.1/5.1-channel systems.

CONCLUSION

A different set of compromises to others in its class, but this is a more traditional design than some. Build quality is particularly good, and acoustic output power is prodigious. Best used with small to medium size speakers.

HI-FI CHOICE >> **85%**
OVERALL SCORE

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HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



CLASSE



CDP-102

Club Classé

If you want first class performance at a business class price, this player is just the ticket

PRODUCT Classé CDP-102

TYPE CD player (with two-channel DVD-A/V playback)

PRICE £2,950

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 44.5x12.1x41.9cm
● Weight: 12.3kg ● Analogue outputs: balanced and single ended (variable) ● Formats supported: CD, CD-R, CD-RW, DVD-Audio/Video, VCD, SVCD, MP3, AAC, WMA, DTS CD, DVD-R, DVD+R, DVD-RW, DVD+RW

CONTACT ☎ 01903 221500 🌐 www.classeaudio.com

In HFC 284, we found the Classé CDP-202 to be an extremely refined and beautifully constructed CD player. The CDP-102 is that machine's doppelgänger. It's built into the same casework and supports the same features, but with different components and a price tag that's nearly two grand lower. The CDP-102 is essentially the platform from which the CDP-202 was created and you get a lot of the 'big' player for 'medium' player money.

Though high-quality, two-channel CD playback is their primary goal, both machines will also play DVD-Audio and Video discs alongside a plethora of other formats including

DVD-Video, MP3 and WMA. They also share a touch-screen display that allows you to navigate DVDs without the need for a monitor. This touch-screen gives access to a huge variety of other functions too, including some useful features for the two-channel enthusiast.

The CDP-102 has stereo-only analogue outputs in both balanced and single-ended form, but you can hook up the coaxial digital output to a processor for Dolby or DTS surround. The only thing you can't do is get hi-res multichannel signals from DVD-A discs, as that would require a Firewire/i.Link type digital interface or a 5.1 analogue output, and neither is fitted. We expect Classé surmised that people wanting to get the best from multichannel DVD-A would buy a player made for that job.

Video performance is a secondary function of the CDP-102 and its outputs reflect as much. You can choose composite or S-Video, but don't expect either to prove stunning on an HD monitor or projector. For that, you need component or DVI/HDMI outputs.

The player features a TEAC slot-loading disc drive selected for "superior disc handling

characteristics, reliability and control flexibility". It also makes for quick disc changes and a sleeker look to the front of the machine. Because the drive is flush mounted, the remote conveniently features an eject button as does the player, which is minimalist in the extreme thanks to its touch-screen controls.

Inside the curvy box, Classé has done its best to eliminate jitter as early in the signal path as possible, explaining that this timing error in digital signals "increases distortion and robs the playback system of resolution if allowed to get as far as the digital to analogue conversion process". The signal is passed through a block of programmable logic that acts as an interface between components in the circuit and controls clock distribution. The signal is also upsampled to 24-bit/192kHz and then converted using a Cirrus Logic CS4398 DAC. This is one area where the CDP-202 (with its separate Burr Brown DACs for each channel) has a concrete advantage over this player. As far as the Classé specs go, the only measured advantage this confers is greater channel separation, but we suspect that its unpublished tests reveal more.

The CDP-102's stereo DAC produces a differential signal, which feeds the balanced outputs and a single-ended output. This is said to be fully optimised and independent in order to give the best results with either connection. Indeed, it is also derived from a differential signal that is combined at the output in order to benefit from the noise reducing advantages of balanced topology.

As with the more costly CDP-202, you can connect the player directly to a power amp and use an onboard volume control, or set it at full output for conventional operation. The casework is not only superbly finished but also extremely solid in order to keep resonance at bay. This is further assisted by large Sorbothane feet.

SOUND QUALITY

Although we were unable to compare the CDP-102 and CDP-202 directly, by using Townshend's TA 565 CD as a common reference point, it's clear that the two are rather more different sonically than they are in appearance. The CDP-102 is close to the Townshend in terms of detail retrieval and imaging, but has the upper hand when it comes to dynamics, at the expense of a slight shortfall in speed and absolute resolution. This means that, when given a decent system with which to strut its stuff, the CD-102 turns in a beguiling and revealing performance.

As with any decent source component, the CDP-102 does a great job of reflecting the material it's playing. This means it's easy to enjoy the off-beat percussion of the Be Good Tanya's *Littlest Birds* and then recoil at the dirty sound of the Stranglers' *Nice and Sleazy*.

Engineers no longer have to resort to these sorts of devices to make bands sound fashionable (instead they just compress things and hope that the iPod users won't notice). But look a little harder and you'll find music that is both great and sounds good, such as the Schidlof Quartet playing Shostakovich. Okay, it ain't pop, but it bites harder than the Stranglers and delivers torment alongside some beautiful string tone – a true beauty and the beast combination that brings home the sheer horror of Stalinism with little difficulty.

In marginally happier times, Muddy Waters made his *Folk Singer* recording and thirty years later it got onto HDAD, a variation on DVD-A. Fortunately, this process does little to diminish the power and dynamic range of his voice,



“The CDP-102 is close to the Townshend in terms of detail retrieval and imaging, but has the upper hand when it comes to dynamics.”

which the Classé serves up to the point where you wonder how the microphone could cope. Less of an audio challenge is Rickie Lee Jones and her slightly nasal, dulcet tones. But even here, the CDP-102 shows that she also covers some range in level terms, allowing the player to get you right in close when she sings *Spring Can Really Hang You Up the Most*.

Listening to both balanced and single-ended outputs, there is a small advantage to be had from using the bigger plugged alternative, if your amplifier is also balanced. The XLR connection provides a slightly more refined and relaxed result. That said, much of our listening was done with an RCA phono-terminated Living Voice cable, and this produced some stunning results. If anything, the CDP-102 is a bit more fond of the bottom end than it is of the top, and it will therefore suit systems with components near its price point. In more expensive systems that are full bandwidth and wide open, the CDP-202 is more at home. This is not a criticism of either player, but an

observation that the CDP-102 makes sure that the highs never become inappropriately aggressive and that the bass is fully figured. This is a balance that will suit many speakers extremely well.

The CDP-102 brings you the build and features of its sibling alongside a degree of resolution and tonal balance that gets you right in close to the heart of the music. That seems like a pretty good deal to us. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy



VERDICT

SOUND >> 92% [Progress bar]	PRO Great features, superb build, funky touch screen controls and a lovely remote combined with a smooth but powerful sound. Stereo DVD-Audio functionality a bonus, too.
FEATURES >> 92% [Progress bar]	
BUILD >> 94% [Progress bar]	CON As with the CDP-202, video output is basic, bass is not as tight as some of the competition, which means that speed is a hint relaxed.
VALUE >> 88% [Progress bar]	

CONCLUSION
You get an awful lot of build quality and features for your money. In fact, you get the same as you do in a player that's nearly two grand more. Its sound is rich and dynamic with a full bottom end and impressive power for such a smooth player.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 90%

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Mini maestro

This little speaker is as cheap as it is tiny. Can something so small deliver true hi-fi sound?

PRODUCT Q Acoustics 1010

TYPE Standmount loudspeaker

PRICE £100 per pair

CONTACT ☎ 01279 501111 🌐 www.qacoustics.co.uk

Ten years ago, the £99 per pair 'miniature' loudspeaker was a major part of the British hi-fi scene. Times change, prices crept upwards, and the budget sector went into a slump. Almost overnight, the £99 miniature seemed threatened with extinction, and it must be a good many years since such a speaker came the way of this reviewer.

It therefore came as something of a surprise to receive this sub-miniature from a new but thoroughly serious brand sailing just under the £100 barrier by costing precisely £99.90.

Q Acoustics is part of the Armour operation, a budget-oriented specialist hi-fi group that brings together such well-known brands as QED, Alphason, Myryad and Goldring. Armour used to distribute Mission's budget price M-series speakers, but when Mission changed hands in 2005, Armour decided to develop its own Q Acoustics speaker brand instead.

The initial launch covered four stereo pairs, plus home cinema-oriented extras. The largest, the £330 per pair 1050 (presented with a Best Buy badge in an *Ultimate Group Test* in HFC 284) clearly offers exceptional material value for money. The same is obviously true of this 21.5cm high 1010 baby, and the reason why these two offer such a lot of speaker for relatively little money has

everything to do with ultra-competitive Chinese manufacturing costs. Put these together with design and engineering expertise from Armour personnel and consultants and you get a combination that's difficult to beat.

At 3.4 litres of enclosed volume, the 1010 is just half the size of the stereotype miniature, and features an appropriately tiny 100mm main driver with an 80mm doped paper cone. Port loaded in the front, the tough little 15mm MDF enclosure, finished in cherry, beech or black vinyl woodprint, has no need for extra bracing. The wrap edges are nicely post-formed, and the inside is lined in longhair wool. The front panel has an extra 12mm layer, and the 25mm soft dome tweeter is rear mounted into the front layer. A single terminal pair feeds the signal in via a fourth order crossover network.

SOUND QUALITY

One can hardly expect such a small speaker to offer much in the way of bass extension or sensitivity, but the overall compromises adopted here seem to be very well judged. Indeed, our measured sensitivity is actually a close-to-average 88dB, and some 2dB above the 86dB claimed in the specification. Bass extension is inevitably limited, because the port is tuned to a relatively high 65Hz, but the impedance stays above four ohms throughout, so the load the speaker presents to the amplifier is not unduly demanding.

While free space siting does provide the best imaging and a marginally superior midband balance, it also leaves the lack of serious bass output all too obvious. The best solution is probably to use a subwoofer, perhaps unsurprisingly given the company's home cinema footing. However, placing the speakers close to a rearward wall proved very effective in boosting the midbass at least, even though low bass remains well beyond its capabilities. And if wall proximity renders the broad midband a little less even in consequence, it still passes muster and stays within good limits, while delivering decent bass output down to 50Hz, and stereo images remain well formed.

The dimensions confer positive benefits, and this speaker's low cabinet coloration is very audible and praiseworthy. Indeed, despite the price and size, in no way is this speaker one to take lightly. It is beautifully voiced through the broad midband and presence region, bringing fine expression and intelligibility to speech as well as song lyrics, yet with sufficient restraint to avoid unwanted aggression.

The treble is also very nicely judged, if lacking a little sweetness. Although the sound isn't particularly smooth or even, it actually does better than the bigger 1050 in this regard. Ultimately, of course, loudness capabilities and dynamic expression are limited, especially when playing material with a heavy bass content, and this limitation will be compounded when vinyl, with its heavy subsonic output, is the source of choice. But at just £100, this mighty mini is great value – anyone seeking a small, budget speaker should park their ears here. **HFC**

Paul Messenger



VERDICT	
SOUND >> 75% 	PRO Attractive sub-miniature has very solid engineering content, and delivers a remarkably good sound for a ridiculously low price. Works well close to a wall.
EASE OF DRIVE >> 84% 	
BUILD >> 80% 	
VALUE >> 96% 	
CON Very limited bass output, especially when sited clear of walls, and limited loudness capabilities, especially with bass rich material or vinyl.	
CONCLUSION Use it with a subwoofer or put it back close to a wall, and you'll be surprised at just how good such a cheap speaker can sound, thanks to fine midband voicing and subtle crossover integration. Ultimately, it lacks bass for standalone hi-fi use.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 86%	

Oehlbach XXL-7 Mk II

TYPE Digital interconnect (coaxial)

PRICE £90 (1m)

CONTACT ☎ 020 8863 8979 🌐 www.oehlbach.de

Oehlbach may have some of the wackiest promotional material around and a somewhat pretentious website, but the cables themselves seem sane enough. They cover pretty much every application and price point throughout home audio and cinema. This distinctly bulky but oddly lightweight specimen comes with no very surprising claims: it's a regular 75-ohm interconnect as required for standard digital (or video) interfacing.

It does, however, feature a double screen and the weight is a clue to the presence of a partially air-spaced dielectric. That's between the shields and so of questionable relevance to the signal itself, but the unusually large distance between the shields may well impart its own signature. The dielectric between 'hot' conductor and inner shield is PTFE, which is a suitable high quality material.

One doesn't tend to expect large performance changes between digital cables and we didn't find any here. All the same, there was a consistent and surprisingly marked



character to the sound of various DACs we tried when hooked up with this Oehlbach offering, when comparing it with industrial 75-ohm cable. We were most taken with its bass, which seems just a shade better defined and controlled, and makes for very tuneful listening with 'problem' instruments liked plucked double bass. The midrange is neutral and detailed, while the treble seems just a little mellow compared with both the industrial cable and familiar audiophile references.

Stereo imaging is very good indeed, with performers clearly defined but not unnecessarily spot lit. This is clearly a very fine cable, even if it won't suit all tastes. **HFC**

Richard Black

VERDICT	
CONCLUSION A cable that seems to major on tunefulness, not precision. Tonality may not be perfectly neutral but we like it a lot.	HI-FI CHOICE >>> 84%

QED Qonduit MDH4

TYPE Mains cable and distribution block

PRICE £199

CONTACT ☎ 01279 501111 🌐 www.armourhe.co.uk

We were certainly taken with the initial impression this block makes on unpacking it. The body is made of solid aluminium, a trough-like extrusion with thick end-caps bolted on and the sockets fitted on the top face. It's extremely robust, elegant and space saving too, despite which there's some sophisticated filtering fitted tightly inside the case. In a manner adopted by several other manufacturers of such devices, one socket is dedicated to high power applications (power amps, basically) and the others are for source components with a surprisingly low maximum rating of 100W – which will nevertheless cover any source or preamp you care to think of, with the possible exception of the odd piece of hi-fi exotica. Each socket is clearly marked with its rating and build quality is excellent. QED includes a Qonduit PMC mains cable with the block, a thick, shielded design that's reasonably practical.

We've commented before that the different approaches to filtering employed by various



manufacturers can give subtly different kinds of improvement to the sound – or, more generally, kinds of alteration, since not every kind will necessarily be an improvement in every situation. In this particular case, changes seem to be in quality of treble, which struck us as slightly more clearly defined. Mains filters often reduce background 'hash' – we weren't consciously aware of that here, but better definition may be an indirect symptom of it. Some may hear it as added brightness, but

there is definitely more precision and detail there and we feel this is one of the more successful mains filters we've tried at its very reasonable price. **HFC**

Richard Black

VERDICT	
CONCLUSION It offers a slight tightening up of precision in the treble, for more informative listening. Clicks are well suppressed too!	HI-FI CHOICE >>> 87%

Custom Design Icon Signature

TYPE Equipment support

PRICE £330 (four shelves)

CONTACT ☎ 0191 262 4646
 🌐 www.customdesign.co.uk

Custom Design makes technical claims for this rack, but it's also one of the nicest-looking bits of audio-related kit we've had the pleasure of encountering in some time. Other woods and finishes are available for those legs, but overall the combination of wood, smoked glass and minimal amounts of black metal strikes us as tasteful in the extreme.

It's also practical. Positioning of the middle shelves is adjustable in small steps, while dimensions are nicely judged between adequate and bulky. The rack, while easy and quick to assemble, is strong and rigid. It stands on the obligatory spikes and happily supported a pair of inconsiderately heavy amplifiers on the upper storeys without complaint.

Custom points to the advantages of combining different materials in suppressing resonances, though in the end the use of glass shelves is always likely to give an acoustic signature. You can buy the stand with a full set

of 'iRap' plates to deaden this (at a premium of £270 – or concoct your own homebrew damping solution!), but without them there's slight added colour in the sound and some loss of detail. On the other hand, there's plenty of attack and life and we can well imagine that some will find this a not unwelcome addition to the sound. In terms of price, the rack is neither expensive as a hi-fi accessory nor as furniture. Top stuff! **HFC**

Richard Black

VERDICT

CONCLUSION

This stand is highly acceptable sonically and exceptionally attractive... although the 'iRap' version is better still.

HI-FI CHOICE
 >> 85%



Monster Cable Z2 Reference

TYPE Speaker cable

PRICE £190 (3m terminated pair)

CONTACT ☎ 01923 431634 🌐 www.monstercable.com

Like most Monster cables, there are plenty of technological buzzwords surrounding the Z2 Reference design. Among other things, it uses something called a 'Magnetic Flux Tube'. This sounds like the hollow conductors used by QED in its successful X-Tube series, though Monster (which almost certainly did it first) adds various other features, including the characteristic use of windings made up of different wire thicknesses.

Another familiar Monster trait, and one we thoroughly approve of, is the fitting of thin metal pins as terminations. These can then be fixed to 4mm plugs or spade terminals – or the pins can be inserted into some designs of amp/speaker binding post directly. While it does technically mean another contact in the signal path, it also makes life simple and they're all gold plated and can be screwed down nice and tight.

This is a very sophisticated-sounding cable, no question. It is full of detail and covers the audio band comprehensively and neutrally. But,



from time to time, the sound has a slight dryness, which leaves us feeling curiously uninvolved. At the same time, stereo images are more forward than we are accustomed to hearing in familiar recordings, though the relative positions of instruments within the image seem well defined. It's an immediate sound and an informative one, but somehow doesn't seem to draw the listener in and encourage those late-night listening marathons.

We can imagine it acting as a foil to excessively laid-back speakers, perhaps, but for general use we admit to some reservations. **HFC**

Richard Black

VERDICT

CONCLUSION

Sound is analytical and highly satisfactory, but lacks that musical touch and fails to engage the emotions.

HI-FI CHOICE
 >> 72%

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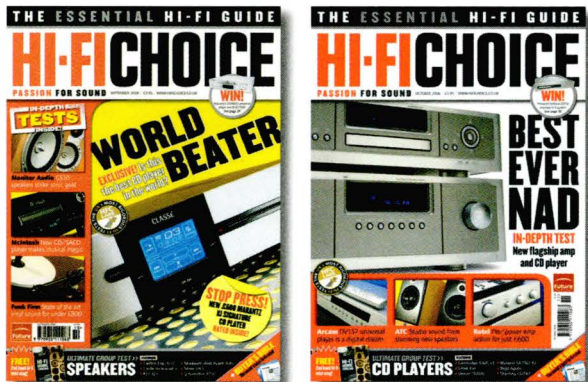


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GROUP TEST AND LAB REPORTS: RICHARD BLACK

AMPLIFIERS

These six amps prove the 'back to stereo' movement shows no signs of slowing

ON TEST



Arcam DiVA A90
£895



Audiolab 8000Q/8000P
£1,000



Cambridge Audio Azur 840A
£750



Creek Destiny
£1,200



Denon PMA-2000AE
£1,200



Onkyo A-9755
£700

In our last amplifier *Ultimate Group Test* (HFC 278), we commented on the continuing dominance of stereo for music replay. That is even clearer now than it was at the beginning of the year. Manufacturers are releasing two-channel amplifiers again and there are some interesting newcomers in this group, alongside an old hand or two.

Not that multichannel is entirely overlooked, but most of these amps are so stereo-oriented, we could easily be in the 1980s. But these amps are a lot smarter and more powerful than your average £1,000 integrated amp from a decade or two back. We'll find out over the next few pages to what extent they outperform their forbears, but it's clear the designers have not stood still.

Partly, this reflects trends within the electronics industry as a whole. The advance of miniaturisation and the invasion of the microprocessor into everything from phones to fridges have both had their effects on audio – the former allowing designers to get more components and hence more functions into a given space, the latter making possible such features as remote control, sophisticated output protection and funky user interfaces.

Computer-aided design and manufacture has played its part, too. This allows designers to create more efficient layouts for their products, squeezing up boards and transformers, for instance, to allow heatsinks to be fitted internally. And indeed, although manufacturers tend to throw their hands up in horror with every new regulation announced by Westminster or Brussels, some of these (particularly the infamous 'CE mark', which covers a raft of details from safety to electromagnetic interference) have catalysed design

innovations that may otherwise never have happened. These changes lead to anything from better sound to improved power efficiency.

All that's by way of saying that if you think you've seen it all in the stereo amplifier world, if you haven't tried any of the models from the last year or three... you're probably wrong. If you have an amplifier that you're perfectly happy with we don't want to wind you up, but if you suffer from that niggling feeling that an upgrade may be only a demo away, read on – we've got good news for you! **HFC**

EQUIPMENT USED

- ⊕ ATC SCM20 loudspeakers
- ⊕ Cambridge Audio Azur 640C CD player
- ⊕ Pioneer PDR-609 CD recorder (as CD transport)
- ⊕ dCS Elgar DAC
- ⊕ Kimber, Furukawa and Bespoke Audio hi-fi cables
- ⊕ Pink Triangle PT TOO turntable with SME309 arm, Shure VST cartridge and Highphonic MC-A3 cartridge
- ⊕ EAR 'The Head' step-up transformer

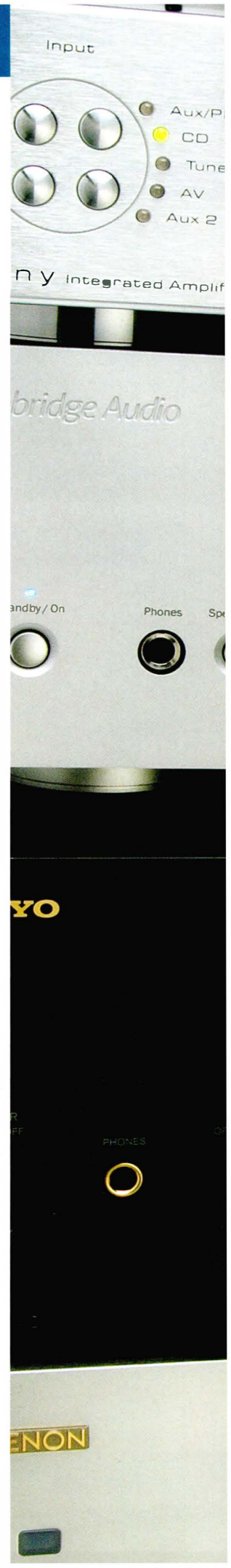
MUSIC USED

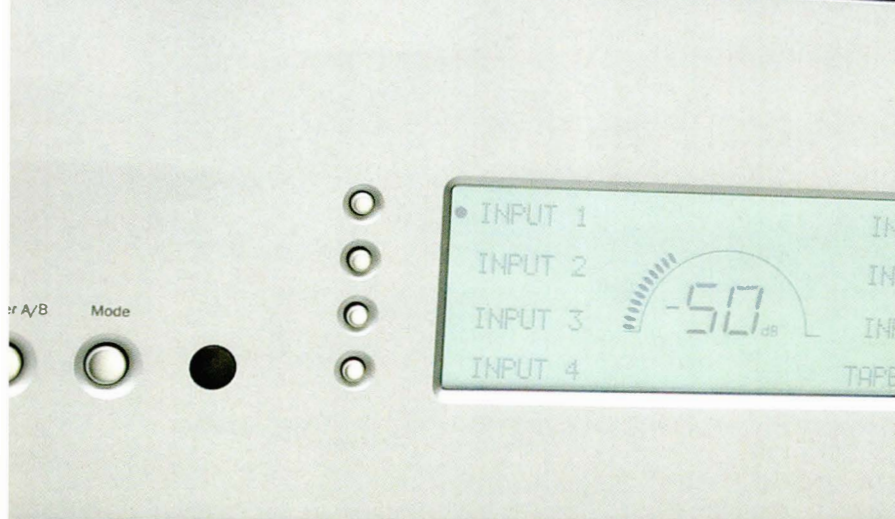
- ⊕ Damien Rice *O*
- ⊕ Bertouch *Trio Sonatas*
- ⊕ Dick Hyman *Tunes by Fats Waller*
- ⊕ Rossini *Stabat Mater*
- ⊕ Donald Fagen *Kamakiriad*

EARS USED

As ever, our gratitude is due to the listeners who endured repeat after repeat of the same tracks, 'blind', via each amplifier. On this occasion, deepest thanks to:

- ⊕ Luke Creek (Creek Audio)
- ⊕ Peter Miller (Audio Partnership)
- ⊕ Phil Tyndale (Densen)





LISTENING TESTS

In classic *HFC* fashion, the centrepiece of the listening was a 'blind' presentation of each amp to a panel of expert listeners, in an attempt to remain free of prejudices and preconceptions. Listening levels were matched and the same programme of music was played through each amp with minimal distractions. In addition, each amp was auditioned more informally, at different listening levels to suit the particular character of each amp under test.

LAB TESTS

The amplifiers were measured with a variety of equipment, including a Hameg distortion measuring set and also items of audio equipment (ADCs and DACs) adapted to lab duty and reporting data for analysis to Cool Edit and Mathcad on a PC. This approach enabled us to build up a picture of the amplifiers performance under different conditions of frequency, level and load. This allows truly accurate assessment of published amplifier specifications and precisely determines the amplifier's characteristics under real-world conditions.

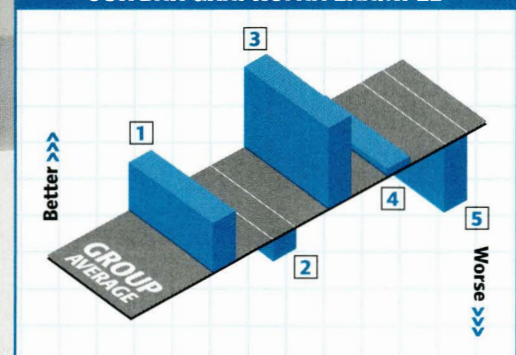
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LAB REPORTS: THE BAR GRAPH

Our unique 3D bar graphs are a simple way of showing how the products compare across five technical parameters. In each case, a percentage is given that falls above or below the group average. In this test, the parameters are:

- 1) Dynamic power:** This reflects an aggregate of continuous and peak (instantaneous) power, giving an indication of power available under realistic conditions.
- 2) Frequency response:** This is a measure of how smooth the frequency response is within the audio band and defines the upper frequency (-3dB point) limit.
- 3) Dynamic range:** An indication of the background hiss level, as compared to maximum power output.
- 4) Distortion:** An aggregate figure of measurements at different frequencies and levels.
- 5) Output impedance:** A measurement of how tight a grip the amplifier has upon the loudspeaker cones.

OUR BAR GRAPHS: AN EXAMPLE





£895 ☎ 01223 203200 🌐 www.arcam.co.uk

ARCAM DIVA A90

Modular multichannel flexibility marks out this DiVA



We reviewed this amp in *HFC 273* and liked it so much, we declared it the winner in its category in our 2005 Awards. It's here again, not least as a point of reference, and to see how it gets on against the class of 2006. Arcam has not seen any need to fiddle with it in the interim, and indeed it is still the epitome of a modern amplifier, all microprocessor control, surface-mount circuit boards and multichannel options.

Yes, multichannel. The basic A90 is stereo through and through, but Arcam offers an optional module that sits on top of the preamplifier section of the unit and provides volume control across eight (7.1) channels.

The other optional extra is a phono board, which cleverly doesn't involve losing a line-level input. There are seven of the latter, including two 'tape' monitor inputs and – as with most current integrated amps – one can separate preamp and power sections, in this case simply by pushing an externally accessible switch.

Microprocessor control brings in its wake various possibilities, which Arcam has not been shy to implement, including 'input trim' which allows one to set not just volume but also balance and tone control parameters for each input. These parameters are recalled each time the input is selected.

Construction is very good indeed, with smart circuit boards and a very efficient (not overweight or oversize) case. Power comes via a good-size toroidal transformer and the bipolar output transistors are mounted on a businesslike heatsink.

SOUND QUALITY

While the details of the comments on this amp do indeed differ from last time – hardly surprising, with different competition, a different listening programme and indeed different listeners – there is enough common ground between tests to give us continuing confidence in the A90's capabilities. Most notably, its sound was described on several



occasions as 'big', in that it envelops the listener, creating a large and convincing image of the performers in an almost tangible way.

It didn't convince all of our listeners all of the time, and there were a couple of comments suggesting that the bass is light and/or lacking in control. This is something that appears to contradict our findings last time, but then this group does include several excellent reproducers of bass and we suspect that made our listeners all the more critical. Our own listening suggested that control is an issue, but not a worrying one.

Stereo imaging was liked. There were comments on its extensive breadth and generally fine depth, though it was thought not quite the most pinpoint precise of the group. There's usually a good correlation between imaging and detail, this being no exception – the A90's detail retrieval is good, and our listeners found it easy to hear clearly what was going on in the middle of a mix.

The overall picture that emerges clearly from all the listening is of an amp that doesn't fuss unnecessarily over minutiae but which gets the big picture convincingly and attractively in focus. It has no particular musical preference and is highly satisfying in any style. A year on, its value seems no less attractive. **HFC**

VERDICT

SOUND >> 86% 	A well-featured amp that never sounds less than convincing and has very little character of its own. Not super-analytical and shy of deep bass control in comparison, but highly informative nonetheless.
FEATURES >> 91% 	
BUILD >> 85% 	
VALUE >> 88% 	

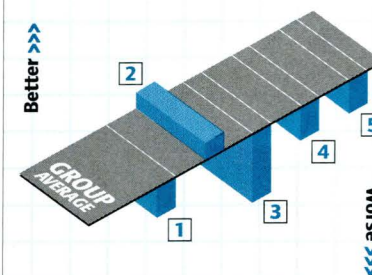
HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE 87%

LAB REPORT

With a raw distortion figure as good as any in the group, this amp nevertheless rates below average on the bargraph, due to the way that distortion behaves with level and frequency. The distortion residual contains some quite high harmonics and these remain visible down to quite low signal levels. In addition, distortion rises with frequency by a little more than most of the amps here and includes distinct traces of hum modulation. All the same, its level cannot be said to be alarming, at about 0.025% at high frequencies and moderate output.

Output power more than meets the 90W rating, holding up well into 4 ohms, but with no great dynamic reserve. The poorest noise showing of the group still reflects a respectable figure, unlikely to bother any but owners of ultra-efficient speakers, while the amp's low power consumption at idle (switched on but silent or playing very quietly) makes it the greenest of the group.

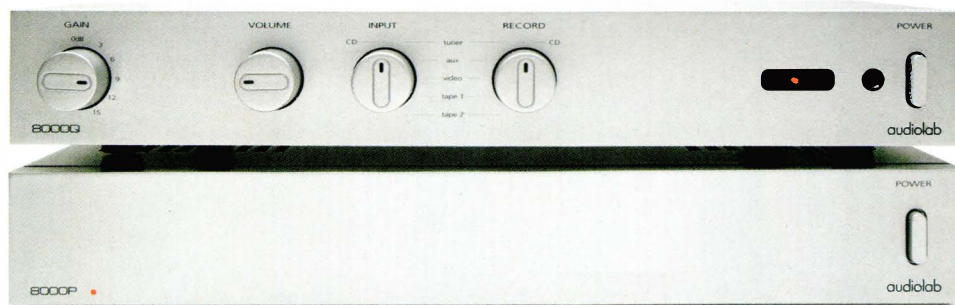
HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Dynamic power >> -20%
- 2] Frequency response >> +10%
- 3] Dynamic range >> -40%
- 4] Distortion >> -20%
- 5] Output impedance >> -20%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	90W	102W
Distortion (1kHz/8 ohms)	0.005%	0.002%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-	±0.2dB



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AUDIOLAB 8000Q/8000P

One of the 1980s biggest names is back with a pre/power combo

The original Audiolab brand found fame in the 1980s before being remodelled as TAG McLaren Audio in the late 1990s. But you can't keep a good name down; Audiolab has recently resurfaced, now as part of the International Audio Group.

As the only separate preamp and power amp in this group, the 8000Q and 8000P may look a bit out on a limb. In effect, though, they match the features of the other units closely enough, but for the simple fact that they occupy two boxes and require an extra mains lead and interconnects. There are pros and cons of the approach, which we'll find out about shortly...

The 8000P is certainly a lot of amplifier for the money. It's built in 1990s fashion (single-sided circuit board and no surface-mount components) with good quality parts and generous power supply provision. The output stage uses a robust double pair of output transistors (bi-polar) and the heatsinks are fully enclosed. Output phono sockets, connected directly to the inputs, allow very easy biamping.

Any surprise at finding the preamp the dearer unit should dissolve when one examines the well-filled case. The mains transformer may be smaller, but the parts count is very high indeed. There's plenty of signal buffering and boosting going on, relay selection of inputs and outputs, motorised mechanical volume control, selectable calibrated maximum gain, and a notably generous provision of three recording outputs alongside the twin main outputs and six line-level inputs, but phono is not an option. Physical construction of both units is unpretentious but solid, with medium-thickness steel casework and simple painted finish.

SOUND QUALITY

There were aspects to the sound that the panel liked, including the bass extension and the soundstage, which was thought both large and quite precise. But reservations were expressed about dynamics and there were also some doubts about the degree of detail portrayed.



Results varied between the various musical excerpts, with piano being the most consistently liked. The well-extended bass certainly helped this duo sound 'real', and the amp did not accentuate the bright tone of the recording we were using. One of the suggested that the treble just doesn't seem very dynamic. It soars away cheerfully enough when dynamics aren't an issue but when the music relies heavily on rapid changes of dynamics, as it will when notes come thick and fast, the treble seems less assured.

Maybe that's behind the comments on detail. At any rate, one listener thought this combination distinctly lacking in that department during the Damien Rice track, and the others had at least some reservations, pointing among other things to a loss of definition in the Rossini and a degree of vagueness in differentiating the instruments in a couple of tracks.

Separating the units subsequently, we felt that the preamp is the less detailed of the two, the power amp offering a relaxed but open and highly informative version of events that frankly belies its modest price. The preamp never shakes off a sense of being shut in. But, if you need a decent, cheap power amp... **HFC**

VERDICT

SOUND >> 82%

FEATURES >> 86%

BUILD >> 86%

VALUE >> 83%

Offers all the advantages of separate preamp and power amps at an integrated's price, but the preamp seems less detailed and neutral. The power amplifier is a solid, neutral performer and good value for money, too.

HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE **83%**



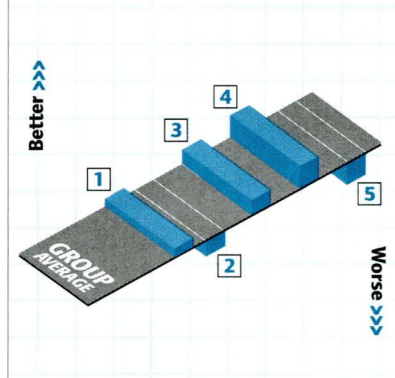
LAB REPORT

The preamp's measured performance belies its sonic shortcomings, apparently, for our tests showed next to nothing amiss with it. Its distortion is very low indeed, bandwidth extends way beyond the audio band, and as for output level and current drive, it's capable of putting a third of a watt of output into a load, so driving long lengths of interconnect cables should hardly tax it.

The power amp has slightly more of a signature, with a very gently tailored treble response. No such editorialising occurs at the bottom end though, and bass extends practically to DC. Its distortion is low across the band, notably so in the treble, though again there's a little hum modulation.

Output power comfortably exceeds its rating and nearly doubles into 4 ohms, though the mechanical noise emitted by the amp suggests it doesn't enjoy the experience. Noise of both units is very low and contains a particularly low level of hum harmonics.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1) Dynamic power >> +5%
- 2) Frequency response >> -10%
- 3) Dynamic range >> +10%
- 4) Distortion >> +15%
- 5) Output impedance >> -15%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	100W	136W
Distortion (1 kHz/8 ohms)	0.007%	0.002%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	±0.2dB	±0.3dB

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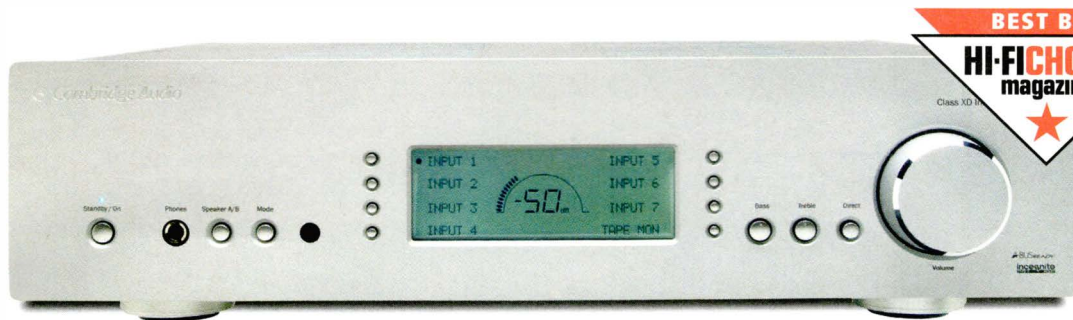
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CAMBRIDGE AUDIO 840A

Cambridge has created new class of amp for the top of its Azur range

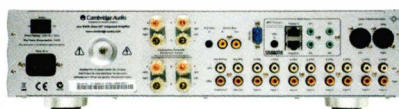
If Cambridge is trying to make a statement on just how much amplifier it is possible to supply at a retail price of £750, we get the message. This has one of the biggest mains transformers we've seen in anything under a couple of grand. Then there are the big heatsinks, well-filled circuit boards fitted into every crevice of the case and even a separate, tiddly transformer for standby functions. Cambridge's 'Incognito' multiroom interface, fitted as standard, completes the package.

But probably the most exciting feature is the new amplification class that Cambridge's leading designer, Doug Self, has cooked up for the amp: Class XD. An obvious idea but a hard nut to crack practically, this gives Class A performance from near-Class AB standing current levels, combining very high linearity with sensible efficiency, all the time remaining free from crossover distortion. There's still a bit of heat coming off this amp and we would strongly recommend heeding ventilation recommendations, but it's no inferno.

As a microprocessor-controlled amp, the 840A offers input gain trim and other nice features including automatic volume ramp-up when switching on. That, however, shows up the one feature we don't like, which is the use of noisy relays to alter volume. On the whole, though, it's entirely thumbs-up on the features front: for instance, we love the output protection that winds down the gain to prevent overload. The eight inputs (one via balanced or unbalanced socketry) can be renamed from the default 'Input 1' etc. It's a well-assembled unit and (noise apart) nice to use.

SOUND QUALITY

The 840A's combination of lively enthusiasm and fine detail retrieval meant the panel found much to praise. Comments like "the piano hangs in the air nicely" and "good warmth on female vocals" attest to its essential realism and musicality, while the timing was thought good and resolution was praised frequently.



It's evident that something about certain types of music stimulates artefacts on this amp that affect some listeners more than others. How can the midrange be both clear *and* muffled, or the bass both heavy *and* fast?

The muffled midrange allegation was made in the Damien Rice track, exactly where another listener thought bass a bit slow and heavy. This track (*The Blower's Daughter*) was chosen for the tests not least because it features some very heavy bass in conjunction with complex midrange and treble, and it seems that something the 840A does with it comes across to some ears as affecting the bass, to others as a midrange problem.

Similarly, the clear midrange and fast bass were both found in the baroque track, which doesn't have any pronounced bass to speak of and thus shows off the midrange to perfection, unencumbered by any LF artefacts.

We've dwelled on that a little, partly because those tonality issues were the only criticisms our panel came up with. In fact, two of our panellists overall enjoyed this amp immensely, the third being less convinced as he was the one most bothered by the bass. Listen out for that, for sure, but don't overlook this amp: it's a fine performer with a lot to offer. **HFC**

VERDICT

SOUND >>> 87%

FEATURES >>> 90%

BUILD >>> 87%

VALUE >>> 92%

An amp that's both detailed and lively, with excellent midrange and treble detail; very mild bass anomalies seem to disturb only some listeners. Those who don't notice these tendencies simply love the sound!

HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE 89%



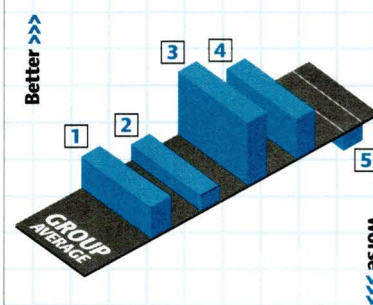
LAB REPORT

Output power from this amplifier is considerable, all the more so when one tests its performance into a 4-ohm load – the same 33V output is available, equivalent to 272W. Beyond this, the electronic protection simply turns down the gain, but momentary signals can exceed this by a little, giving a modest dynamic headroom.

It is clear that Class XD works as claimed, for while midband distortion is not exceptionally high by the standards of this group (very high standards, for sure) the performance in the treble is remarkable, barely worsening compared with lower frequencies.

At any frequency, distortion pretty much vanishes into noise below about 5W output. Noise is excellent and the treble bandwidth very wide indeed, bass being -1dB at 6Hz. The high power consumption at idle shows that Class XD doesn't quite match Class AB for efficiency, and standby power is also a little high – so switch it off at night!

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Dynamic power >>> +20%
- 2] Frequency response >>> +10%
- 3] Dynamic range >>> +40%
- 4] Distortion >>> +25%
- 5] Output impedance >>> -10%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	120W	136W
Distortion (1kHz/8 ohms)	0.0015%	0.002%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-	±0.2dB

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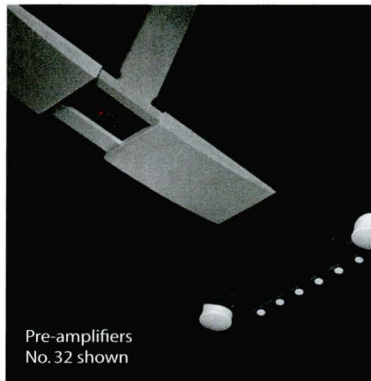
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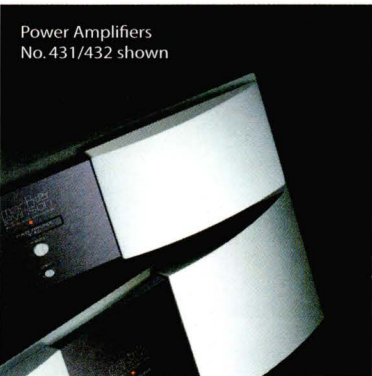
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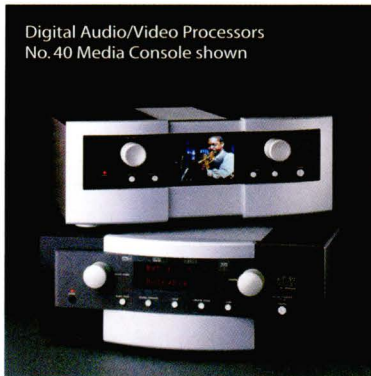
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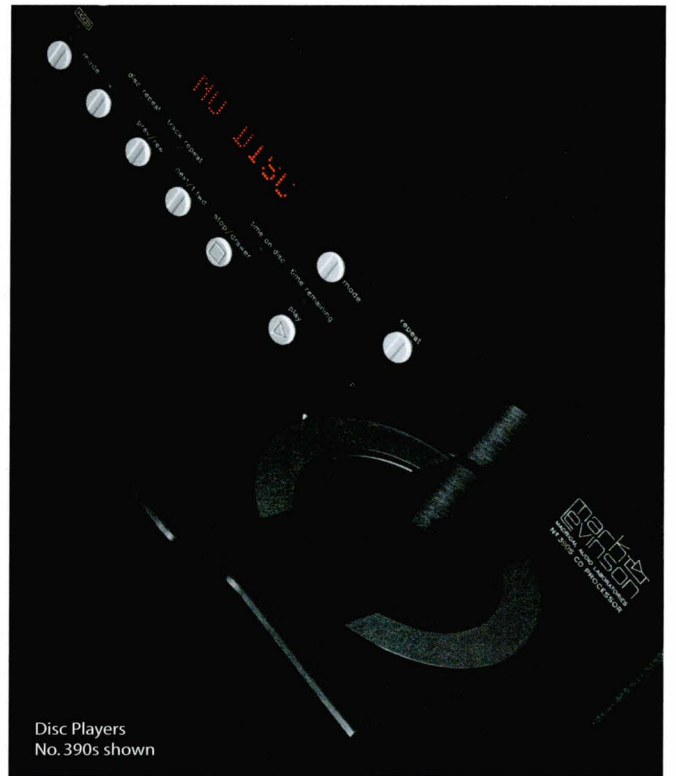
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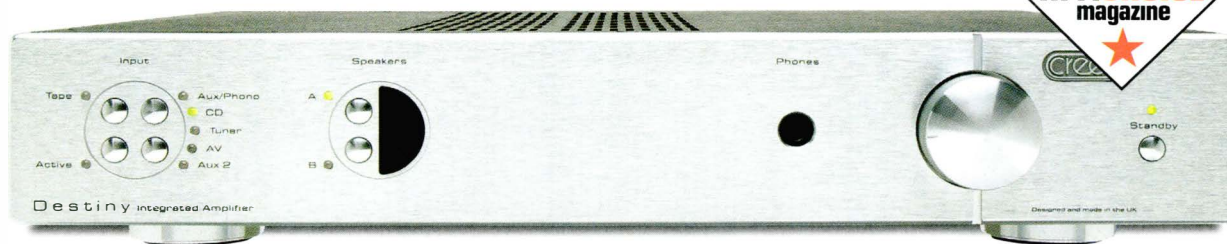
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CREEK DESTINY

Creek's new flagship range may look slender, but don't be deceived

Taking our first look at this amplifier, in partnership with the matching CD player of the same name, back in *HFC* 277, we remarked on how cleverly Creek had maintained links with the appearance of past products, while the amp is basically entirely new both inside and out. Since then, the cheaper Evo range has appeared on the scene and the 2006 Creek 'house style' is firmly established. Amazing what you can do with what is in essence a slab box, if you try!

The amp's minimal height is deceptive. It conceals a large toroidal transformer, substantial heatsinks for each channel, and a large array of relatively small power supply capacitors. Compared with the usual pair of big, fat components, these caps bring lower power supply impedance at both low and high frequencies. This attention to detail is further illustrated in the use of high-speed Schottky rectifier diodes, which produce less electrical noise than the more familiar cheap, slow types.

The input line-up is the usual six, one of which can be turned into a phono input if desired. Switching is by relays, but Creek has kept a good ol' mechanical volume control, motorised for remote operation. Two sets of very robust WBT output terminals can be independently switched in and out of circuit. Creek's power output configuration is familiar from previous models, using MOSFETs in a proprietary 'totem pole' arrangement, while the rest of the audio circuit uses a mix of integrated circuits and discrete components. Assembly of the amp is very good indeed.

SOUND QUALITY

If there's one definite recommendation we can make on the basis of our listeners' notes, it's to give this player a good crack in any demonstration. It's a grower, but it's worth waiting for. All three of our panellists found its overall performance more appealing the longer they listened. How come? Evidently it's a rather self-effacing bit of kit.



It's true that some qualities of the Destiny amp were appreciated from the outset. Its bass, for one – piano doesn't have very much LF level, but what bass it does have is very important and needs to be full in level, well controlled and well timed if the overall sound is to make sense. Here it did.

Gradually, listeners realised what they were getting was not an underpowered and uninvolved sound, but instead a version in which all the elements are so finely balanced that none leaps out at you. But they're all there and clearly audible, nonetheless.

In the baroque track, the Destiny's efficiently effortless treble and assured dynamics made the ensemble seem light-footed and thoroughly enjoyable. But if one chose to listen for details, they were all there too. And the scale of Rossini's *Stabat Mater* was felt in a large, deep and precise soundstage.

On the debit side, one of the listeners found the amplifier a touch cold and its unvarnished version of events will not be to everyone's taste. All the same, it is more than capable of drawing the listener into a great musical performance, sometimes even before one has realised what has going on. On this occasion, our listening panel confirmed what we first thought: this is a great little amp! **HFC**

VERDICT

SOUND >> 88% 	While this amp may appear a bit flat initially, first impressions can be deceptive. In fact, it is a highly assured performer that doesn't superimpose its personality on the music. A great, honest little amp.
FEATURES >> 83% 	
BUILD >> 90% 	
VALUE >> 88% 	

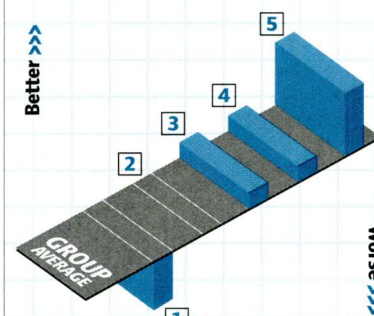


LAB REPORT

Power output falls shy of the rating by an inconsequential 5W, making this in practice the least powerful of the group – though 95W can rattle most windows. There's a slight droop into 4 ohms, of course, but not very big: what does become more obvious as the load gets tougher is that clipping is slightly asymmetric, which under very hard driving could make the sound a little loose in the bass.

Distortion is so-so in the midrange, but one of the best in the group at high frequencies. In fact, it actually appears slightly better at high frequencies than lower in the band, which is highly unusual. Since those midband levels are actually pretty good by most standards, it's no wonder this amp sounds clean. Noise is fine, but bandwidth depends a bit on volume setting, losing about 1.5dB at 20kHz with volume set to two o'clock, 0.2-0.5dB at more typical settings. Excellent standby power consumption!

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1) Dynamic power >> -30%
- 2) Frequency response >> 0%
- 3) Dynamic range >> +10%
- 4) Distortion >> +10%
- 5) Output impedance >> +40%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	100W	95W
Distortion (1kHz/8 ohms)	0.05%	0.009%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-	±0.25dB

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DENON PMA-2000AE

Amplifiers don't come much bigger than this heavyweight

Does this Denon need to be so big? Possibly not, but there's not much in the way of space wastage inside. Dominant on the central axis of the case are a pair of mains transformers, which share the work for both channels. Denon refers to this layout as a "leakage cancelling" arrangement and indeed it will tend to reduce the stray magnetic field that transformers invariably produce. Each transformer looks about 250VA size, and they feed a pair of reservoir capacitors of generous size and rating.

Each channel's power amplifier board is mounted vertically, attached to a heatsink of considerable size, though we were slightly surprised to discover only a lone pair of transistors ('Ultra-High Current' MOSFETs) per channel carrying the output current. Then again, the rating of the amp is quite modest at only 80W nominal, so said pair shouldn't be too stressed. The preamplifier functions are fulfilled on a separate board of similar size, mounted on the right of the unit right by the sockets – input selection is electronic.

As with other Denon products we've reviewed recently, physical assembly is tried and trusted rather than cutting-edge, with single-sided circuit boards, through-hole components and wire links; if nothing else, this makes it possible to service the unit even after some years, if it's necessary. Facilities are pretty much what one expects these days, though the MM/MC phono input is a nice extra.

SOUND QUALITY

Reading through our listeners' notes, the sense emerges that its performance is somehow less than the sum of its parts. Few comments express outright love and admiration for the sound, even while most of them praise specific aspects of the sound.

One listener did rate it very highly overall, concluding his remarks by pointing to a nice, enjoyable balance that clearly suited his ears. The others, though, were not entirely drawn in.



There were good things said about timing and also about detail. Bass was mentioned specifically only once and that was favourable, too (usually if the bass is weak, it's the first thing to get picked up). Treble was thought perhaps bright, but images were felt to be well spaced across the width between the speakers.

Our feeling, based on the panel's comments and our own sighted listening, is that this amp's presentation of detail is too immediate. This ends up by giving a forward balance. The comments on bright treble, and a general feeling that imaging is much better on width than depth, point this way and, switching rapidly between this and other amps, we did find it more upfront than the average.

It's also a function of the music one listens to and how it's recorded. The Rossini track, for instance, has a lot of acoustic space and can tend to 'swim' if not kept under control. This amp's dry nature reins that in and it's no surprise that it was the most successful track. Damien Rice, by contrast, was too bright. But there is plenty to enjoy here (including the commendably quiet and detailed phono stage) and this amp is worth consideration. **HFC**

VERDICT

SOUND >>> 84%

FEATURES >>> 85%

BUILD >>> 87%

VALUE >>> 81%

HI-FI CHOICE

OVERALL SCORE

83%

A powerful and imposing amp which sometimes seems a little dry and shut-in, though there's plenty of detail on offer and fine bass, too. Vinyl users should also note the excellent built-in phono stage.



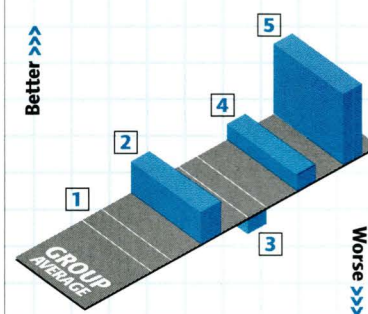
LAB REPORT

The sheer size of this amp leads one to expect more than its rated 80W, and sure enough it whacks out 128W with ease. The amp barely flinches into 4 ohms too, albeit with limited dynamic headroom because the transformers are not highly stressed (dynamic headroom is a get-me-by for compromised transformers, in reality).

Distortion is very low in the midband, but does pick up a bit in level as the frequency rises, at high outputs anyway. Output levels below 10W show barely any discernible distortion. The bandwidth is wide, -1dB points being a couple of octaves beyond each end of the 20-20k audio band, while output impedance is across the band is among the lowest we've ever seen.

Very low values at HF can be a sign of instability, but we looked hard for that and failed to find any here. The amp is a little thirsty when idling, but in standby its consumption is acceptably low.

HOW IT COMPARES



1] Dynamic power >>> 0%

2] Frequency response >>> +20%

3] Dynamic range >>> -10%

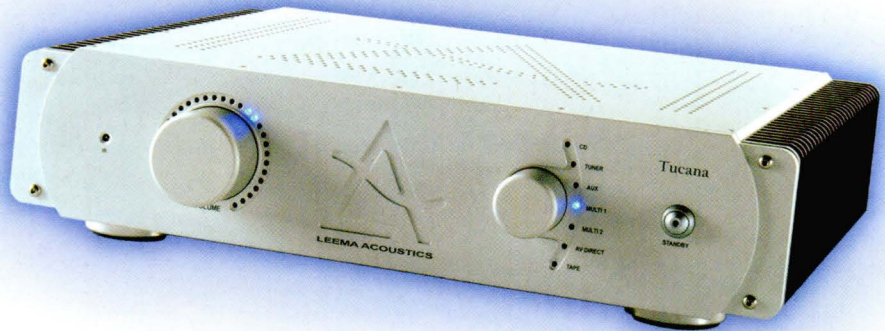
4] Distortion >>> +10%

5] Output impedance >>> +45%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	80W	128W
Distortion (1 kHz/8 ohms)	0.01%	0.0025%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-	±0.15dB

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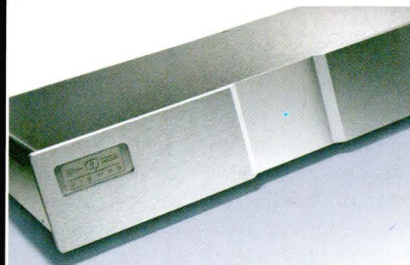
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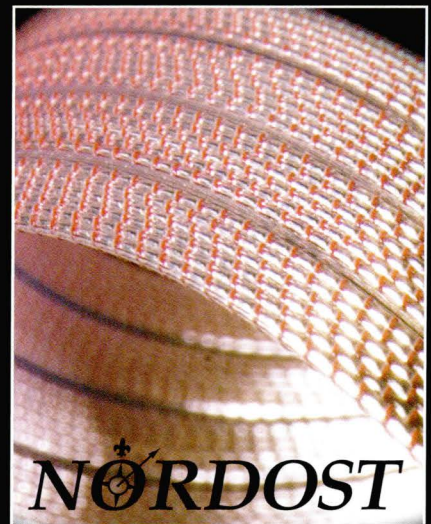
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ONKYO A-9755

D is for 'different' as Onkyo delivers another 'digital' amplifier

Onkyo's A-933 did well in our *Ultimate Group Test* in HFC 278; the A-9755 we're testing here is a larger, somewhat more costly but technically related design. The most significant feature it shares with the '933 is the use of a Class D (switching) output. It's not really a digital output, though the distinction is a bit vague, and Onkyo is happy enough to call it a 'Vector Linear Digital' circuit.

The fact is that the use of Class D techniques confers certain benefits, most notably in power efficiency. This eases the requirements on the heatsink, which is indeed pretty small for a notionally 150-watt amp. It also makes this the ideal amp for green-minded headbangers, if there are any. Heatsink apart, the amp doesn't appear remarkably different internally, with a pair of output transistors per channel, some nice big reservoir capacitors and a pair of mains transformers.

Those two contribute a large share of the unit's imposing weight and size. The input stages are largely conventional, with selection between the seven inputs being carried out by an electronic switch. In addition to those seven there is a 'direct' input, which bypasses all the preamplifier functions and effectively turns the unit into a power amp. Unfortunately, there's no corresponding preamp output, so this is not an ideal unit for bi-amping arrays. One of the inputs is a moving magnet phono input, which far from being the simple afterthought one often finds, is a neatly assembled board using discrete transistors.

SOUND QUALITY

Given the technical similarities between the units, it's little surprise that the tone of our listeners' comments followed that of the A-933. On the whole, this wasn't thought a very 'hi-fi' amp – in terms, that is, of chucking buckets of detail at the listener, driving bass with great aplomb and so forth. But the panel didn't worry about that because they were too taken up with enjoying the music.



There were a few technical comments, of course, praising not least the timing and the soundstage. As far as tonality is concerned, one suggested the bass wasn't the best of the group, and another pointed to a mild treble lift. One listener thought that voices in the Rossini were a touch rough at the climax, although this was well within the amp's power envelope.

For the rest of the panel, it was more about musical realism and the sense that performers were really in the room. It seems that this amp manages to combine dynamic agility, a good if not great level of detail and an unfussy presentation in such a way as to create clear and believable musical images, which largely transcend any technological artifice. It's laid back too, and a couple of comments suggest that the soundstage seems distant, but that simply equates to long-term listening comfort.

If you really want to hear the finest details in your disc collection, this may not in the end be the best option. Being really picky, it's veiled next to the Creek and Cambridge units, for instance. But, in terms of offering a plausible connection with a real musical event, it's got a lot going for it, and its high power output makes it a good choice for inefficient speakers, big rooms and loud tastes. **HFC**

VERDICT

SOUND >> 83%



FEATURES >> 85%



BUILD >> 83%

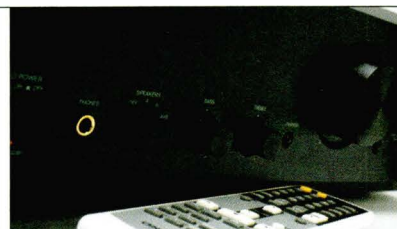


VALUE >> 85%



Not an amplifier for those who habitually listen for fine details, but its involving and musical nature makes it a very pleasing listen with any material. The far-away soundstage benefits those who like music laid back.

HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE **84%**

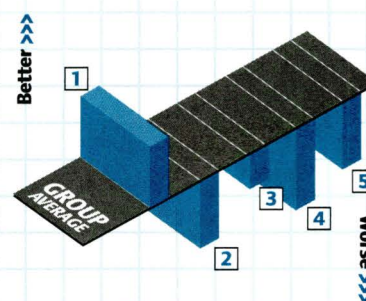


LAB REPORT

As we've come to expect from switching amps, there's a residual of the carrier frequency in the output, a signal that varies in frequency from around 500kHz downwards as power increases, with level of a few hundred millivolts. It doesn't seem to have any effect on sound quality, but it makes maximum output a little hard to gauge, especially given that the amp doesn't clip in quite the same way as conventional designs.

Nevertheless, we reckon that 200W is a fair estimate, with basically no dynamic headroom but good current delivery into 4 ohms, equivalent to power of at least 300W. Distortion is considerably higher than with the other amps, with high harmonics present, though it drops to insignificance at levels of 1W or so. A high and frequency-related output impedance makes treble response dependent on the speaker: on the whole, 20kHz comes out a little bright.

HOW IT COMPARES



1] Dynamic power >> +35%

2] Frequency response >> -40%

3] Dynamic range >> -20%

4] Distortion >> -50%

5] Output impedance >> -40%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	150W	200W
Distortion (1kHz/8 ohms)	0.08%	0.06%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-	±0.1dB

CONCLUSIONS

Do these six thoroughly modern amps live up to the stereo masters of old?

We promised at the outset of this group test that we would see how these amps compare sonically with those of yesteryear. But, with all due respect to the prophets of doom, for whom things have never been on a steady downward decline since 1960, we humbly submit that the upwards trend of quality – which we have mentioned before – shows no sign of levelling off. Or if it does, it's a function of the dreaded law of diminishing returns: there's simply not much room left for improvement.

None of these amps would pass muster if put to the test in a true top-notch system. But none would be in any kind of disgrace, either. They all offer balance, power, refinement and inner detail, in sufficient quantity to qualify for the uniformly high marks we have deliberately awarded them. Still, as ever, they differ sufficiently to make some careful auditioning worth the bother.

Scoring lowest overall, the Audiolab two-box combo does come perhaps at something of a disadvantage, though we'd argue

comparing it with like-priced integrated amps is not unfair. Clearly it scores highest for its upgrade potential, and we'd love to hear the power amp partnered by a slightly more open and detailed preamp. It is just pipped sonically by the Denon, a monster larger in every dimension than the two Audiolab boxes together. Overall, we felt the Denon is a decent amp, but it does need to do a little more to justify its size and weight.

Onkyo's A-9755 offers a lot of power for the money and we liked it a lot. It shares with the cheaper

and less powerful A-933 a basically musical approach, but for the extra £200, we'd tend to be more impressed by extra detail and insight rather than the extra power. Call us hard-hearted, but we find it a little underwhelming.

The Arcam, Cambridge and Creek models are hard to choose between. True, the Creek is by some margin the dearest, but its extra refinement is a justifiable expenditure in our book. Arcam's fully featured A90 is just a touch less detailed, but in terms of value for money the Cambridge wins by a nose. **HFC**

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HINTS AND TIPS

» Amplifiers generate heat and need to be able to get rid of it. Allow a little breathing space round the amp.
» Use decent cables. Phono plugs can also lose their grip in sockets and speaker wires have a habit of working loose in screw-down terminals.

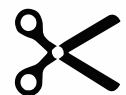
» Switching to standby, rather than properly off, usually avoids losing settings and can help speed warm-up.
» Amps are seldom electrically microphonic, but the casework can resonate audibly. A few damping devices can work wonders.

STEREO AMPLIFIERS AT A GLANCE



MAKE MODEL	Arcam DiVA A90	Audiolab 8000Q/ 8000P	Cambridge Audio Azur 840A	Creek Destiny	Denon PMA-2000AE	Onkyo A-9755
PRICE	£895	£1,000	£750	£1,200	£1,200	£700
SOUND						
FEATURES						
BUILD						
VALUE						
OVERALL						
CONCLUSION	Well-featured amp with very little character of its own. Highly informative, rather than analytical.	Offers the advantages of pre-/power separates at an integrated's price, but the preamp seems less detailed and neutral than the power.	Detailed and lively, with excellent midrange and treble detail; some very mild bass anomalies.	A highly assured performer that doesn't ever try to superimpose its own personality on the music.	Imposing amp that can seem a little dry, though there's plenty of detail on offer and fine bass, too.	Not incredibly detailed, but its involving, musical nature makes it a very pleasing listen.
KEY FEATURES						
LINE INPUTS	7	6	7	6	6	6
TAPE OUTPUTS	2	2	1	1	2	2
PHONO INPUT	Optional	No	No	Optional	Yes (MM/ MC)	Yes (MM)
SIZE (WxHxD)	43.5x10x32cm	44.5x7.5x34cm (each)	43x11.5x38.5cm	43x7x31 cm	43.5x18x48cm	43.5x14.5x43cm
WEIGHT	11kg	6 + 8.7kg	15kg	10kg	24kg	17.6kg
REMOTE CONTROL	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
BALANCED INPUT	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
LAB CONCLUSIONS E = EXCELLENT • G = GOOD • A = AVERAGE • P = POOR						
CLIP POINT (8 OHM)	28.5V G	33V G	33V G	27.5V G	32V G	40V E
FREQUENCY RESPONSE	±0.2dB G	±0.3dB G	±0.2dB G	±0.25dB G	±0.15dB E	±1dB A
DYNAMIC RANGE	99dB A	104dB E	107dB E	104dB E	102dB G	101dB G
OUTPUT IMPEDANCE	0.08 ohm G	0.07 ohm G	0.06 ohm G	0.02 ohm E	0.02 ohm E	0.14 ohm A
POWER CONSUMPTION	20W/2.4W	30W/-	64W/10W	37W/0.7W	58W/3W	62W/1W

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This issue, we move into multichannel with AVIA's first-rate calibration DVD. It's intended for hardcore home cinema types to get the best possible picture and sound, but don't forget that the disc is ideal to optimise sound from SACD and DVD-Audio, too.

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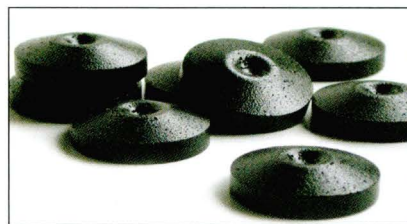
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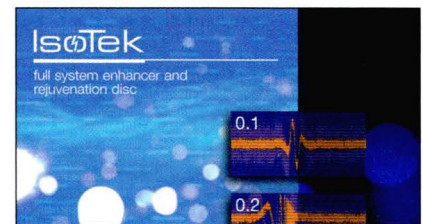
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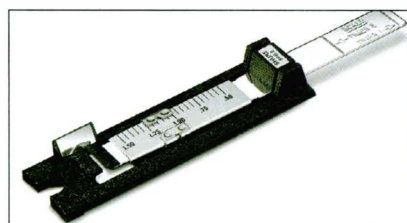
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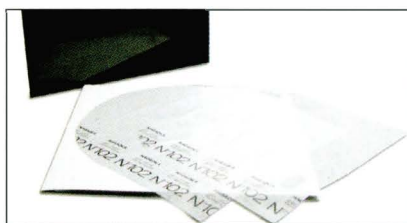
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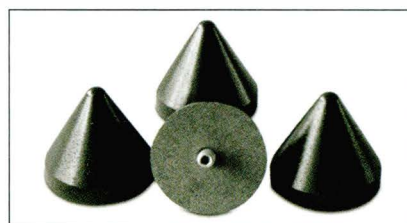
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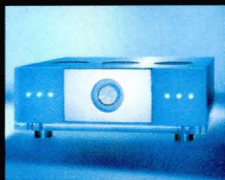
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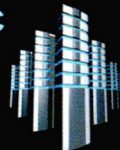
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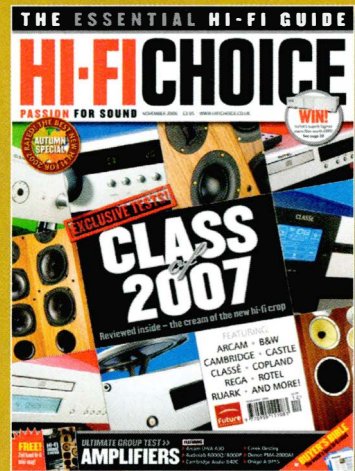
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HI-FI CHOICE BUYER'S BIBLE



Welcome to the *Hi-Fi Choice Buyer's Bible* – the ultimate guide to the very best high performance hi-fi and multichannel gear you can buy. Here, you'll find our favourite current products listed under easy to use categories, plus useful information on what to look for and how to get the most from your components.

Reviews you can trust

Our test results are the most reliable in the business. We employ the most experienced reviewers and use the most stringent techniques to ensure our ratings are the ones you can trust. All the equipment we rate most highly is contained within these pages, from CD and vinyl to the latest multichannel disc players. Whether hi-fi stereo or high performance surround and vision, these components will take you a step closer to reality.

How to use this guide

The *Hi-Fi Choice Buyer's Bible* is the best way to make a shortlist of components for your system. Pick the ones that best suit your taste and budget, then use our *Dealer Classified* section to find specialist outlets where you can audition these components with your favourite discs.

Products that score more than 80 per cent overall are automatically considered for inclusion in the *Hi-Fi Choice Buyer's Bible*. Any Best Buy or Editor's Choice Badges awarded are also displayed.

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CD PLAYERS

Audio disc players for music only



Despite the emergence of new formats and the resurgence of an old one

(vinyl), CD is still the king of formats if you require breadth of choice. And despite the fact that other sources will play CDs, if you want to hear your discs at their best, there's little substitute for a dedicated CD player.

It's also the most enduring format on the market. Despite high-resolution contenders like SACD and DVD-Audio, nothing has been able to undermine this universally popular format.

CD players work by reading a stream of 1s and 0s off a disc that spins at a constantly changing speed (to counteract the increasing length of 'groove'). This bitstream is then digitally filtered before undergoing digital-to-analogue conversion in the DAC (D-to-A convertor). Thereafter, the signal is filtered



again before being amplified and sent to the output sockets.

The processes of reading the disc and converting the data are sometimes split between a CD transport and separate DAC in so-called two-box players. A popular approach with very high-end kit, this separates the electronically noisy elements from the sensitive analogue stages, but can introduce timing errors known as jitter, therefore one-box players usually offer best results where budget is a consideration.

SUPER AUDIO CD

SACD or Super Audio CD is a relatively new audio-only format introduced by Sony and Philips. It offers higher resolution than CD in the form of considerably greater bandwidth and improved dynamic range. It also has the potential for uncompressed surround sound using up to six channels, and most new discs take advantage of this. SACD discs are usually hybrids and will play on normal CD players, but you won't be able to appreciate their highest quality or their multichannel capability without an SACD-compatible player. Some SACD players also play DVD and even DVD-Audio – these are listed in our DVD section.



Q&A

WHAT'S A DAC?

A DAC or digital-to-analogue convertor is a fundamental part of any CD player and converts the digits read from the disc into an analogue music waveform which is amplified to line level.

WHY HAVE SEPARATE TRANSPORTS & DACS?

Discs are read by a transport or disc drive, which creates radio frequency 'noise'. Separating the DAC means the conversion can be done with less interference.

CAN I USE AN OUTBOARD DAC WITH MY INTEGRATED CD PLAYER?

Yes, if it has a digital output – and most do.

DO I NEED DIGITAL CABLES FOR A CD PLAYER?

No. All analogue cables are suitable for connecting a CD player to an amp. Digital specific cables with 75ohms impedance are useful when connecting the player to a digital recorder or DAC.

WHAT IS OVERSAMPLING/UPSAMPLING?

Oversampling involves multiplying the sampling frequency by a whole number, usually between four and 32, but sometimes higher, and is designed to let the DAC to work in a more linear fashion. Upsampling is where the data stream is stretched out by interpolation and is typically used to refer to large changes in sampling rate such as from 44.1kHz to 192kHz.

CAN I PLAY SACDS ON A NORMAL CD PLAYER?

Yes. The vast majority of SACD discs are hybrids, with a CD layer that all CD players can read.

CAN I PLAY DVDS ON A CD PLAYER?

No, the same applies to DVD-As. But you can play CDs and DVD-As on normal DVD players.

TOP BUYS



Cambridge Audio Azur 640C v2 £250

The old 640C was a fantastic low-cost CD player, and its new 'v2' replacement is even better – an extraordinarily graceful and dynamic-sounding player for the money.



Cyrus CD8x £1,000

The latest diminutive CD spinner from Cyrus is an absolute stunner. Highly detailed and supremely musical, it's more than a match for many more outwardly exotic machines.

Our favourite CD PLAYERS

Audio-only CD and SACD players

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS							ISSUE NUMBER
				SACD COMPATIBLE	ELEC DIG OUTPUT	OPT DIG OUTPUT	CD-RW COMPATIBLE	CD TEXT	BAL ANALOGUE OUT	HEADPHONE SOCKET	
UP TO £1,000											
[HB]	Cambridge Audio Azur 640C	250	If you value the effortless flow of musical information, you should certainly hear this player	●	●	●			●	285	
[HB]	Creek Evo	495	A minute treble lift; otherwise this is a very capable player that offers fine value		●	●	●			285	
[HB]	Cyrus CD6s	650	Small, efficient and cheerful, with plenty of energy and just the smallest lack of detail			●			●	276	
[HB]	Cyrus CD8x	1,000	Impressive mix of detail, musicality, analysis and appearance. Even better with the PSX-R power supply (£400)		●	●				270	
[HB]	Denon DCD-700AE	250	Excellent entry level quality CD player lacks for nothing. Musicians please note: even has variable speed replay		●	●	●		●	284	
[HB]	Marantz SA7001	430	Easy, relaxed sound arguably lacks true grit, but is extremely listenable from CD and SACD	●		●			●	281	
[HB]	Naim CD5i	825	As idiosyncratic as ever, but sonically the CD5i is the definitive player at the price				●			259	
[HB]	Rega Apollo	498	Unless you can't abide top-loaders, check this out: musically it's a highly praiseworthy performer		●		●			285	
[HB]	Sony SCD-XA3000ES	800	A good, if not truly great, all-rounder with CD and fine multi-channel SACD performance	●	●	●	●	●	●	276	
ABOVE £1,000											
[HB]	Arcam FMJ CD36	1,200	Fine detail, extension, dynamics and neutrality: 'bland' or 'honest' according to listener taste!		●	●	●	●		280	
[EC]	Audio Research Ref CD7	8,000	Top of the CD playing tree, with a sound as open and musically accomplished as you'll ever find from the format		●	●			●	279	
[HB]	Ayre CX-7e	2,195	If you want a clean-sounding, revealing and entertaining player with fabulous build this is a strong contender		●				●	281	
[EC]	Classé CDP-202	4,750	CD/DVD-A player with brilliant sound, if sophistication is your bag. Includes S-video and composite outputs		●	●	●		●	284	
[HB]	Copland CDA823	1,750	Don't let the laid-back character fool you - this player has plenty of insight too		●		●		●	280	
	Creek Destiny	1,200	Our listeners failed to connect intimately with this player, though essentials all seem excellent		●	●	●	●		280	
[HB]	Cyrus CD Xt/DAC X	1,900	Greater resolve than the single box competition, and DAC X has six digital inputs for whole system conversion		●	●	●		●	279	
[EC]	Esoteric X-03SE	4,950	Resolution and musicality close to the top of the game. For out and out transparency and build quality it's hard to beat	●	●	●	●		●	285	
[EC]	Krell SACD Standard	4,244	A landmark SACD player and an excellent CD player at what by Krell standards is a relatively affordable price	●	●	●	●		●	251	
[HB]	Linn Majik	1,950	Compact and capable of most CD formats, it's musically communicative with fine pace and enthusiasm		●	●	●			283	
[HB]	McIntosh MCD201	3,400	Superb CD performance and even better with SACD which has its own output level control.	●	●	●	●		●	284	
[HB]	Marantz SA-15 S1	1,200	Some inconsistency over imaging, but enjoyable performance, strong on detail	●	●	●	●			276	
[HB]	Meridian G06	1,695	Great combination of all-round attainment with superb looks and build quality, plus superb remote control		●	●	●	●		281	
[EC]	Meridian 808i Signature	8,250	Stunning CD player with added preamp functions. Versatile and quite delightful		●	●	●	●	●	263	
[HB]	Myryad MXC6000	1,400	A highly listenable player with excellent tonal balance and very fine detail		●		●			270	
	NAD M5	1,299	Beautifully made and very versatile CD/SACD player handles most formats with very superior dynamic range	●	●	●	●		●	285	
[HB]	Naim CD5x	1,450	Unique design nicely complements a sophisticated and highly capable performance				●			280	
[EC]	Naim CDX2	2,800	Fine quality one-box CD player, but its best feature is upgradeability via outboard XPS supply				●			238	
	Primare CD31	1,500	A well made player that may not appeal to timing freaks but does lovely things with large musical forces		●	●	●		●	270	
[EC]	Resolution Audio Opus 21	2,850	Dynamic, well timed and 3D performance with an analogue volume control and digital input for a second source				●		●	244	
[HB]	Sugden CD21SE	1,395	Delivers its particularly musical touch brilliantly and warrants the attention of all true music lovers		●					271	
[HB]	Shanling CD-T100	1,650	Stunning-looking player that offers various operating modes: in any, sound is clear and assured		●				●	270	
[HB]	T+A CD1230R	1,500	Filter options make this a player for all tastes, aided by top quality engineering				●			280	
[EC]	Wadia 302	3,999	A dynamic and gripping player, with bass to die for and resolution to change your listening habits		●	●	●		●	253	

SPECS KEY SACD COMPATIBLE Plays high-resolution SACD discs in multichannel and/or two-channel mode. ELEC DIGITAL OUTPUT Electrical coaxial output for digital connection to a DAC or digital recorder.

OPT DIGITAL OUTPUT Optical Toslink output for digital connection to a DAC or digital recorder. CD-RW COMPATIBLE Will play CD-RW (rewritable) discs, most CD players can cope with CD-Rs.

CD TEXT Will display album and track titles from inserted disc. BAL ANALOGUE OUT Balanced XLR output connections for similarly equipped amplifiers.

HEADPHONE SOCKET Quarter inch (6.3mm) headphone jack fitted to the CD player. VARIABLE OUTPUT Player features both fixed level and variable, volume adjustable outputs.



Copland CDA823 £1,750

This distinguished, yet minimalist Scandinavian CD player combines a real ear for detail with full-scale dynamics and an effortless musical style. A genuine hi-fi star.



Resolution Audio Opus 21 £2,850

This player is king of subtlety. Outwardly, the music sounds dynamic and well-scaled, but it's the level of inner detail resolved here that is truly outstanding.

DVD PLAYERS

Disc players for audio and video



DVD has proved a phenomenal success in commercial terms and has virtually extinguished the market for budget CD players – you can't really beat a multiformat player when it comes to features. Early DVD players were not particularly good CD spinners because of the enormous amount of RF interference produced by video circuits, but as this problem has been identified manufacturers have begun to tackle it. Nowadays, most DVD players are competent CD players and a few are very good – often as not they are the ones that play DVD-Audio discs as well.

The great advantage of DVD is that it offers sufficient capacity to hold a feature length movie or music concert *and* discrete multichannel sound on a disc the size of a CD. In the case of plain DVD-Video discs, the audio is encoded in either the Dolby Digital or DTS format, both of which use 'lossy' compression to fit the audio onto the disc alongside the video data. You can use



a DVD player with your stereo system by connecting the stereo outputs, though this won't give the surround sound benefits that the format specialises in.

Q&A

WHICH AUDIO OUTPUTS GIVE THE BEST QUALITY?

Use the analogue outputs for CD, DVD-A and SACD, and the coaxial digital output for DTS and Dolby Digital movie soundtracks.

WHICH VIDEO OUTPUTS GIVE THE BEST QUALITY?

The best connection is component video closely followed by RGB Scart, which is clearly superior to S-video and the basic composite video option.

DO I NEED A MULTICHANNEL AMP TO USE A DVD PLAYER?

Only if you want to hear music and movie soundtracks in multichannel surround. DVD players can be used with stereo amps and just two speakers to great effect, but you'll only get stereo, not surround sound.

DO I NEED PROGRESSIVE SCAN VIDEO?

It's worthwhile for the very best picture quality, but make sure your DVD player and display device support PAL progressive.

DVD-AUDIO

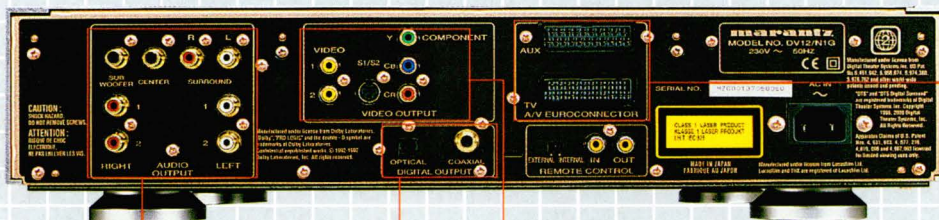
DVD-Audio is a high-resolution format that offers multichannel, stereo and Dolby Digital tracks on dedicated DVD-A discs. The discs can be played on any DVD player, but the CD-beating high-fidelity sound can only be appreciated with a DVD-A player.

While offering similar benefits to SACD, it has the advantage of on-screen display for information – lyrics, images and so on. To save

you having to decide which format to go for, a few brands are bringing out universal players to cover SACD and DVD-A, alongside CD and DVD-Video – a neat and relatively future proof route into high-resolution multichannel music. Higher-end models featuring high-bandwidth compatible digital audio links are now also appearing, enhancing DVD-A/SACD sound when used with similarly equipped amps.



CONNECTIONS



SCART CONNECTIONS:

These are a good-quality option for video, especially ones that output RGB.

ANALOGUE AUDIO OUTPUTS: For stereo and multichannel connections, use these for best results with DVD-Audio, SACD and CD.

DIGITAL OUTPUTS: For Dolby Digital, DTS and PCM audio bitstreams.

VIDEO CONNECTIONS: Yellow sockets are composite, green and blue sockets are for component which gives best results, while the black multipin socket is S-Video, which sits qualitatively between the two.

Our favourite DVD PLAYERS

HB BEST BUY **EC** EDITOR'S CHOICE

Audio/Video disc players

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					ISSUE NUMBER	
				DVD-A COMPATIBLE	SACD COMPATIBLE	ELEC. DIG. OUTPUT	OPT. DIG. OUTPUT	HEADPHONE SOCKET		
UP TO £1,000										
HB	Arcam DiVA DV78	700	Imagine almost all of the DV88 Plus at a knock-down price. Top picture and sound performance for the money	●	●	●	●	●		254
HB	Denon DVD-1920	250	Respectable (if unexciting) and flexible audio player, but something of a star from its HDMI equipped upsampling video subsystem	●	●	●	●	●		276
HB	Denon DVD-2910	600	It's now a little long in the tooth, but this mid-price Denon universal player's audio and video performance is still pretty impressive	●	●	●	●	●		262
HB	Marantz DV7600	600	A mid-market cracker, with sound and picture quality that generally exceeds expectation	●	●	●	●	●		274
EC	Onkyo DV-SP503E	300	Budget Onkyo universal player is a straightforward Pioneer based implementation, which performs well with audio and video	●	●	●	●	●		275
HB	Philips DVP9000S	400	Philips proves it hasn't lost its touch with mid market DVD players. Includes SACD and HDMI for quality video, and it's a star	●	●	●	●	●		274
	Sony DVP-NS9100ES	1,000	Video playback is foremost, with the iLink delivering significantly better sound than the analogue counterparts					●	●	274
HB	Yamaha DVD-S2500	700	Universal player, slightly stronger with video than audio, but well turned out with a wide range of analogue and digital in and outputs	●	●	●	●	●		280
ABOVE £1,000										
HB	Arcam DiVA DV137	1,250	Good overall audio performance and excellent upscaling HDMI DVD-Video player, but stereo-only SACD playback at time of writing	●	●	●	●	●		285
	Cyrus DVD8	1,200	An impressive step up from the DVD7+, which includes component video outputs			●	●			238
EC	Denon DVD-A1XV	2,500	Sophisticated universal player with state of the art video processing, high class disc replay, especially SACD	●	●	●	●	●		266
EC	Linn Unidisk SC	2,995	Groundbreaking universal player with built-in preamplifier, with excellent picture for home cinema and sound for hi-fi	●	●	●	●	●		259
HB	Marantz DV9600	1,500	With excellent, next-generation picture and impressive sound quality on CD and SACD, this sets a very high standard to beat	●	●	●	●	●		280
EC	Meridian G98AH	3,625	Meridian's most widely compatible G-Series DVD player – groundbreaking DVD-Audio replay and a fine CD player too	●		●	●			265
EC	Naim DVD5	2,565	Naim's first DVD player is a real success, notable for its class-leading sound with CD and (optional) multichannel DVD-Audio	●						263
HB	T+A SACD 1245 R	2,000	Dedicated stereo only/SACD/CD player avoids the usual compromises. It does a limited job, but it does it with fine fidelity			●	●	●		279
EC	Townshend TA 565 CD	3,000	A universal machine that excels with music and is quite exceptional with good ol' stereo CD			●	●	●	●	270

SPECS KEY **DVD-A COMPATIBLE** Plays high-resolution DVD-A discs in two and multichannel modes. **SACD COMPATIBLE** Plays high-resolution SACD discs in two and multichannel modes. **ELEC DIGITAL OUTPUT** Electrical coaxial output for digital connection to a multichannel amplifier or receiver. **OPT DIGITAL OUTPUT** Optical Toslink output for digital connection to a multichannel amplifier or receiver. **HEADPHONE SOCKET** Quarter inch (6.3mm) headphone jack fitted to the DVD player.

TOP BUYS



Philips DVP9000S £400
An attractive and well designed DVD player with a great picture and good CD/SACD sound.

BEST BUY
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Marantz DV7600 £600
A universal player that's strong with all formats, including music on CD/SACD/DVD-A.

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magazine



Arcam DiVA DV137 £1,250
The first 'universal' player from this top British brand is a cracker, sonically and visually.

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magazine



Meridian G98AH £3,625
A digital *tour de force* – as exceptional with both audio and video as you'd expect.

EDITOR'S CHOICE
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine

In celebration of Supra's 30th Anniversary, the Sword-ISL has been developed, based on technologies derived from the award winning Sword speaker cable. Sword-ISL is a high-end 2-channel interconnect, fitted with phono or XLR plugs, in 0.8m pairs. The first "run" will be supplied in a luxury Limited Edition 30th Anniversary Presentation case.

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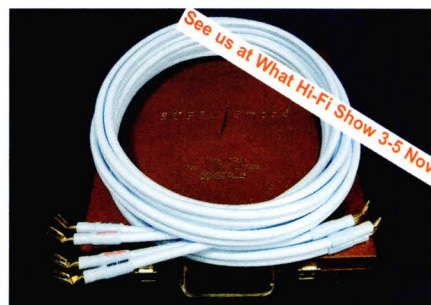
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Hi-Fi+ (#41) "Even as it stands its performance is jaw-droppingly musical and seems set to cut a swathe through the opposition".
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Hi-Fi World (Apr 2006): "Sonically, it's up with the best I've heard.....An excellent high-end cable"



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VINYL

Turntables, cartridges and phono stages



Record players or turntables offer the digital revolution serious competition when it comes to sound quality. Even a modest model can turn musical tricks that most CD players struggle with. Some call it vinyl warmth, but in reality it's a lack of digital hardness that makes the format so engaging. True, the software requires a bit more care, but even a knackered LP is more playable than a scratched CD.

Record players are made of three, perhaps four, fundamental parts. The turntable is the plinth and platter, usually also containing the motor and any suspension system. A tonearm sits on the plinth and allows the cartridge to trace the vinyl groove by pivoting or parallel tracking over the record. The cartridge contains the means of turning the mechanical movement of the groove wall into an electrical signal.

A fourth element is an amp dedicated to the delicate job of amplifying and equalising the cartridge's insubstantial output. This is called a phono stage and can be found in some integrated amplifiers and preamps, but is increasingly purchased separately for use with line-only amps.



TURNTABLE SET-UP

Setting up a turntable varies from model to model, but the general principle is to level the platter by adjusting the suspension or, as with solid platters, the surface it sits on. Sprung suspensions sometimes require a bit of fine-tuning to sound their best, but the principle is to achieve a smooth, pistonic bounce. Cartridge set-up is even more critical, as the angles at which the stylus traces the groove affects its tonal balance and levels of distortion. A good alignment protractor is essential if you are intending to set up your own cartridge, as is a degree of patience. In essence, there are two angles you need to get right: the tracing angle as the cartridge crosses the record if you are looking from above, and the vertical tracking angle (VTA), which is adjusted by raising or lowering the arm base to bring the arm parallel with the record surface.

There are two types of phono cartridge: moving magnet (MM) and moving coil (MC), and with a few exceptions the latter outperforms the former. But MCs produce a lower output and require better-quality amplification to be heard at their best. As a general rule, MCs offer a broader bandwidth, greater dynamics and more detail, but the better moving magnets do most things well enough to distract you from your CD collection.

TOP BUYS



Goldring
 GR2 £265

This Rega-derived design is stunning value for money. Supplied with an RB250 arm and Goldring 1012GX cartridge, it'll blow most budget CD players into the weeds.



Michell
 Tecnodec £767

A distillation of all the good things from some of Michell's past masters, all knitted together beautifully. Understated looks and a full-bodied sound make this a star.



Clearaudio
 Champion £1,475

Current king of acrylic, the Clearaudio deck, arm and cartridge combination turns in a beautifully well-balanced delivery, but choose your support wisely.



Avid
 Volvere Sequel £3,500

Avid has been one of the most impressive exponents of the vinyl arts in recent years, and this mid-range deck is a stunning example of analogue engineering.

Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

TURNTABLES

Record players

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS				
				SPEEDS	SUSP SUBCHASSIS	SWITCHABLE SPEED CHANGE	SUPPLIED WITH ARM	ISSUE NUMBER
	Avid Diva	1,100	A solid and powerful sounding deck with fine build, requires a smooth, relaxed cartridge for best results	33/45	●			247
	Avid Volvere Sequel	3,500	Heavyweight turntable that will deliver more of what's in a vinyl groove than most of the competition	33/45	●	●		229
	Clearaudio Champion	1,365	Smart, practical and good-sounding, with impressively 'dead' arm. Isolation recommended	33/45			●	268
	Clearaudio Ambient	4,220	Innovative use of materials leads to a fast, precise and thrilling sound (tonearm extra)	33/45		●	●	271
	EAR Disc Master	7,695	Combines new 'no contact' drive technology and high quality materials to bring state of the art resolution	33/45/78	●	●	opt	276
	The Funk Firm Funk	450	You won't find another turntable at the price that can touch the Funk for dynamics, tone colour or detail	33/45		●	opt	279
	The Funk Firm Funk V	750	Vector drive brings a refinement to the standard Funk that increases resolution. For high-class analogue sound, it's a killer	33/45		●	opt	284
	Goldring GR2	265	Nicely finished Rega-manufactured deck with RB250 arm and an open, engaging sound quality	33/45			●	266
	Michell Tecnodec	767	Simple and smartly understated, performs above expectations – full-bodied and highly detailed	33/45			●	268
	Michell Gyro SE	1,058	New DC motor-equipped Gyro offers great looks and even better sound. Price includes RB300 arm	33/45	●		●	239
	Michell Orbe SE	2,015	A superb turntable, able to mix it with the best at virtually any price. Now features new DC motor	33/45	●			235
	Nottingham Analogue Horizon	529	A fluid midrange and nimble but rich bass are two of the many attributes of this bargain deck (price inc RB250 arm)	33/45			●	253
	Pro-Ject Debut SE	200	The best Debut has a quality cartridge and easy upgrade arm cable, it delivers a scale, energy and resolve with ease	33/45			●	276
	Project RPM 5	400	Great looks plus an on the ball, engaging sound that puts it in the serious league, needs good isolation for best results	33/45			●	279
	Pro-Ject RPM 9 X	1,000	A gorgeous turntable that sounds as good as it looks – vital and transparent! Price includes carbon-fibre arm	33/45			●	268
	Rega P5/RB700	698	Combines a great sense of timing with market-leading resolution and a phenomenal tonearm – a hard act to beat	33/45			●	257
	Rega P7/RB700	1,298	A highly capable player that could hold its own in the most exalted company – a vivid and natural performer	33/45			●	257
	Rega P9/RB1000	2,498	Exceptionally elegant hi-tech player with complex outboard supply, ceramic platter and wonderful RB1000 tonearm	33/45		●	●	228
	Roksan Radius 5/Nima	850	Sophisticated design with accomplished sound quality, excellent imagery and good isolation (acrylic version tested)	33/45	●		●	248
	SME Model 10A	3,411	Elegant and extremely capable design, tested here with Series V/309 hybrid arm	33/45	●	●	●	195
	SME Model 20.2A	5,274	Beautifully built, extremely neutral damped and suspended deck with superb sound. Inc V arm	33/45/78	●	●	●	186
	Townshend Rock Anniversary	4,900	If you want to get to the meat and bones of the music this is a great tool for the job (price inc. Excalibur arm)	33/45	●		●	259

Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

PHONO CARTRIDGES

MM and MC cartridges

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS		
				MM	MC	REPLACEABLE STYLUS
	Cartridge Man MM III	625	The MM III challenges MCs at twice the price, it produces detail, space and energy and has stunning resolve in the right arm	●		
	Denon DL-103R	200	Adds refinement to basic DL-103, at a price. One of the best rock'n'roll cartridges around		●	
	Grado Prestige Black	40	Offers admirable detail and treble extension, with good bass and ambience too	●		●
	Grado Prestige Gold	110	Produces rich, open and expansive music with the minimum of fuss	●		●
	Lyra Helikon	1,095	Highly capable and highly neutral, this is a cartridge for all seasons, albeit fussy about vinyl quality	●		
	Sumiko Blue Point Spec Evo III	239	High output MC with refinement at high frequencies and a nimble, articulate and revealing sound		●	
	van den Hul MC One Special	699	A gorgeous cartridge that's worth the price every time you hear a familiar track in a whole new light		●	
	van den Hul Condor XCM	2,400	A stunning cartridge with stereo imaging, dynamics and detail resolution to die for		●	
	Wilson Benesch Naked Analog	1,450	With its smooth clean highs, transparent midband and nimble bass, this is a lot of performance for the money		●	

Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

PHONO STAGES

Phono stages

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS			
				MM PHONO INPUTS	MC PHONO INPUTS	AU. GAIN	AU. IMPEDANCE
	Cambridge Audio 640P	60	Tested with the almost-as-good £40 540P, this remarkable phono stage brings refinement and bass weight to budget vinyl	●	●		
	Clearaudio Smart-Phono	250	Minute and very practical unit with slightly bright, but very detailed and low-noise, sound	●	●		
	NAD PP2 phono stage	50	A fine buy for turntable users on a tight budget – open tonality and clarity is distinctly impressive for the money	●	●		
	Tom Evans Microgroove	400	For dynamics and real bass extension with good tonal colour this is the one to beat. The Plus version (£700) is even better!		●		
	Tom Evans The Groove	1,800	Plenty of detail, excellent imaging and almost flawlessly neutral: a good choice for maximum information retrieval off any LP	●			
	Trichord Dino/Dino+	498	Relaxed yet resolute with very good image depth and natural balance, not to mention great flexibility	●	●	●	●

TURNTABLE SPECS KEY **SPEEDS** Speeds offered in rpm. **SUSP SUBCHASSIS** Turntables with a sprung or suspended support for the platter and arm. **SWITCHABLE SPEED CHANGE** Some decks require manual lifting of the belt from one pulley to another to change speed, but not these ones. **SUPPLIED WITH ARM** Deck is supplied complete with tonearm – some require a separate purchase in this department, but the dealer will fit it for you.

SUPPLIED WITH CARTRIDGE Some decks are supplied with a starter cartridge and this is included in the price shown.

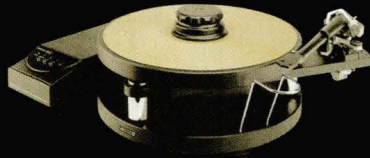
CARTRIDGE SPECS KEY **MM** Moving magnet cartridge – see amp and phono stage features to match this type, **MC** Moving coil cartridge – see amp and phono stage features to match this type

REPLACEABLE STYLUS Some cartridges have separate styli for ease of replacement, but it compromises sound quality

SME

The way to play vinyl...

Model 10



Model 20/2



Model 30/2



Series M2



Series 300



Series IV



Series V



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PINEWOOD MUSIC

HIGH END BABIES FOR THE BOOKSHELF

'High end' and 'bookshelf' were not generally considered to be compatible bedfellows - until now. If you are looking for the ultimate compact designs to work in tight surroundings, then you must turn your ears to the WILSON AUDIO DUETTE or KRELL LAT-2000. We are the only UK dealer to have both - and we love them to bits. A simple high quality integrated amplifier like a Krell 400xi is fine.

KRELL EVOLUTION 202

NEW AND JUST IN: The only preamplifier this beauty plays second fiddle to is its four-chassis big brother the mighty Evolution Two, which we also have. Preamplifiers are vitally important, yet often overlooked in favour of juicy power amps. But the fact is that once a signal loses its integrity, no power amplifier can right that wrong. With the 202, there is no wrong to be righted.

MARTIN LOGAN VANTAGE

This has to be the best value electrostatic available. Works virtually anywhere, and with an onboard powered woofer doesn't want or need massive horsepower. It's slim, it's elegant and it's ours. Why not make it yours, too?

SONUS FABER CREMONA

No newcomer, but a lovely alternative to the Vantage if you prefer dynamic floorstanders. The Cremona, like all Sonus faber, is renowned for its magical music-making. Available in Maple or Graphite finishes.

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RADIO TUNERS

FM and DAB hi-fi separates

Radio is a fantastic musical resource that's in danger of being taken for granted, but whatever your tastes there's someone out there catering for it. If you haven't got a decent tuner hooked up to your hi-fi already, you're missing out!

DAB or FM?

Digital Audio Broadcasting (DAB) is now said to be available to more than 80 per cent of the population and the long-term plan is to switch public broadcasting over to digital entirely, but hardware prices have yet to come down to a point where this would be acceptable. Its advantages over FM include hiss-free reception, the potential for a wider range of stations and the ability to display comprehensive programming information. FM's RDS system means that station name and occasionally track titles are displayed, but the range of information is fairly limited.

Where FM scores over DAB is in the lower cost of hardware and the greater reception

area. It can also provide higher sound quality if reception conditions are favourable. Absolute sound quality judgements are muddled by the fact that you are listening to different forms of compression and processing at the studio for each station.

What is clear, however, is that there are more and more radio stations broadcasting on DAB that aren't available on FM. So if it's variety of programming you're after, they have a lot to offer.

RECEPTION

The quality of signal you feed a tuner will dictate its sound quality. So serious FM listeners should get a decent external aerial and connect it with as few junctions and splits as possible. Every time you split the cable (ie take a feed for another tuner) you halve signal strength! With DAB the same applies but get a DAB-specific aerial. See www.bbc.co.uk/digitalradio for details.

TOP BUYS



Denon TU-1800DAB £250
Combines DAB with FM/AM reception and good all-round design at a tempting price.



Creek T50 £550
A thoroughly accomplished AM/FM tuner with a substantial and detailed sound.



T+A T1210R £1,000
This FM tuner looks, feels and sounds top-notch – great detail and imaging.



Magnum Dynalab MD 90T £1,195
FM tuner with valves – 'affordable' for an MD, but still streets ahead of most radios.

Our favourite TUNERS

🏆 BEST BUY 🏆 EDITOR'S CHOICE

FM & DAB HI-FI SEPARATES

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS
FM TUNERS			
🏆	Creek T50	550	Very fine results indeed with precision, polish and insight added to excellent basics
🏆	Cyrus FM-X	500	A classic no-nonsense FM tuner that achieves gratifying sonic results. Upgradable with PSX-R power supply
🏆	Denon TU-1500AE	130	Well attuned to the crowded modern FM band, this tuner produces clear, detailed sound with plenty of gusto
🏆	Denon TU-1800DAB	250	There's a little grain on FM, the generally decent performance on both bands makes this an great dual-band choice
🏆	Magnum Dynalab MD 90T	1,195	No remote or presets as standard, manual everything and valves... but its sound is simply sublime
	Marantz ST7001	300	FM reception could offer a little more detail and insight. DAB is fine, but near-identical Denon 1800 is cheaper!
🏆	NAD C422	180	Admirably free of roughness or other obvious nasties, with just a slight lack of clarity
🏆	Primare T21	600	A very fine tuner – bass and treble are both well extended and detail is excellent
	Pure DRX-702ES	210	Apparently good value is restricted by persistent veiling on FM: 'PAC' on DAB mellows sound a little
	Rega Radio 3	398	Strong bass, clear treble and a high enjoyment factor make this an appealing FM performer
	Rotel RT-02	279	A highly competent tuner which always sounds appealing and fuss-free
🏆	T+A T1210R	1,000	High-end looks are matched by the sound, which is detailed and sophisticated, with useful features too

DAB TUNERS			
🏆	Arcam DIVA DT91	450	As good as any on DAB, with serviceable FM, this one-box solution offers good build and value
🏆	Cambridge Audio DAB500	150	Very good sound, plus optional response tweaks, and slickest operation yet
	Cambridge Azur 640T	200	Slightly ahead of the pack in DAB performance, though FM is never better than decent
🏆	Denon TU-1800DAB	250	DAB reception is as good as any and FM performance clearly benefits from Denon's long experience
	Pure Digital DRX-702ES	330	Very flexible DAB (inc L-band) and FM tuner. DAB is good, FM a touch disappointing
	Sony ST-SDB900	200	Nicely designed UK-tuned model is a touch bright with both DAB and FM but generally insightful and clear

SPECS KEY WAVEBANDS Which bands are supported: FM, M – medium wave, L – long wave, DAB – digital audio broadcasting. PRESETS How many stations can be stored in memory. RDS Radio Data System – station names and program titles can be displayed among other facilities (FM only, DAB has more comprehensive display potential). REMOTE CONTROL For the couch potato. SIGNAL STRENGTH METER Useful for setting up an aerial. ROTARY TUNING KNOB An ergonomic alternative to buttons.

SPECIFICATIONS						
WAVEBANDS	PRESETS	RDS	REMOTE CONTROL	SIG. STRENGTH METER	ROT. TUNING KNOB	ISSUE NUMBER
FM,M,L	128	●	●	●	●	251
FM	7		●	●	●	283
FM,M,L	100	●			●	281
DAB,FM,M	200	●	●		●	283
FM	opt		opt	●	●	257
	200	●	●		●	283
FM,M	30	●		●		250
FM	30	●		●		230
DAB,FM,M	99	●	●	●	●	283
FM,M	20			●		283
FM,M	30	●	●	●		242
FM	100	●	●			283
DAB,FM	16		●	●	●	269
DAB	10		●	●	●	248
DAB,FM	60	●	●	●		260
DAB,FM,M	200	●	●		●	274
DAB,FM,M	99	●	●	●	●	242
DAB,FM,M	60	●	●		●	259

elevate your expectations ...

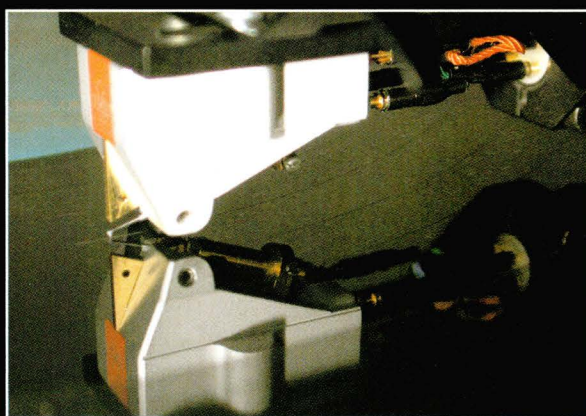


Emillé

With a decades old pedigree in precision engineering Emille has applied the company's traditions (as well as their senior personnel's audiophile aspirations) to the introduction of this range of carefully thought out, impeccably designed and beautifully constructed valve amplifiers.

EMT

Synonymous with broadcast quality turntables, tonearms and cartridges that set unequalled standards for performance, reliability and longevity, EMT now return to the high-end with a compelling selection of cost-no-object components for the most demanding of vinyl enthusiasts.



Air Tight

Valve amplifiers have 'come of age' recently and none more convincingly than the hand crafted models from Air Tight of Japan. Regarded internationally amongst the most musically informative and emotionally persuasive components in the real high-end, all Air Tight products are now available to discerning audiophiles throughout the UK.

SELECT AUDIO

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DIGITAL AUDIO RECORDERS

CD, MiniDisc and hard drive recorders



MiniDisc

MD's strength is versatility. You can record and then re-record many times over. Editing facilities are second to none – you can erase mistakes, name tracks and re-order a disc's contents with a few simple button pushes, making it ideal for building compilations. They're pretty robust too.

Sound quality is below that of CD-R/CD-RW. The format uses a Sony-developed compression technology called ATRAC, which discards part of the data in order to squeeze it on the disc. If you're copying from CD to MD, the result tends to sound a little cold in comparison, lacking a degree of detail and ambience. But to most people it still sounds light years ahead of cassette – clean and hiss-free.

Recordable CD

With recordable CD you have a choice of two disc types: CD-R discs are the cheapest, but you can only record once; and CD-RW discs are a little more costly, but you can re-record on them *ad infinitum*.

Though the latest machines incorporate some useful editing facilities, CD-R/RW is not as flexible as MD. However, sound

quality is higher – if you're recording from a CD, the best models will give you a copy that is very close to the original. In terms of compatibility, most CD players will play back a CD-R disc, but older models might have trouble with CD-RW (though you can, of course, play the disc back on your own recorder). If you want to play a CD-R/RW on a DVD player, check for compatibility.

Hard drive

The latest contender on the digital recording scene is also the most flexible. Some HDD (hard disk drive) recorders can store whole music collections if you use a compression format such as MP3. HDD recorders are taking over from multidisc CD changers as sound servers in multiroom installations, where their ability to play more than one piece of music at a time is a great boon. HDD also offers impressive editing facilities on a par with MD, and they can also record from CD (or to CD-R/RW) at high speed.

At present, sound quality isn't the driving force behind the format – flexibility and storage capacity being bigger issues – and a plain CD-R/RW machine will outperform an HDD recorder in fidelity terms.

TOP BUYS



Philips CDR802 £300

Multidisc recorder that's slick and capable, albeit with a slightly flaky build.



Yamaha CDR-HD1500 £599

Combining hard disk with CD-R adds flexibility to digital audio recording.



Cambridge Audio Azur 640H £600

Rip and store CD tracks on hard disk, create playlists, connect to a PC and more.



Hermstedt Hifidelio Pro £850

160GB hard disk and CD-R/RW drive in a box – as music servers go, this is a cracker.

Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

DIGITAL RECORDERS

CD-R/RW, MD and HDD recorders

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS			
				DECKS	HD CAPACITY (GB)	OPTICAL IN/OUTPUTS	ELEC IN/OUTPUTS
CD-R/RW RECORDERS							
	Denon CDR-1000	400	A respectable player and recorder, though some midband congestion was noted when recording	1		● ●	218
	Marantz DR6000	400	No frills, but in its fundamentals this is one of the finest CD recorders on the market	1		● ●	233
	NAD C660	500	Audiophile twin deck offering high-speed copying, HDCD replay and notably fine recording from analogue	2		● ●	243
	Philips CDR802	300	Tacky looks and build notwithstanding, this is a well-equipped and technically sound 3-to-1 autochanger/recorder at a good price	2		● ●	233
	Philips CDR951	380	An improvement on previous models, it delivers the musical goods in some style	1		● ●	205
	Pioneer PDR-609	270	Classic CD recorder with outstandingly good sound for the money on both record and replay	1		● ●	243
	Pioneer PDR-W839	350	Good-quality twin CD burner makes recordings that can be hard to distinguish from the original. Good value too	1		● ●	218
MD RECORDERS							
	Pioneer MJ-D508	200	Well equipped, but musically sleep-inducing that receives its recommendation owing to the price	1		● ●	205
	Sony MDS-JE480	130	Straightforward and effective, but the three real killer features are price, price and price	1		●	233
HDD RECORDERS							
	Cambridge Audio Azur 640H	600	Not so much a HDD recorder, more a complete audio computer and nerve centre in one useful box. Complex, but worth it	1	160	● ●	276
	Hermstedt Hifidelio Pro	850	Can be used as a CD player, but also as a recorder, and can encode MP3, play AAC and form the heart of a distributed audio system	1	160	● ●	280
	Yamaha CDR-HD1500	599	Great for archiving a music collection or making compilations without compromising on flexibility or sound quality	1	250	● ●	278

SPECS KEY **DECKS** Amount of drive mechanisms on board – twin-deck recorders use one to play while the other records. **HD CAPACITY** Amount of gigabytes of storage capacity, for HD only. **OPTICAL IN/OUTPUTS** Optical Toslink in and outputs for digital connection to a CD player or DAC. **ELEC IN/OUTPUTS** Electrical coaxial in and outputs for digital connection to a CD player or DAC

STEREO AMPLIFIERS

Integrated and pre/power amps



Amplifiers come in two basic forms: integrated and preamplifier (pre) plus power amp combinations. Integrated simply means that both pre and power sections are in one box. There are definite advantages to separating the low level, delicate signals in the preamp from the radiations of a power amp, so the more ambitious designs come in two or more cases. In some cases, each channel has its own power amp called a monoblock.

Amplifiers use two basic technologies: transistors or valves. Transistors are popular because of their practical and technical advantages, but valves – aka tubes – live on owing to aspects of sound quality that transistors can't replicate. If you want to play your music loud, use transistors; if you appreciate acoustic music, try valves.

The fundamental of amp/speaker interfacing is power rating and speaker sensitivity. You can drive a high-sensitivity speaker with a ten watt valve amp, but it takes a 200W behemoth to get the best out of speakers which present a difficult load. As a rule, you can't have too much power.

How to choose an amp

The main areas in which amps vary are: timing, dynamics, stereo imaging and transparency. Timing is the ability to present the attack and decay of each note precisely; amps with strong timing have a snap and coherence that is very appealing.



Dynamics is a general term for the ability to portray variations in level between individual notes and is different to dynamic range (the difference between the loudest and softest notes). Dynamically strong amps tend to have more life and energy.

Stereo imaging is how solid or three-dimensional an instrument or voice sounds. The point of having two rather than one speaker is to make it possible to recreate the soundstage of the original recording, thus amps that have strong imaging skills can create a sonic space that seems to extend the room.

Transparency of detail is the most obvious difference between amps. One amp will present more subtlety than another, but the drawback with using this as your main criterion is that a 'forward' or 'bright' sounding amplifier will emphasise detail at the expense of overall musical coherence.

HOME CINEMA STEREO

Stereo amps can be used in home cinema set-ups as well. You don't get the surround and centre channels, but well set-up stereo speakers do a remarkably good job of creating atmosphere for movies. Stereo amps

tend to be better at reproducing music as they don't have the (electrical) noise-inducing digital processing of AV amps. AV amps cost three to four times as much as stereo models of a similar quality.

Q&A

SHOULD I LEAVE MY AMP ON ALL THE TIME FOR BEST RESULTS?

All audio electronics perform better when they are warmed up, and this is particularly the case when it comes to amplifiers. If there's no way that you can leave it on all the time, make an effort to switch it on at least 20 minutes before listening.

WHAT IS BI-WIRING AND BI-AMPLING?

Bi-wiring is when you run separate cables to the treble and bass/mid terminals on the speaker. In most instances, this improves sound quality so long as identical cables are used. Bi-amping is using two stereo amps to drive one pair of speakers, using one amp to drive the treble and the other for the bass/mid sections of the speakers.

WHY DO VALVE AMPS HAVE SO LITTLE POWER?

Valve amps are inherently low powered in absolute terms – at least when you compare them to their transistor-based cousins. But when partnered with high-sensitivity loudspeakers, they are quite capable of producing perfectly adequate head-banging levels.

TOP BUYS



Marantz
PM7001 £350

If you thought the PM7200 was a great budget amp, just wait until you hear this! Its sound is so detailed and involving, you'll think it costs twice the price.



Arcam
DiVA A90 £890

Top dog in Arcam's DiVA range is this excellent integrated amp. Its strengths include a slick, flexible user interface and beautifully smooth and detailed sound.



Naim
NAC 112x/NAP 150x £1,475

Naim's new entry-level pre/power amp is a fabulously engaging combo. As you'd expect, rhythm and timing are to the fore, with a healthy dollop of finesse to boot.



Primare
PRE30/A30.2 £2,400

Beautifully made and with a sound to match, this Scandinavian pre/power combines warmth and body with energy and detail – a truly musical performer.

Our favourite BT BEST BUY ED EDITOR'S CHOICE

STEREO AMPLIFIERS

Integrated amplifiers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					
				LINE INPUTS	PHONO INPUT	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
UP TO £1,000									
	Arcam DIVA A65 Plus	400	Occasionally a touch bright, but a good all-rounder with decent detail and plenty of life	5	●	●	●	40	278
	Arcam DIVA A80	600	A very competent mid-range amp with a sophisticated control system and crisp, detailed sound	6	●	●	●	90	251
BT	Arcam DIVA A90	850	Very well specified, well built, a delight to use and a real musical all-rounder	7	opt	●	●	90	273
ED	Cambridge Audio 640A V2	300	Nasty-feeling controls are the only real downside to this powerful and lively little amp	6		●	●	75	279
ED	Cambridge AudioAzur 840A	750	A very fine amplifier, practical, smart and well made; offers some of the best sounds we've heard at this price	7		●	●	120	281
ED	Creek Evo	500	Not the most accurate, strictly, but its lively, energetic musical presentation is entirely lovable	5	opt	●	●	85	283
	Cyrus 8vs	800	Slightly inferior to Cyrus 6vs, but the tables are turned with the add-on PSX-R power supply – in that form it's a real Best Buy	7		●	●	70	261
ED	Denon PMA-1500AE	500	Well set up to make the most of big-scale music, with copious power and drive, though slightly bright	5		●	●	70	278
ED	Denon PMA-700AE	250	One of a growing number of new low cost amps, it offers good timing and analysis at up to moderately high volume levels	4	MM	●	●	50	284
ED	Marantz PM7001	350	Detailed and highly communicative amp with fine treble and good bass extension – exceptional value for money	5	●	●	●	70	279
ED	Marantz PM7001KI	550	Building on an already fine amp, the KI variant offers superb bass and bags of detail	5	●	●	●	70	283
ED	NAD C352	350	A dynamic and musical amp at a bargain price – another budget classic from NAD	7		●	●	55	253
ED	Naim Nait 5i	699	A trade-off of more power and better connectivity against less inputs works surprisingly well in a grunty, musical manner	4		●		50	252
ED	Onkyo A-933	500	Puts the music first, with sound that delivers the basics correctly but above all involves the listener	5	●	●	●	80	278
ED	Primare I21	750	A confident and energetic amp, with just a touch of veiling at times. Great build quality	4		●		75	273
ED	Roksan Caspian M Series-1	1,000	Improved version is as involving as ever but now with added focus and bass depth	5		●		85	278
ED	Sugden A21a	899	This single-ended, Class A transistor amp has exquisite resolving ability and presence – an authentic classic	5				25	224
ABOVE £1,000									
ED	Arcam FMJ A32	1,200	Ultra-civilised amp with plenty of features that's also highly revealing and musical	7	●	●	●	100	266
ED	Audia Flight TWO	2,500	Quirky, but musically highly effective model which is expressive and analytical, with some minor operational quirks	8		●		100	280
	AyreAX-7e	1,995	High end sound at a sensible price. Lacks the balls of less revealing designs but has precision in the timing department that is rare	5		●		60	284
ED	Bryston B100-SST DAC	3,850	A remarkable amplifier which is greatly enhanced by the inclusion of an impressive onboard DAC	6	●	●	●	100	275
ED	Chapter Précis	3,995	Tight, nimble and dynamic across the board and unusually articulate in the bass, but the ergonomics could be refined	6		●		130	281
ED	Copland CSA29	1,900	A hybrid valve/solid state amplifier that gets close to offering the best of both worlds	6	opt	●		85	255
ED	Creek Destiny	1,100	Adds impressive high-end virtues to the excellent basic performance we've come to expect from Creek	6	opt	●		100	277
ED	Denon PMA-2000AE	1,200	Unusually refined and detailed medium power design with the attributes necessary for good stereo only SACD replay	5	●			80	275
ED	Densen Beat B150	3,000	Gorgeous bass: slight treble dryness detracts only a little. Good sense of scale and rock-steady rhythms appeal too!	6	opt	opt		100	277
ED	Gamut DI 150	5,700	Serious contender for the best integrated amp ever. The DI 150 takes on pre/power combos on their own terms	6		●		180	275
ED	Krell KAV-400xi	2,698	The best integrated Krell yet is quick, agile, solid and finely detailed	5		●		200	247
ED	McIntosh MA2275	5,400	A valve amplifier that doesn't patronise. It's not soft-centred and it understands dynamics	5	●	●		75	271
ED	Marantz PM-11S1	2,500	A good-looking, well-endowed, high-quality amp that's a great match for the impressive SA-11S1 stereo CD/SACD player	6	●	●	●	100	265
ED	NAD M3	1,899	Massive and flexible, it goes very loud with fine authority and dynamic range, but lacks some sparkle	7		●		180	285
ED	Primare I30	1,500	A smooth, sophisticated yet agile performer, and beautifully built too	6		●		100	267
ED	Sugden A21SE	1,995	Hot-running Class A amplifier that sounds more delicious than most. A definite step up from the classic A21a	4		●		40	268
ED	Unison Research Unico 200	3,000	Hybrid integrated with high power/quality low power modes combines much of the best of solid state and valve design	5		●		200	269

Our favourite BT BEST BUY ED EDITOR'S CHOICE

STEREO AMPLIFIERS

Pre/power amplifiers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS						
				PREAMPLIFIER	POWER AMPLIFIER	LINE INPUTS	PHONO INPUT	REMOTE CONTROL	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
UP TO £2,000										
	Arcam FMJ A32/P35	1,980	One of the few correctly matched integrated/power combinations, the sound has real gravitas and sophistication	●	●	7	●	●	100	227
ED	Cyrus DAC XP	2,200	A knockout DAC/pre with naturalness and resolution to die for and six digital inputs for signals up to 96kHz	●		2		●		266
ED	Densen Beat B-250/B-350	8,200	Upgradeable to surround, with sweet preamp and slightly coloured power amp, but sound is big and assured	●	●	6		●	125	270
ED	Exposure 2010 S Integrated/Power	1,098	Bi-amping with the additional power amp increases the musical communication of an already fine integrated	●	●	6		●	75	264
ED	Naim NAC 112x/NAP 150x	1,475	Uprated entry-level Naim pre/power is a master of musical communication	●	●	6		●	50	262
ED	Quad 99/909	1,650	Well thought out and well executed, with a strong, engaging sound and just a little veiling	●	●	5	●	●	136	256
	Rotel RC-06/RB-06	598	A capable and surprisingly powerful-sounding combination which offers real value	●	●	5	●	●	70	285
ABOVE £2,000										
ED	Arcam FMJ C31	1,200	Professionally presented, beautifully built and exceptionally revealing, this preamp achieves much by doing little	●		5	opt	●		273
ED	Border Patrol Control Unit	2,995	Bluff looking valve preamp, with one of the most neutral yet dynamic sounds around	●		5	opt			277

SPECS KEY **LINE INPUTS** Input sockets for source components with a line level output: CD players, DVD players, tape decks, tuners, phono stages etc. **PHONO INPUT** Input sockets and onboard phono stage for a cartridge. Either MM (moving magnet) or MC (moving coil), occasionally both. **REMOTE CONTROL** A remote control is supplied with the amplifier. **HEADPHONE SOCKET** To drive your cans with. **POWER OUTPUT** Manufacturer's rated output in watts per channel.

Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE
STEREO AMPLIFIERS *continued*

Pre/power amplifiers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					ISSUE NUMBER	
				PREAMPLIFIER	POWER AMPLIFIER	LINE INPUTS	PHONO INPUT	REMOTE CONTROL		POWER OUTPUT (W)
EC	Bryston BP26 DA/2B SST	5,550	Bryston's top preamp is now a serious competitor. The power amp reveals a lot of signal and delivers serious grunt	●	●	6	opt	●	100	278
EC	Chapter Preface/II+	9,800	Among the finest amps available, the resolution of this preamp and power amp challenges the best at any price	●	●	6		●	300	249
EC	Chord Prima/Mezzo 140	6,100	Small, muscular, beautifully made and styled and sounds like a dream	●	●	5		●	120	269
EC	Conrad-Johnson ACT2/Prem 350SA	20,000	Valve preamp and solid-state power deliver some of the most transparent and naturally dynamic sounds around	●	●	5		●	350	264
MB	Densen Beat B-200/B310	2,300	Lively, energetic combination that bring a great sense of scale to familiar recordings	●	●	8	opt		80	276
	EAR 864/534	4,156	Valve combo delivers fine measured and subjective performance and inspires great confidence	●	●	6	●		50	254
EC	ECS EA-1	6,000	Understated monoblocks with real transparency to the fine detail, passion and energy in your record collection		●				180	253
EC	Gamut D3	3,430	Creamy smooth, yet lets you hear all the fine detail that goes to making a tonally rich, dynamically strong sound	●		5	opt	●		265
EC	Gamut D200 Mk3	3,950	A great power amp that's now even better – one of the best regardless of price		●				200	247
EC	Halcro dm10/dm68	25,550	Extravagant, extreme and massive amp combo will probably polarise opinions, but delivers stunning midrange clarity	●	●	5	●	●	225	243
EC	Hovland HP-100/RADIA	12,745	Uncommonly musical valve/transistor hybrid transcends stereotypes, one of the genuine high achievers	●	●	9	opt		125	250
EC	Krell FPB 700cx	14,998	Reference class amplifier may represent overkill in many systems, but when no compromise is called for, this is it		●				700	234
EC	Linn Klimax Kontrol	6,000	Beautifully executed example of Scots audio art, sounds as clean as it looks and is a lot more transparent than most	●		4		●		238
EC	Naim NAP 500	11,875	Wonderful neutrality, bandwidth and dynamic range, plus Naim's traditional leading-edge definition		●				140	208
EC	Naim NAC 552	12,100	Extremely expensive preamp, but still solid value. Magnificent sound with fine flexibility and convenience	●		6		●		233
MB	Primare PRE30/A30.2	2,400	Smart kit that lives up to the visual promise with gorgeous sound – a really musical performer	●	●	7		●	128	256

AV AMPLIFIERS

Surround sound amps for music and movies



The multichannel, surround sound or AV amplifier is a popular option, thanks to the success of the DVD player and home cinema. Now you can buy five channels or more of amplification for the price of two. Now that multichannel music is also on the agenda, there's a lot to be said for a good AV amp or receiver (an amp with a radio tuner built in).

So if you fancy hearing what DVD-Audio, SACD or even music DVD-Video can do, then check out a multichannel amp and speaker set-up – they're stunning with movies and none too shabby with music.

AV amps are usually designed primarily for movies and come with digital processing for the various soundtrack formats – Dolby Pro-Logic (analogue), Dolby Digital and DTS, which offer discrete surround sound in 5.1 and 7.1 channel formats. More ambitious designs also offer THX post processing, designed to emulate the sound of the mixing theatre at home.

Processing in AV amps is needed because the surround formats on DVD-Vs are compressed, limiting their high-fidelity



potential. This is why new formats SACD and DVD-A, which don't use 'lossy' compression, were created for music.

All this processing power can take its toll on analogue formats. The best multichannel amps for music are often the simplest, but any that offer a complete bypass option with six-channel input are suitable. It's also worth looking at real power – five or seven channels of amplification are not easy to produce with a feeble power supply, and the cheaper amps in particular often fail to live up to the claims.

Q&A

HOW MANY CHANNELS?

Depends on how many speakers you want. Multichannel music discs come with six or 5.1 channels, but for new movies, 7.1 is where it's at. 7.1 set-ups also mean you have speakers directly behind you – preferable for music discs.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A PROCESSOR AND AN AV AMP?

Processors don't have built-in amplification and you need separate power amps. AV amps and receivers have processing and amps in the same box.

WHAT DOES THE .1 IN 5.1 STAND FOR?

This is the LFE (low frequency effects) or bass channel that is reproduced by a subwoofer.

HI-FI MEETS SURROUND SOUND

With DVD-Audio and SACD offering high-quality multichannel music, surround sound is no longer just a home cinema thing. An increasing number of people want to build a multichannel system that will do their music as well as their movie

DVDs justice, and the number of AV products delivering sufficient quality is on the increase. But most aren't cheap – building a top-quality system with five or more channels is inevitably more expensive than sticking with stereo. There

are some very decent integrated options below £1,000, though the best (and most costly) route is to buy a separate processor and power amp(s). Or you can add AV amplification to a stereo model you can't bear to part with.

TOP BUYS



Yamaha
DSP-AX757SE £499
 If you're looking for a multichannel amp that's good with music as well as home cinema, this is your best bet below £500.



Arcam
DiVA AVR300 £1,300
 Here's one for those who value great sound over numerous gizmos and gadgets – an integrated AV amp for audiophiles.



Denon
AVC-A11XV £2,500
 A splendid 7.1-channel amp that packs in the latest digital links and processing formats without sacrificing sound quality.



Arcam
FMJ AV8/P7 £5,750
 A fantastic achievement from this respected UK brand – a top-ranking AV processor and seven-channel power amp.

Our favourite AV AMPLIFIERS

BBB BEST BUY EOC EDITOR'S CHOICE

Multichannel amplifiers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	RECEIVER	LINE INPUTS	7.1 COMPATIBLE	5-CHANNEL POWER (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
MULTICHANNEL INTEGRATED AMPS								
BBB	Arcam DiVA AVR350	1,500	Sets the standard for music and movie performance at the price, although features count low and HDMI limited	●	7	●	100	284
EOC	Denon AVC-A11XV	2,500	Sensible, real world derivative of AVC-A1XV, but still immensely flexible, and well endowed with digital i/o		11	●	140	273
EOC	Denon AVC-A1XV	4,000	Inelegant, but powerful and effective tool with excellent auto set-up and capable of driving two 5.1 systems simultaneously		●	●	170	266
EOC	Lexicon RV-8	5,000	Classy multi-zone receiver lacks high tech digital attributes (HDMI etc) but majors on very effective audio engineering	●	10	●	140	267
	Marantz SR-12S1	3,000	A multichannel amp that can be taken seriously in stereo too. Resources are in the engineering rather than the gimmicky	●	3	●	160	255
EOC	Pathos Cinema-X	4,750	No processing, just sexy Italian style, a sextet of valves and the chance of 450 watts in stereo! Cultured sound, too		5	●	110	270
EOC	Pioneer VSA-AX10Ai	3,000	State of the art one-box amplifier with enhanced sound quality, auto set-up and other enhancements		10	●	150	260
BBB	Sony STR-DB798	250	Cheap but effective, and passably good with pure audio sources, but control system messy	●	7	●	100	273
BBB	Sony STR-DB795	300	A superb value little amplifier, well appointed technically and successfully tuned for UK ears	●	7	●	100	260
EOC	Sony TA-DA9000ES	2,600	Arguably the first convincing fully digital amplifier, an excellent match for players with i.Link encrypted outputs	●	10	●	200	253
BBB	Yamaha DSP-AX757SE	499	Exceptional sounding budget/mid price receiver offers brilliant sound per pound; ergonomics could be better	●	9	●	100	273
MULTICHANNEL PREAMPS/PROCESSORS AND POWER AMPS								
BBB	Arcam A90+7.1 mod, P90/3	1,920	Add Arcam's multichannel module and a P90/3 power amp to the A90 stereo integrated and you've got got superb purist 5.1		8	●	90	250
	Arcam AVP700/P1000	3,000	Cutting-edge processor/tuner with HDMI sounds great, but the matching Class H power amp lacks finesse to match its power	●	8	●	135	275
EOC	Arcam FMJ AV8/P7	5,750	High-quality preamp/processor (£3,150) and seven-channel power amp (£2,600). An excellent fusion of stereo and surround sound		7	●	180	235
EOC	Classé SSP-600/ CA-5200	11,900	Subtle, exacting sound, tremendous flexibility and high power audiophile standard amplifier - lacks hi-tech digital interfaces		11	●	200	278
EOC	Copland CVA306/CVA535	3,748	Tube analogue six-channel pre transforms multichannel audio from a novelty into a genuine advance for the high fidelity art		5	●	125	236
	Linn Exotik	1,750	Is hi-fi ready to make the jump to multichannel music? Linn think so with this musical preamplifier		4			260
EOC	Meridian 861	9,833	Powerful surround processor with flexible modular construction, marvellous versatility to drive any speaker configuration		6	●		230
	Naim AV2/NAPV175/NAP150	4,175	First truly credible multichannel system from Naim is idiosyncratic but offers excellent basic sound with modest spatial steering		5	●	50	238
EOC	Parasound Halo C1/A51	7,500	Powerful and flexible processor/power amp combo with impressive sound. Excellent value – processor includes onboard screen		11	●	250	243
BBB	Primare SP31.7/A30.5	4,200	Great all-round system which brings the qualities of good stereo high fidelity to a multichannel world		5	●	120	238

SPECS KEY **RECEIVER** Integrated multichannel amp with built-in radio tuner. **LINE INPUTS** Input sockets for source components with a line level output: CD players, DVD players, tape decks, tuners, phono stages etc.

7.1 CHANNEL COMPATIBLE The amp either has seven-channel in and outputs or in some instances is equipped with seven channels of amplification.

5-CHANNEL POWER (W) Power output in watts per channel of all channels driven by the amp.



After 5 years in production, the Dino is still one of the most popular phono stages around. Highly versatile with accessible switches on the baseplate to facilitate a wide range cartridges.

'Never Connected' power supply technology virtually removes all incoming mains noise allowing only the music to be heard.

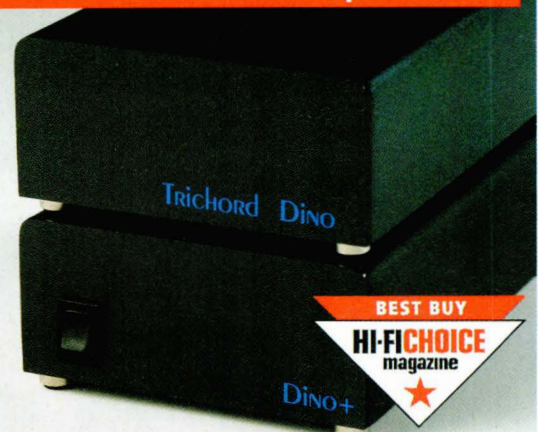
Visit our website to learn more about this exciting product and the high performance Diablo phono stage.

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Dino Phono Amplifier



HOME
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HOME
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As part of its Home Cinema Season, Sevenoaks is offering 3 Home Cinema Options designed to meet your lifestyle.

- **Options 1 and 2** combine some of the highest quality brands to give outstanding performance: and save you money.
- **Option 3** allows you to achieve a bespoke solution to meet the exact needs for you and your home.

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NEW



OPTION 1

Pioneer

PDP427XD 42" Plasma TV
DVR545HX DVD/HDD Recorder
VSX2016 AV Receiver

KEF

KHT2005.2 5.1 Speaker Package

£3945

Standard cable and installation package included

Normal System Price £4496

SAVE
£550

NEW



OPTION 2

Samsung

LE40F71BX 40" 1080p LCD TV

Denon

DVD3930 DVD Player
AVR3806 AV Receiver

B&W

MT30 5.1 Speaker Package

£5950

Standard cable and installation package included

Normal System Price £7050

SAVE
£1100

ME
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The experts in home entertainment

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3
OPTION

Creating your dream
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Sevenoaks can design and install a unique Home Cinema System to meet your exact needs and your budget.

Just call **0800 587 9909** and discuss with a Sevenoaks expert.



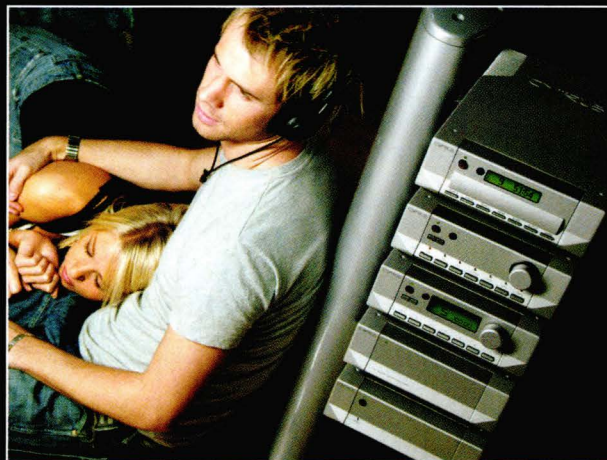
YOUR REQUIREMENTS

- PLASMA OR LCD SCREEN
- PROJECTOR AND SCREEN
- SCREEN SIZE
- DVD OR BLU-RAY PLAYER
- AV AMP / RECEIVER OPTIONS
- SPEAKER SYSTEM OPTIONS
- MULTI-ROOM OPTIONS
- LIGHTING CONTROL
- UNIVERSAL REMOTE

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MAKE THE INFORMED CHOICE TO ENHANCE YOUR LISTENING PLEASURE



Cyrus

If you've enjoyed listening to music before, try listening to it through a Cyrus system. With every product tuned by ear, Cyrus represents a quality of sound, which is rare at any price. Invest in a Cyrus system and you'll be rewarded with a wealth of sound you wouldn't have thought possible.

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
AWARDS 2003
PRODUCT OF THE YEAR
CD PLAYER
CYRUS CD64

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
AWARDS 2003
CD PLAYERS
BEST CD PLAYER £1500-£2000
CYRUS CD64

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
AWARDS 2005
CD PLAYERS
BEST CD PLAYER £1500-£2000
PRIMARE CD11

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
AWARDS 2005
STEREO AMPLIFIERS
BEST STEREO AMPLIFIER £1500-£2000
PRIMARE 136

Primare

Primare has built a worldwide reputation for producing innovative audio and video products that challenge convention. With a unique blend of sophisticated Scandinavian design, class-leading build quality, and proprietary state-of-the-art technological advance, they build into elegant, reliable, easy-to-use systems that promise years of high quality performance.

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SILVER RS6

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- Choice of Finish Options
- Bivirable
- **What Hi-Fi? Recommended**

"The Silver RS6 is a success: it looks dressed to kill, delivers plenty of detail and punches like a heavyweight"



WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
★★★★★
SEPTEMBER 2004

Spendor

Spendor 'S' Series loudspeakers feature;

- The hand-made 'e' generation bass-midrange drive units reward with a uniquely clear and musical sound
- Advanced 2nd generation 3D Liner Flow Port Technology for consistent and seamless sound even when placed close to a wall
- Natural wood cabinets incorporate Dynamic Damping engineered to eliminate booming of bass sound



"They consistently deliver a refined, yet dramatic sound that's of the quality beyond what we would expect at this price."

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
★★★★★
OCTOBER 2004

B&W XT4

The XT4 is the perfect solution when contemporary design, minimal visual bulk and outstanding performance are all top of list.

- Kevlar® Mid-Range Drive Unit
- Tube Loaded Aluminium Tweeter
- Dual 130mm Bass Drivers

"These are style speakers without compromise, competing with the very best at this price level."

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
★★★★★
MAY 2005

Arcam DiVA

Arcam believes that superb sound quality is vital to the real enjoyment of music. The DiVA range reproduces music at a level that is remarkably true to life.



WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
AWARDS 2004
BEST CD PLAYER
£250-£500
Arcam CD731

QED

How much difference can cables make to your system? With QED's range of audio and video cables the answer is probably much more than you think.



See and Hear the difference

Who are Sevenoaks?

Established as Sevenoaks Hi-Fi in 1972, we have grown steadily into one of the leading independent home entertainment specialists in the UK

We have 49 stores and are specialists in:-

- Hi-Fi
- Home Cinema
- Custom Design and Installation

Exceptional Product Range

We have one of the most comprehensive ranges of the best products from leading brands. To find out more:-

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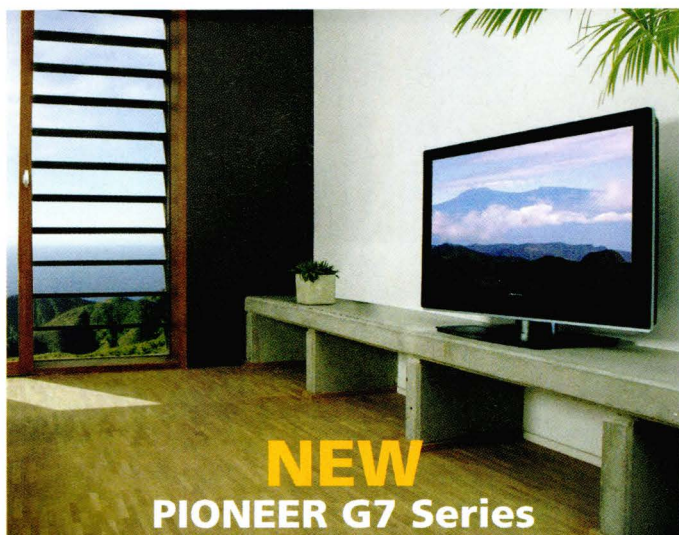
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- We visit your home to review the best options
- Agree a system specification and cost
- We manage the Installation
- You have years of enjoyment

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NEW PIONEER G7 Series

Built around its seventh generation PureBlack 2 panel, Pioneer's new 'G7' line-up includes the 42 inch PDP427XD, boasting 1024 x 768 XGA resolution, dual HDMI ports, PC Input, picture-in-picture and an ISF calibration mode. The 50 inch PDP507XD boasts a higher (1365 x 768) resolution.

HOME CINEMA SHOW

READING TOWN HALL • 21ST OCTOBER 2006

Everybody likes a birthday and Sevenoaks Sound & Vision is no different. Our Reading outlet is celebrating its 10th year in business by putting on a mini Home Cinema show at Reading Town Hall on Saturday 21st October 2006. Admission is free and you'll be able to see products from the likes of Pioneer, Arcam, Sim2 and KEF on display, with a rolling demonstration of the latest advances in home cinema. Opening hours will be 10.30am-4.30pm and there'll be a public home cinema forum at 3pm-4pm so pop in if you can.

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01752 226011

POOLE
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01202 671677

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40-41 LUNE STREET
01772 825777

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3-4 KINGS WALK SHOPPING CENTRE
0118 959 7768

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109-113 LONDON ROAD
01732 459555

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635 QUEENS ROAD, HEELEY
0114 255 5861

SOLIHULL
149-151 STRATFORD ROAD
0121 733 3727

SOUTHAMPTON
33 LONDON ROAD
023 8033 7770

SOUTHGATE
77 CHASE SIDE
020 8886 2777

STAINES OPEN SUNDAY
4 THAMES STREET
01784 460777

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8-9 COMMERCIAL ROAD
01793 610992

SWISS COTTAGE OPEN SUNDAY
21 NORTHWAYS PARADE, FINCHLEY RD
020 7722 9777

TUNBRIDGE WELLS
28-30 ST JOHNS ROAD
01892 531543

WATFORD
478 ST ALBANS ROAD
01923 213533

WEYBRIDGE
43 CHURCH STREET, THE QUADRANT
01932 828525

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1 THE GROVE CENTRE
01376 501733

WOLVERHAMPTON
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STEREO SPEAKERS

Speaker pairs for stereo sound



While loudspeakers are relatively straightforward in construction, they have one of the most difficult jobs in hi-fi – turning an electrical signal into an acoustic one. Most consist of two or more drive units in a box that usually has a port in it to make life easier for the cone in your mid and/or bass driver. Alternatives to this arrangement include panel speakers, which use electrostatic or ribbon technology, and horns, which use drive units in complex cabinets that greatly improve efficiency.

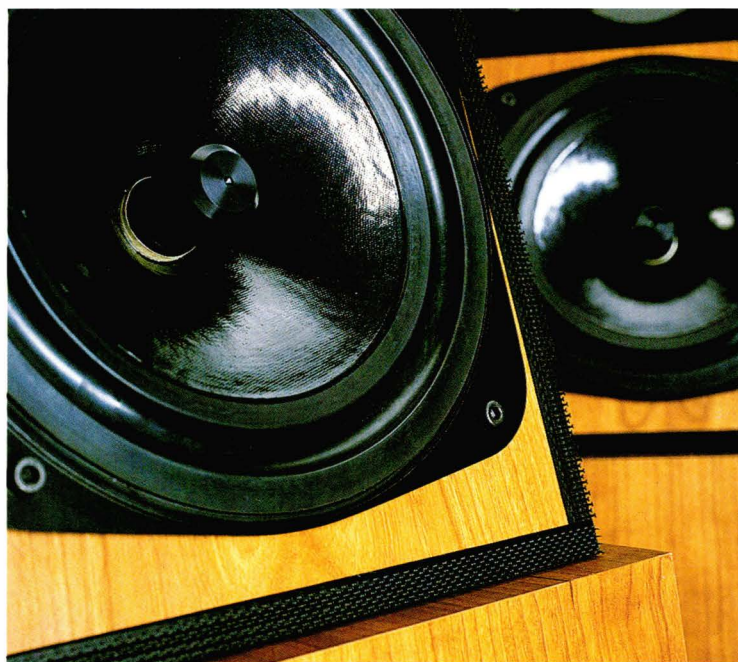
Box speakers are either designed to stand on the floor (floorstanders) or on a stand (stand or shelfmounts). Floorstanders have greater internal volume which can translate into greater efficiency and/or bass extension, but less substantial designs also introduce cabinet resonance and thus distortion. But they don't need stands and therefore have the aesthetic edge. Standmounts have less cabinet to vibrate and often score in terms of imaging and timing, but need good stands to work well.

Positioning

The closer the speaker is to a wall, the greater the reinforcement of bass. As all rooms differ, there's no simple formula for placement and experimentation will yield the best results. Altering the angle at which the speakers face the listener can also make a difference to balance and stereo image.

Going multichannel

Many stereo speakers can be augmented with centre and surround channels from the same brand to create a multichannel system. The most important element is a centre channel, which needs to match the stereo pair as closely as possible. For the best musical results, surrounds should be as per the front left and right channels, but if space or funds don't permit, smaller designs can be used quite effectively.



Choosing speakers

Because speakers and the rooms they are used in vary so much, choosing a pair tends to be quite subjective. To find some that will suit you, try to listen to a good variety to hear how they differ, and if possible, audition some at home. Tonal balance tends to vary the most, but is less important than more subtle factors such as timing and dynamics. Finally, listen with your ears not your eyes – great-looking speakers aren't necessarily great sounding.

Spikes

Floorstanding speakers and stands have threaded inserts for spikes that allow rigid coupling with the floor. These have the advantage of draining resonance from the speaker and giving tighter bass, but can result in more vibration getting back to the electronics and often cause the floor to resonate as well.

POWER

Though some speakers have a power rating, this isn't as informative as a rating for how difficult they are to drive, nor does it indicate wattage extremes for the partnering amp. In practice, an amplifier cannot be too powerful. Our listings quote ease of drive to indicate how much power

your amp needs to avoid a mismatch. An above-average (A+) speaker will work with amps rated at 25W plus, while an average (A) speaker will need 50W or more, and a below average (A-) speaker could require 100W plus to sound its best. These are guidelines rather than rules.

Q&A

IF SPEAKERS ARE RATED AT 75 WATTS, DOES THAT MEAN I NEED A 75 WATT AMP?

No, see the box on power for the full story.

WHICH SPEAKERS ARE BEST FOR SMALL ROOMS?

Those designed to work close to the wall will be smoother in confined spaces. Speakers that have relatively dry, tight bass will also sound better.

WHICH SPEAKERS ARE BEST FOR BIG ROOMS?

Big, efficient, easy-to-drive designs are more likely to be able to fill a room better than compact models.

DO I NEED TO BUY CENTRE AND SURROUND CHANNELS FROM THE SAME BRAND AS MY STEREO SPEAKERS?

Yes, assuming that you're wanting to create a homogenous surround sound experience, where voices don't change when they move from one channel to another.

TOP BUYS



Rega
R3 £448

A neat little floorstander that really knows how to communicate with music. Its sound is crisp and agile, and what it lacks in sheer bass weight it makes up for in energy.



KEF
iQ9 £800

This superbly judged floorstander delivers a clean, powerful and transparent sound, with impressively taut bass. A very fine all-rounder for the money.



B&W
805S £1,600

A superbly well-engineered standmount that's capable of delivering magnificent musical communication, alongside superior subtlety and delicacy.



Mordaunt-Short
Performance 6 £3,500

This extraordinary speaker stands at the pinnacle of Mordaunt-Short's current range. State of the art resolution and imaging are among its many attributes.

Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE STEREO SPEAKERS

Stereo speakers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE WxHxD (CM)	FLOORSTANDER	EASE OF DRIVE	BASS FROM (Hz)	FEET SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
UP TO £1,000										
	Acoustic Energy AE1 Classic	845	Sharply priced classic replica has a beautifully balanced midband, wide dynamic range and little boxiness	18,29,5,25,5		A-	45			283
	Acoustic Energy Linear 1	250	Not at its best with classical but a well integrated, involving, timed aligned speaker nevertheless	19,36,26		A+	50			277
BC	ALR Jordan Entry L	500	Not the most pretty speaker but a sonic triumph, with a beautifully judged balance and impressive transparency	20,86,29		A	23			279
BC	AVI Neutron IV	499	A great example of what can be done with a genuinely small speaker, but the warts-and-all balance won't suit all	15,27,21		A-	65			260
BC	B&W DM303	180	Chunky looking and lively sounding, with deep bass, a fine midband and a restrained top end	20,33,23		A	23			226
BC	B&W DM602 S3	300	Old-fashioned size/shape, but this timeless design has a rare combination of grip, authority and headroom	24,49,29		A	25			234
BC	B&W CM1	500	Luxury miniature has neutral, laid back sound, with low coloration, fine imaging but weak dynamics	16,5,28,28		A-	40			279
BC	B&W 705	900	Deft, delicate and delightful, if a little bass light, with clever enclosure and driver engineering	22,42,29		A	35			253
	Castle Richmond 3i	320	Pretty real-wood miniature sounds superbly smooth and even, if dynamically weak	17,33,23		A+	45			284
BC	Castle Compact Column	550	Compact, not so much that you need a sub to back up the bass, an elegant and engaging speaker for its size	14,87,5,16		A-	50			280
BC	Dali Ikon 6	899	Needs care with setup, but rewards you with impressively transparent and almost obsessively detailed sound	19,100,33		A	37			271
BC	Dali Ikon 7	999	Bulky vinyl floorstander has high sensitivity and a bright sound with superior coherence, delicacy and transparency	20,114,34		A+	22			275
BC	Dynaudio Audience 42	400	An aristocrat of the vinyl-covered miniature breed. A terrific small speaker for the price	17,29,24		A	40			215
	Dynaudio Focus 110	850	Luxury real wood miniature with tapered enclosure sounds punchy, sweet and avoids boxiness	17,30,28		A-	38			279
BC	Epos ELS 303	399	Midband is impressively smooth, even and coherent, but the sound lacks some dynamic grip and top end detail	18,85,20		A-	28			273
BC	Epos ELS3	200	Few affordable speakers sound as clean and convincing while taking up so little real estate	18,27,19		A-	60			241
BC	Epos M5	349	Gorgeous miniature works well close to wall. Could be smoother but communicates with authority	18,33,21		A-	40			269
BC	Epos M12.2	449	A true classic stand-mount with lovely presentation, fine sound balance, superior coherence and low coloration	20,37,25		A-	40			265
	Epos M22	949	Very classy floorstander has a tricky bass and an edgy top, but a very smooth and even midband	20,88,25		A-	25			275
BC	JBL Studio L880	700	Good value floorstander with neutrality, massive headroom and plenty of punch. Could be more transparent	22,99,37		A	25			275
BC	KEF iQ3	280	Shapely, vinyl-covered stand mount has lively dynamics and fine imaging, but could be smoother and sweeter	22,37,33		A+	40			284
BC	KEF iQ9	800	Shapely and solid floorstander has wide bandwidth and dynamic range with superior neutrality and sensitivity	22,94,33		A	25			273
	Monopulse 42A	995	Uniquely different in style and sound, midband time-coherence is magnificent but treble is too restrained	26,110,25		A+	28			271
BC	Monitor Audio Bronze B4	350	A beautifully balanced loudspeaker with fine overall dynamic range and good imaging	19,85,26		A	23			255
BC	Monitor Audio GS10	800	More neutral tonally than some recent MAs. Quality stereo design which take's up little room and is easy to drive	206,360,270		A-	40			284
BC	Monitor Audio Silver RS8	800	Bold, dynamic sound marks it out from the crowd, and it's an easy load that works well in larger rooms	90,18,27		A	33			276
BC	Mordaunt-Short Avant 906i	350	The generous, well balanced sound shows good enclosure control, could do with more grip and better spikes!	165,85,29,5		A	40			281
BC	Naim n-SATS	695	Very discreet and informative, if a bit lean and forward. Just add an n-SUB for excellent all round results	20,29,21		A	50			268
BC	Nbien DX-5	250	Unusual shape miniature delivers generous scale, weight and dynamic expression for something so compact	17,5,34,24		A-	40			284
	Nbien NX6	899	Very nice cabinet work for the money and a decent speaker it makes too with good imaging and low noise	21,38,30		A	46			275
	PMC DB1+	625	Now with sweeter treble, this fun-size tiny lacks some weight and authority, but is beautifully balanced	16,29,24		A	50			261

SPECS (KEY) SIZE WxHxD (CM) Width, height and depth of one cabinet in centimetres. **FLOORSTANDER** Speakers that don't require stands. **EASE OF DRIVE** How much power the amplifier needs (approximately) to drive the loudspeaker effectively. **A+** 25 watts plus **A** 50 watts plus **A-** 100 watts plus **ACT** Active – the speaker has its own In-built amplifier. **BASS FROM** How low the speaker goes – the smaller the number the deeper the bass. **FREE SPACE** The speakers work best away from wall(s). **CLOSE TO WALL** The speakers will work best when up against a wall (but avoid corners).



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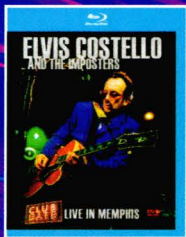
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EDITOR'S CHOICE

STEREO SPEAKERS continued

Stereo speakers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					
				SIZE WxHxD (CM)	FLOORSTANDER	FACE OF DRIVE	BASS FROM (HZ)	FREQUENCY SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL
BB	PMC GB1	995	Ultra-compact floorstander is beautifully clean, articulate and free from boxiness, with a notably delicate top end	16,92,24	● A+	30	●	257	
BB	PMC TB2+	795	Classy transmission line stand-mount has superior midband, restrained presence and a bright clean top end	20,40,30	A	28	●	275	
BB	ProAc Tablette Ref Eight	699	Stunning standmount with electrostatic-like imagery. Its Signature brother costs £200 more and is even better!	15,27,23	A+	40	●	267	
BB	Q Acoustics 1050	330	Great value, the sound lacks smoothness but has fine dynamics and impressive transparency	19.5,97.5,30	● A+	28	●	284	
BB	Rega R1	298	Cute baby sounds busy, coherent and involving, if a touch thin. Sweet and delicate treble with even bass	15,32,24	A	50	●	269	
BB	Rega R3	448	Discreet, pretty and fine value. A little lightweight but impressively open, it delivers music with great agility	20,76,28	● A	40	●	265	
BB	Revel Concerta F12	900	The money has gone into the active hardware, so cosmetics are plain. Performance is on par with more costly designs	25,108,37	● A-	28	●	283	
BB	Triangle Antal ES	975	Neither pretty nor smooth but a very exuberant and involving communicator, with plenty of scale and expression	20,108,34	● A	20	●	263	
BB	Triangle Titus ES	370	Not pretty but busy, coherent and involving, if a little thin. Sweet and delicate treble with even bass	18,37,30	A-	40	●	269	
BB	Triangle Comete ES	500	Bulky standmount lacks style but delivers engrossing musical coherence and vivid dynamics	20,42,34	A	40	●	265	
ABOVE £1,000									
BB	A2T Mezzo	2,000	Seamless overall coherence, with persuasive monitoring capabilities. Sounds a little mid-forward. Top could be sweeter	27.5,40,26	A+	40	●	281	
	Acoustic Energy AE1 MkIII	1,900	Luxury miniature has a laid back but bouncy sound, fine dynamic range and very superior imaging	18.5,31,25	A-	30	●	281	
BB	ALR Jordan Classic 5	1,200	Slim, laid back floorstander has sweet sound with fine coherence, imaging and dynamic range	17,99,26	● A	28	●	275	
BB	ATC SCM19	1,499	Super linear motor system, heavy weight construction and fabulous veneer that makes the ATC a pro favourite	22.3,44,31.5	A-	54	●	285	
BB	Audio Physic Spark 3	1,499	Classy and discreetly laid back floorstander has delightfully neutral balance and surprising bass weight	15,98,22	● A+	27	●	271	
BB	Audiovector Mi 3 Super	1,596	Dynamically very expressive, clear and intelligible voices, arguably even better value than the Signature version	20,100,29	● A	20	●	267	
BB	Aurum Cantus Leisure 3SE	1,200	Fabulous lacquer finish and a classy ribbon tweeter. Sounds smooth and sweet, if a touch laid back	25,40,30	A	28	●	263	
BB	AVI Duo	1,299	Sophisticated floorstander, a natural partner for AVI's electronics. Unusually clean and honest musical presentation	19,77,28	● A	50	●	280	
BB	B&W 704	1,400	Cleverly tapered enclosure and external tweeter delivers superior bass and treble, with a laid-back midband	22,96,32	● A	20	●	257	
EC	B&W 802D	8,000	Great timing, superior dynamics and a sweet top end all enhance musical communication. Makes sweet music	37,115,56	● A	<20	●	267	
BB	B&W 805S	1,600	Classy standmount with excellent coherence and imaging. Can sound laid back but otherwise a real delight	24,39,33	A	25	●	271	
BB	B&W 703	2,000	Bass is immensely powerful and even, and the overall sound is lively and dynamic, though not overly smooth	23,101,36	● A-	20	●	260	
	B&W XT4	1,800	Gorgeous, silver, super-slim floorstander has notably clean bass, but sounds a little too polite and lacks dynamic grip	15.2,114,20	● A-	25	●	281	
	Beauhorn B2.2 Revelation	3,984	Magnificent midband and fine overall balance but limited bass is best with small-scale material	34,130,75	● A+	80	●	244	
BB	Canton Vento 809DC	1,800	Quick, lively and agile, with fine overall coherence and expressive dynamics. A thoroughly impressive allrounder	25,112,35	● A	30	●	267	
	Canton Vento Ref 5DC	3,499	Strikingly handsome speaker has a studiously neutral balance with delightful midband analysis	25,112,35	● A	40	●	283	
	Chario Cygnus	1,200	Beautiful solid walnut sides. Port tuning suspect, but laid back sound has fine delicacy, imaging and refinement	20,96,27	● A-	28	●	275	
EC	Dali Helicon 400	2,999	Advanced drivers and enclosure give a generous sound with wide dynamic range and no boxiness	22,103,46	● A	20	●	264	
BB	Dynaudio Focus 220	1,850	Cleverly tapered floorstander has a brilliantly smooth, neutral balance and very sweet treble. Could be more dynamic	20.5,98,29.5	● A-	<20	●	281	
EC	Eclipse TD510	1,200	Replacement for the TD512 does astonishing things with musical timing. £600 floor stands also recommended	24,36,26	A	45	●	277	
	Elac FS 607 X-Jet	5,000	Highly revealing and capable, the mid/tweeter provides impressive detail and depth of soundstage	29,108,33	● A	28	●	269	
EC	Focal-JMLab Alto Utopia Be	11,000	Attractive and beautifully balanced, with fine bass alignment and focus, low coloration and very clean top end	37,121,53	● A-	20	●	248	
EC	Focal-JMLab Diva Utopia Be	7,599	Lovely slimline speaker combines remarkable transparency with fine dynamics and gorgeous bass	25,110,53	● A+	30	●	255	
EC	Focal-JMLab Electra 1027 Be	4,000	Outstanding mid and top with fine delicacy and low coloration, but lacks some bass grip and drive	26.5,111,35	● A-	25	●	276	
EC	Focal-JMLab Micro Utopia Be	3,799	New 'Be' version is clearly an exceptional standmount, capable of revealing the innate quality of the music	25,42.5,38	A	50	●	245	
	Focal-JMLab Profile 908	1,300	Open and revealing especially of spatial and atmospheric detail, makes up for its bass restraint with joi de vivre	23,39,27.5	A	50	●	274	
EC	Gamut L5	5,900	Impressive build and sophisticated driver design make the L5 a stunning speaker with rare transparency levels	20,116,43	● A-	32	●	271	
EC	Jamo Reference R909	7,500	Top model (in a class of one) is open, full and easy on the ear, and surely a classic in the making	48,127,54	● A-	25	●	280	
EC	Krell Resolution 2	6,497	Large but good looking, with Sonus Faber type elasticated front. Musically a great full bandwidth all-rounder	122,29,61	● B	28	●	273	
BB	PMC Wafer 2	1,650	Clever 'hang-on-wall' speaker has minimal sonic compromises. Smooth midband delivers impressive stereo imaging	33.5,57.5,10	A+	45	●	285	

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STEREO SPEAKERS *continued*

Stereo speakers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS						
				SIZE (WxHxD) (CM)	FLOORSTANDER	FASE OF DRIVE	PASS FROM (Hz)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
	MartinLogan Clarity	2,498	Relatively affordable and easy to live with electrostatic hybrid with class-leading resolving power	26,135,31	●	A-	46	●		245
	Meridian M3100	1,850	Attractive and capable active (125w) with great imaging and strong bass. High neutrality and good power handling	19,39,25		ACT	45	●	opt	280
	Monopulse 82	2,495	Could be more neutral, but excellent coherence, lively dynamics, fine imaging and a wide dynamic range	27,110,25	●	A	<20	●		281
	Mordaunt-Short Perf 6	3,500	Revolutionary enclosure design and aspirated tweeter make for a fast, hi-res ride	24,121,37	●	A-	35	●		264
	Naim Ariva	1,275	Cute and discreet floorstander has superb bass and a wide dynamic range, but it could be smoother and sweeter	23,88,31	●	A	25		●	259
	Neat Elite SE	1,499	Smooth and natural performer with notably expressive midband. Fine voice articulation and unusual sweetness	20,90,18	●	A	25	●		267
	Neat Motive 1	1,200	Beautifully neutral balance sounds open without aggression. Fine midband but could be more authoritative	16,92,5,20	●	A-	20	●		276
	PMC FB1+	1,695	Nicely proportioned floorstander has a sweet top and a beautifully natural, open and restrained midband	20,100,30	●	A	20	●		260
	PMC IB2	6,150	Stunning in an understated way, this speaker creeps up on you and hooks you with its transparency and power	33,74,47		A-	25	●		237
	ProAc Response D25	2,995	The traditional ProAc high-end detail mixed with greater efficiency and more pace - a splendid speaker	22,107,25	●	A+	20	●		254
	Rega R7	1,498	Super-slim and super-smooth floorstander has fine agility with a slightly bright overall character	27,98,35	●	A	25	●		271
	Rega R9	2,498	This subtle, laid back but very informative performer has a very superior dynamic range, especially in the bass	17,103,39	●	A	20	●		256
	Revel F32	3,200	Meticulously balanced, tonally neutral design makes for a taut, well disciplined sound	22,105,39	●	A	30	●		265
	Revel M22	1,800	A remarkably clean and revealing speaker with superb tonal and microdynamic capabilities	22,37,30		A-	48	●	●	274
	Roksan Caspian FR-5	1,995	Sharp looking speaker sounds exceptionally open and lively without aggression. Could be warmer	20,100,25	●	A	<20	●		279
	Ruark Talisman III	1,499	No bass demon, but a sophisticated and agile speaker epitomising Ruark's design ideals	22,84,31	●	A	22	●		259
	SonusFaber Concerto Domus	1,799	Great choice, especially for acoustic material, which performs significantly above its price level	21,99,31	●	A	35	●		270
	Sonus Faber Cremona A.	2,149	Standmount 'Auditor' version of the Cremona makes a soundstage bigger and better than its size suggests	19,35,32		A	48	●		246
	SonusFaber Grand Piano Domus	2,498	Fabulous physical appearance, and clean, refined sound especially well adapted to acoustic music and voice	21,106,31	●	A-	32	●		283
	Tannoy Dimension TD8	4,000	This stylish speaker is a splendid all-rounder, with fine dynamics, precise imaging and minimal coloration	31,86,30	●	A-	25	●		240
	Totem Model 1 Signature	1,595	Expensive, but very seductive miniature delivers a beautifully smooth and balanced midband	17,31,23		A	35	●		277
	Triangle Celius ESW	1,395	Not the smoothest sound around, but has great vigour and enthusiasm, plus good scale and weight	20,117,34	●	A	22	●		277
	Triangle Magellan Concerto	9,995	Scintillating midrange and treble, with tuneful, well-timed bass - a thoroughly engaging musical ride	28,149,34	●	A	35	●		262
	Usher Compass CP-6381	2,500	Lots of speaker for your money, with plenty of deep bass, unusual styling and massive build	35,127,65		A	20	●		270
	Vivid Audio B1	7,750	Impressive cabinet design combined with hi-tech drivers to make truly world class speaker	27,110,38	●	A-	40	●		261
	WEGG3 Stelar 1	4,995	A full-range sound from a small(ish) box is possible, but only if you are very careful about set up, room and amps	35,97,45	●	A-	28	●		275
	Wilson Benesch Curve	5,000	Much (but not all) of the ACT's performance in a much more compact and affordable package	23,91,37	●	A	28	●		254
	Wilson Benesch ACT	8,400	Superb enclosure gives uncanny freedom from 'boxiness'. Well balanced, but top end might be sweeter	23,108,36	●	A	20	●		252

AV SPEAKERS

Speaker solutions for multichannel surround sound



Multichannel speaker systems have a front left/right (L/R) stereo pair, a centre or dialogue channel, two (5.1) or four (7.1) surround speakers and often a subwoofer. For best results, each of these speakers bar the sub should be identical. The problem is that few surround systems are dedicated to music and perform a home cinematic role as well, meaning the centre speaker has to sit above or below a video

monitor. Centre channels are usually wide and short for this reason.

This should not be a barrier to great surround for music and movies however, as many brands make centre channels with a very close sound to their L/R designs.

Music vs movies

High-resolution SACD and DVD-A music recordings tend to be mastered with

surround speakers in the ITU standard position which is as far behind the listener as the front channels are in front. 5.1 movie soundtracks tend to place surround channels not so far behind and to the side of listeners. Usually, practical limitations will dictate a limited range of placement options, but if you are a dedicated music fan, check out the ITU set-up regulations in the booklet supplied with SACD discs.

SET-UP

Ideally you should set up surround speakers with as much care as you would stereo systems, but practical issues tend to have a significant bearing on surround and centre speaker placement. Surround channels can be floorstanding or wallmounted, and centres usually have to perch on the TV or underneath it. Given these limitations, adjust your L/R front

speakers to give the best tonal match with the centre. If there's more than just you listening, 'toe in' the speakers so that their axis crosses in front of the listening position - this gives a wider stereo image. And if there's a subwoofer it should be placed near the front speakers. Use a sound pressure metre (available from Tandy among others) to accurately set levels.

SUBWOOFERS

Subs start working where stereo speakers run out of steam at low frequencies. The idea is to create deeper, better-controlled bass rather than more of it. They usually have onboard amplification (active) and connect to either the LFE (Low Frequency Effects) channel in a home cinema set-up or the speaker terminals in a stereo set-up.

TOP BUYS



B&W
600 S3 package £900
Incorporates 602s, 601s and an LCR 600 centre speaker. Great in both stereo and multichannel surround modes.



Naim
n-SAT/CENT/SUB £3,385
Five n-SATs, and n-CENT and an n-SUB make a highly engaging and (for Naim) discreet multichannel package.



ATC
Concept 3 £4,877
It might not look as flashy as some, but the quality of engineering in this ATC package ensures superb all-round performance.



Linn
Akurate package £13,750
Linn has worked wonders with its new multichannel speaker system – it's not cheap, but its performance is breathtaking.

Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

AV SPEAKER PACKAGES

Multichannel speakers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					
				EASE OF DRIVE	NUMBER OF SPEAKERS	BASS FROM (Hz)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
	ATC Concept 3	4,877	Extremely engaging, revealing and musical multichannel system providing 360 degrees of full-on entertainment	A-	6	12	●	opt	255
	B&W 300 package	900	An excellent compromise between the requirements of music and those of home cinema (inc. subwoofer)	A	6	27	●		241
	B&W 600 S3 (602/601/LCR 600)	900	Unquestionably delivers the sonic goods. High-quality drivers in standmount enclosures	A	5	22	●		224
	Castle CAV Sterling	1,250	Lovely real wood veneers. Sound has fine dynamic drive and expression, but can sound a little hard	A	5	28		●	224
	Dynaudio Audience 42 package	1,142	Multichannel package for hi-fi purists with real authority and imaging, but needs subwoofer for full-bore movie sound	A-	5	53	●		241
	Final Sound Electrostatic system	4,875	Slim, attractive, electrostatic panels have clever connections, limited loudness but a breathtaking transparency	A-	6	20	●		251
	Focal-JMLab Electra package	3,017	Bold, solid system, tremendous consistency and easy to expand with an added subwoofer	A	5	50	●		232
 	Linn Akurate (242/212/225/221)	13,750	An extremely capable system that offers new insights into the potential for multichannel audio	A-	6	18	●		253
	Mirage Omni 2	2,650	Dark tonality, but superb imagery makes this an excellent all-round choice	A	5	30	●		232
 	Mission m5 package	1,450	Main m52 is a clean, attractive full-range stereo speaker, while the m5as sub does big bass for movie fans	A	6	28	●		241
	Mordaunt-Short Genie	800	A prince among sub/sat packages – good integration and impressively little compromise compared to full-size models	A-	6	38		●	262
	Mordaunt-Short Declaration 500	1,600	Good value vinyl THX Select package with Power Towers. Good authority, but must be 5.1-connected	A	5	25		●	210
 	Naim n-SAT/n-CENT/n-SUB	3,385	Priced here as a 5.1 package, Naim's neat n-SATs and matching sub/centre make an exceptional compact ensemble	A	6	20		●	268
	Tannoy Arena	1,200	Fabulously stylish sub/sats with Dual Concentric drivers. Unusually revealing for the breed, but sub lacks refinement	A	6	29		●	269

SPECS KEY **EASE OF DRIVE** How much power the amplifier needs (approximately) to drive the loudspeaker effectively: **A+** 25 watts plus **A** 50 watts plus **A-** 100 watts plus.
NUMBER OF SPEAKERS The amount of individual loudspeakers in the package. **BASS FROM** How low the speaker goes, the smaller the number the deeper the bass.
FREE SPACE The speakers work best away from wall(s). **CLOSE TO WALL** The speakers will work best when up against a wall (but avoid corners).

Our favourite BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

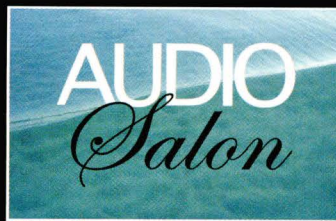
SUBWOOFERS

Bass speakers

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS			
				SIZE (WxHxD (CM))	POWER (W)	BASS FROM (Hz)	ISSUE NUMBER
 	B&W PV1	950	Gorgeously styled sub shakes the air but not the floor, delivering a very clean sound with negligible coloration	29,34,35	500	20	259
 	B&W ASW850	2,000	Does all the things subwoofers should do with music and movies alike, but transparently and seamlessly	53,56,52	1000	18	246
	Monitor Audio ASW100	300	For the price, this compact subwoofer performs particularly well	32,32,34	120	27	225
 	REL 305	795	Landmark mid-price sub, works particularly well with low crossover frequency, looks great too	32,36,34	300	25	284
 	REL Stampede	550	Few subs at this price match the Stampede's subtlety and ease of integration. Much more hi-fi than AV	28,40,29	100	18	257
 	REL Strata 5	700	Highly musical sub that integrates well but the REL Stampede offers near-identical performance for less money	32,46,33	150	18	257
	REL Storm III	900	Excellent sub with powerful, detailed and deep bass. Comprehensive facilities, including flexible filter adjustment	42,62,33	150	18	225
	REL Storm 5	1,000	Well engineered, good bass depth, appropriate for mixed hi-fi & home cinema/multichannel systems	34,52,37	200	15	267
 	REL Stadium III	1,500	It's a bulky piece of furniture, but offers superior filtering as well as an ability to delve deep into the bass nether regions	59,56,39	200	16	217
	Titan Saturn	800	Very bulky sub has curious styling, but decent filtering gives good weight and headroom	72,48,72	200	20	239

SPECS KEY **SIZE WxHxD (CM)** Width, height and depth of one cabinet in centimetres. **POWER (W)** How many watts the onboard amplifier of active models delivers.
BASS FROM How low the sub goes, the smaller the number the deeper the bass.

EST.



1979

INTRODUCTION

In a world of copycat dealers and counterfeit products, the arrival of an original master is worth celebrating; and hopefully worth the trouble to check out. When you've discovered the short-cuts are cul-de-sacs, make the pilgrimage to Britain's last remaining high-end dealership. Still crusading since 1979.

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OPERA

Before you buy "an authentic Italian loudspeaker" please enquire where it was made! Opera combines the traditional Italian passion with 21st century maths of designer Mario Bon. The value and performance are outstanding. And they are made in Italy: I watched them being built!! Models stocked: from the £595 Mezza to the £9,995 Tebaldis. Highly recommended combining emotion and accuracy; value and looks.



ESOTERIC

TEAC decided to keep UK customers waiting for the special edition X-03se at no extra price for the stiffened power supply and other refinements. It has been worth the wait. This is a combination of VRDS precision engineering and painstaking audiophile refinement. At £4,995 it has to be the high-end bargain of the decade.



UNISON RESEARCH

We commend the quality and value of Unison Research amplifiers (we stock models from £950 to £32,950!). From the astonishing 845 Absolute, the chief designer Prof Sacchetti has derived a series of wallet-friendly integrated valve amps; the £5500 Performance; the £2950 Sinfonia and now the £1795 Preludio. Hard to believe, but makes Chinese products overpriced (even the Chinese amps with British or American badges!)



JPS LABS

The next decade's cables available now! SuperConductor brought JPS to the attention of the world's audiophiles almost 20 years ago. Now the third generation SuperConductor is launched: interconnects and loudspeaker cables which definitely deliver performance audibly ahead of anything you have heard. Thanks to JPS policy of minimal marketing, the price of a metre pair is £795 and £349 for the "junior" version. Home loan/ approval is available.



LYRA

The SKALA phono cartridge is £1,895. Now any new model from LYRA creates headlines in the world of analogue, but the SKALA is the fifth generation of new technology which defines the future of what is now the greatest phono cartridge designer on Planet Earth. To offer this performance for less than £2,000 is Heaven on Earth!!



PATHOS

And then there comes along the long-awaited Italian CD player and it gives you the goose bumps. Comparisons with Alfa Romeos and Ferraris convey the excitement that a product of passion; stimulating and absolutely sensational. Do not waste £4,500 on ... What you were about to buy!!!



for those who don't believe in compromise

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HEADPHONES

For your ears only



Headphones come in several varieties and some are designed for particular usage. The majority of 'cans' use dynamic cone and coil-type drive units and can be used with anything from a personal stereo to a dedicated amplifier. Other types also exist, most significantly electrostatics that use a charged panel membrane to produce a distinctly refined sound. These are supplied with their own dedicated amplifiers, which tends to increase the price.

Cans are split into several types. There are open and closed-back designs, the latter being best for noisy (or noise sensitive) environments as they minimise leakage and intrusion. Open-back types tend to have a more open, less 'in-head' sound. There are also three variants of earpad design: circumaurals enclose the ear and press on your head, supra-aurals press on

the ear and intra-aurals sit in the ear and are particularly popular with personal stereo users.

Getting the best from your cans

Getting a good result with headphones is not quite as straightforward as it should be. Merely plugging them into the output on your CD player or amp will not give particularly engaging results unless you are very lucky. If you are planning on serious listening, invest in a dedicated amp – the increase in dynamics is not in the least bit subtle. A variety of models are made and prices start at around £80 for a QED, a little more for designs from, say, Creek or Musical Fidelity. And if you're really into cans, look up the valve-powered Earmax.

Our favourite HEADPHONES

BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

Stereo headphones

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SPECIFICATIONS					
				ELECTROSTATIC	SUPRA-AURAL	CIRCUMAURAL	OPEN BACK	CLOSED BACK	WEIGHT (g)
	AKG K44	20	Lively, enjoyable and remarkably detailed: a bargain					190	219
	AKG K270 Studio	129	Pro oriented design which is very transparent and great with acoustic material					270	230
	AKG K1000	650	Neutral, analytical and completely out of the head sound, suitable for connection to speaker outputs only					270	244
	Audio Technica ATH-D40fs	105	Detailed and involving sound with a professional 'studio' quality appeal					250	194
	Beyerdynamic DT990	160	Impeccable balance, very extended bass and treble, and bags of detail place this model ahead of the pack					250	245
	Grado SR-60	90	For sheer musical enjoyment these are hard to beat. Retro styling may not be to everyone's taste					200	194
	Grado SR325i	310	Highly sophisticated and detailed sound with great extension: check for comfort					200	270
	Philips HP890	70	A remarkably sophisticated and very comfortable headphone					330	219
	Sennheiser HD595	150	Technology from upmarket HD650 model makes this a very revealing headphone that's also extremely comfortable					270	266
	Sennheiser HD650	300	Astonishing resolution and hardly less impressive tonal balance make this a true hi-fi experience					260	252
	Shure E500PTH	420	Sophisticated in-ear design with three drivers, plus switchable 'voiceover' mic in the lead: quality stuff					20	285
	Stax SRS-2020 Basic Sys. II	349	Luxury option at its price, but the sound delivery is five-star quality all the way					295	205
	Stax SR-001 Mk II	239	Expensive and power hungry, but this electrostatic drags personal stereo into the world of high fidelity					280	268

SPECS KEY **ELECTROSTATIC** Uses electrostatic film instead of more common cone or dome dynamics. **SUPRA-AURAL** Earpads sit on ear rather than around it. **CIRCUMAURAL** Earpads rest on the head around the ears. **OPEN BACK** Vented capsules let sound in and out. **CLOSED BACK** Sealed capsules. **WEIGHT** In grams. **3.5MM JACK ADAPTOR** Allows connection to personal stereos, computers etc.

SOUND SYSTEMS

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CABLES



Wires to hook your system together



Hi-fi cables come in two varieties: interconnects and speaker cables.

Analogue interconnects come in preset lengths, generally with RCA (phono) plugs attached, though some equipment uses XLR connectors for balanced connection – this can be sonically advantageous, especially over longer runs. Speaker cable is commonly sold by the metre and can be used without plugs or can

be fitted with screw or solder-on types.

Choosing cables is not quite as straightforward as it might seem. One problem is that components interact with the cables you use and this often results in audible effects, but there are few cables that are fundamentally incompatible with any components, and we recommend the advice of a good dealer. In any case, you should look to spend as much as you can afford.

Digital cables come in two flavours: electrical and optical. In most instances electrical varieties sound better than optical, given the choice, but optical cables may be a better bet over long runs (10m+). Optical inputs/outputs usually use Toslink connectors, while most electrical types use RCA plugs, but some opt for BNC connection instead – check your components before you buy.

Our favourite CABLES

🏆 BEST BUY 📌 EDITOR'S CHOICE

				SPECIFICATIONS					
BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	STRANDED	SOLID CORE	COPPER	SILVER	DIGITAL CABLE TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
INTERCONNECTS AND SPEAKER CABLES									
ANALOGUE INTERCONNECTS									
📌	Black Rhodium Concerto	225	This DCT cable from the Polar range gives a distinctively dark timbre, rich in detail, with low subjective noise	●	●	●			270
	Brilliance Hi-Fi Synergy	83	High quality materials help give this cable fine imaging; bass not as extended as some	●	●	●			275
	Chord Company Signature	499	Silver plated, triple screened. Some granularity but great resolving ability, a good match for Chord Signature loudspeaker cable		●				255
	Chord Company Chorus	215	Very even-handed balance with notably extended bass	●	●				259
	Clearer Audio Silver-Line	244	Complex, well-screened cable which offers good sound all round with exceptional bass - at a price!	●	●	●			279
	Ixos Ixotica IX1	200	Notable for its relaxing sound, this cable still presents plenty of analytical detail	●	●	●			283
	Kimber Timbre	89	Typical Kimber construction with ditto sound – clean, extended and detailed	●	●	●			248
📌	Monster M350i	45	Few cables at this price reveal so much about the recording space. Clear treble, too	●	●	●			281
	Monster M1000i	200	Very capable, with only a hint of bass dryness to set against excellent results elsewhere	●	●	●			284
📌	Nordost Heimdall	370	Micro-monofilament cable, silver plated more affordable alternative to Valhalla, sounds transparent, detailed and neutral	●	●	●			278
	Oehlbach NF214	63	The bass is a matter of taste, but suits many smaller speakers. Very good mid and treble	●	●	●			281
	Oehlbach Silver Express +	70	Good, firm bass is accompanied by clear treble and well defined stereo imaging	●	●	●			280
	TCI Tiger	30	Not the most detailed interconnect around, but performance belies its modest price, especially in the bass	●	●	●			285
📌	Townshend DCT300	300	DCT wire with hum-busting ferrite sleeves. Packed with enough detail to make rivals sound flat		●	●			234
	van den Hul The Well	85	Hybrid cable with carbon-fibre conductors added. Very slight bass coloration does little to detract from fine performance	●	●	●			241
	Wireworld Luna 5	30	Authoritative bass and clear treble outperform many cables at twice the price	●	●	●			273
	Wireworld Solstice 5	70	A cables with all-round appeal – treble is slightly 'dark' but bass is excellent and the overall balance very good indeed	●	●	●			259
DIGITAL INTERCONNECTS									
📌	Clearer Audio Silver-line	125	Very satisfying performance with finely-etched detail and sweet treble	●	●	●		E	278
📌	Kimber Select KS2020	629	Provides a subtle but rewarding lift in musicality with any DAC, justifying the price		●	●		E	260
📌	QED Qunex Signature 75	80	First-rate balance and imaging – ever so nearly as good as it gets at any price			●		E	265
	van den Hul Optocoupler II	49	Noticeably has the edge over other optical leads, but still second best to electrical types					O	234
📌	Wireworld Starlight 5	90	Clear gains in detail and imaging precision are this cable's main strengths: good value and near-high-end performance	●	●	●		E	279
SPEAKER CABLES PRICE PER METRE									
	Black Rhodium Tango	15	A little bass-heavy but with smaller speakers, but that's no bad thing: mid and treble are detailed and clear	●	●	●			284
	Chord Odyssey 4	34	This biwire version of Odyssey offers excellent speed and impact, with low listener fatigue	●	●	●			258
	Clearer Audio Copper-Line Alpha	10	Strong, ringing bass and neutral tonality are plus points: treble is not the purest we've heard	●	●	●			283
	Kimber 8VS	18	Beautifully full, open and transparent sound right across the board	●	●	●			227
	Monster MCX-1s	8	Notable for its bass, which is perhaps a touch overdone at times but could be a good foil to small speakers. Good mid and treble	●	●	●			280
📌	Nordost Heimdall	162	Alternative to Valhalla, silver plated, micro-monofilament construction, low colouration, high res and suitable for exacting systems	●	●	●			278
	QED Silver Anniversary XT	5.50	Full bass and nicely detailed treble combine with good imaging - a budget bargain	●	●	●			276
	QED X-Tube XT300	10	A natural and well controlled sounding cable that's cost effective for mid-priced systems		●	●			234
📌	Townshend Isolda DCT	50	Cryogenically treated 'impedance matched' cable with stabilising components added: great sound all-round		●	●			241
	van den Hul The Bridge	6	Lively, energetic and possessed of fine midrange detail and imaging	●	●	●			277
	Wyrewizard Spellbinder	5.50	Sold off the reel, this entry-level cable is a surprisingly purist performer, lean yet powerful, with good detail resolution.		●	●			267
	Wireworld Terra 5	5	Deep powerful bass, clear treble and very solid imaging add up to above-class performance	●	●	●			261
	Wireworld Solstice 5	20	Unfriendly to handle, but makes up for it with very assured sound – heaps of bass and great insight	●	●	●			248
	Wireworld Oasis 5 Biwire	38	Full-bodied and precise sound across the board – an excellent performer in bi-wire or single-wire mode	●				●	262

SPECS KEY **STRANDED** Cable has a number of (usually) twisted strands to conduct the signal. **SOLID CORE** Cable has one or more individually insulated strands to conduct the signal. **COPPER** Material used to form the conducting element of the cable. **SILVER** Alternative material used to form the conducting element of the cable. **DIGITAL CABLE TYPE** E – electrical, O – optical. Cables are one metre length unless otherwise stated.

DEFINITIVE AUDIO



Main image: Art Audio Concerto Integrated Valve Amplifier £4,400



- L to R:** 1. Kuzma Stabi XL £10,000 2. KSL Kondo Neiro Line Stereo Valve Amplifier £23500 3. Living Voice IBX R2 (Burr Oak) £4400
4. SME 10 / SME V £4115 5. Living Voice OBX RW (Santos) £7200 6. KSL Kondo Ongaku Integrated Amplifier £49,000
7. Magnum Dynalab 106T Valve Tuner £3600 8. KSL Kondo Gakuoh 300B Mono Amplifiers £48,500
9. Resolution Audio Opus 21 CD Player £2950 10. KSL Kondo V-z (1m) Interconnect £750

STANDS AND SUPPORTS

Equipment racks and speaker stands



If you want to get the most from your source and amp components, it's important to consider good quality support. Dedicated equipment supports are racks and tables made specifically to hold hi-fi gear, and the best can have a profoundly positive effect on sound

because, for example, they can help to isolate kit from ground-borne vibrations and mechanical or electrical interference. Equally, if you own a pair of small 'bookshelf' or 'standmount' speakers, it's important to place them on good quality, purpose-built speaker stands.

Our favourite EQUIPMENT SUPPORTS

BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

Equipment supports

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS
	Alphason A5-G	399	Nice looking, very solid and practical with a pretty well balanced sound, but lacks a little detail
	Atacama Equinox	280	Stable, modular design with style. Excellent bass transients and a fresh design concept
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Audiophile Base	615	Price is justified by its earth-shattering sonic abilities – a worthy upgrade
	Avid Isosshelf	1,100	An enthusiast's equipment support stand free from coloration, if a little fiddly to set up
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Clearlight Audio Aspekt	650	Stunning neutrality and detail from a well-damped design. Its performance makes the price tag good value
	Custom Design Aspect 650	270	Smart looks and practical thanks to adjustable shelves. Sound is fair with some loss of detail
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Custom Design Icon 400	600	Beautifully built, conveniently adjustable and with little sound of its own, a very classy rack
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Custom Design Concept 400	700	Slightly drab looks, but great sound and efficient use of space ('Acoustic' version tested – standard version £300)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Custom Design Vantige	449	'Acoustic Aluminium' shelves plus steel supports equal practicality plus musical satisfaction: just a shade bright
	Partington Minim	389	Looks good, sounds good and is impressively flexible to boot
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Naim Fraim	1,825	Pricey but very classy looking and sounding, with modular flexibility
	Quadraspire Q4 Reference	480	Excellent performance from the school of wobbly racks. Natural sounding and plenty of detail
	Russ Andrews Torlyte Rack	988	Attractive modular system made of very light Torlyte: a touch of added warmth is its only vice
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Sound Organisation Z560	195	Excellent value rack, five shelves too! Well balanced and under 200 quid!
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Townshend VSSS	1,300	The Seismic Sink goes all glassy and attractive, yet retains the same excellent vibration-killing sound quality

SPECIFICATIONS					
HEIGHT (CM)	TOP PLATE SIZE (CM)	WELDED	NUMBER OF SHELVES	SHELF TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
80	66,46		5	Glass	247
81	50,50	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	4	Glass	217
82	43		4	MDF	193
87.5	48		5	MDF	193
75	53,5,45		4	MDF	217
66	46	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	4	Glass	206
75	57, 41		5	Glass	263
74	48,40		4	Metal	247
62	49,44		4	Metal	271
75	45,36		5	Glass	261
96	45,34		5	Glass	232
51.5	49,39.5		4	MDF	217
68	54,49		4	Torlyte	240
92	50,40		5	Glass	217
76	35,50		4	Glass	273

Our favourite SPEAKER STANDS

BEST BUY EDITOR'S CHOICE

Speaker stands

BADGE?	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS
	Alphason Aragon AG60	80	Good separation and imaging, with just a little coloration and bass looseness
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Custom Design RS300	110	An attractive stand whose lack coloration and ringing makes suits it to high resolution systems, at a tempting price
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Custom Design SQ404	200	Robust four-pillar design gives very low coloration and maximises performance of speakers great and small
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	hne Cableway	395	Looks great, sounds great, so start saving! Clean and sweet, and neutrality is exceptional with orchestral material
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Kudos S50	159	Formidable bass with real authority, and a wide dynamic range across a broad bandwidth
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Partington Ansa 60	99	Elegant flat-packer 'disappears' sonically; restrained but neutral and coherent
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Partington Dreadnought BS	249	The Dreadnought Broadside is a superb stand for high-class standmount speakers – and it looks great too!
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Russ Andrews Torlyte	299	Very relaxed sound from this metal-free design, with excellent imaging too

SPECIFICATIONS					
HEIGHT (CM)	TOP PLATE SIZE (CM)	FILLABLE	WELDED	NUMBER OF LEGS	ISSUE NUMBER
60	16,14.5	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		3	280
56	16.5,18	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		1	281
61	18,16.3	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		4	283
63	17,20	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		1	220
61	15, 20	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		1	220
62	18,15	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		4	232
61	17,15	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	5	261
60,50	15,21			3	280

EQUIPMENT SUPPORTS SPECS KEY HEIGHT Of complete stand. TOP PLATE SIZE (CM) Width by depth of the supporting platform(s). Single figures indicate a square platform.

WELDED As opposed to bolt-together construction. **NUMBER OF SHELVES** To put your kit on (different configurations are often available). **SHELF TYPE** Material that shelves are made of.

SPEAKER STANDS SPECS KEY HEIGHT Of each stand, not including spikes. TOP PLATE SIZE (CM) Width by depth of platform. Single figures indicate a square platform. Speakers generally overhang top plates.

FILLABLE The stand can be mass-loaded with sand and/or lead to stop ringing. **WELDED** As opposed to bolt-together construction. **NUMBER OF LEGS** That support the stand.

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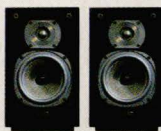
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GLOSSARY

TECHNICAL TERMS

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 – 'low bass' refers to the bottom octave (20-40Hz), 'mid-bass' the middle octave (40-80Hz) and 'upper bass' the top octave (80-160Hz).

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 drive unit 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, compatible with older CD players.

CLASS A The 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 have the advantage of offering lower distortion, while Class B tends to generate less heat.

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. Used to synchronise the data being taken from a disc.

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.

DAB (digital audio broadcasting). Digital radio using frequencies in the 217.5-230MHz band. Broadcasters use varying degrees of compression and offer a broad range of programming.

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 A compressed digital audio format that typically contains five or more entirely discrete channels, eg 7.1 EX where side and rear 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.

DSD (direct stream digital) The coding format used for SACD offers a frequency response of over 100kHz and a dynamic range over 120dB. It has over four times the data capacity of CD.

DSP (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-AUDIO 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.

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 driving it.

JITTER An insidious distortion specific to digital audio caused by imprecision in the clock, used to regulate the conversion of data into analogue audio.

KBPS (Kilobits per second) Digital data rate measurement system used primarily with highly compressed formats such as MP3, DAB etc. The higher the amount, the better the quality.

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 are 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 complex 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.

MP3 (MPEG layer 3) Lossy compression format for digital audio that drastically reduces data content in order to squeeze music through internet connections or allow hundreds of CDs to be stored on a hard disc.

OUTPUT IMPEDANCE A measure of resistance to alternating current, a source with low output impedance (below 100 ohms) helps ensure compatibility with most amplifiers, even with long interconnect cables.

PCM (pulse code modulation) The digital coding system for analogue waveforms used for CD and DVD. Quality is limited by the oversample and bit rates used – CD is 44.1kHz/16-bit while DVD-A is capable of 192kHz/24-bit.

PRESENCE BAND 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 (Super Audio CD) was launched in 1999 and is a Sony/Philips format based on DSD coding that offers high resolution stereo and multichannel sound from hybrid discs that can also be played on ordinary CD drives.

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), measured 1m from the speaker.

THX Standards system for home cinema set-ups which includes amplifier power and speaker dispersion characteristics. The latest THX Ultra 2 standard is more stringent than THX 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, ie above 3kHz.

TWEETER Treble driver.

TWO/THREE-WAY Loudspeaker crossovers split the signal into two or three frequency bands, a two-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.

WOOFER Bass driver.

DESCRIPTIVE TERMS

AGGRESSIVE Forward and bright sonic character.

AMBIENCE The impression of an acoustic space, such as the performing hall in which a recording was made.

ANALYTICAL Highly detailed.

ARTICULATE Intelligibility of voice(s) and instruments and the interactions between them.

ATTACK The leading edge of a note and the ability of a system to reproduce the attack transients in music.

BALANCE Essentially tonal balance, the degree to which one aspect of the sonic spectrum is emphasised above the rest. Also channel balance, the relative level of the left and right stereo channels.

BODY Fullness of sound, with particular emphasis on upper bass. Opposite of thin.

BOXY The sound of a loudspeaker with audible cabinet resonances.

BRIGHT A sound that emphasises the upper midrange/lower treble.

DARK A tonal balance that tilts downwards with increasing frequency. Opposite of bright.

DECAY The fadeout of a note, it follows the attack.

DEFINITION (or resolution) The ability of a component to reveal the subtle information that is fundamental to high fidelity sound.

DEPTH (of image) The perception of music being reproduced behind the loudspeakers and inhabiting a reproduction of the acoustic space of the original recording.

DETAIL The most delicate elements of the original sound and those which are the first to disappear with lesser equipment.

DRY A sound that is devoid of 'juice', which usually comes across as fine-grained and lean. Also a loss of reverberation as produced by a damped environment.

DYNAMIC The suggestion of energy and wide dynamic range. Related to perceived speed as well as contrasts in volume both large and small.

EUPHONIC An appealing form of distortion that generally enhances perceived fidelity, often ascribed to the harmonic elaborations of some valve amps.

FAST Good reproduction of rapid transients which increase the sense of realism and 'snap'.

FOCUS A strong, precise sense of image projection.

FORWARD(NESS) Similar to an aggressive sound, a sense of the image being projected in front of the speakers and of music being forced upon the listener.

GRAINY A slightly raw, exposed sound which lacks finesse.

GRIP A sense of control and sturdiness in the bass.

GRUNT See grip.

HARD Uncomfortable, forward, aggressive sound with a metallic tinge.

HARSH Grating, abrasive.

IMAGING (stereo) The sense that a voice or instrument is in a particular place in the room.

JUICY Sound that has joie de vivre, energy and life.

LOW-LEVEL DETAIL The quietest sounds in a recording.

MUSICAL or musicality. A sense of cohesion and subjective 'rightness' in the sound.

NATURALNESS Realism.

OPAQUE Unclear, lacking transparency.

OPEN Sound which has height and 'air', relates to clean upper midrange and treble.

PACE Often associated with rhythm, a strong sense of timing and beat.

PRESENCE A sense of an instrument or voice occupying a place in the listening room.

PRESENCE RANGE The upper midrange.

SEISMIC Very low bass that you feel rather than hear.

SIBILANCE An emphasis of the 'S' sound, often heard on radio.

SNAP A system with good speed and transient response can deliver the immediacy or 'snap' of live instruments.

SPEED A fast system with good pace gives the impression of being right on the money in its timing.

STURDY Solid, powerful, robust sound.

THICK A lack of articulation and clarity in the bass.

THIN Bass light.

TIMBRE The tonal character of an instrument.

TIMING A sense of precision in tempo. See speed and pace.

TRANSIENT The leading edge of a percussive sound. Good transient response makes the sound as a whole more live and realistic.

TRANSPARENCY, TRANSPARENT A hear-through quality that is akin to clarity and reveals all aspects of detail.

TWEAK To tune a system or component in an attempt to get the best performance from it.

TWEAKER Someone who enjoys this process.

VEILED Loss of detail due to limited transparency.

WARM A fullness in the lower midrange/upper bass.

WEIGHT A sense of substance and underpinning produced by deep, controlled bass.

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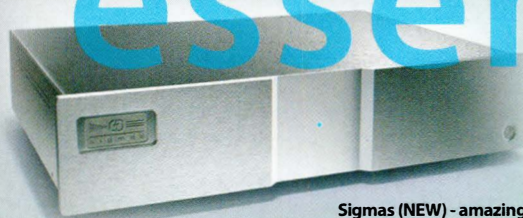
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IsoTek Sigmas
Hi-Fi Choice, October 2006

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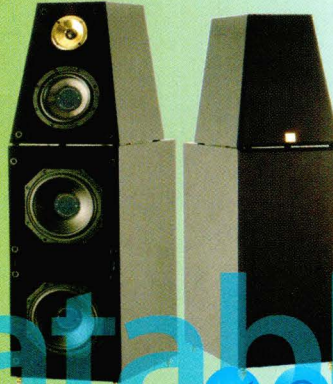
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Hyperion 938
David Allcock, Hi-Fi News



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ATC SCM19
Hi-Fi Choice, October 2006



SCM7



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Ken Kessler, HFN Aug 2006



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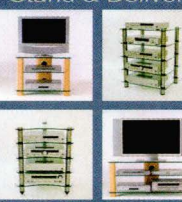
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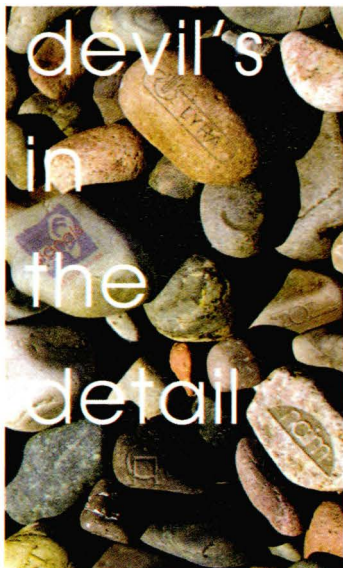
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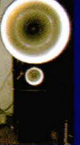


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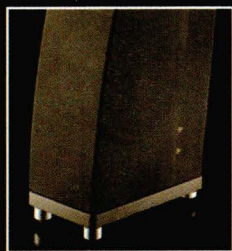


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2nd-hand shootout

So, you've got £1,000 to spend on a second-hand stereo amp. Which should you buy?

Spending £1,000 on a second-hand amplifier opens up a seemingly limitless range of options. Essentially, you can choose valve or transistor, current or vintage, the typical comparatively low powered beat-conscious British amp or the super powerful Japanese model. They're all for the taking. To start you off, we've selected three very different designs that each represent a particular niche. Starting off with the 'safe choice', we have the Naim NAC102 preamp with the NAP180 power amplifier. This combo represents a typical British pre/power set that won't be too old, tricky to service or hard to come by. Both of these products were fairly recently discontinued (2002), and sold strongly throughout the 1990s.

"The NAP180 has often been referred to as a 'baby NAP250', and it's easy to see why."

The combo is easy to find and has a fine reputation for reliability, plus the preamp can be boosted by the addition of a HI-CAP power supply. Naim's service back-up is excellent and, should anything go wrong, you can rest assured that it will be fixable. As for the sound quality, you'll find it tight, cohesive and dynamic.

The NAP180 has often been referred to as a 'baby NAP250', and it's easy to see why. It doesn't quite have the vice-like grip and current swing of the legendary NAC250, but it's not all that far off. With the NAC102, you get a remote control and plenty of inputs but, as ever with Naim, it's worth remembering that most of these are DIN connections rather than RCA phonos. Still, as enjoyable, involving and relatively worry-free £1,000 amplifiers go, this is about as good as it gets, if you like the upfront presentation.

If valves are more your bag, then £1,000 gives you access to some thoroughly decent kit. Models from Beard, Radford, EAR, Audio Note and Audio Research are all worth considering, but one we've focused on here, though, is the Lumley Reference LVI/ST70 combination. Dating from the early 1990s, this combination twinned a passive preamp

with a meaty 70-watt valve power amp. At the time, this extremely well built combination offered a pentode/triode switching option for very little extra, and it's a feature well worth seeking out on a second-hand example. The switch option switch changes the presentation from typical valve lushness (in triode mode) to a punchy and dynamic force that can almost trade punches with Naim (using the pentode setting). Unlike a good deal of other valve amplifiers made around the same time, the Lumley References were extremely well built. Today, that build quality should stand you in good stead, but there are a few points to watch. Bubbling plastic on the top of the output transistors usually points to abuse, so steer clear. It's

also worth mentioning that anything with faulty transformers is also worth giving a wide berth. Valves, of course, are readily available and you might even like to try valve coolers on this model – they give noticeable improvements in definition for relatively little cost. Finally, the preamp neatly attaches to the base of the power amp, and is fully hardwired and passive. Should anything go wrong with this, the hardwiring should make it an easy fix.

Lastly, how about 120 watts in Class A/B mode – switchable to 20 watts pure Class A – massive construction with gloss black casing, copper plating, cast iron encased power supplies and 'Urushi' finished wood side cheeks. We are, of course, talking the Pioneer Elite or 'Reference' range here. This range of ultra high spec components was actually run by Pioneer for a good 20 years or so, although not all of it came to the UK.

That said, the C73 with M73 pre/power combo sold in reasonable numbers in the early 1990s. Pioneer Elite has something of a cult following and you won't get a great deal of change from your £1,000.

Nevertheless, we found a M73 with the superior C90 preamp and you may even come across one of the very high spec C91s. The build quality is fabulous, but most of the unique parts are now no longer available, so only choose the most cherished examples. With the M73 switched to Class A mode you'll find the sound quality surprisingly delicate – although sensitive speakers are needed to make the most of it. Class A/B packs a punch, which is ideal for those who like bass weight with warmth.

Although very different in their audio presentation, these three amps are the type of products that engender pride. Just seeing them will give you a buzz of satisfaction. Listening to them will heighten it. **HFC**

Dominic Todd

Next month: £1,500 loudspeakers



Naim 180 power amplifier



Naim 102 preamplifier

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Proceed PAV pre-amp
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Perreux 200ip int. amp
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Arcam Alpha 8R integrated amp
Arcam Alpha 8P power amp
Kora Triode 100SB
Ayre AX-7 Integrated Amp
Mark Levinson 432 Power Amp
Mark Levinson 11 & 12 pre/power
Audio Analogue Puccini int. amp
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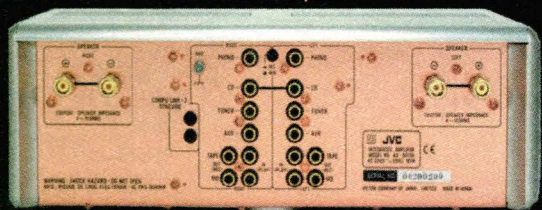
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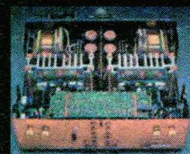
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Canary 303 monos. PP 22 watts 300B with Living Voice upgrade	£4800	£8400
AudioNote UK wired Helius Cyalene tonearm	£900	£3000
Audio Note UK IO-Limited field coil cartridge with PSU. Light use only	£2500	£10000
Placetech passive line stage - 3 inputs - 120v - remote control - 6 mnths old	£900	£13600
Gotham Type 39 monos (Western Electric version of Canary CA309)	£5000	£13000
Audio Innovations P2 phono stage - standard - collectible classic	£950	
Paithos 2 box pre-amp with remote control - spotless!	£1200	£3500
Canary 903 4 box pre-amp - champagne facia - 3 mnths old - boxed	£3500	£6500
Audion Golden Night 300B monos - very good condition	£1500	£4500
Border Patrol 300B SE - Western Electric valves - 8 watts - very little use	£3250	£5000
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Revolver 33 loudspeakers - grey/maple - new	£250	£600
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Avid Acutus - one lady driver - fine looking example - excellent condition	£3000	£6000
Aloia pre-amp - beautifully made - very little use - boxed	£900	£2800
Revel M20 bookshelf loudspeakers - Santos Rosewood - with stands	£700	£2000
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FOR SALE

ACOUSTIC ENERGY AE109

black, £150. Arcam Alpha 7 CD £75. Arcam Alpha 9 amp, £225. Soundstyle XS310 black laquer, £150. Yamaha DSPA1 black, £225. Meridian 605 24, £600. Celestion A2 cherry (two pairs) and Celestion A4C X1 and 46 sub, offers. 07957 330708 or email cueball@1981@hotmail.com (Surrey).

ARC CD3MKI £2,700.

Transparent Musiclink 1.5m RCA interconnects with network boxes £375. Audiosource distribution block with AC cable £160. Monsterlink digital chord, optical, 1m £50. 07810 434589 (Glasgow).

ARCAM DIVA AVR350 brand new with Arcam warranty,

(£1,500) £1,295. KEF 5001 centre channel, (£150) £95. 020 8951 3178 (Middx).

ATC SCM35 speakers, one owner, perfect condition, amazing sound, boxed, £1,500. Paul 07783 362456 (Hounslow).

AUDIOLAB 8000Q preamp plus remote. Boxed, excellent, £350. Luxman direct drive turntable PD 131 plinth cover, SME MkIII arm, interchangeable arms, excellent, £300. Mr Kelsall 01782 256087 (Stoke on trent).

AUDIOQUEST EMERALD

interconnects 1m pair, (£260) £90. QED Silver Spiral Qunex 1m pair, (£90) £40. Campaign Audio 2m Silver power cable, (£75) £35. All mint and boxed. 01278 782622 (Gwent).

B&W 805V and Partington stands, mint, £400. Sony CDP-X3000ES. Tri-digital filter, champagne gold, £200. Matching tuner ST-S3000ES. Hardly used, £150. Peter 01227 794817 (Kent).

B&W DM601S

standmount speakers with matching stands, one year old, vgc £130. 01909 489684 (Notts)

CYRUS CD8X CD player boxed as new with guarantee. Can demo, £550ono. 07947 427768 (Coventry).

CYRUS CD8X with PSX-R, ten months old, as new £800. Sugden A21SE Class A amp, eight months old £1,350. 01977 618403 (Pontefract).

CYRUS Q7 dual mono chip. Suits Cyrus models that support this option. Difference is significant, £100. An upgrade bargain. Calls after 8pm please. 01424 442225 (East Sussex).

DYNAUDIO CONTOUR 1.8

MkII speakers (£1,900) cherry. 250 watts power handling. Immaculate and boxed. Bargain at £750 ovno. 0161 7750478 or 07957 461479 (Manchester).

EPOS/ROTEL system, Epos M5 speakers plus RCD-02 CD player and RA-01 amplifier, (£980) £580. All items in original boxes, owned from new and in mint condition. Lee, 01384 412234 (West Midlands).

IMF TRANSMISSION LINE Mk

III monitor loudspeakers, vgc for age, £250. TAG McLaren 60p power amplifier, 72wpc, (£850) £400. US Amps 300w valve car amplifier, £300ono. 07837 428254 (Devon).

KEF Q35.2 loudspeakers, boxed, as new condition, in black finish, £140. 07760 120668 (West Yorks).

LINN KARIK CD player, Numerik D/A, Kairn preamp, LK100 power amps (x4), Keltik Speakers. All in mint condition, call for more info, £4,000ono. 07759 432451 (Merseyside).

LINN KLIMAX 500

solo power amps, good condition, boxes, £7,500. Barrie 01323 487781 (Sussex).

LINN PEKIN tuner, mint, £350ono. Alex 01189 834894 or 01256 304242 (Reading).

MARANTZ CD52MKII CD

player £50. Denon DRM800 cassette deck £45. Foundation speaker stands £30. 02476 422697 (Coventry).

MARANTZ PM66SE amp, very good condition, serviced, £800ono. Sony MiniDisc player JB930 £95ono, vgc. Mission M73 speakers, vgc £95ono. 01404 891728 (Devon).

MERIDIAN 201 pre (inc MM/MC phono) mint, boxed £280. 204 tuner, good, boxed £250. IOS monoblocks £350. Remote £50. Or, sensible offers for the lot. Andy 0115 9566288 (Notts).

MICHELL GYRO SE turntable, SME IV tonearm, vdH One Special cartridge. Michell QC power supply, Dino phono stage/power supply, all excellent, £1,800. Kevin 07884 226964 (London).

MONITOR AUDIO GOLD

Reference 20 speakers, piano black finish, as new, boxed, (£1,800) £650. 01491 613760 (Oxford). ▶

WANTED

ARCAM ALPHA 10 tuner must be good cond. Karl 01942 234927 karl138ufft@msn.com (Wigan).

ATLAS OR NORDOST Red Dawn interconnect. 07810 1039008 (Yorks).

B&W NAUTILUS SCM1 wallmounted rear speakers. 01782 256087 (Stoke on Trent).

DUAL CS500 turntable. Must be in good condition, 0117 986 4652 (Bristol).

JECKLIN FLOAT headphones, prefer Float Two, but any Jecklin or Ergo considered. John 07855 121587 or email john.

boys444@ntlworld.co.uk (W Yorks).

KEF TDM34PS dipole rear speakers. 01782 256087 (Stoke on Trent).

KRELL KAV300I and Martin Logan Aerius. May consider swap. 020 7253 4469 (London).

MISSION 773E floorstanders in cherry and mint. LPT spares also wanted. 01323 487640 (Sussex).

NYTECH power amp CPA602. Please call 01540 651453 (Scotland).

SONY XA9000ES SACD player wanted must be black finish and immaculate cash is waiting. 01494 445005 (High Wycombe).

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 if the price is right.

Do some research on which brands have a good service back-up, so if something does go wrong, you can get it fixed. Unless you purchase from a dealer, you're unlikely to get any warranty, so it's up to you to ensure the fitness of any gear that you buy.

Usually, speakers should be less prone to breakdown than amps, and amps should be more reliable than CD players. But any abused component could be trouble – have a proper dem, and judge the seller as well as the goods!

FOR SALE

❑ **MISSION 751** speakers plus Atacama stands, both in black, £85. Soundstyle four tier rack, piano black, £100. Email Kesterbantin@hotmail.com (London).

MOON HARBOUR CD player HDCD. This is identical in appearance to the Katana Oem HDCD. Wood feature remote control. As new, can demonstrate, £700ono. Buyer collects. Living Voice Auditorium speakers, Mk1 good condition, £800. 0131 334 4881(Edinburgh).

MUSICAL FIDELITY A1000 classic British pre./main amp. 50 wpc of pure Class A with separate twin power supply box. Immaculate condition, beautiful deep gloss black casework. £750. Peter, 01227 794817 (Kent)

MUSICAL FIDELITY X-A2 amplifier, £250. Musical Fidelity X-Ray CD player, £400. 01752 291703 (Plymouth).

MUSICAL FIDELITY A5 power amp, two months old, 250 watts per channel, (£1,500) £900. Boxed and mint. 0161 681 1583 (Manchester).

MUSICAL FIDELITY F19 (£4,000) £1,100. B&W Nautilus HTM1 black, (£1,700) £700.

Cardas Golden Cross speaker cable, two metres, (£2,000) £500. 07900 394165 (London)

MUSICAL FIDELITY X-10 V3 buffer stage, as new, boxed, (£300) £175. Audusa interconnects IS300 signature, 1m pair, £80. 01491 613760 (Oxfordshire).

MUSICAL FIDELITY A5CD £1,100. Musical Fidelity A3CR pre./power amp £800. B&W Nautilus 804 £1,200 (rosewood). Van Den Hull D102 Mk 3 interconnects. All exc condition 07956 526082. (Manchester).

MUSICAL FIDELITY NU-VISTA preamp and 300 power amp. Mint condition, boxed with manuals £2,200. Would deliver reasonable distance 01423 770309 (Harrogate).

NAIM 32.5 preamp upgraded with 72 boards, boxed, vgc. Russ Andrews power supply (£900 for parts supplied by RA), £450 for both. 08455 843450 (work) or 01404 46337 (home) (Devon)

NAIM CDI £300. 72 preamp, £300. 140 amp, £300. NAT03 tuner, £200. SBL speakers, £300. Russ Andrews powerblock, £50. Bargains, do call. 07743 630656 (Swansea).

NAIM 150X purchased new October 2004. Mint, boxed, remote, lead. Can demo, £425. 01273 385209 (Brighton).

NAIM CDS1 £450. Naim amps; NAC112x and NAP150x £900. Neat Elite SE speakers, ash, £850 (unboxed). Quadraspire four shelf rack in oak, one year old, mint. 020 7498 8902 (London).

NAIM NAC82 MM phono, £1,200. Naim NAP180, £700. Naim SBL, £1,100. All items boxed and excellent condition, 020 7253 4469 (London)

NORDOST SOLARWIND interconnects 2x0.6m, mint condition, boxed, £50 each. A bargain! 01926 402824 (Warwick)

PINK TRIANGLE CARDINAL transport, Ordinal DAC, anti-jitter re-clocking upgrade, vgc and rare, bargain at £730ono. 0115 9566288 (Notts).

PROAC STUDIO 100 loudspeakers in Yew, (£1,000) £520. Apollo Olympus stands, £30. Audiolab 8000A integrated amplifier, £220. 07723 652769 (Birmingham).

QUAD 34 preamp/306 main amp (grey with phono plugs). New power caps (from Quad) and heavy speaker connectors, excellent condition, £250. 0121 382 0145 (Birmingham).

QUAD 77 integrated amp, power amp, CD player, remote control handset, all boxed with manuals. Serviced by Quad, as new condition, £1,200. 01932 853789 (Weybridge, Surrey).

QUAD ESL 57 speakers in black. Completely rebuilt by 'One Thing'.

Near mint. Sensible offers. Lentek moving coil step-up phono amplifier, £750ono. 01745 331681 or 07714 530889 (Wales).

ROKSAN CASPIAN M-SERIES power amps (two) £400 each, or £700 the pair. Marantz CD17 MkII KI (gold) £350, manuals etc. 07815 861746 (Surrey).

ROKSAN CASPIAN integrated amp, 125 watts into 4 ohms. Concert 11 speakers 3-way awesome bass extension, in American cherry. Pioneer 565 DVD/CD etc with upgrade by Tom Evans. QED Genesis cable 1m and 3m. Mains conditioner. £2,000. 07623 928984 (Gwent).

RUARK BROADSWORDS in cherrywood. Very early pair. £200 upgrade by Wilmslow Audio in 2002. Very little use. Cabinets not perfect, still attractive. Offers over £100. Apollo stands extra. 0121 707 8083 (Birmingham).

SONY REEL TO REEL TC377 mechanically perfect. 30 years old, but as new, even wood case unmarked. Manual, bills, probably unique £550. 020 8998 1708 (London).

SONY XA9000ES multichannel SACD player (£2,400) £995 mint. 020 8951 3178 (Middx).

STAX CLASSIC system II SRS 3030 earspeakers with SRM-313 energiser. Sounds superb, excellent condition £375. 01656 733354 (S.Wales).

TEAC P30 transport XLR RCA, ST outputs, disc clamp mechanism (£2,500) £995ono. TAG McLaren DAC20 (£1,250) £495ono. 07811 613140 or 0117 9629725 (Bristol).

WHARFEDALE PACIFIC EVO 30 speakers in winter maple, still in boxes, £500. Sennheiser HD590 headphones in box, £150. 01493 665761 (Norfolk)

WILSON AUDIO 5.1 (Watt/Puppy) loudspeakers. Immaculate gloss black finish, manual and crates. £6,100 ovno. 01926 653421 (Warwickshire).

YAMAHA 1000 monitor speakers, vgc £650ono. 01799 502038 (Essex).

YAMAHA NS-1000M black monitor speakers, one owner, £1,200. +46 477 31270 (Sweden).



Above: Arcam DiVA AVR350 home cinema amplifier

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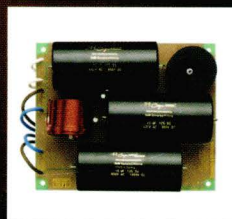


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